

Curatorial practices



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Assignment 6(a) Curatorial practice, an evil good Prepared by: Gitanjali

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curatorial practice ??" an art that operates on the field of art itself ??"??™

Aaron Schuster, critic, 2005 The Mauritian Triennial 2008 has been boycotted

by a group of acclaimed contemporary artists for the inability of the National

Art Gallery to curate such an event (GroemeHarmon 2008). Mauritius is a

country with almost no contemporary gallery infrastructure. Any form of

gallery space has been managed by the artist-curator who produces works

but also manages the display of works and other administrative issues

(press, publication, invitations) related to the exhibition. It is important to

understand the contemporary situation of Mauritian art to comprehend

issues related to the confrontation between institutions and artists. Felipe

Chaimovich (2006) examines the ??? fundamental opposition??™ in

contemporary art in Brazil with ??? cultural production ruled by European

patterns remaining as the officially accepted practice, described and

transmitted as art??™ on one side and a commercialized ??? Brazilian

contemporary art??™ without any critical debate based on international

globalised capitalism.

In Mauritius, a small group of post-colonial? visual artists contest forms of

cultural, political and institutional dominance in the arts. On one hand a

Eurocentric tradition of conceiving, describing, appreciating and displaying

art objects is adopted and accepted as the norm while the other facet of

contemporary art in Mauritius investigates newer models of representation.

This paper attempts to demonstrate the importance of introducing curatorial practices in the Visual Arts in a country where debates and confrontations about the nature of contemporary Art, the proper management of the Arts and its economic impact are for the first time being investigated. The curator's history and multi dimensional role are researched and analysed to be applicable to locally related art issues. The term 'post colonial' as defined here refers to the notion of 'oppositional postcolonialism' by Mishra and Hodge denoting a politics of opposition and struggle, and related issues with racism, a second language and forms of colonial oppression.

History of the curator

The term 'curator', derived from the Latin word 'curatus' meaning 'to take care of', was initially used during the Roman Empire as a title given to officials in charge of public works like sanitation or transportation (Strauss 2007). The curator's role as a 'care-taker' shifted to the 'clergy' having a spiritual charge in the Middle Ages. Strauss also believes that curators are 'a mixture of bureaucrat and priest'. The term 'curatorial practice', more commonly used today in the museum setting, has been popularised in the early years of the public museum (beginning of the 19th century), when the arrangement of objects based on a chronological and historical approach to show the 'progress of civilisation toward Enlightenment' (Bennett 1996) was the main concern of the museum.

During the period of a century, the role of the museum and art gallery changes from display of objects to instrument of social reform and public instruction, then to an autonomous area of contemplation for viewer and individual work of art to interact. With a radical and paradigmatic change

at the museum over the past two decades^{??™} and a new emphasis on audience development (Spitz & Thom 2003), the production of meaning becomes as important as the production of artworks; the invisible (meaning) and the visible (artwork) in an art space as explored by Bennett (1996). The rise of theory in relation to Art practice and Aesthetics becomes critical and curators^{??™} role as ^{???} keeper^{??™} of museum^{??™}s collection extends itself to aesthetician, art critic, historian, audience developer, and promoter as noted by Michael Brenson (2001), New York Times art critic and professor of curatorial studies at Bard College. In the 1960^{??™}s the exhibition space started getting precedence over objects of art. Paul O^{??™}Neill (2008) analyses the surge of professionalism in curatorial practices amidst the changing role of the modern art museum. Curators were not merely behind the scenes arranging for the clear and attractive display of objects but started to be open to curatorial criticism. In the 1990^{??™}s the shift of curatorial practices as a ^{???} potential nexus for discussion, critique and debate^{??™} gave rise to international summits, symposia, seminars and conferences on the professional practices of the curator (O^{??™}Neill 2008).

According to Benjamin Buchloh (1989), while art practice is ^{???} doing^{??™}, curating necessitated a discourse as ^{???} speaking^{??™} or ^{???} writing^{??™} in order to be acknowledged in the institutional superstructure at the level of discourse. Since the 1980^{??™}s, the inception of Documenta and the various biennales and fairs has become the primary site for curatorial experimentation (Obrist 2008). The spread of international group exhibitions changed the populist perception of the activity of curating where the curator now manages projects of magnitude in different geographical locations, on a

basis of temporality and receives a new degree of visibility and responsibility. As contemporary art practice evolves, the role of the curator within the visual arts has changed dramatically in the last 10 years (Barker 1999). While Paul O'Neill (2005) observes that the last decade has been a dynamic period of productivity, progress and visibility for curators, Bruce Altshuler (1994) sees the rise of curator as creator within a new multi-disciplinary role.

Noel Kelly (2007), curator and critic in Dublin and founder of the Arts Projects Network (<http://www.artprojectsnetwork.net/>), considers the presence of curators whose roles, functions, positions and the influence that they can potentially exert has changed their own careers and has created a new form of relationship between the audience, the artist, and art institution.

Boyd (2007) mentions in his blog that those who undertake curatorial efforts will undoubtedly assume multiple roles of art critic, historian and cultural producer. Curators of contemporary art have become principal representatives of some of our most persistent questions and confusions about the social role of art (Straus 2007). Curators have also moved outside the realm of museums and galleries, working independently and being generators of their own projects (Kelly 2007). As a result, curators work as intermediaries across an everexpanding number of contexts; from the gallery to the public realm and the local community and from the mass media to online art (Gibbons 2008). Higgs (2002) believes that there is no consensus as to the role of the curator just as there is no single definition of what constitutes art.

Jens Hoffmann, Director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, California has a more metaphorical depiction of curatorial practice, as ??? something that is fluid and temporary, constantly changing, evolving, unpredictable and in continuous progress??™. This paper aims at dissecting the significant features of curatorial practices which can contribute in a better representation, distribution and interpretation of the visual arts in Mauritius. The next paragraphs present three perspectives of the curator, each with its numerous characteristics: The institutionalised dimension of curatorial practice with its multi-disciplinary characteristics and the new acclaimed role of the artist-curator in artist led initiatives. The institutionalised dimension of curatorial practice A curator, in a cultural institution context, is a guardian or an overseer (Rubel 2008). In this paper, institutions refer to museums, national libraries and government institutions responsible of the organisations of national and international events like the biennial. According to the Code of ethics for curators (2008) by the American Association of Museums, The work of curators is varied and multifaceted.

Depending on the institution, curators can be highly specialized experts with responsibilities focused on a particular collection area ??; they fulfill collection, exhibition, management, program, facility, and/or other duties ??; curators are ambassadors who represent their institution in the public environment ??; the distinctive responsibility of curators is focused on the interpretation, study, care, and development of the collection, and/or on the materials, concepts, exhibitions, and programs that are central to the identity of their museum. According to Dodson (2004), chief since 1984, of the New York Public Librarys Schomburg Center for Research in Black

Culture, curators in museums devise exhibitions, educational programmes and function as mediator between collections and the public while library curators collect, catalogue, process, preserve original material and organise their collections for their users. Another facet of curatorial practice at the service of institutional agenda is in the forms of art biennials and triennials, the ??? popular way of displaying contemporary art in the international art world??™ (Wang 2008) for ??? nomadic curators, artists and viewers??™ (O??™ Neill 2006). Mieqin Wang, assistant professor"of Asian art history with a specialization in contemporary art at California State University Northridge believes that biennials/triennials have brought tremendous creative energy and local diversity into the family of international exhibitions functioning ??? as active forces that are shaping and reshaping the structure and relationship of the global art world??™. Discussions, lecture programmes, conferences, publications and discursive events are re-current and integral part of international exhibitions which act as ??? vehicles for the production of knowledge and intellectual debates??™ (Filipovic 2006). Judith Rodenbeck (2007) in her paper ??? In This Issue: Crossing Memory's Green Line- Contemporary Art in Beirut??™, articulates her joy of having an artist, who struggled to find recognition in his country of origin, participating at the Venice Biennial. Participation in these prestigious international exhibitions have become symbolic of achievement for artist who lives in specific political and social context where art practices do not receive any form of positive response from public and public institutions. Curatorial practice nowadays is exposed to as much scrutiny and criticism as the artists participating and artworks displayed, in a biennial for instance.

Jerry Saltz (2007), senior art critic for New York Magazine firmly believes that contemporary curators work ??? robotically or without insight??™ and are less innovative than their counterparts two generations ago. His post modern? approach to the visual arts, as denoted by Macy Klages (2006), ??? The world is meaningless Lets not pretend that art can make meaning then, lets just play with nonsense??™ explains his attitude towards contemporary curatorship:??? If curators can ??| convert biennials from being super-slick mega-events, these behemoths can still be zones of aberration, maps of the present, theaters of doubt and palimpsests of perception. They can still produce pleasure, tension, surprise and revelation. Nancy Princenthal (2002), also considers a certain freedom of expression important for the representation of art and condemns the so and so Biennial, especially its installation, ? post modern as related to the Age of information and the predominance of new media(Baudrillard), post industrial societies (Lyotard) where new forms of experiencing time and play (Harvey) reflects a culture of mass entertainment and edutainment."which ??? seemed calculated in the extreme??™ and concludes that ??? virtuoso curating is ultimately self-defeating; art is better off when its essential anarchy is respected??™ .

Several debates around biennials evoke the traditional temporal and fixed spatial framings of biennials (Obrist 1999), the modular framework based on nationality or subjects (Podesva 2006), and the ??? accelerated rate of exchange and consumption parallel to the global flow of capital and information??™ (Bradley 2003). Mesquita (2003) goes further to say that biennials are happening in more cities to secure a place in the international arena of economy and culture where the stakeholders nurture a ??? production system??™ which produces hierarchical roles for the participants.

The Mauritian Triennial can develop its own format to suit its purpose.

Massimiliano Gioni (2007), director of special exhibitions at the New Museum and also organiser of the 4th Berlin Biennial, Manifesta 5 and “ The Zone” at the 2003 Venice Biennial suggests that rules have to be changed, new formats to present art devised and new strategies and experiences designed by interacting directly with art and artists. Paul O’Neill (2006) also points out that biennials or art fairs should not follow previous patterns but endeavour to improve last years’ curatorial practice: Documenta 11 will be considered whilst reflecting upon the success or failure of the curation of Documenta 12.

EBC (Emergency Biennale in Chechnya), launched in 2005 by independent curator Evelyne Jouanno can be viewed as the anti-thesis to the biennial phenomenon. A relatively new form of art presentation known as the “evolutional exhibition”, first articulated by Obrist (1990) consists of a complex and flexible format that resists closure and fixity in time and space, reflecting the instability and unpredictability of contemporary life much like the asynchronous insurgencies of the world today. The evolutional exhibition presents an opportunity and space for facilitating experimentation, collaboration, and differentiation and does not focus on typical curatorial practices.

This new way of curating can be experienced in several recent projects such as Interarchive 2002, Utopia Station – 2003, and e-flux video rental -2004 to the present, among others. Utopia Station (2003) is worth elaborating for its unconventional form of curatorial practice by protagonists Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanij. The “Utopia station was the first large

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exhibition project, organized for the Venice biennale in 2003, regrouping about 160 artist, filmmakers, intellectuals and including 4 offsite projects ??“ a few experimental art sites located along a stretch of desert communities, an interactive archive of pictures, community projects around the themes power relations, democracy and self-organization and a sound project looking at the radio as an artistic independent space. The project is meant to be mobile and not based on temporality and spatiality as traditional biennial??™s project works. The curators named above use their curatorial knowledge and expertise to devise projects which place artists, their practices as well as audience interaction at the forefront. Such an endeavour helps portray the collaboration which can give rise to newer forms of art events and discourses. Traditional biennials like the Documenta Germany, Johannesburg or Venice biennials are attached to discourses on cultural policy, national representation and internationalism and have become polarizing spaces to certain forms of artistic and curatorial praxis within the global culture industry (Chaimovich 1999).

The Mauritian Triennial does not need to follow ??? imperial???™ forms of organisation and representation. The goal of curatorial practice is the best representation of contemporary visual art to an identified audience. The ideas on the relationship between art, exhibition space, and audience are changing, and the way that art institutions are structured and administered is becoming more complex.

Future models of Triennials/ Biennials will have to emphasise on collaboration as ??? a challenge to the autonomous authorial identity associated with the object of art??™ (Slayton 2002) and as interactive

partnership between authors and users in contemporary use of new media (Manovich 2002). Collaboration also refers to the access to the museum through multimedia applications like websites or CDROMs. On a very fundamental level ??? the bureaucratic system of exhibiting and collecting art – a system which has historically been at odds with the demand for equal access to the art museum – has met its match with ? imperialistic mode of representation refers here to a colonial perspective of institutions as monolithic structures of power and hierarchy.

It also denotes here a Eurocentric (Western point of view) approach to display based on notions of traditional European museums. "the advent of the internet??™ (Williams 2002). The curator, in the face of new media, its virtual realities (Baudrillard 1995), new forms of expression and mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1936), networked media and internet art, should genuinely explore ways to ??? incorporate these emerging forms??™, understand the best role to play, create an appropriate frame to best enable access to these experimental forms, provide tools and explore discourse on how to represent these art projects (Weil 2002). According to Dodson (2004), curators of the 21st century has a challenging responsibility to collect, catalogue, process and preserve abundant original materials intellectually using new technologies, working in close collaboration with IT experts and scholars. In relation to digital collection, knowledge of the content, interpretation and access remain fundamental to the curator??™s task (Prochaska 2004). Critical community intervention and education are also amongst the important features which should be focused on during biennials. Nakamura (2007) elaborates on the new role of cultural community projects

which can act as a resource for both sociopolitical and economic amelioration^{??}™. Institutional curatorial practices of the 21st century will also emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration between conservation scientists and curators as preserver of history and knowledge (Ainsworth 2005).

The curator should also be able to generate programmes related to education and other issues pertaining to society ^{??}“ eradication of poverty, AIDS, Global Warming for instance. Understanding social responsibility programmes and political agendas contribute to a wider scope of projects which concern the community at large. Artist led initiatives While curators in an institutional context operate ^{???} with pre-defined missions and agendas^{??}™ (Dodson 2004), others prefer to challenge ^{???} the autonomous authorial identity associated with the object of art^{??}™ (Slayton 2002) and venture in more unsafe waters. The post-war era with visual art movements like Pop art and Minimalism fundamentally altered the way in which the public interacted with art. One of the most visible changes"was the emergence of the artist from studio to exhibition space (Greenberg 1965). In the 1950^{??}™s, the Independent Group, precursor to the Pop Art movement, started challenging traditional views of Fine Art with symposiums centered on popular culture – mass advertising, movies, product design, comic strips, science fiction and technology.

Richard Hamilton, member of the Independent group, realised early in his career that works on its own in a museum space do not reach the public and brings much sense to the art object. The exhibition ^{???} This is tomorrow^{??}™ was the starting point of new forms of visual representation and display

where the role of curator and artist becomes blurred (Birnbaum 2003).

Harald Szeemann, on the other hand, was initially a curator in an institutional context who left the institution of the Kunsthalle as ??? a rebellion aimed at having more freedom??™ (Straus 2007). There has been a significant shift away from the didactic model of curating based on a curator-author format towards a more collaborative model where genuine dialogue binds artist and curator (Howard 2008).

According to O??™ Neill (2008), the current notion of the artist as curator emerged with the birth of ??? alternative spaces??™. The development of alternative spaces like White Columns and Franklin Furnace was initiated by artists who were striving for a new method of presenting their work (Myers 2004). Today debates within curatorial discourses on the relevance of curator as artist are still being discussed in contemporary art magazines like Art monthly and frieze. Artist led initiatives, in the forms of non-profit arts associations, informal art groups and artist run spaces, very often limited by a scarcity of time and funds, ??? simplify the relationship between cultural traditions and economic transactions??™ (Podesva 2006) by being able to organise events and exhibitions outside the bureaucratic and financial structure of institutions. Such initiatives ??? challenge the limitations of cultural institutions to explore new ways of seeing??™ (Laurence 2004).

This challenge has also contested traditional curatorial practices with animated debates on the present role of the curator outside the institutional context, the need for the artist to embark on curatorial practices and the art of curating as critical discourse. According to Reid (2005), the curator is the catalyst in the synchronisation of the various elements in artist led

initiatives, holds a powerful and responsible position to put forth new ideas, to choose the focus, to stimulate dialogue between audience and artists, thereby broadening understanding about potential for art and artists to change thinking, to effect cultural and social change. Boyd (2007) is sceptical about the implications of contemporary art's curatorial efforts which are initiated by persons trained in either institutional settings or from the vantage point of art history. He believes that contemporary exhibits should be mounted by artists who define themselves by their art practice, rather than as curators. Myers (2004) is also in support of a break of hierarchy between curators and artist: Change in inevitable Contemporary artists have recognized and are embracing these new approaches, and are taking charge as curators, critics, and administrators – shifting the division of power in the art world.

Curators and critics coming from academically trained professional institutions usually believe that artists do not possess the capabilities to perform outside the studio environment promoting the stereotypical view of the artist as inarticulate, unorganized, and uneducated with respect to the history of art and need the help of curators to give direction to their work (Koplos 2002). Curatorial practices comprise of certain methodologies which contributes to intellectual critical discourses around the visual arts. Whether professional curators or artist-curator, the practices of curatorial discourses are relevant to any artist initiatives whether led by institutions or artists. As valorization, curatorial practice has definite power within the contemporary art world, and practicing as an artist and curator implies a certain knowledge of art and a desire to affect the history of art (Boyd).

Boyd believes that a curator must be prepared to tackle questions from the public sphere, like meaning, political and social context of artists' works, ideologies behind artworks, works' significance within a global perspective, engagement with the audience. The curator of the 21st century Artists who explore the realm of curatorial practice have the same responsibility to situate works and artists and act as the coherent speaker for all stakeholders in the arts – those involved at political and managerial level, funding bodies, artists, audience. Artist-"curators of the 21st century can also be policy interventionists, capacity builders, involved in sustainable projects which link art to other societal, environmental or economic issues. The debates around artist-curator and curator-artist prove that a new hybrid of professional and intellectual artist is emerging. At the start of a conference on media art curating in Liverpool, Amanda Crowley (2006), a curator refused to be categorized as a curator and claimed: "I'm making situations!" some curators (also) strive to be artists.

The term "curator" is now a stereotyped depiction of the conceptual director of corporate, institutionalized funding dynamics now, new media apparatchiks with artists merely becoming invisible, creative laborers, mere workers in the culture industry, according to Crowley. Although curatorial practices as professional course has been introduced for the last 10 years in the biggest art universities like the Royal Art College of Art, London or the VU University, Amsterdam, debates like the conference organised by the Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sunderland, England in 2005 around the theme "Curating can be learned, but can it be taught" contests the mould graduates who leave university with

similar forms of practices and examined innovative curatorial practice, and the relationship between artists, curators and the academy. Paul O'Neill (2005) in his paper 'The co-dependent curator' is optimistic on the future role of curatorial practice which has been subject to constant transformation, states of hybridity and a discourse that is in continuous flux. Like any such dynamic phase, curating's future will be determined by the small shifts that are currently evolving. In 2006, he added in an article 'Curating: Practice Becoming Common Discourse': 'We feel that we are part of something. We go there; we experience; we return home; we read about it, and someone has written our holiday report. We are part of the common discourse'. The 21st future role of the curator could well encompass a mixture of aesthetician, diplomat, economist, critic, historian, politician, audience developer, and promoter as noted by Michael Brenson (2001).

ConclusionThe topic for this thesis was decided after much discussion with the different members of Gasworks, London during my internship in July 2008. Gasworks also started as an artist led initiative in the form of studio galleries managed by the artists themselves. Gasworks succeeded in obtaining some funding to offer more professional services to artists and community at large in terms of art experience.

The need to establish some structured form of curatorial practice was considered fundamental for the progress of the association, in terms of commitment to both funders and community. Based on the success of Gasworks which curate amongst the most innovative shows in London, this research attempts to introduce the ideologies of curatorial practices in its

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most expansive features to the local arts scene. Several publications and journals were consulted for this paper. However, the most important part of the study was the numerous readings available on the Internet written in the last 10 years where curatorial practices have been scrutinised in several critical discourses by critics, artists, curators and the press.

The numerous blogs, online magazines, newsletters and discussion forums hosted by curators, arts organisations, universities, artists, lecturers and directors on curatorial practices gave a multifaceted dimension to the research. The objective of this paper was to finally present a researched analysis on the history of curatorial practices, the critical debates around different practices and the role of the curator of the 21st century. The purpose is to introduce curatorial practices to the contemporary visual art initiatives in an institutional and artist led context in Mauritius. The duality between artist-curator and alternative spaces versus institutional galleries is also investigated throughout in order to understand the source of discussions between institutions and artists which is also giving rise to critical national debates here.

Writers and visual artists in Mauritius, a democratic post colonial nation, have often rebelled against any form of post-imperialism?. The Eurocentric? attitude of the National Art Gallery which designed the 3 Triennials upon the formats of other European biennials is being contested today by a group of ??? avant-garde??™ local artists. The artists??™ disappointment was not fully understood by the press who is represented by journalists"with very little exposure to arts discourses. This paper aims at understanding and promoting curatorial practices in a country where the term is used

inadequately to portray the mere organisation of events. Innovative curatorial practices based on critical discourses, collaboration and sustainability has the ability to inform the press, educate the community and recommends arts associations – whether the National Art Gallery or other artist led initiatives – as well as public and private authorities on the development of sustainable programmes for the benefit of artists and society at large."List of referencesArtist led study day: Building networks and capacity 2006, British Council, UK, viewed 30 October 2008 .

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