

A. What is Curating?

Curating is the practice of making art (or something related to art) become public. Curators are mediators between art and its audience in one way or another. The role is as old as the need to look after collections of objects in any culture. The title originated in the museum context to denote experts taking care of objects: to 'curate' referred to the conservation and classification of artifacts, nature specimens, and artworks. In the art field, over time the term 'curator' has come to cover a wide range of activities beyond the museum, including organising exhibitions, programming events, conducting research, and engaging directly with artists and audiences. While not all arts have an explicit 'curator' role, many of the curatorial functions, skills and challenges addressed here are present in the role of artistic directors, producers or programmers in music and theatre.

B. The Curator's Skills

Connecting art with audiences involves many tasks. Curating and artistic direction is a creative, intellectual, and managing job at the same time. Think of it as a mix between ideating, organizing a production process, and facilitating dialogues between many agents. The curator skills include:

- A great deal of understanding of art forms, art history and theory, and of the art and culture scene. This means you often need to be willing to do research, interview artists, and get involved in their creative process to support them while respecting their artistic freedom.
- A knack for public relations, the ability to mediate between different perspectives in a team, and to network with institutions.
- To be savvy about artistic needs during production and display of artworks (technical aspects), and good at anticipating spatial, illumination, and acoustic issues as well as accessibility needs.
- Writing skills to present your ideas and engage in public conversations about art with on- and offline communities.
- Managing or producing knowledge and know-how (see sections E. and F. below)

Everyone relies on the curator for communication to run smoothly, for an exhibition or event concept to be clear, collaboration terms to be fair to everyone involved, and for artworks to be engaging for the audience. For this reason, curatorial projects often have more than one person running the show and sharing decision making. Increasingly in the

last decades, it is curatorial collectives who make the most interesting projects in galleries, museums, performance venues, festivals, biennials and self-organized local spaces.

C. How to Start?

There are many ways to come up with a curatorial proposal:

- From a **topic** or main narrative. What are your curatorial questions? A good curatorial project does not operate with a generic topic (e.g. climate change, love and friendship, abstract painting, virtual reality). It needs to propose a particular, well-informed, and innovative approach to the topic. Delve deep into your topic and find a meaningful angle to work with.
- From an exhibition **space or platform** that you are somehow connected to. This setting will provide clues for which content or approaches are relevant.
- From a community of **practice** / group of artists you want to collaborate with; or sets of techniques, genre, and media you are interested in showing publicly.
- From an **audience** in society (locally and/or international) you'd like to reach, a larger dialogue you want to be part of.

Regardless of your departure point, in order to get funding for the project you need to pay attention to how all these components relate: Ensure that the topic actually matches the artists' profiles, the artistic medium involved, and the context where the works will circulate. The exhibition or performance space should be well suited to the art practices, and you should have good strategies to reach relevant audiences.

D. Curatorial Approach

Once you have a starting point, it matters a lot how you make your curatorial project appealing and distinct from other curatorial ideas out in the field. This will be your curatorial approach or statement. There are many things to decide. Consider the following questions:

- Creating an experience: What kind of experience do you expect from exhibitions or events and why? What type of aesthetic experiences would be the most interesting in connection with your departure point? (be specific: spatial, visual, sonic, embodied, participatory, textual, dialogical, virtual, etc.) Justify your choices.
- Go beyond art objects/media: Which activities or encounters do you think are important today? Which are missing in art events in your field?
- What would you need to support particular artworks in the show? Are there obstacles for them to fit well in the space, or can you propose strategies to ensure they are fully appreciated?
- Audiences: When you pick a topic or media it is obvious it will speak more to some people in society than others for different reasons. But consider for a minute: Who is

missing from art exhibitions and events that you think could bring value or enjoy them? Are there physical or social barriers for them to attend or access the art forms curated? How could you reach out to them? How may you accommodate their needs? And when they come, how can the project engage them, relate to them... How will you foster a true dialogue?

E. Context and Funding Sources

To ensure the content of the exhibition or event will be a good match with the context where it will become public, you need to learn how to play by the rules in each context and have a meaningful dialogue with it and its audiences. Consider if your project is better suited to:

- Public institutions and venues
- Art market and galleries
- Internet spaces and communities
- Local community spaces
- Cultural/entertainment events or festivals
- International collaborators and partner initiatives
- Curatorial grants or curatorial residences

Your project might match more than one of these. Make a list of concrete venues/platforms and find out how they work before you move forward. Making the right choice of context is essential to implementation. A good fit will help you get public funding for the project (via local or international grants). It will also be important to forge alliances with local organizations and to network effectively with gallery directors, community leaders, or decision makers. Be prepared to try more than once, as it might take some time to mature the project and find the best match for it. Residences are great for this!

F. Production

Curating implies careful and realistic management of many practical aspects. The larger the curatorial project, the more detailed your planning needs to be:

- Timeline: put it on the calendar from idea development, to funding, to final implementation
- Production of works: will the project have fees for creating new works or only to present pieces that are ready? Timelines and budgets for these two kinds of collaboration are very different.
- Will you organize an open call or make direct invitations? Deciding this will impact your timeline greatly, and will make your work more about research and networking (when inviting artists and adjusting to their agendas) or about planning and

managing submissions (promoting the open call, creating a platform and criteria for selection). Either way, try to find a balance between approaches and to give space to different voices in your selection. Projects and practitioners who are very different can come together in interesting ways and promote a deeper discussion on the topic.

- Budgeting of production and knowing how to use funds (payments, taxation, etc.)
- Questions of accessibility of venues and content.
- Sustainability of the production and during the display. What is the afterlife of the project? Can materials be recycled/reused?
- Negotiating terms and fees for participation, drafting contracts with artists, producers, social media agents. Ensuring the work is compensated fairly and tasks and timeline are clear for everyone.
- Following up on the production of works; having curatorial discussions with artists.
- Writing and editing curatorial statements, wall text, program notes, and promotional materials.
- Designing the exhibition space (equipment, technical and accessibility riders)
- Planning the opening or premiere (guests, activities, invitations, press)
- Planning the moving and installing/dismounting of works
- Programming support activities in the space (guest speakers, guided tours, etc.), and hosting public events.
- Supporting artists to plan how the work will live beyond your project. Forging longer collaborations or facilitating their access to a wider network to expand the reach of the work in other venues, festivals, and art publications. Writing recommendation letters for them in future grants.

G. Getting your curatorial project ready for pitching/submission

When developing your project and deciding where and who to work with, make a succinct draft of your proposal with all its components. We recommend that you do this well before grant deadlines and especially before you arrange meetings to pitch your ideas with galleries, venues or other collaborators. It will help you clarify your own intentions, what you can offer, and what you need from them.

Use this checklist. Try to include them all (not in this order necessarily):

1. State your **departure point** clearly: what is at stake in your project? Define a concrete **curatorial question-narrative** to work with your topic and practices in the context you are proposing to do the project.
2. Describe the **artistic practices/processes/objects/genre** you are interested in and explain why you choose these art forms in relation to a larger artistic or societal discussion. What is their relevance or contribution to your question?

3. **Content:** list the names of artists, practitioners (if you already know who they are; or cite them as examples of whom you aim to reach), and give basic info of their work. How do you see the relations amongst them? And their novelty value or meaningfulness in your project?
4. Explain the **exhibition/event set up:** state the production, spatiality, audiences, social context and accessibility when relevant. What audiences are you expecting to reach there?
5. **In a nutshell:** Give it a strong tentative title and write the shortest pitch (150 words) you'll need to promote it in a grant, online, or in a catalogue.
6. **Visuals:** find tentative pictures (and/or sketch the exhibition space) to convey your proposal and the art forms you intend to work with.
7. **Timeline & budget:** estimate your production schedule and costs realistically. Dream big but be resourceful also: sometimes having two scenarios (Ideal / Basic), can help you do this better.

And be prepared to change it! As the project gets real and more feasible and as you find collaborators or funding sources, many things will need to be adjusted. A curator is a good negotiator: persistent, invested in convincing others, but also willing to listen and skillful to adapt to what circumstances and partners can offer.