The title of this book comes from the simple fact that the contributors are academics, artists and curators directly associated with RMIT University. The School of Art – along with a number of other schools within the university – presents a vast calendar of exhibitions, installations, events and performances. In every case someone is named as curator. It was this that started my questioning of what it is to be a curator in an academic environment.

The writers were invited to consider all or some of the following questions:

What do you understand by the term “curating”?
What are the essential characteristics of a curator?
What has been the most influential curated experience for you?
What are the limits you place on yourself as a curator?
Is there a direct relationship between being an artist and being a curator?
What do you consider to be your most significant curatorial experience? Why?
What has been the most influence on you as a curator?
When curating an exhibition what is your principal concern?
The aim in posing these questions was not to limit the considerations of the writers but to act as a springboard for thought and reflection on the contributors’ activities, influences and practice.

The writers have to a greater or lesser extent discussed their understanding of the term curator. In responding to this and the other questions there is not necessarily a consensus view presented. It should be stated that this was never the intention of this project – it was to capture the thoughts and ideas of artist/curators at a particular time in their career. Equally as artist/curators their approach, insight and determination about how their works and the works of others are presented to an audience (however it is defined), the story line (if there is in fact a narrative or some description), or even the manner in which some of the ideas that have resulted in the development and presentation of the works have been conveyed. Throughout the collection, the writers have provided a multitude of perspectives.

The curatorial process is complex in many ways. For me, the most important component is the enabling and transmission of an aesthetic experience. But I acknowledge that this is not always necessarily so; for example, an exhibition may be mounted simply to provoke or to make a political statement. Certainly, the curator guides and assists with the communication between the artist/art work and the audience. Through the conceptualising of an exhibition/performance/festival the curator presents a view of the art work (or works), its world, and the world in which it now exists. The curator adds to our interpretation and communication and educates in the broadest sense of the word.

In the literature much time has been devoted to the range of definitions and etymology of the term curator. From its ecclesiastical and exegetical sources through to its position of care and direction, we see the development and articulation of what a curator has become and indeed, what future roles might be.
Borah (2005) in an article “Not the artist, but the art” suggested “The word curating…originates in the museum; the curator being a person who is the protector and guardian of the art objects and is also responsible for its impact on society. In short, the buck stops with the curator” (p. 1). The “buck” in all its facets does stop in so many ways with the curator. Klein (2002) suggested that “in the past twenty-five years the role of the curator had been transformed from someone whose role was to curate/care for the collections of the museum to a person with an active engagement and role in shaping the discourse around and about contemporary art” (p. 105).

Friedman (2010), in a wide ranging discussion around curating, particularly relating to the vast amounts of information available, suggested

To be a curator was once to be the professional overseer of a large collection of important physical objects, be they books, artwork, shrubbery or zoo animals. Today, anyone with computer access and a few minutes to spare can curate. It is irrelevant that their collections do not exist in the animate world. It is assumed that good search skills have replaced deep subject knowledge. And it is a reflection of our current, turbulent relationship with knowledge that this particular term has undergone such a massive massification. (¶ 5)

Friedman continues with the comment that “when we are overwhelmed with the flow of knowledge…it makes perfect psychological sense to call forth the term used to identify one of our earliest knowledge handlers. A signifier that, unlike Librarian, has avoided unfortunate stereotypes: a cure-all, a Terminator, a Curator!” (¶ 8).

From an educational perspective there are numerous parallels between the role of a curator and that of a teacher. In the 1950s Roger Sessions explored the relationship between the composer, the performer and the audience. These
views have been taken up by a number of writers. The Russian composer and educator Dmitri Kabalevsky (1977) in exploring the artistic and aesthetic relationship between the composer, the performer and the listener added the teacher to realise and complete the nature of the experience. He said “the composer, the performer, the listener and the music teacher comprise an indivisible system. The system is put on a serious trial in many countries of the world today; the equilibrium is often disturbed. All the four units of the system are equally important” (Kabalevsky, 1977, p. 14). So too the curator contributes to the indivisible system. In pursuing this discussion at a later date, Kabalevsky (1988) stated that “as for the teacher, he must not lose sight of the fact that music, like any art, helps children to see the world and nurtures their education by developing not only their artistic tastes and their creative imagination, but also their love of life, mankind, of nature and their country” (p. 120). These, indeed, are also some of the functions of a curator.

In discussing Instructional Design, Suzie Boss (2009) discusses the work of teachers in using the internet as “sifting through all that stuff to find what you need – and then knowing how to incorporate the gems into your curriculum” (¶1). She draws the parallel with what a teacher does to curating: “arranging chosen pieces into an order and structuring a compelling question around them” (¶4). Again from an Instructional Design perspective she takes the comparison further:

When I consider the museum exhibits I remember most vividly, I can see how the curator has directed my attention to particular details, patterns, or nuances. Sometimes it’s the story behind the painting that grabs my interest. Or it might be a biographical detail about the artist that stays with me. Good curators work in the background, but their influence is powerful. Like artful teachers, they
make critical decisions, raise questions, challenge assumptions, and provoke responses. (¶5)

One of the principal concerns of an educator is to convey ideas and ways of seeing the world. It is to prompt, guide and facilitate others to think and consider their world and the world of others. In addition by combining the artist with the educator and the curator we have the opportunity to experience the impact of the works within an artistic and knowledgeable context. The contributors to this volume give voice (and space) to the development of an idea, a concept, a point of view, a standpoint, a way of viewing and hearing, and most of all a way of thinking and understanding.

References