Barefoot Curating: Contemporary Art and the Role of the Freelance Curator

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Damian Smith
BA Fine Art, RMIT University
MA ArtCur, University of Melbourne

School of Art
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis/project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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CHAPTER HEADINGS

At the beginning of each chapter a brief description of the material contained therein is presented. It is distinguished from the body text of the chapter and is therefore presented in single line spacing.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Where I have not been able to locate a specific primary source, I have referred to authoritative secondary texts.

FURTHER RESEARCH

In terms of suggesting further appraisal of my practice as a curator and arts writer the reader is directed to a recently established archive containing my published works, approximating some 200 documents, most of which are listed in the appendices under my curriculum vitae (Appendix 6.0), plus additional artworks and ephemera, which in 2015 was established at the State Library of Victoria. The Damian Smith Archive, which is housed in the Library’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Department, is intended as the repository for an ongoing project mapping developments in contemporary art primarily through the work of Australian art practitioners and complimented by research into art practices in diverse locations especially through inter-cultural projects that establish connections between Australian artists and their counterparts elsewhere. This presently includes projects undertaken in China, Tibet and Cuba and where possible will include additional catalogues and ephemera pertaining to the various regions. The earliest material therein dates from 2000 with new additions being made periodically. I am especially grateful to Arts Librarian Dermot McCaul and Des Cowley, History of the Book Manager, for their assistance with this process.
ABSTRACT / SUMMARY

Barefoot Curating: Contemporary Art and the Role of the Freelance Curator, examines the role of the freelance curator in contemporary art with initial focus on the context of Australia though ultimately further afield. In doing so the research endeavours to account for the conditions that challenge the viability of the role within an overall industry of art. The importance of this research lies in the significance of the freelance curator as one who is capable of bringing to bear new perspectives within a sector that is contained and arguably constrained within institutional structures that include funding bodies, public galleries, universities and commercial interests. The problem is significant because it highlights the degree to which new knowledge may be inhibited within a sector that claims newness and difference as a key objective while simultaneously perpetuating cultural tendencies that disavow access to or interest in broader cultural discourses, even at the expense of its own sustainability. Through considering a range of factors, including projects enacted beyond the national context the research embraces the possibilities of working in remote, unusual and under-resourced contexts with a view to developing new cultural knowledge derived from the experiences associated with these settings.

The practical application of the research can be seen in the light of emerging geo-political issues associated with such factors that include climate change, resource management and population displacement, which comes into focus through the question of what role if any might art play in changing our prospects as a species especially in the face of pressing global challenges. In answer the research articulates the concept of 'Barefoot Curating' being both a practical and philosophical response to developing art projects in under-resourced contexts.

The research centred on the analysis of three curated projects enacted respectively in institutional, commercial and independent contexts. A two-part methodology was applied consisting of ‘Arenas’ and ‘Critical Measures’. ‘Arenas’ frames the overlapping agendas of ‘subjectivities’, ‘contexts’ and ‘economies’ as the requisite factors upon which exhibitions rely. ‘Critical Measures’ outlines the critical perspectives that were brought into play to enable and refine the curatorial work, outlined under the sub-headings of ‘makers’, ‘practice’, ‘knowledge’, ‘audience’, ‘space’ and ‘change’.

Through conducting the aforementioned research, a growing awareness of the limits impeding the viability of freelance curating in Australia led to a reappraisal of both the freelance curatorial role and more broadly the systems with which curating interacts. In responding to the problems confronting freelance curators, working with expanded cultural contexts including inter-cultural projects is suggested as a means forward, both for curating as a profession and as a means of imparting new cultural knowledge at a time of transition within the Australian art sector.

The larger implications of the research pertain initially to the viability of freelance curating within the visual arts sector in Australia, which in turn has implications for artists also and the emerging cultural landscape. Secondly, the implications of Barefoot Curating as a mode of practice become apparent when considered in light of the unprecedented human population levels globally and the challenges for cultural practitioners at a time when cultural values and actions are capable of impacting and even destabilizing the future well-being of people generally.
PRELUDE

As an Australian-based freelance curator of contemporary art it is true that cultural contexts dissimilar to my own have often attracted me. The situation in to which I had now been cast however was of a different order entirely. Directed to remove my shoes, the Padrino leads me barefoot through darkened rooms to an inner sanctum arrayed with the deities of Santeria, the Cuban equivalent of Voodoo. It is here upon receiving a blast of white rum, delivered without warning from the sputtering lips of my guide, directly into my face, that I hear the instructions. I am to commune with the ancient god Ogun.

Pivoting to a dimly illuminated corner I find a vessel manically pierced with a hundred or more knives and overlain with implements of every sort. While I can only begin to imagine what my encounter with this arcane fetish might mean, I find it is impossible to distract myself from more pressing feelings and the daunting task on my mind. Commissioned to curate a major series of projects for the Bienal de la Habana, one of the world’s most significant contemporary art festivals, I am filled with anxiety about my ability to function within the limits of the institution’s well-known frugality. It is a strategy utterly in line with a country that has long laboured under the toughest of economic sanctions, yet its productions and cultural dialogues have been profound. In silent contemplation I wonder how, on no foreseeable budget and in a nation where basic materials are scarce at best, could I possibly begin this undertaking. What had I signed up for? What on earth was I thinking?

Exiting the sanctum, I discover that Ogun is the orisha of iron, tools and weapons, the overseer of work and projects, he who tirelessly toils to create new inventions and overcome all challenges. More than this Ogun is said to be the progenitor of civilization. Heralded by a ritual cleansing, which the Padrino unleashes with the aid of a nervously flapping pigeon, this obscure knowledge is conveyed. Yet now in the fading Caribbean light, amidst the crumbling apartments on Calle San Lazaro where the rumblings of the ocean buffeting the Malecon sea wall resonates along unlit avenues, he fixes me with two dark eyes. In a gently enunciated patois this avuncular master of ceremonies offers some prescient advice. “That big event you plan to do here in Cuba, all you have to know is that everything you need, every thing, is already at hand.” If only, I think, if only this were true.
INTRODUCTION

This practice-led research develops, arrives at and illuminates the concept of ‘Barefoot Curating’, being both a practical and philosophical response to developing art projects in under-resourced contexts. The term, which I coin in this dissertation, stems from an interrogation of the role of the freelance curator in contemporary culture and along with it the function of art in society more broadly. Framed in the context of an over-populated and arguably resource-challenged planet the question of what role if any might art play in changing our prospects as a species finds an optimistic response in Barefoot Curating. Formed primarily in under-resourced contexts, Barefoot Curating reaffirms the intrinsic worth of art as a unique expression within human culture. Importantly, the articulation of these ideas comes at a time when the visual arts are entwined with market forces in ways that are unprecedented and which are profoundly reshaping culture today. As such, the ideas that are here explored may be seen as a response to these conditions.

Issues pertaining to this situation are explicitly addressed by arts academic Justin O’Connor. In his article *After the Creative Industries: Why We Need a Cultural Economy* O’Connor states:

Art and culture are under immense threat. I am not thinking only about those sustained by public subsidy but about the fate of culture itself. Our system of collective and individual meaning-making has been given over to a market-machine for the capture of ‘profit without production’, whose dominating logic is financialisation and the battery of digitised metrics that goes along with it (O’Connor 2016, p.51).

As one amongst many who have been swept along by these forces I locate my research within a realm of cultural advocacy that aims to reclaim the intrinsic worth of culture precisely at a time in which culture has been monetized to an inordinate degree. This does not mean the abandonment of a sustainable career, a course that, were one to embark upon it, would be but an inverted expression of the problem. There is more at stake than personal sentiment alone. Rather if we fail to critically appraise and to think outside of the logic of art as monetized commodity then we exclude a myriad of possibilities that may flourish through other concerns and other dreamings, from other ways of being that are yet to be imagined or have simply receded from memory.

The concept of ‘Barefoot Curating’, loosely derived from the ‘Barefoot Doctors’ of post-revolutionary China has emerged out of a three-fold analysis – of the historical conditions of curating, of the broad terrain of curating today, and lastly of my career as a freelance curator working primarily in Australia, including three specific projects that are here analysed in detail. Yet where the Barefoot Doctors or *chíjiāo yīshēng* (Zhang & Unschuld 2008) operated with rudimentary means the significant difference
today, especially for those working on lean budgets, is the ready availability of cheap technology and on-line networks. Being small no longer means being isolated or insignificant. Indeed, instances where disruptive technologies are in play suggest that both the agility and fresh thinking associated with small players is becoming a game changer. While monolithic, single-desk models still persist they are no longer the driving forces of industry for they are increasingly challenged by the nimbler players. To the extent that art is an industry, which indeed it is, and which includes large and centralizing systems for distribution such as international art fairs, many artists and curators continue to develop their own things though not always with the ambition of acceptance within the prevailing system.

In the era of globalization, which emerged towards the end of the 1980s, this represents a curious set of circumstances. On the one hand artists, such as those who participated in the world changing events of 1989 including the collapse of the Berlin Wall, were keen to see a new era of global connectedness. It did not take long however to recognize the homogenizing challenges where culture was concerned, ‘a world without borders’ becoming ‘new world order’ in not too long a time. For many young artists the possibility of global notoriety is nowadays tempered by recognition that local culture and one’s unique point of difference may in fact be a concept worthy of commitment. Though to do so one must also contend with the political dimensions of what one wishes to convey.

In Australia in 2016 this is a point of significance. The nation’s incumbent Turnbull government has signalled scant regard for small to medium sized arts companies, slashing funding to some sixty-five long-running arts organizations with much the same happening to individual artists (Taylor 2016). Despite the prime ministerial rhetoric around ‘flexibility and agility’ within professional spheres the retraction of government support must be an occasion for reassessment where long term survival of artists and independent arts workers is concerned. Agility certainly, but not without perceiving the degree to which contemporary art, as a thing of value in its own right, is not always aligned with or may even challenge the interests of government. If anything the current status quo should prove to be but a low point in a political cycle that fails to identify with cultural voices that function in ways that are different to its own; in effect cultural voices whose motivations are not primarily ideological.

What I would argue for is a system where government recognizes the value of culture and cultural diversity within society, but remains at arm’s length from that which it funds. Otherwise we risk moving to a situation already realized in modern-day Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan wherein government actively pursues those it perceives as different to itself (The Financial Times 2007). To paraphrase actor Cate Blanchett’s comments on the global refugee crisis, there are no solutions down the path of intolerance.
Through this research the vision at which I arrive is one in which artists and curators are empowered through a constellation of means to enact projects of cultural significance regardless of the economic regimes under which they toil. Further still I see that new forms of culture often emerge in contexts that are initially un-funded – albeit for short periods - because they have not yet entered mainstream culture, have not found their full articulation; they are nascent and hold the promise of the future.

But make no mistake. This is not an argument to de-fund the arts. Far from it. Mavericks, creative thinkers and innovators need their supporters and it is here that government has a real role to play, primarily through funding, though additional mechanisms and policies also. The responsibility of governments and businesses and private individuals to invest in the arts extends from the fact that culture is of intrinsic importance to society for it binds people together, is a source of social cohesion, tolerance and understanding and is a key factor in the enrichment, enlargement and transformation of individual and collective consciousness. Art especially is emblematic in this sense for at its best it offers powerful insights that go to the core of our humanity.

In addition to art’s intrinsic worth, there is also the economic factor, by which art and culture, time and again, are revealed to be significant drivers of economic growth. In recent years a significant body of research has focused on these concerns. For example, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) commissioned social researcher Hristina Mikić to survey the financial contribution of cultural industries to society. In Measuring The Economic Contribution of Cultural Industries: A Review and Assessment of Current Methodological Approaches, 2012 Mikić accumulates vast statistical data to this end. Similar endeavours include CISAC – the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers, the publishers of Cultural Times – The First Global Map of Cultural and Creative Industries, which attributes 3 per cent of the world’s GDP or 2.25 billion US dollars annually, to the creative industries. Richard Florida’s highly influential text, The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life, 2002 draws on the economic contribution of cultural actors to account for the significance of creativity in building strong economies. Clearly artistic communities are catalysts for transforming underperforming economies, especially city centres, into economic powerhouses. Within this equation curators, and especially freelance curators have an important role to play, especially so where they are curators not only of art but of social relations as well. It is through the curation of social capital and networks of diverse actors that artistic practice enters cultural and social systems, thereby changing them fundamentally.

As the assertions I make about the viability of freelance curating in the national context are less than positive, though marginally more optimistic in the international context, I begin this dissertation with a biographical overview of my career in the visual arts. I do so in order to provide the reader with an
account of my expertise across an industry with dimensions that are sufficiently diverse, stratified, partitioned, trans-national, unregulated and obscure to require broad and prolonged experience within it in order to claim some insight about its future. The breadth of my experience, working in different countries and in different aspects of the contemporary art world are outlined, which while providing a temporal framework for the research also inform the subsequent detailed delineations of the sector and the conclusions at which I arrive. In providing context to the research, the opening remarks help to establish how the initial research questions emerged from a practice that is diverse in character, as indeed many arts careers can be. Thus the emergence of Barefoot Curating as a mode of practice can be seen as having relevance to a wide variety of arts practitioners who share the challenges of creating within the complexities of modern society. Barefoot Curating may even signal a way forward, a way in which ‘meaning making’ need not be dependent on market forces, even as it recognizes practitioners who are already creating art projects of significance on minimal means.

Methodological Rationale

The process of outlining my professional history enabled me also to reflect on the specificities of my experience and to perceive also how certain tendencies had emerged with regard to my approach to curating. These tendencies ultimately informed the development of a research methodology, especially with regards to developing and appraising the three projects examined in this dissertation. That phase of the overall methodology is outlined in Chapter VIII, for it leads directly into my appraisal of the three projects. But before that part of the methodology could be outlined it was important for me to appraise and consider its formulation in light of wider critical factors. After all, the methodology to which I refer is grounded in the context of my working life and up until now I had not critiqued it in any substantial way. Due in part to my education in art history my instinctive response where critique is concerned was to look to history, though not just the recent history of curating but something deeper, older and perhaps more profound than the current zeitgeist that surrounds curatorial activity might suggest. For me, at a very personal level, curating is about a contemplation of culture through artefacts. It is about our relationship to material things and to the immaterial concepts that are reified within them. These are precious and important outpourings that contribute to our notion and experience of a human culture. They embody, reflect and enable the processes of our being and becoming. Further still it is around and through these things that we construct and recognise shared understandings, which in turn enable us to connect and empathise, and to change and grow as individuals and communities. Without these enlivening characteristics that are embedded in art and culture and their making, curating would have little or no appeal, just a glib
shuffling of objects that makes no contribution to meaningful or reflective existence. Curating affirms, frames and celebrates the role of art in life.

Having thus laid claim to a deep history of curating – of ‘cultural care’ as I call it, I turn also to the contemporary terrain – that is to say the period in which I live and work. This more than anything has been the context in which my curatorial methodology has taken shape – at times with considerable haste and practicality and generally with a good deal of delight in working with artists and other professionals. It is for this reason that the consideration of comparative models, critical filters and social factors that pertain to this period has enabled me to shape my methodology into something that is not just pertinent to me but also to others within the curatorial and contemporary art arenas. And after all curating is all about the act of communication. To do so one must come to grips with what others are thinking and thinking about and the challenges with which they must contend. Chapters IV – VII respectively analyse therefore the conditions, variety, problems and social agency of curating. Finally it is through correlating the observations contained therein with both my historical analysis and the appraisal of my own practice that I arrive finally at a critically rigorous methodology for analysing my curatorial work.
CHAPTER I
FROM ARTIST TO CURATOR: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

The breadth of the author’s experience, working in different countries and in different aspects of the contemporary art world are outlined, which while providing a temporal framework for the research also inform the subsequent detailed delineations of the sector and the conclusions arrived upon. I begin in Melbourne, Australia in the late 1980s.

Being an art school graduate who became a curator it is possible to contextualise my career within a growing class of art world practitioners that have, in the late 20th Century and beyond, obtained significance in terms of how contemporary art is displayed, talked about and collected. However, Fine Art in 1987 at Victoria College, Prahran and from 1989 painting at RMIT did not prepare me for a career in the curatorial arena; indeed, I have no specific recollection of what is now, curating, a much-used term, let alone recognition of it as a creative profession. It remains nonetheless the role in which I have worked for over twenty years, one that I came to via a circuitous route of art old and new and in disparate geographical locations.

Yet as a budding artist with interests in expressionist figuration this was not always the case. Initial tutoring by well-known artist-teachers suggested, if not a career, then at least a life less ordinary. On the Prahran campus near the corner of High and Chapel Street, Howard Arkley’s ironic expressionism was juxtaposed with Tony Clarke’s cynical conceptualism, Vivienne Shark-Lewitt made an ethereal presence, performance artist and sculptor Alex Danko demanded that we ‘work’ and in the mandatory English class the teacher screened Luis Buñuel and David Lynch. This created an engaging set of tensions, indeed one in which many students flourished. However, the general tone, while entertaining, implied the mastering of techniques that had not been adopted by our teachers. Further exposure was to visiting lecturers - American conceptualist Barbara Kruger, British media theorist Dick Hebdige and Russian mavericks Komar and Melamid. This I followed with a sojourn in northern India before moving to RMIT. While Jon Cattapan was the more successful painter on staff, emphasis on Theory was a trend that none could escape. Art historical and film theory studies at the University of Melbourne later offset this, rounding out research methods that would later prove their worth. Finishing my studies, a one-way ticket to Europe garnered employment at the Paton Gallery in London’s East End. This was the mid-1990s and the Young British Artist movement, the YBAs, was on the rise. According to my employer, the self-styled ‘Anglo-Polynesian’ art dealer Graham Paton, an expatriate New Zealander whose resemblance to Quentin Crisp did not go unremarked, the gallery’s principal client was a graphic designer by the name of Charles Saatchi. For the first time I got a sense
of what serious collecting looked like, albeit in a manner that profoundly impacted both the market and marketing of contemporary art.

Despite the art world contacts, a squatting lifestyle became my adopted mode of existence and for a time I resided in the freewheeling Rainbow Tribe in Kentish Town. Located in a disused 19th Century church it was a wild and at times dysfunctional place but one where informal social movements including 'critical mass', 'reclaim the streets', 'hacktivism' and the renunciation of legal tender and Greenwich meantime obtained popular currency. The One World Rainbow Centre as it was officially known was an abode for dreamers, but in truth the Tribe had a dark and sporadically violent undercurrent. Throughout this period painting and drawing remained a preoccupation. When I was not making images of 'life in the tribe' I would visit other artist’s studios. This included Scottish war artist Peter Howson who was painting his haunting Bosnian scenes in a space adjoining the Paton Gallery, as well as Hervé Constant, the French/Moroccan painter at Space Studios who was playing with Kabbalah, Tarot and poetry. Over in Hampstead at Grove Terrace, the post-conceptual painter Gary Willis was perpetually on the night shift and when I wasn’t dropping by I travelled further afield, including trips to the Glasgow School of Art and Jeffery Smart’s 300-year old Palazzo and studio in Arezzo, Italy amongst many other experiences. Occasionally I was employed to install paintings like Lucien Freud’s *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, (1995), which was exhibited at Flowers Gallery in Hackney. Some years later, in 2008 the work acquired the dubious honour of obtaining the highest price ever paid for a painting by a living artist – US$33.6 million.

Throughout this period contracts with numerous UK based Modernists, including the Bauhaus trained designer Lucy Halford Williams and Australians Arthur Boyd and Mary Nolan were coming to fruition. In the latter case I was the archivist for the estate of Mary’s well-known husband Sid. It was a position I held for four years at the couple’s 16th Century home on the Welsh borders. Weekends were spent in London taking in the art - *Sensation* at the Royal Academy, being the show that announced the arrival of the YBAs, Laurie Anderson’s curated projects installed in outer London storage units, Indigenous artist Pansy Napangardi at the Groucho Club in Soho presented by Jennifer Isaacs and countless open studio projects across the East End to name but a few. Lectures at the Tavistock Institute alerted me to trends in psychoanalysis, while access to the British Museum’s Prints and Drawings Room offered volumes of study. Still vivid in that sea of imagery: a suite of charcoals by Spanish master Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and the bizarre pantomime skeletons produced by the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913). I spent most Fridays with the arts editor Peter Townsend (1919–2006). A renowned Sinophile who had once spent time with Mao Zedong, Peter’s collection of Chinese Socialist Realists prints first took shape after the Chinese Premier Zhou En Lai presented him with an example. He later sold those treasures to the Australian National
Gallery in Canberra, using the funds to start *Art Monthly Australia*, a magazine that is still running today.

Operating from a studio in London Fields my work was shown at Australia House alongside the concrete poet Richard Tipping, at Alice Perceval’s gallery in Wales and in the Whitechapel Open Studios; however, the company of what was estimated to be more than 10,000 newly graduated artists in Hackney alone proved somewhat challenging if not a little sobering. Eventually after brokering a contract with the National Gallery of Victoria as a guest curator, I returned to Melbourne. Departing then Director Gerard Vaughan’s office on a handshake deal, I enrolled in the University of Melbourne’s curatorial Masters course. My choice of profession had largely been settled.

These opportunities notwithstanding, I remained if not restless then actively curious about global art and culture. Short-term contracts in Australia and further afield occupied my time, and in artistic terms my disenchantment with painting was being fuelled by the expanding arena of contemporary Asian art. The Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1999 was a memorable case in point, being an event to which significant contributions were made by curators including Margo Neale, Ranah Davenport and later Suhanya Rafael. Eventually following a phone interview conducted between my temporary bolthole in Fujian’s coastal capital Xiamen and distant rural Victoria, I was offered a tenured position at the Shepparton Art Gallery and later on at the Maroondah Art Gallery. I took the post of Vice-President at the Public Galleries Association of Victoria and was guest curator at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne. The exhibition I co-curated with in-house curator Kendrah Morgan, *Unmasked: Sidney Nolan and Ned Kelly 1950 – 1990*, began as my University of Melbourne Masters thesis but became subsequently the centrepiece of Heide MOMA’s 25th anniversary celebrations.

I worked also with Karen Casey my partner of fifteen years, an Indigenous artist from Tasmania whose beginnings as a firebrand painter gave way to issues of reconciliation and later to art and neuroscience, an arena in which Karen is now a well-known pioneer. In Canberra, we were jointly awarded the National Indigenous Heritage Art Award’s Reconciliation Prize but quickly moved into public art, establishing a consultancy under the name Art-o-logical. We were both invited to China and I later curated a project with the famous Red Gate Gallery in Beijing run by Brian Wallace. I continued my Australian based projects but worked alongside artist Tony Scott on numerous Chinese/Australian ventures. His company China Art Projects continues to represent numerous well-known practitioners including the Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso. Following inclusion in the 2009 Venice Biennale ‘Making Worlds’ Gyatso’s works became objects of art market desirability. A succession of sales led to my secondment to Lhasa to research the local scene. I took the train from
Beijing and it reconnected me to the Buddhism I first encountered as a teenager visiting the far north of India. However, the trip also offered insight into the challenges of life in the Tibetan capital. At the Gendun Choephel Artists’ Guild I viewed a plethora of works, many of which were coloured by angst and uncertainty. Later on we watched videos by British enfant terribles Jake and Dinos Champan screened clandestinely for the local artists. Back in Sydney, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales I gave talks on contemporary Tibetan art and wrote numerous articles on the Zen Buddhist artist Lindy Lee.

For the launch of Casey's Global Mind Project, a venture that transformed brainwaves into art, performances were developed with artists Stelarc, Jill Orr and Domenico Di Clario and presented at Federation Square, Melbourne. In Istanbul during the 2011 Biennale we showed kaleidoscopic brainwave generated video work that hummed with the sounds of didgeridoo and Sufi flute, known in Turkish as ney. Neuroscience became a focus of research, mainly quantum mind theory; the writers Karl Pibram, David Bohm and Daryl Rainey a mainstay amongst others. Yet contemporary though these writers may be their concepts of mind did not seem out of place when contrasted with the mystical and geometric architecture of Istanbul. This magical city casts a spell but all the more so when viewed from the steamy rooftops of the 16th Century Çemberlitaş Hamam, the discrete if exotic location where the project’s artistic director Lanfranco Aceti held court during the International Symposium of Electronic Art that year, thus conflating the ancient and the modern to a peerless degree (Aceti, Cubitt, Dziekan & Thomas 2011; Casey & Smith 2013).

In 2011 Casey and I took the arts and reconciliation project Let's Shake to New Zealand’s National Museum and then, after it was awarded the 2010 RMIT Design Challenge: Crime, we flew to the conflict zones of Mexico. This elegant participatory work was first established by Casey as a means of fostering positive relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, especially in the context of the Reconciliation movement that was prominent in Australia during the 1990s and 2000s. The project required nothing more than two strangers to shake hands, with the addition of a wet dollop of plaster cupped between their palms. The plaster would slowly set as the interlocutors conversed, leaving a small sculptural mould of their unique and intimate encounter. The project was enacted in three countries and more than 2,000 individuals took part. There were performances and installations in Oaxaca where we reconnected with the Indigenous poet and performer Natalia Toledo and in San Louis Potosi where the drug war had impacted life throughout the city we worked in an abandoned jail. Returning to Mexico City we caroused with fellow guests at the National Centre for the Arts including the environmental artist and performer DJ Spooky and seminal electronic music guru Don Buchla. It was a world away from my museum-based practice, from the indigenous shows I had curated in Melbourne featuring artists Ellen José, Gayle Maddigan, Robyne
Latham and Lin Onus and even the contemporary scenes of England, China and Australia that had occupied my time. However, it was enriching my experience in ways that I had neither calculated nor intended.

At mid-point on this journey I resigned from the public galleries circuit and opened Words For Art – a consultancy enabling my curating and writing in ways that I hoped would be freeing. I published Sidney Nolan’s seminal *Drought Photographs* dating from 1953 and through Australian Galleries sold the editions to public institutions nationally. I travelled to London on a contract to write about the British conceptualist Wayne Warren and whilst there was introduced to Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei and the British sculptor Anthony Gormley. It was a brief but memorable encounter with individuals whose practices are both aesthetically advanced and socially engaged. Over the years I would drop in on my artist friends in Beijing including Yin Xiuzhen and her husband Song Dong, whose obscure beginnings as conceptual artists catapulted them to international fame. Publications multiplied and after 15 years of writing I could look back at 150+ texts including peer-reviewed papers on topics ranging across art and neuroscience, art and Buddhism, contemporary Australian art, urban Indigenous art, Australian Modernism, and contemporary Chinese art. More than forty curated projects were behind me.

Over time my interests expanded beyond a focus on the central arenas of contemporary art practice. What was happening, I wondered, beyond the commercial galleries, the art schools and museums? Through working with the small yet highly effective non-governmental organisation Multicultural Arts Victoria these questions were partly answered. I partnered with Indigenous artist and curator Maree Clarke and later, with Chilean/Australian arts manager Trinidad Estay in producing the *Heartlands Refugee Art Prize*, a national prize open to artists from refugee backgrounds. The project was defunded when the Abbott Coalition Government came to power in September 2013 but not before we had promoted the careers of numerous artists whose training set them apart, sometimes advantageously sometimes unfavourably, within the Australian art system.

In 2014 I arrived in Indonesia and began working with Melbourne-based artist Mia Salsjo on the *Bali Artist’s Camp*. Our host, arts patron and Queen’s Councillor Colin McDonald has a passion for Indonesia and has always looked to art as a means of brokering cultural connections. This was not unrelated to his professional sphere. For instance, Colin had made legal representations on behalf of Scott Rush, the youngest of the Bali Nine drug smuggling ring who unlike the leaders of that group, Myuran Sukumaran and Andrew Chan, had been spared the executioner’s bullet. Art in the Councillor’s view was not only about aesthetics; it also connected people to one another, opening the channels of understanding across cultural divides.
What did I make of these experiences, and perhaps more to the point what did they make of me? Was I a post-colonial tourist forever floating in other people’s cultures? Was I an as yet unnamed Anglo-Asian, Techno-Aboriginal adrift in trans-national contexts? Or was it that I typified the privilege of over-educated First World mobile consumers who saw too much and were baffled all the same? If anything, art had become a tool for orienting myself within this infinite and shifting landscape. Whatever I was, and quite possibly I never wanted to define myself, it was through these and other experiences and impressions that I formed my views about art, what it is, what it does, how it benefits our existence and why I think it is necessary within contemporary society. In light of my practise I have come to a view on art that is essentially two-fold: on the one hand, I think of art as finding its significance within a crafting of poetic language, and on the other through operating and affecting change within social contexts and relations. Problematically however I see also how these two spheres – poetic language and social relations – have been unnecessarily separated within academic circles and in both instances, have given rise to far from satisfactory work. Recognition of this heedless dichotomy brings me to the start of my PhD research, which concerns the role of the freelance curator as a bridge across these arenas. It takes shape around my personal perspective whereby art as poetic language both creates and inhabits a unique and precious sphere within the public arena though one that is both lauded and suspected. Betwixt the artist and their creations and the ever-watchful audience stands the curator, an interpreter and mediator but also one who conjures, frames and advocates. This is where I begin.
CHAPTER II
RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES: A STRATEGY FOR CURATORIAL ANALYSIS

At the commencement of the research my sights were set towards a macro perspective on curating, however the limitations of this project are really defined by the parameters of practice-based enquiry, of which this is an example. The methodology stems on the one hand from research concerning a history of curating and on the other an analysis of contemporary issues confronting curators. It is from this basis that two emerging factors completed the methodology for analysis. The first of these is ‘Arenas’, which is sub-categorized as Subjectivities, Contexts and Economies. The second is ‘Critical Measures’, being divided into Makers, Practice, Knowledge, Audience, Space, and Change.

In 2009 resignation from a full-time curatorial position in a public art museum signalled the beginnings of a new career path: consulting as a freelance curator. Some Australian colleagues expressed scepticism, suggesting economic survival in that realm was precarious at best; yet five years later ‘gun-for-hire’ was still a point of identification with contracts lining up well into the future. Working in this way was certainly filled with challenges but it was also very rewarding. For instance, my work is Australian based; however, this also entails working in and between other regions and countries including exporting and importing cultural projects often with a view to linking local artists and institutions with new audiences and counterparts abroad. The geographical regions in which my work has occurred includes England and Wales, China and Hong Kong, Indonesia, New Zealand and Mexico. More recently contracts with the Government of Colombia and the Cuban Ministry of Culture and the Bienal de la Habana have come to fruition. I was attracted to the arena largely as a response to working in public institutions and from feeling that innovation and creativity was very often stifled by the complex demands of policies, politics and inter-personal relationships that ricochet through public institutions. Could there be a way of working that enabled greater creative freedom and allowed me to develop projects that I saw as having a vitalizing relationship to contemporary art and culture? It was with these thoughts in mind that I embraced the free-market context and also, a few years hence, enrolled in a PhD program at RMIT University; I set my sites on examining precisely what it is that a freelance curator does.
Specifically, I posed the questions:

What is it that I do as an Australian-based freelance curator of contemporary art?

And,

If this role is not sustainable, what does that imply about Australia’s artistic culture and what must I do differently?

Through careful analysis of three core projects, along with additional activities, I formed a view about my role as a freelance curator. I came also to a definition of the role that is distinct on the one hand from the private connoisseur and on the other from the institutional curator, all the while maintaining overlaps and relationships with both of those enterprises. But where selected commentators see freelance curating as arising in the 1960s along with other post-Fordist professions (Fernandez 2008, p.42), I see a different picture. Freelance curating has many contemporary characteristics but I perceive also that the role of curator, that is one who cares for and about artworks, is a role that in various manifestations reaches back to the earliest history of Western and other cultural traditions. Significantly the complex and multifaceted nature of freelance curating recalls modes of cultural strategizing enacted by individuals, groups and institutions throughout our collective histories. People have always cared for and about art and culture; they have studied and valued these things and in so doing have bequeathed them to future generations. In terms of approaching the pre-history of curating I have applied a historical cultural framework to the theme of cultural care. In doing so I am not so concerned with care as a universal value but more in the fact that cultural care persists as an action across almost all civilizations. Those instances where cultural care is repudiated as a value, as for example as one might ascribe to the ascetic regimes of such figures as St Francis of Assisi (1184–1226 CE) or the Tibetan saint Milarepa (c. 1052 – 1135 CE), are very rare indeed, though of course their followers were very keen to preserve their legacies. Iconoclasm is another repudiation of cultural care; indeed it’s very opposite, however I have not had the space to include a study of it in this research. Rather, the examination of care as a persistent cultural action is considered in the context of a long succession of cultures from the Babylonian period up to the 19th and 20th Centuries and in each instance the significance of that ‘care’ has been considered within the cultural determinants of each period and also in terms of why and for whom they preserve the artifacts of the past and respective present(s). From these factors, a view of contemporary freelance curating is arrived at that identifies it as a role that works laterally – across the terrain in which it is enacted - and interlinks subjectivities, contexts and economies, and vertically - through history - by perpetuating, disrupting and/or transforming cultural traditions.
Case studies

In this research the projects I have focused on have been conducted in three complementary arenas – institutional, artist-run and commercial. The value of these framings becomes clear in light of recognizing that freelance curators predominantly work in all of these fields, often simultaneously. Each requires different emphases of awareness, even as one recognizes the porosity and overlaps between these arenas. I was curious from the outset to consider how the contrasting demands within these spheres impacts the work of the curator. For instance, a university aims to produce knowledge, artists operating in independent contexts strive to push the boundaries of art, and the key goal of commercial galleries is sales. In light of these variations it is reasonable to ask is there a consistent role for the freelance curator or does that change depending on the context? The projects against which that question is tested are:

A: *Ping Pong*, Colombian Government, RMIT University, Multicultural Arts Victoria, 2013


Each project received support from different entities including government funding, universities, non-government bodies, in-kind support and finally through self-funding. They were elaborated respectively within the contexts of A: an institution, B: a commercial organisation and C: a collective of independent artists. Analysis of the projects was conducted via the methodologies outlined in Chapter VIII, thus ensuring uniformity within the research while allowing for investigation into the significant differences that characterised each venture.

Throughout the research my sights were set towards a macro perspective on curating, however the limitations of this project are really defined by the parameters of practice-based enquiry, of which this is an example. Consequently, the conclusions at which I arrive are reflective of the subjective and singular nature of my processes and procedures as a freelance curator, even as they avail upon established methodologies from within the curatorial field. My methodology stems from critically reflecting on my practical work as a curator and also on my tertiary studies. Those studies, in the discipline of art making (BA Fine Art RMIT), in art history (post-grad art history, University of Melbourne) and as a curator (MA Curatorship, University of Melbourne), are related to one another.
but they do not always intersect. Having perceived differences within these fields, I propose in my methodology a way to work with contemporary artists that simultaneously takes into consideration artistic processes on the one hand and also the contexts of display. In the language of analytical philosophy, I draw on aspects of both procedural and functional definitions of art (Davies 1991), including art’s aesthetic function on the one hand and on the other art’s staging within institutions and as phenomena ‘anointed’ as art by qualified practitioners; categories moreover that I do not see as mutually exclusive.

As a practice-led research project I am here concerned with my own work as an independent curator. However, in narrowing the focus to myself questions arise about comparative experiences drawn from other curators. Chapter V outlines manifestations of the variety of curating today and in doing so offers an account of methodological differences. Clearly there is much to be gleaned from interviewing and reflecting upon the work other Australian curators, however I have felt it necessary to account first and foremost for my own curatorial practice, the reason stemming from a recognition of the complexities of curatorial work and a desire to first illuminate the methodology with which I am most familiar, being my own practice. In essence this has been accounted for in Chapter VIII, Section B: Critical Measures. It is there that my critical methodology is outlined under the categories: Makers, Practice, Knowledge, Audience, Space, and Change. By bringing clarity to my methodology the research also paves the way for future enquiry, whereby analysis of other curatorial practitioners, their methodologies and the implications of their work may take place, though this will need to be at a later occasion.

Through analysis and reflection, I outlined what I perceived as the key areas of concern for myself as a curator – Subjectivities, Context and Economies. Encompassing such things as artworks, art galleries and public funds, Subjectivities, Contexts, Economies do not simply work in tandem; they conspire to evince a dynamic set of relations that have far reaching implications within social and cultural frameworks. Difficult to uncouple, Subjectivities, Contexts, Economies act as a tripartite engine, which variously sustains, transforms, enlarges and sometimes derails social settings and structures. Moreover, they encompass both the abstract and material realms; through them it is possible to make and perceive linkages between the imaginary and tangible arenas of life, about which we may say, we can think a world into being and then become its inhabitants.

Through this analysis I was able to consolidate and apply the critical measures I use when contemplating a project, detailed in Chapter VIII. They form the basis for the subsequent critical analysis of the three principal projects and associated activities. In addition to the analysis of projects, there is the documentation of each project, a summary of the associated activities, and a detailed
timeline of the research period. Each of these forms an aspect of the research and are deposited with the RMIT Research Repository.

Outcomes

Through the articulation of practice, I arrived finally at a renewed appreciation of my work as a curator. Awareness in particular of how curators leverage the cultural and social capital embedded within the contexts and subjectivities of their projects enabled a crystallisation of thoughts. Specifically, I define my approach to curating as ‘Barefoot Curating’. The term indicates a mobilisation of cultural and social capital, more so than economic capital, within contexts that are not reliant upon the traditional structures of museums and art galleries, even though they are also applicable there. Implicit in the term is the intention is to get things done irrespective of the available resources. Importantly however ‘Barefoot Curating’ is first and foremost a philosophy. It is a philosophy that has grown out of practice and aims to enable lateral thinking and artistic leaps, especially in settings where the outcomes of practice are largely unknown. The philosophy of ‘Barefoot Curating’ is outlined in in Chapter X.

However, with regard to establishing emergent or new knowledge, it is important to state that ‘Barefoot Curating’ comes not only from critically analysing the role of the curator but also the broader, indeed the underlying question of cultural contribution, as in, what is and how can Australian art contribute to global cultural discourse at a time of immense social change and uncertainty? In percentage terms this may for Australia be a tall order. Consider for instance that the country constitutes a fractional 0.0329% of the world’s population. Balanced against our wealth it is no wonder that Australia is, relatively speaking, a well-regulated, highly educated, internally peaceful and orderly society. While it is within these conditions that our art circulates, nowhere is this orderliness, indeed this cultural containment, more apparent than in the confines of our museums and galleries, institutions that in turn profoundly influence the direction of our artistic culture. As a cultural researcher I would even say that Australian art is institutional in character. However, we would be wrong to imagine orderliness as being the optimum condition for cultural production.

Comparatively, in more complex, more populous, and less wealthy nations orderliness is by no means a given social condition. Yet such environments often prove culturally fertile, even to the extent that they are out performing their First World neighbours and competitors. Art and culture may appear in museums and galleries but they may also proliferate in the streets, favelas, protest movements and alternative social strategies in ways that are very often unpredictable and influential. Exposure to these
trends causes me to think that claims made by and for Australian contemporary artists to ‘international status’ are nothing if not narrowly fixated. After all, a few wins in London and New York, so sought after by many Australian art practitioners, is not international. Could it be that our privilege places us at a disadvantage that is difficult to apprehend?

As both a culture and as a nationally located industry of art, ignoring the immense dynamisms, dangers and potentials of the diverse cultures emerging from the 7.4 billion people who inhabit the world today, diminishes our role in a much larger conversation. While there is no historical precedent for the state of human cultures now, simply looking to the modernist trajectory, as many post-modern artists do whether critically or otherwise, is far too narrow a zone where contemporary culture is concerned.

Faced with these conditions can Australian artists and curators, who are generally well-educated and socially mobile, leverage what they have and what they know to produce and contribute to global culture in ways of significance? While this is not my primary research question, a nascent response to the above, indeed the response that may be categorized as ‘new knowledge’ emerges as a result of querying the degree to which freelance curatorial work is sustainable in the national context. In my experience the practice within the national context is barely tenable; in the global marketplace the role is at least plausible. This should come as no surprise to anyone working in Australia’s visual arts sector, which has in the past ten years been profoundly eroded by both Labor and Coalition government policies. Equally it is recognized that the freelance curatorial role fails as a primary cultural driver if it is motivated by the imperative to survive in the market economy. Rather, through laying claim to a philosophical position, the freelance curator demarks a territory of difference, of contribution to culture and possibly also change. How I frame my own practice philosophically is through the term ‘Barefoot Curating’.

I begin however with an historical overview of curating as this sets the scene for a critical analysis of the conditions, variances, problems and social agency of curating today, thus providing a context of substance for my own practice as a contemporary freelance curator.
CHAPTER III
FROM ARK TO ARCHIVE – THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR CURATING

Freelance curating has many contemporary characteristics but the role of curator, that is one who cares for and about artworks, is a role that in various manifestations reaches back to the earliest history of Western and other cultural traditions. Significantly the complex and multifaceted nature of freelance curating recalls modes of cultural strategizing enacted by individuals, groups and institutions throughout our collective histories.

The origins of curating are not always so well documented as to suggest a substantial historical tradition; however, as the following research bears out, curating – caring for and about visual art and culture, is an activity that can, in various guises, be traced throughout much of Western history. Etymologically the verb ‘curate’ from which the increasingly popular noun ‘curator’ is derived finds its origins in ecclesiastical circles. Organised religion provides the context, for it is within this setting that art, culture and belief were, historically speaking, mediated, worried over and promoted. This custodial role is reflected in some of the titular appellations of the modern day clergy. The Curate for instance designates the individual who is invested in the care, or cure of the souls of a parish. The term however can be traced to the Latin, *Curatus* and its associated forms – *curo, curare, curavi*, which variously refer to such actions as ‘arranging’, ‘healing’, ‘providing for’, ‘taking care of’, and ‘worrying about’. It comes to us also in the ‘curing’ of small goods, being the preservation of meats that would otherwise decay. In contemporary terms we recognize the aforementioned activities as the kinds of things that a curator of art might do. For those of us whose profession is that of curator, we know too that caring for objects and worrying about their safety are not the only tasks required of our positions. Curators are largely commentators, drawing as much on philosophy, politics, sociology and other humanities-based disciplines when it comes to curating a project or exhibition as they draw also upon the old fashioned guidelines of art history, aesthetics and conservation. To a large extent curating has become an expanding field. Rather like contemporary art, contemporary curating has outgrown its conventions, making use of, and finding worthiness in a vast array of human cultures and activities. So just what is it that makes a curator a curator? What constitutes contemporary freelance curating? And before we can address those questions, what are the historical precedents upon which curating draws?

It does not seem that long ago that questions such as these would not have crossed my mind. As late as 2002 when enrolled in a curatorial Masters course at the University of Melbourne one had a pretty good idea of what curating was about. Art historians taught it and what they had to say prepared students for a career in the public gallery sector. In 2004 at the point of graduation what lay ahead
seemed fairly clear cut and perhaps even achievable. Working for a public museum or art gallery the newly qualified curator would turn his or her hand to researching artists, artworks, and the institutional collections under their care. They would examine the historical and social contexts in which artists operated and consider how their works might be conserved, interpreted and exhibited. Curators tended to have two dominant ambitions: to build public collections of art and to curate major exhibitions of art accompanied by scholarly catalogues. Beyond these fields, aspiration to becoming a public gallery director and perhaps even to curate an international biennale were the more ambitious options on offer.

Significantly many of those biennale curators had spent periods as both institutional curators and also freelance practitioners. They understand the ways in which institutions operate and the pressures placed upon them; they have also extensive networks within and beyond those bodies and have proven their ability to work with artists in contexts of relative creative autonomy. One such person was the seminal Swiss curator Harold Szeeman (1933–2005). The highly influential and much sited exhibition curated by Szeeman was the 1969 show Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information), staged at the Kunsthall Bern in Germany (Altshuler 2013). For arts academic Bruce Altshuler:

> it was the show that led Szeemann to re-create himself as an independent exhibition maker, founding a career path that would be followed by generations of curators.

"Attitudes" has also come to represent the romantic conception of the curator as inspired partner of the artist, a creative actor who generates original ideas and structures through which art enters public consciousness (Altshuler 2013, p.95).

But like all such ventures the exhibition also required funding, and this too entailed the involvement of the curator. Szeeman’s exhibition was underwritten by sponsorship from the tobacco company Philip Morris and the public relations firm Rudd & Finn; indeed, it was Szeeman who clinched the deal (Obrist 2008, p.109). Nowadays in the alert climate ushered in by concepts like ‘corporate social responsibility’ tobacco sponsorship would likely result in the cancellation of a project. This is especially so as institutions are exposed to public opinion and pressure. It is here that a clear example of the freelance curator acting as a linking agent between subjectivities (artists and ideas), contexts (the Kunsthall Bern) and economies (Philip Morris and Rudd & Finn) can be seen. The factoring of these relationships marks, I contend, a clear distinction between the activities of a freelance curator and an institutional curator. This is largely because institutional curators are able for the most part to focus their energies on the research and development of an exhibition, leaving the economic side of things to their institutional director and/or fundraising officers. The distinction also raises questions about the
degree to which independent curating can be viewed as an activity that is not impacted by economic factors. Indeed, as the research bears out, freelance curating is intimately linked with the agendas of the contributing economies, even though many practitioners would prefer to signal otherwise. In my experience the curator; in order to produce an exhibition of critical worth, must work to mediate the vested interests arising from the economic and contextual contributors to a project, just as they must mediate the subjective elements as well.

Szeeman was a case in point for he was required to negotiate between the elements of subjectivities, contexts and economies in order to produce an exhibition that contributed substantially to contemporary cultural discourse. Historically speaking however, Szeeman stands at the cusp between the expanding field of freelance curating and a period in which curators were largely the employees of public institutions. It dates to the opening of the Louvre Museum, Europe’s first public art gallery, which opened on 10 August 1793. The period between the opening of the Louvre and Szeeman’s seminal exhibition, spanning some 160 years, occurs throughout the two centuries in which Western art was transformed as never before - from the Romanticism of the 19th Century, through the period generally talked of as Modernism and arriving at the conceptual and post-conceptual practices of the mid-20th century. Commentary on this period will be delayed as the research progresses still further to a time before the great museums were opening their doors to the public and consider their antecedents.

The painter David Teniers the Younger (1610–1690) may be seen as an early curator, because he cared for, arranged and reproduced the collection of the Austrian collector and Governor of the Spanish Netherlands, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (1614–1662). Teniers was an artist whose compositions often included the paintings in the Archduke’s collection presented in salon-style hangs. In one such composition, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Gallery, (c.1647) Museo del Prado, Madrid, the Duke, flanked by courtiers and lapdogs, is surrounded by his sprawling collection. Little games of juxtaposition occur throughout the composition, such as St Peter’s heaven-turned gaze alighting on a semi-naked Venus in the canvas directly above his head; her expansive derriere is directly in line with the Saint’s enraptured visage. According to Chilean curator Gonzalo Pedraza, Tenier’s painting:

is an encyclopaedia whose sole observation exceeds volumes of art history and material culture. The idea of installing this fiction – the cabinet was non-existent, and was only a visual record of the works possessed – was also to generate cross-readings between the works and not left to right as we are accustomed to, the zigzagging of the gaze and its endless wandering formulated a creative way of observing, creating infinite links between
While Tenier’s compositions are noteworthy for the novel ways in which they both represent and interrelate the works of other artists, his position as collection curator can also be linked to the now obscure profession of Antiquarian.

Since the time of antiquity Antiquarians have assumed significance within Western culture and their influence did not subside until well into the 19th Century. Elias Ashmole (1617–1692), founder of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford can be included here, though the lineage can certainly be traced to the Roman historians Titus Livius Patavinus (64 or 59 BCE–17 CE) and Tacitus (c. 56 CE–117 CE). Antiquarians as the title implies were students of ancient things, though their methodologies were not always grounded in rigor. For instance, a key aspect of the Antiquarian imagination was the ‘cabinet of curiosity’ (also known as Kunstkabinett, Kunstкамmer, Wunderkammer, Cabinets of Wonder, and wonder-rooms). These remarkable displays brought together contrasting objects of interest in configurations that spanned both educational as well as sensationalist sentiments. Ferrante Imperato (1525–1615), an apothecary of Naples published Dell’Historia Naturale in 1599 and illustrated it with scenes from his own cabinets at Palazzo Gravina, Naples. In one noteworthy scene a crocodile is depicted. It is attached for no particular reason to a ceiling where it clings to the stucco like a giant multi-fanged arachnid, surrounded all the while by exotic seashells. In contrast, the Flemish painter Frans Francken III (1607–1667) created numerous paintings of wunderkammers. Fracken’s An Allegory of the Liberal Arts, (undated) depicts a mother and child deep in literary contemplation. They are in a room of paintings, sculptures and objet d’art and in their company is a monkey, which we can see is gazing at a landscape painting. The diminutive gibbon appears to perceive the scene upon which its eyes alight as real. Seemingly the implication of so much amassed knowledge and culture is that man stands apart from the animals because he is capable of reflecting on the world and is equipped to both appreciate and unearth its mysteries; he can know truth from fiction and in so doing may bask in the wonders of the Divine.

But in much the same way that curators today are prone to gentle mockery, Antiquarians were the subjects also of popular stereotyping. Thomas Rowlandson’s lampooning aquatint Death and the Antiquaries, (1816) is one such example for it depicts those learned men of taste gathered around the decaying body of a king. Freshly exhumed from beneath the Westminster flagstones it galvanizes their attention. So enraptured are they the group fails to notice death in skeletal guise looming over their wigs and tri-corn hats; he holds his poison arrow at the ready. Similarly, the connoisseur Horace Walpole (1813–1894) took much delight in deriding the esteemed Society of Antiquaries, stating:

The antiquaries will be as ridiculous as they used to be; and since it is impossible to infuse taste
into them, they will be as dry and dull as their predecessors. One may revive what perished, but it will perish again, if more life is not breathed into it than it enjoyed originally (Walpole 1842, p.199).

These critiques point to a significant challenge for curating, namely reconciling specialist knowledge with popular taste and sentiment. For those with access to regal patronage this may not have been an issue though the same could not be said in those instances where cultural practitioners perceive academic institutions as being counterproductive where art is concerned. For example, contemporaneous with Walpole, the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) saw Antiquarianism as a threat to contemporary culture. In his 1876 treatise On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life, Nietzsche states:

If we want to transfer into the area of culture the customs of popular agreement and the popular majority and, as it were, to require the artist to stand in his own defence before the forum of the artistically inert types, then we can take an oath in advance that he will be condemned, not in spite of but just because his judges have solemnly proclaimed the canon of monumental culture (that is, in accordance with the given explanation, culture which in all ages “has had effects”). Whereas, for the judges everything which is not yet monumental, because it is contemporary, lacks, first, the need for history, second, the clear inclination toward history, and third, the very authority of history. On the other hand, their instinct tells them that culture can be struck dead by culture. The monumental is definitely not to rise up once more. And for that their instinct uses precisely what has the authority of the monumental from the past.

So [the Antiquarians] are knowledgeable about culture because they generally like to get rid of culture. They behave as if they were doctors, while basically they are only concerned with mixing poisons. Thus, they develop their languages and their taste, in order to explain in their discriminating way why they so persistently disapprove of all offerings of more nourishing cultural food. For they do not want greatness to arise. Their method is to say: “See greatness is already there!” In truth, this greatness that is already there is of as little concern to them as what arises out of it. Of that their life bears witness. Monumental history is the theatrical costume in which they pretend that their hate for the powerful and the great of their time is a fulfilling admiration for the strong and the great of past times. In this, through disguise they invert the real sense of that method of historical observation into its opposite (Nietzsche 2010, p.17).

The Antiquarians may well have been deplored by the smart men of the Enlightenment and also those who came in their wake but their role is significant for they both adopted and progressively challenged methodologies and epistemologies employed in an earlier period - by the professional Analysts and historians of the later and earlier Middle Ages. Amongst those writers one can include the authors of
the first history of Ireland, the *Annals of the Four Masters* (University College Cork n.d.). This legendary document, which was compiled between 1632 and 1636, synthesizes earlier records and incunabula. *The Annals* was the collective achievement of Brother Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, Cú Choigcríche Ó Cléirigh, Fearfeasa Ó Maol Chonaire and Peregrine Ó Duibhgeannain. The Cléirigh was a clan of poet historians and teachers whose influence then and now has been profound. It is noted however that even as they set their histories upon paper and vellum sheets the sept kept and preserved ancient things, most notably antique volumes of poetry and history (Clark 2015); they were in effect curators of ancient knowledge.

At work in their cloisters the Analysts of the Middle Ages looked back to the scholars and historians of the pre-Christian era, but importantly also to the priestly classes, drawing on the speculative, magical, mythological, poetic and predictive thinking of the Druids in the pagan Celtic world, the oracles of Classical Antiquity and also to artists and poets. In his 1961 publication *The White Goddess* (Graves 2013) the poet, novelist and critic Robert Graves (1895–1985) examines aspects of medieval poetry, perceiving it as a coded evocation of pre-Christian knowledge. Graves notes that the pagan bards and minstrels were subsumed with the coming of Christianity and their later Irish descendants by the presence of Cromwell; their ancient groves of learning, as was the case with the clan O’Cleirigh, were usurped. There was however, and this is Graves’ argument, a transitional period, around the 14th Century where the Druidic lore was encoded in poetic form. Graves sites D. W. Nash’s mid-Victorian translation of the enchanting poem *The Battle of the Trees*, which he interprets not as a real or fictional battle but as a metaphor of ancient wisdom; the battles enacted by the trees represent inner, psychological battles. Robert Graves notes:

> Commentators, confused by the pied verse, have for the most part been content to remark that in Celtic tradition the Druids were credited with the magical power of transforming trees into warriors and sending them into battle. But, as the Rev. Edward Davies, a brilliant but hopelessly erratic Welsh scholar of the early nineteenth Century, first noted in his *Celtic Researches* (1809), the battle described by Gwion is not a frivolous battle, or a battle physically fought, but a battle fought intellectually in the heads and tongues of the learned. Davies also noted that in all Celtic languages trees means letters; that the Druidic colleges were found in woods or groves; that a great part of the Druidic mysteries was concerned with twigs of different sorts; and that the most ancient Irish alphabet, the Bet-Luis-Nion (‘Birch-Rowan-Ash’) takes its name from the first three of a series of trees whose initials form the sequence of its letters (Graves 2013, p.34).
Graves thus presents a case for the encoding of ancient knowledge within the poetry of the 1300s; the
origins are concealed, but the wisdom can be unearthed; the poem is a portmanteau that can be
unpacked with patience. Nowadays the idea of secret, hidden or arcane knowledge, so redolent of
conspiracy is ridiculed. Exceptions arise when organisations like the on-line publisher of secret information
WikiLeaks brings to light events which are intended to be hidden from public purview and also when
‘secret’ Indigenous knowledge is brought forth. Cultural knowledge however is for the most part explicit
and rarely if ever would a curator think in terms of coded meanings in the manner of the medieval writers.
But as Graves attests, at times of cultural transition and cultural loss existing knowledge is only preserved if
individuals seek to preserve it.

One can see now that the writings of the Analysts displayed a mythic sensibility. It enabled evocation of
such things as ‘the great deluge’ 2,242 years after the day of creation as if it really happened and were
enlivened to think that their early ancestors could turn into fish or birds and live for thousands of years,
as is recorded in the Lebor Gabála Érenn, The Book of the Taking of Ireland (Macalister 1941). By the time
of the Enlightenment however superstitions such as these were largely discarded; they were the stuff of
folklore. But had it not been, in an even earlier period, for the maintenance of Old Testament and
classical writings, then the first Christians and later Humanists would not have had quite so much to
draw upon. With the destruction of both the First (586BCE) and Second Temples (70CE) in Jerusalem
many ancient documents were lost to us, and so it fell to the copyists to preserve those texts. These
patient men of letters and those who commissioned their works remained significant for much of the first
millennium CE. For instance, in 1417 the Papal secretary, professional Scriptor and book hunter Poggio
Bracciolini (1380–1459) unearthed, in a German monastery, a copy of Lucretius’ ancient poem De Rerum
Natura, On the Nature of Things, (50BCE). He immediately ordered it to be copied and thus reintroduced
the poem into circulation. The document had far-reaching effects on Renaissance thought and beyond.
Bracciolini can be seen as both researcher and curator of ancient knowledge whose work contributed to
cultural and social change (Greenblatt 2011).

Other notable copies are the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, which include Old Testament writings such as
the Book of Genesis, which were discovered in sealed jars in the Qumran Caves not far from the Dead
Sea in the Jordan Rift Valley (Shanks, 1998). The keeping of papyri in earthenware jars was one form of
preservation or ‘curing’ but similar techniques can be traced to much earlier periods. In the Book of
Exodus (Ex. 19:20; 24:18) we learn of God describing to Moses how to build the Ark of the Covenant, a
box made from the impermeable acacia wood, the timber of the attractively named Shittah tree, to
house and protect the Ten Commandments. The box was covered in gold and became the focus of
religious rituals and beliefs. The creation, meaning and function of the Ark is one early example whereby
subjectivities, contexts and economies are combined to produce cultural presence, cultural knowledge,
experience, change and tradition. If we are to take that narrative at face value, it is recalled also that Moses as custodian of the law experienced spiritual transformation upon receiving instructions to remove his sandals and stand barefoot on holy ground. In doing so he turns symbolically as man in direct conduit with forces that reside beyond conscious awareness yet profoundly impact the whole of culture and society.

While the intertwining of cultural care and religious practice during the period of Antiquity was common, early examples whereby individuals and groups were interested in history, culture and philosophy as subjects to study and support through collecting can also be identified. On this point the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist suggests that the “famed library of Alexandria is the oldest known museum” (Obrist 2014, p.42), an assertion that is entirely incorrect. The ancient Greek Musaeum or Mouseion (Ancient Greek: Μουσαέων), at Alexandria dates to the 3rd Century BCE. However, temples dedicated to or associated with the ‘Muses,’ as the name Musaeum implies, can be traced to the 5th Century BCE (Watts 2008, p.150). In any event the Alexandrian library was not a museum in any modern sense but closer rather to a university. In contrast the world’s oldest known museum can be found in the context of Babylonia.

In 1925 the Oxford educated archaeologist Leonard Woolley (1880–1960) unearthed an unusual collection of artefacts that far pre-dated the site of investigation. What Woolley revealed was a museum, created by the long forgotten Princess Ennigaldi-Nanna, the daughter of King Nabonidus, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Dating to the 6th Century BCE, the site included some of the first museum labels, which were written in three languages. Woolley interprets the labels thus:

“These,” it said, ”are copies from bricks found in the ruins of Ur, the work of Bur-Sin king of Ur, which while searching for the ground-plan [of the temple] the Governor of Ur found, and I saw and wrote out for the marvel of beholders.”

The scribe, alas! was not so learned as he wished to appear, for his copies are so full of blunders as to be almost unintelligible, but he had doubtless done his best, and he certainly had given us the explanation we wanted. The room was a museum of local antiquities...and in the collection was this clay drum, the earliest museum label known, drawn up a hundred years before and kept, presumably together with the original bricks, as a record of the first scientific excavations at Ur (Woolley 1952, p.236).

The Babylonian example, though exceptional, is atypical in the sense that cultural care remained largely the preserve of religious interests, governing both the living and those who had passed away. In ancient Egypt for example fascination with the afterlife and the journey of the departed within it gave rise to
elaborate forms of preservation, especially where the deceased human body was concerned. The tendency is here noted because, while cultural care is done so for the living, which, as a preserving activity facilitates reflection on the present, speculation about the future and knowledge about the past, human bodies, once so animate with life, cannot be maintained in their original state. Rather, they become fetishized artefacts, revered and reviled in equal measure. For contemporary curators, ambivalence towards this perennial obsession arises when the issue of human bodies and human tissues are introduced into the art gallery environment. The historical manifestations of the corpse, be it Pharaoh, Corpus Christi, incorruptible saint, scientific specimen, Auschwitz death pile and so on, persists as an abiding human fixation and one that remains relevant to performative arts practices from the mid-20th Century onwards, especially where artists have used their own and other bodies to reflect on personal mortality and fragility.

The conceptual and fetishistic significance of the corpse is raised by cultural theorist and arts writer Edward Colless in his essay Interfering With The Dead, 2014 (Colless 2014). Drawing on the so-called Gnostic Gospels, exhumed from a graveyard in Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 and dating from the early-mid 2nd Century, Colless examines a saying attributed to Jesus of Nazareth – ‘Whoever has known the world has fallen upon a corpse’ (Logion 56.1, Gospel of Thomas). For Colless the contemplation of death as signified by the corpse is crucial if we are to understand life in all of its complexities. According to Colless,

> The corpse in this image is not the victim in a crime scene awaiting investigation, identification and justice. It is the sex object hidden by, succumbing to, and complying with necrophilic ravishment. Worldliness is a matter of life and death, of knowing that they will embrace, in a consummation devoutly to be wished (Colless 2014, p.19).

For curators the significance of this reflection becomes apparent when we recognise that while it is entirely possible to curate bodies it is not possible to preserve them as artefacts without changing them fundamentally. What this reveals is that while curating may be ‘life-affirming’ it cannot ‘embody’ life in the way that human bodies, human beings can. The spectre of the corpse and its associated forms (human tissue etc.) remains therefore a conundrum that curatorial work can never resolve even as it contemplates the problem. The Human Tissues Act, 2004 passed in the British Parliament is one recent example of how legislative bodies have responded to the complexities surrounding the preservation of human tissues. The legislation has for example been instrumental in enabling the return of Aboriginal human remains housed in British museums to their tribal origins (UK Government 2004, ‘Human Tissues Act 2004’).
Issues concerning the body persist in the 21st Century and are especially apparent in the ambivalent relations between public art museums and artists working with bodies-as-media. One such example is the Australian artist Stelarc, who despite being internationally regarded has in his home country faced resistance from within mainstream institutions. Stelarc collaborated with artists Oran Catts and Ionatt Zurr to produce the ¼ scale ear project, which involved human skin cells being grown over a scaffold in the shape of a human ear, though at one-quarter the conventional size. Exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in the Clemenger Prize 2003, the work was met with consternation from within the institution itself. According to Catts and Zurr:

[We] will only comment about the NGV refusal to allow us to use human tissue for this installation and their somewhat strange request from us to declare that the work does not raise ethical issues: According to the curators of the NGV, shortly (about two weeks) before the show was about to open they realized that the NGV has no policy in regard to presenting living tissues in their gallery, the director instructed the curator to seek clarification in regard to the project including a statement from us that the work does not raise ethical issues in general and in particular in the biomedical community. We could not reassure the gallery that this is the case as we see the primary aim of our work to act as a tangible example of issues that need further ethical scrutiny, and critically engage with the biomedical project. This was stated as our aim when we applied for the human research ethics clearance from the University of Western Australia. Disregarding the fact that this installation received ethics, safety and health clearances from UWA the NGV decided to cancel the installation. Only to later ‘compromise’ and allow it do go ahead in the condition that we did not use human tissue (Catts & Zurr 2014).

We thus arrive at a picture of two persistent trends within curating – a concern on the one hand with worldly affairs and on the other hand with life after death and indeed the condition of death itself and perhaps even non-death. The divergence is significant for it highlights a problem that curating cannot resolve: the raison d’être of cultural care is knowledge and insight into life, but the primary locus of life, the body eludes both preservation and care. The corpse is thus prescribed with fetishistic significance – alternatively abject and/or divine – for it challenges so profoundly how and why we act in the world; it remains a contentious site for both artists and curators alike.

Returning to the historical view however, the period of the Israelite exodus from Egypt was an era of profound cultural change; it also gave rise for the necessity to preserve cultural knowledge, tradition and artefacts, especially in the harsh conditions of the Sinai. However, while the events depicted in Exodus are no longer perceived as historically accurate they are clearly suggestive of a process of migration, be it
in a single event or over time. Importantly, the symbolic implications of the Ark are what concerns this research for it illustrates a distinct early example of cultural care of profound social significance and one that would have lasting implications.

In similar fashion one of the great moments of transformation in the first millennium CE occurred when the Roman Emperor Constantine (272CE–337CE) embraced the new religion of Christianity; it signalled the end for the old Roman gods. Constantine established his capital, Constantinople, in Byzantium. He then appointed his mother Helena (Flavia Iulia Helena Augusta; c.250CE–c.330CE) as Augusta Imperatrix, a title of near godly status. Helena had unlimited access to the Imperial Treasury and she was commissioned with finding the relics of Judeo-Christian tradition. This she did with gusto. In today’s parlance Helena’s crusade might be described as the actions of an international curator in pursuit of conceptually complex objects capable of impacting epistemology globally. Helena’s adventures in the Holy Lands are now legendary for it is claimed that she unearthed the timber Cross upon which Jesus Christ was crucified. The object’s veracity was established when an ailing supplicant was restored to health after touching it. Helena’s story illuminates the link between the different aspects of the Latin Curatus, for she ‘cared for and about’ (cūra) the relics but also used them to ‘heal’ (curo). Curo also translates as ‘arrange’, and this double meaning becomes significant when it is observed that Helena arranged for the cross to be broken apart and the relics distributed far and wide. In conducting her mission Helena commanded a powerful economy; she deployed it in pursuit of a no less compelling subjectivity embodied in the holy relics and the context in which she worked was nothing short of the entire Holy Roman Empire.

Such relics were, like the Ten Commandments before them, contained in ornate boxes or reliquaries. One such container is the Reliquary of the True Cross (Staurotheka), dating from the late 8th to early 9th Century CE and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The rectangular container has the naïve charm of many Byzantine objects – the unconvincing anatomy of the crucified Christ, the enlarged circular eyes of the figures decorating the margins of the lid, the clumsily arrayed script flanking the central figure. The materials however, gold and silver, cloisonné enamel and niello conspire to suggest something that is pleasing and precious (The Metropolitan Museum of Art n.d.).

Numerous later examples of religious preservation can be found for they manifest in almost all instances where the veneration of holy relics is concerned. However, curatorial work, in the form of custodial care, took a most unconventional turn in 12th Century Palestine, when a disinterested third party was appointed to protect religious interests. In 1187 after Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb, known more widely as Saladin ended the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, a decision was made to protect the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the holiest of Christian sites and reputed location of Jesus’ crucifixion, burial and resurrection. The keys to the Holy Sepulchre were handed to two Muslim families, the Joudeh and the Nuseibeh.
Passing control of the keys to non-Christians meant that no Christian faction, be they Catholic, Greek, Armenian, Coptic, Syriac, or Ethiopian Orthodox could take control of the site. According to an edict known as the Status Quo of 1853, which arose from a decree by the ruling Ottoman Empire, the ancient custodial relationship could never be rescinded; the decision was subsequently affirmed in the Treaty of Berlin, 1878. Not only does the Status Quo persist to this day it has afforded the Holy Sepulchre a notable degree of political neutrality where it might otherwise have been the plaything of religious factionalism. While there are periodic reports of monks engaging in fisticuffs due to access rights, the vesting of the keys to the Joudeh and the Nuseibeh effectively means that no person or group can lay claim of ‘ownership’ to the doors of the church. The arrangement did however impart immense social and political prestige to the key keeper. In terms of this research, what is significant about the arrangement is the recognition that some things are too important to entrust to vested interest groups. Arguably the Joudeh and Nuseibeh are the earliest examples of professional cultural custodians or as is said today, curators (Metav 2012).

By arriving at the period of Antiquity key aspects of the origins of curating are illuminated – cultural care emerging from sacred contexts deployed to affect socially and culturally unifying narratives often in times of cultural transition and change. However, in coming to this period one arrives not at an end point, but in post-modern terms at a problem. It is here that we must eschew the vertical perspective and turn our gaze laterally to the many other cultures that in form our contemporary sensibilities, especially as contemporary curating traverses so many cultural boundaries.

For instance, in Australia, being the context in which this research has taken place, the production of art in ancient rock shelters, which by default are natural galleries of art, precedes the Western narrative by more than 25,000 years (David et al. 2013) and beyond. The dating highlights both the brief timespan in which Western curatorial practice has evolved (around 3,000 years), but also the possibility of approaching curatorial work from exceedingly diverse traditions, timeframes and angles of thought. This raises an important question regarding the production, maintenance and dissemination of cultural knowledge, which can differ from one culture to another and at times be diametrically opposed. To illustrate the point, one needs look no further than Captain James Cook’s first expedition in Australia as part of his voyage to the Pacific 1768–1771. Here one sees not only the rupturing of Indigenous isolation and indeed the decimation of native cultural knowledge, but also the development of the now standard museum archive folio – the Solander Box. The Swedish man of letters Daniel Solander (1733–1782) was the first university-trained scientist to set foot on the Great Southern Land. He worked closely with the naturalist Joseph Banks (1743–1820) who recorded all manner of flora and fauna and also Indigenous customs. In what was but the first of European challenges to Aboriginal sovereignty, it set in train a raft of negative attitudes where Indigenous
people were concerned. They would not even be recognised in the Australian Constitution of 1900, a reality that did not change until the Referendum of 1967. But following his antipodean adventure, Solander, between 1773 and 1782 held the position of Keeper of the Natural History Department at the British Museum.

His clamshell style Solander Box, a distant descendent of the Ark of the Covenant, though one whose streamlined design signalled not a pact with God but the new religion of science, is now synonymous with a particular aspect of museological thinking – the systematic cataloguing and preserving of objects of all kinds. Conceptually speaking the lidded capsule is closely aligned with the *Encyclopaedia*, the book of all knowledge, developed by Denis Diderot (1713–1784) and published between 1751 and 1772. The box was a means of containing and preserving knowledge, for what was known and what also might be gleaned at a later date was embedded in the thing contained within. These boxes remain a feature of the British Museum collections and can be seen in such settings as the Museum’s peerless Prints and Drawings Room with its endless shelves of boxed works on paper. They may also have contained some of the human remains of 138 Indigenous Australians ‘collected’ for the museum and only repatriated in 2011 (Brown 2011). From the Indigenous perspective, interest in the new arrivals is apparent in numerous examples of cave and rock shelter paintings depicting tall ships and their seafarers. While these archaic stylizations are preserved to this day, experience of them is complex, for they are haunted also by our realization that the encounters they depict signal the progression of one epistemological system at the expense of another (Middleton 2013).

This encroaching modernity clearly had its down side and conversely, as has already been illustrated, 19th Century commentators such as Walpole and Nietzsche took aim at those who would enshrine the cultures of the past over the achievements of the present. Likewise, it is easy to imagine their antipathy towards the likes of Diderot and Solander. Yet despite their posturing it would fall to others to usher in the new. Curiously one of the more significant artistic catalysts, the Salon de Refuse 1863, an exhibition that included many of the more influential pre-Impressionist artists, had no curator at all. Rather, in an act of political expediency, the exhibition was merely sanctioned by the reigning conservative Emperor Napoleon III (1808–1873). A statement, which today might pass for a curatorial rationale, was issued by the Emperor’s office. It proclaimed:

> Numerous complaints have come to the Emperor on the subject of the works of art which were refused by the jury of the Exposition. His Majesty, wishing to let the public judge the legitimacy of these complaints, has decided that the works of art which were refused should be displayed in another part of the Palace of Industry (Maneglier 1990, p.173).
Better for the crowds to mock these hapless daubings than to empower the ingénues with a sanction! The lasting impact was however rather more significant. Edouard Manet’s painting *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*, (1863) was a highlight of the exhibition and it featured a scandalous scene of modern life; two clothed men and their naked female companions. Though it recalled a classical composition [Raimondi’s *The Judgement of Paris* (c. 1515) after Raphael] it conjured a scene that most Parisians could link to the sex trade plied in the Bois de Boulogne park. Art as never before was drawing closer to ‘the now’; Manet had signalled not only a shift in artistic content but also a way of seeing that persists in the self-conscious sensibilities of contemporary networked society; his legacy is apparent even in countless fashion spreads and magazines. This painter of ‘modern life’ remains pivotal to our understanding of art as an encapsulation of the ‘present’. Manet seized the opportunity created by the context of the Salon, wherein he and his fellow artists presented their new subjectivities. The entire production was subsidised by the French State through the provision of public space within the Palace of Industry. The initial mockery notwithstanding, the exhibition signalled a new legitimacy for the avant-garde and in the absence of a curator the art critic Emile Zola (1840–1902) assumed the position of advocate.

The absence of curatorial control over the *Salon de Refuse* was by no means mirrored in conservative circles however, for entry into the official Academy was closely monitored by a jury panel. The success of the *Salon de Refuse* had a ricocheting effect. The key protagonist here was the archconservative Count Alfred Émilien O’Hara van Nieuwerkerke (1811–1892), who held the office of Superintendent of Fine Art. The position had been specially created for Nieuwerkerke at the behest of his mistress, Princess Mathilde; it commanded a salary of 60,000 Francs and enabled Nieuwerkerke to direct government arts policy. According to art historian Ross King, under Nieuwerkerke’s orders “the jurors were specifically instructed to take a more tolerant view of the works submitted. Any works not admitted to the Salon would simply be deemed ‘too weak to participate in the competition for rewards’” (King 2006, p.116). Here for the first time we see a state-sanctioned art academy modifying its own rules to accommodate avant-garde taste even though it was diametrically at odds with the aesthetics of the Academy. The combination of artistic pressure and public interest was now influencing curatorial decision-making, thus setting a trend that would last to this day.

Though the circumstances that conspired to produce the *Salon de Refuse* are illustrative of the collective machinations of French cultural life in the mid 19th Century, it was not always the case that curators were absent from the scene. It is here that attention turns to the other craze of fin-de-siècle Paris – one that was not about the moment but indeed its timeless opposite: Exoticism. One manifestation of L’Exotique was the ‘discovery’ of all things Japanese, a trend without precedent that came in the wake of the United States of America’s forced entry into Japanese ports in 1854. The curatorial impresario of this exciting cultural import was the art dealer Siegfried Samuel Bing (1838–1905). Bing as importer and later as the pre-eminent dealer of Art Nouveau places him as a late 19th Century curator of extraordinary influence.
and vision. Post-colonial critics now view the Western fascination with the East as a symptom of cultural imperialism; but it also affected the way in which Europeans viewed their own cultural traditions. Bing’s role, like so many before him, hinged on his ability to make linkages between subjectivities, contexts and economies to enact cultural change. Bing’s principal context was his Maison de l’Art Nouveau (‘House of New Art’), which he opened in Paris in 1895. The Maison enabled economic survival, indeed it flourished, and it offered subjectivities in the form of Japanese objets d’art and later the artistic collective Les Nabis, of which Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) and Maurice Denis (1870–1943) became the better-known members.

Bing died in the first decade of the 20th Century when Art Nouveau was on the wane; he was however a key protagonist in the great French century, a period that revolutionised art in a most astounding fashion, paving the way for artists to think about their methodologies, content and language in new ways. For curators however the 20th Century, despite being the period in which the profession finds its métier, brings with it a range of problems and complexities. Unlike any preceding period, the proliferation of art practices ensured that each decade, in cultural terms, is closer in density to any previous hundred-year period; the 20th Century was a ‘millennium’ unto itself and its presence weighs heavy on cultural practice today. Reflecting on this legacy, Italian curator Massimiliano Gioni felt compelled to address 20th Century influences when he was appointed as curator for the 55th Venice Biennale 2013, which he dubbed Encyclopaedic Palace. Gioni did this by not limiting his selections to living artists, nor even to individuals who traded as artists. Rather he extended his reach to anyone who made a contribution to cultural knowledge. Included here were such 20th Century figures as the educationalist Rudolf Steiner, the psychotherapist Carl Jung and the occult figure Aleister Crowley amongst others (La Biennale di Venezia, 2015). That individuals such as these were included in a biennale dedicated to living artists is suggestive of the lasting impact of 20th Century thinking on the art and curatorial practices of the 21st Century. It thus falls to the researcher to delineate key aspects of artistic and curatorial practice that persist in terms of relevance within the 21st Century.

In the early decades of the new century both the burgeoning science of psychoanalysis and the artistic movement known as Surrealism, inheritors both of the late 19th Century’s radical intelligentsia, turned attention to ‘irrationality’ and ‘the uncanny’ as valid approaches to knowledge. As the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) implied in 1912, when he coined the term ‘Orphism’, art was an activity of ‘sublime significance’. His term invoked the legendary Greek musician, poet and prophet Orpheus, the charmer of all living things who valiantly descended into the underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice. Such methodologies – descending metaphorically into the psychic underworld and engaging with intuitive, irrational and fragmented forms of knowledge inspired many Modern artists. The artist Salvador Dali (1904–1989) was much taken with the idea and a humorous aphorism concerning it is popularly attributed to him: “There is only one difference between a madman and me. The madman thinks he is
sane. I know I am mad.” Rather more poignantly the psychologically afflicted Surrealist actor, poet and artist Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) perceived that: “No one has ever written or painted, sculpted, modelled, built, invented, except to get out of hell” (Artaud 1965, p.149). Irrational, intuitive and uncanny states remain potent touchstones for countless contemporary artists and are thus significant to curators. Indeed, how can we know about that which we speak if we have not journeyed to those realms ourselves?

While madness and insanity may be a bridge too far for some, the concept of the artist-as-curatorial, that is an artist who is both intuitively capable and also administratively adept, is an idea with which many will now be familiar. The tendency can be traced to the French-American Dadaist and conceptualist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), who, as exiled European drew on the idea of the archival box to produce a now famous edition: Boîte-en-valise, (1935–41) (Museum of Modern Art, n.d.). As its title, 'Box in a suitcase' suggests, it recalls a travelling suitcase but also one that houses an additional container – a riddle wrapped in an enigma. But it also recalls the Solander box, the Wunderkammer, a reliquary and also the sacred Ark of the Covenant. The latter is suggested not merely because Duchamp was a prophet in exile – a key originator of conceptualism active in a time of immense cultural transition, but also because this 'archive' of Duchamp's key works recalls etymologically, the term 'Ark', from the Latin arca 'large box, chest'. Boîte-en-valise contains numerous miniaturised examples of the artist’s self-proclaimed key works. According to the Museum of Modern Art’s website:

Each box unfolds to reveal pull-out standing frames displaying Nude Descending a Staircase and other works, diminutive Readymades hung in a vertical 'gallery,' and loose prints mounted on paper. Duchamp included in each deluxe box one "original." In The Museum of Modern Art's Boîte-en-valise, this is a hand-colored print depicting the upper half of The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, or Large Glass (1915–23). Among the reproductions found in the box is L.H.O.O.Q., a rectified Readymade created by taking a cheap print of the Mona Lisa and adding a moustache, goatee, and lascivious pun (understood when the letters L-H-O-O-Q are pronounced rapidly in French to mean "she's got a hot ass") (Museum of Modern Art n.d.).

Boîte-en-valise has also been described as “a salesman’s sample case” (Foster 2004, p.274), by which historians Hal Foster et al. interpret as a nod to “the ‘spirit of art’ retooled in the light of commodity culture” (Foster 2004, p.274). Boîte-en-valise thus provides us not only with a nascent example of the Pop Art aesthetic but also with an early manifestation of the artist-as-curatorial. It stands at the beginnings of a trend that continues to this day.

From a curatorial perspective projects that deserve comparison with Duchamp’s Boîte-en-valise include French novelist and art theorist André Malraux’s (1901–1976) idea of the museum without walls, or
**Musée Imaginaire**, and the German philosopher and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin’s (1892–1940) 1936 hypothesis that mechanical reproduction diminished the ‘aura’ of the work of art (Benjamin 2008). In the pre-internet era Malraux’s museum was an on-going project that gathered together reproductions of art from all times and places and arranged them in startling juxtapositions, not unlike the earlier mentioned paintings of David Teniers the Younger. According to Malraux:

A ‘Museum without Walls’ is coming into being, and (now that the plastic arts have invented their own printing-press) it will carry infinitely farther that revelation of the world of art, limited perforce, which the ‘real’ museums offer us within their walls (Malraux 1974, p.17).

In pre-supposing that insights can be gained into cultural and creative activity through radical comparison, Malraux sought to unearth qualities that are intrinsic to all peoples. In the wake of World War II, conflict in which Malraux was an active participant, there is a redemptive quality to his venture. From a post-modern perspective however one senses that the project’s universalising tendency also jettisoned cultural specificities, the likes of which are glossed over by Malraux’s formalist readings. In contrast Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936 recognized that the mechanical reproduction of imagery was problematic where art was concerned. In his eyes the work of art was more than its image; it was a thing in the world that conveyed knowledge and experience through its unique presence. Duchamp, Malraux and Benjamin each tackle issues raised by the mechanical reproduction of artworks, and in so doing they laid the ground work for successive curatorial strategies that similarly deal with the physical reality of artworks and their transposition into widely disseminated media. It is a set of semiotic relations that is now culturally entrenched globally.

While in this analysis the second half of the 20th Century is approaching, examination of aspects of curatorial practice emerging from within this period will be delayed, as this will be visited in Chapter V – *The variety of curating today*. However, by arriving at the mid-century what is already apparent is the vast and complex legacies that curators inherit now. One approach to this problem would be to simply ignore it; just get on with the show and hope for the best; alternatively, the research remains on-going and the future implications beguiling. However, two issues remain apparent. A) Curating is intimately entwined with specific processes and linkages – subjectivities, contexts, economies. B) In the 21st Century claims to being *au fait* with cultural and artistic practices places an onus on curators to engage both analytical as well as intuitive, speculative and poetic methodologies. This interlinking of methodologies, far from being a product of new cultural and economic systems, recalls modes of cultural practice reaching back to the earliest beginnings of Western civilisation. But while all of these qualities are at play in contemporary art, the arena is not limited by such modes alone, especially as artists have in recent decades radically realigned
their *modus operandi*. For example, modes of artistic expression arising from both ‘institutional critique’ and ‘relational aesthetics’ will be analysed in Chapter V. The contemporary freelance curator is therefore, intimately linked to the perpetuation and transformation of cultural practice but maintains, either inevitably or by necessity, an ambivalent position within the tensions, vicissitudes and synergies of artistic practice, traditions and cultural change. In the following chapters I will examine the conditions, styles and problems of curating today and arrive at a contention that curating is itself a vitalising agency within contemporary cultural life.
CHAPTER IV
THE CONDITIONS OF CURATING TODAY

Financial advantage in and of itself is rarely an incentive to pursue freelance curatorial work, though it is often the case that the investment of time and labour in the freelance sector can lead to subsequent advantageous contracts either with private art collectors, employment with a commercial art gallery or consultative contracts with state-run institutions and departments. However, one distinct advantage that freelance curating affords is the liberty to locate oneself in culturally specific contexts and also for research to be conducted without a pre-ordained outcome in mind, in effect the ability to experiment.

Reflecting on the challenges of defining curating as a professional activity arts academic Olga Fernandez states:

I have always been intrigued by the fact that, in order to define what a curator is or a curator does, curators think about their practice in terms of analogy. Tom Morton has written on this topic that “curator as...constructions speak of a welcome self-reflexivity and plurality of approach but (...) there’s a faint atmosphere of subterfuge about them, of borrowing the glamour or gravitas of another profession.” Most analogies are related to other professions maybe because the difficulty of putting into words a kind of experience and knowledge that is learnt and developed in practice. Curators’ expertise is usually defined by a set of procedural skills and organizational abilities, and intellectual production. My argument will be that this knowledge combination is a key element in the post-fordist economy (Fernandez 2008, para. 1).

The framing of freelance curating within ‘post-Fordist’ economy is worthy of examination, for it helps to distinguish the endeavour from other modes of employment, such as the institutional curator (working in industrial-scale state-run art houses), while also enabling a series of critical questions to be posed. According to the Collin’s English Dictionary post-Fordism denotes “the idea that modern industrial production has moved away from mass production in huge factories, as pioneered by Henry Ford, towards specialized markets based on small flexible manufacturing units” (Collin’s English Dictionary n.d.). While the definition encapsulates many aspects of the market conditions of freelance life one might also consider the advantages and disadvantages of adopting the freelance mode of practice as opposed to other more secure forms of employment; for instance, in public art galleries. In my experience wages alone are rarely an incentive to embark on freelance curatorial work. For others the situation is little short of dire. For instance, cultural theorists Grace McQuilten and Anthony White suggest that, “workers
have come to embrace their own self-exploitation in the name of creative industry” (McQuilten & White 2016, p.171). In contrast however, it can also be the case that the investment of time and labour in the freelance sector can lead to advantageous contracts either with private individuals such as wealthy art collectors, employment with a commercial art gallery or consultative contracts with state-run institutions and departments. More importantly, and key to this research, is the question of what is to be gained in both creative and cultural terms as a freelance curator that might not be attained through government sector employment. From the point of view of the research it is apparent that there is a risk of over valorising the status of the freelance curator, especially when one recognises that projects that generate significant cultural impact, including biennales, triennials and museum-based exhibitions can only be curated by those who forgo, albeit temporarily, the freelance role or alternatively by entrenched institutional curators. What this highlights is, in order to be effective as a freelance curator one must always be open to working within institutional systems. This returns us to the question of what is to be gained from working as a freelance operator. What do freelance curators know or do that their institutional colleagues might not?

One distinct advantage that freelance curating affords is the liberty to locate oneself in culturally specific contexts and also to conduct research without a pre-ordained outcome in mind, in effect the ability to experiment. In the case of myself for example, research conducted during freelance periods has extended to examining and working with localized art forms and practices whilst working in a range of countries. These include New Zealand, Tibet, China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Cambodia, Turkey, Mexico, Cuba, Italy, the United Kingdom, remote northern Australia, Indonesia and also in the west African nations of Morocco and Mauritania. (For further reference see the author’s Curriculum Vitae included in Appendix 6.0 of this document and also the Damian Smith Archive, State Library of Victoria). Field research in these contexts has been complimented by academic and private studies and also through attending arts focused conferences and symposia. In circumstances that are unencumbered by institutional obligations, that is where one is not required to outline, in institutional terms, a rationale for a particular line of enquiry or why one may choose to journey to destinations, or perhaps inhabit sub-cultural contexts without knowing what is to be learnt from the experience, then new forms of knowledge may be gained. Unfettered by these responsibilities the freelance curator is capable of undertaking research in diverse locations and settings, thus affording them first-hand knowledge of emerging artistic practices, often in geographically disparate settings, in marginal or radical social contexts and through making new connections. To borrow from the descriptive prose of art theorist Elizabeth Grosz, curators share something with artists and philosophers, the ability “to ride the waves of a vibratory universe without direction or purpose, in short, their capacity to enlarge the universe by enabling its potential to be otherwise” (Grosz 2008, p.24). This becomes significant when one reflects upon the pace at which institutions respond to cultural events, which is to say very often well after the
proverbial horse has bolted. Similarly, if the freelance curator enacts independent projects or even ventures with creative latitude in the contexts that he or she finds himself or herself to be, there is the possibility of generating new cultural knowledge and experience through the interlinking of subjectivities, contexts and economies.

What are the advantages to be had from this mode of practice? To respond, one must first turn to perceptions about the role and purpose of art. For me immediate attention falls on arts capacity to illuminate something that might otherwise have remained unvoiced. By drawing attention to something, be it physical, psychological, metaphysical or otherwise, art enables acknowledgment and awareness of that which may haunt society while still remaining hidden. Further still the mere enactment of an artistic project or strategy in one cultural context can have ramifications in other settings. ‘They did it and so can we’, so to speak. This is where documentation, amongst other strategies, is important, not just as research but as a way of transcribing an experience from one context to another.

For instance, one case in point is a project in which the author participated whilst working as a freelance curator for RMIT University. This was on the 2011 project Trust: Intervention Through Art, which took place in Mexico at the Centro de los Artes, Oaxaca and Centro de los Artes, San Louis Potosi. Devised by Melbourne-based artist Karen Casey Trust: Intervention Through Art was a means of facilitating connections between strangers. It entailed that individuals shake hands, though with the added extra of a wet dollop of plaster contained within the interlocked palms. The couples were required to sustain the handshake until the plaster had set. The resulting forms, shell-like and encoded with the imprint of personal encounters, were subsequently displayed in grouped installations. The outcome of the project included strengthening community connection, precisely at a time when Mexico’s so-named ‘war on drugs’ was destabilising social relations. However, it was not merely that social connections were strengthened. Something was voiced about the longing for connection and a space was formulated in which this could occur. At the centre of the project was a powerful sentiment that ran to the very essence of being, of man as a social creature and the importance of being witnessed by another.

At the conclusion of the project, documentation and research developed by me informed and was cited in Elizabeth Grierson’s presentation Drawing Out TRUST As A Public Good For Resilient Communities: RMIT Design Research Institute Award Winning Project DRD, (Marshall, 2012) presented at the ‘Drawing Out’ conference, Central Saint Martin’s College, London in 2012. In addition, an exhibition of work arising from the Mexico projects was staged at the Lethaby Gallery, Central Saint Martin’s (DRI: Design Research Institute Exhibition: Karen Casey, 2012). It featured the video work Reach Out (2012), which Casey compiled using film footage, which was shot by me in San Louis Potosi, Mexico and Melbourne, Australia using a Canon D5 SLR camera (Casey, K Smith, D & Cole, T 2012). As for the communities in Mexico I
can only attest to the positive feedback that was received from participants. As one local elder stated, the project was about ‘connection’ and that was just what the community needed.

Of course freelance curating is not for the faint-hearted and should probably be avoided by practitioners who are new to the field. The aforementioned example required a certain degree of alertness in a city that was under military lock-down and where kidnapping was a commonplace, not an environment that I would recommend to a novice in any field. However, the reason for raising a caution is less one of personal security and more that successful freelance curating is largely dependent on the individual having already developed a significant network of professional contacts and having evolved also in-depth critical understanding of the workings of the visual arts sector. This extends to a detailed understanding of what exactly constitutes the ‘visual arts sector’, for the expression encapsulates a number of interlinked industries, practices, concepts, policies and funding initiatives. (See Diagram I at the end of this chapter, which schematises the arenas across which curators may form linkages and/or find employment). Both the knowledge that curators provide to the industry and also the facilitation skills they deploy within the perpetually shifting cultural, economic and policy landscapes has the potential to catalyse projects, thus ensuring greater optimisation. Successful freelance curating is therefore contingent on acute responsiveness at an individual level, to multiple factors, circumstances and opportunities within the contemporary environment. Freelance curating is furthermore effective within and across independent, commercial and institutional contexts because cross-sector linkages are what those arenas require, especially where A) new or advanced knowledge and/or methodologies may be required, B) new products and/or experiences may be required, and C) new linkages may be required.

While such issues are pertinent to the practicalities of contemporary freelance curating they do little to shed light on the specific nature of the world or worlds in which freelance curators ply their trade. For example, the esteemed art historian Hans Belting reminds us that the art world changed dramatically in 1989. It was the year in which the Berlin Wall finally collapsed, as did Apartheid in South Africa, and so too the nascent hopes of China’s democratic movement in Tiananmen Square. According to Belting:

Global art, to pin it down, does not have a history (how could that be otherwise?), but it has a chronology, as a term and as a concept. If we look at London and Paris, two places with a colonial history, it becomes apparent that there has been a turning point, a global turn, in the same year 1989 when also world history changed (Belting 2007, para. 6).

Perhaps more than any other scholar Belting highlights the peculiar conditions in which curators operate, for wherever they may be curators must contend with the dizzying uncertainties of Globalization - anxieties stemming from cultural complexities that are impossible to grasp, a longing for cultural contexts
that are at least humanist in scale, the daunting prospects of competitive capitalist markets and so on. The condition recalls Andre Malraux’s observation that “Man knows the world is not made on a human scale; and he wishes that it were” (Malraux 1992, p.96). Belting suggests however that art no longer represents itself,

it represents everything else in its own time, and everything else again has a geography. New media have made art narrative. But any narrative involves a place where it makes sense, and thus a local audience. Global Art is not global in that it is everywhere the same. On the contrary, it feeds the expectation that also art is as multiform as the global universe (Belting 2007, para. 6).

Such an observation raises the prospect of contemporary freelance curators tackling the world in ways that are idiosyncratic, subjective, localized and indeed multiform and this at least strikes a note of optimism. However not all share such buoyancy. For instance, the forces that enable contemporary art to be Global scandalize the German contemporary artist Hito Steyerl, who states:

To brutally summarize a lot of scholarly texts: contemporary art is made possible by neoliberal capital plus the internet, biennials, art fairs, parallel pop-up histories, growing income inequality. Let’s add asymmetric warfare—as one of the reasons for the vast redistribution of wealth—real estate speculation, tax evasion, money laundering, and deregulated financial markets to this list.

To paraphrase philosopher Peter Osborne’s illuminating insights on this topic: contemporary art shows us the lack of a (global) time and space. Moreover, it projects a fictional unity onto a variety of different ideas of time and space, thus providing a common surface where there is none.

Contemporary art thus becomes a proxy for the global commons, for the lack of any common ground, temporality, or space.

It is defined by a proliferation of locations, and a lack of accountability (Quoted in AICA International Association of Art Critics 2015).

Steyerl’s fears, that contemporary art has become “a proxy for the global commons, for the lack of any common ground, temporality, or space… and a lack of accountability” is now a topic of scrutiny for critics in the international arena. The artist’s words appear on the flyer for the 2015 symposium and introduce the topic: ‘Who Cares? Cultural Intelligence: Value, Veneration and Criticality’ (AICA
The conference attracts international participation for it is convened by the UNESCO-backed International Association of Art Critics in partnership with Culture+Conflict, Royal College of Art, London. It is here that critics are asked to respond to the question: What are the ethical tensions for the contemporary artist and critic when art becomes a global currency at a time of extreme inequality and instability? (AICA International Association of Art Critics, 2015).

In a vein that may be compared to Steyerl, the Mexican artist Perdro Lasch eyes the complex and inequitable global arena in which art finds its currency and like Steyerl, Lasch is far from optimistic. For example, at the 2015 Bienal de la Habana, Cuba, Lasch presented a series of graphical works and banners, including *Art Biennials & Other Global Disasters*, (2013–ongoing) (Lasch n.d.). The work juxtaposes the names of fashionable art biennales with sites of human disaster, such as ‘Venice / Chernobyl’, presented as colourful festive banners. Lasch articulates a link between the ‘haves and have nots’, highlighting the implicate violence that enables wealth and art to accrue in contexts of conspicuous display and consumption, including biennales and art fairs.

For curators it is certainly feasible to operate in contemporary art contexts while simultaneously turning a blind eye to these broader cultural forces, though they do so at their peril. At the 19th Sydney Biennale in 2014 a group of invited artists took exception at being linked to the key sponsor of the festival, Transfield Holdings. The company is a shareholder in Transfield Services, which manages facilities at the Australian immigration detention centre on Papua New Guinea’s remote Manus Island. There on that isolated spot amongst daily miseries and tragedies the 23–year-old Iranian asylum seeker Rezender Berati was murdered 17 February 2014 (Laughland 2014). In response to the threatened boycott, which was being proposed by the artists, the outgoing Sydney Biennale Chairman Luca Belgiorno-Nettis stated: “I wear two hats: one as chair of the Biennale of Sydney and the other as a director of Transfield Holdings; both organisations conceived by my father and nurtured by my family over many decades” (Safi & Farrell 2014). It fell to the Australian curator Juliana Enberg to mediate between the various parties, though the resignation of Belgiorno-Nettis did not equate to the sponsorship being dropped. Rather the biennale and the corporation remain linked.

The above examples are indicative of the issues and tensions that traverse the work of the curator – money, politics and power and rarely, if ever, art all on its own. Joseph Beuys said it clearly with his equation ‘künst = KAPITAL’, (c.1979–1982). Further they reveal how the conditions of curating today are, not only, exceedingly complex, layered and nuanced; they are difficult at best to predict. For curators therefore, clear insight into the ethical dimensions of practice remains an especially productive goal. As will be outlined in the following chapter however, the complexities of contemporary life have given rise to diverse approaches to curatorial work. An ethics of care is but one facet of those practices.
DIAGRAM I – freelance curators work across a wide range of arts industry sectors

SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Humanities and science specialists
- Philosophers, Social Theorists
- Art couriers
- Picture framers
- Picture hangers
- Art installers
- Conservators
- Graphic designers
- Social Media
- Editors
- Translators
- Signage manufacturers
- Printers
- Distributors
- Photographers
- Fund raiser
- Legal
- Accounts

- Freelance curators draw on a wide variety of service providers

INDUSTRY SECTORS

- Artists
  (Living artists & artist’s estates)
- Artist-run initiatives (ARIs)
- Public Galleries
- Museums
- Libraries
- Governments
  Federal, State, Local
  Government agencies including consulates
  Foreign governments

- Not for profits
- Peak Bodies
- Commercial galleries
  & Private Art Consultancies
- Publishing houses
  Fine Art Publishers
- Charitable trusts

- Freelance curators make linkages across a wide variety of arts industry sectors

AUDIENCE

- Corporations
  Corporate art collections
- Hybrid Entities
  Eg. art/science research centres
- Private Collectors
  Private Museums
- Art Fairs
- Festivals
- Biennales
  International arts festivals
- Auction houses
- Universities
  Education providers
- Magazines & journals
- Cultural tourism
CHAPTER V
THE VARIETY OF CURATING TODAY

An overview of contemporary curating reveals a surprisingly complex arena, where curators hail from a variety of creative disciplines – art, art history, museum studies and curatorship, fashion, film and even social sciences. This diversification mirrors artistic practice more broadly and can be encapsulated in the terrain of ‘relational aesthetics’, proposed by art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud.

I’m not a critic ... I’m a curator ... a poet of space. I make places where individual works by artists can breathe, where they can transmit their message to tomorrow. I articulate that spirit in the space between the works (Szeeman 1990, p.6).

Harold Szeeman’s utterance presents us with a vision of the curator working to create the optimum settings for artists to display their works. Szeeman’s ‘a poet of space’ rings true for many subsequent practitioners and draws to some extent on the concept of connoisseurship, the judgment of taste as a guide to curatorial propriety. But since Szeeman’s time the complexities of the contemporary arts industry, combined also with the vast array of artistic practices at play in the world today has swelled significantly. It is not surprising that curating is now also characterized by a discernible variety of approaches, methodologies and viewpoints.

Various publications and websites illuminate and critically engage with curatorial issues and the terrain faced by curators. For example, Hans Belting and Peter Weibel established the on-line journal globalartmuseum.de in 2006. According to the introduction on the website:

The project represents a first attempt at documenting the contested boundaries of today’s art world; its aim is to spark a debate on how the globalization process changes the art scene and to undertake a critical review of the development 20 years after its onset (Belting & Weibel 2006).

Not long after, in 2008, the on-line journal oncurating.org made its debut, opening with transcripts of discussions between students and teaching staff of the Postgraduate Program in Curating of the Institute of Cultural Studies in the Arts (ICS), at Zurich University of the Arts. Editor Dorothee Richter introduces the Journal, explaining that, “To encourage a debate around curating is therefore a way to engage with the ideological sphere, and that is motivated through desire not to curate but
to engage with the world” (Richter 2008). In the following year, 2009, The Exhibitionist was established as a ‘journal by curators, for curators’. Modelled on the legendary Cahiers du Cinema, founding editor Jens Hoffman (b. 1974) outlined the agenda in the inaugural edition. Drawing inspiration from French film director Francois Truffaut, Hoffmann declares that “The application of the auteur theory to curating has been one of the most remarkable developments in our field in recent years, and it finds another level of urgency, intensity, and self-reflection in these pages” (Hoffmann 2010, para.3). Harking back to Dorothee Richter, the theme of ‘engaging with the world’ was still potent some four years later, in 2012, when The Journal of Curatorial Studies was established. Within the Journal’s statement of Aims and Scope, editors Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher note:

While curating as a spatialized discourse of art objects remains important, the expanded cultural practice of curating not only produces exhibitions for audiences to view, but also plays a catalytic role in redefining aesthetic experience, framing cultural conditions in institutions and communities, and inquiring into constructions of knowledge and ideology (Drobnick & Fisher 2012).

In contrast Terry Smith’s Thinking Contemporary Curating, which was published in 2012, turns attention to curatorial processes rather than aiming to expand its parameters as the aforementioned journals had. Smith’s five interlinked essays commence by asking,

Do curators think in ways that are unique to their profession? Can curatorial thought be distinguished from the thinking processes within the myriad of closely related practices—especially art criticism, art history, and art making—and from curating within other kinds of museum or display spaces, public and private? (Smith 2012).

The New York based Independent Curators International, possibly the longest running independent curatorial organization, publishes Smith’s work (Independent Curators International n.d). Established in 1975 it sees itself as “a unique organization that focuses on the role of the curator as a contextualizing force for contemporary art” (Independent Curators International n.d.). Shortly after Smith’s publication appeared, Hans Ulrich Obrist’s A Brief History of Curating came into the market (Obrist 2014). Obrist presents a series of interviews with prominent curators. These include interviews by Hans Ulrich Obrist with Anne d’Harmoncourt, Werner Hofman, Jean Leering, Franz Meyer, Seth Siegelaub, Walter Zanini, Johannes Cladders, Lucy Lippard, Walter Hopps, Pontus Hultén, and Harald Szeemann, thus reaffirming the idea of curating as a subjective activity akin to a cinematic auteur.
One question that this proliferation of research raises is the possibility of a macro perspective on curating, which is to say how in broad terms might a definition arise as to what is it that a freelance curator of contemporary art does exactly? The importance of this question becomes apparent when we come to identify how often it is that curators will reach for analogy when describing their practice and indeed when the various accounts are shown to be so diverse. Curator and academic Olga Fernandez reflects upon the analogies used to describe curating. Fernandez states:

I have always been intrigued by the fact that, in order to define what a curator is or a curator does, curators think about their practice in terms of analogy. Tom Morton has written on this topic that “curator as...constructions speak of a welcome self-reflexivity and plurality of approach but (...) there’s a faint atmosphere of subterfuge about them, of borrowing the glamour or gravitas of another profession.” Most analogies are related to other professions maybe because the difficulty of putting into words a kind of experience and knowledge that is learnt and developed in practice. Curators’ expertise is usually defined by a set of procedural skills and organizational abilities, and intellectual production (Fernandez 2008, para.1).

The point that has already been made, that freelance curators investigate and make linkages between subjectivities, contexts and economies, gains credence when considered alongside Fernandez’s “set of procedural skills and organizational abilities, and intellectual production” (Fernandez 2008, para.1). Both models, however, contrast rather starkly with the self-reflexive methodologies described by many practicing curators. As can be seen in the 2010 publication The Curator in the Academy, edited by David Forrest, questions concerning the nature of contemporary curating elicit a complex array of perspectives. For curator Stephen Gallagher “Curating is grouping objects to reflect a thought. It is the development of a reservoir of varied resource materials, the maintenance of this collection, or creating an exhibition of objects to express a thought” (Gallagher 2010, p.13). In contrast, artist and academic Maggie McCormack asserts a “public curating as the staging of ‘moments’ (Lefebvre 2004) within a space and time map that generates a dialogue between artists that addresses these questions” (McCormack 2010, p.66). While emphases such as these are revelatory about individual approaches, they are not intended as macro-perspective models. Compare then with Elisabeth Grierson’s suggestion that, “the curating role suggests an ethics of care as a way of being” (Grierson 2010, p.19). Grierson’s emphasis on “an ethics of care as a way of being” draws attention to the historical conditions of cultural ‘care’, which is delineated in Chapter III. The ethical imperative is sufficiently broad to encompass caring for and about. Curators care for objects but in order to care about objects one must invest in understanding both the objects under examination and the contexts in which they circulate.
African–American curator Fred Wilson provides a salient example of how curators care about the objects under their purview. In the essay *Artists and Collections: A working partnership*, Australian curator Rachel Kent outlines elements of a project conducted by the American artist/curator Fred Wilson, *Viewing the invisible: An installation by Fred Wilson*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 1998. Kent states:

Since the gallery’s re-development and launch as The Ian Potter Museum of Art in August 1998, a further project has drawn upon The University’s diverse collections in its construction. *Viewing the Invisible: an installation by Fred Wilson* (1998) represented the culmination of a three-month residency by American museum interventionist Fred Wilson and incorporated collections material from The University of Melbourne Medical History Museum, The University of Melbourne Anatomy Museum, and The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Works were also sourced for display from the collections of three key regional Victorian galleries - Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Bendigo Art Gallery, and Geelong Art Gallery - and from the archival holdings of the State Library of New South Wales.

Inspired by a longstanding fascination with museums and their operations, Wilson is best known for his groundbreaking exhibition *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore (1992). In the exhibition, he drew upon objects within the Society’s collections to create a fictitious museum-style display that revealed inherent ideological biases relating to issues of race and representation in the museum. Wilson noted of his methodology: “I looked at every object in the Historical Society collection, which is a vast one. They’ve been collecting since 1840, and it was a men’s club in the early days, so they have some odd things in the collection. But those things aren’t on view. And those are many of the things I have put on view, because what they put on view says a lot about the museum, but what they don’t put on view says more”. In *Viewing the Invisible* Wilson likewise created a fictitious museum display, introducing subtly disruptive elements that reflected upon dominant Australian historical narratives whilst revealing omissions and counter-histories (Kent 1999, para.9).

While Wilson’s practice illuminates important issues pertaining to the institutional framing of race, it demonstrates also that while curators care for objects, the objects are at the mercy of curatorial interpretation. The subject is fertile though vexed for it raises real concerns about the way in which artworks are framed in public context. Is the curator within his or her rights to radically reframe artworks in conceptual terms, or is negotiation with the artist or cultural milieu always the preferred
model? For example, in the domain of Australian Commonwealth legislation the concept of Moral Rights was introduced into the Copyright Act 2000. This includes the ‘right of integrity’, whereby an artist can assert a right over the integrity of their work (Arts Law 2015). While a case of ‘aesthetic impropriety’ is yet to be prosecuted, and at which point a clearer interpretation of the term ‘integrity’ may emerge, ‘right of integrity’ remains hypothetically an avenue that aggrieved artists may wish to pursue.

In the 1990s however, Wilson was one amongst many curators who perceived the critical concept of the ‘intentional fallacy’ (Wismatt & Beardsley 1946), the idea that the meaning attached to artworks was not necessarily inscribed by the artist, as a validation of the ‘curator-as-artist’ – a curator/artist moreover whose primary materials was the works of other artists. Two decades after Wilson’s exhibition was staged, Chilean curator Gonzalo Pedraza took the paradigm one step further and dispensed with ‘artists’ altogether. In his 2013 project Colección Vecinal, (Neighbourhood Collection), at the Matacana 100 art space, Santiago, Chile, Pedraza invited members of the local community to submit favourite artworks displayed in their homes in an exhibition (Villasmil 2011). As he delineated at a public talk at the inaugural Sydney Contemporary Art Fair, many of the artworks were ‘tasteful’ scenes or alternatively popular culture images that were not especially associated with an author. In this scenario Pedraza positioned himself as both curator and conceptual artist engaging directly with audiences to produce a networked art practice, entirely dispensing with the idea of the artist-as-author. Seemingly it embodies what the cultural theorist Roland Barthes predicted in his 1967 essay The Death of the Author,

We are now beginning to be the dupes …. by which our society proudly champions precisely what it dismisses, ignores, smothers or destroys; we know that to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author (Barthes 1971, p.6).

But in condemning the artist/author to death Barthes predicts a significant problem for curatorship, being a bottom up approach to culture governed by populist taste. This is indeed a reality that impacts the variety of curating today and to a large extent limits its expansion. The phenomenon becomes apparent when one considers the degree to which contemporary museums are pressured to perform economically. One logical and indeed endemic response has been to employ marketing executives in a bid to determine ‘what audiences desire’. Curators can be brought in to produce the next ‘blockbuster’ exhibition but not to deviate from the model. While digital networks have empowered audiences in ways that are unprecedented, they have also emboldened the marketeers. Yet simply pandering to the masses, whether in the guise of a quasi-Pop-Art ethos or otherwise,
seems the least inventive way for curators to work with an imagined spectatorship or audience. Subjectivity, which as curators we must champion, may be interesting to some but it is also risky; research-driven market sampling can equally displace it.

In my own experience curatorial work that engages with audiences and networks as an intrinsic part of the production of art can be a most exciting venture. As the curator of the aforementioned project Trust: Intervention Through Art, Mexico, I found myself working closely with the artist, volunteers and community members. This included being a participant, installing the works and completing the documentation. However, where projects such as this extend the role of the curator beyond that of facilitator I am also aware that audience engaged projects are not always critically conceived. Rather marketing initiatives that link audience ‘research’ with ‘exhibition as production’ can result in very predictable ventures that have little to do with the complexities or tensions of modern society and art. At best they are elaborate productions that harness the complex mechanisms of networked society but do not aim to challenge. As a point of difference one could begin for instance by substituting the word ‘engagement’ with ‘entanglement’ which already suggests a more complex and already occurring relationship between institutions, societies and individuals. Of course, a freelance curator is entirely at liberty to devise any project of his or her choosing and may well prefer to develop ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions for large-scale museums. However, where the skills and knowledge of freelance curators becomes a mode of critical intervention is something that concerns us here. Indeed, it is the precise ways in which curators extend the nature of their practice that enables the research to define the limits of curatorial activity and thus encapsulate curating as a distinct activity within the matrix of cultural and artistic networks.

Though I hold to the distinct role of the curator one should not forget that artists have also appropriated curatorial strategies to a degree that challenges easy definition of curatorial territory. In Australia during the 1980s and 1990s the conceptual influence of the ‘intentional fallacy’, which emerged in the context of the New Criticism that dominated American literary theory in the mid Century and Barthes’ ‘death of the author’, which arose in the context of French Post-Structuralism, fed emerging narratives that would see artists reassessing where they stood in the hierarchies of artistic circulation. The locally produced magazine Art & Text, which was edited by critic and curator Paul Taylor (1957–1992), was a key vehicle of dissemination in the Australian scene. Smarter players, sensing that life as an artist was no longer what it once might have been, adopted a theoretical mode known as ‘institutional critique’, which entailed modes of practice that critically analysed its own positioning in galleries and museums and by extension the social function of art. According to Alberro and Stimson:
one of the central characteristics of institutional critique in its moment of formation was that both an analytical and a political position were built into the critical interpretive strategy—that if one problematized and critically assessed the soundness of the claims advanced (often tacitly) by art institutions, then one would be in a better position to instantiate a nonrepressive art context (Alberro & Stimson 2009, p.3).

The mode also enabled arts practitioners to maintain professional valence, becoming a way for artists to work within the system and perhaps change it in the process. In Australia well-known artist curators include Charles Green (Design and Art Australia Online n.d. ‘Charles Green’), Brenda Croft (Art & Design, n.d. ‘UNSW Brenda Croft’), and Djon Mundine (Mundine n.d.). As Aboriginal artist/curators both Croft and Mundine have been influential players within institutional circles, doubling their artistic work with political activism. In contrast Green is well-known as an artist, curator and academic specializing in the history of contemporary art.

In the case of both ‘the intentional fallacy’ and ‘death of the author’, a shared conceptual turn was the reliance on emphasizing the end product of artistic activity while diminishing the significance of process as an aspect of artistic practice. Unsurprisingly this led to a countering in artistic quarters and many performance-based practitioners from the 1970s onwards, enacted projects that existed for discrete periods of time or otherwise not at all. For example, Australian conceptualist Gary Willis presented the hyper violent performance …and the Leopard Looked like ME!’ – Play for You, (1980), at 3.30 am in the Adelaide Fringe Club (Willis, n.d.), meaning none but the night owls would view it. In contrast art imbued with more socially engaged strategies gave rise to several significant movements. In 1970s Australia this included the Art and Working Life movement, of which artists Ian Millis, Ian Burn and Geoff Hogg were participants, while in Sydney the Feminist Art Movement, which formed around artists Barbara Hall, Vivienne Binns, Sue Ford and others took shape. Slightly later, in the early 1980s, the Aboriginal Legal Service in Fitzroy was a catalyst for politically charged art practices, especially through the medium of silkscreen printed posters. Precursors such as these pre-date the more recent boom in socially engaged curating, including, for instance, the work of the UK based ‘Situations’, (Situations n.d.) whose Director, Clare Doherty was recently invited to work as International Affiliate on the inaugural Public Art Biennial Lab at the Queen Victoria Market, Melbourne, under the stewardship of Chief Curator Natalie King (City of Melbourne 2016).

From a curatorial perspective however, it seems hubristic to say the least to imagine that context alone might determine the meaning of an artwork, which is where ‘Institutional critique/death of the author/intentional fallacy’ thinking may bring us, a point I might add that has been variously interrogated by curators in the new millennium. To recap, artworks are multivalent portmanteaus
that cannot be so easily reduced. German hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests something similar in his key text *Truth and Method*: “All encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event” (Gadamer 1960, p.99). Gadamer’s statement suggests hermeneutics holds significance, both in its contemporary and historical manifestations, for curatorial practice. The reasons for this become apparent when one considers that hermeneutics is concerned with first and second order theories of understanding. The question “How to read?” is replaced by the question, “How do we communicate at all?” (Ramberg & Gjesdal 2005).

One curatorial project, which contemplated the hermeneutic conundrum was the 2013 exhibition *Process Presence / Processo Presenza*, held at the Museo Italiano, Melbourne. As curator of this show the approach was to offer a space for artists to articulate creative processes as a means of both articulating and exploring the conjoined concepts of ‘meaning and language’. The outcome was intended as a project in which objects were viewed in terms of their uncanny presence, derived for the most part through the enacting of creative processes. Most of the participating artists drew inspiration from the Italian art movement Arte Povera. The key curator of that inspiring movement was Germano Celant. In 1967, just two months after the inaugural Arte Povera exhibition Celant penned a manifesto: *Arte Povera: Notes on a Guerilla War*, (Arte Povera. Appunti per una guerriglia) which appeared in the art magazine *Flash Art*, no.5, 1967. In it Celant commented on the hermeneutic dimensions of the work being produced, stating: “The difficulty of knowledge, or of taking possession of things, is enormous: conditioning prevents us from seeing a pavement, a corner, or a daily space” (Celant 1967, p.3). Process was seen as a way of manoeuvring within the perceptual labyrinth.

Yet where it was once possible to think of art as a perpetually unfolding process, the opening of the 21st Century was destined to contain yet more complex artistic territories, where process alone could not encapsulate the precise nature of art. Aesthetic philosopher Morris Weitz recognized this condition in his essay *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics* (Weitz 1956). According to Weitz: “‘Art’, itself, is an open concept’ (Weitz 1956, p.4). The full extent of this much-cited quote reads:

"Art," itself, is an open concept. New conditions (cases) have constantly arisen and will undoubtedly constantly arise; new art forms, new movements will emerge, which will demand decisions on the part of those interested, usually professional critics, as to whether the concept should be extended or not (Weitz 1956, p.4).

For curators, the logic is apparent. If art is an open theory, then surely curating must also be an
open theory.

As if to celebrate Weitz's point the term 'curator' has entered an unprecedented phase of popular currency. Celebrity chefs are invited to 'curate' menus, while their arboreal counterparts 'curate' the floral arrangements; even guest lists are spoken of as being 'curated'. Just as artists are challenged by the exponential expansion of art as a concept and indeed the vast numbers of individuals who claim the title of artist, so too are curators challenged by the popular co-option of their professional terrain. But where it might be wished that no amount of 'chefs-curating-menus' will impact upon the work of contemporary art curators, we should perhaps consider how celebrity has infiltrated the art scene to a considerable degree.

This brings us to an acknowledgment of the 'celebrity' curator, for if nothing else it identifies those practitioners who have scaled the vertiginous heights of late Capitalist art markets to the extent that they are now heralded for being famous, rather than for what they do or at least offer. One celebrity curator, albeit one of impeccable credentials, is Germano Celant. The erstwhile curator of Arte Povera (poor art) is now Artistic Director of the Prada Foundation, Milan, one of the wealthiest fashion houses in the world. According to the Art Newspaper, Celant is to be recompensed to the tune of 750,000 Euro to organize a pavilion for the Milan Expo 2015, affording him an elite status as one of the better paid curators world-wide. (The Art Newspaper n.d.; Walter 2014).

As is the case of Celant working for Prada, this linking of art and fashion is now widespread. Indeed, the interconnection has proven mutually beneficial as the arenas cross-pollinate their symbolic capital - glamour and creative license; the consummation has represented a significant boon in both sales and audience numbers (Willis 2015). The fashion-as-art phenomenon has also seen a new class of curator, arising not from art historical or museum studies arenas but from within the fashion industry itself. When The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier opened in my hometown of Melbourne at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2014, the show’s curator, Therry-Maxine Loriot, drew on his experience as a former male model. According to an article in the New York Times Loriot was unknown in curatorial circles prior to the success of the Gaultier exhibition, which originated at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2011 (Wilson 2013). Loriot’s case exemplifies how individuals with specialist knowledge that is not specifically curatorial may nonetheless inhabit curatorial roles. Significantly, high-end fashion curators bring specific subjectivities to centre-stage contexts that enable economically successful projects to be enacted.

While I have not always been inspired by fashion-centred curating, one curator whose work has been of personal significance to me is Jean-Hubert Martin and I will now describe an exhibition...
curated by him at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Tasmania. I am interested to do so because it is safe to say Martin has been influential on Australian curating even if it is simply to invest others with a sense of the possibilities of curating. He achieved this by intermingling the private art collection of well-known Tasmanian entrepreneur David Walsh with borrowed pieces from public institutions and arranging them in startling juxtapositions. That show, called Theatre of the World, (Martin 2012) was a sprawling cabinet of curiosities that included all sorts of things, like for instance a Giacometti standing woman sculpture Grande figure (Femme Leoni), (1947) and an Egyptian sarcophagus alone together in a room of Polynesian Tapa cloths. This scenario contrasted most vividly with a nearby salon, deep inside Walsh’s subterranean museum, in which one encounters a miniature mountain, which was in fact a work by Australian sculptor Callum Morton called Babylonia, (2005). It is a piece one is able to enter only to discover within it a series of hotel room doors that appear to go on forever. Walking through the exhibition I had no real idea what it was all about, other than a strange series of sensations that time or history had been abandoned or perhaps scrambled and in some disconcerting paradox I was underground in this remote island at the very bottom of the world. It confirmed all the old myths and prejudices about the antipodes being an upside down kind of a place. I remember also it was at the time when the aftershocks of the Global Financial Crisis were still rocking Europe and America in 2012, and here we were gorging ourselves on a surreal and sumptuous banquet that David Walsh had provided for the opening of his amazing private museum. And it struck me that this private collector who seemed to come out of nowhere was the real curator of this experience and will probably go down as the most influential curator Australia has ever produced. On reflection however, it was the pairing of Walsh and Martin that enabled this most remarkable of exhibitions.

What is thus presented is an overview of contemporary curating that reveals a surprisingly complex arena, where curators hail from a variety of creative disciplines – art, art history, museum studies and curatorship, fashion, film and even social sciences. In truth the terrain could be expanded to include science-based and interdisciplinary fields as avenues resulting in curatorial work. Examples include the long-running International Symposium of Electronic Art (ISEA) (Casey & Smith 2013) and more locally, SymbioticA, University of Western Australia (SymbioticA). One might even include Professor Carl Sagan’s iconic role in leading the team who compiled cultural content in the form of gold-plated phonographic audio recordings for inclusion in NASA’s Voyager space probe (North American Space Agency n.d.). This diversification mirrors artistic practice more broadly and may best be encapsulated in the terrain of ‘relational aesthetics’, proposed by art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud. Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 2002, p.113). Not only as a way of
thinking about art Bourriaud’s model is compelling when faced with the many facets of curatorial work.

While the advantages associated with curators hailing from diverse or discipline-specific backgrounds is one of proselytization, that is, the spruiking of new and specialized cultural knowledge, questions must also be raised as to what is it that curators do that is different or distinct from the teaching and learning professions. If curators are not merely ‘presenters of knowledge’ or maybe ‘facilitators of experiences’ but rather, are as Harold Szeeman suggests, ‘poets of space’ whose language occurs in the ‘space between’ artworks, then how is curating strengthened and/or diminished by the expanded practice of curatorship? What are the problems for curating today?
CHAPTER VI
THE PROBLEMS FOR CURATING TODAY

If high-speed changes in culture and society engender widespread and deeply felt existential challenges that are not being tackled by traditional institutions, then in both philosophical and political terms, curators must choose, either consciously or otherwise, where they stand in relation to these factors.

Harold Szeeman’s description of a curator as ‘a poet of space’ has a lovely ring to it. It seems so ephemeral, so Zen-like and self-possessed. Working with things, we remain steadfastly appreciative of the intangible attributes of artworks. Appealing though these sentiments be, they do little to illuminate the complex sets of relations with which contemporary art curators must daily contend. One facet of these challenges is highlighted by Australian intermedia artist David Pledger who suggests that artists and by extension curators, are not always free to work as they please. Pledger writes:

[artists’] autonomy has been curtailed by policy that institutionalises them within organisations, events and venues that curate culture on behalf of funding agencies. They have little or no influence in determining their conditions, as they are barely visible at elite levels of governance (Pledger 2014, para. 2).

Pledger’s statement goes to the heart of the funding and policy issues that face both contemporary artists and curators and highlights reasons for both fields of practice to wonder where their power as artist and/or curator resides. But before the locus of cultural power is considered, let us imagine for a moment a worst-case scenario for curating. It is this: No one is looking; no one is interested; no one really cares. Curiously this is not too distant from what the cultural theorist Robert Pfaller perceives as a very real condition of contemporary society. In his 2014 publication On the Pleasure Principle In Culture. Illusions Without Owners, Pfaller states the case for a condition he describes as ‘interpassivity’. Drawing on a suggestion by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (b.1949–) that “feelings and convictions can exist externally” (Pfaller 2014, p.20), Pfaller asserts that “1. There are artworks that view themselves; and 2. There are consumers who want to be replaced by something that consumes in their place” (Pfaller 2014, p.20). Pfaller further iterates:

The steady growth in the ranks of art curators also seems to be an example of interpassivity. Don’t they in fact view the curated art, replacing traditional viewers who have
recently become scarce (for example, because they have been re-educated by the interactive installations to become active artists)? And the numerous video installations in major exhibitions, whose length regularly surpasses (many times over) the time spent by even the most patient viewers - aren't they also self-viewing apparatuses, which in an interpassive way mediate to exhibition visitors the feeling of having seen something (and to non-visitors, the feeling of not having to see)? Isn't there a peculiar conformity here, such that the viewers (who actually see only very little) perceive the situation that there is a lot to see, in such a way that it seems as though they have seen a lot? (Pfaller 2014, p.21).

Reflecting on curatorial experiences I have certainly had the sensation of wondering if the inordinate amount of research undertaken for an exhibition was somehow lost or only partially gleaned by the individuals who came to look at the show. Did it really matter to the visitors that the research demonstrated or revealed a particular aspect of cultural history in a unique and special way? Weren't they just out for a good time?

If, as Pfaller suggests, interactivity has re-educated audiences to be artists, or at least somehow ‘creative’, then what are the implications for curating? It is possible for instance to see a shift from curator-as-educator to curator-as-facilitator? If we agree to this role, curators are also required to defer aspects of their traditional function to their audience. ‘You too can curate the exhibition (more or less).’ At the same time, Pfaller’s concept of interpassivity suggests a kind of stupefied spectator – one who is so overwhelmed by the spectacle of media that the role of being a spectator is now too arduous. Could it be that Pfaller is entirely correct when he suggests that curators are now somehow professional viewers, whose role it is to assume the responsibilities of ‘looking at’ culture? Is it possible also that this ‘looking’, which relieves others of the burden of looking, recalls the origins of curating – the Curate for instance, as one who cares for the souls of the parishioners? And finally are not these two conditions – interactivity and interpassivity – antithetical? Does this suggest, not a death of curating, but a strange displacing of the role into the very opposite of what curating once was? Instead of showing art to the public are curators destined to look on behalf of a public who have already become pro-active consumers – prosumers (Toffler 1980) – who have no wish to engage but rather remain within the narcissistic condition of late Capitalist life? Prior to dismissing this as conceptual elaboration, might we not reflect on first-hand experiences based on how we also engage with exhibitions? One personal experience of observing the weekend crowds thronging through an exhibition I had curated for a major Australian art museum was both amusing and perturbing. How many of those in attendance were actually looking at the works, let alone reading the carefully researched didactics that served to inform the paintings? At least some of the artworks appeared to be as popular as the mobile phones in the gallery.
The position that Pfaller’s logic draws us towards is not one of ‘disinterested pleasure’ as philosopher Emanuel Kant famously suggested as a condition of taste in The Critique of Judgment, 1790 (Kant 1914). Rather, Pfaller presents us with an altogether new class of nihilism that seeks no sense of communality, no shared appreciation, is not even interested in self pleasure but rather arrives only at a state of pleasure deferred. If all that has been said is feasible, then curating has entered a most perplexing condition. For despite what may be gleaned from the revenue-determining attendance records maintained by public art galleries and museums, curating mediates between conditions of contemporary life that may appear, superficially at least, to possess common interests but are only circumstantially linked. This is apparent in the chain of relations that link curators to institutions, institutions to funding agencies, funding agencies to legislators, and legislators to constituents who are also gallery goers. For example, funding bodies are interested in acquitting their role to their political masters and may well be staffed by disinterested bureaucrats. Galleries are interested in acquitting their role to the funding bodies and may well be staffed by disinterested administrators. Politicians are interested in maintaining their power base by appeasing constituents, and constituents are the self-same gallery-going audiences that are content only when they are not required to look (or at best/worst only superficially). And thus curators are required to maintain the pretence that both scholarship and the facilitation of interactivity is valued by all of the above but most likely only by other curators and the exhibiting artists. For many in the profession such a perspective is nothing if not the living death of curating. As no alternative to this new model of curator-as-zombie appears likely a tacit acceptance of the status quo must inevitably persist.

While the acceptance of prevailing conditions may work for some, capitulation is not an option for the transgender curator Beatriz Preciado. For Preciado problems surrounding curator/spectator dynamics do not simply arise from an over-saturation of imagery. Rather, they run to a far more complex transformation of human subjectivity driven by factors ranging from bio-technologies to the mediation of sexual desires within neoliberal societies. According to Preciardo:

> The changes within neoliberalism that we are witnessing are characterized not only by the transformation of ‘gender’, ‘sex’, ‘sexual identity’ and ‘pleasure’ into objects of the political management of living, but also by the fact that this management itself is carried out through the new dynamics of advance techno-capitalism, global media and biotechnologies. We are being confronted by a new type of hot, psychotropic punk capitalism (Preciado 2013, para. 4).
Preciado outlines, in bleak terms, forces that weigh on contemporary life, to such a degree that one is compelled to profoundly re-think the nature of curatorial work and its possibilities. According to Preciado:

These recent transformations are imposing an ensemble of new micro-prosthetic mechanisms of control of subjectivity by means of biomolecular and multimedia technical protocols. Our world economy is dependent upon the production and circulation of hundreds of tons of synthetic steroids, on the global diffusion of a flood of pornographic images, on the elaboration and distribution of new varieties of synthetic legal and illegal psychotropic drugs (e.g. enaltestovis, Special K, Viagra, speed, crystal, Prozac, ecstasy, poppers, heroin, Prilosec), on the flood of signs and circuits of the digital transmission of information, on the extension of a form of diffuse urban architecture to the entire planet of which megacities of misery are knotted into high concentrations of sex-capital.

In order to distinguish this new capitalism from the nineteenth century discipline regime, I shall call ‘pharmacopornographic capitalism’ this new regime of the production of sex and sexual identity (Preciado 2015, p.33).

In light of these observations it stands to reason as curators it is not enough to imagine and impart ideas; we must imagine also the visceral and sensual bodies that contain, extend, inform, impact and transform our audiences. We must do this, because the subjectivities we research and stand for are not only the subjectivities of artists but of audiences as well. Our work entails that we imagine their dilemmas, contradictions, tensions and longings lest we risk loosing touch with our times. Yet as Perciardo reveals, such bodies, which experience those sensations and sentiments can no longer be assumed as natural or fixed in conventional terms.

Hence by cross-pollinating Preciardo’s evaluation of a chemically enhanced, media saturated society with Pfaller’s articulation of interpassivity as a condition of contemporary being it is possible to hypothesize a crisis for curating, especially with regard to the old sense of the term as referring to one who works in a museum. This is particularly apparent when one considers the degree to which the outlined factors radically collide with the genteel social contract traditionally ascribed to museum and gallery culture. Further to this Pledger’s suggestion that cultural practitioners are not represented at elite levels of governance points to the possibility of an arch-conservative hierarchy that aims to maintain some kind of perceived status quo irrespective of or in the face of the complexities of modern life. In both philosophical and political terms therefore, curators must choose, either consciously or otherwise, where they stand in relation to these factors. Does one
accept things as they stand or endeavour to forge a new criticality that tackles the emerging social conditions of our respective societies? As a means of devising an answer, a consideration of the social agency of curating, which may well contain the seeds of a critically informed trajectory, is the focus of the following chapter.
CHAPTER VII
THE SOCIAL AGENCY OF CURATING

As participants within social and cultural discourse, curators are capable of challenging conventions and political frameworks that are resistant to change. Our case is aligned with the ‘Critical Theory’ developed in 1937 by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School, by which “a ‘critical’ theory may be distinguished from a ‘traditional’ theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human “emancipation from slavery”, acts as a “liberating … influence”, and works “to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers” of human beings” (Horkheimer 1972, p.246). Arguably, one of those needs includes a space for art in society. To make that space in ways that do not diminish, augment of sublimate the valence of art, curators must be capable – in no uncertain terms - of articulating and defending a concept of art. To do so, a rigorous and definitional understanding of art within the frameworks of aesthetic philosophy is required.

The preceding chapter proposes a series of problems for curating. They are dilemmas in which the human value of art and the urge to connect and communicate with others is presented in the harsh and sometimes disquieting light of late Capitalist society, one moreover that privileges surface appearances above all else. Added to this we rush here and there too busy to look, save for the occasional and distracted glance, and when we do it is through a medicated or augmented screen. Clearly this is not the whole of the picture and neither does it suggest that curating is under threat. By all accounts the opposite is true, curating is everywhere, business is booming; curating has become not merely a profession but in psychological terms, a coping mechanism within our object-laden, media saturated, hyper-sensory lives. It is part of our way of being. However, to deny the possibility that curating might be a vitalizing force within contemporary culture is perhaps not only myopic; it disavows the many instances where curating – curators – offer something significant. It is to these significant things that attention now turns as the case is laid for the role of the curator as one who both possesses insight into art as a specialized activity and facilitates its journey through social space and relations, thereby giving rise to changes within social and cultural terrain.

To begin, curators make a profession of looking at and thinking about art. This itself is vast. So much to look at, so much to mull over. What in this world of art is good, virtuous, worthy? What is not? To the smorgasbord of art curators bring their critical skills, their perceptions about artistic judgment, their sensitivity concerning the role of art in society, their historical knowledge and inklings of what might ‘work’ in terms of an exhibition, their latent exposure to process. All of
these activities hinge on our capacity to look and to engage, consciously and critically, with that sense by which we apprehend the visual world. The profession of curating relies most heavily on seeing. And yet, despite our ready identification with the ocular faculty it remains in the critical sense problematic. Early Modernists, including the Impressionists, were explicit about issues pertaining to seeing, and progressively the social dimensions of looking have also been examined. From the feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray one learns that:

more than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, maintains the distance. In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing, has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations...the moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality (Irigaray 1978, p.50).

Appraised from the vantage point or perhaps one should say from the sensory dimensions of today, it is hard to deny that curators have more than taken on board Luce Irigaray’s critique. We think in sensual and philosophical terms as much as we think about looking. Correspondingly we think about and act upon social relations and conditions.

Indeed, if they are worth their salt, curators are capable of bringing to bear critical perspectives within circuits that might otherwise privilege social conventions, political frameworks and economic markers that assert normative regimes. For instance, as a commentator on art French philosopher Jacque Rancière draws attention to “a whole school of so-called critical thought and art that, despite its oppositional rhetoric, is entirely integrated within the space of consensus” (Rancière 2007, para. 11). As examples Rancière sites:

all those works that pretend to reveal to us the omnipotence of market flows, the reign of the spectacle, the pomography of power. I think of the statuification of media icons a la Jeff Koons’s Michael Jackson and Bubbles (1988). I think of Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades’s spectacular 2002 installation Shit Plug, which placed the excrement of visitors to Documenta 11 in containers to show us the gigantic waste of the society of the spectacle and to reveal the participation of art in the empire of merchandise and spectacle. I think of all these recycled objects mixed with advertising imagery, quotations of social-realist imagery, fairy tales, and video games that go from fair to fair, to the four corners of the world. If there is a circulation that should be stopped at this point, it’s this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle, etc. There is a whole series of forms of critical or activist art that
are caught up in this police logic of the equivalence of the power of the market and the power of its denunciation (Rancière 2007, para.11).

The artists to whom Rancière alludes are indeed the goliaths of contemporary art and by most accounts it is unlikely that critical blows will render them senseless any time soon. Curating however, which is indeed different from philosophy and critique, is not just a matter of discourse. Rather it is the stance of curators as makers – as producers of exhibitions, as architects and facilitators of contexts and as conveners of aesthetic and social strategies that enable artistic agency that provides both challenge and alternative.

However, in doing these things, making shows, staging events, inserting and insinuating works where they might not conventionally reside, documenting works and so on, curators who wish to pursue critical modes of practice must do so in crucibles of perpetual enquiry. Self-enquiry, critical appraisal of art practices, investigating the contexts in which projects take place, and asking questions about the sources of funding are four such examples. The socio-critical stance is, one feels, cause for optimism, though before we consider its merits its better-known critics should firstly be tackled. For Jacque Rancière “The core of the problem is that there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics” (Rancière 2004, p.62). Are we signalling desires for change only to be thwarted by regimes that already know our game, and who are forever adept at co-opting dissent? In certain instances, this may well be the case. Think for example of the public sculpture Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle, (2010) by the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE. On permanent display at the National Maritime Museum, London no less, it appears, par excellence, as post-colonial critique recolonised-by-the-colonisers. However, from my perspective what Rancière highlights is not so much a problem as an opportunity. This gap, this lacuna, which he identifies strikes me as the exact space in which curatorial criticality finds precisely its niche. The lack of correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics signals a space for dialogue. Curating finds its niche because curating is a mediating profession – between artists, institutions and audiences.

But if Rancière is misguided as is suggested, then our case is aligned with the ‘Critical Theory’ developed in 1937 by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School, who in turn echoes those Victorian era perturbations that gave birth to working class rights movements like the Chartists and prompted Charles Dickens (1812–1870) to mount his polemics against social inequality. According to Horkheimer:
a “critical” theory may be distinguished from a “traditional” theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human “emancipation from slavery”, acts as a “liberating … influence”, and works “to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers” of human beings (Horkheimer 1972, p.246).

While many prominent examples of curatorial projects that lay claim to critical discourse can be cited, the Biennales, Documentas, Triennales and so on, one might also enquire as to the extent of their effect. What do they achieve in social terms that say, other tourist spectacles do not? This is varied terrain indeed as the social agendas of organizations diverge considerably, as for instance one might anticipate in a comparison of the heavily subsidized Venice Biennale as compared with the Bienal de la Habana, the so-called biennale of the Third World. It is here however that I would like to propose a significant role for freelance curatorial practice, which operates in exceedingly diverse settings and at differing scales of production, from the mega exhibitions to the most discrete of projects.

The focus here rests on a consideration of curatorial projects that bring into play the unique skill sets, processes and procedures that are precisely constituted within the freelance role. Freelance curators have an important part to play in terms of researching, documenting, interpreting, caring for and presenting works of art. Yet it is in their capacity to make linkages between subjectivities, contexts and economies that the significance of curatorial, and especially freelance curatorial work is defined. This brings to light, for instance, the work of artists and curators operating in the territory of ‘social enterprise’, which the art theorists McQuilten and White outline in the co-authored publication Art as Enterprise: Social and Economic Engagement in Contemporary Art, 2016. McQuilten and White suggest for instance that while social enterprise is not a perfect model, it does present:

an alternative to the current impasses of artists being subject to the economic hierarchies of the art market, on the one hand, or conforming to the institutional demands of governments and private sponsors, on the other (McQuilten & White 2016, p.174).

Importantly, their research recognizes the Situationist International (SI) art movement, operating between 1957 and 1972, and its influence on subsequent generations. The key theoretical protagonist of SI, Guy Debord (1931–1994) boldly laid the case in Report on the Construction of Situations… 1957, saying:
First of all we think the world must be changed. We want the most liberating change of the society and life in which we find ourselves confined. We know that this change is possible through appropriate actions (Debord 1957, p.701).

Debord’s position is not without significance, especially in its historic moment, but it fails to predict a number of challenges facing artists today. For instance, the Sydney based curator and arts writer Pedro de Almeida suggests, ‘socially engaged art’, which expands the definition of art into territory that implies liberating social change is not an interesting question. Instead, thinking of the trajectory of both the application and meaning of the catch-all term, one is compelled to question the convenience of the art world’s semantic reconfiguring of the social in political and economic climates that are increasingly disowning civic responsibilities (Almeida 2016, p.62).

Almeida further suggests that:

it follows that just as the ‘social’ in contemporary art is tested by the motives and consequences that arise from artists’ strategies of engagement, if we are to passively accept the ascendancy of neoliberalism upon human relations one can only dread what might become of the ‘beautiful’ (Almeida 2016, p.62).

While we concede that the model of curator as effective manager of social, cultural and political capital has distinct advantages in terms of professional agency, it remains to be seen to what extent the management of those forces might be advantageous in a primary way to the production and function of art and for that matter ‘the art of the beautiful’. Is there something about art that sets it apart as an activity – distinct from social, cultural or political work – and for which curators must advocate? On this point, I am wholly at odds with curator Han Ulrich Obrist who suggests that his early encounters with the artistic duo Fischli and Weiss “expanded my definition of art – and perhaps this is the best definition of art: that which expands the definition” (Obrist 2014, p.5).

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully canvas distinctions of art as an independent category, which students of aesthetic philosophy will recognize as notoriously problematic terrain, we must do it nonetheless. Without it we are curators of things and systems that we can but vaguely explain.

The problem of art is such that it challenged even the greatest of Russia’s novelists Count Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). In his 1897 reflection, What is Art? Tolstoy, commented “It is difficult to say
what is meant by art, and especially what is good, useful art, art for the sake of which we might condone such sacrifices as are being offered at its shrine” (Tolstoy 1904, para.8). For philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–976) encounters with art were essentially metaphysical in nature. In Heidegger’s The Origin of the Work of Art, published 1950 and 1960 the author states:

In the work of art the truth of an entity has set itself to work. ‘To set’ means here: to bring to a stand. Some particular entity, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its being. The being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining. The nature of art would then be this: the truth of being setting itself to work (Heidegger 2000, p.88).

While Heidegger is fixated on art as a reflection of being, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) draws attention to art as a process of endless unfolding. In Gadamer’s Truth and Method the philosopher states, “All encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event” (Gademer 2004, p.90). If, however one wishes to characterize the nature of that process as unlike other acts of creative endeavour, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (b.1942-) provides insight. In The Man Without Content Agamben states “The true work of art offers us the gift of poiesis, the uncanny production of presence, where the past and the future are both at stake and the act of Being in the world reclaims its proper meaning” (Agamben 1999, p.101).

Agamben’s uses the term ‘poiesis’, which can be traced to Plato’s Symposium circa 385-370 BCE. It invokes Plato’s third order of poiesis - “poiesis in the soul through the cultivation of virtue and knowledge” (Plato, para.27), which is to say a bringing forth or creating of art and poetry through inner processes, the likes of which are more recently linked to human psychology and the cultivation of mind.

For my part these reflections inform a two-fold view on art, which I have already posited, wherein art finds its significance within a crafting of poetic language, and on the other through operating and affecting change within social contexts and relations. Art as an independent category may be seen as the illuminating and amplifying of those processes that conspire in the production of our being, shining most brightly in the company of others. As for curating I feel it is entirely plausible that curatorial work that enables an optimum or even contingent solution for the public presentation of art is advantageous to the life of art. However, what those optimum and/or contingent solutions might constitute will surely be as diverse and varied as the artworks and practices they facilitate. In essence this appears as the crux of freelance curating today.
CHAPTER VIII
FREELANCE CURATING – A SELF-REFLEXIVE PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter self-generated methodologies applied to the development and implementation of curatorial projects are outlined. The methodologies are divided into two sections, which consist of:

SECTION A: ARENAS
Subjectivities, Contexts, Economies

SECTION B: CRITICAL MEASURES
Makers, Practice, Knowledge, Audience, Space, Change

As has been demonstrated in the preceding chapters contemporary freelance curating draws on exceedingly ancient precedents within the matrixes of cultural production, presentation, reception and critique. Since the 1960s the role of freelance curator has been occupied by increasing numbers of practitioners resulting in a notable emergence of diverse styles, methodologies, boundaries, delimiting strategies and outcomes. Freelance curators periodically forgo their autonomy to work within institutional contexts, thereby energizing, learning from and at times changing institutional discourses, though the opposite in each case is also plausible. Whether one curates in situations that are led by institutional, economic or individual agendas curators are required to establish a space or multiple spaces for artistic, philosophical and social subjectivities and to accommodate a variety of mediating factors. In my experience freelance curators must negotiate and make linkages between the arenas of A: Subjectivities, B: Contexts, and C: Economies. Similarly, in their critical methodology curators must engage with individuals and their practices, with the knowledge and experiences they produce, with audiences, with spaces and finally with the possibility that the artistic work may or may not be a catalyst for change, either artistically or within social relations.

In this chapter I propose a model and methodology of the curatorial practice with which I am most familiar – my own. However, in arriving at this point I have come to recognize that a model and methodology for curating more broadly is neither practical nor overly productive; rather the authoritative position is one of personal insight and critical reflection. The Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist Andrew Paterson in his 2008 article Curation, Creation, Interpretation, Imagination, Many Other Nouns and Also Their Verbs (Paterson 2008) raises precisely this issue by foregrounding inter-disciplinarity as a key feature of contemporary curating. Paterson raises the prospect of a “personal inter-disciplinary practice,” (Paterson 2008, para. 13) which describes exactly the bringing together of diverse processes
within a self-directed methodology. Moreover, I find that the delineations I propose and their ensuing methodologies can be confidently transposed and repeated throughout a multiplicity of projects. However far from being rigidly proscriptive the proposed delineations allow for a considerable degree of flexibility.

Section A: ARENAS, outlines the predominant arenas of curatorial concern, for in developing critically meaningful projects the arenas in which I am vested and make linkages between, are A: Subjectivities, B: Contexts, and C: Economies. In Section B: CRITICAL MEASURES, the model developed by me for critically assessing, driving and communicating my curatorial work is presented. The critical measures are grouped as: A: Makers, B: Practice, C: Knowledge, D: Audience, E: Space, and F: Change.

SECTION A: ARENAS

‘Arenas’, outlines the predominant arenas in which I am vested and make linkages between when curating projects. They are:

A: Subjectivities

Subjectivities encompass such things as: Artworks, ideas, objects, concepts, philosophies, beliefs, fantasies.

B: Contexts

Context includes settings such as: Public galleries, museums, libraries, commercial galleries, artist-run spaces, public spaces, cyber-space.

C: Economies

Economies include but are not limited to: Public funds, private funds, corporate sponsorship, social capital, cultural capital, in-kind support, and gifts (Mauss 1966).

For example, I am asked to curate an exhibition of works by a contemporary painter in a public art gallery and the Australia Council for the Arts funds the project. I am required to consider the artist’s practice, their artworks, how I personally respond to the works and how I might interpret those artworks for the public; I must consider the space in which the works will be presented and finally I must develop the project within the limitations of the available funds, resources and in-kind support.
ARENAS

Curators make linkages between Subjectivities, Contexts and Economies to produce cultural knowledge, experience and presence.

Subjectivities
- Artworks
- Ideas
- Objects
- Concepts
- Philosophies
- Beliefs
- Fantasies

Contexts

Economies
- Public galleries
- Museums
- Libraries
- Commercial galleries
- Artist-run spaces
- Public spaces
- Cyber-space

Exhibition

Public funds
Private funds
Corporate sponsorship
Social capital
Cultural capital
In-kind support

Through producing cultural knowledge, experience and presence curators either perpetuate traditions, illuminate the present or affect change.
‘ARENAS’ also encapsulates an important recognition for this research, being – Curators make linkages between subjectivities, contexts and economies to produce cultural knowledge, experience and presence. Through producing cultural knowledge, experience and presence curators perpetuate traditions, illuminate the present or affect change.

The upshot of the aforementioned outcomes, which may occur singly or in combination is worthy of examination for it challenges, in my view, a tendency to over-valorise one mode of curating in preference for another, especially the much vaunted claim to a ‘radical’, ‘ground-breaking’ or avant-garde curatorial practice. Curators are sometimes instrumental in contributing to cultural change, however it is far more likely that curatorial work will contribute to discourses about the present. Contemporary curating tends generally to reflect the status quo, as is apparent in countless biennales that aim to encapsulate what is happening in global contemporary art ‘now’. Putting these two modes aside however, what emerges is that perennial avant-garde obsession by which ‘tradition’ and ‘traditions’ of any sort are disparaged, a stance that many ‘contemporary’ practitioners are wont to adopt. Tantalising though this might be, a recent incident in world culture brings into focus the significance of tradition as a factor of utmost importance. That example is the fate of Khaled al-Asaad, the 82-year-old curator who, for the crime of defending the antiquities under his care, was beheaded by Islamic State in Syria (Shaheen & Black 2015). al-Asad, a renowned antiquities scholar, had spent 50 years as head of antiquities in Palmyra, effectively devoting his life to the preservation of that priceless ancient site. Despite month-long torture and the obvious threat of execution, which came to fruition in August 2015, the curator refused to divulge the whereabouts of safely hidden antiquities, which had they been found, would have been destroyed or sold on the black market.

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of preserving historical knowledge, either through material artefacts or intangible cultural heritage. al-Asad knew this and he paid for it with his life. Ironically contemporary curators who aspire to ‘radical’ modes of practice, i.e. curatorial projects that affect social change, must also conclude that such ambitions only find their valency against a backdrop of tradition or traditions. Tradition and change are bound in a dialectic; one cannot be maintained without the other. Further still it is a dialectic with a history and therefore a tradition. Compared with regimes that seek to obliterate cultural knowledge, be it Pol Pot’s Year Zero policy in Cambodia, ISIS in the Levant, the Taliban at Bamayan, or the ‘Shock and Awe’ tactics of the second Gulf War, which saw the US army turning a blind eye to the looting of cultural treasures, tradition is not just appealing, it is shown to be fundamental to culture more broadly. While the cultural historian Alain Besançon makes similar claims for the iconoclastic ambitions of 20th Century avant-gardes, (Besancon 2000, p.7), in no uncertain terms Kaleed al-Asad’s story illustrates what the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer observes on the topic of
SECTION B: CRITICAL MEASURES

Well-known art theorist and author of the publication Relational Aesthetics, Nicholas Bourriaud begins his influential text by asking, from where do the misunderstandings surrounding contemporary art come? According to Bourriaud:

"The critic’s primary task is to recreate the complex set of problems that arise in a particular period or age, and take a close look at the various answers given. Too often, people are happy drawing up an inventory of yesterday’s concerns, the better to lament the fact of not getting answers. But the very first question, as far as these new approaches are concerned, obviously has to do with the material form of these works. How are these apparently elusive works to be decoded, be they process-related or behavioural by ceasing to take shelter behind the sixties art history? (Bourriaud 2002, p.7)."

Many in the curatorial arena share Bourriaud’s concerns, yet how one responds to these queries is largely down to experience. This has certainly been the case where my own work is concerned, mediated nonetheless by curatorial, art historical and artistic training. ‘Critical Measures’ outlines the model that I have developed for critically assessing, driving and communicating my curatorial work and for responding to a diverse range of contemporary art practices. It does not come from Bourriaud, yet in reading the theorist’s concerns I recognize a similar set of reflections that has emerged through my years of practice.

Moreover, the Arenas - Subjectivities, Contexts and Economies - are the spheres in which these Critical Measures are applied. Subjectivities, Contexts and Economies are the settings in which Makers work and their Practices take shape, and in which their Knowledge is produced. They are the arenas in which Audiences are addressed, engaged and facilitated; they concern the Spaces occupied and impacted by art, and they are the spheres in which Change is engendered.

Significantly the intersection of these arenas constitutes the Exhibition, which in turn is critically measured against issues pertaining to Makers, Practice, Knowledge, Audience, Space, and Change.
CRITICAL MEASURES

Subjectivities, Contexts and Economies (S C E) are the arenas in which Makers work, their Practices take shape, and in which their Knowledge is produced. They are the arenas in which Audiences are addressed and engaged; they concern the Spaces occupied and impacted by art, and they are the spheres in which Change is engendered.

The intersection of these arenas constitutes the Exhibition. The exhibition is critically measured against issues pertaining to Makers, Practice, Knowledge, Audience, Space, Change.
The critical measures are:

A: Makers

What does ‘making an artwork’ mean? Convention tells us individuals and sometimes teams of people led by an individual artist make artworks. Original artworks are deemed to be original because they have been ‘touched by the hand of the master’. In context of contemporary art this may or may not be the case. Indeed, it is often the case that not only are a string of technicians involved in the production of an artwork, the artist may not necessarily be involved, as for example is the case in the instructional works devised by global art star and conceptualist Yoko Ono. For curators the question as to who is involved in the chain of artistic production – not only in terms of the thing itself, but also in terms of its presentation within public space and discourse – is crucial if one is to understand both ‘the work’ and ‘the work of the work of art’.

Practically speaking a curator is able to make informed choices about the project’s prospects if he or she can assess the professional capabilities of the people with whom he or she happens to be working.

B: Practice

What is the artist’s practice? What are they doing? How do they do it? What do they say about it? What do I think about it? What do others say about it? How can I communicate aspects of that practice to others?

C: Knowledge

What is the artist trying to say? Are they aiming to communicate some kind of knowledge, experience or both? In what context is that knowledge and/or experience relevant? Why is it relevant? Is the artist aware of the knowledge they produce or are they simply bound up in their process?

D: Audience

What is an audience? Can we know, estimate or imagine whom the term ‘audience’ will encompass? When will the audience encounter the work? Will they look at it or interact with it in a different way?

With regard to the formation of audiences, Dr Geoff Hogg in our discussions suggested thinking in terms of audiences-as-constituencies. The imparted ideas were that exhibition making included not only
the development of a presentation of art but also the formation of a constituency that is invested in the origins, processes and outcomes of an artistic venture. The curatorial role would therefore entail building and maintaining a constituency and in so doing expanding the cultural reach and impact of a project or projects that might otherwise only exist as little more than a fleeting and perhaps even culturally negligent exhibition.

With additional reference to the question of audiences, cultural theorist Boris Groys critically examines their complex nature in his essay *The Politics of Installation*, which was first outlined as a lecture at the Whitechapel Gallery, London in 2008. Later re-published in the catalogue of the Eleventh Bienal de la Habana 2012, it was brought to my attention by Bienal Director Jorge Fernández Torres on the occasion of our early discussions regarding projects for the Thirteenth Bienal. Groys lays a case for curators as representatives, not of artists but of the audience.

The curator administers this exhibition space in the name of the public – as a representative of the public. Accordingly, the curator’s role is to safeguard its public character, while bringing the individual artworks into this public space, making them accessible to the public, publicizing them (Groys 2012, p.48).

As a point of comparison, I recognize a personal bias on my part towards artistic process rather than audience experience as a mode of curatorial focus. That being said, one cannot ignore audience dynamics any more than artistic processes can be dismissed. The exhibition space functions as an interchange between two very different domains – being generally an individual perspective conveyed to a public. Audience engagement takes many forms and is a mainstay of curatorial and museum practices globally to the extent that it is now an area of specialization within museum circles.

E: Space

Where will the project take place? How will the work look in the space? What can we do with the space? How will the space inform the work? What is it like to walk through the space, to linger in it, to encounter others within it?

F: Change

Change need not be a revolution. It may be a transposition, transliteration or augmentation. The important thing is, does the artwork and/or exhibition tell something new? And if it does what does it change? Does it change anything at all or does it merely iterate what is already known? Does it change
For example, an artist calls me and arranges a meeting; I look at their work and learn about their practice. I ask myself what it’s all about, what drives this individual and why people might be interested in their work. I then think about the audience and how they might experience the work. I find a space and think how the work will look in that space. I might make a model of the space and map out the show. Alongside these activities I set about finding resources to make the project happen. I write a text, which is aimed at the target audience and all the while I am thinking about the evolution of the artwork and the artist’s practice. Where is it all going? What is the end goal, the next step, what do they want to achieve? Can we do it? And finally is there something about the project that is ground-breaking? Does it add something new – to how we think about art, about society, about the world, about each other, about being human and so on. Sometimes the answer is ‘no’ but I always hope that the opposite is true.
CHAPTER IX
ANALYSIS OF THREE CURATED PROJECTS

In the preceding chapters an overview of the contexts and criteria that I use as a frame of reference when undertaking and analysing curatorial projects is established. In this chapter those measures are applied to critically analysing three contrasting projects. They are:

A: Ping Pong, Colombian Government, RMIT University, Multicultural Arts Victoria, 2013

B: Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot, Mia Salasjo, Damian Smith, Published by Words For Art, Melbourne, 2015, Exhibited MARS Gallery, Melbourne, 2015


Unintentionally, and indeed due to factors that I did not personally set in train, the three projects that I elected to develop and analyse in this research entailed processes linked to varying types of parlour games – ‘ping pong’, ‘tarot’, and ‘Chinese whispers’ and each made use of lexical prompts, such as word and phrase associations. Generally speaking, the projects came about through serendipitous circumstances and mainly through invitation. In my professional capacity it is not unusual to receive overtures from artists and organizations looking for a freelance curator so the case studies are reflective of the scope of my freelance work. However, what does stand out is that each of the three projects is characterized by being linked to both Australia and to another national context or contexts. The nations of Colombia and Vietnam were the specific links in two occasions, while in the intervening project there were links to a number of other countries including Indonesia and Albania. This constellation of locations is indicative of a thematic overlay of intercultural dialogue, which is undoubtedly of interest. While this may appear to suggest a multicultural bias, there is also an economic reality that cannot be ignored in the Australian context. Namely, it is difficult at best to maintain a living in Australia as a freelance curator, making it something of a necessity to work across other regions such as Asia & the Pacific, Latin America and Europe. As it turned out, during the period of the research I worked on 30 or more projects, including a curated exhibition in China, a conference in the UK, numerous publications and the creation of an archive of my past work for the Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection at the State Library of Victoria (Appendix 2.0). As a ‘working curator’ these additional projects provided opportunities for reflection. While I limit the scope of my analysis to three specific projects, one key point that I took from my recent curatorial experience was the degree to which one must always be prepared to improvise. Working with Australian artist Philip Faulks in the newly built Changzhou Museum in China was a case in point, for despite its external appearance the museum was devoid of basic resources. This is an important consideration that contributes to the development of ‘Barefoot Curating’, which will be
discussed at a later point in Chapter X. Consequently, and largely because it is not true, I resist using the term ‘international’ to describe my own practice, as it tends to imply something quite grand. Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol attract this designation for the effect of their respective practices is far reaching indeed; in reality neither of those artists were great travellers but the impact of their work transcended their cultural localities. In contemporary terms however there is nothing unusual about working ‘country-to-country’, a term that is far more accurate in terms of what can safely be applied to the working lives of many curators and visual artists today. The projects that I investigate are clear examples of connections such as these.

However, while each of the projects has evolved within contexts that can be respectively perceived as ‘institutional’, ‘commercial’ and ‘artist-run’, it remains the case that such categories are not always mutually exclusive and neither do they always imply the things one might expect of them. Rather they require critical analysis from the outset and an acknowledgement that such arenas often seek to address one another as a means of quantifying their influence. In this instance however the terms of reference relate to a question of how settings impact curatorial rationale. For example, who or what is commissioning the curator to do what exactly? Effectively this is a question of curatorial patronage. It acknowledges those epiphenomenal forces that curators very often like to pretend are not there, thereby projecting a role of authorial autonomy not impacted by external forces. What I contend is a role of negotiation, mediation and critique. What might this project achieve for the parties vested in it? How can I communicate to them in advance what I think will be the outcome, or the value of entering into a process that has an unknown outcome? What are the risks? What might be the rewards?

What might also be considered are the ways in which contexts or settings have been appraised depending on the individual’s point of view. For example, artists who have adopted ‘institutional critique’ as a mode of practice have given rise to new ways of thinking about the structures that support and in some instances over-determine the ways in which art is presented, valued and discussed. As the American cultural theorist Miwon Kwon points out,

Works by artists such as Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles are seen as challenging hermeticism of this system, complicating the site of art as not only a physical arena but one constituted through social, economic and political processes (Kwon 2004, p.3).

It follows that curators might similarly cultivate critical awareness about the social, economic and political processes that impact their area of practice and also the degree to which one may or may not be implicated within these power structures.
CASE STUDY 1: PING PONG

Ping Pong, installation view, Design Hub, RMIT University, 2013, photograph courtesy Damian Smith, Greg Creek & Jorge Julián Aristizábal.

In mid-2013 I was invited by the non-government arts organization Multicultural Arts Victoria to curate the Melbourne leg of an international cross-cultural arts project called Ping Pong, which centred on artists from the Republic of Colombia being paired with artists from countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The aim of the project was for the artists to exchange individual words, ten each, and for the words to act as prompts in the creation of mixed media works on paper. The selected artists were Greg Creek from Melbourne, and Jorge Julián Aristizábal from Medellín, Colombia, two artists whose practices are deeply concerned with drawing. The local project team consisted of Trinidad Estay and Claudia Escobar from Multicultural Arts Victoria and myself as curator. The project was funded by the Colombian Foreign Ministry and was envisaged as a means of promoting cultural connections between Colombia and Australia, with additional connections being made between Colombia and the nations of India, China, Thailand and Singapore. At the conclusion of the collaborations the works would be shown in the host countries with a final exhibition of all the works being presented in Colombia at a later date.
Both creatively and from a personal perspective the Ping Pong project was attractive. I have generally been interested in contemporary art projects from the geographic south, and have worked on various art projects that are specific to this region. This has included projects in Australia, New Zealand and Mexico as well as travel and study in Central America, in Guatemala and Honduras. An early introduction to the magical realist writers associated with the Latin American ‘Boom’, including Borges, Garcia Marquez, Fuentes, and Llosa, was the inspiration behind my early sojourns; my familiarity with these authors has persisted as a creative point of reference and has informed my perceptions of Latin America. But while such experiences were pivotal, equally the critically acclaimed South Project, which was convened in Melbourne in 2001 as a multi-faceted cross-cultural arts venture, and to which I was fortunate to contribute, was a distinct catalyst for engagement. Under the guidance of curator and academic Kevin Murray, the South Project sought to examine cultural dialogues and exchanges across the southern latitudes. ‘South’ was post-colonial in outlook; it embraced the myriad cultures of the south and challenged northern hemisphere hegemony. This commitment to regional sensibility, to plurality, local knowledge and culture remains a presiding personal interest and has been a theme in my curatorial work.

As the Melbourne curator of Ping Pong I soon realised that my role was somewhat unusual in that I did not select the artists, I did not devise the concept and I did not choose the artworks, which were simply the pieces created for the project. This left me in a curious position, whereby I needed to consider what my role would entail. My initial thoughts ranged across a number of issues, including the exhibition’s context, or indeed multiple contexts such as artistic, institutional and diplomatic, the possibility of developing supporting programs such as public talks and the intention that the project be a means for cultivating cultural connections between Colombia and Australia. In light of these factors I raised the possibility that the partnership between the Colombian Foreign Ministry and Multicultural Arts Victoria be expanded to include RMIT University, where my research was being conducted. The logic here stemmed from a range of factors. Many Latin American students are enrolled across RMIT’s faculties and connections to this region have been occurring through a host of academic initiatives. For instance, one project was Trust: Intervention Through Art, which I had worked on in Mexico and Australia in 2011/12 with artist Karen Casey resulting in an academic publication through RMIT’s Design Research Institute. Following discussions with the various bodies a three-way partnership was adopted and a space at RMIT’s Design Hub was allocated for the show. This set the stage for the evolution of the Ping Pong project, not just as an exhibition of art but a multifaceted program for cross-cultural connections, dialogue and engagement.

With the key relationships in place I turned my attention to the various tasks that I saw as imperative for the production to be a success. I looked for instance at the artist’s previous works, researched the
history of the Ping Pong game, examined the exhibition space and started planning the layout of the show. I wrote an essay for the exhibition catalogue, developed signage for the exhibition and waited for the works to arrive. There were other activities as well – inviting key individuals to speak at the opening, writing speech notes and press releases, discussing protocols and finally convening a conference relating to the project.

Ping Pong’s political history

Well before my attention turned to the possible presentation of artworks there were a number of conceptual issues that I felt needed to be explored. For me this meant looking at the history of the game Ping Pong and consideration as to why it was selected as a theme for an international project. While the Foreign Ministry informed me that well-known Colombian artist José Antonio Suárez Londoño was the instigator of the project, there was little to suggest where the idea had come from. At this stage Suárez Londoño was exhibiting in the curated section of the 2012 Venice Biennale, ‘The Encyclopaedic Palace’ and was not readily available, which left me somewhat to my own devices.

At its most basic the name Ping Pong implies a game-like exchange of ideas, which the process of sending and receiving individual words clearly entailed. But as I soon discovered Ping Pong also has a political sub-text, and this was worth exploring. Created by British soldiers stationed in India during the period of the Raj, the game was first known as ‘Whiff-whaff’. Books were used instead of bats and a golf ball was employed making for vigorous bouts. These early tournaments were presumably unruly affairs that enabled the officers to blow off steam and relax. With so much levity to be had it was not long before the game took off across the British Empire. However, it was in the United States of America that a patent was registered for ‘Ping Pong’ and subsequently marketed worldwide. As a means of bypassing the patent laws the name ‘Table Tennis’ was adopted in amateur circles. In a curious twist the game became popular with Chinese Red Guard soldiers, and this proved significant because it was through international table-tennis tournaments that Sino-American diplomacy found a ‘back channel’ for dialogue, which gave rise to the vernacular term ‘Ping Pong politics’, often used in consular circles. As recently as 2008, the Mayor of London Boris Johnson laid claim to the game ‘Whiff-whaff’, announcing that London would host the Olympic games and perhaps even out do the Chinese.

From my perspective, the idea of Ping Pong as a metaphor for both inter-cultural dialogue and country-to-country diplomacy was a layered point of reference for connections between Colombia and Australia. Ironically the political sub-text would not feature in the exhibition of works, which was reflective rather of two individual artists’ practice. It did however become a point of reference for the evolution of the project as a whole. This was apparent for instance when we decided to organise a daylong conference
to accompany the show. During preliminary meetings with expatriate Colombian artists in Melbourne, the history of the game was discussed. This prompted a fair amount of debate especially as the artists were surprised that the Colombian Government would finance a cultural project with possible political undertones. These preliminary meetings, which were convened at the Design Hub, were an important early step because it represented the coming together of a group of individuals who had a vested interest in cultivating cultural connections between Colombia and Australia. This was personal as well as professional and as such likely to result in ongoing projects and dialogue. The games in one sense had already commenced, not just with the principal artists but also more broadly through discussion.

Conference: Colombia – Australia Cultural Connections in the 21st Century

Preparatory discussions with Trinidad Estay, Claudia Escobar and myself centred on the degree to which a one-off art exhibition might be cause for establishing cultural connections between Colombia and Australia or if more was needed to fully realise this ambition. Past experience with Australian embassies in China and the United Kingdom alerted me to the fact that cultural connections, while often supported by consulates are primarily driven by expatriate artists and arts professionals, as these are the people who are invested both personally and professionally in realising such outcomes.

We felt therefore that in addition to the exhibition a conference focusing on cultural connections between Colombia and Australia would be an occasion for bringing together individuals who were interested in the long-term relationships between these nations. As a ‘meeting of the clans’ the conference would be a chance to share knowledge, make new acquaintances, learn and ultimately plan future ventures.

Our proposal was accepted by the Foreign Ministry and the conference was designed to feature a range of presentations - by the exhibiting artists and myself as curator, expatriate Colombian artists living in Melbourne, arts professionals and the incumbent Colombian Ambassador to Australia, Clemencia Forero-Ucrós.

Beyond the structure of the conference we were keen to ensure that productive connections were made, and here the involvement of local Colombian artists was in my estimation crucial. In the lead up to the conference we met with artists Katherine Gailer, Julian Clavijo, Anthony Rodriguez, Maria Peña, Maria Jose Gallo, Claudia Escobar, Jorge Leiva and others. In a group forum the artists provided an overview of their work and we discussed the Ping Pong project. The artists would later meet with the Colombian Ambassador and again present their work. Trinidad and Claudia suggested that the project would be of interest to Latin Americans generally and not just to the Colombians and we arranged to
promote the conference through RMIT’s Latin American student network. The meetings led also to a good deal of informal socialising and this facilitated further discussion about the Ping Pong project.

Finally a program was devised and an audience of around 60 people attended. While we had hoped for greater numbers, those who came on the day generally had a particular interest in or connection to Latin America, so it was a genuine occasion to not just share information but to cultivate connections and seed future possibilities.

So, what did I take away from the conference? As a person who has no first-hand knowledge of Colombia, but has spent a considerable amount of time engaged in cross-cultural arts projects, the daylong conference was illuminating. The degree to which these two nations engage with one another is far greater than I realised, economically and culturally. For example, independent theatre producer Justin Macdonnell spoke about his work over the past 25 years bringing Australian theatre and music to Colombia. In many instances projects that were unable to find support in Australia were enthusiastically embraced in Colombia. Also, as artist Anthony Rodriguez pointed out, anecdotal evidence suggests there are currently around 100 Colombian artists based in Melbourne alone. Jorge Leiva gave an overview of a broad range of cultural traffic between the two countries and Claudia Escobar provided insights into the performing and visual arts collective El Tarro (El Tarro n.d.), which she and Jorge Leiva first founded in Melbourne. Of the artists who presented at the conference it was apparent that a strong theme in all of their works was a commitment to social justice and to improving the lives of others through the production of art.

Catalogue production

Catalogues are first and foremost an opportunity to document an exhibition, but they also allow for additional information not represented in the exhibition to materialise. For this reason a catalogue is sometimes seen as ‘more important’ than the show because it is a lasting record. For the Ping Pong project the production of the exhibition catalogue occurred primarily in Colombia. It entailed input from the Colombian Embassy in Canberra, from Multicultural Arts Victoria, RMIT University and documentation provided by the artists.

For my part an introductory essay was the principal contribution (Smith 2013). My text touched on the history of the Ping Pong game, highlighting its metaphoric significance to the project. I mentioned some of the influences of Colombian culture in the English-speaking world, highlighting such figures as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and artist Doris Salcedo who worked closely with Sydney-based curator Tony Bond. I
touched on the exchange of words between the artists and how this opened a space for the audience to engage with the work.

A few months later

Shortly after emailing the essay I was informed that the catalogue designer had been injured in a traffic accident; the printing of the document would now be delayed. Thus in March 2014, four months after the project’s conclusion the exhibition catalogue arrived from Bogota; also during this period the documentary commissioned through Multicultural Arts Victoria was completed. Both productions capture key aspects of the Ping Pong project and more importantly give a sense of its totality - the art, the people, the cultural investment, the dialogue and so on. The documentary, produced by Colombian-born videographer Sebastian Avilla conveys the immense enthusiasm of all those involved. The coming together of many different people with connections to Colombia and Australia was very exciting, all the more so as this was the first time that such a gathering had taken place in Melbourne and quite possibly in Australia. Everyone was keen to discuss their experiences and were very forthcoming with their views. There was a general consensus that these connections were growing to a point where a genuine cross-cultural phenomenon had been established to the extent that it was having a cultural impact, especially in Australia.

From a curatorial point of view, the significance of the documentation raises a number of questions that need further consideration. In terms of an art project - what is more important, the temporary exhibition of original artworks, or the lasting published documentation? Or rather: How is the knowledge represented in one medium (an exhibition) different to the knowledge represented in another medium (catalogue and/or documentary)? How do these representations work in tandem?

The catalogue and documentary represent a significant investment in terms of research and record making. But they are also devices for reaping future returns. They can be used for future leverage, publicity and research.

Documents such as these also travel in time. They offer a chance for later reflection, comparison and evaluation of things that may not be apparent in the first instance, at a time when one is embroiled in the production of a show. One example of how this comparative process can be both useful and also deceptive relates to my appraisal of the Ping Pong exhibition. The show came together very quickly and at the time I was not overly convinced that all was entirely resolved, even though I did receive excellent feedback from those in attendance. Many in the audience were arts professionals and there was a general consensus that a focus on process over finished product was a ’good thing’. These favourable
comments notwithstanding I still had reservations because there was nothing to my eye that was iconic or even overly memorable, which I value in any exhibition. In comparison, the catalogue was another matter entirely. The illustrations in the catalogue were reproduced at a smaller scale to the artworks (as one would expect) but in higher colour saturation to the original works of art. In each case the artworks looked stronger, punchier and more resolved. Had I not seen the show I would think, here is a really impressive exhibition. The catalogue had essays and the ‘instructions’ relating to the Ping-Pong art game. The show did not have these instructions because no one thought to send them to Australia, which I would certainly have included as part of the didactics. But of course, none of this really matters because the remaining currency from the show lies in the documentation, which can now be put to effect in developing further cultural connections.

Signage production

Designing the exhibition didactics and signage was also an aspect of my curatorial work in this case. The text was presented in the shape of a Ping-Pong bat, whereby the body of the text was contained in the circular part of the ‘paddle’, and the words exchanged by the artists were listed in the ‘handle’. I was confident that this shape would work having sited it in the work of Australian modernist Sidney Nolan. In Nolan’s seminal composition Boy and the Moon (1939-40), National Gallery of Australia, a figure is signified by a round yellow circle and vertical ‘neck’. The image is arresting yet surprisingly simple, some might say graphical, so it was an easy appropriation that in my estimation was suitable for this project.

While exhibition signage is always an important aspect of a show, in this instance ‘language’ via the exchange of words was a central consideration, which in this case occurred across vernacular Spanish and English. This was factored into the exhibition by presenting the exchanged words in both languages. Yet as the most immediate point of ‘difference’ between the participating cultures it was perhaps inevitable that there would be a few misinterpretations along the way. For example, I had a few discussions with my colleagues, including the two artists, about the translation of certain words such as ‘amor propio’, which was translated as ‘self-love’ rather than ‘self-esteem’. This played to the reading of the artworks so it was important to get it right and to a certain degree reaffirmed the idea of an exchange between two parties.

Exhibition design and installation

At a physical level the installation of the exhibition at RMIT University’s purpose-built Design Hub, which was designed by Australian architect Sean Godsell, proved a novel experience. Instead of a conventional
white-wall space and hanging system, the walls in the Design Hub are clad in a metal grill whereby the works are attached using magnetic fasteners. The Design Hub’s Long Room galleries are austere spaces with concrete floors and metallic ceilings. The dominant colour is grey, but the east facing windows, which run the full length of the building, provides for natural lighting. The effect is one of a seemingly unyielding environment, yet strangely pleasant because of the diurnal passage of light and the unencumbered views of the city.

The artworks by Melbourne-based artist Greg Creek were of uniform size (42cm x 30cm) while the pieces by Jorge Julián Aristizábal, though somewhat smaller, were mounted on black foam-core boards that matched these dimensions. This allowed for a linear arrangement, whereby the artists’ works ran in parallel to each other. There was an introductory signage panel and located on the concourse directly beneath each of the paired works was the word that prompted their creation. I experimented with positioning the words in between the works, but this was intrusive both visually and conceptually. Consideration here was for the experience of the viewer, who would see the works and make connections based on the visual imagery rather than on the appearance of a printed word. Placing the words on the concourse enabled the connection to be made but it did not intrude on the reading or appreciation of the individual pieces. In the context of an exhibition ‘text’ is a visual element as well and needs to be treated as such. It is not always so prominent as in this case, yet for certain visitors text in an exhibition is the primary point of engagement rather than a direct encounter with the artworks. I reflected on this variety of encounter when I laid out the show and felt that the right balance was struck between the formal / visual aspects of the show and the didactic material.

Due to the late arrival of the artworks I did not have a chance to see the works ‘in the flesh’ until the day of the installation. Instead I relied on images sent via email. Consequently, the installation was the period in which I was able to examine and reflect upon the works. This was not the first time that I had to install a show at short notice so the challenge was quite familiar. Working with the geometry of the space (a long room) I arranged the works accordingly, pacing them out at equal spaces, moving the introductory signage away from the works and placing the word prompts along the concourse were all a part of the process. In fact I drew on many years of experience in this process. For instance, over the past 20 years I have curated more than 40 exhibitions and installed well in excess of 200 additional shows in spaces ranging from the National Gallery of Victoria, white-walled commercial galleries, a 16th Century Chinese watchtower, an Elizabethan tithe-barn and a disused Mexican prison amongst others. Clearly the possibilities pertaining to the arrangement of artworks is infinite; however, there is also a number of ‘default’ positions that can act as useful points of reference, especially when time is of the essence. In my early professional training the London-based art dealer Graham Paton, widely known as a prescient artistic ‘talent spotter’ and a regular purveyor of paintings to collector Charles Saatchi, proved
an instructive guide. Graham directed me to the ‘classical’ hang used in the National Gallery, London. The largest painting is installed in a centralized position and the smaller works are then arranged along a centralized eye-level horizon running either side of the major canvas. The classical hang leaves little to the imagination and is clearly stifling in some instances; yet the mathematical underpinning allows for a balanced geometry to emerge, which if nothing else instils a sense of harmony. In the case of the Ping Pong exhibition where the works were of uniform size I made use of the classical principal, resulting in an undisrupted, even positioning of the artworks. By my own estimation all of these factors contributed to the visual impact of the show and generally the effect was one in which the works were visually accessible and reflective of a creative dialogue between the two artists. Both of the participating artists and Trinidad Estay were present during the installation and this allowed for a process of discussion and appraisal as the show was installed in the space.

Exhibition appraisal

Despite the many aspects of the project being successfully undertaken, I was left with a nagging feeling about the exhibition, as from an artistic perspective the show was not without issue. Both artists are well trained and generally the standard of their works is quite high. They are skilled in the art of drawing and this underpins their work. However, on this occasion the drawing processes involved appeared quite cursory, and where they were not, the works seemed unrelated to the show as a whole. The result is an unmemorable exhibition of exploratory works on paper that tend to begin but fail to evolve into artworks of greater meaning and / or substance. They hint at ideas in gestation but where they take us and what insights are revealed in their production I am unsure.

Observing the exhibition more closely we see that the entire production is eclectic. Stylistically speaking no two works is alike. This should not by default be problematic but rather than creating a sense of diversity the result is one of confusion. What is this show about? Referring to the signage, which as the Melbourne curator I both wrote and designed, I remind myself that the exhibition is about a dialogue between two individuals – one Colombian and one Australian. The implication is that cultural background may or may not be a cause for communication or lack thereof and where language may be problematic, art can be a means to connect. It is an idea to which I am sympathetic, realising moreover that cultural background is but one factor in our personal trajectories, which is intertwined with individual experience and exposure to global cultural trends. This layered set of conditions is reflected in the works for they draw on an array of visual styles emanating from disparate geographic locations and historical periods - from Renaissance Italy to Japanese manga comics, from Colombian folk-art to digital design and collage. Yet the amalgam of images, which both artists assembled, is lacking in authorial voice. Rather we are presented with a succession of post-modern quotations that suggests little about
contemporary culture and discourse, except perhaps that meanings are neither fixed nor singular, that culture is a self-devouring process and the recycling effect is about as much as we can expect in our image-saturated world.

Conceptually speaking the written word in this project preceded, indeed prompted, the production of the artworks. Nonetheless the primacy of the text (the words proceeding the images) should not be interpreted as implying an epistemological hierarchy. The artists were not obliged to illustrate the words, merely to respond to them in any way they chose. In some instances the connections are vividly apparent, in others entirely obscure. For instance, in Jorge Julián Aristizábal response to the word ‘claustrophobia’ we see a rat contained in a frame peering into a hole. The image is clearly evocative of the lexical prompt; it is a rat in a trap. In contrast Greg Creek’s response to the same word is a watercolour rendering of a human rib cage. We do not immediately connect the word and image, but the artist may not have intended that we do.

To a considerable degree the word/image relationships reminded me of art critic John Berger’s famous pronouncement that:

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled (Berger 1972, p.7).

It is indeed an ambivalent series of arrangements between image, text and experience that the Ping Pong project evokes.

South Ways

Berger’s reflections are insightful but their grounding in developmental psychology allows but one kind of reading. In further considering the conceptual parameters of the Ping Pong project, what it entailed, what was intended by its production and to what extent those intentions were fulfilled, I have looked also to projects and theorisations concerning exchanges between southern hemisphere countries with a view to establishing potential similarities and perhaps differences. Prominent here is the discursive project South Ways, co-ordinated by Dr Kevin Murray, Adjunct Professor RMIT University and the original instigator of the well-known South Project. South Ways was launched in December 2013 as an open project to develop and share ideas about alternative ways of depicting the world. According to its website:
‘South Ways’ is an attempt to open up a fresh space for creative practice that engages across the latitude. Its framework is dialogical, in which the field is understood as a changing set of views that are positioned in relation to each other…. ‘South Ways’ focuses on forms of creative practice that seem to reflect southern theories. It begins with four words – open, glean, swap and bestow (South Ways: Southern Perspectives n.d.).

In terms of the Ping Pong project the term bestow is of particular relevance for it embraces and indeed privileges such qualities as reciprocity, exchange and discourse. According to the South Ways introduction, ‘bestow’ can be linked to “focusing creativity in new circuits of exchange rather than in the art object itself” (South Ways: Southern Perspectives n.d.). By these terms the dialogical framework of South Ways has much in common with the Ping Pong project. While both projects were prompted by engagement with individual words, it is reasonable to assert that “focusing creativity in circuits of exchange rather than in the art object itself” is precisely where the Ping Pong project finds its cultural significance. Indeed the subsequent evolution of the project has now included overtures from the Colombian Government to fund an artist in residency program at RMIT University for visiting Colombian artists.

What curatorial lessons can be gleaned from this process?

In an article on the work of the well-known Sydney-based curator Nick Waterlow (1941–2009), the artist and curator Djon Mundine suggests ‘everything you do as a curator must have depth and a strong ‘gee-wow’ factor. You can’t just do simple things. You shouldn’t do things casually’ (Mundine 2010 pp.642–643). Reading these words I am struck by the realisation that while many aspects of the Ping Pong project were produced with rigorous attention to detail and a passion for cross-cultural dialogue, such rigour could not on my part extend to the selection of works. While this process remained the preserve of the artists, on reflection the project would have been better served if an additional step had been taken, whereby the show could have been considered in its totality from a curatorial perspective.

While there is a range of realisations that I take away from this project, the single salient point rests curatorially on maintaining a deep knowledge of the intended works and reserving the option to vet the final selection. It is not enough to accept at face value an appreciation of the artist’s existing processes, even where a strong track record would suggest otherwise. Curators establish a frame for artworks to be presented but they must also select and critically appraise the works. It’s a case of the frame and what’s in the frame. Both aspects must be attended to. In this respect the conceptual method did not allow for an editorial process to take place, which may well have resulted in a more substantial exhibition.
In pursuing this analysis I have reflected also on the extent to which curators should consider such extraneous factors as institutional contexts in realising a project. Art exhibitions are primarily about dialogue and do not take place in a vacuum. Curating, as German conceptualist Joseph Bueys reminds us, is an act of social sculpture (Tisdall 1974, p.48). The curator therefore must engage with a host of extraneous factors, not only with the artworks but with all of the institutions, individuals and instrumentalities that conspire in the realisation of a project.

Future

The final stage of the Ping Pong project will consist of all works from Colombia, Australia, India, China, Thailand and Singapore being presented in a single exhibition in Colombia. This will most likely result in a different visual dynamic, arising from the juxtapositions that will naturally take place between the various bodies of work. The date for this exhibition has not yet been announced, but I look forward to attending the show in Bogota and to considering the works, especially from the Melbourne project in this context. At this point the exhibition has not yet taken place.

As for cultivating future connections between the two countries, this remains to be seen. The means by which these connections may continue will of course be varied. This could include the organisations Multicultural Arts Victoria, RMIT University the Colombian Embassy and Foreign Ministry and the artists and arts professionals working between these contexts. The Memorandum of Understanding between the Colombian Foreign Ministry and RMIT, which is currently being negotiated, is intended to support an artist-in-residence program at RMIT for visiting Colombian artists. As a practical outcome this may well prove to be a focal point for the perpetuation of cross-cultural dialogue and engagement. What, one wonders, could Australia do to reciprocate this gesture? For my part I made a submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to develop a project with the Universidad del Atlantico, but was unsurprised to learn that Barranquilla was not high on their priorities. Funding was not forthcoming.

Challenges, Opportunities

While the project had the financial and institutional support of the Colombian Ministry of Culture it became apparent that this would not necessarily translate into long-term connections between Colombia and Australia. Because after all, governments change, ambassadors and their staff move on to other positions and projects loose their momentum. What this brought home to me was, rather, the importance of embedding projects within communities. In this case the expatriate Colombian community in Melbourne was the embodiment of the country-to-country connection and especially the
cultural practitioners. So if art projects are to have lasting effect then they have to have a constituency for which the project is meaningful or productive. This highlights both the limits of institutional support and the inherent virtues of communities. This observation was an early pointer towards the development of Barefoot Curating because it identified a valuable asset within community contexts, one moreover that was not determined by money alone.

LINKS

The following links are to on-line sources related to the Ping Pong project. They include the online documentary Ping-Pong Exhibition - Colombia-Australia Cultural Connections through Visual Arts (2013), which was broadcasted on Chanel 31, Melbourne and included interviews with the project participants. The Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs article Ping Pong: un proyecto artístico que acerca a Colombia y Asia Pacífico, (2013) contextualized the exhibition and conference alongside other iterations of the project in the Asia-Pacific region. Multicultural Arts Victoria published the project program online, including details about the conference.


The suggestion that an artistic project might arise within or in response to a given context, such as a commercial, artist-run or institutional setting, may seemingly imply that the project will somehow be influenced by the specifics of the given setting. In reality however there are no particular limits as to how a project or body of work may develop even though a degree of conformity might, on the face of it, be anticipated. For instance, merely because a body of paintings was developed for presentation in a commercial gallery does not preclude the possibility of those works being received within institutional circles based on their critical worth; just such an outcome may well have been intended and indeed for many in the art world it is a convention which will be familiar.
The logic in raising this point however is to highlight both the inter-relatedness of social and artistic contexts, including the three arenas considered in this study and also to underscore how differing settings can act as artistic catalysts in ways that transcend their immediate remit. Such was the case with my second case study, the *Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot*, a set of contemporary tarot cards developed as a conceptual project in collaboration with artist Mia Salsjo for presentation at MARS Gallery, a commercial art gallery in the Melbourne suburb of Windsor.

The project originated through a series of conversations that began on the Indonesian island of Bali and continued when Mia Salsjo and I returned to Melbourne in late 2014. During this period, we touched on topics that many artists will recognise, including artistic process, curatorial strategies within the context of contemporary art and also ways of approaching the commercial realities of being an artist in Australia today. With a solo exhibition in a commercial gallery looming each of these topics was of relevance. However, it is also noteworthy that issues pertaining to the commercial dimensions of artistic practice would seldom be presented as part of the public discourse connected with an exhibition or artistic career. Rather it is a topic that artists, curators and gallerists tend to speak about 'in house', while preserving an illusion of artistic process as somehow sacrosanct where the market is concerned.

The following therefore is an account of the *Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot* as it was developed for presentation at MARS Gallery.

According to the MARS Gallery website:

MIA SALSJO is a multi-disciplinary artist working across the mediums of drawing, video and musical composition. Since graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts, Salsjo has been working between Australia and Indonesia. Her video works have been featured in significant curated festivals including Dark MOFO, Tasmania and White Night, Melbourne. Her practice is informed by classical music and compositional transcriptions and engages with ideas of chaos, cosmology and sound and their expression in visual form. She has exhibited at numerous artist-run gallery spaces and is represented in Australia by MARS Gallery, Melbourne (MARS Gallery 2015).

From my perspective I came to know Mia through the group exhibition *Co-Variance* presented in 2013 at the Counihan Gallery, Brunswick for which I was commissioned to write the catalogue essay. Subsequently in mid 2014 I met up with Mia at a privately run artist residency in Bali, Indonesia, where she was working on a series of large-scale drawings for a solo exhibition at MARS Gallery. It was here that we conducted a series of informal conversations about ways in which the exhibition could develop from a curatorial
perspective. While aspects of that process are documented in my exhibition essay *Mia Salsjo: The New Age is a Cult*, published on the MARS Gallery website (MARS Gallery 2015a), the focus here concerns the development of the tarot.

The origins of that card deck began with the artist posing a question: *how can I explain my work when its physical appearance is nothing at all like the things that inspire me?* The exact nature of Salsjo’s enquiry became apparent after reviewing her abstract free-flowing pencil drawings alongside the photographic diaries that she used as visual prompts to spur studio practice. The photos were a curious mix of people, places and things, shot during travels to locations including Sweden and Albania being two countries in which the artist has close family connections, as well as Austria, Nepal and Indonesia. There were photos of medieval suits of armour, of komodo dragons, of flowers, rubbish, boats, castles, masks, table tennis tables, chairs, buildings, flea markets. All sorts of things. Further discussions suggested that this visual diary acted as a prompt for the artist's unconscious. There was something uncanny about these images that ignited a particular train of thought. They were a source for the drawings though not in any literal sense. So why not just show the images if the desired outcome was to alert one’s audience about the precise nature of the creative process?

This is where the idea of producing the images as a tarot set came into being, quite literally because the photographs were consulted by the artist as a kind of ‘oracle’, similar to the way in which tarot cards are used to speculate on the future. By this point however my role as curator had slipped over into creative collaborator; we had begun matching words to the images and a game of free association had begun. With the show fast approaching we set to designing a back for the deck and sourcing an on-line production house that could turn the images into packs of cards. But why tarot specifically? This is not an easy question to answer, however a clue lies in the title of the exhibition in which the works would be shown - *The New Age is a Cult*. Derived from a sardonic piece of text-based graffiti, which we sighted in the Balinese town of Ubud, the phrase summarised a number of perceptions shared by Salsjo and myself about the merits of various lifestyle options on offer in the alternative cultural mecca, Ubud, about which we were somewhat bemused though not wholly cynical. The tarot cards were an extension of this feeling, which are enjoyable to use but not quite grounded in rigor. Similarly, the title of the deck was derived from a poorly worded t-shirt on sale in a local market, which, like the graffiti, elicited a humorous response. Added to this were a cluster of conceptual interests as embodied in the work of occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), the cultural scientist Aby M. Warburg (1866–1929) and the art theorist Andre Malraux’s ‘museum without walls’, c.1947. Crowley’s *Thoth Tarot*, designed in collaboration with Lady Frieda Harris (1877–1962) is well-known as is also his cultish status. In contrast Warburg and Malraux were concerned with the archiving and juxtaposition of imagery, especially reproductions of art. Their respective archives were conceived with the idea of drawing meaning from image constellations, in
much the same way that tarot cards can appear to suggest coherent narratives when grouped together. For example, according to the Warburg Library:

The last project of the German Jewish “cultural scientist” Aby M. Warburg (1866–1929), the Mnemosyne Atlas is an unfinished attempt to map the pathways that give art history and cosmography their pathos-laden meanings. Warburg thought this visual, metaphoric encyclopaedia, with its constellations of symbolic images, would animate the viewer’s memory, imagination, and understanding of what he called “the afterlife of antiquity (The Warburg Institute).

In contrast Malraux’s intentions differ in that they are focused on the role of the curator as the generator of meanings within image constellations. According to the online culture Blog Neatly Art:

Andre Malraux’s idea of an imaginary museum, a ‘museum without walls’ (which he first announced in 1947), is a prescient manifesto of the digital age that enacts the displacement of the physical art object and the museum by photographic reproduction. And Malraux’s privileging of curatorial over artistic production is a first instance of explicitly locating the creative act in the process of assembling, grouping, and displaying works of work (Neatly Art n.d.).

However, Malraux also had something of a spurious reputation, a conjuror more than a scholar, but one nonetheless who obtained high office as France’s Cultural Affairs Minister during General de Gaulle’s presidency (1959–1969).

In the photographic documentation of Salsjo’s exhibition the layout of the cards can be seen, along with the artist who is examining the spread at her feet. Both compositionally and conceptually the photographs draw heavily on well-known images of Malraux taken by photographer Maurice Jarnoux (1907–1969). In one photograph, André Malraux selecting photographs for Le Musée imaginaire, Paris, (c. 1947) the eponymous subject is seen examining his ‘imaginary museum’, which consists of photographic reproductions of world art (e-Flux, n.d.). It was this image that I showed to Salsjo and our photographer friend James Widdowson who documented the show, including taking a photograph that was inspired by the Jarnoux composition (See: Appendix 1.3 – Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot, documentation pp.5-6). We noted also the work of American artist Denis Adams, who similarly referenced Jarnoux’s images of Malraux. Adams’ filmic work Malraux’s Shoes (2012) is a single-channel video lasting for 42 minutes that was written and performed by Dennis Adams and directed by Dennis Adams and Paul Colin. Shot in ‘film noir’ black and white, Adams’ piece restages Malraux contemplating his archive, though in a
manner that infuses the subject with deep comic angst (Micchelli 2012).

Further inspiration for the tarot project can be found in popular aspects of psychoanalytic theory, specifically ‘free association’ as pioneered by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). The reason being that it is possible to see the kinds of narratives that emerge from tarot readings, and perhaps also from images constellations of any kind, as reflective not of the images but rather of the person who views them. Meaning is something we seek, and seek it we will in whatever appears before us. Free association is an extension of this idea and was also a productive tool for many Surrealist artists. It remains a fascination for artists to this day and became a form of creative play within the tarot project.

Knowledge production

The knowledge that was produced by this project relates primarily to artistic process, in the sense that the images were derived from investigative processes used by Salsjo in her practice. In addition, however the project aimed to raise questions about the ways in which individuals interact with images and may choose to construct narratives and meanings based on what might otherwise be random constellations of pictures. In drawing on modes of image juxtaposition that can be traced to cultural theorists and practitioners including Aby Warburg, Andre Malraux and Aleister Crowley the project opens a whimsical dimension to questions of epistemology, casting a speculative light on possibilities pertaining to knowledge construction.

Audience response

Audience response to the project was quite varied, ranging from a formal or aesthetic reply, to those who perceived the project as an authentic mode of divination to others who dismissed it as a prank. Anecdotally individuals who purchased a deck of the cards reported their enthusiastic use of them as a tarot deck. Others saw the cards as being the catalogue for the exhibition. There were six enlarged versions of the cards, which were also presented in the show. These enabled closer examination of the selected images, which were striking in various ways. For instance, the card titled Trashed (2014) carries the image of a smiling man (actually the anarchic performance artist Danius Kesmenis) squatting inside a rubbish bin; he looks entirely absurd. Salsjo sited these works during an artist talk at MARS Gallery, where we noted many positive comments about the inter-relating of the drawn and photographic images.
Spatial presentation

The cards were presented in the exhibition on a circular dais with seating on either side. This layout referenced the aforementioned photographic image of Andre Malraux with his ‘museum without walls’. However, the circular installation was placed on the floor in front of a large printed banner, *The Watchers*, (2014). The banner included references to the magical incantation, ‘Abracadabra’, which, at different times has been linked to the tarot. For example, Aleister Crowley made light of this possible connection. The installation provided a dramatic centralized form within the exhibition. However, it was not entirely easy to play with the cards, or to inspect them closely, especially while sitting in the chairs provided. At a later date I would like to revisit this problem and consider ways to install the cards in a manner that makes them easily accessible to audiences.

A new tarot in an old tradition

Tarot has a European history that can be traced to the 14th Century; however, in the 20th Century a resurgent interest in divinatory processes spurned by new forms of spirituality such as Theosophy and Eastern mysticism, by potent psychoanalytic techniques and by innovations in artistic practice saw new decks come into currency. Prominent among these was the *Rider-Waite Tarot*, published in 1910, closely followed by the *Thoth Tarot deck*, (1938–43) designed by Lady Frieda Harris (1877–1962) with instructions from occultist Aleister Crowley (1877–1947). Three decades later the famed surrealist Salvador Dali (1904–1989) produced a signature deck, (c.1970), in which the artist is cast as magician. In 2013 the *Contemporary Magic: A Tarot Deck Art Project*, was published to coincide with a travelling exhibition of the same name (Engman 2011). Stacy Engman, formerly of PS1 MoMA, curated the project and the series included images by artistic luminaries ranging across Yayoi Kusama, Ultra Violet, Nan Goldin, Karl Lagerfeld and Vivienne Westwood. The catalogue foreword by Eric Shiner, Director of The Andy Warhol Museum, confirmed the ongoing interest, at least in artistic circles in tarot iconography (Shiner 2011). Prominent though these tarot makers may be, this abridged overview would remain incomplete without reference to artist Suzanne Treister and her project Hexon2.0. It is here that Treister publishes her very own tarot to elaborate effect (Treister n.d.).

According to the artist’s website:

**HEXEN 2.0** looks into histories of scientific research behind government programmes of mass control, investigating parallel histories of countercultural and grass roots movements.

**HEXEN 2.0** charts, within a framework of post-WWII U.S. governmental and military imperatives, the coming together of diverse scientific and social sciences through the
development of cybernetics, the history of the internet, the rise of Web 2.0 and increased intelligence gathering, and the implications for the future of new systems of societal manipulation towards a control society.

HEXEN 2.0 specifically investigates the participants of the seminal Macy Conferences (1946–1953), whose primary goal was to set the foundations for a general science of the workings of the human mind. The project simultaneously looks at diverse philosophical, literary and political responses to advances in technology including the claims of Anarcho-Primitivism and Post Leftism, Theodore Kaczynski/The Unabomber, Technogaianism and Transhumanism, and traces precursory ideas such as those of Thoreau, Warren, Heidegger and Adorno in relation to visions of utopic and dystopic futures from science-fiction literature and film.

Based on actual events, people, histories and scientific projections of the future, and consisting of alchemical diagrams, a Tarot deck, photo-text works, a video and a website, HEXEN 2.0 offers a space where one may use the works as a tool to envison possible alternative futures (Treister n.d.).

These five examples reveal the extent to which tarot cards have been appropriated by a disparate range of interests, from spiritual to social, from fashion to political conspiracy. While it is perhaps difficult to construe these affiliates as a tradition, there is a common thread, which if nothing else lays claim to ‘play’ as a mode of creative life capable of bearing fruit. It is here that the *Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot* can be seen within a broader history of artistic appropriations of tarot. The deck is reflective of Salsjo’s artistic process, yet brought to light through a collaborative process.

Subsequent developments

A few months after the exhibition Salsjo and I travelled to Cuba to attend the 2015 Bienal de la Habana. It was here that we discovered the Museo de Naipes, a local museum dedicated to playing cards and tarot. While exploring the collection of over 2,000 cards we were able to play with the *Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot* and to informally present them in the museum space. Salsjo gave card readings to the staff, which led to speculations about possible future projects. This remains to be seen; however, as we are returning to Cuba for other projects an installation or performance at the museum may be possible.
Economic factors

Compared with the production of the large-scale framed works on paper and fabric works produced by Salsjo, the tarot cards, which were manufactured with the aid of an on-line China based printing company, were a relatively inexpensive production. As highly portable items capable of covering a larger surface area, an advantageous aspect of the cards was their portability and easy re-staging in different settings and installation configurations. For example, whilst working in Cuba it was noted that tarot cards have been incorporated into the Santeria religion and that the locals recognised it as an intrinsic part of the culture. This opened up a cross-cultural context in which the cards could be presented. Further, there is no need to present the cards in a conventional gallery and they may well garner greater dramatis through being displayed in unusual or contrasting settings.

Yet this concern for portability arises also from access to and participation in international mobility, namely inexpensive air travel. It also lies within an economic consideration of how to produce artworks and projects during periods of little or no income. For both Salsjo and myself, and indeed for many other arts practitioners, it was apparent also that there was and remains a real need to find opportunities to work in stable and affordable situations, primarily because art doesn’t pay very much. Yet as First World visitors to the island of Bali, where the project began, it was certainly the case that our financial position was much improved as compared with life in Australia. This is an option that many in the arts adopt but seldom publically disclose, other than to present an ‘exclusive’ or exotic spin on their Third or Second World adventures, (Australian artist Donald Friend being one of the first to adopt this pose in Bali). So aside from the conceptual and creative aspects of this project, what was really brought home to me was the extent to which disparities exist within an art structure that is dependent on global economic systems and also determined to present a First World spin around the ‘exclusivity’ of art. All of this occurs at the cost of ignoring disparity.

Through this experience I began to consider issues around art practice and the global economic systems upon which the entire enterprise of art relies and also perpetuates. While I had not yet formulated my conclusions a strong feeling about my place within the arts began to take shape. This strange condition of global mobility and economic uncertainty (because my income was so irregular) produced a dizzying, even addictive state of being. It was risky and exciting but it hardly offered something upon which I could build a life. If a systemic change was to take place within the arts, then it had to factor in all of the players, their strengths, aspirations and vulnerabilities. With the later articulation of Barefoot Curating as a mode of practice it is easy to see how working with diverse agents in contrasting and interlinked economic zones contributed to its emergence. Further still Barefoot Curating would look to enable outcomes that were not grounded in exploitation.
‘Artist run’. In the patois of the Australian art world the curious term, ‘artist run’ seems to have gained currency some time in the 2000s. Artists were running things, doing their own thing, outside of institutions, un-beholding to commercial galleries. That this formulation of artistic independence, which one can hardly construe as new, should thus be enunciated precisely at a time when the art world had expanded in all sorts of ways seemed somehow to imply its opposite, that artists were largely enmeshed within institutional structures. While this may for the most part be the case, the emergence of ‘artist-run initiatives’ did not exclude the possibility of the curator as a participant especially when the Artist-Run-Spaces and Initiatives (ARI) facilitated also the rise of the artist-as-curatorial. However, with the Australia Council for the Arts adopting ‘artist run’ as a designation within their funding guidelines it became clear that few if any artistic practices could be seen as truly independent of institutional networks for support.

“An Artist Run Initiative (ARI),” explains the Australia Council “is a collective or space run by artists to present their own and other artist’s work” (Australia Council For The Arts). While this raises a number of questions concerning the possibilities of artistic independence – what is it, what does it mean, is it viable, is it a productive aspiration and so on, it also raises questions for curators. If curators make linkages between
artists, artworks, audiences and institutions then it is difficult to assert a romantic concept of a curator as independent. Further still curators may be brought into independent contexts precisely because of their ability to make external linkages to institutions, funding bodies and contexts for presentation. So, where does this leave the question of the curator in the independent context? One way of thinking around this problem is to consider how curators and artists deal directly with one another, especially when the work or works in question are not yet finished, realised or resolved. Independent curators working in the contemporary art field very often have a background in art making, which in itself is significant because they possess insights into how artists work. They know something about process. It is to these kinds of relationships between curators and artists that we now turn our attention, and in particular to the author’s experience of working with two Australian artists – Minh Phan and Khue Nguyen. This chapter concerns the nature of the artist/curator relationship and how a curator might act as a sounding board and collaborator within the evolution of a public exhibition and/or performance.

I came to know artist Minh Phan through my work with the Heartlands Refugee Art Prize, a national art prize open to Australian artists from refugee backgrounds. Over two of the years in which the prize was convened Minh had presented meticulous photo-realist paintings concerning his experience as a refugee. The first of these, titled Brimanger Diptych (2012) were depictions of immigration documents relating to his entry into Australia. The paintings imbued these records of identity with a tangible quality that the originals lacked. Somewhere in the translation from original to copy an authenticity had materialised. In it one sensed a correspondence with the process of reifying one’s own identity even as the concept proved insubstantial. I was drawn to these works both for their technical finesse and also for the sentiments they conveyed. They were simultaneously clinical yet full of emotion. The brush strokes followed the contours of the originals, seemed almost to dissect them, yet they were also tactile and sensual.

I met Minh at Fortyfivedownstairs, a gallery-for-hire in Flinders Lane, Melbourne where the exhibition was being staged. He was roughly the same age as me, a medical doctor by profession and a graduate of the Diploma of Visual Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts. In 2013 Minh was the joint winner of the Heartlands Prize, having entered a four-panel oil on copper work titled Two Views (2013). Each of the panels reproduced portrait photos of his family in Vietnam and Australia. The Vietnamese photos are in black and white; the Australian pictures are in colour. Minh and I discussed the works and I remember in particular his articulate account of what he was aiming to achieve with these images, being a reflection upon memory and representation, as well as continuity and change across geographies and familial generations. I recall also that we ruminated on our perceptions about the Refugee Art Prize. We both felt that while we appreciated the degree to which the project put a positive spin on refugees, especially at a time of immense negativity around the topic, it also constituted a label that did not reflect the realities of those involved. No one is just a refugee. Ironically however we did not have to wait too long before the
project was defunded, shortly after the Abbott Coalition Government came to power. It was in this context that we began to talk about future projects, with I might add, the assistance of Multicultural Arts Victoria (MAV). At this time, I was working on a variety of projects for MAV, including exhibitions occurring between Australia and China, Australia and Cambodia, and now perhaps Australia and Vietnam. At one point I even met with the Bosnian-born artist Minela Krupic while we were both in Venice, she en-route to post-war Sarajevo and me to Melbourne, to discuss the idea of her working in Cambodia and showing the work in Australia at a later date. It was an interesting situation because MAV was always looking for money to make these projects happen. I was fairly independent as were many of the artists and there was a tacit understanding that we would just get on with things and if the funding didn’t materialise then we could make a call on whether the project went ahead or not. Many involved had an income that was not dependent on their art, but I was not one of these. Sometimes I got paid and sometimes I did not. It was my choice so I did not feel disadvantaged by the situation and generally I just tried to keep moving forward. This observation I share because it is often suggested that curators get paid and artists do not. That is not my experience. Equally there has always been a commitment on my part to cultural production that is not financially driven.

While perhaps not post-Fordism at its worst these are tenuous conditions in which to operate. But while I have accepted this myself I remain uncomfortable with inviting artists to participate in a project where the return to the artist is nothing more than that involvement. The idea that participation in a show will be ‘good for your career’ is for the most part insubstantial. Artists need to be paid. They need publicity that is effective and they need to know that they have something to go on with. Otherwise there is no equity. With these thoughts in mind I was dismayed to learn that a new offer to develop an exhibition for the Human Rights Arts & Film Festival, which arrived on my desk via Multicultural Arts Victoria, came with no budget other than a modest curatorial fee. We had the space for free, which was not too bad considering it was on Federation Square, one of the most prominent cultural precincts in Melbourne. The project would be promoted through the festival and Multicultural Arts Victoria would lend a hand in installing, opening, invigilation and demounting. There were no fees for the artists, no budget for materials and no gallery furnishings. Signage would be covered but it was pretty basic. I discussed this with Jill Morgan, the CEO of Multicultural Arts, who suggested that along with Minh Phan there were a few artists from Vietnamese backgrounds who had expressed interest in doing a project. I met with three of the artists – Minh Phan, Khue Nguyen and Thanh Duong and explained what was on offer. I included also the additional proviso that if I was curating the show I would do whatever I could to advance the cause of the artists. It wasn’t very much.

But like me the artists agreed that the exhibition was a good idea. The prominence of the space and the festival was an incentive. Minh, Khue and Thanh were all easy to work with and they each proved to be
central to the formation of the exhibition. We also invited Quan Trieu and Phuong Ngo who contributed works. In general, there was a no nonsense approach, no grandstanding, no sense that any one artist was more or less important. At our initial meeting on Federation Square we instantly recognized the possibilities and limitations of the project and generally there was a feeling that it presented a rewarding challenge.

As the curator I was however worried that the slight budget would translate into a less than substantial exhibition, especially as the space was quite voluminous. I did not want the works to be dwarfed in the cavernous interior. Adopting the ‘arte povera’ mode I purchased a couple of industrial looking trestles from the hardware store and a few other supplies with the intention of using these items as gallery plinths and hanging devices. Khue by this stage had departed for Vietnam but had provided instructions about how he wanted his work installed. This was easy enough; however, a couple of weeks later a more alarming request arrived via email. Khue’s work centred on the question of human rights in Vietnam and he was busy interviewing people there, much to the annoyance of local authorities. At one point Khue alerted us to say that his contacts in Vietnam were worried that something might happen to him, that the secret police may arrange an accident with him as the intended victim. Khue seemed only mildly concerned but he did state that should this eventuate we were to proceed with the exhibition. This was the first time that I had been faced with the possibility that a project in which I was intimately involved may result in the death of an artist due precisely to the work being created. Despite my misgivings I recognized that Khue, who to this day I regard as a mature and level-headed individual, had made his decision and there was nothing I could do to change it. I resolved to proceed with the show come what may.

I did however discuss the situation with Minh and some of my colleagues at Multicultural Arts Victoria. While MAV took the step of contacting the Australian Embassy in Hanoi, Minh and I talked about the conceptual, and dare I say it, the moral dimensions of the project. As a component of the Human Rights Arts & Film Festival it stood to reason that we should give voice to the kinds of issues being raised by Khue. It was one of the contributing factors to devising a title for the show, which I nominated to call Vietnam/Australia: Voicing the Unspoken (Appendix 1.31). I presented this to the artists and they agreed that it summed up the themes within the exhibition. Through their works the artists addressed a range of issues and experiences emanating from both their individual lives and also the community of Vietnamese Australians that developed in the wake of the Vietnam War. The artists had either entered Australia as refugees or they were the children of refugees. Minh and Khue had both arrived in Australia by boat though their age gap meant that their experiences were quite different. Thanh Duong was a teenager when she made the journey and her installation Inside Looking Out: A Refugee Experience (2013) captured some of her feelings about that voyage.
During the developmental phase of the exhibition works were being presented for consideration. The artists would show images of their works and sometimes just describe what they wanted to do and everyone would discuss it. At this time, I mentioned that my awareness about contemporary Vietnamese culture and politics was not especially strong, which put me at a disadvantage. However, I was reassured by the way the artists affirmed my role and also when the conversation turned to the installation of the show. Strictly speaking the role of the curator is not one of political commentator even when political commentary may be an aspect of the work. Rather the curator aims to broker a relationship between audience and artists through the medium of art, making it a role of articulation. This is not to say that the curator is always apolitical or neutral. This was brought home to me during the project that followed on from Vietnam/Australia: Voicing the Unspoken (Appendix 1.3.1), which was called Forty Acts of Remembering (Appendix 1.3.2). In the first draft of my essay for that show I quoted the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–) without realizing how contentious a figure this well-known individual is within the Vietnamese community. Some see him as an apologist for the Communist regime and not a figure one would associate with national unity. Minh Phan emailed me to say that older members of his family were very upset with this reference to an alarming degree. This was problematic because the project, which marked the 40th Anniversary of the fall of Saigon, had been conceived around the idea of Vietnamese unity. We weren’t looking to start a fight. Ensconced in my new base in Havana, Cuba I rewrote the essay and sent it via roadside email (Smith 2015a).

These experiences have occasioned me to reflect on how dizzying and disjointed life sometimes feels when the projects one is engaged in are located in places around the globe. Khue had previously left Australia to work on our exhibition that would take place in Australia and following this, right when I was working on the second Vietnam project I flew out of Melbourne because my Cuba projects were taking precedence over everything else. Minh and Khue, who had worked on both projects, indeed were key drivers in each, were understanding of my position. At least I had met with all of the artists, including My Le Thi from Sydney and I had been involved in discussions about the formation and presentation of the proposed performance work, where it would be staged and how the exhibition would be formulated.

However, to obtain further clarity around my research and my role as a curator within conditions of considerable fluidity I posed questions to Minh and Khue about our interactions to see how effective my curatorial input may have been. The three questions were:

How was your experience working with me as a curator?

What impact did it have on your practice as an artist?
What kinds of things did our discussions alert you to with regard to the presentation of your work?

Minh Phan’s responses:

How was your experience working with me as a curator?

My experience is one of expanding trust and respect. Through our initial short conversations at Heartlands, and in listening to you talk of art in direct language, I felt that you weren’t clogged down in the trappings of jargon nor interested in power-dynamics, and that you were mutually interested in art that mattered to the experience of living. This is why I was interested in working with you in Voicing the Unspoken. Your no-nonsense approach to the curating, your ability to improvise to craft possibilities from limited resources, your insights in the catalogue essays on all of our work – all of these merits were reasons for Khue and I to work with you in Forty Acts of Remembering, and hopefully on future projects together.

One of the advantages of being over 40 years old is in knowing more about how I work and knowing whom I work well with. Data for this assessment ranged from you reliability in turning up to meetings on time without fail, your willingness to rock up to my parent’s house to see my art, to your ease with chatting out our project while digging into cheap pho from a city alleyway. Throughout, I got the sense that you, me and Khue are in the same groove, which gives me the confidence to brainstorm without fear of being too hastily judged. The discoveries that you were a maker of art, that you are interested in the non-resolution of blues harmonies, etc etc are bonus reassuring signs.

My experience in working with you is a fraternal trust (something that I know well growing up with a brother on either side of me) that forms the foundation of our working relationship.

Minh’s response to this question refreshed my memory of our working together to solve problems on minimal means and to fruitful ends. During this time there were a few in-house jokes by Minh and Khue about my way of working being at one with Vietnamese approaches to economizing. Joking aside however, the discussion certainly clarified for me that aesthetic resolution was by no means interchangeable with elaborate or high production values. The solutions at which we arrived were very much in the barefoot mode, which drew attention for instance to the essentials of the material dimensions of the works. For instance, Khue’s work Chopsticks, (2014) was made up of nothing but disposable chopsticks presented on an industrial trestle. The audience was invited to break individual chopsticks and
toss them on to the floor. At the same time, they were encouraged to try their hand at breaking a bundle of chopsticks located in the middle of the table, which was impervious to any such attempts. The piece implied strength in unity.

What impact did it have on your practice as an artist?

The main impact is the ability to do collaborative work with people I trust and respect. In this way, the scale of my work was no longer restricted to a single ‘creative unit’, but, in the case of Forty Acts, I was able to create a work on a scale of three ‘creative units’. I liken it to the ability to play in a band, rather than just soloing on the guitar. Until Heartlands, I was working in an isolated fashion, but working with you as curator slowly demonstrated to me the merits in joining with other artists as a way of artistic growth. In fact, my next project is a group exhibition with a strong sense of collaboration involving up to 12 artists from over 6 different countries of origin.

By drawing attention to the virtues of collaborative or group effort, Minh Phan identifies an important asset within the production of Barefoot Curating, namely the degree to which social capital can serve to enhance a project. The comments remind me also that exhibitions can also constitute a temporary production or focusing of community with the potential also to enhance and sometimes change social and cultural dynamics, precisely through art as a vehicle for communication.

What kinds of things did our discussions alert you to with regard to the presentation of your work?

Your curatorial ability to see the whole picture is something that I’m constantly learning from. And not just spatially, as in regards to the final hang of works, but also the temporal whole. In your discussion of your Havana project, I can follow your concept for a project from a seed of the idea, through to its current stage of bringing it into fruition, with the future track always in mind also. This has reinforced in me the importance of not working merely painting to painting, or even show to show, but to think more long term about how where my current works/practice comes from and where it may lead to. Previously I have followed local artists who I admired to see how they navigate this long term view, but my conversations with you has shown the importance for the individual artist to develop a curatorial filter upon the creative lens.

The above seems a bit abstract, so I’ll give you two concrete examples where your advice
resulted in concrete changes to the final work. The first is your excellent advice to tailor our public performance called ‘An Act of Remembering’ to be site specific. You advised us to note the unique qualities of each location. When we filmed the work we took note of each location and filmed it from a specific angle unique to each of the three sites. In the final edit, we were able to ‘triangulate’ all three performances to show it at different points of view, united by time. The final work was strengthened because the same performance was like a single melody that played over three different chords. It was in fact the difference in the background that gave the strength to this performance piece.

The second example relates to Forty Acts. In one of our early gallery visits to Space@Collins you were conscious of the sparseness of the show and encouraged us to think about calligraphy or something similar to unite the blank spaces. In the end, we didn’t use that gallery, but the advice was imbedded in our thinking. In the final display of Forty Acts, blank walls had written words projected onto the walls when they were inactive, which worked very well visually, keeping those spaces ‘restful’ but not blank.

Minh’s comments regarding “[my] concept for a project from a seed of the idea” resonates strongly with me because it points to the conceptual basis of art as it exists prior to the its material realization. For me this ‘artistic DNA’ is perhaps more capable of being transmitted over time – even vast periods of human-scale time – than objects themselves, which require at least some form of preservation. In effect, there is no more economical mode, nothing more barefoot than to be the arbiter of an idea. The rest, whether technically sophisticated or otherwise, is material expression of a meme. This is not to diminish the significance of that realization. For as Minh continues to say, how those ideas were developed were in fact contingent on a material form – an essential step, for it is only by such measures that the conceptual take form, be further elaborated and ultimately transmitted to an audience. In the case of Forty Acts of Remembering the audience feedback from those who attended the live performance at Steps Gallery in Carlton was one of intense emotional connection, pathos and depth, especially through the encounter with the performers.

Finally, some general comments:

I find it interesting that you spent some time discussing the issue of financial payment to the artist and curator, in particular your defence of the proper payment of artists in contrast to the rationalizing of your own lack of salary. You state:

Artists need to be paid. They need publicity that is effective and they need to know
that they have something to go on with. Otherwise there is no equity. Sometimes I got paid and sometimes I didn’t. It was my choice so I did not feel disadvantaged by the situation and generally I just tried to keep moving forward. This observation I share because it is often suggested that curators get paid and artists do not. That is not my experience. Equally there has always been a commitment on my part to cultural production that is not financially driven.

My personal feedback to these concerns is that I think virtually everyone involved with the arts is sober to the fact that there is very little financial reward. Despite this I think the hidden currency of ‘time’ is true marker for staying in the art world. Given that we all only have a fixed amount of lived time, I think it’s telling that people like you, me and Khue continue to live in the domain of art, despite the lack of money.

Up until this point I had not considered time as a ‘hidden currency’, yet in the grand scheme of things it is indeed a commodity that can scarcely be purchased. In point of fact Minh’s observation is one of considerable existential depth, which on reflection I can see as relevant to aspects of Barefoot Curating. Put simply the expenditure of time is a measure of individual capital, so to embark on work in under-resourced contexts one must be prepared to be rewarded in-kind, in effect with non-material returns. This may not always be the case but sometimes the old saying ‘money isn’t everything’ is the applicable adage.

Khue Nguyen’s responses:

How was your experience working with me as a curator?

My personal point of view in life is that living and working go side by side.

On the ‘working’ wise, my work and my life are both a ‘work’ in progress, I always try my very best, I learn new things, I make decisions, I make mistakes, I learn from mistakes and I grow etc.

On the ‘living’ wise, some of the human values in which I value most are Respect, Trust, Responsibility, Reliability, and Sharing.

This ‘living’ motto of mine leads to your question: "How was your experience working with me as a curator?"
It is about respect and trust. Since working with you on Vietnam / Australia: Voicing the Unspoken exhibition to last year Forty Acts of Remembering exhibition, I felt that we shared these same values. We respected each other viewpoints, we respect our opinions, we respect each other as a human to human. There was no "power" playing found here. It is all about mutual respect, and willingness to listen to each other, and sharing our knowledge, and trust. We have built our trust by being responsible, reliable. Whatever tasks we were given to do, we delivered. Whatever we set out to achieve, we did our best to deliver it. This point also applied to Minh and My Le the two artists for our last year collaboration.

In addition, "Sharing" is another factor in which I learnt from working with you. Sharing here is in the sense of both sharing knowledge and sharing life experience. Working wise, you are always very generous with your feedback and you always share your knowledge with us all. Living wise, you let yourself to be honest, sometime vulnerable, and to share your life experience with me, which allowed our bond to grow, and our trust to further strengthen.

To sum up, my experience in working with you is about understanding, respect and trust.

Being reminded of such values as respect, trust, responsibility, reliability and sharing is most certainly heartening. Equally, Khue’s remarks help to pinpoint some of those more specific qualities that concepts like ‘social capital’ tend to gloss over. For instance, participation within one’s community is not just about who you know or how one can leverage a social network to achieve a particular goal. Rather these most basic of qualities are of great import with regard to feeling human. It is as the South African Zulu term ubuntu suggests – ‘a person is a person in relation to other people’. In contrast philosophical concepts like ‘Being and Being in the world’ as articulated by Martin Heidegger appear at this juncture to be overshadowed by a simpler eloquence that words like ‘respect’ and ‘trust’ convey most vividly. It is at this moment also that I perceive how the conceptual language of my dissertation might fail to convey a key feature of my curatorial work. Namely, the role of trust in bringing others into a collective artistic endeavour, especially where the outcomes of that venture are unknown. This is indeed a leap of faith, a stepping into the void.

What impact did I have on your practice as an artist?
The main impact for me is that, for collaborative work, everyone - all involved artists and the curator must prepare to be honest, to be direct and to open to each other for the mutual understanding to develop, for bond to grow, and for trust to be nurtured.

What kind of things did our discussions alert you to with regard to the presentation of your work?

By working with you on the last two exhibitions, your knowledge and your ability to see the whole picture is invaluable for me. From our conversations, you subtly helped me to:

- identify my weakness or in other word 'lack of', so from there I could find solutions to strengthen it.
- be aware of new technology, new materials, or better service provider etc. in which I could apply to, so it would be best suited my work.
- look at my work in a different angle, raise questions and further develop my work.

One specific example about this point is the way how my *Altared* [artwork] was installed in *Forty Acts of Remembering* exhibition. Firstly, you alerted me about the 'one off' / limited run for my 'altared' God, from there I could check the availability of materials / options which added value to the work. Secondly, we discussed about lighting, which prompted me to further investigate different approaches, different effects so I could achieve the effect I wanted to create.

Khue’s delineation of our critical discussions is in part reflective of my tendency, when working with artists, to draw attention to such critical measures as Makers, Practice, Knowledge, Audience, Space, Change as outlined in the previous chapter; especially as this has proven to be of benefit to an array of artistic practices and in the curatorial sphere. For me Khue’s response reaffirms the usefulness of this model as a critical tool and one that requires little more than opportunities for conversation and sharing.

Having thus concluded the three case studies and also through conducting several other projects I came to perceive that behind my methodological approach was a distinct philosophical position that persisted regardless of the context in which I happened to be working. The following chapter illuminates that philosophy.
CHAPTER X
BAREFOOT CURATING: STEPPING INTO THE VOID

As the preceding case studies reveal curators work in a variety of contexts and settings and with differing scales of resources to produce exhibitions. At the same time curators must work to accommodate and at times challenge the expectations of vested interests within a given endeavour. However, if curators are to advance the cause of art as a practice that simultaneously enriches a given context and through critical means enables that context to change, then at some point curators must do something new. In this chapter I propose a model of curatorial practice that I call ‘Barefoot Curating’. Barefoot Curating reconsiders the significance and perceived importance of economic resources where curated projects are concerned, instead utilising and making light of philosophical perspectives with regard to encounters with art practice. As a mode of care and as a way of encountering and existing within the world, Barefoot Curating traverses the diverse stages of artistic endeavour from moments of inception to development, resolution, interpretation and presentation.

Throughout this research I have applied the research methodologies outlined in Chapter VIII to various settings for curatorial work, which in turn have helped to illuminate the array of actions that constitute freelance curatorial practice. Commencing with an historical perspective the research establishes that curating, while being a prominent phenomenon within contemporary art and culture today, has exceedingly ancient roots across a wide variety of cultures. This is apparent in so far as an ethics of cultural care can be found across human cultures more broadly. In approaching an analysis of my own curatorial practice, being a self-reflexive investigation, I have considered an array of issues pertaining to contemporary curatorial practice. These include the conditions of curating today, the ways in which various curators have established individualistic approaches to curating, the array of challenges that impact the work of curators and finally an appraisal of curating within contexts of social agency. These steps establish a framework against which my own curatorial practice is appraised as applied to three curated projects.

In addition to the above stages of research I have reflected on how and to whom this research may be communicated, for it is clear that there is something to be shared with younger, aspiring and institutionally based curators who aim to enter this challenging though rewarding field. For example, on invitation from the Director of the 2015 Bienal de la Habana, Jorge Fernández Torres, elements of the research were presented to undergraduate students at the Instituto Superior de Arte, the principal school of art in Habana, Cuba. During the tutorials I was able to solicit feedback and to discuss with the undergraduates their concerns about curatorial practice more broadly and to perceive ways in which this
research anticipates numerous issues confronting a new generation of art practitioners. These reflections come in light of the obvious realisation that there are established curatorial courses that equip students with the necessary skills required for working in well-resourced museums of art, most notably in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and other European countries, though remarkably not in China where the development of museum complexes on an unprecedented scale has recently been undertaken. However, the things that I wish to share are differing and complementary skill-sets to those applied in the gallery of art.

They are modes of practice that enable curatorial work in contexts that lack the stability of the museum, but are nonetheless highly significant because of their instability, their liquescence, porosity, vulnerability and human scale. Indeed, conditions that verge on unknowability, unpredictability, erasure and ambiguity make these settings contexts for rapid cultural change and incubators of new social dynamics. How one operates in these settings - with agility, humility, humour, through being present and responsive constitutes a particularly vital manifestation of freelance curatorial work. Such conditions enfold the broadest economic base so their cultural power is inevitable.

It is within these circumstances that I raise the prospect of ‘Barefoot Curating’, being the implementation of curatorial methodologies in contexts where resources, be they economic or otherwise, are in short or unreliable supply. I suggest this not because under-resourced settings are somehow exotically other, but because they are ubiquitous in the freelance curatorial terrain, mainly because curating beyond the museum requires that we do something new. In this context application of the methodologies outlined in Chapter VIII – Arenas and Contexts – suggests a mode of practice that is not reliant on larger economic factors, but rather, on modes of thinking, looking and engaging, effectively an ethics of care and an ethics of being in the world that begins with the abstract and intangible intent of artistic creation and continues throughout the realisation, implementation and reception of the work of art and the exhibition as a whole.

As a term Barefoot Curating takes its cue from the Barefoot Doctors, chìjiǎo yīshēng (Zhang & Unschuld 2008), being those individuals who were trained and deployed in post-Revolutionary China under Chairman Mao as a means of addressing the medical needs of the country’s rural poor, trained specifically to deal with the challenges of impoverished social conditions. As a broad based program the Barefoot Doctors were a popular success in the nascent People’s Republic of China, dwindling only in stature as economic conditions improved. It seems noteworthy therefore that the methodologies encapsulated by Barefoot Curating, first proposed in Chapter VIII – Section A: Arenas, and Section B: Critical Measures, would be well applied to the array of newly built though under-resourced art museums and galleries scattered throughout China. This is but one possible context, applicable because
skilled curators are in short supply in China and the contexts in which they work are generally lacking in funding.

There are however many non-museums based environments in which Barefoot Curating is not only applicable but is already happening. For example, the acclaimed American artist Andrea Zittel, who in her desert hideaway explores the minimum requirements of human habitation, operates with limited means (Zittel n.d.). Robert Janz, New York’s octogenarian graffiti artist goes ‘barefoot’ when he inscribes his work on the disused billboard hoardings of his city (Janz n.d.). The Australian curator Marcus Westbury operates in the mode of a Barefoot Curator when he sets out to convert the empty shopfronts of Newcastle in New South Wales into vibrant artistic centres and enterprises (Westbury 2008; Westwood 2015). The Albanian Prime Minister and artist Edi Rama, who revitalised his nation’s capital Tirana with buckets of paint also operates in this mode (Rama 2012). Further still, India provides cogent examples of Barefoot Curating. Included here are projects within the Kochi-Murzi Biennale, Kerala, (Kochi-Murzi Biennale n.d.) and the Dharavi Biennale (Dharavi Biennale n.d.), which is staged in the Mumbai slum of the same name and the St+Art Festival, New Delhi (St+Art Festival n.d.). Predating all of these and perhaps also a forerunner, the Barefoot College in Rajasthan, which was established in 1972 by the social activist and educator Bunker Roy, uses culture as a tool for communication in some of the poorest communities in the world. Noteworthy are their wonderfully expressive hand puppets, which are used in settings where conventional literacy has little or no currency. Born of an irony as biting as it is practical, they are made, explains artist Bhanwar Gopal, from the recycled pages of financial reports produced by the World Bank. According to the artist “We keep getting these reports that no one reads, so we decided to put them to some use…We use the World Bank paper to fight poverty and social problems in our own style” (Barefoot College 2015). In Australia, The Centre for Art, Society & Transformation at RMIT University develops, aggregates and researches many such projects. This can be seen on the CAST website, which publishes information about the Centre’s range of activities and exhibitions. CAST’s ‘Projects’ page (CAST ‘Projects’ n.d.) provides a number of notable examples.

Specific to this research and arising from a series of CAST research trips that included Geoff Hogg and myself, inspiration is drawn from recent and ongoing experiences working with the Bienal de la Habana, Cuba. This final case in point is especially relevant because the key flow-on project arising from my research is an opportunity to co-curate a major project for the 13th Bienal in 2018. The project, called Intercambio: A Conversation Between Two Trains, will be staged in the context of two train lines – the Hershey Line in Cuba and the Upfield Line in Melbourne (Hogg & Smith 2014; Smith & Salsjo 2015; Smith 2015). These radically contrasting contexts will act as catalysts for cross-cultural collaboration and dialogue between Australia and Cuba through the visual arts. The project, which represents the first substantial inclusion of multiple Australian artists within the Bienal, was made possible via a partnership
between the Bienal’s auspice body the Wifredo Lam Centre for Contemporary Art, the Cuban Ministry of Culture and RMIT University resulting from the efforts of myself and Dr Geoff Hogg in 2015 during two research trips to Cuba and a third in 2016.

In historical terms the Bienal de la Habana was inaugurated within the epoch of the U.S. Trade Embargo, which came into effect in 1960 in response to the expropriation of American-owned oil refineries by the newly incumbent revolutionary government led by Fidel Castro (1926–2016). In light of these circumstances the Bienal was never going to conform to First World expectations, outlooks or allegiances and clearly it has not. Inaugurated in 1984 with a vision to provide a platform for the underrepresented artists of the Third World, and early on, through the stewardship of Director Lilian Llanes Godoy, to the countries of the geographical South, the Habana Bienal took a radically different approach to the concept of the mega-exhibition, both in content and context (Altshuler 2013, p.239–252). By way of context it sits within the important early cluster of biennales, commencing with La Biennale di Venezia, which opened in 1895. Following some decades later, the Whitney Biennale commenced in 1932 and the Bienal de São Paulo opened in 1951; Documenta in 1955, and the inaugural Biennale of Sydney started in 1973. Havana commenced in 1984 and Istanbul Biennial in 1987.

Havana is a dispersed Bienal, which is to say it is not located in one centralised pavilion or giardini, but rather throughout the neighbourhoods and districts of the city in which it is staged. Projects can be found in the community centres, public squares, cinemas, in the streets and in the homes of the local citizenry. Sometimes even the locals are participants within the construction, staging and interpretation of the artworks. This ambition is articulated by Fernández Torres, who states, “I think the question is to precisely reconstruct our discourse based on the public’s energy. It is the public specific” (Fernández Torres 2012, p.24). The position aims to challenge the professionalised hermeticism of the global art world, as is revealed by Fernández Torres when he states:

The promotional circuits of the visual arts are essentially restricted to a circle of initiated and experts who systematically attend each presentation. However, the time has come to suggest other alternatives: taking that untrained passer-by into account (Fernández Torres 2012, p.24).

As if in a curious time capsule all of these activities have occurred within the context of the sixty-five-year long embargo, a period in which the country has, despite its capacity to bite at the heels of the United States, remained on the periphery of the First World. Difficult though this has been, the conditions of the Embargo have also presented opportunities. For instance, in the so-called Third World diminutive Cuba is a big player, a nodal point in which the impecunious nations of the Americas, Africa
and Asia dream, scheme and make do. It is this, the broad base of the world’s poorer nations that represent a significant sector of the global population, not only in demographic and economic terms but also through cultural dynamics and ontologies. It is here that freelance curatorial work – Barefoot Curating, assumes a role of significance. For the cultural theorist Boris Groys the curator speaks for the audience but the question remains, who is exactly in the audience? From a First World perspective the broad base of the audience may be a large proportion of citizens, but it remains nonetheless a citizenry within an especially privileged population, one moreover that inhabits the higher echelons of global wealth. In terms of audience however globalisation plays a double-handed game, intensifying pressures that offer anything but assurances. Labour markets manifest where the price is lowest, so the advent of a new kind of audience, and for that matter new kinds of cultural producers, ones far broader and more dynamic than are generally admitted or appraised within Australian (and other First World) cultural discourses are in play. They are aspirant and unpredictably political. This was abundantly demonstrated in the uprisings of the Arab Spring, (a point of reference in the subsequent bienals world-wide), where for example social media and an array of artistic practices were used to convey the uprising’s multifaceted messages.

Barefoot curating may well be applied in the simplest way as a set of practical steps, but equally and especially when we turn our attention to broader economic and ontological questions and entanglements, might it be applied as a philosophical enquiry. For example, how can our actions be effective, strategic or perhaps even redemptive within cultural structures that are simultaneously global and inequitable? While the question stands as an open enquiry, other queries about Barefoot Curating can be clearly answered. For example:

What is the role of the barefoot curator?

The role of the barefoot curator is to practically stage art as discourse - social, philosophical, political, spiritual, and economic discourses, amongst others - but precisely in those times and places in which social imbalances, social tensions, and the possibilities and seeming impossibilities of social changes are in play.

What does barefoot curating recognise?

Barefoot curating recognises that art is ultimately political because it constitutes a dreaming of difference. It is political because it constitutes exposure, illumination and redress. It addresses our being and our becoming.
How is barefoot curating different to other modes of curating?

Barefoot curating is different from other modes of curating because it is primarily concerned with the convening of contexts, more so than the art that may enter that context. The barefoot curator sets the stage, not just for art to be shown but for art processes to be enacted. The barefoot curator establishes the terms of engagement, dialogue, participation, questioning, and finally a preparedness for outcomes that are unknown. The barefoot curator sets these terms by forming an accord between the parties invested in a context.

What has barefoot curating abandoned?

Barefoot curating leaves behind a conception of art as objects that inhabit museums, objects that are precious because of their fetishized cultural status. Barefoot curating leaves behind the intense demands of the market for art merely to serve as hyper-expensive commodity, as signifiers of wealth and culture.

To expand this discussion in terms that are wholly personal however, I consider a few surprising collisions as emblematic of Barefoot Curating and also its potential capacity for affecting change. The first of these took place in 2010 in a dusty backstreet studio in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa at the Gendun Choephel Artist Guild (Asianart n.d.) As part of the project 28 Reasons We Still Need Superman developed by British curator Tim Crowley, I was one in the gathered crowd to watch videos by British art stars Jake and Dinos Chapman clandestinely screened for the local artists (Smith 2010). While the collision of cultures was stark – the Chapman’s blood-filled glove-puppets imitating famous art stars exploding during the final moments of their death throes, contrasted with the Spartan concrete studio - I noted also the likelihood that many in the local audience would in turn make their own bid for the centre stage of global art. This was later confirmed with the ascendancy and proliferation of their cultural productions and with it a politicised articulation of unyielding social conditions.

Secondly, the pulsating work Wounds and Absent Objects (1998) by Anish Kapoor, screened in the near destitute Prayet Cinema in Central Habana during the 2015 Bienal. Within the throbbing of this formalist inspired orb a social lesion that transcended First World / Third World dichotomies was conveyed. But to know why that laceration was imparted one would need the in-situ encounter, the inhalation of decay permeating the chasms structure and the reverberation of sound that shook the trembling foundations.

And lastly the memory of a road trip through rural Australia in 2011 with Indonesian art luminary Heri Dono, who communicated his satisfaction to me at working in small hamlets like the country town of Castlemaine in Victoria, because the sociability with the locals was more grounding than the usual run of
Louis Vuitton, Palais de Tokyo or Saatchi galleries in the major international capitals where his work is routinely displayed (Castlemian Festival n.d.). The artist’s meteoric mobility had been enabled by Heri’s vision for remaking traditional cultural forms, elevating his situation in the developing nation of Indonesia to one of global importance.

What examples such as these suggest is that where cultures change and where innovation takes place is not only at the centre and not only at the periphery. It is everywhere, it is always and it occurs within an entwining of the other. Culture is liquid and it is infinite. We find the stepping-stones, we make waves and plumb the depths, we become other in ourselves and enable changes of significance when we dare to test the waters. This is the challenge of curating, it is why freelance curators are not wanting for projects, and it is why those practitioners require above all else a capacity for barefoot thinking.

International reception of barefoot curating

An opportunity to test Barefoot Curating as a conceptual model within an internationally significant context arose in July 2016 via an invitation from the presidency of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) to participate as a guest speaker in the 2016 AICA World Congress and to address the topic of my dissertation. In an unprecedented moment the AICA Congress was convened for the first time in Havana, Cuba at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, with the key event being a day-long symposium titled ‘New Utopias: Art, Memory, Context’ (AICA International Association of Art Critics 2016).

As an apex art critical event the AICA Congress presented a suitable forum for the launch of Barefoot Curating, as both a conceptual model and as an optimistic approach to cultural development. The model was presented to a cohort of curators, art critics, theorists and arts professionals from across the globe and attracted an array of positive responses. For instance, during the panel discussion Robert Storr, former Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the first American commissioner of the Venice Biennale in 2007 and Dean of the School of Art Yale University was the first to comment on Barefoot Curating as a new approach to developing art projects in contexts beyond the museum and one moreover that had potential in terms of establishing new approaches to the articulation of emerging cultural challenges. Significantly, comments from presenters and delegates suggested to me that many of the ideas associated with the development of art projects in under-resourced contexts were in fact concerns for curatorial practitioners world-wide. From both freelance and institutionally based curators there were remarks that suggested public institutions are not always conducive to the cultivation of the new. Rather, contexts outside of institutions were productive for curators because they allowed for experimentation and ambiguity in ways that institutions do not and
were therefore appealing because of the latitude afforded therein. This is perhaps more evidentiary than surprising but it does highlight a global condition where the presentation of culture is concerned, notably a tension between that which arises outside of institutions of culture but remains perennially the object of institutional fascination.

Perhaps due in part to the appeal of working outside of institutional frameworks, several parties expressed interest in barefoot curating. Panel moderator Niilofur Farrukk, the managing trustee of the Karachi Biennale Trust in Pakistan enquired as to examples and antecedents of barefoot curating and later suggested involvement with the Karachi Biennale where barefoot curating might be suitably applied.

Also, several delegates expressed interest in the idea of barefoot curating and approached me with a view to initiating projects in locations ranging from Asia, Latin America, the Middle-East, Europe, Eastern Europe and Australia. In order to pursue these opportunities, I initiated an informal network of practitioners interested in barefoot curating with a view to cultivating opportunities and further develop the conceptual and philosophical discourse emanating from the model.

These are positive outcomes that point to many future activities. However, in the face of these exciting possibilities I feel also that I must restate the initial reasons for examining cultural and artistic developments in under-resourced contexts. At a practical level that reason was one of ‘how to do it’, especially in straitened circumstances. At a philosophical level the questions are more complex, which have already been covered in this dissertation. In light of these thoughts, I feel compelled also to reflect on conversations with some of my Cuban compatriots, for their insights concerning ‘under-resourced’ contexts were not only illuminating, they helped also to ground my focus in terms of localised outcomes and therefore offered a sobering counterbalance to the AICA forum. This is especially the case with their anecdotes about Cuba’s so-called ‘Special Period in a Time of Peace’, which occurred during the 1990s when food shortages gave rise to an array of social problems affecting individuals indiscriminately. As those friends relayed to me, the absence of basic necessities meant that daily survival prompted many to resort to desperate measures. Confronted with the stories of this period - the malnourishment, the sexual exploitation and so on - I can but reflect that the idealistic intentions of Barefoot Curating – to develop art projects in under-resourced contexts, would doubtless be sorely tested if one were to pursue cultural ambitions during times of extreme hardship.

It is with some fascination therefore that I recall the story of the famed Historian of Havana, Eusevió Leál, who petitioned his government to embark on a restoration program of the old city, of the exquisitely beautiful La Habana, precisely in those dark days. To insist, in the face of dire necessity, on a value of human dignity through cultural expression is no mean feat. To restore a city on the basis of that declaration is another matter entirely. It is my hope therefore that these two perspectives, being on the
one hand an optimistic stance wherein culture can be seen to aid the development of society and the other perhaps more sobering position, whereby the dire necessities of life vie with artistic aspirations, can enable not only sensitive but also sensible approaches to the possibilities of barefoot curating.
CHAPTER XI
FREELANCE CURATING: FREE, REALLY?

Following the delineation of Barefoot Curating as a mode of practice, which constitutes the penultimate phase of the research, I return finally to the primary research questions and outline the conclusions at which I arrive. To recap, the initial questions are:

What is it that I do as an Australian-based freelance curator of contemporary art?

And,

If this role is not sustainable, what does that imply about Australia’s artistic culture and what must I do differently?

A Complex array of mitigating factors impact the role of the curator, who in turn must negotiate with the vested parties. In the contemporary scene significant challenges emerge from the intense pressures of modern society, which threaten to diminish the role of art therein. To counter, one must articulate and practically apply an ethically grounded practice.

This research began with a number of ideas about ways in which art might be presented and the imagined possibilities that artistic practice, discourse and presentation could take place such that they are somehow independent of mitigating factors. What I now recognize is that not only do such circumstances not exist, but also that it is not productive to imagine art forms and practices as existing at a remove from the contexts in which they are produced. Art provides a vital point of difference from other modes of communication and experience and very often in ways that are not easily articulated. But in doing so art provides insights and perceptions about the world we live in. Curators have an important role to play in terms of researching, documenting, interpreting, caring for and presenting works of art. They operate in roles that require a considerable range of skills, knowledge and experience to enable optimum outcomes in terms of artistic staging.

To do this, curators make linkages between subjectivities, contexts and economies to produce cultural knowledge, experiences, presence and change. However, in order to sustain their practices within Capitalist contexts (Communist, Socialist and tribal contexts are another matter entirely and lay outside the scope of this research), thereby ensuring a relative degree of creative autonomy and with it the legitimizing of their unique contribution to cultural knowledge, freelance curators who are not otherwise financially self-sufficient are required to work in differing arenas, such as institutional, commercial and artist-run settings. In each of these the curator must work to accommodate explicit, implicit and emergent expectations, including artistic exploration, knowledge creation, and marketing strategies.
However, where the curator of art must be flexible in terms of context he or she is required also to be advocates of art. To occupy the role of advocate in a manner that is efficacious the curator must be cognizant of and capable of contributing to a concept or concepts of art. This includes instances where such theories may be pre-determined formulations or ones that are not yet solidified, fixed or wholly articulated. While the conceptual attributes of art will be perceived differently from one person to another, each curator must have a critical comprehension of the ontological, epistemological and aesthetic relations to which they themselves are subject. Indeed, how those concepts are formulated, interrelate and are expressed goes to the heart of the individual ethos of the particular freelance curator and is generally reflected in their projects.

My understanding of what art is comes from personal and professional experiences, notably from working with artists and latterly from encounters with philosophy. While I recognize the logic of Morris Weitz’s “Art, itself, is an open theory;” (Weitz 1956, p.4) greater purpose has been found in the writings of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Giorgio Agamben. For instance, Heidgger tells us that art has the ability to shine a light on reality in ways that transform our perceptions and our Being. Gadamer notices that art is an ongoing process and looking at it is part of that process. Agamben feels that art offers the gift of poiesis—a coming into the truth of ones being both through creating art and looking at it. These are metaphysical concepts, which to me become personally meaningful when grounded in and connected to experience. The nub of that experience and the crux of my research has come out of a rapidly changing cultural landscape, one that straddles the end of the 20th Century and the beginning of the new millennium.

Impressions of this period cause me to note that in late Capitalist culture, both art as a concept and artists as individuals find themselves in the crosshairs of cultural pressures and tensions of unprecedented degree. Within the same period that we are required to accept that art is no longer a stable concept and that creative industry may soon be a preferred frame of reference (note for instance that from the 1 January 2015 Arts Victoria formally transitioned into Creative Victoria), artists are simultaneously expected to seek validation for their products within the competitive and oftentimes hyper-inflated marketplaces of international art fairs, collector circuits and secondary markets. To a large extent art is not ranked in its own terms but rather by market forces. While conditions such as these are by no means historically unique, clearly it is no longer a case of art and artists being leaders in cultural terms, as it may have once been within the period of 20th Century Modernism, but rather the two are under pressure to yield to the bazaar.
Neither is the situation limited to Australia. For instance, Mary Moore, the daughter of renowned British Modernist Henry Moore (1898–1986), perceives the ascendancy of the market as historically retrograde and generally negative. In mounting her argument Moore contrasts the relational dynamics surrounding the work of contemporary artist Damien Hirst with that of her father’s. Perceiving the younger artist’s work as problematic where art is concerned she states “[Henry Moore’s art] is not narrative, it’s not contextual, it is about exploring the invented object in front of you.” While with Hirst’s work “Art has gone back into a frame, it has gone back to being a contextual, narrative thing which is actually where we were with the pre-Raphaelites” (Brown 2015). Moore’s observation contrasts two approaches to art – a purest Modernist one, and a perception of art as being inseparable from its context. As with many of my generation I am unconvinced by the Modernist belief in the autonomy of the art object. Equally however it is hard to ignore the over-valueisation of Hirst’s practice within collector circuits and with it the pervasive presence of the market as a litmus test for artistic excellence. Similar observations have also been made about Hirst’s American counterpart Jeff Koons, whose 2014 Whitney Museum retrospective was described by the New York Review of Books art critic Jed Perl as “a succession of pop culture trophies so emotionally dead that museumgoers appear a little dazed as they dutifully take out their iPhones and produce their selfies” (Perl 2014).

In Australia hopes of reinvigorating, philosophically or otherwise, art’s autonomy, and with it that unique point of difference, had in early 2015 been further diminished by developments in Federal Government policy. Rather than looking to arts professionals as a source of cultural knowledge, the department of Federal Minister for the Arts, George Brandis invited non-arts professionals to sit alongside industry figures to assess funding applications to the newly established National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA). Despite the organizational title, which appears to privilege individuals of creative stature, independent artists were not allowed to apply to the NPEA; rather it is a fund reserved exclusively for arts organizations. Per the Australian Government’s website:

> The Ministry for the Arts welcomes expressions of interest from arts and culture professionals as well as from a broad cross-section of the Australian community including individuals who attend, visit and participate in arts and culture (Ministry for the Arts).

This is not as I would have it. I agree with outspoken arts commentator and artist David Pledger, who is emphatic about the dangers posed by the NPEA. Addressing a Senate Enquiry into the fund he stated, “The NPEA is not a national program for excellence in the arts. What Australia will get is a program that guts the Australian arts sector” (Pledger 2015). Like many of my colleagues I see art as a place where, to borrow Heideggarian terms, ‘Being’ and ‘Being in the World’ stakes a claim. Admittedly I am not so naïve as to imagine that such a condition can always be achieved, or indeed that it is wholly incompatible with
economic realities, or indeed with popular sentiment, but it is the ethos that I bring to my projects, whether they are enacted in institutional, commercial or independent contexts.

While my above appropriation of the Heideggerian phrasing ‘Being in the World’ evokes the philosopher’s opposition to the division of subject and object within Western thought, my interest in Heidegger comes also in the wake of a prolonged immersion in different forms of Buddhist thought. These include the Tibetan tradition of mental development (Dhargye 1974), and more recently in Zen or Chan Buddhism (Smith 2014) and latterly Nichiren Buddhism. While it is beyond the scope of this research to investigate the relationships between these contrasting modes of thought I recognize it as an essential aspect of my critical responses to Heidegger and influential therefore within my curatorial thinking and ethos.

Philosophically speaking linkages across these fields are not without precedent and should be noted here. Indeed, one of the more insightful comparisons between Eastern and Western forms of phenomenology can be found the work of art theorist Norman Bryson, who, in The Gaze in the Expanded Field, 1988, reconsiders the work of both Jacque Lacan and Jean Paul Satre in light of commentaries by two well-known Chan Buddhist teachers, Nishida and Nishitani. For Bryson, Nishitani offers a far more radical appraisal of the gaze in the context of Buddhist emptiness or sunyata. From my perspective, though I do not reference Bryson, I have taken a similar approach when considering the work of the Sydney-based artist and Chan Buddhist practitioner Lindy Lee to the extent that my research identifies ways in which Lee interrogates concepts of emptiness within her practice. That text appears in the catalogue for the artist’s 2014 retrospective at the University of Queensland Art Museum (Smith 2014). As that edition describes, the Buddhist concept of Sunyata, which finds translation as both ‘emptiness’ and ‘interconnectedness’ collapses the subject/object relationship, and in its stead places all within unceasing vibrational fields that are but dimly glimpsed in ordinary terms and ultimately only navigable by raising the level of consciousness at our disposal.

Esoteric though this may be, there are distinct instances where Buddhism, based precisely on this insight is practically applied, including in the sphere of culture. One example is the work of Japanese philosopher Daisaku Ikeda. As a formidable intellect and President of the Nichiren Soka Gakkai International, Ikeda is the recipient of more than 300 academic awards including honorary doctorates and professorships, and is a frequently invited pundit at United Nations forums. Notably Ikeda is a passionate advocate of art and culture as vehicles for human transformation. For instance, emblematic of his stance is his suggestion that “only culture could foster [Japan’s] recovery from the tragedy of war” (Ikeda 2003). While his influence is wide-reaching, in the sphere of contemporary art Ikeda’s ideas, interestingly, have next to no valence whatsoever. From my perspective, however, Ikeda’s philosophical position is a distinct point of reference,
especially with regard to Barefoot Curating. This is because his primary concern is building human communities around concepts of compassion, commonality and connection. Indeed, ideas such as these constitute mediating processes in that they require expanded awareness of one’s fellow beings, their needs, aspirations and so on. A socially engaged enterprise to be sure.

As a point of difference and as a unique contribution to knowledge, my research has broadly surveyed the curatorial terrain and endeavoured to account for my efficacy in giving expression to the conditions and associated processes of being and being in the world as conveyed through art practice, while operating in the contrasting contexts of institutions, commercial arenas and artist-run settings, especially in the Australian context. I have recognized that my curatorial style is process oriented; it entails critical analysis more than connoisseurship (which it does not exclude) and is socially oriented in that it takes into account the myriad of individuals who contribute to and ultimately experience artistic projects.

Each of my key projects – Ping Pong, the Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot and Forty Acts of Remembering – Working with Minh Phan and Khue Nguyen were contingent on relationships within and outside of Australia. This is reflective of my general work as a freelance curator, which has encompassed projects in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, the Middle East and Europe. However, such linkages are relevant also within the context of the Centre for Art, Society and Transformation (CAST) where I am based, not only because the predominant tendency within the Centre is for country-to-country research, but also because projects that seek to explore and establish new social strategies are seldom exclusively sustainable within the arts funding climate of the Australian Commonwealth, States and Councils. For instance, following the 2015 Federal Budget (13 May 2015) the situation for independent practitioners in Australia appeared even more challenging. At that time the Federal Arts Minister George Brandis announced the reallocation of $104.7 million over four years away from the Australia Council for the Arts for “a national program of excellence in the arts”, directly administered through the office of the Arts Minister. Despite the inference, the funds were to be allocated to arts companies rather than to individual practitioners (Pledger 2014). This raises alarm and perhaps future research, for it points towards a preponderance of policy-determined art practice within contemporary Australia (Adler 2015).

Further still I hope that my projects counter persistent, and in my view, heedless dichotomies that play on contemporary art discourses, namely polarizations of ‘art for art’s sake’ vs. ‘art as instrumentalization’, and also ‘art in social context’ vs. ‘art in the market place’. Arts commentator Nat Muller gives voice to this issue, suggesting:

It is an unpopular position to challenge the direct social and political impact of art projects.
My quarrel is as much with the total commodification of art in an art market that has
totally spun out of control as it is with artistic practices which are blatantly instrumentalist and hence end up in their own way commodifying the arts. Albeit not in terms of sales, but rather of its measurable contribution, i.e. profits to society. A wholesome participatory society, whether it’s the neo-liberal variety that is organized top-down or the self-organized horizontal ‘Occupy’ variety, both call for a wholesome and participatory art. Aesthetics – that dirty word – has all but disappeared from most critical artspeak. I am exaggerating for the sake of argument, but there is a disturbing and cloying dogmatic reek to all of this (Muller 2015, p.25).

Muller’s observations are a constant reminder of the importance of the curatorial role, which remains invested in the aesthetic dimensions of art via its representation and contextualization.

These factors enable me to conclude that my role as curator is one that straddles on the one hand the complexities of artistic ethos, process and production and on the other the demands, expectations, shortfalls and advantages of institutions, commercial contexts and independent ventures, while anticipating also the complex subjectivities of audiences. The purpose of this role is to articulate and give shape to knowledge and experience with a particular bias towards the conditions of being and becoming as distinct from other forms of empirical or quantitative data and to advocate on behalf of artists and their products within contexts that maintain strangely ambivalent attitudes to those sought-after commodities and their dangerous makers.

Finally, in terms of the sustainability of my freelance curatorial work in Australia, I can only conclude that the role is only feasible in so far as I work between Australia and other countries. It is noteworthy also and somewhat counter-intuitive, that the productive outcomes that have arisen have not been from merely accommodating existing cultural structures but rather from creating new possibilities through an ethically determined practice, which I outline as Barefoot Curating. This opens up a range of future possibilities in terms of practice and research, especially in terms of the degree to which Barefoot Curating can be implemented in ways that contribute to cultural practice, discourse, and presentation and as a change agent within contexts that lack the stability of entrenched institutions of culture.
1. Freud, Lucien 1995 Benefits Supervisor Sleeping, Oil on canvas, 1513 x 2190 mm, Private Collection.

2. Teniers the Younger, David c.1647 Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Gallery, Oil on copper, 1060 x 1290 mm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

3. Francken, Frans undated An Allegory of the Liberal Arts, Oil on canvas, Private Collection.

4. Rowlandson, Thomas 1816 Death and the Antiquaries, Aquatint, 140 x 240 mm, Society of Antiquaries of London.


6. Unknown late 8th - 9th Century Reliquary of the True Cross (The Fieschi Morgan Stauroteke), Gilded silver, gold, enamel worked in cloisonné and niello, 27 x 103 x 71 mm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

7. Manet, Edouard 1863 Le déjeuner sur l’herbe, Oil on canvas, 2080 x 2655 mm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

8. Duchamp, Marcel 1935 – 41 Boîte-en-valise, Leather valise containing miniature replicas, photographs, and color reproductions of works by Duchamp, and one “original” (Large Glass, collotype on celluloid), (69 items) overall 406 x 381 x 102 mm. IX/XX from Deluxe Edition, Museum of Modern Art, New York.


12. Giacometti, Alberto 1947 *Grande figure (Femme Leoni)*, Plaster, 1530 mm high, including base, Foundation Maeght, France.


15. McCarthy, Paul & Rhoades, Jason 2002 *Shit Plug*, bottles filled with excrements and baby oil, steel closure, on plastic barrels, Dimensions variable, exhibited 2002 Documenta 11, Germany.


17. Nolan, Sidney 1939-40 *Boy and the Moon*, oil on canvas, mounted on composition board, 733 x 882 mm, National Gallery of Australia.

18. Aristizábal, Jorge Julián 2013 *Claustrophobia*, 420 x 300 mm, collection of the artist

19. Creek, Greg 2013 *Claustrophobia*, watercolour on paper, 420 x 300 mm, collection of the artist.


22. Adams, Denis 2012 *Malraux’s Shoes*, single-channel video 42 mins, (written and performed by Dennis Adams and directed by Dennis Adams and Paul Colin).

23. Salsjo, Mia 2014 *Trashed*, digital photographic print, 420 × 600 mm, Collection of the artist.


31. Phan, Minh 2011 Brimanger Diptych, Panel A, oil on upstretched linen, 210 x 300 mm, Panel B, oil on plastic ID card, each card 85 x 55 mm, Collection of the artist.

32. Phan, Minh 2013 Two Views, Four-panels, oil on copper, each panel 100 x 150 mm, Collection of the artist.


34. Nguyen, Khue Chopsticks 2014, disposable chopsticks, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist.


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1.0 APPENDICES OVERVIEW

The Appendices to the dissertation contain documents pertaining to the three core projects, the additional non-core projects, a summary of the author’s publications during the period of research, a research timeline, ethics approval and the author’s Curriculum Vitae, which has been included as a record of activities and experiences leading up to the Doctoral research. In detailing previous publications by the author the Curriculum Vitae also records many of the publications contained in the Damian Smith Archive, State Library of Victoria.

DOCUMENTATION OF THREE PROJECTS

1.1 Ping Pong

The documentation pertaining to the Ping Pong projects includes a summary overview of the exhibition and conference (1.1.1) as well as the published Conference brochure (1.1.2).

1.2 Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot

The documentation for the Love Which I Experience 21st Century Tarot project provides an overview of the cards, including design elements such as packaging, card titles and card backs. The documentation also includes images and concepts that were influential in the development of the tarot project, and finally installation shots of the cards and associated artworks as they were presented in the exhibition ‘Mia Salsjo: The New Age is a Cult’, MARS Gallery, Melbourne.

1.3 Forty Acts of Remembering – working with Minh Phan and Khue Nguyen

The documentation for Forty Acts of Remembering – working with Minh Phan and Khue Nguyen includes two exhibition catalogues. The first catalogue (Appendix 1.3.1) is Vietnam/Australia: Voicing the Unspoken. The second catalogue (Appendix 1.3.2) is Forty Acts of Remembering. These are the two exhibitions that I worked on with Minh Phan and Khue Nguyen, which are examined in the dissertation.

2.0 SUMMARY OF NON-CORE PROJECTS

The summary of non-core projects provides an account of 40 additional activities undertaken during the period of research including curatorial projects, lectures, field research and publications. As the research concerns the role of the freelance curator, these additional activities were important as they stemmed from my experience as a working freelance curator.

3.0 AUTHOR’S PUBLICATIONS DURING THE PERIOD OF RESEARCH 2013-2016

The list of publications includes 29 essays published between 2013 and 2016.

4.0 RESEARCH TIMELINE

2013 – 2017 timeline of activities

5.0 ETHICS APPROVAL

6.0 CANDIDATE’S CURRICULUM VITAE