

## **Fruit, sashimi, cuisine – three ways to curate an exhibition**

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(Translated by Phyllis Fok)

Four years ago, my friends and I had a chance to show our works in a very cool exhibition space: old ladies' houses. Our gang of artists became all excited and got into the mood of doing a show of female art. So we teamed up with some other artists who were also interested in female art. Since all artists have a style of their own, we came up with the topic, "Wo Man". The word "woman" was split into two parts to emphasize the space in-between. After completing the administrative work, we focused all our time and energy on our own creations. The exhibition was quite a success, with a lot to offer. Later on I came across an article that criticized the curator's close-mindedness and poor curatorial concept. It really had me scratching my head. Where did this curator come from? We did not have any curator. I called the critic involved, and requested to have the information rectified. She just gave me a firm "no", as if we must have a curator, and we must accomplish the curating part.

Is a curator a must? The exhibitions I had been to when I was little did not have a curator as far as I remember, but a lot of them were good. If the critic mentioned above was referring the organizer as the "curator", then the curator can be a group as well as an individual, and her argument would make sense. The organizer might choose not to have a curator and downplay its own role, to direct the focus onto the exhibited works. This is also a curatorial method, and not necessarily bad.

Insisting on having a curator is a kind of bias. If an exhibition is only half-curated, conflicts might arise. There have been many instances where the curator and artists can't collaborate with each other, leaving the exhibition with mixed messages. Here I am going to draw from John Pick's categorization of cultural policies (1), based on which I will try to demonstrate the different ways of curating exhibitions.

A curator is the mediator between art objects and the audience. Curating has a similar agent nature as formulating a cultural policy, and can be categorized in similar ways. I am going to follow John Pick's descriptive and reactive methods, and modify his prescriptive method into a prescription method.

When the descriptive form is taken, the curator keeps the artists' interpretation intact, and let the exhibited works talk themselves. Curating is sometimes described as interpreting art. If the message of an artwork is obvious enough, then no further explanation from the curator is needed. Or, if the artists and audience are all mature – the artists know how to communicate with the audience, and the audience already has considerable art knowledge – the exhibition will go well enough without the curator trying hard to help the audience understand the artworks. When the curator is the artist himself/herself (artist as curator), or, when it is a show of an individual artist or a group of acquainted artists, the descriptive approach is often used. Sometimes, the curator would call himself/herself a contact person or chief coordinator to indicate the minimal curatorial work involved. "Painting, Unpainting" held at 1a Space last January was an exhibition curated in an descriptive way. Organizer Choi Yan-chi took

on a reviewing theme about painting, which was exactly the same theme the four artists were working on. The double-covered exhibition booklet included two first-pages, one featuring an introduction of the four artists, another printed with Choi Yan-chi's foreword. It showed how artists were taken with great respect.

Reactive curating is about preserving the artists' interpretation, while fine-tuning the position of the exhibition according to the requirements of the audience, sponsors and society, and providing related activities. The original meaning of the art objects remain unchanged, but efforts are made to help the artists face the audience, and to help the audience better understand the exhibited objects. The way Leung Po-shan curated "Fotanian 2004: Open Studio" can be considered reactive. The audience was brought directly to the workshop to see the artworks. The exhibition booklet included an introduction about the artists as well as relevant historical information. The press release connected the show with current social events. There were guided tours, shuttle service, night gatherings and banquets. The mental and physical needs of the audience were well served. As a result, the number of visitors increased sharply, the audience base was broadened, and the venue became well known to the public. Around the same time, "Mapping Identities: The Art and Curating of Oscar Ho" was held. As curators of the show, Irene Ngan and Eliza Lai rearranged his works and put them under different topics, so that the audience could easily grasp the meaning of his works. That was also a form of reactive curating. In Hong Kong, where art is not yet popularized, reactive curating is often necessary to cope with the diverse developments in contemporary art.

Prescription curating is opposed to descriptive and reactive approaches, where artworks come before a curatorial concept. Under the prescription method, a curatorial concept goes first, and artworks are arranged or created accordingly. The curator takes a leading role and offers his/her own bold interpretation on art and culture. He/She curates to boost creativity and attempts to redefine a certain entity with art. He/She presents a new way of thinking, proposes his/her own topic and has artists work on it. "Home and Homeless: Portraits of Families" held last year at the Goethe-Institut fell into this category. Curator Oscar Ho raised a question: "Do all those with a place to live have a family?" Four photographers spent six month's time to create their works, with which they expressed their views on the topic. The "homeless" part featured images of street-sleepers, showing that the curator had considered the curatorial concept from various angles.

Let's exemplify the different curating methods with food. The descriptive form is the same as eating fruits – nothing is added or taken away. The reactive form is like eating fresh food with dressing or seasoning, such as sashimi or salad. Prescription involves elaborate cooking, like a cuisine or a big feast. None of these is necessarily good or bad. The chef can also arrange a lunch buffet where fruits, salad and cooked food are served at once. An exhibition can be partly reactive and partly descriptive, such as the exhibition "building hong kong – redwhiteblue". The curator another mountainman's works were on display, which were created out of his interest in red/white/blue fabrics. At the same time, there were artworks of other artists, based on the theme of Hong Kong spirits. It was a mixed curatorial approach.

It can be mixed, but not mixed up. Half cooked rice is not eatable. Some exhibitions started out with a prominent theme and have apparently adopted the prescription

approach. But halfway through it turns into reactive curating. The artists create their works at their own wish, without taking the exhibition topic into account. As a result, the artists and curatorial topic fail to complement each other. The audiences are not able to read the artwork accurately as their eyes have already been shaded by the exhibition topic.

Too many people are used to flavor enhancers, and don't know how to enjoy the original taste of food. Nowadays audiences tend to rely on the viewpoint provided by the curator, instead of trying to understand artworks by themselves. The media and sponsoring organizations seem to favor exhibitions that have a topic or general impression, thus providing a market for curators. The Hong Kong Arts Development Council selected curators rather than artists as Hong Kong representatives for the Venice Biennale. There are exhibitions that have several curators but not any artists. There are also artists who give up being artists and become curators. In these situations, are certain "untitled" exhibitions and "blank" curatorial strategies being undermined? Taking curating as a topic and a new form of creativity, exhibition planners should get to know more about their own position, to avoid mixing up their role with the artists. Curators should also exercise their power carefully, communicate more with the participating artists, so as to prevent them from feeling being used or works being misinterpreted.

### **Reference:**

#### **1. Prescriptive Policies**

A policy may be said to be wholly prescriptive when it seeks:

- A. To define the parameters of arts,
- B. To control creational means of artistic creation, and
- C. To control all the means by which the arts may be publicly or privately enjoyed...

#### **Descriptive Policies**

A policy may be said to be descriptive in nature when it makes generally available knowledge of all the existing definitions and practices which hold general sway within the country. Such policies do not set fresh targets nor propose new systems, but aim merely to disseminate knowledge about existing practice and announce an intention of sustaining what already exists...

#### **Reactive Policies**

This form of policy is in board terms the opposite to a wholly prescriptive one. It contains in some sense the setting up of agencies which react to requests and to wants of the arts markets, but does not involve any form of direct interventionism in them. Artists, managers or audiences will make requests for aid or for advice when the usual mechanisms break down, but in normal times the government will intervene as little as possible in the ways in which artists meet their audience.

Excerpt from John Pick (1988, 1993). *The Arts in a State: A Study of Government Arts Policies From Ancient Greece to the Present*. London: Bristol Classical Press.