

AUTHENTICATION
IN ART

AiA Art News-service

APOLLO
THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

Are undergraduate degrees in curating useful?



Illustration by Graham Roumieu/Dutch Uncle

Does an academic qualification prepare you for a career as a curator? Or is the opportunity to spend three years studying and participating in the curatorial field perhaps beneficial in other ways?

Janna Graham

Lecturer in visual cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London and programme leader of the BA Curating

The question of whether curating can be taught has been around for as many years as the programmes set up to do just that. At dinner-table conversations, curators from my generation are often bemused by how they came to be graced with this title, one they wear somewhat uncomfortably, having entered the field from different and often oddly intersecting modes of living, scholarship and practice. We tend to agree that curating should not and cannot be taught.

This is not because it is the original creative act of a genius auteur, as some have come to profess, but rather because the curatorial is in a constant state of becoming, something possessed not by a particular set of workers or institutions. For many of us, the curatorial offered an approach at the limits of existing practices. In my case, as a young person working against police racism in Toronto, it enabled the production of alternative platforms for youth voices in the city, beyond the story of the media and the state. These platforms moved in and out of museum and gallery spaces, the press and the courts, and enabled new practices of organisation and alliance driven not by a shared discipline so much as a shared set of desires for change.

The curatorial here gave shape and organisation to social and political urgencies and gave licence to engage in a collective transgression of the boundaries of language and professional practice. Beyond the endless cycle of production of exhibitions and programmes that has come to define the contemporary practice of curating, this other definition of the curatorial returns to the etymology of the term curate, lying in the Latin curare, from care, anxiety, worry, from the desire to work with the issues and contexts that unsettle us. A curatorial programme in this vein must consider what it is to care in this moment, a moment in which the time and cost of caring are profoundly devalued.

How might we care in such a way as not to fetishise, nor exclude the worlds of people and objects? How do we care in the context of an exploitative economic reality that routinely disables caring work? How does the curatorial allow us to convene, assemble, organise with others consensually and usefully, in ways that intervene and resist colonial and paternalistic modes of caring? What does the curatorial field look like when we begin from the position of not knowing what is to come, rather than re-inscribing class and racialised hierarchies of the world of cultural production as we know it?

To the great surprise of the managerial class, whose mantra of employability runs rampant in today's university, students on our BA in Curating at Goldsmiths are driven by these questions of care. They are less often looking towards a set job or fixed professions and more often searching for answers to complex social and political questions that intersect with, but are not confined to, galleries and museums. They are dwellers of the limits of their world, and come with a desire to change it. They seek out spaces in which to think about theory and practice together, to work at the intersection of disciplines, to begin from the contradictions they face in their lives and enquire into the practises they might use to act upon them. While they are inspired by art and literature, and by the work of artists, museums, galleries and other cultural producers, they are also deeply critical of them, understanding the curatorial less as a profession than as a force, as a series of gestures for which there may not yet be names or institutions.

This does not exclude thoughts on the material conditions they will inhabit when they graduate, but equally does not accept the options currently on offer. An undergraduate degree focused on the curatorial provides three years to probe these questions, to move from questions of care to those of organisation, assembly and the making of plausible worlds. In a higher-education sector steeped in debt, anxiety and the proliferation of performance measures, the use of the collective imagination of the curatorial here can be read optimistically and critically, as neither affirmation nor reproduction of what exists in the curatorial field of the present, but as a direct confrontation with the impossible possibilities of the future.

Niru Ratnam

Writer and former gallerist

Undertaking an undergraduate degree before attempting to become a curator is useful. This undergraduate degree could be in art history or fine art. Or an alternative degree might be followed by a masters in art history or curating. Of much more questionable value is an undergraduate degree in curating – a relatively new phenomenon. A quick test for would-be curators is to check the academic backgrounds that those at the top of their desired profession have. And a survey of the art world's leading curators is revealing: Hans Ulrich Obrist studied economics and social sciences, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev studied literature, philology, language and art history, Ralph Rugoff studied semiotics, Massimiliano Gioni studied art history, and Sheena Wagstaff studied the history of art and architecture.



Illustration by Graham Roumieu/Dutch Uncle

The counterargument to this skepticism is that undergraduate degrees in curating were not available until recently, and that if the option had been available one might assume that some of the leading curators would have chosen it. However this ignores a key point. Curating is contextual. It is about grasping and interpreting a set of knowledge that needs to be understood before thinking about curating: art practice and history. An undergraduate degree in curating offers plenty of context but little content to contextualise.

This does not necessarily mean studying art or art history at undergraduate level. Curators such as Obrist, Christov-Bakargiev, and Rugoff did not study either of these subjects, but they all set out by visiting artists, or writing about art after their undergraduate studies. That practice of studio visits, looking at, and writing about art was their practical education in learning about how artists make work, and what that work means within an ongoing tradition. Each would then go on to curate exhibitions after that grounding.

To suggest that there is an order in which things should be studied is not reactive or conservative. Take, for example, Tate Modern's decision to scrap the chronological hang of the Tate collection, thought to be a radical gesture when the museum opened in 2000. The best way to begin to understand this is to study the development of modern art, looking carefully at artworks, the immediate contexts they were made in, and artists' writings and manifestos about modernism. The next stage is to look at critical interpretations of modern art, ranging from Clement Greenberg's focus on abstract painting as an autonomous object through to more socially inflected readings, interpreting such phenomena as primitivism in relation to cubism and surrealism. And then finally, when both art history and different critical approaches to it are firmly in place, to think about how modern art has been and might be exhibited. The radical curatorial gesture (abandoning chronology) could only persuasively be made with the grounding of a solid art-historical understanding of why chronology had become central to accounts of modern art.

Even undergraduate curating courses that include history of art as a key component, such as the University of Essex, or courses such as those at the University of York and Manchester Metropolitan University that combine art history and curating, are conceptually muddled: they implicitly suggest that thinking about how things can be exhibited can be thought through at the same time as acquiring a basic understanding of those artworks. In fact the art history offered by most curatorial courses is basic. The undergraduate course offered by Goldsmiths, for example, offers a brief excursion into art history in its first year with a module on 'Modernities'. But by the third year the modules sound like a mish-mash of whatever the academics teaching the course are interested in ('Sexual Poetics', 'Film Fables', or 'Fashion as a Dialectical Image').

None of these seems to have much connection with the way artists make art and why it might be interesting.

The result of BA courses in curating will be a bunch of 21 year olds who will be theoretically savvy, but have little idea why particular works of art have a particular resonance at a particular time. They will be around £30,000 poorer after paying tuition fees – probably more, given their living costs – and they will realistically have few immediate employment prospects in the field of curating. Still, they can probably always go on to teach on a curating course.

