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Opinion

The Guardian Arts Editor Sparked a Furor by Suggesting Curators Don't Need to Be Named in Reviews. Here's What's Really at Stake

At the heart of the debate is the matter of curatorial prestige—and pay.

Naomi Rea, August 23, 2019



The core of the raging debate is about how we imagine curatorial work. Is this how you picture it? Photo: Phil Noble/PA Images/Getty Images.

The arts editor at the *Guardian* kicked up a storm this week when he took to Twitter with a message for curators: don't expect to be named when your exhibition is covered in the press.

"Dear curators, in the same way that I don't get a byline when I commission and edit a piece, chances are you won't get mentioned in the *Guardian* when we cover one of your shows," Alex Needham, who has been the arts editor at the national British newspaper since January 2018, wrote on Tuesday. "That's just how it is."



[**Alex Needham**](#)

✓ [@alexneedham74](#)

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Unsurprisingly, the message incited a flurry of polarized responses from curators, editors, and writers across the globe, many of them frustrated with Needham. Why shouldn't curators—the authors, some argued, of the exhibitions critics see—be mentioned in reviews? Some of the responses made the point that, especially in an era of “alternative facts” and widespread disinformation, we should want to know whose story we're getting.

Whose biases are at play? When we read the wall labels next to a display of colonial-era artifacts at the British Museum, for example, are we taking in a sanitized version of bloody realities, and not the objective truth? Does the line-up of a contemporary art show favor artists who are pale and male? And is that because the curator is, too?

Ostensibly, this is what the raging debate was all about. But the heart of the problem actually lies elsewhere—and it has everything to do with how we imagine curatorial work.



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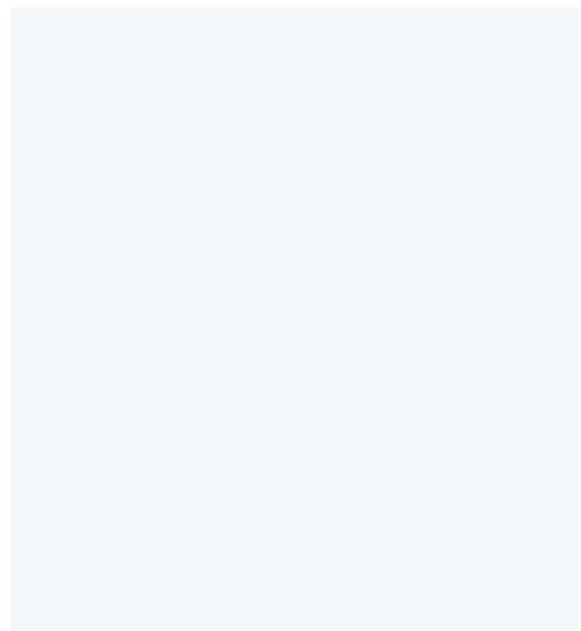
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crediting
curators

crediting curators,
learning officers,
archivists, communities,
retail, audience
development,
conservation, visitor
assistants, volunteers, partners



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Until fairly recently, curating was a behind-the-scenes job, and in most places, it still is. The majority of curators, especially at small institutions with fewer resources, make checklists and sometimes pack boxes. They arrange for shipping. They direct art handlers. This invisible work fits neatly with Needham's analogy of editorial work. The curator, in most historical instances, stood in the background to foreground the work he or she was showing, be it ancient Assyrian lamassu to the paintings of Van Gogh. The culture or the artist got the credit, just as the writer gets the byline.

But quite suddenly in recent years, the role of the curator—and specifically the contemporary art curator—has shifted, in part because of changes in the politics of labor. These days, people are much more anxious to be recognized for their work, especially in fields where prestige and reputation are currency. In the art world, reputation-building is done in part through press coverage. When a curator is named in an exhibition review, it opens up doors for future work—and future remuneration. This is the gig economy at work, and independent curators especially thrive economically on the opportunities and security afforded by name recognition.



[Alex Needham](#)

✓ [@alexneedham74](#)

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Dear curators, in the same way that I don't get a byline when I commission and edit a piece, chances are you won't get mentioned in the Guardian when we cover one of your shows. That's just how it is



[Natalia Zagorska-Thomas](#) [@Expurgamento](#)

Blame Hans Ulrich Obrist and the whole Curator as Artist nonsense. Megalomania and status anxiety, that's all it is.

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Some curators have spun entire careers from this newfound reality. The most obvious example is Hans Ulrich Obrist, who would never be who he is if we believed his first responsibility was to quietly stand around directing art handlers. Whatever it is he actually does when organizing a show, that's not what you imagine it to be.

Curators like him are game-changers. They have redefined how we perceive the "authors" of contemporary art shows. For a certain (admittedly small, but certainly influential) sector of the public, his name is enough of a draw to bring them to an exhibition, even if they've never heard of the artists involved. An Obrist affair is no ordinary art show. He is the star; and he attracts star artists to revolve around him.

That's what many of the curators who were frustrated with Needham imagine for themselves, whether they admit it or not. They want their names checked because the conditions of curatorial work have changed. To be unnamed is to be unseen in an economy that thrives on visibility. And if we imagine curators simply unpacking boxes, they'll likely be out of sight, out of mind, and very likely a buck poorer.

Ultimately, this Twitter storm is about a new generation of curators telling people like Needham to get with the times. A curator, post-Obrist, is a visionary—or, at least that's what he or she imagines. They argue that their exhibitions are urgent and necessary because they urgently and necessarily need to be recognized. It affects their bottom line.