

What does  
the word  
**curate**  
mean to  
you?

## INTRODUCTION

In May 2010 **mac birmingham** reopened its doors after an extensive redevelopment. Around this time, newly appointed Visual Arts Producer Craig Ashley was in the process of developing the arts centre's exhibitions programme to engage and re-engage audiences following the two year period of closure. With a remit and an appetite to collaborate with independent curators and producers, Craig invited artist Trevor Pitt to develop a project that would challenge the traditional hierarchies and practices of curating visual arts exhibitions. The outcome of their initial discussions was a proposal by Trevor to re-think and re-work the tired formula of the summer 'Open' exhibition. After further consultation and negotiation with teams at **mac**, *Anticurate* was conceived and later realised in the summer of 2011.

At the heart of *Anticurate* was a series of unique exhibitions which together featured the work of 351 artists from the West Midlands region. Each week across the summer a different group of 'Anticurators' – people who don't usually curate – worked collectively to select from the 351 artworks delivered to **mac** via open submission. With a focus upon learning, and supported by curatorial advisors, the result was a series of alternative perspectives on a collection of work, brought about through an alternative process of filtration.

More recently, projects including *Allotment* (2012) and *The Open Project* (2013) at **mac** have continued to build upon the outcomes and premise of *Anticurate*, furthering a dialogue and discourse around the role of the curator and the art institution.

As part of *Anticurate*, and as a critical counterpoint to the exhibitions, Trevor and Craig invited artists, curators, critics and other arts professionals to respond to the question "What does the word curate mean to you?" The 60 responses they received were made into posters and fly-posted in **mac**'s Arena Gallery to encourage and stimulate debate. The result was something that resembled an urban street with competing definitions of the verb 'curate' pasted directly to the gallery wall. Visitors were invited to submit their own response to the question and each week a further three responses were added to the existing display to create a layering of definitions.

Twenty nine of the 'curate' posters have been selected by Craig and Trevor for this publication, accompanied by a responsive essay written by artist and academic Mona Casey.



**Contributors** | Jivan Astfalck, Maria Balshaw, Beth Bate, Kathrin Böhm, Jason E. Bowman, Ele Carpenter, Tom Cullen, Emma Daker, Maia Damianovic & Andy Robinson, Deirdre Figueiredo, Lorenzo Fusi, Darryl Georgiou, John Hammersley, Ellie Harrison, Andy Horn, Trevor Horsewood, Peter Jenkinson, Juneau Projects, Indra Khanna, Wendy Law, Skinder Hundal & New Art Exchange, Graham Peet, Amy Pettifer, John Plowman, Matt Price, Deborah Robinson, Linda Saunders, David Schischka Thomas & Gavin Wade

**Installation images** | Elly Clarke

**Design** | Rich White

**Essayist** | Mona Casey

**Editors** | Craig Ashley & Trevor Pitt





## I CURATE, YOU CURATE, WE ALL CURATE (a nod to Alex Farquharson)

Mona Casey

Some Thoughts.....

Reading the many attempts at defining the term 'to curate', I found myself, associating with some completely, others, there were sections that I could relate to and some that remained distant from what I thought the curatorial act to be. For example, Lorenzo Fusi says that "In my experience there are as many ways of curating as there are approaches to art-thinking or making. Technically, the possibilities are endless. A single declination of the profession does not exist".<sup>1</sup> I also believe this to be the case; the parameters that might constrain the activity 'to curate' should alternatively be seen as fluid and tenuous edges, which instead of defining the 'curatorial', are allowed instead to breach and transform the territory that is 'curatorial activity'.

To begin, I had the idea of drawing some conclusions or enlightened elucidation based on the 'to curate' statements submitted to Trevor Pitt, intending to create taxonomies of meaning and generally critiquing the content, all the while making links to other international producers' definitions. Alex Farquharson, in his essay 'I curate, you curate, we curate,' considers:

"The recent appearance of the verb 'to curate', where once there was just a noun, indicates the growth and vitality of this discussion: new

words after all, especially ones as grammatically bastardised as the verb 'to curate' (worse still the adjective 'curatorial') emerge from a linguistic community's persistent need to identify a point of discussion. This new verb, 'to curate' may also suggest a shift in the conception of what curators do, from a person who works at some remove from the processes of artistic production, to one actively in the thick of it."<sup>2</sup>

But in the end it seems the onward debate regarding what 'to curate', 'curation', 'the curatorial', mean expands with that activity, and the definitions submitted to Trevor, as broad, similar, nuanced etc., as they are, define the productive terms for those individuals. JJ Charlesworth, in his essay 'Curating Doubt,' states:

"The expanding, hypertrophied uncertainty that accumulates in current discourse on curating is a phenomenon peculiar to the present moment, in the sense that the constant navel gazing on the part of curators into the terminological black hole that is 'contemporary curating' tends to produce more discussion about its undecidability and fluidity, rather than precipitating any serious theoretical crisis or professional rupture."<sup>3</sup>

With 'uncertainty' and 'undecidability' reverberating around the territory of curation,

what is interesting are issues of quality; quality within the activity of curating. As Alex Farquharson identifies in 'I curate, you curate, we curate,' there are a number of factors for the increasing focus on the activity of the curator, including the recognition of curating as an academic discipline in its own right, the rise in the number of Biennales and the de-centring of the art world and that this has required a different kind of curator, who is mobile and internationally focused. The nature of curation itself as an activity has shifted and is shifting and with this expansion there are increased numbers of collaborations between artist and curator, curator and curator, artist and artist, developing exhibition strategies.

Without a doubt, the increasing academic research into the history and practice of curating, the growth in large scale global exhibitions and subsequent art tourism, alongside increased arts activities in developing world economies, support the prevailing sense that there is a lot of curating going on, both at home and abroad. This can be a positive development, especially when we look at examples of curatorial excellence and learn from these.

Wendy Law argues however, that "Over the last few years the term curation has been devalued." She goes on to say "... a good curator is usually a trained curator," but doesn't go on to explain



what a 'trained curator' means in this instance.<sup>4</sup> To a certain extent I agree with the first part of Law's statement.

The 'devaluing' of the activity of curating, seems to occur from a lack of understanding of what, for me, are the important hierarchical features of curating; so where the higher values of importance lie within the act of exhibition making:

"Exhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained, and occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions - especially exhibitions of contemporary art - establish and administer the cultural meanings of art."<sup>5</sup>

There are many different activities involved in the role of curating and in the presentation of exhibitions and each to her/his own theory as to what these are; but for me there is a distinction between what are the project management components that enable the realisation of an exhibition and the activity to curate. Whilst both aspects - the project management (administrative, marketing, financial, etc.) and the curatorial (concept generation, context framing, selection and presentation) - are not mutually exclusive territories, there is in my view a ranking of importance.

Any reasonably capable individual with decent administrative skills could take on the role of presenting an exhibition, taking care of the day-to-day organisation and running. 'To curate', however, is not so reduced. The creative

phenomenon of idea generation and critical decision making in relation to contemporary and historical art and curatorial practice, does not come from a place that is purely the practical aspects of making exhibitions happen; to curate is instead, as Jivan Astfalck states in her definition in relation to Bakhtin, a dialogue which "not only takes place externally, but also internally, between an earlier and a later self, the artist and the academic, oneself and the world."<sup>6</sup>

Today and in recent years, there is a prevailing sense that everyone can be a curator, however, you might choose to define the role.

'... medium, midwife, DJ, agent, manager, platform provider, self-promoter and scout ... diviner, fairy godmother or even God.'<sup>7</sup>

'... caregiver, collaborator, cultural mediator, facilitator, negotiator and cultural agitator.'<sup>8</sup>

My question is, does all of this curating bring us any closer to quality exhibition activity that critically engages with the wider world?

So in order to curate then, it is not in itself enough to select and display a number of likeminded individuals' artwork in a space and present their work. The curatorial voice must be heard loud and clear in the juxtaposed clatter of the other participating voices. To quote Kathrin Böhm, "Ideally it means ... that the person or group who are curating have time for ideas and messiness."<sup>9</sup> To curate is an action; it has performative value and the exhibition is an event which requires a robust curatorial concept. To curate is an art-making act. Carolee Thea in her introduction to

'On Curating' says:

"... aesthetically, curators are more like theatre directors, and it could be argued that they follow a performance paradigm rather than one based on the object or commodity. We could say they are translators, movers or creators whose work is the material of others..."<sup>10</sup>

Or as Susan Hiller suggests, "I think of people making exhibitions as practising a form of art."<sup>11</sup>

For myself, to curate is meaningfully expressed within the terms of the curator as auteur, 'the curator as creator' to reference Bruce Altshuler.

*Mona Casey is an artist and curator based in Birmingham. She is Course Director MA Contemporary Curatorial Practice at The School of Art, Birmingham City University, where she is also Director of ARTicle Gallery.*

Visit [www.articlegallery.info](http://www.articlegallery.info) for further information.

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  - Carolee Thea. 'Introduction,' *On Curating*. Distributed Art Publishers (2009) p.6
  - Susan Hiller. 'The Producers: Contemporary Curators in Conversation.' *Baltic/University of Newcastle* (2001) p.35

The strategy of assembling or curating a set of objects (mine or those of others) into one context, one work, and to use title and textual support to achieve a layered narrative rests on the understanding that the reading of the individual part-pieces of the work bounce off each other in dialogue and that they open up to the viewer and invite their own contributions to be added to the existing layers of reference.

Dialogism, according to Bakhtin, is characteristic of a world where at any given time, in any given place, there will be social, historical, psychological and other conditions. The construction of meaning will be determined by those conditions. It follows that meaning would be different under any other conditions. Bakhtin conceptualised this phenomenon acknowledging the existence of a constant interaction between competing meanings, all of which are capable of conditioning the other. This dialogical imperative, regulated by the pre-existence of language, relative to all of us, insures that there can be no actual monologue. It also follows, that to seek to achieve a unitary language or an objective point of view, would be relative to the experience of the overpowering force of dialogism. Dialogue not only takes place externally, but also internally, between an earlier and a later self, the artist and the academic, oneself and the world.

Jivan Astfalck, artist and researcher

Curate for me means to select and organise, thoughtfully, artworks, artists and activities to express a visual argument about the way we see the world.

At its best, curation places equal emphasis on creating space for the viewer and the artwork to negotiate meaning and find visual pleasure.

Maria Balshaw, Director of Whitworth Art Gallery and Manchester City Galleries

*To progress in life you must give up the things you do not like. Give up doing the things that you do not like to do. You must find the things that you do like, the things that are acceptable to your mind.*

Agnes Martin

Beth Bate, Director of Great North Run Culture

Ideally it means for me that the person or group who are curating have time for ideas and messiness and offer an open brief to whoever they invite.

This costs time, doesn't necessarily deliver one-liners and might not always succeed, but it gives space and support for trying something new and moving on.

Kathrin Böhm, artist

Curate  
= Care

Jason E. Bowman, artist and curator

**Curating is  
like farming:  
cultivating  
knowledge  
through the  
seasons**

Ele Carpenter, curator, writer and researcher

Curators  
just  
don't  
understand  
Physics!

Tom Cullen, freelance multimedia technical manager and consultant

Researching,  
learning,  
inspiring,  
liaising,  
organising,  
interpreting,  
agonising,  
designing,  
perfecting,  
displaying,  
managing,  
worrying,  
arranging,  
networking,  
reviewing.

Emma Daker, Curator at Craftspace

We believe in pro-active curating, where the curator works together with artists, contributing creative content to projects. In a way adding a charge as in the late Latin root of the word “curator”- e.g., cura or *spiritual charge*. This is to move away from what we would term passive curating, picking a topic, organizing and overseeing an exhibition (although, by no means excluding these aspects). Similarly, knowing theory is important, but arriving at one’s own positions through praxis is more important.

Furthermore, not any and every topic is of interest. It is more significant to develop positions and thematics that reflect a critical contemporary ethos. This means being aware of a wide range of social and political tendencies and deriving one’s own, independent response to them.

Form and content should be one. For us this meant crossing conventional borders of visual art by *experimenting* with transformat and later on with multi-sensory, participatory and interactive connections with various in real life experiences and situations or what Maia terms the “directly experiential,” “situational” & “performative” interactions and “enactments.” This thinking was to some extent influenced by Julia Kristeva’s term “inter-subjectivity”. The difficult and exciting thing about experimentation is that it can bring both success and failure (even at the same time). But that is the seduction of creativity.

Our recent motivation was the development of “critical popular” projects which are at once critical, joyful, and engaging for a broad, not merely educated art public; a generous and complex process to really ignite that spiritual charge.

Maia Damianovic & Andy Robinson, founders of futuresystemprojects

One or more  
people  
engaging in a  
creative  
activity to sift,  
sort and re-  
mix culture

Deidre Figuelredo, Director of Craftspace

**Curate** means much more than the verb form of the word curator, or what the curator ‘does’; for me, it increasingly means a form of social sculpture.

The word in this context represents the shift to the production of meaning. A revitalisation or change from the traditional processes of art selection and production (guardian, keeper, or custodian of objects) to becoming more actively engaged and involved in its wider development. Art is only one tool in this ongoing process, inviting us into a conversation to produce both context and meaning, whilst establishing new relationships between people, objects and ideas.

Hopefully engaging more citizens along the way to curate and therefore make choices or connections that put things into cultural contexts with some bearing on the here and now.

Footnote: Curator’s curate: they sort stuff... filter, facilitate, design and collaborate. Not to be confused with marketing, branding or selling.

In my experience there are as many ways of curating as there are approaches to art-thinking or making. Technically, the possibilities are endless. A single declination of the profession does not exist: I cannot, in fact, think of a univocally safe, always-valid or orthodox way of operating as a curator. I believe a strong working and intellectual ethic is key, but there are many different sensitivities, interests or modalities for articulating discourse and ideas.

Conclusively, in my opinion “anticurating” is strategy practiced every day, in every part of the world, including by those who are conventionally labelled or addressed to as “curators”. These cultural operators, committed as they were to deconstruct the relatively recent “tradition” of the discipline, act similarly to the artists: they attempt to find their own voice, keeping in mind the past so to move always a little forward...

Reflection on Anticurating: John Hammersley, 2011.

#### Introduction

I consider curators as administrators of art's conversation and its theorizing. Increasingly much emphasis has been placed on their role to increase and widen the participation of others in this conversation and collective meaning making. Curating suffers from the inevitable divisions of labour in arts conversation and the pressure to package consumable chunks of discourse as art. In the divided labour of art conversation others are invited to speak and the discussion is chaired by the curator and re-presented as art. In this analogy of art as a conversation, we might look at who the curator speaks for, and what might it mean to oppose the increasing monologue of curators in the conversation of art?

#### Who does the curator speak for?

Often exhibitions are organized and administrated by curators. Traditionally it was the role of curators to administrate the care of objects and to provide interpretation of their cultural value and meaning in an institutional context. This role was in part also maintaining the institution's authoritative version of what objects and artworks mean, and thus the institution's cultural authority.

With the recent explosion of art fairs, biennials and social engaged art projects the authority of the gallery/museum has received greater competition for the share of the conversation. Ever greater pressure seems to be placed on the celebrity curator flown in to give an art festival or project a singular genius vision and purpose, to brand the event and guarantee critical acclaim and appreciative audiences. This themed exhibition or singular agenda (often phrased as a question – or branded with a clever logotype and contraction or assemblage of words) opens up a discussion which the curator then chairs and administrates on behalf of the commissioner/s. Such agendas often have both as much political as cultural resonance – for are the two ever really separate? Art in recent years has become a battleground for the demonstration of the democratic credentials of culture. We can all participate in culture and have our say surely? The curator then speaks for the often absent political other whose agenda is paying for the work.

But the work is provided by artists and may be thought of as their singular and creative utterances. Increasingly art without a conceptual agenda seems to be relegated to the safe brands of decorative or applied arts. Contemporary art is noisier, heralded by the explosion of artists' talks, texts and seminars. Often such theorizing is seen as the artwork in its own right, as Boris Groys argues (2010). Even site-specific works seem increasingly accompanied with links to critical texts on the web: The need to keep the online conversation going as pressing as maintaining brand awareness. For the conversation to fall silent is for the brand to fall out of consciousness. The curator is responsible for keeping this conversation going, keeping people consuming the conversation. In order to do this the curator often invites the participation of artists. Could they write a text or a statement about their work? Sometimes the contradictory visions or utterances of artists may necessitate a marketing synthesis, a translation into consumable strap lines so that publics can buy into the conversation. The curator then may invite the artist to speak and rearticulate (in effect speak for or on behalf of) the artist.

The public may also be invited to participate in the democracy of debate, invited to participate in the themed conversation paid for by commissioners and packaged by curators. This is no longer to simply anticipate the public's question 'what should I think?' but to initiate the conversation by asking the question, "what do you think?" The curator's role is thus to give people the sense that they are participating in a democratic conversation. Their role is a giving voice to others, harvesting and representing these comments as the product of their curatorial conversation.

The curator may also speak for publics through gallery handouts, marketing material or through the carefully primed invigilator. If the conversation should stall some mouthpiece of the institution should move things along with a helpful prompt or question. The public's participation is evidence of their interactivity with the work of art, and the democratic voice of audiences being heard. Public comments and reTweets are the latter-day letter to the editor (the new digital comments book). But this is no less an administrated mode of conversation. The curator speaks for and on behalf of all participants as administrator of art's conversation.

#### What is it to be opposed to conversation?

To be opposed to conversation maybe to believe the work should speak for itself, or not (that it is simply to be experienced). But as Voloshinov asserts, "you cannot not communicate." And the Gallery and any exhibition or projects theme have already been voiced by the time we experience the utterance of any art object or project. Even to choose not to participate in the conversation speaks volumes. It seems impossible to be opposed to the conversation of art as it is like a team game that goes on without you, while you sit on the bench or in the stands.

Art as an unstoppable conversation of human culture is a Rortean notion that evokes the spectre of relativism. How can anything definitively mean anything, if the conversation doesn't come to a conclusion? Such a notion of conversation is opposed to the idea of having a final word. Conversation is a metaphor for the history and changing meaning of human culture that we participate in. As Nicholas Davey describes, rather than being a managerial mode of conversation, where there is a goal to be reached, it is more akin to the kinds of conversation that we fall into unexpectedly. Perhaps it might be possible to oppose curators managing the conversation, setting the goal, or having the final word. This might require that curators fall into the conversations of others, or acknowledge their participation in wider ongoing conversations. Perhaps we might be opposed to the idea of managing conversation but this makes for an awfully messy and digressive mode of discourse, and very difficult to package neatly.

#### To oppose the other in conversation.

Much criticism has been leveled at the cult of conversation and dialogue in art. Especially criticisms of such participatory and dialogical projects being intrinsically democratic or good. The critic and historian Claire Bishop makes exactly this point and instead argues for a mode of discursivity based on antagonism, a questioning and opposing dynamic. But Claire Bishop's antagonistic model of exchange and art conversation seems like a News of the World intent on disrupting the assuredness of the other, creating discomfort yet ill equipped to turn a disruptive inquiry against its own certainty that it is in the right. Such oppositional discourse does not seem to breed a healthy democracy as it seems to naturally benefit those with the power to stir popular consensus and fears. The curator's role may be like editors of any news conversation, a role which demands balancing the need to expose subject ideas to scrutiny with the need to give voice to those less powerful. What the newspapers fear as much as the art world is the conversation falling silent. This may involve exploiting the vulnerable.

Curators are like many administrators of culture's conversations, be they television, the press, or art exhibitions. They are struggling with increasing opposition to all modes of authoritative administration. It remains to be seen what answers they come up with that give authentic voice to others.

#### To anticurate.

I have focused on the curator's role as administrator not of simply objects but of art's conversation. Increasingly such theorizing conversation is offered as the on-going work of art itself. I have wondered if it might be possible to oppose conversation itself but feel that this is to misunderstand our bigger temporal relationship with culture. We participate in it rather than control it – we perhaps can reflect on the difficulty of opposing others in conversation. This does not seem to bring about a healthy democratic culture however. What I wonder is how anticurating might be more than simply a rebranding exercise of curating. How it might go beyond the administration and appearance of a public participation in a cultural dialogue. What seems to have emerged from this conversation with myself is that we often get an administered conversation packaged as a free flowing improvisational conversation – a conversation we can fall into. The appearance of such open conversation seems to be tied in with the importance of audience participation – we are stuck with the problem that the urge to make something, to rebrand and package such conversation seems overpowering. To anticurate may thus be to argue and oppose such tendencies to reduce arts conversation to neat news copy and sound bites.

John Hammersley, artist and researcher

As an artist, I found myself using curating as a tool in my ongoing quest to find like-minded individuals.

Like a lot of my collaborative projects, it became a way of bringing people together through shared interests, obsessions, concerns or anxieties.

Ellie Harrison, artist



I always think about curating in the display sense, how you put things together so that you consider them as a whole or in relation to each other in a new or different way. In traditional museum terms, a curator looks after collections, responsible for their care and research. Curating things is a process of editing, taking out what might be unnecessary, or editing in the re-ordering sense. We do this both consciously and unconsciously through arranging and re-arranging. It can be the physical - sorting clothes out in the wardrobe to create order - types of clothes hang together, such as jackets, trousers and shirts, perhaps ranged by colour, or winter or summer clothing. We might arrange books or CD's on a shelf, or pictures and furniture in a room. Increasingly for people it can be digital, using Facebook to edit our lives and present a showcase to others, to gather our friends - who often represent different aspects of our lives - into an online framework in a way that they would never come together otherwise. Sometimes it is the way we do things subconsciously that is more interesting - the way children draw things together in pictures or how people arrange seemingly random and unconnected things at a car boot sale.

We respond to what the culture we live in determines for us - we are often what is termed 'culturally determined'. We group things together often according to the conventions our time, for instance we put certain furniture in certain types of room. Artists often challenge these conventions, a famous example being when the artist Marcel Duchamp placed a urinal in a gallery. When something is taken out of one context and placed in another, it can acquire a different meaning, or forces us to engage with it in a different way. To me curating is about this, not always as such a bold statement, but more often in subtle, quiet and reflective ways.

Andy Horn, Exhibitions Manager at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

## *To be the mapmakers in the capital city of the birds*

Aristotle

Trevor Hoersewood, Co-director, Departure Lounge and VAGA co-ordinator

**Do say: Great Art with Everyone**  
**Don't say: Great Art for Everyone**

*To curate is  
to engage in  
the process  
of making  
things  
visible  
to others.*

The word 'Curate' seems to have some sort of great caché nowadays, despite there being so many more curators practising than there were, say, 20 or 30 years ago. Why else are people now using the word outside of the visual arts world - I have heard people saying they are 'curating' a book, a live festival or a music CD - even though there are perfectly good words (such as 'editing') already in existence for these activities. But I digress.

Curating is thinking, clarifying, chasing, presenting, digging, negotiating, discarding, asking, learning, in a circular manner over and over, with my responsibility to the audience being equally as important as the responsibility to the artist.

Indra Khanna, independent curator

To me the word to curate means the difference between an exhibition that is underpinned by research and is conceptually developed to both represent the intention of the artist while exploiting meaning, and the ad hoc arrangement of work that does neither. Curation is a collaborative process (curator and artist) to develop the potential of the artist's work. Over the last few years the term curation has been devalued - a good curator is usually a trained curator.

Wendy Law, Director of Turning Point West Midlands

*Animate 'space' with infinity of thought*

*(to share and deepen our knowledge in a contracting multiple time zone, that is post audience and in a phase called the 'New'...)*

**Skinder Hundal, Chief Executive**

To Curate is to present, display, contextualise, conceive, deliver, make accessible, bring together, and convey objects, art work, ideas, text, images, histories and stories to an audience.

**Roshni Belakavadi, the artist/curator**

Using artistic awareness to make decisions about how an exhibition should be put together to create a certain aesthetic or to give a certain view or theme.

**Alice Thickett, the artist and budding curator**

Identify/work with artist/artists (emerging / established) that fulfill the vision of the curator's organization 'to deliver' an exhibition or fulfill the curators own vision.

**Mervyn Mitchell, the community man**

To assist an artist in realising their vision, to ensure that these visions are realistic within the frame of what is possible, to make sure the pictures are hung the right way up, to write convincing waffle to accompany artworks in order to make them seem better than they actually are. That's what a curator means to me.

**Steve Smith, the chef**

**CURATE**, Create Universal Reflections of the Artist's Techniques and Expressions.

**CURATE** = Engineering (Interpreting, Designing & Planning and Implementing).

**CURATE**: To create art using the work of others.

**Islam Muhammad, the international volunteer**

Organically denote a harmonious relationship between diverse elements and take care of those varied expressions by giving unexpected meaning(s) to what we take for granted.

**Laura Rossi, the international volunteer**

- Shaping, moulding and presenting a project according to a specific artistic vision and interpretation.
- Turning your thoughts into a reality
- Realising your vision.

**Raam Tarat, the market**

Project Manager.

**Andy Lindley, the technician**

Championing and taking care of art whoever and wherever you are so it goes beyond the shackles of the elite.

**Simmy Kaur, the audience**

New Art Exchange, Nottingham

**I think that to curate means choosing stuff to show in 'exhibitions'. It usually means artworks, but...**

Is it choosing something that other people want to see?

Is it about choosing things that people didn't know they wanted to see?

Is it choosing something that makes you feel or understand something?

Is it about spending the money of the gallery on carrying out the mission of the gallery?

Is it about allowing artists to be artists - but wouldn't they be artists anyway?

Is it about joining a shared understanding about what is currently fashionable in the 'art world'?

Is it a clique?

Is it about using art to change the world bit by bit?

Is it about choosing stuff that people don't want to see?

Is it about training people in a magical way of thinking?

Are Curators to Art as Theologians are to Religion or Research councils are to Science?

Or are curators like advertising executives, or gossips, or news journalists or market traders?

**Don't ask me!**

Graham Peet, Exhibitions Manager at The Public

*Curate* is a word that really doesn't have an empirical meaning (it is underlined in green in my grammar check) and as such it can tend to find itself in some odd places. Places where perhaps it doesn't belong.

Someone once said that there was a time when everyone wanted to be an artist or a rock star. Now everyone wants to be a curator. Perhaps it is this lack of definite meaning that makes it so appealing; the fact that you can claim it without having to justify it, a creative act in itself perhaps.

Curating is an act without words. There is no inherent language to define its terms - no suggestions or synonyms - there are only metaphors and borrowed signifiers. *Orchestration* or *Choreography* take us closer but never quite to the heart of the thing.

To me, curating implies dealing in pluralities, sympathies, textures, nuances ... dozens of voices and things opposed or else things that connect delicately through their details.

It means noticing.

It means making a world ... albeit a temporary one...

In the bringing together of all these connections and textures and details - through discussions and the spinning of ideas - it is possible to create a landscape, with its own histories and geographies and mysteries and jokes and damage to be explored.

I like Martin Creed's adage;

**The whole world + the work = the whole world**

If you think of "the work" is the job of curating then perhaps this becomes a nice definition.

Or at least a suggestion for one.

Amy Pettifer, visual arts consultant and writer

**curate is to  
create**

**as**

**create is to  
curate**

John Plowman, artist and Co-director of Beacon Art Project

**Administration / Perspiration**

**Disillusionment / Illumination**

**Exhaustion / Exhilaration**

Curating is about supporting the development of artists' work and presenting their work to audiences in challenging and stimulating ways.

You could write an essay of course but I think, for me, this is basically it.

When I started in Walsall, the security guys at the Town Hall were called curators!

Before I explain what the word 'curate' means to me I think it is useful to look at the root meaning of the term 'curator'.

*"'Curate' (noun) is from the mediaeval Latin adjective curatus (of, belonging to or having a cure or charge), itself from the imperial Latin curatus (past participle of curare, to take care of). Ultimate root of all these words is the Latin cur or cura (care). 'Curate' (n) entered the English language in 1300-50 as an ecclesiastical term to mean a **clergyman** and by the 1550s, 'curate' additionally meant a **member of the clergy to assist** a parish rector or vicar (and still does). Shortly after 'curate' entered into English, the noun 'curator' appeared in English in 1362, descended from the Latin curatorem, meaning **overseer, guardian or agent**. By early 1400s, 'curator' took on a more secular meaning of a **legal guardian**. By around the 1600s, 'curator' additionally meant a **manager or steward, an officer of a university or a person in charge of a museum, art gallery, exhibition, library or the like**. This is the current meaning of the word."*

The term 'curator' has always seemed problematic to me. I always associated the term 'curator' with an unattainable position, a lofty, aloof person who looked after a Museum collection, or an international jetsetter, networking with top 'brand' artists, and discussing who is 'in' or not 'in' with other curators and gallerists at dinner parties around the world.

My experience of 'curating' has been very different. I have for many years been a curator in institutions in the UK, but recently taken on the daunting position of a freelance curator. Some of the work has been glamorous, but the vast majority of the work has been administrative, including all aspects of organising an exhibition from fundraising to hanging. It will be very interesting to see how my understanding of the word 'curate' will change now I am working in a freelance capacity. I certainly believe that traditional spaces like a gallery is not the only space that I will be curating exhibitions, and with new digital technologies is it stretching the term 'curate' to organise a web based exhibition?

With the changing roles of the curator as defined by the demands of artists and new technologies, and the changing definition of the term curator in the past, and most possibly in the future, the root meaning of 'curate' (*Latin cur or cura: care*) I believe still has a resonance.

To me, 'care' is central to the work of a curator. Care for the art, the artist, the space and the positioning of the work, the context and meaning of the art, the interpretation of the work, the audience and how audiences interpret the work, the marketing of the art, concept and artist. Most importantly to me, I care passionately about breaking down barriers, whether these barriers are intellectual, political, religious, social, physical or economic.

David Schischka Thomas, freelance curator

**We are all curators, presenting the elements of our lives in ways that enable us to make sense of ourselves for ourselves and for others.**

**In a gallery we have the tremendous privilege of doing this on a public scale - seeking out and gathering together treasure and presenting it in ways that play upon our collective and personal experiences, memories and responses, to shine new lights on our view of the world.**

**Curating is the ultimate "show and tell" and, as such, fantastic.**

Linda Saunders, Managing Director of The Public

# Do to the world as you would have the world do to you.

Gavin Wade, Director of Eastside Projects

## About *Anticurate* (2011)

Imagined as **mac birmingham**'s version of an open exhibition, *Anticurate* tested the conventions and authority of the visual art space. Artist Trevor Pitt devised the project in association with **mac** as a platform to explore democratic and collective approaches to exhibition curating. With 351 participating artists, it became one of **mac**'s most ambitious and engaging projects.

Following a public call declaring "We Want Your Art", artists across the West Midlands came to **mac** on Saturday 9 July 2011 to submit their artworks to the *Anticurate* project. From painting, sculpture, ceramics and print to photography, video, performance and text, *Anticurate* invited both established and lesser-known artists to share the results of their creative pursuits. Alongside the formality of registering works of art, the 9 July event provided an opportunity for artists to meet 'Anticurators' – the people charged with selecting the *Anticurate* exhibitions – to receive feedback and to talk about the ideas and the skills involved in making their artworks.

The 'Anticurator' groups charged with selecting the exhibitions included: young people from Ikon Youth Programme; a group of older people from Young at Heart; members of the Extra Special People professional development programme at Eastside Projects; **mac birmingham** operations staff; and new arts collective No Aloha.

Negating the assumed traditions and authorial position of the visual art space, **mac** extended the opportunity to curate an exhibition in their main gallery to people of different ages and interests from both arts and non-arts communities. In deconstructing the processes of selecting and producing the visual art exhibition, the project explored new ways of working and collaborating, and it facilitated a deeper and broader engagement with audiences on how **mac** conducts its business as an arts venue.

What resulted was series of five week-long exhibitions taking place over the 2011 summer holiday period. A closing Salon exhibition featured all 351 works of art and brought into question the notion of democracy in the realm of the arts which, through the removal of the

selection process, echoed the event of the Salon de Refusés – an exhibition that embraced artworks that had been refused by a jury or panel.

## About *Allotment* (2012)

Throughout 2012, as a follow-up to 2011's *Anticurate*, the *Allotment* project provided opportunities for new and emerging visual arts talent to grow. *Allotment* transformed **mac**'s Arena Gallery by dividing it into ten plots, eight of which were assigned to artists and curators or 'plot holders' from across the region. The remaining two plots were assigned through an open call to Midlands-based creative practitioners.

With a plot to manage and make their own, 'plot holders' were given the space to take risks and experiment, and to identify, profile and nurture artwork from a wide range of artists drawn from Birmingham, the UK and beyond. The project was led by 14 individual curators and collectives, and no fewer than 98 artists and collaborators exhibited at **mac** during the course of the nine month schedule. An *Allotment* 'shed' was installed in **mac**'s public space and used by the 'plot holders' as an artist studio, an office to gather to discuss ideas, and a space for events to share and discuss their ideas with audiences.

'Plot holders' included: independent contemporary gallery TROVE; children's art project Moonbeams; Birmingham/Berlin-based Clarke Gallery; Birmingham City University MA Contemporary Curatorial Practice; artists Dan Auluk, Helen Foot and Sparrow + Castice; art collective Dialogue; and a group of young people from **mac**'s Next Generation programme.

## About *The Open Project* (2013)

Building on the success of *Anticurate* in 2011, and informed by *Allotment* in 2012, *The Open Project* was devised by independent artist and curator Trevor Pitt in collaboration with **mac birmingham** and artists Juneau Projects to continue their explorations of the 'open' exhibition format, testing the conventions of the visual art space and creating a platform for democratic and collective approaches to exhibition curating.

An open day on 29 June 2013 was staged to receive artists' submissions.

This event provided participating artists with the opportunity to petition those selecting *The Open Project* exhibitions, and to discuss their work and ideas in depth to impart a greater understanding. Supported by Turning Point West Midlands, a professional development workshop offered advice to artists on registering to the project, writing about their work, marketing and sales. Over 280 artworks were submitted, forming a collection that would later be shown in its entirety during the closing Salon exhibition between 22 August and 8 September 2013.

*The Open Project* exhibitions were selected by talented Young Curators aged between 16 and 24 years, as part of **mac**'s Next Generation programme. In a series of four unique exhibitions, the Young Curators offered alternative perspectives to that of the institutionalised art curator – the authorial decision maker, gatekeeper and trend setter. They worked in teams to decide upon a theme and shaped an exhibition that reflected it.

Curatorial advice and support was provided to the Young Curators throughout the process as part of a programme of professional development. Designed to explore theory and practice, a series of workshops covered topics such as the role of the gallery in engaging audiences, marketing and PR, interpretation methods, and handling art in a gallery setting. Several visits to galleries across Birmingham gave a broader insight into different approaches to the format of the exhibition.

Resuming the work they started in *Anticurate*, Birmingham-based artist duo Juneau Projects were commissioned to design an exhibition structure for *The Open Project* exhibitions. Influenced by Le Corbusier's proposition that 'a house is a machine for living in', Ben Sadler and Phil Duckworth created a space that would act as a 'machine for curating in'. Each exhibition was housed within a purpose built 'white cube space' within **mac**'s main gallery, leaving the unselected art 'on show' to the public in storage areas. The remainder of the gallery was taken over by the Young Curators as their office, studio and workshop where they were invited to share the ideas and the concepts behind their chosen exhibition.

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## Anticurate (2011)

**Artists** | Sam Aaron, Cleone Abbs, Cristina Adams, Kirsten Adkins, Andy Aitken, Wesley Alcorn, Desmond Alleyne, O Alonge, Sarina Amir, Rosemarie Annetta, Thomas Armstrong, Abigail Ashley, Craig Ashley, Louise Ashley, Neil Bailey, Jane Baker, Nailah Bakhsh, Craig Barber, Ray Barrett, Tim Barrett, Christian Barry, Paul Bartlett, Nick Bassett, Patricia Beach, Guy Beebee, Dave Bell, Dikla Betzalal, Keerat Bharj, Myhriam Bi, Laura Billing, Louise Blakeway, Adele Boden, Philippe Bonnet, Jeni Bradbury, Janet Braithwaite, Sally Bramble, Anne Brierley, H Brown, Eitan Buchalter, Frances Buchanan, Maria Burleigh, Charlie Butler, Hira Butt, N Caldwell, Heather Cannon, Rosie Carmichael, Jane Carrington, Laura Chaisty, Simone Chester, Esther Cheung, Dave Chilton, Eileen Clews, Christopher Clinton, Nicky Coen, Roxie Collins, Richard Constable, Jessica Cooper, J Copplestone, Chris Cowdrill, El Cummins, Susheela Curtis, Romayne Curzon, James Darnbrough, Wendy Datta, Benedict Davenport, William Davie, Ruth Davies, Maggie Davies, Harley Davies, Paige Davies, Neil Davies, Amber Davies, Carl Dean, Jeanette Deen, Wendy Derrick, K Dodds, T Donald, Micheala Dowling, Karen Du Plessis, Karl Dudley, Natalie Duff, Emma Duggan, Zeldine Duke, Craig Earp, Stewart Francis Easton, Michelle Edinburgh, Tom Ellis, Rhianne Evans, Steve Evans, Owen Falconer, Pauline Farnham, Myrtle Farrell, Janine Fenton, Anna Field, Cam Field, Stephen Filer, Patricia Fletcher, Dawn Forbes, Sarah Fortes Mayer, Jen Foulds, Vivian Fuller, Steven Giannitto, Roux Gilbear, Stephan Gilliver, Eileen Glass, Debbie Goostrey, Teresa Gordon, Matthew Gorman, Melissa Grant, Barry Gratton, Jubal Green, Marcia Gregory, Daniel Griffin-Hayes, K Grogan, Anne Guest, Lauren Guthrie, Amy Harding, Janette Harris, Marion Harris, S Harris, Simon Harris, Simon Harwood, June Heather, Sophie Hedderwick, Joan Hems, Conrad Herszenhorn, R Hewitt, Kurt Hickson, Mark Highton, Jeanette Hill, Martin Hinchliffe, P Hipkiss, Rachel Holden, Louise Holland, James Holland, Clare Hollingworth, Clair Holmes, Susan Hope, Robbie Hornby, Gwen Horton, Gemma May Hotchkiss, Allan Howard, Graeme Howell, Caroline Howells, Mollie Howells, Martin Humphries, Lawrence Hunt, David Hunter, Mahtab Hussain, Mumtaz Hussain Shah, Harry Hussein, Thomas Hynes, Mandy Ingram, Jasmine Isaac, Adam Islaam, Gary Izzard, Susan Jackson, Oliver James, Anya Jung, Alexi K, Kriim Kahn, Jaswinder Kaur, Hannah Kershaw, Zarina Keyani, Tommy lee Kimberley, Jason King, Adrian King, Abiola Klein-Velderman, Tomasz Kolisko, Karolina Korupczynska, Sevven Kucuk, Helen Lane, Danny Langran, Ayesha Latif, Hannah Leach, Susan Lee, Vicky Lee, Emma Leppington, Victoria Linehan, Susan Lissiter, Emma Little, Stephen Lloyd, Anthony Lloyd, Peter Lopeman, Luiz Lopes, Ms Lorenz, Vicky Lowe, Shaun Loynds, Judah Loynds, Helen Maguire, Geoff Malin, Deborah Manning, Ayshe & Mariam, Chris Marshall, Marnie Maurri, Caitlin McAtavey, Helen McDonald, Jain Mckay, Michael Mckie, Mollie McPherson, 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Rushton, Eileen Rushton, Megan Russell, Dega Sian Rutherford, Donna Ryan, Jose L Santos Lopez, Scarlet Scardanelli, Miriam Schwarz, Badr Habeeb Shah, Nick Shale, Richard Sharland, Carole Sherman, Jordan Sherman, Katie Sims, Lizzy Singleton, Rachael Smith, Kirsty Smith, K Smith, Andrew Spackman, Ashley Spindler, Daniel Stedman, Ann-Monique Stellinga, Tessa Stevens, Richard Stevenson, Shea Stevenson, James Stove, Greg Strong, Debbie Sutton, Hannah Swingler, Julie Swinsco, Jared Tang, Helen Tarr, G Taylor, Jane Thakoordin, Heather Thomas, Jon Jon (Xinkai) Tian, Wendy Ann Titmus, Emil Toescu, Faye Tonkinson, Jita Toor, Milan Topalovic, Martin Towers, Fern Towers, Jean Trainor, Margaret Tyler, Ruth Tyler, Roseanne Velin, Vicki Vella, Jaci Vianna, Andre Vieira, Damien Vincent, Clare Wainwright, J Walker, Albert Wallace, Rachel Warren, Jim Warrior, Neeta Wassi, Ruth Watkins, Carol Watson, Alison Watson, Louise Watts, Janet Watts, Amanda Wearing, Joseph Welden, Mr Welden & Stock, Rachel Wells, 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**What does the word curate mean to you?** | Craig Ashley, Jivan Astfalck, Maria Balshaw, Ian Banks, Lucy Bannister, Anaïs Bas, Beth Bate, Katy Bevan , Kathrin Böhm, Jason E. Bowman, Ele Carpenter, Centre of Attention, Tom Cullen, Emma Daker, Maia Damjanovic & Andy Robinson, Keith Dodds, Jo Fairfax, Deirdre Figueiredo, Lorenzo Fusi, Darryl Georgiou, Dr Roz Hall, John Hammersley, Ellie Harrison, Carolyn Hassan, Liz Hawley, Andy Horn, Trevor Horsewood, Peter Jenkinson, Andre de Jong, Juneau Projects, Indra Khanna, Wendy Law, Charlie Levine, Maurice Maguire, Rachael Matthews, Mitra Memarzia, Skinder Hundal & New Art Exchange, Graham Peet, Redhawk Logistica, Granny Ludski, Paul Newman, Sara-Jayne Parsons, Amy Pettifer, Trevor Pitt, John Plowman, Matt Price, Celia Pym, Deborah Robinson, Beth Rowson, Linda Saunders, Zoe Shearman, Sally Shineman, Nik Slade, Nick Slater, David Schischka Thomas, Clare Thornton, Amy Twigger Holroyd, Gavin Wade, Jonathan Watkins & Mo White

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**Sign writer** | Jilin Niu

**Visual identity** | Keith Dodds

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## Allotment (2012)

**Plot 1: TROVE** | Sophie Bancroft [curator], Anna Francis, Liz Hingley, Will Kendrick, Milk Two Sugars, Bharti Parmar, Matthew Robinson, Tim Robottom, Daniel Salisbury [curator], Helen Snell, Kate Spence [curator] & Caroline Wright | **Plot 2: Dan Auluk** | Dan Auluk [curator], Saranjit Birdi, Mark Carroll, Di Cope, James Cox, Maddy Dickerson, Jamie Fowkes, Simon Hope, Paul Langford, Louise MacKuin, Paul Newman & Nita Walters | **Plot 3: Moonbeams** | Janette Bushall, Sarah Jenkinson-Evans [curator], Jonathan Lee & Jon Williams | **Plot 4: Clarke Gallery** | Dan Auluk, Jon Campbell, Elly Clarke [curator], Jeanette Dean, Kim Donaldson, Tatiana Echeverri Fernandez, Carly Fischer, Linda Franke, Jo Gane, David Helbich, Nurul Huda, Lisa Jugert, Fiona Macdonald, Anna Mielsds, Bon Mott, Alana Richards, Cathy Wade, Barbara Walker & Mo White | **Plot 5: mac Operations Staff** | Emma Little [curator] & Marie Prestleton [curator] | **Plot 6: BCU MA Curatorial Practice** | Martin Bardell, Mel Brimfield, Michael Bold, Adam Burton, Mona Casey [curator], Elena Cassidy-Smith, David Cheeseman, Chris Clinton, Christophe Dillinger, Sara Dobson, Aylwin Greenwood-Lambert, Joanne Humel-Newell, The Jackson Twins, Jonathan Kelham, Paul Newman, Lisa Roffey, Sonya Russell-Saunders [curator], Matt Smith, Rosemary Terry, Phil Thompson, Matt Webb, Matt Westbrook & Grace Williams | **Plot 7: mac Next Generation programme** | Cody Lee Barbour, Antonia Bruno, Tiff Byrne, Alexandra Davenport, Future Poets, Silje Lovise Gjertsen, Adam Guy, Ikon Youth Programme & Priya Palak | **Plot 8: Sparrow + Castice** | Sparrow + Castice [curator] | **Plot 9: Helen Foot** | Sophie Copage, Ella Ruth Cowperthwaite, Christophe Dillinger, Beth Fletcher, Helen Foot [curator], Richard Foot, Julie Hedges, Milbank & Foot, Pam Newall, R&A Collaborations & Hayley Robinson | **Plot 10: Dialogue** | Joss Burke, Graham Chorlton, Peter Grego, Myfanwy Johns, Véronique Lamare, Tom Ranahan & Francis Viguera

**Visual identity** | Keith Dodds

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Photo: Chris Keenan

## ABOUT mac birmingham

First opened in 1962, **mac birmingham** is the Midlands' pioneering arts complex for everyone. Following a two-year £15.2 million redevelopment funded by Arts Council England, Birmingham City Council, charitable trusts, commercial sponsorship and public donations - **mac** reopened to the public on 1 May 2010.

**mac** offers a busy programme of theatre, dance, independent cinema, exhibitions and special events, as well as a wealth of practical classes in all aspects of creativity, from playing musical instruments to ceramics and jewellery-making. Located in Cannon Hill Park, two miles south of Birmingham city centre, **mac** is a national leader in developing work with children, families and young people of all backgrounds.

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