THE TRANSFORMATION OF ROLES: ‘Curatist’ (Artist as Curator)

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to look at the ‘curatist’, a term coined from the combination of the words ‘artist’ and ‘curator’. It tries to note the practical changes to the function of the artist who takes on the curator’s role. The emergence of the artist as curator is not merely filling up the vacuum of artistic appreciation but also opening up and building a new definition of artistic creation for the practicing artist. This transformation is occurring due to the fact that most of the country’s art institutions do not have a program of art history and art philosophy specializing in producing art histories, therefore causing an imbalance in the artistic practice and discourse.

A curatist not only serves as the curator of an exhibition, but more than that, the curating is done taking into consideration an understanding of artistic direction to better present what is to be communicated to the audience, especially in terms of approach, presentation, and exhibition design to achieve the primary purpose of the exhibition.

If we survey the exhibitions held in the country, most of them have been curated by those with a fine arts education who were also artists. ‘Towards a Medical Reality’, ‘Rupa don Iwa’, ‘Rupa Malaysia’, ‘Manifestation of the Soul of Islam’, ‘Art and Imagination’ and ‘Electronic Arts’ are some of the most important and successful artist-curated exhibitions which have contributed to a greater appreciation for art in the country and which are still discussed and debated to this day.

TERMINOLOGY

What is a curator and what is a curatist? A curator is traditionally defined as a builder, keeper, manager, guardian and custodian in an institution of art, culture and heritage such as a gallery, museum, library and archive, who is responsible for the collections of the institution. Normally, the objects in question are those that can be seen and touched such as works of art, historical artifacts and scientific collections.

Nevertheless, the definition differs according to the place and role. In Britain, the term also refers to a civil servant in charge of monitoring contract archaeological works and managing the cultural resources of an area. In the United States, the term also is used to denote the head of a cultural unit or organization and advances in new technologies have increased the scope of the role of the curator with the field of curatorial being an object of academic study and scientific research in major art institutions there. But this presentation is not focused solely on the curator but on the artist as curator or the curatist as well, who is directly involved in making the selection, building and interpreting contemporary works of art and at the same time responsible for writing catalogue essays, labels and other documentation for the exhibition.

Artist as curator or curatist is not a new idea, it has a long tradition of influence. In the course of historical development of art, this phenomenon had been discussed but not seriously. At the end of the 19th century in Europe, particularly in Paris which had become centre of art, the artists protested against the Salon jury and the conservative institution behind ‘Salon des Refusés’ of the 19th century. They proceeded to organise their own group of avant-garde artists, the ‘Salon des Refusés’, to exhibit their works outside the institution. Thirty years later, in the 20th century in New York, the movement of artist-run-spaces or art centres run by artists went on to become a worldwide phenomenon.

The artist-as-curators of exhibition does not only curate but is capable of writing and producing good publications on art, as demonstrated by Joseph Kosuth, Ad Reinhardt, Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Robert Smithson. In the country, artists such as Riedza Piyadasa, Salehman Bao, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Ismail Zain are among those respected for their contribution in writing essays for the exhibitions they curated. Their words are still relevant and still prevail, and are often quoted as discourse openers to strengthen an argument and bring the audience closer.

In Malaysia, curatorial activities for an art exhibition officially began after the establishment of a national art institution, i.e. the National Art Gallery in 1958. However, we may not have fully appreciated the role and contribution of the artist as curator in the development of Malaysian art and perhaps there has not been any specific discussion examining the boundary separating the two roles, namely that of the institutional curator and that of a curatist. Here, I’d like to point out the shifts that have allowed for the transformation of roles and how the transformation works and its impact on the development of the visual arts as a whole.
CHALLENGING THE LIMITATIONS OF CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Those who are directly involved in the arts now inevitably have to move in step with the current trends or the contemporary practice which identifies and recognizes new models and new approaches with the tendency to make changes to the curatorial practice. In the effort to expand the space for artistic expression and creativity in curating an exhibition, the emergence of the curatorial role can be seen to be antinomic or defying the institution. Curators tend to see what may be overlooked by institutional curators, their purpose in curating the exhibition and writing their own exhibition concept being a response to the limitations of art institutions in understanding their requirements which may seem to challenge the prescribed vision and imagination of policy makers.

The argument regarding curating as art, or curator as "author" stems, therefore from the lack of definition regarding the limits of curating, and the consequent troubling realisation of the potentially unlimited power of the agency of curating. The reverse of this, the artist as curator, similarly emerges from collapse of any viable distinction between the work of artists and the work of curators, whilst the professional and institutional distinction between them remains and is in the process of being professionalised further.

Confronted with the limitations of expressing a vision, the curator looks for a way that will work well with the mission and vision that she or he envisages by opening up an alternative space or an art-environment, either individually exhibiting own works or collectively exhibiting own and others' works of the same theme and objective. In this country, among the spaces normally run by curators are Rumah YKP, Rumah Air Panas and Lost Gen Space, which overlap the existence of museums and art galleries and display innovative and experimental art directly to new audiences. This happens not only in visual art but also in the music scene with indie bands rejecting pop music recording companies and in theatres with theatre of the absurd challenging mainstream theatre.

EXPLORING NEW WAYS OF SEEING

A good creative direction makes storytelling compelling, a curator is like a film director or more accurately an "exhibition director". The end of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century saw many artists starting to organise exhibitions in place of institutional curators. In exploring the creative potential of exhibition design and display, it has become a trend in major art events such as the biennale and contemporary art festivals for organisations to invite artists as artistic directors or curator with the full responsibility of curating the event. The reputation created by the artist as curator in offering unusual and interesting presentations helps pull in the crowd to come and view the show.

The approach of the curator is quite different from that of the institutional curator in terms of creativity. Curators tend to come up with the idea first before going to look for artists who fit in with their idea, whereas in common practice the idea for an exhibition usually originates from the artist's studio. They often run counter to the conventional approach as much as possible in order to explore and present something that has never been seen before in terms of artistic design and display.

The visitor who enters the gallery or museum space hence enters a new world created by the curator. Upon entering the gallery, the visitor is no longer in the realm of their regular daily life, she or he steps into another world designed by the curator, an aesthetic world which words cannot describe, the world of the imagination. That is why when you go into a museum or gallery, you are bound to encounter things weird and wonderful.

Conceptual artist John Baldessari was entranced by the Los Angeles Contemporary Art (LACMA) with displaying the works of several artists in their collection. The exhibition, 'Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images' was held in 2006 to explore the impact of Belgian painter Rene Magritte (1898-1967) on a generation of visual artists of post-war America and Europe. The exhibition displayed all paintings and drawings by Magritte and 48 works in various media by 31 contemporary artists such as Richard Artschwager, John Baldessari, Vija Celmins, Robert Gober, Jasper Johns, Jeff Koons, Ed Ruscha and Andy Warhol.

In Malaysia, there have been such exhibitions that can be used as role models. Many important exhibitions were curated by artists who were engaged in research, such as 'Rupa dan Jawa' by Syed Ahmad Jamal which was the fruit of his study of the traditional Malay art. His exploration and findings were documented in a book and he himself curated the show which explored the continuity of tradition in contemporary Malaysian arts. 'Towards a Mystical Reality': a collaborative effort by Sulaiman Esa and Redza Py idasa and a conceptual art exhibition assimilating the Eastern and Western perspectives in a study of meditative and mystical philosophy found in Asia relating to Taoism and the Zen practice. It has had substantial influence in art discourse and produced polemic even to this day.

CONCLUSION

Whether we realise it or not, most of the important shows in this country are curator-curated exhibitions. The exhibitions curated by curators have had enormous influence on visual art in the country along with their writings which accompanied the events, as in the case of Redza Py idasa, Sulaiman Esa, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ismail bin Haji, Ali bin Jumari, Raja Najran, Halim A. and Wong Hoy Cheong. The emergence of a new generation of artists, among them Khoran Raja, Zakaria Raja, Yap Suyin Lin, Firdaus Arif and this writer, is noteworthy for their demonstrated commitment in curatship.

The curatorial is not only educated but also "gifted". She or he is not only able to discuss the influence of art history, ideas, concepts, theories of visual aesthetics and the philosophy of their own art but also the artistic practice in general. The contemporary curator is not only able to identify and introduce new approaches in curating but is also able to act in a multi-tasking capacity as an artist and administrator as well. This certainly points to a stronger and powerful transformation of roles in the art world involving artists, curators, galleries, critics and collectors alike...

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