



FLUX: Design Education in a Changing World

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First Author's name Catherine McDermott
Affiliation Kingston University
Postal and e-mail address 9 Werter Road Putney London SW15 2LL
catherinemcdermott@mac.com

New Sites of Practice – educating new curators of the contemporary

Abstract

Problem being addressed

This paper explores curation as a developing field within the creative industries and explores the theory, methodology of such new sites of practice outside the traditional gallery and museum context. It evaluates a new role for curating in terms of economic and cultural growth.

Seven years ago Kingston University and the Design Museum London launched a Masters programme in response to a clear need for professionals who could curate and communicate design within the new landscape of the changing museum and design sectors. The paper will present new approaches to curating the contemporary via a series of key case studies including the UK Design and Crafts Councils that reflect such changes. The role of curating in the 21st century is at the centre of much debate and interest within the creative industries. Curating is now perceived as a practice activity that can work across the creative industries to enhance design practice and the cultural sector in ways relevant and important for all design cultures. Curating the Contemporary can identify and develop important new networks of interdisciplinary practice and which cuts across education and employers.

Contemporary design now demonstrates the fundamental importance of the interdisciplinary team bringing together practitioners and processes traditionally thought of as separate categories and activities. The paper will reflect on the potential of teaching curating and present the author's latest project - Africa UK Curating Indaba

Key Words:

Curating

Contemporary

Design

interdisciplinary team

New Sites of Practice – educating new curators of the contemporary

The role of curating in the 21st century is currently the focus of much interest within the international creative industries sector in ways relevant and important for all design cultures. Curating is now perceived as a practice that can enhance design and the cultural sector not only affecting the UK but internationally in design, tourism and the creative industries. The title of this DEFSA paper Curating The Contemporary: New Sites of Practice is taken from a series of conferences organised by the Curating The Contemporary Research group at Kingston University. The focus of this work is to explore the important shifts in curating and help develop an emerging critical discourse for curating. The new curating model is a shared, mutually dependant activity, an interdisciplinary and participatory process, which reflects these wider changes in the design profession and as this landscape is changing so do the skill-sets that education needs to offer.

Curating Contemporary Design

The role of curating in the 21st century is the hub of our MA programme Curating Contemporary Design launched in 2000 at Kingston University in equal partnership with the London Design Museum. We launched this new MA in response to the lack of trained curators who could communicate design exhibitions across both the museum and cultural sector. Our vision was for the Design Museum as a laboratory to develop and grow new thinking about curating the contemporary. Our MA programme had core-teaching programmes alongside live briefs with agencies we identified that were redefining

curating. We sought to explore close working relationships with the British Council, Demos, General Public Agency, the Dana Centre and the Wellcome Trust. Their creative input has challenged our students with professional briefs, which reflect new demands from public audiences and new areas of practice. These include curating science, public spaces, and social issues, commissioning practice and exploring national identities. To tackle the rising public expectations of increasing involvement and curating with and for new media in which the potential of curating the web is only beginning.

One of the key markers of success for us was that almost from our first graduating year our Curating MA graduates obtained work in key international posts across government agencies, museums, retail, design practice, journalism and events management. The demand for our MA graduates continues to be strong and their varied careers reflect the new roles for the curator in a contemporary context that includes the first Inspire Fellow at the British Museum, the Design Team at the British Council, the Contemporary Team at the V&A, research at the Design Council, the Korean Institute of Design Promotion, English Heritage, Ideo, Sugino Costume Museum, Japan and Wolff Olins. An finally last but not least our first South African graduate Jacki Lang newly appointed Gallery Manager of London's Established & Sons and Raphael Chikukwa, Zimbabwean national but who has worked in South Africa for 12 years our current Chevening Scholar. These successes identified the market for the new curator.

From our very first intake of students we attracted practitioners who shared an ambition to pioneer new approaches to curating, significantly not only in the UK but also from Africa, China, Singapore, South America and Australia. Significantly the global nature of our student intake had a profound impact on the direction and shape of our approach. Most notably this has shaped, over the last five years a series of conferences exploring the emerging field of curatorial practice. Collecting now was held in 2003 at the British Museum, 2003, an institution more famous for Greek and Roman antiquity but we wanted to explore how collecting the contemporary is playing a vital role in its strategic planning. Neil Macgregor has frequently written with great pride about the BM's acquisition of Contemporary Mozambique design from the artist Kester for its new African galleries matched by contemporary commissions from Asian and Arabs artists and designers.

Curating Contemporary Cultural Diversity was our second key theme in 2004, partnered by the Museum of London, 2004 possibly the most important area within new curating – its potential to drive and support social change by embracing diversity. The potential of inclusive curating to involve a wider constituency of people was also a theme we continued to address in 2006. Eddie Otchere, the National Portrait Gallery's Inspire Fellow, focussed on the curating's new role to reach new museum audiences and to ensure curators from a more diverse range of backgrounds. The potential here for curators to support and benefit powerful social ambitions are one of the most potentially exciting directions. Examples of innovative work in this sector include the potential of curating as an agent of social change including Out of Styal: Jewellery Released made by prisoners of Styal Prison http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article2054781.ece and Crafting a History: Arts and Crafts from America's Concentration Camps, www.janm.org/exhibits/crafting World Craft Council. Some of the world's most inspiration work comes however from the reconciliation programmes of South Africa. From ground breaking projects such as the Robben Island Museum and the Women's Prison in Johannesburg, which was presented so movingly at the 2006 UK Museums Association conference. Such pioneer work from Africa has similar work in the UK in Belfast and in Serbia and Croatia. For our MA it helped inspire our newest curating project the Africa UK Curating Indaba.

The aims and objectives of our Indaba are to connect African and UK Curators to discuss ways to make a difference between two communities. We want to develop partnerships with African organizations and museums by supporting a small exchange programme and become advocates for the promotion of African art and design across the UK. Our first event in November is an advocacy seminar with Marilyn Martin, Director of Art Collections for the Iziko Museums Cape Town whom we invited to be Visiting Professor of International Curating Kingston University. We aim to raise the profile of African Curators in London to bring about a better understanding about current trends in contemporary African Art in UK Universities. Supporting a platform for exchange between Africa and

UK of Curatorial practices. I hope we can talk further at the conference about more projects we can look to develop.

It brings me back to our 2006 conference New Sites of Practice was held at the UK's London Design Council in 2006 The proceedings of which were published in a special issue of Blueprint magazine, widely regarded at the UK's premiere creative industries publication and one of its most popular issues. Curating here was a useful way of exploring changes in contemporary design and demonstrating the fundamental importance of the interdisciplinary team, bringing together practitioners and processes traditionally thought of as separate categories and activities. New Sites of Practice explored changes in curating practice located outside the traditional gallery and museum context, as a distinct activity alongside the traditional role of collection conservation and management. It must be said that these changes to curating have also raised some cautionary warnings that such diversity of practice could strip curating of its meaning. Bettina Von Hase, art advisor for Selfridges, warned that soon it will be possible to talk about 'curating' our homes or even our lives and former Wallpaper editor Tyler Brule, has described his recent television project as curating television schedules. Moma's Design Curator, Paola Antonelli the conference keynote speaker summed up these new shifts in her description of the move away from the Curator as Scholar towards the Curator as Reporter. Clare Cumberland, co-director of General Public Agency offered a third more radical definition, the curator as an Agent of Change, which is reflected in the cultural diversity focus discussed earlier.

The Curator As Reporter

Our MA programme defines design duration as telling stories in which a strong curatorial concept governs the narrative. The best design curation explains the moment at hand and communicates that in an exhibition, installation or event. Curating is adapting to a new landscape and working with the future. Path finding curators are working across an impressive range of activities, pioneering new territories such as public services, hospitals, art and business in which the boundaries of practice are blurring.

In this context

Of course curating can be directly aimed at commercial growth. We have a important Selfridges's arts consultant Bettina von Hase has spoken about new sites of curating to create an experience within retailing. Her curating practice has made this international department store into an important site for the contemporary with installations such as the 2006 Eating The City by Chinese artist Song Dong. At Selfridges, artists have been inspired by the public space offered by a retail store and are not inhibited or controlled by it. In this way the Selfridges curating model has offered an unexpected outcome for both the artist and the consumer and has moved curating practice to the other sites, including below the Design Council.

Case Study: Living Building A Curatorial Project for the Design Council.

When the Design Council moved from its iconic headquarters in the Haymarket designed by Ben Kelly it gained one of most seminal British interior design spaces of the late 20th century but it lost its public face, which included a popular bookshop, café, programme of exhibitions, publishing arm and the internationally respected DESIGN magazine. In the years following that re-structure the Design Council faced the problem of finding other ways to explain its function and activities. Some of these solutions have been very successful, including the Design Council website, widely regarded as a premier design site and the high quality of its project and strategy print publications. However the Design Council as a physical space to connect visitors with its activities is more problematic. Living Building is a new form of curatorial project intended to address these issues and help explain, support and enhance Design Council work within its current offices in Bow Street. The first curatorial question was therefore - the building as a forum for whom? The Design Council offices are not open to the public and 3 different constituencies currently use it. Design Council Staff - currently about 75, Professional Visitors to Design Council seminars, events, receptions, staff meetings - estimated at 500 visitors per week and VIP advocates who require an introduction, a tour of the Design Council. There is also the potential of further groups, which might include creative industry students/professionals who would welcome access to the Design Council for education/training. Each of the groups has access to 3 different areas for curation, the Design Councils public areas: the limited entrance area/ lift

to the 3rd Floor area outside the office entry doors, reception area, library and café. With the overall aim to develop a Design Council tour for advocates and ways in which British design can be curated within the offices, integrated into a working professional environment, highlighting key objects, for example, Matthew Hilton and Jasper Morrison furniture. And finally how could we use the Design Council story to celebrate Design Council history over 60 years of British design.

Curating Across Different Disciplines

As the traditional boundaries between different disciplines have been slowly eroded, the links curating can offer are crucial. UK Curator Andree Cooke has reminded us how rewarding the experience of looking over these fences can be, seeing UK furniture designer Michael Marriott at the Camden Arts Centre, for example, or furniture designed by artists such as Donald Judd at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York. We wanted to explore these themes in our forthcoming conference with Key Questions for the Crafts Conference to address New Sites 2 scheduled in November 2007 at the newly built Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) in partnership with the Crafts Council and scheduled for publication in Crafts magazine. The Crafts Council is the UK national agency for crafts is working to position the UK as the best place in the world for making, seeing and collecting contemporary craft. The conference is part of a wider strategic program to identify key questions around curating craft which are fundamental to driving the sector forward and energising its future. We have identified several key issues for curating which include:

1. What is Craft?

How do we define Craft in the 21st century?

How relevant is the process relevant to the exhibition of craft?

The role of new technologies

2. Exploring new sites of practice for curating / exhibiting contemporary craft

3. The discourse of contemporary craft:

Identifying the language of craft. Writing, documenting contemporary craft and writing for new audiences

4. Commissioning objects for craft exhibitions and collections

Breaking into and developing new critical markets to invest in the future

5. Curating Craft in context of other disciplines, architecture, fashion, design and fine art spaces.

To sum up therefore the new curating model is a shared, mutually dependant activity, an interdisciplinary and participatory process, which reflects the wider, changes not only in the design profession but also potentially as an agent of to change the quality of lives.

These questions demonstrate the fundamental importance of the interdisciplinary team bringing together practitioners and processes traditionally thought of as separate categories and activities. Just as our readings of what design is have broadened in scope to merge, for example, brand development and design as the model for practice in the creative industries. Design now allows input from different perspectives and disciplines, combining the talents of curators, policy makers, production managers and service personnel within interdisciplinary teams expected to take responsibility for the whole project. Equally inclusive curating has an important role not only contributing to the economic success of the creative industries but the quality of our lives.



PROFESSOR CATHERINE MCDERMOTT FRSA

EDUCATION

- 1977 MA Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham University
1975 BA (Hons) History of Decorative Arts, Leeds University

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

- 2001 Research Professor
1981- Kingston University
1980-1 Senior Lecturer in Design History, City of London Polytechnic
1977-80 Senior Lecturer in Design History, Teesside Polytechnic

JUDGING COMMITTEES

- 2004 Portland Design Festival, USA
2000 Design Week Awards Judge
1999 Member of the Jerwood Furniture Prize Committee

RESEARCH GRANTS

- 2006 Calgary University Development Grant
2005 Denver Museum of Arts, Colorado to develop contemporary design collection
2004 British Council Small Grants for Cultural Diversity Conference
2004 AHRB Small Grant for Cultural Diversity Research
2000 British Council Australia Lecture Tour to install exhibitions to celebrate Sydney's Year of Design

RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

- 2007 Concepts of Design, Routledge
2002 Made in Britain: Contemporary British Fashion Mitchell-Beasley

CONFERENCES ORGANISED

- 2004 Exploring Cultural Diversity in Contemporary Museum Practise, Kingston University and The Museum of London
2003 Collecting Now, in partnership with the British Museum
1999-2004 Curating strands for four annual Design History Society Conferences, London, Aberystwyth, Norwich and Belfast

CONFERENCE PAPERS

- 2004 Curating Cultural Diversity, DHS Conference, Belfast University
2002 The Role of University Museums, Galleries and Collections in Modern Collections Southampton Institute
2000 Thoughts on New Directions, Birmingham Millennium Lecture Series, Birmingham University, March.
1999 Mapping The Erotic in The 20th Century Choda Conference on Fashion and Erotic, Courtauld Institute
1999 Curating Contemporary Design Conference at the Dundee Arts Centre, Dundee University
1999 Keynote Speaker, Design History Society Annual Conference, Nottingham Trent University

