

The Role of Curator in Postmodern Epoch: A Manager, A Leader, An Innovator or All?

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ABSTRACT

This paper approaches the concept of contemporary curation and the role of the curator in the postmodern epoch from management point of view. In this paper, curators are considered not only as intermediary or agency, but also as a manager, a leader and an innovator. Thus, this hybrid position attribute a new meaning to the curator, being multi-faceted persona. In order to discover brand new identity of the curator; postmodern epoch, the different roles and competencies of curators will be discussed in an elaborate manner from a managerial perspective.

Keywords: Curator, Postmodern epoch, Peripheral vision, Improvisational skills, Polyphonic communication

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of globalization and recent developments in the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly in information and communication technologies, have led to dramatic changes in many forms of living and in human understanding of the universe. For instance, grand narratives, general theories, universalism, and rationalism are recognized as tokens of a modernist paradigm that has become outdated in the postmodern epoch. “The postmodern condition expands the range of possible choices; experiments with a plurality of eclectic lifestyles, languages and modalities of social interaction; offers the greatest opportunities for generational, ethnic and gender groups to develop alternative subcultures that establish their specific public identities” (Martinelli, 2005, p. 85). In other words, the postmodern paradigm focuses on indeterminism, discourse, relativity and chaos – in short, on uncertainty. In this very complex and deep ground, the curator has gained new meaning and reconstructed his/her existence. Curators are not simple intermediaries any more. Instead, they can be a manager, a project leader, a cultural entrepreneur, an innovator, an improviser and a co-creator. Curators are now expected to deliver important competences, including peripheral vision, improvisational skills, and polyphonic communication. Given the foregoing discussion, this paper approaches the concept of contemporary curation and the role of the curator in the postmodern epoch from the viewpoint of managerial practice and attributes a new meaning to the curator as a multi-faceted person. The changing roles of the curator will be discussed in the following sections.

2. POSTMODERN PARADIGM AND ART IN POST-MODERN EPOCH

“Postmodernism does not have core principles as other –ism’s do. Rather, postmodernism rises upon uncertainty and normlessness becomes the

norm of postmodernism. That is the reason the motto of theory is anything goes” (Şaylan, 2006, p. 53). Postmodernism can be discussed from different sides of the same coin. One side of the coin represents the era that comes after modern, whereas the other side of the coin represents the new epistemology that is completely dissimilar to modern epistemology. Thus, the so called “new” era, post-modern era, has a nested structure that revolves around postmodernist epistemology. According to Hassard (1999), the main feature of postmodernism is the multivocality within/between the forms of representations and objectivity of the external world. Thus, it is not possible to talk about any objective understanding or representation of what is going on around us. If we cannot talk about any objective or static or mechanic understanding of things, then we are implying relativity and its consequences; multivocality, subjective understanding, and versatile representations of situations, phenomenon, and things around us.

According to Martinelli (2005), consumption, not production, is the key element of postmodern society. He further claims that he is not referring to the mass consumption, which is a modernist paradigm’s reality, but rather to the more eclectic, ephemeral, and sophisticated consumption patterns in compliance with different lifestyles. Hence, these features of new consumption patterns put pressure on organizations to be prepared for many different expectations. These expectations generally do not have functional values of products or services. Instead they are more about the aesthetic values that attract the postmodern society. Böhme (2003) entitles these aesthetic-based formulations as the aesthetic economy, and argues that it represents an important factor in advanced capitalist society. He separates classical use values of commodities from the value of commodities in postmodern society by emphasizing their attractiveness, aura and atmosphere, rather than functionality. He further

identifies the new aesthetic laborer and how they differentiate from previous assumptions. There is no sharp contrast between creators of art or culture from artisans, cosmeticians, and advertisers. The bounds are smudged and the creator is also a businessman, the fashion designer is also a brand manager, and so forth. This way of seeing and feeling things also affects, constitutes, and shapes art as well. Thus, art is no longer rising out of normative and rigid modernist totalitarian expressions anymore. There is a high fusion between different approaches and backgrounds. Best and Kellner (1997) describe this situation as a deviation from bourgeois elitism, high modernism, and the avant-garde and embracement of pluralism, populism and new aesthetic perception. Hence, art is not in the objective any longer, if aesthetic consciousness is occurring between art, artist, and audience (Hatch, Kostera, & Kozminski, 2005). The modern paradigm pushes the one best way of doing things, even in art. Post-modern art differs from modern art in many respects. First, post-modern art has a pluralistic character that nourishes via different colors, smells, and tastes. It is constantly in the mood of becoming and in a state of flux. Rosenau (1992), emphasizes that post-modern art deals with aesthetic concerns rather than functionality as modern art did. He further claims that, in post-modern art, the presentation and delivery of art is provocative, intense, and moving. For him, postmodernists do not follow a modernist approach: thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Rather, they prefer complex, diversified, and unrelated patterns (Rosenau, 1992).

Postmodern art is viewed as a new approach that reconstructs definitions and concepts. Post-modernism blurs the boundaries of how artists and audiences comprehend art and its images. Garousi and Kowsari (2011) associate this situation with the changing roles and identities of art, artists, works of art, and their capabilities against their modernists existing in the past.

Postmodern art overcomes all modernist biases, all rigid, totalitarian, and mechanistic concepts of art. It becomes more connected to science, technology, and different social and technological fields. Therefore, postmodern art is more interdisciplinary, sophisticated, and complex in its nature. For instance, fractal art is a new way to express how order and chaos coexist in postmodern society, which preserves order and chaos, pattern and non-pattern, and sense and non-sense simultaneously (Garousi & Kowsari, 2011). According to Hawkins (2012), one of the most important developments in art, it that it has started to become site-based socially engaged practices that include its community as a subject, material, and audience. In other words art in the postmodern epoch becomes a co-creative practice that recognizes different stakeholders as a part of its colorful construction. Just as art has gained new meaning in the postmodern epoch, so have artists, audiences, and curators. The relationships between different, yet complementary stakeholders have become more sophisticated than ever. Perception, taste, and choice have evolved out of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction in compliance with postmodern discourse. Thus, the change in perceptions, interpretations, expectations and tastes of people constitutes new patterns of understanding and lifestyles (Bulut, Aslan & Mutlu, 2013).

3. CURATION AS RECONSTRUCTED PRACTICE

Curation is a connective attempt to mediate between art (visual, performing, or otherwise) and its audience. It does not create art, but the experience of art (Hopkins, 2012).

O'Neill (2007) states that one of the most significant developments in contemporary curatorial practice is the increase in local and global dialogue in the scope of international, transnational, and multinational scales.

Curatorial works have gone out of museums and find themselves different sites and activities. Perhaps the most popular events are mega events, art fairs, art centers, biennals, and so forth. Smithson's (2001) critiques of the museum and the curator are remarkable. According to him museums are institutions similar to asylums and jails that have straight borders. In these neutral rooms called galleries, a work of art is isolated from the outside world and becomes an object protected from the rest of gallery space. Thus, the curator functions as a chaperone of the Panopticon, where work of arts are stacked. The curator thus becomes a separator, in one sense. Böhme (2010), states that beauty is not defined by the difference between serious and popular art and it cannot be tucked away in museums any longer. The work of art, the way it is exhibited, the site, the beauty, and the aesthetic value are converging on a different point. Contemporary curation has moved beyond museums and come to any place that is convenient to share reciprocal experiences among different stakeholders. Biennials (one of the most appreciated art events) especially have become the token of contemporary curatorial activities. According to Tang (2007), biennials have become very prestigious events which have not only brought together art and curatorial permutations, but also acted as catalysts in cultural tourism and created opportunities for artists, critics, curators, museum directors, and gallerists to meet their different expectations.

In the postmodern epoch, curating activities have become more experimental and inclusive. For instance Muller and Edmonds (2006) discuss laboratory concepts, considering art as an interactive and collaborative phenomenon, that creates new meaning for curators, artists and audiences. They view the Beta_space, the collaborative project of the Powerhouse Museum and Creativity and Cognition Studios, University of Technology Sydney, which is an experimental public space, a living laboratory. The object of this project is to

constitute a convenient space for hybridization of production and exhibition. Beta_space is a good example of how curating has deviated from its traditional role. Because this space lets artists and curators work interactively through the lived experience of the audience, it provides a unique aesthetic and art experience for all parties. Böhme (1993) argues that the new aesthetic is the production of atmospheres in the presence of persons, objects and environments.

Contemporary art has promoted the evolution of curatorial practices. These curatorial practices consist of sculptural installations, video projections and site-specific interventions, the conventions of curating exhibitions rather object-oriented presentations (Nanjo, 2008). The identity of exhibition centers has changed due to the expectations of consumers and art providers. For instance; streets, slums, bars, and bus stops have become new spaces for art exhibitions. Hence the space, the audience, the artist, and the art itself are in a constant state of flux. Heraclitus (B.C. 540-480) long ago pointed out the continuity of change and the reconstruction of things. Perhaps in today's postmodern world, he could be better understood. Möntmann (2009) states that curators not only invite important artists, but they also have a passion to change institutional structures, hierarchies and functions. Curators are becoming game changers by taking responsibility for innovative movements in different fields. Curating is about opening up relationships between things, people and ideas. It is a multilayered interface of ideologies, statements, different positions that may agree, contest, or antagonize each other (O'Neil, 2009).

4. THE ROLE AND COMPETENCIES OF CURATOR

Traditional curatorial practices consist of mechanistic and static forms of performing administrative activities such as providing a flow of art

objects between museums and galleries, business development activities with other art galleries and museums, and so forth. In these “mechanistic” and “static” forms of administrative activities, the curator was considered as custodian with a limited job description and job qualifications. Therefore, the consequences of globalization have led to dramatic changes not only in the economic or political sense, but also in social and cultural areas of humanity. The meaning of the curator has been changed in this brand new globalized world and by the new understanding of art in this postmodern epoch. The dominant role of the curator has transmuted to a more creative and dynamic one, as the curator is no more only a career, but has an active role in production processes (O’Neill, 2007). According to Bodo and Demarie (2003), even art museums have started to absorb the “cultural model” of communication and encourage interdepartmental and interdisciplinary versatile teams in order to go beyond the traditional role of curator and assign new professional skills such as educator, marketing officer, interpretive planner, audience advocate, and outreach officer. As Farquharson (2003) stated, the word curate deviated from its longstanding meaning and the curator, who was excluded from the artistic production process, has become a leading actor and found himself in the middle of everything. Therefore, the shift from a passive to active position to an active one has given a new meaning to the curator. The curator has exceeded either a very classical approach custodial role or a modern approach in the postmodern epoch. Now, the curator has a great responsibility for the dissemination of art, attracting a variety of audiences, and creating a bridge between artists, audiences. The curator is not only a manager, but also a leader and innovator.

The curator as a manager has the function of administering the organization in order to provide continuous services and reach an effective performance outcome. This thus represents a

very basic job definition of the manager who has to plan, organize, co-ordinate, and control. The main function of the manager is to get things done via the actions of others, but although this is a necessary function of the curator, it is not enough. According to Byrnes (2009), an art manager is not only responsible for a successful opening, but should have a high awareness of the world around the organization locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. The manager is responsible for creating the most effective combinations of people and resources in order to achieve objectives. Consistent with this definition, Byrnes (2009, p. 7) states that “a stage director, a lighting designer, a conductor, a choreographer, and curator are all managers although their job descriptions may differ”.

The curator as a leader has the function of transforming what he or she finds at hand. Ibbotson (2008) gives a good example of this transformation process and he interfuses leadership, innovation, and creative process in his explanation. According to Ibbotson (2008), creative enterprises that require innovative outcomes should be directed. Thus, if there has been a creative process and there is an innovative outcome, then leadership is an important co-creative component of it. Ibbotson (2008) further claims that innovation is not an outcome of a single mind but rather is the cross-fertilization of different minds and backgrounds. Therefore, we propose that in order to decrease entropy, especially in creative works, leadership is an indispensable component.

Ibbotson (2008) probes creativity, innovation, art and concludes that creativity and innovation are highly contextualized. So it is with art. It comes from others: people, ideas, crafts and practices. The main idea is to notice, bring together, and manage these so called “others”. Therefore, the curator as an innovator has the function of creating the context and content of curatorial activity in a unique manner.

Given this, we define the curator as an ambidextrous person nourished by the chaos, relativity, and environmental uncertainty of postmodern society and develop a new discourse that transforms social reality based on societal, political, and ephemeral postmodern art. In the postmodern epoch curators must have these three different, yet connected roles to meet the complex and shifting demands of postmodern society. According to the literature, in order to give meaning to these roles, the curator should have crucial competencies such as peripheral vision, polyphonic communication, and improvisational skills.

4.1 Peripheral Vision

Peripheral vision is a term that specifies the necessity of widening the perspective beyond the actual work (Day & Schoemaker, 2004). Indeed, it identifies the need for seizing opportunities and threats within the micro and macro business environment. The periphery is accepted as an important scope that both prevents threats and provides a source of opportunity and innovation by appreciating the importance of changes occurring within a business environment (Pina e Cunha & Chia, 2007). Peripheral vision is a strategic tool that helps to realize what is beyond the tip of the iceberg. It is a sort of realizing of weak signals, change factors that are not obvious at the moment, but constitute a strong trend in the future (Godet, 1994). When considering the uncertainty, inconstancy, and chaos in the environment, peripheral vision gains a whole new meaning and importance. Peripheral vision can be a detector of weak signals that can be a threat or an opportunity.

According to Haeckel (2004), specialized people are truly important for organizational survival are skilled at detecting signals from the periphery that may not make any sense in that context, but have the potential to make sense in another context. Thus, catching these weak signals is critical for the continuance of any organization.

Why should curators have peripheral vision? The answer is clear. To be able to read the sudden changes in artists' and audiences' tastes, expectations, and aesthetic values in advance is crucial for the success of any curatorial activity. Curators, benefiting from uncertainty, chaos and non-linear relations around them, reflect these combinations back to their environments. Being the trend catchers, curators' peripheral vision, will help them understand and interpret the social and artistic streams and turn them into productions that fulfill different stakeholders' needs in different societies and environments.

4.2. Polyphonic Communication

Polyphony is considered to be "a construction of voices of different characters with equal rights" (Ahmad, 2009, p. 271). In music it refers to the collective action of different musical instruments or different vocal parts that follow independent melodies under the same assembly. The most difficult part of polyphony is the ability of to practice simultaneously with other instruments or voices that are totally different. Hence, in a polyphonic context, performers must be good listeners, have great focusing ability, and be an agile decoder. Because polyphony is relational, rather being a monologic effort, the interrelatedness and interdependence create special meaning for the concept of polyphonic communication.

Bangle (2001) describes the art of communication as converting the language of art into the language of corporation that is surrounded by realities such as requirements, budgets, and deadlines. He thinks it is important to be keen on finding ways to bridge communication gaps. Christensen and Cornelissen (2011), criticize contemporary management practices in communication, because of propensity to overemphasize the consistency in corporate messages that ignores the complexity of human and organizational communication. They further suggest that polyphony is a key component of organizational life that may

manifest itself at different levels and contexts in the organization. Polyphonic communication allows it to germinate multiple variations of co-creating and co-existing.

Polyphonic communication is a valuable resource or a tool of creativity and innovation. Since creativity and innovation cannot be considered without its context, such pluralistic communication offers the opportunity to translate many raw discursive materials into something practical. For instance, most of the time, artistic productions occur with the help of simplification of these complicated languages and their interactions. For curators, these many voices come from different stakeholders, such as foundations, the government, artists, audiences, and critics. These stakeholders have different paths and discourses that flow to one hub: the curator. The curator should analyze, interpret, and translate this unstructured mosaic into a unique discourse for the wealth of the organization, the environment, and society as well. The importance of polyphonic conditions derives from plurality of languages and voices that is normally repressed. This multivocal condition should be encouraged by the leader in order to use existing discursive practices that are the output of the language and communication and then turn them into something new for the organization (Kornberger, Clegg & Carter, 2006). Humphreys and Brown (2002) state that organizations cannot be in the position of monologic discourse. Rather, they are in the middle of multiple and simultaneous dialogical practices. Thus, to benefit from such conversations, communications, and interactions prolifically, the manager or leader should not silence or repress other ideas, approaches, and ways of thinking.

The curator, as an actor and also an observer in the middle of this polyphonic communication, is the only responsible soul (employee) for decoding and recoding discourses intertwined with the dispositions, realities, and feelings of each person.

4.3. Improvisational Skills

Although improvisation as a course of action puts forward freedom during the creative process, it describes a dependent and patterned-based constitution. Because freedom has no meaning when it lacks the power of habits and decisions take root in life (Küpers, 2011). Hence, improvisation neither characterizes unplanned nor irrational behavior (Chelariu, Johnston, & Young 2002). Improvisation may be based on the motivation to deviate from habits and routines (Küpers, 2011). However, because it describes a sophisticated process that is blended with expertise, flexibility, divergent thinking, and know-how, improvisation is far beyond a rambling practice.

Improvisation is related to time and suddenness. A lack of time or emerging situations trigger this specific behavior. According to Küpers (2011, p. 116), "improvisation is characterized by immediacy, suddenness, and surprise, transgressing pre-determined plans that push creativity by being de(con)structive, innovative, or seemingly foolish, a-rational forms of action". These restrictive circumstances push the limits of people who have to deal with uncertainty and the unknown.

Because it depends on real-time efforts, human relations and practices, improvisation is embedded in a specific material, structure and culture that centers around constant organizing, disorganizing, and re-organizing and moving between the subjective and objective realms (Küpers, 2011). Improvisation is a social, spontaneous, creative, accessible, and collaborative practice that creates a response to problems (Hargreaves & MacDonald, 2012).

The curator, a fusion of manager, leader, and innovator, has to improve his or her improvisational skills in order to adapt curatorial activities to postmodern contexts. If one of the known outcomes of improvisation is innovation, then the improvisational skills of the curator will lead

to innovative practices as well. When Stein and Harper (2012) suggest that creativity is a necessary, but insufficient condition for innovation, they were implying the adaptedness of creativity to a certain context. Thus, the curator forms the theme and the ambience of the artistic works and produces the most convenient aura for the art, artist, and audiences.

When curators improvise, they apply divergent thinking. Divergent thinking, unlike convergent thinking, is the ability to find multiple solutions to a certain task or problem (Lewis & Lovatt, 2013). When a curator works on a particular issue, divergent thinking is an important tool.

Another important component of improvisational skills is bricolage, which refers to “making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems or opportunities” (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 333). The process of bricolage is considered to be “a form of dialogue which starts from the moment when the bricoleur is confronted with an objective or a practical function to be fulfilled” (Duymedjian & Ruling, 2010, p. 137). Therefore, the idiosyncratic character of a bricoleur, who uses resources, knowledge, practices in a unique manner, is important (Duymedjian & Ruling, 2010). The curator as a bricoleur attempts to find the most convenient (not the best possible) solution encountered during preparations of any staging activity, because he/she is a natural bricoleur due to the constraints of the field.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to delineate the new role of the curator in the postmodern epoch and reveal the necessary competencies of this role. In the first part of the paper, we discussed the postmodern paradigm and art in post-modern epoch. We come to the conclusion that, art in post-modern epoch is solecistic, rich, and more world-embracing in terms of different cultures, expressions,

feelings, and tastes. This new understanding reveals new ontological and epistemological questions and perspectives, such as what the art is, how it should be represented and consumed, what the limits of knowledge and knowing art are, and what the role and position of the curator is in this sophisticated context. The authors believe that the curator and curating activities have taken on new meaning. The curator has become a hybrid position in the postmodern age.

In the second part of the paper, we evaluated contemporary curation practices and how it deviates from conventional and rigid practices. Contemporary curation practices have broken their chains and become much closer to society, excluded artists, and off the charts discourses. Every object, experience, discourse, feeling, movement, or motivation can be a subject for contemporary curation. This condition nurtures the ever-changing position of curatorial activities. Therefore we define the curator as an ambidextrous person nourished by the chaos, relativity, and environmental uncertainty of postmodern society, who develops a new discourse that transforms social reality based on societal, political, and ephemeral postmodern art.

In the third part of the paper, we discussed the role and competencies of the curator. According to the authors, there is an ongoing hybridization of different roles and capabilities of the job description and qualifications of curator. Therefore, considering the curator as a mere manager is no longer rational. The curator has become a fusion of a manager, a leader, and an innovator. This eclectic role attributes new meaning and identity to the curator. As the hybrid position widens the scope of curator and curatorial practices, there will be high expectations regarding the competencies of the curator. According to these authors, these competencies should consist of peripheral vision, polyphonic communication, and improvisational skills.

Peripheral vision is an important competency for curators that enables them to comprehend future trends in art producers and art consumers. Reading these trends will help curators to be innovative and take action. Polyphonic communication is also a crucial competence for curators. Non-linear and pluralistic communication often provides sources for the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of multiple patterns. The curator acts upon these different discourses by blending them in a single inclusive pattern. In a way the curator is an agile decoder, even a discourse analyser. Improvisational skills give the curator the insight that there is no single right way or method for fulfilling objectives. They are an indispensable competency for the curator. If an improviser is a divergent thinker, then he/she has the ability to make useful combinations using what is at hand at any given moment. Thus, for the curator, these existing resources are taken as source for the new formulations.

In the post-modern epoch, curators benefit from the uncertainty, chaos, and non-linear relations around them, and reflect these combinations back to the environment. Therefore, the curator has great responsibilities in scouting talent, creating ambience, and disseminating art through society. If self-efficacy is “the ability to identify the courses of action, cognitive resources, and motivation needed to meet given situational demands” (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 408), then curators must possess these in order to succeed in realizing, combining, creating, managing, leading, innovating, and launching art in this age of post-modern art and society.

This paper approaches the concept of contemporary curation and the role of the curator in the postmodern epoch from a managerial practice perspective and constructs a new meaning for the curator as a multi-faceted leader or manager. There are important managerial channels and practices that curators can benefit from, meaning

that business environments can benefit from the perspectives of curators and curating as well. Therefore if business environments can evaluate the multi-pronged efforts of these curators then they can easily take credit for their business activities. Thus, in this paper, becoming a curator leader or a manager is proposed as a potential answer for the curator of the future.

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