

Forms of caring

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the issue of art curatorship by looking at two extreme understandings of the practice that derive from the different meanings of the Latin word ‘cura,’ implying diverging valorizations of so-called cultural artefacts. In the first case, curatorship is primarily oriented toward safeguarding the material permanence of cultural artefacts; in the second, it is mainly focused on the effervescence of their semantic dynamics. On the one hand, it involves a set of practices whose aim is preservation, that is, reducing the risks of the material degradation of heritage. On the other hand, it designates a set of practices that keep up with contemporary interpretive currents and further contribute to and enhance these meanings, as exemplified by the central role that the figure of the ‘curator’ has assumed. Owing to the curating vocation as a discipline of ‘meaning care and social therapeutics,’ the semiotic method can play a significant role in analyzing and evaluating these different paths, both from a theoretical point of view and through examining emblematic case studies.

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: **10**Issue: **02**Winter **2024**ISSN: **2459-2943**DOI: **10.18680/hss.2024.0023**Pages: **101-109**Lic.: **CC BY-NC-ND 4.0**

KEYWORDS:

Curator**Curation/maintenance****Exhibition practices****Semiotics and sense-making**

*If there were only great men or geniuses in the world,
everything would be even more complicated.
You need people to keep things under control,
and to take care of the practical problems.*

Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Beach*
(chap. XXXIV)

Assault curators

“The curator, initially a champion of new objects (the modernist era), has become a champion of new ideas (the conceptual era) and finally a champion of himself as a futuristic institutional entity: in this evolution, he has changed the avant-garde forever.” This lapidary statement appears in David Balzer's *Curationism. How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (2014). Despite its polemical slant, the book is an intriguing reflection on the dramatic importance the curator has assumed nowadays. This crucial figure has come to outflank and often replace more established institutional art world figures like critics, conservators, or museum directors in prestige and fame, both within the art system and without. Balzer speaks of curationism, introducing a neologism into English to indicate what he believes has become a mass phenomenon even outside the art world. It is a neologism, he writes, “that plays on the assonance with creationism and recalls its connection to religious fervor, divine creation, and grand narratives” (Balzer 2015: 14):

Curationism is, then, the acceleration of the curatorial impulse to become a dominant way of thinking and being. I contend that, since about the mid-1990s, we have been living in the curationalist moment, in which institutions and businesses rely on others, often variously credentialed experts, to cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers. As these audiences and consumers, we are engaged as well, cultivating and organising our identities duly, as we are prompted. (Balzer 2015: 8-9)

Balzer offers a reconstruction of how and through which leading personalities this general dissemination and enhancement of curatorship comes about, almost by contagion, focusing first and foremost on the art field. Among these personalities, he cites, for example, the undisputed and original figure of Hans Ulrich Obrist, born in Zurich in 1968, who he describes as a tireless traveler, scholar, and connoisseur – the prototype of the independent curator – before becoming (in 2006) the co-director of the exhibition program at the Serpentine Gallery in London. His biographical achievements include curating his first group exhibition at the age of 23 in his home kitchen, with works by artists that have since become part of the Pantheon of contemporary art, such as Fischli/Weiss and Christian Boltanski! In addition to organizing several influential exhibitions, Olbrist's scholarly activity also includes an ongoing exploration of art institutions, particularly curating.

He has helped to define it as a specific profession bordering on art practice through exhibitions, books, archives, and above all, interviews, some of which were collected in the book *A Brief History of Curating* (2008), in which he dialogues with the ‘pioneers,’ independent or ‘structured,’ who in the 20th century in his opinion have operated in

the art system more innovatively. “For me,” says Olbrist, “the curator is a catalyst, a generator, and a motivator: a sparring partner who accompanies the artist to the construction of the exhibition - and the curator builds bridges, especially with the audience.” Or again: “I think that artists are the most important people on the planet, and if what I do is useful and helps them, then that makes me happy. I want to be useful.”

Care and maintenance

Keeping these interesting statements in mind, to which we will return, let us better characterize how the figure of the curator has come to take on connotations of creativity and prominence, joining the already crowded procession of people connected to the art world. Semiotician Yuri Lotman already emphasized the composite and collective dimension of museum management, comparing it to the semiosphere. He described the museum as a sphere of coexistence, interweaving, in a single meaning-producing environment, very different enunciative instances. Typically, the museum’s upper management consists of a director, a conservator/collections manager, an educational services manager, a public relations, marketing, fundraising, and communication manager, a security manager, and an administrative and economic/financial procedures manager.¹ These roles are associated with a set of tasks and are inscribed in a specific organizational model. They are linked to determinate positions in the institution whose manifestations are largely predictable.

In this sense, if we go back to the historical genesis of the curator’s role² and consider the simple dictionary definition of the word, the curator appears to align with the role of the conservator/collections manager. Indeed, the dictionary states: “He who is delegated to the exercise of particular functions of assistance, custody, administration, and surveillance in cases provided for by law,” and again, “The scholar to whom the philological edition of a text is owed.”³ This work is specialized and ‘behind-the-scenes.’ It is fundamental in importance, falling within the broader scope of maintenance or upkeep activities that ‘cultural heritage’ (Eco 1988), as all material expressions of human life, require. Museums and the artworks they house are characterized by a distinct sense of temporal suspension, functioning as *heterotopias* in Foucault’s meaning. That is, they are detached from any potential use value, and they must convey a sense of permanence and, consequently, transcendence around the values that they represent. In reality, however, they are inevitably immersed in time and thus subject lead to the transformations that this entails.

¹ These are the minimum requirements, necessary for all museums to obtain accreditation and inclusion in the National Museum System, expressed in DM 113 of 21 February 2018.

² See chapter ‘Curare,’ in Modena (2024: 253-281).

³ Google dictionary provided by Oxford Languages.

The alarm raised by Louvre curator Laurence Des Cars in a confidential report to the French Ministry of Culture, which has become public, about the worrying condition of the museum that stands as the symbol of Parisian cultural hegemony, is topical. Every year, the museum welcomes twice as many visitors as its facilities can sustain. The Louvre's facilities have become obsolete and insufficient even with the major renovation ordered by President Mitterand, symbolized by the famous crystal pyramids designed by Sino-American architect Ieoh Ming Pei for the new entrance (30 March 1989). What seemed to be the height of audacity and innovation and contributed, in no small measure, to launching the architectural fashion for new museums (Pezzini 2011) today requires radical care to continue to operate. This is not to mention the drastic restoration of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, which started in 2023 and is only slated to be completed in 15 years. Likewise, the recent fire at Notre Dame Cathedral (15-16 April 2019) in Paris showed the extraordinary fragility of even secular works, perhaps heightened precisely by today's hypermodernity. Hence, the constant work of museum agents involved in the preventative conservation of collections and museum facilities and spaces, acting at best according to an ecological approach, although they belong to different departments ('heritage and collections' and 'technical and security services').⁴

When it comes to sustainability, which is now at the heart of the contemporary cultural debate and the concerns of discerning politicians and economists, a new strand of study, the so-called *Maintenance & Repair* studies, is indeed emerging. Denis and Pontille's book *Les soin des choses. Politique de la maintenance* offers a significant example in this field (2023). The two sociologists begin and end their discussion by reflecting on the work of conceptual artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who thematizes the issue in his practice. One of his performances, in a museum in Hartford, Connecticut, consisted of the meticulous cleaning of the glass case in which an Egyptian mummy on loan from the Metropolitan Museum has long been kept, with the final inscription/title 'Maintenance Art Work.' It is a gesture that amounts to cleaning the shrine housing the precious artefact: "The performance," notes Gianfranco Marrone, "had led to seeing the invisible, that is, to perceiving the conditions of possibility, material and moral at the same time, of the gaze, of every gaze, towards the world, and in some way to questioning the hierarchy of values normally taken for granted" (Marrone 2023).⁵

⁴ Practices - *savoir-faire, knowhow* - studied by museum anthropology: see Beltrame (2024).

⁵ In 2023 and 2024, the International Centre for Semiotics in Urbino (CISS) hosted seminars dedicated precisely to the 'care of things', cf. <https://semiotica.uniurb.it/>

Curating and re-semanticization

Given that the organizational chart of the museum is hierarchical, it seems evident that the figure of the ‘curator,’ as it has recently evolved, is more complex and is merging with that of the Director. This latter role, at least in Italy, in a distinct type of state museum, the so-called ‘super museum,’ has been very much emphasized in this sense. Such positions have been filled, for example, through open competitions at an international level instead of being exclusively reserved for internal candidates coming from supervisory agencies and national ministries. The declared objective of this wider candidate search was aligned with a more general plan to foster the modernizing of museums in accordance with the successful ‘new museum’ model. That is, a spectacular museum, attractive for its architectural form or at least for its interior design; a cultural pole expressing a continually renewed offer; a center of services appreciated by an increasingly vast and stratified public, strongly connected to tourist flows; a public space instead of a space reserved for the few.⁶ The results of these initiatives were not long in coming and often accompanied by controversy. To give some concrete examples from Italy, the GNAM (Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea) in Rome has changed three general displays in a few years, at the change of each Directorate, based on very different concepts (Maria Vittoria Clarelli 2012; Cristiana Collu 2016; Renata Cristina Mazzantini 2023). This has ranged from a historical and thematic itinerary of the works in the collection to the negation of an actual itinerary, with the proposal of unprecedented juxtapositions between works from different periods.

Another example is the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which, during the COVID-19 pandemic, launched unconventional online promotional campaigns through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok aimed at a younger audience.⁷ New museum directors are now expected to adopt a highly personal management style and become super-curators, in the sense above. If, intuitively, the role of the director once seemed linked to greater stability, while that of the curator was associated with freedom – akin to the difference between employee and freelancer – this distinction has now blurred. At the same time, the ‘romantic’ image of the ingenious star curator is becoming institutionalized through specialized study courses, a common occurrence when prominent personalities create new professional profiles traceable, at least in part, to specific and replicable skills and practices.⁸

⁶ See Velotti (ed.) 2021.

⁷ Cfr. Peverini-Pezzini 2024.

⁸ David Balzer (2015) devotes the part of his book entitled ‘Jobs’ to this aspect, in which he examines the curricula offered by various training institutions. In particular, he dwells on the list of the various tasks, organized in several stages, from concept to post-production, that should characterize the professional curator (2015: 124-130).

Let us try to analyze the 'curator' from the point of view of narrative semiotics. By considering this figure as an actor capable of drawing great narrative potential from the art system as a reservoir, we can see the curator both as an actantial role – that is, in terms of the modal positions that a narrative subject can assume along the narrative pathway that is proper to him – and as a thematic role – that is, in terms of the unfolding of themes or semantic paths. In the former case, it is, as we know, a matter of analyzing the competence that the curator pours into his performances in modal terms, i.e., of want, duty, knowing, and power, both on the side of *being* and *doing*. There is no doubt that the curator we are examining is a What seemed to be a highly motivated subject, an expert who, in some ways, retains aspects typical of the amateur since he is endowed with a competence that is not merely technical but also passionate, dynamic, cohesive, and steadfastly focused on his program (Marrone 2021).

To characterize the thematic role of the curator, and thus his discursive programs, let us focus on the term 'care,' which comes from the Latin 'cura,' and from which we derive not only the curator but also the curious. 'Care' thus implies both the idea of guarding and of being interested in something. In the first instance, the curator, driven by his curiosity, is a seeker. Balzer rightly compares his work to a form of bricolage that Lévi-Strauss speaks of in *La pensée sauvage* (1962). At the basis, there is a free-roaming thought that unites artists who freely invent, using the most disparate materials in their ateliers, with unscripted human groups who observe their environment, experiment, categorize, and construct theories, employing a non-formalized science. It is a quest for intellectual as much as aesthetic enjoyment and, hence, for something of profound value. That which is to be taken care of, articulated as attention, care, commitment, and, at a later stage, implies public affirmation and dissemination.

Somewhat like the 'curate' in the religious sphere, the contemporary curator is supposed to foster the public's 'faith' in art and artists and to successfully do so within the confines of the museum or gallery's political mechanisms. With regards to this last point, we can characterize the curator's competence as endowed with a specific *savoir-faire*, a strategic competence approaching the Greek Metis, which, as Detienne and Vernant write, implies a complex yet very coherent set of mental attitudes of intellectual behaviors combining intuition, sagacity, foresight, mental poise, pretense, the ability to get out of one's way, vigilant attention, a sense of expediency, skill in various fields, experience acquired after many years. It applies to fleeting, mobile, puzzling, and ambiguous realities, which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous reasoning (Detienne and Vernant 1974).

This type of enterprising curator, so to speak, has little to do with the tasks of a simple custodian of works assigned to him by tradition: i.e., intent on preserving

their material integrity, protecting them from all possible risks to which they are exposed and working to ensure that they are enjoyed in the best possible way. According to some, including critic Boris Groys (2007), the curator/author as understood today, namely the discoverer, theorist, and re-organizer of works – whether new or not – is precisely the opposite of that, and even a potential iconoclast, since he “can’t but place, contextualize, and narrativize works of art – which necessarily leads to their relativization.”

Elisabetta Modena, in her recent book *Display. Luoghi, dispositivi, gesti* (2024) observes that according to some, “the mere fact of inserting a work or an object in a context, in a narrative or an exhibition space would determine an emptying of its autonomous meaning” – including, moreover, what happened historically with the removal of most works from their original contexts (for example, churches and palaces, but also nations) to collect them in designated spaces. “Even today, the curator ‘instrumentalizes’ them for his ends, using them as raw material for a project that has its own independent and recognizable authorship, so much so that artists have increasingly claimed to organize the exhibition of their works autonomously” (Modena 2024: 249).

This observation is radical. It implies a value judgement on curatorship that qualifies it as a form of ‘cultural deterioration,’ an expropriation of the meaning of the work of art. One could argue that this is a rather unjust generalization. In some instances, the super-curator identifies or creates a framework that helps to better understand both individual works and their ensemble. This happens when an artistic movement takes hold through the occasion of each new exhibition of works, even those already known, whose organization in a broader or hitherto unthought-of constellation highlights specific paths of meaning in them. In this sense, one can think of the ‘invention’ of different art movements: in Italy, for example, the Transavanguardia movement coined by Achille Bonito Oliva or Germano Celant’s Arte Povera.

But more generally, it is worth considering the distinction made by Nelson Goodman between the execution of a work and its *implementation*. By execution, he means the entire process of creating an artwork. By implementation, he means everything that contributes to the making of a work, which works, in his view, to the extent that it is understood, to the extent that what it symbolizes, and how it symbolizes it, is discernible and influences the way we organize and perceive the world (Goodman 1984). In a broader sense, Goodman understands implementation as all the processes initiated to ‘make the work operate,’ regardless of their outcome: just putting a frame on a painting can either activate its meaning or paralyze it, and this applies all the more to the organization of exhibitions and other curatorial actions.

Semiotics as caring

Here, the meaning of ‘caring’ ranges from the seemingly simple custodianship of something whose value is already given and only needs to be reaffirmed and maintained to a form of curating that establishes or adds a specific, potentially new value. Obrist himself, though often cited as the prototype of the curator / creator, explicitly positions himself in his statements more in terms of an Adjuvant towards artists, not as a Destinant, even though he may end up appearing as such. Of course, narrative semiotics have taught us that within the same actor, several roles can coexist and that only the analysis of concrete cases can provide answers regarding the dominance of one or the other.

In this regard, I find it interesting to reread the pages that Umberto Eco dedicates to the figure of the *critic* on the occasion of this recurring cultural polemic because they can be usefully extended to the curator. Eco observes that the critical act always takes place in a context that is a theatre of passions: one hates or loves, one adheres to or distances oneself from the choices he proposes. However, in his view, the ‘perfect critic’ is the one who clarifies the reasons for his passions for the benefit of all (Eco 1989).

With regards to the role that semiotics can play in the analysis and evaluation of curatorial pathways, there has, in fact, recently been a desire in Italy to characterize the field’s contribution precisely in terms of a “cure of sense” (Marrone and Migliore 2022), to recover its vocation as a ‘social therapeutic’: that is, at the same time ‘knowledge’ and ‘action on the state of things,’ not therefore in the abstract but in its capacity to transform them, in the wake of the teachings of its best masters (Greimas 1987; Fabbri 1995).

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