The multifaceted curator in question

An unprecedented proliferation of art and art exhibitions has taken place in the past few decades, and as art curators have multiplied in a similar rhythm and as their position has gained prominence, questions about the tasks, risks and responsibilities of curators have occupied many minds.

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The London-based Contemporary magazine tackled the question last year in an issue dedicated to interviewing prominent curators like Frances Boran, Hou Hanru, Mauricio Pinoteo, Massimiliano Gioni, Roselee Goldberg and many more. In Jakarta, Visual Arts Magazine was the first to bring the question to the Indonesian audience, with an issue that concluded with a roundtable discussion. However, it seems that the discussion is far from over.

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But particularly noteworthy was the initiative of the Goethe Institut, together with the Asia-Europe Foundation, which recently acted upon a vision for the future in an effort to find new strategies for the changing role of curators.

Maria Stokenburg of Goethe Institut Jakarta revealed it was part of the bigger vision implied in a project that seeks to blur cultural, mental and, in a way, nationalistic obstacles.

The one-week workshop on the Multifaceted Curator, held recently in Jakarta and Bandung, brought together 18 young curators, all under 40 years of age, from Germany, Hungary, France, Greece, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Portugal, Italy, the United Kingdom, China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Korea and Indonesia.

The curators were chosen based on their proven interest in cross-cultural contexts.

Interesting was the fact that all the participants had a certain level of curatorial experience and each was trying to give their best to what they thought was the best in their specific situations.

Remarkably, 12 of the 18 curators were women, with Birgitte Bjerregaard and Fong Hwa Chi from South Korea working as curators in The Netherlands and Sweden, while Italian Natalie Colonello is a curator in Beijing. Hungarian artist/curator Csaba Holubik works in Hong Kong and Maria Jose Albuquerque Tavares from Portugal works at the Audio-Visual and Interactive Technology Services of Macao’s Scientific and Cultural Center in Macau.

Meanwhile, the only male participant outside his home country was the global curator Thomas Berger of Germany, who is now working in Hong Kong.

Goethe Institut secretary-general Hans-Georg Knopp (center, wearing glasses) takes part in a discussion attended by 18 curators from Asia and Europe during the Multifaceted Curator seminar in Bandung, West Java. Goethe Institut organized the event to find new strategies for the changing role of curators.

So in the context of contemporary art developments and increasing cultural exchange, in this case between Asia and Europe, what is the curator’s role, does he/she work alone or in a team, how does a curator relate to his/her employer and what role does the artist, the environment, cultural issues, in the local/global constellation, and how about the curator’s responsibility toward the artists, the artworks, contemporary art developments and society?

The curatorial practices of the 18 participants appear to have similar conceptual visions toward developing contemporary art and engaging the general public, but face different realities vis-a-vis geographical, historical, sociopolitical and cultural characteristics and place-specific strategies have to be followed.

In Vietnam, for instance, as gallery owner and curator Du Thanh Thai Mai revealed, where both the public and the government are not very familiar with contemporary art, she organizes exhibitions inviting high-profile international speakers, which nevertheless require endless patience to explain the importance of the event for the bureaucracy to issue a permit.

The question of curator/artist relations came with a special note in the case of the recent Indonesian CF Bienale, where some artists are now facing the threat of imprisonment for an alleged uncompromising work exhibited at the event.

Unlike in Europe, or the West in general, most Asian countries do not boast a long tradition of curatorial practice, and exhibitions are often in either off-spaces or commercial galleries led by freelance curators who lack training or experience. On the other hand, curators from abroad who have international experience need to familiarize themselves with site-specific social and cultural contexts.

So how to help close the gap?

One suggestion was for joint curatorial exhibitions in which a few curators from different countries would take part. Some have already outlined a big project in which all the curators of the workshop would join the curatorial team.

Another suggestion, which may have a broader impact, is to establish an Open Academy for Curatorial Studies, for which the European participants could become the resource in a vice-versa benefit of cultural knowledge/practice. Eun Supriyanto, curator-art critic, suggested the academy start in Indonesia, where it could eventually expand to other countries in the region.

If this happens, then surely various comments made in the seminar should be borne in mind. For one, Karen Detor, a graduate of Ecole du Magasin-CNAC Grenoble, who has an master of arts in art history from the Sorbonne, who blends permanent work with freelance curatorial practice, noted the importance of deliberation in cultural, post-colonial and gender studies.

Eileen Lagaspi Ramirez from the Philippines, who engages in considerations on how intra- and cross-cultural exchanges in the spheres of art and scholarship and curatorial practice can lead to mutual understanding, the ideal curator should also be knowledgeable in such parallel fields as international law, visual communications, education, new technology, sociology, cultural studies, politics, economics, etc.

Perhaps most importantly, as seasoned international curator Ute Meta Bauer, noted on being a curator is to instill a sense of the urgency of providing access to contemporary practices, in which having a backbone, imagination and passion are paramount.

The dynamic group and individual discussions during the week in Jakarta and Bandung on issues of identity, language, local and global, presentation and representation have certainly led to important insights, fostered the forging of close relationships, and was an important stage in each of the participants’ experiences of cross-cultural encounters, a major contribution to the cultivation of relationships between the self and others.

It is hoped that the “seeds” planted in the workshop will eventually flower in the not too distant future.
For Ute Meta Bauer, the most important responsibility of a curator is providing access to education, including an understanding of artistic practices.

Recently appointed director of the Visual Arts Program at the Department of Architecture at MIT, Bauer is a seasoned curator, a term which, for her, implies an understanding of education. Her participation in a recent one-week workshop on the butterfly curve in Jakarta and Bonn added significance to her search for new strategies towards a wider ranging role of the curator.

"It's not about curatorial autonomy; it's about artistic reflection and engaging the public in the discourse, in the process of creation," Bauer said in an interview on the last day of the Centre for Curatorial Studies. "We call it 'collaborative,'" Bauer added.

As a professional, Bauer has always been interested in exploring the boundaries between art and society. In 1999, she founded "Endurance," a workshop organized in cooperation with the "Artists in Residence Program." In 2001, Bauer established the "Bauer Art Foundation" in Hamburg, where she received her diploma with honours in Visual Communication/Design in 1987, as artistic director of Staatliche Kunsthalle, Stuttgart (1990 to 1994), her program, which was structured around re-identifying institutional parameters to consider current artistic practices, included reviewing historically classified practices, such as Toni Tàpies and Bernard Katz. These issues emerged in her curating of Architectures at Discoveries (Barcelona, 2001), First Story: Women Building New Narratives for the 21st Century for the European Cultural Capital-Premises, and the exhibition "Art History in the Age of the Image." In 2005, she was the Artistic Director of Haus Konstruktiv in Hamburg, Hamburg, where she directed the "Biennale for Contemporary Art." In 2007, she founded "Endurance," a workshop organized in cooperation with the "Artists in Residence Program." In 2009, Bauer established the "Bauer Art Foundation," a non-profit organization, which is dedicated to promoting contemporary art and artists through various programs and initiatives.

At the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Bauer has been the founding director of the Norwegian Office for Contemporary Art (ONCA), a private foundation founded by the Ministry of Culture and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to develop collaborations in contemporary art between Norway and the international art scene.

Bauer's career has been marked by a commitment to exploring the intersections between art, culture, and society. Her efforts have been dedicated to advancing the understanding of contemporary art and its role in shaping society. Bauer's vision for the future is one of dialogue and collaboration, where art is seen as a vital force for change and transformation.