

Becoming a Curator & Working with Curators

Video Transcript

Hi and welcome to this video: How to become a curator and how to work with curators. My name is Josephine Reichert and I'm the artistic director of Ort Gallery and today is video number four out of four so there's three videos that have come before this in the series, so please do check them out. All the links are down below in the description box. There's a lot of overlap in what I say in these videos so please make sure that you go and have a look at those as well.

Today's video is funded by Arts Council so thank you very much for the support. As a audio description of myself I'm a white woman in my 30s, I have dark blonde hair that's nearly shoulder length, I am wearing chunky brown wooden earrings and a bright yellow top.

Just a quick disclaimer: today's video is very much based on my own experience of my career over the past 9/10 years in the UK arts industry so some of the things I'll be saying might be specific to the UK and might not apply in other countries and also it's very much my own experience so it's definitely not an exhaustive list of things that will help you become a curator or work with curators.

So in part one I'll be talking about how to become a curator and then in part two I'll be talking about how to work with curators. I encourage you to watch both parts because there will be a lot of learning, even from an artist's point of view on how to become a curator can really help you to understand how to work with curators. Of course you're a free person you can do what you like.

So part one: becoming a curator. Some curators actually study curation at university

level and others, like myself start out as artists and then become curators over time. So in video 1 I talk about finding your unique selling point. I think it's really important in any career that you understand who you are and what you're interested in. This [can] take a lot of time, it took a few years for me to really grasp what my passions were in contemporary art. So therefore it's really important to read a lot, to go and see lots of exhibitions because this unique selling point will be extremely important down the line when you are setting up exhibitions.

Curators especially freelance curators are often sort of middle people between organizations and artists and so it's really important to know exactly what it is... what you what your niche is, what your field of expertise and your knowledge is so that when you approach an organization or you approach an artist they can understand why you approach them, they will respect you for the work that you've done or

the writing that you've done so this expertise that you're sort of creating and the niche that you're carving out for yourself also becomes your CV and your reputation.

A lot of curators read and write a lot because it means that they stay up-to-date on trends in the contemporary art scene and they ensure that they don't double up things that are already happening but they are also furthering the debate. Often the curator writes the interpretation around the exhibition and artists rely on curators to support them with that. So it's really important to have practice in writing and one way of getting becoming a better writer is to read loads.

Okay, so you are pretty clear on the bits that I just said but you want to launch yourself now as a curator. How do you do this? Well you put on an exhibition right? I encourage you to watch video 2 where I talk about finding and taking up opportunities because the things I

say in there will apply to you as a curator as well.

How do you put on a show? Well you have to find a space whether this is an art space or a more unconventional space and you have to find artists you want to exhibit. If you have never put on a show before you might want to see whether you can shadow a curator when they're working whether this is in a placement or a volunteering opportunity or maybe there is an assistant curator role that an organization is looking for so it's worth looking out for those opportunities because they will give you work experience, they will also give you a better understanding of all the different elements that go into putting on an exhibition and you'll also meet curators which is always a good thing.

You might have to fundraise to put on exhibitions. There are trusts and foundations who support curators to put on exhibitions

so it's worth looking into for that.

You might already have a load of artists who you'd like to work with or maybe you just have a general idea of who you'd like to work with so if you are an emerging curator it might be worth also finding emerging artists to work with unless you have contacts of people further on in their career then that's fine but it will be easier for you to convince essentially emerging talent emerging artists to work with you because they'll also be interested in getting that experience.

There's also specific organizations like International Curators Forum who specifically work with curators they put out opportunities, they put out paid opportunities or similar organizations might support you in taking some time to research and design exhibitions etc so it's always worth looking out for those opportunities that are specifically aimed at curators, ideally emerging curators.

If you curate an exhibition in a unusual space [like] a cafe, a library, an empty shop front then that can really be a testbed for you to test out new ideas try out different approaches. Don't just follow what everybody else is doing, you know, you're trying to find your unique selling point. So how do you do this? You have to try out things and take the time to do this.

Setting up exhibitions can essentially be a very quick process: that goes there, that goes there, that goes there... sorted! But for me personally as a curator a lot more goes into it a lot more thinking. So now, having worked in the field for nearly a decade I go through a whole process before the installation day. Actually I think about the the theme of the exhibition: Is there some research I need to do? Is there maybe a focus group that I need to hold to get some input from people from the community that I'm inviting to this exhibition? Are there any difficult issues within the exhibition that I want

to make sure I preempt? Do I need to speak to the police? Do I need to put a trigger warning on the door and online?

So all of that thinking happens before the day of the show [hanging]. And also the writing of course, so the intro panel is written: How is it written? What size font? How do I make sure that the exhibition is accessible? Is it using simple language? Is the font in a large size? And then also when hanging I try and think about accessibility all the time so can someone in a wheelchair even see the artwork if you hang it where you're got to hang it? For someone who's never been to an art gallery before will your show be really intimidating?

So you need to bear your... bear in mind who your audience is going to be and also what kind of an audience you're hoping to attract. Even if with your first show you're not going to attract everybody who you'd like to reach that

doesn't mean that you can't make your exhibition as accessible as possible.

As a curator you'll be working with artists and you're supporting them with their career. You'll be a critical friend, you'll be an ally. You can also be working with these people for years and years so it's really worth making sure you know really who they are, you pick artists who you know you really respect them not just for one series of work but essentially the person, you know, their ethics, their politics. Do you agree with those?

Supporting artists can can be done in lots of different ways so it might be that you check in with people on a regular basis, it might be that you become a kind of mentor, it might be that you just follow their career, write to them when you, you know, you see they've had a great show somewhere write to them and congratulate them and when you don't hear from them for a while check in with them, find

out what's going on, maybe you can support that.

Being an ally sometimes... often also means having difficult conversations so make sure that you educate yourself and you are also able to support people with difficult issues. So if thing comes up, like I said earlier, around a trigger warning, you know, if it's a show about mental health and you are maybe worried about the artist or about the audiences or about yourself try and find help, try and find support that's already out there so that you can make sure that everybody's, you know, well and safe within that exhibition context.

Another way of being an ally to artists is to make sure that they get paid. So you have to get paid as the curator but so does the artist and so does everybody involved. In every one of these videos, I think, I've talked about volunteering as exploitation because the line is so extremely fine when something is sold to

someone as an opportunity but really they're just not being paid for work that they're doing. If you are in direct contact with an organization and you are sort of saying to that artist: "Oh you know I'd love for you to come on board" you are essentially the person that they sign the contract with even if the contract [is with] the organization. You are the one responsible, you got them involved in the first place. That's great, you know, well done on you, but make sure that that carries through till the end: they get paid, they get paid on time, they get paid appropriately.

All of this you can find out via Living Wage Foundation and similar, Artist Newsletter (a-n)... make sure you research and you also stand up for it when it goes wrong.

You also become a project manager when you curate an exhibition so you have to be very well organized. If you're not well organized make sure that you become well organized.

What I mean by that is: write lists, write [down] deadlines, make sure that everybody who's involved in the show knows from beginning to end what's going to happen, write a timeline, you know, when does... when do things need to go to print so that they're out in time? All of these things are really good to test in these initial exhibitions when you have less pressure on you.

If you're putting on an exhibition at a different space that isn't yours so, you know, whether that's a cafe or like an arts organization you need to make sure that you are in constant conversation with them, that you liaise with them regularly: this is what's gonna happen, these are my concerns, these are my areas where I need to be supported don't just go in thinking that you can do everything. All of this is a learning curve. It's fine to say, you know, this is... it's early stages in my career I'm gonna need support with this. As long as you are very clear people will respect you for that. So don't

pretend that everything's fine and then the day of the opening you know everything falls apart.

For me as a curator there's also an element of audience engagement so this depends on the size of the organization, they might have an audience engagement officer who you will be liaising with, it might be the marketing team, it might be the learning team or it might be a very small organization where basically you have to do all of that so make sure that you are very aware of who you're targeting.

Targeting is one of those buzz words used in the arts industry, essentially it just means: who is the exhibition for? Obviously the exhibition is probably for everybody but who might specifically be interested in it? Which communities, which groups? What age are these people? And it might just be that you want to contact people in a more clever way so you send flyers to youth centres or you ring up some church or other faith groups to

see whether they'd be interested in coming to see the show if, you know, you think they'd be interested in it from the subject matter of the exhibition. Whatever it is do research, think about that at the beginning of the planning for the exhibition.

So part two of this video is how to work with a curator as an artist. As I said in the part one of this video a curator is often a sort of middle person between an organization and a artist whether this curator is actually employed by the organization or they are freelance they will become this sort of middle person, they will be liaising between the two. So for you as an artist having a curator on your side is brilliant.

You can make sure that you have a critical friend in them, they can look at your work and they can say: "Oh you know this isn't quite there yet, you need to improve this" and it's very difficult as artists to have these critical friends so this can really be someone who is

very honest with you and says, you know, "You need to you need to improve this body of work" for example. But they can also be an ally to you as I mentioned.

So how do you find a curator to work with?

Firstly research, it goes back to research.

Using the websites of organizations who you look up to: look at who curates shows in these organizations. Exhibitions that you've been to and that you loved: look at who curated those, next time, every time you go to a gallery from now on and you go and see an exhibition: check who curated that show.

Find curators on Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and as you're doing the research essentially keep a list of these people and then dig a little bit deeper: do you align with their thoughts, their politics, the things they say online? Do you agree with them? You don't just need any old curator, you need someone who you trust and someone who you can work with who will

represent you essentially. So make sure that, you know, you really agree with that person's standpoint.

Ideal case scenario you find someone who's a little bit further ahead in their career so that they can I guess help you up a little bit on that ladder but that's not necessarily always possible or also always necessary. It's great maybe for your first experience of working with a curator to just have a very low-key experience where where you put on a small show maybe even in your own studio and you just figure out with each other how this working relationship is going to work. If it's their first time curating an exhibition as well it's a really great way of just getting your head around all the different aspects that you both need to think about when putting on your show.

So once you've identified people who you'd love to work with you can follow them on

Instagram, you can go to exhibition openings where they worked on, you can introduce yourself and again I would really say be very specific don't just say, you know: "Hi I'm Josie, I'm an artist, I'd love to work with you". Say why: "I feel like we have a lot in common, I feel like I really respect you for the work that you've done, I love the show you did at X, I feel like it's good for you as well to represent me as an artist because of this" So show this artist sorry show this curator that you've done your research that you know who they are and that you're not coming up them completely cold you've, you know, you're prepared.

Curators will obviously also do research and go to exhibition openings so you can invite curators to your own shows and if anybody shows up at your show make sure that you talk to them that you introduce yourself personally that you set up that personal rapport. You can also speak to other artists who you know and

who might already have contacts to curators and you can ask them to introduce you.

Look out for opportunities where there is a curator part of this opportunity so whether it is a commission or a residency or very commonly studio visits tend to be done by curators or similar individuals so those are great opportunities to apply for because it makes... it gives you another way of meeting curators and introducing yourself and your practice.

So now hopefully you've found someone you're going to work with how do you make the most of this opportunity? Firstly make sure that you are very aware that this is an opportunity. This individual is there for you and they're going to be supporting you to put whatever it is exhibition or event on with you. So don't underestimate how much this can be an opportunity. I feel like often artists underestimate it and they don't make the most of it.

So how do you make the most of it? At the beginning make sure that you speak to them a lot you make it very clear what your expectations are. So, for example, if in the past you haven't been paid by an organization speak to them about it, say: "I would really like to make sure that in this case I actually get paid or I get paid on time". If they have certain contacts ask them to introduce you. If you have certain access requirements make sure that they support you with that so they go to the organization and say this individual needs whatever it is. If they have connections to certain organizations ask them to make that liaison for you. Make sure that you really exploit all of these avenues because it's so rare to have this opportunity don't just let all of those things go by.

Ask lots of questions, be open to criticism, don't be upset when someone says something that you didn't expect. You have the right to be upset when someone criticizes your work, but

once you've got over the stage of being upset then go back to thinking about why they might have said this and whether that's true or not. It's fine if it wasn't true well you know opinions differ but it is so much better to have a critical friend and to have criticism than to just plow on and think: Why did no one ever say anything? Don't ever think that you already know everything it might seem very obvious but trust me from my experience a lot of people come across as they do. Sometimes confidence can be mistaken as arrogance so make sure that you seem humble and open when you are meeting people.

And finally make sure that you set up a long term relationship with this individual so if they don't check in with you, just send them your newsletter or ask them if you can sign them up to your newsletter. Once in a while send them an update personally as a curator I still... this still happens I catch up with people and they catch up with me and I always find it hugely

important when people after a six months or one year sort of radio silence suddenly pop up in my email inbox and I'm like: "Oh what have they been up to this is brilliant" and I... just because I've worked with someone in the past doesn't mean that I won't do it again so you know there are... there might be more opportunities further down the line for you as an artist so make sure that you don't miss out on that by just sort of saying: "Oh well you know tick that one off, I have now finished my relationship with this individual... next!"

So I really hope that this has been helpful for you. If you have any questions please don't hesitate to leave them below or you can also email me. My email will be in the description box below. Thank you very much for watching, thanks to Arts Council for supporting this and bye!

Josephine Reichert, Artistic Director, Ort Gallery, 19 June 2020