

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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Do It With Style

Meg Cranston

From the artist's perspective, curators are like hairdressers. The best ones make you look good, the worst ones ask how they should cut your hair. The problem with curators is that so many of them do the latter. It is not, as others have complained, that curators want to take over the artist function. The problem is they concede the curatorial one.

Out of misplaced reverence, or possibly sheer incompetence, they hand over the primary responsibility of assigning emphasis within an artist's work—that primary process of selection and arrangement—entirely to the artist. Directly or indirectly, they ask the artist to style the show, to, in a sense, cut their own hair, and the results are predictably disappointing.

Some artists, of course, can actually cut their own hair. Martin Kippenberger was a brilliant curator of his own works. He was so good at it that the unintended vibe of his posthumous exhibitions has been largely melancholic. We miss the upbeat and generous Kippenberger style that is apparently not easy to achieve, even with the help of photographs.

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Richard Hamilton, who told me he never curated an exhibition, could, in any case, design and move the furniture around in miraculous ways. Hamilton said millimeters matter, and indeed they do. He didn't have masterpieces to work with when he designed exhibitions for the ICA London, but he was 100x more vibrant than many who did.

A talented curator should be able to arrange old coffee filters in such a way that audiences will pay for the pleasure of standing among them. No wall text is needed. Duchamp and Warhol were both artistic and curatorial innovators because they were unabashedly unafraid to take charge of the decor. Such artists, however, are exceptions to the rule. For the most part, artists need curators or the audience doesn't get what it came for. Artists can easily survive without curators, but the audience can't. That is not to say that audience members are idiots who need a signpost at every turn, but they do need an enthusiastic plan, lest the work come off as remote, pretentious, or boring.

Typically, a young curator will come to the studio of an established artist with great enthusiasm and absolutely no plan. Usually well coiffed, the young curator sits there, cheerfully checking text messages, waiting for the artist to suggest something brilliant. This is justified as "not wanting to interfere." Generous as that may sound, it can also be interpreted as the curator wanting to check text messages while the artist devises the essential plan to make everyone look like genius—a fairly weighty and unpaid assignment.

If curators are like hairdressers, then artists should be thought of as actors. Our brothers and sisters in the acting profession have it right: if you want them, you first have to send them a script. No script—no movie star. In many exhibitions there is clearly a star, but no director, no set designer, no hairdresser, and no lively script on which to hang it all.

A shocking example of this was the Franz West exhibition organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art and shown in 2009 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Franz West is clearly one of the best and most respected living artists—a star by any measure. Generally, his exhibitions are exuberant and life affirming. The LACMA show reversed the norm. By virtue of its countless MDF sculpture bases (not of West's design), its oppressively low ceilings, putrid fluorescent lighting, and a 30-foot vinyl mural blazoned with pull quotes about art, the exhibition had the appeal of a discount dress shop.

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Is that any way to treat a star?

Artists who use video projectors, unless they are primarily sculptors, need special help. The problem of video projection underscores a larger concern. Younger curators in particular tend to see their job as a hermeneutic pursuit to uncover or properly define the themes illustrated by objects in the work. This is curator as journalist. The problem is, journalists are storytellers. Their stories can appear in any type (preferably bold) and ideally, they get to the truth behind appearances. In this model, the exhibition doesn't really matter.

Curating should be the opposite. It should be more like hairdressing, with the goal of creating a captivating appearance that eases the burden of received notions of truth. Artists don't really care what the curator thinks the work means, or what the show is allegedly about. When it comes to the hairdresser, all the artist cares about is that the work looks its best. We depend on curators to make that miracle happen.

To that end, curators should have a profound understanding of appearances and a real flair for the superficial. They must be keenly aware of current trends and brazenly obsessed with façade. To be effective, curators must work intuitively, and be flattering, snobbish, precise, and imaginative. Their insights must elevate the work to an overall lyric manifestation of grandeur and pertinence. And fashion. How else can an artwork ever find love.

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