Curating Creativity

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"For every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency."

– **Jorge Luis Borges**, *Library of Babel* (1)

The British-Australian art curator Nick Waterlow was tragically murdered on November 9, 2009, in the Sydney suburb of Randwick. His untimely death shocked the Australian art community, not only because of the gruesome nature of his death – Waterlow was stabbed alongside his daughter by his mentally ill son (2) – but also because his death represented a major blow to the burgeoning Australian art community. He was a highly-regarded art curator (3) who had served as a director of the Sydney Biennale and international art exhibitions and was also an art ambassador who brought together artists and audiences from all over the world.

After his untimely death, his partner Juliet Darling discovered some notes that Waterlow had jotted down shortly before his untimely death to characterize what defines and motivates a good art curator, and he gave them the eerily prescient title "A Curator's Last Will and Testament":

> 1. Passion
> 2. An eye of discernment
> 3. An empty vessel
> 4. An ability to be uncertain
> 5. Belief in the necessity of art and artists
> 6. A medium — bringing a passionate and informed understanding of works of art to an audience in ways that will stimulate, inspire, question
> 7. Making possible the altering of perception

Waterlow's notes help dismantle the cliché of stuffy old curators walking around in museums who ensure that their collections remain unblemished and instead portray the curator as a passionate person who is motivated by a desire to inspire artists and audiences alike.

The Evolving Roles of Curators

The traditional role of the curator was closely related to the Latin origins of the word, "curare," which means "to take care of," "to nurse," or "to look after." Curators of museums or art collections were primarily in charge of preserving, overseeing, archiving, and cataloging the artifacts that were placed under their guardianship. As outlined in *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (4) by Terry Smith, the latter half of 20th century witnessed the emergence of new roles for art curators, both private curators and those formally employed as curators by museum or art collections. Curators not only organized art exhibitions but were given an increasing degree of freedom in terms of choosing the artists and themes of the exhibitions and creating innovative opportunities for artists to interact with their

audiences. The art exhibition itself became a form of art, a collage of art assembled by the curators in a unique manner.

Curatorial roles can be broadly divided into three domains:

1. Custodial – perhaps most in line with traditional curating in which the curator primarily maintains or preserves art collections.
2. Navigatory – a role that has traditionally focused on archiving and cataloging pieces of art so that audiences can readily access art.
3. Discerning – the responsibility of a curator to decide which artists and themes to include and feature, using the "eye of discernment" described by Nick Waterlow..

Creativity and Curating

The diverse roles of curators are characterized by an inherent tension. Curators are charged with conserving and maintaining art (and by extension, culture) in their custodial roles, but they also seek out new forms of art and experiment with novel ways to exhibit art in their electoral roles. Terry Smith's *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (4) shows how the boundaries between curator and artist are becoming blurry, because exhibiting art itself requires an artistic and creative effort. Others feel that the curators or exhibition-makers need to be conscious of their primary role as facilitators and that they should not "compete" with the artists whose works they are exhibiting. This raises the question of whether the process of curating art is actually creative.

It is difficult to find a universal and generally accepted definition of what constitutes creativity because it is such a subjective concept, but the definition provided by Jonathan Plucker and colleagues in their paper *Why Isn't Creativity More Important to Educational Psychologists? Potentials, Pitfalls, and Future Directions in Creativity Research* (5) is an excellent starting point:

> Creativity is the interaction among *aptitude, process, and environment* by which an individual or group produces a *perceptible product* that is both *novel* and *useful* as defined within a *social context*.

Using this definition, assembling an art exhibition is indeed creative – it generates a "perceptible product" that is both novel and useful to the audiences that attend the exhibition as well as to the artists who are being provided new opportunities to showcase their work. The aptitude, process, and environment that go into the assembly and design of an art exhibition differ among all curators, so that each art exhibition reflects the creative signature of a unique curator.

Ubiquity of Curators

The formal title "curator" is commonly used for art curators or museum curators, but curatorial activity – in its custodial, navigatory, and discerning roles – is not limited to these professions. Librarians, for example, have routinely acted as curators of books. Their

traditional focus has been directed toward their custodial and navigatory roles, cataloging and preserving books, and helping readers navigate through the vast jungle of published books.

Unlike the key role that art curators play in organizing art exhibitions, librarians are not the primary organizers of author readings, book fairs, or other literary events, which are instead primarily organized by literary magazines, literary agents, publishers, or independent bookstores. It remains to be seen whether the literary world will also witness the emergence of librarians as curators of such literary events, similar to what has occurred in the art world. Our local public library occasionally organizes a "Big Read" event for which librarians select a specific book and recommend that the whole community read the book. The librarians then lead book discussions with members of the community and also offer additional reading materials that relate to the selected book. Such events do not have the magnitude of an art exhibition, but they are innovative means by which librarians interact with and inspire readers.

One of the most significant curatorial contributions in German literary history was the collection of fairy tales and folk tales by the Brothers Grimm (6) (*Brüder Grimm* or *Gebrüder Grimm*), Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Readers may not always realize how much intellectual effort went into assembling the fairy tales, many of which co-existed in various permutations depending on the region of where the respective tales were being narrated. I own a copy of the German language edition of the *Children's and Household Tales* (*Kinder und Hausmärchen*) (7), which contains all their original annotations. These annotations allow the reader to peek behind the scenes and see the breadth of their curatorial efforts, especially their "eye of discernment." For example, the version of Snow White that the Brothers Grimm chose for their final edition contains the infamous scene in which the evil Queen asks her mirror, "Mirror, Mirror on the wall, Who is the prettiest in all the land?" She naturally expects the mirror to say that the Queen is the prettiest because she just finished feasting on what she presumed were Snow White's liver and lungs and is convinced that Snow White is dead. According to the notes of the Brothers Grimm, there was a different version of the Snow White tale in which the Queen does not ask a mirror but instead asks Snow White's talking pet dog, which is cowering under a bench after Snow White's disappearance and happens to be called "Spiegel" (German for "Mirror")! I am eternally grateful for the curatorial efforts of the Brothers Grimm because I love the symbolism of the Queen speaking to a mirror and because I do not have to agonize over understanding why Snow White named her pet dog "Mirror" or expect a Disneyesque movie with the title "Woof Woof" instead of "Mirror Mirror."

Internet Curators

The Internet is now providing us access to an unprecedented and overwhelming amount of information. Every year, millions of articles, blog posts, images, and videos are being published online. Older texts, images, and videos that were previously published in more traditional formats are also being made available for online consumption. The book *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (8) by James Gleick is quite correct in using expressions such as "information glut" or "deluge" to describe how we are drowning in

information. Gleick also aptly uses the allegory of the *Library of Babel* (9), a brilliant short story written by Jorge Luis Borges about an imaginary library consisting of hexagonal rooms that is finite in size but contains an unfathomably large number of books, all possible permutations of sequences of letters. Most of these books are pure gibberish because they are random sequences of letters, but amidst billions of such books, one is bound to find at least a handful with some coherent phrases. Borges' story also mentions a mythical "Book-Man," a god-like librarian who has seen the ultimate cipher to the library, a book that is the compendium of all other books. Borges originally wrote the story in 1941, long before the Internet era, but the phrase, "For every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency" rings even more true today when we think of the information available on the web.

This overwhelming and disorienting torrent of digital information has given rise to a new group of curators, Internet or web curators, who primarily focus on the navigatory and discerning roles of curatorship. Curatorial websites or blogs such as 3quarksdaily, Brainpickings, or Longreads comb through mountains of online information and try to select a handful of links to articles, essays, poems, short stories, videos, images, or books that they deem to be the most interesting, provocative, or inspiring for their readers. They disseminate these links to their readers and followers by posting excerpts or quotes on their respective websites or by using social media networks such as Twitter. The custodial role of preserving online information is not really the focus of Internet curators; instead, Internet curators are primarily engaged in navigatory and discerning roles. In addition to the emergence of professional Internet curatorship through such websites or blogs, a number of individuals have also begun to function as volunteer Internet curators and help manage digital information.

Analogous to art curatorship, Internet curatorship also requires a significant creative effort. Each Internet curator uses individual criteria to create their own collage of information and themes they focus on. Even when Internet curators have thematic overlaps, they may still decide to feature or disseminate very different types of information because the individuals engaged in curatorship have very distinct tastes and subjective curatorial criteria. One curator's chaff is another curator's wheat.

Formal Education and Training in Internet Curation

There are no formal training programs that train people to become Internet curators. Most popular Internet curators usually have a broad range of interests ranging from the humanities, arts, and sciences to literature and politics. They use their own experience and expertise in these areas to help them select the best links that they then pass on to their readers or followers. Some Internet curators are open to suggestions from their readers, thus crowd-sourcing their curatorial activity; others routinely browse selected websites or social media feeds of individuals they deem to be the most interesting; others may plug in their favorite words to scour the web for intriguing new articles.

Internet curation will become even more important in the next decades as the amount of information we amass will likely continue to grow exponentially. Not just individuals, but

even corporations and governments, will need Internet curators who can sift through information and distill it down to manageable levels without losing critical content. In light of this anticipated need for Internet curators, one should ask the question whether it is time to envision formal training programs that help prepare people for future jobs as Internet curators. Internet curation is both an art and a science – the art of the curatorial process is to creatively assemble information in a manner that attracts and inspires readers while the science of Internet curation involves using search algorithms that do not just rely on subjective and arbitrary criteria but systematically interrogate vast amounts of information that are now globally available. A Bachelor's or Master's degree program in Internet Curation could conceivably train students in the art and science of Internet curation.

Q-Credit

In scientific manuscripts, it is common for scientists to cite the preceding work of colleagues. Other colleagues who provide valuable tools, such as plasmids for molecular biology experiments, are cited in the "Acknowledgements" section of a manuscript. Colleagues whose input substantially contributed to the manuscript and scientific work are included as co-authors. Current academic etiquette does not necessarily acknowledge the curatorial efforts of scientists who may have nudged their colleagues into a certain research direction by forwarding an important paper that they might have otherwise ignored.

Especially in world in which meaningful information is becoming one of our most valuable commodities, it might be time to start acknowledging the flux of information that shapes our thinking and our creativity. We are beginning to recognize the importance of people who are links in the information chain and help separate out meaningful information from the "senseless cacophony." Perhaps we should therefore also acknowledge all the sources of information, not only those who generated it but also those who manage the information or guide us towards the information. Such a *curatorial credit,* or Q-credit, could be added to the end of an article. It would not only acknowledge the intellectual efforts of the information curators, but it could also serve as a curation map that would inspire readers to look at the individual elements in the information chain. The readers would be able to consult the nodes or elements that were part of the information chain (instead of just relying on lone cited references) and choose to take alternate curation paths.

I will try to illustrate a Q-credit using the example of Abbas Raza, who pointed me towards a 3quarksdaily discussion of "Orientalism" and an essay by the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami. Even though I had previously read Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, the profound insights in Bilgrami's essay made me re-read Edward Said's book. The Q-credit could be acknowledged as follows:

Q-Credit: Abbas Raza --> *The 2008 3Quarksdaily Forum on Occidentalism* (10) --> *Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment* (11) by Akeel Bilgrami published 2008 on 3Quarksdaily.com and 2006 in *Critical Inquiry* (12) --> Bilgrami identifies five broad themes in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (13)

The acknowledgement of information flux is already part of the Twitter netiquette. The German theologian Barbara Mack uses her Twitter handle @faraway67 to curate important new articles about history, science, music, photography, linguistics, and literature. She sees the role of web curators similar to that of music conductors, who do not compose original pieces of music but instead enable the access of an audience to the original creative work. She says that "web curation is a relatively new field of dealing with information, and good curation is an act of creativity which requires dedication and a keen sense for content." She agrees that curators should indeed be given credit, "not only out of courtesy but to acknowledge their efforts of taking upon the challenge of bringing the vast information the web provides into a handy form for their followers to enjoy."

Twitter curators like Barbara Mack use abbreviations such as h/t (hat-tip) or RT (retweet), followed by a Twitter handle to acknowledge their sources. Contemporary Twitter netiquette suggests that if curated links are of use to followers, these should acknowledge the curators' efforts before tweeting them on.

One challenge that is intrinsic to Twitter (but may in an analogous fashion apply to other social media networks as well) is that each tweet can only contain 140 characters, which presently makes it very difficult to acknowledge the comprehensive curatorial information flux. If I decide to tweet on an interesting article about the philosophy of science, which I found in the Twitter feed of person X, the space limitations may make it impossible for me to give credit to all the preceding members of the information chain that had directed X's attention to that specific article. The Q-credit system may thus be best suited for acknowledgements at the end of blog posts or articles but not for social media messaging with strict space limitations.

The Future of Internet Curation

The area of Internet curation is still in its infancy, and it is very difficult to predict how it will evolve. Managing online information will become increasingly important. Even though such managerial roles may not necessarily carry the title "Internet curator," there is little doubt that managing online information in a meaningful manner is one of the biggest challenges that we will face in the 21st century. I am quite optimistic that we will be able to address this challenge, but the first hurdle is to recognize it.

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Q-Credits

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2. *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (2012) by Terry Smith --> Information about Nick Waterlow and still image from *A Curator's Last Will and Testament*

3. Book review of *The Information* at *Brainpickings* --> *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (2011) by James Gleick --> *Library of Babel* by Jorge Luis Borges as an allegory for the information glut