

The Role Positioning and Survival Status of “Contractor” Style Curators in Contemporary China

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Abstract: In the context of the thriving development of contemporary art, the curators’ authority in exhibitions is increasingly strengthened, leading to a growing demand for professionals in art curation. The number of curators continues to rise, and their status and role within the art ecosystem are widely acknowledged. However, the working environment and conditions for contemporary art curators in China are not optimistic. Their development has not been as ideal as expected, with both subjective and objective issues and contradictions present. In light of the various problems and contradictions facing the curator community in China, it is essential to conduct an in-depth analysis of these issues to gain a clear understanding of the art curation industry and to truly respect the work of art curators.

Keywords: “Foreman” curator; Art exhibition; Art ecology

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1. Introduction

In China, the curator community is typically divided into two types: institutional curators and independent curators. Institutional curators work within art institutions such as museums, galleries, and art centers, focusing on exhibition planning. They often hold permanent positions, like museum and gallery curators. In contrast, independent curators are not affiliated with any institution. They serve not only as theorists and critics but also as event planners, organizers, and communicators. They are involved in art exhibitions from the initial concept and planning stages to the final conclusion, acting as witnesses to the birth and end of the exhibition, as well as creators in every aspect. Independent curators engage in curatorial practices with a distinct autonomy, playing a unique and indispensable role in contemporary art. This article focuses on the group of independent curators engaging in curatorial practices in China, exploring their current status and analyzing their characteristics, aiming to provide a comprehensive presentation of this group’s overall landscape and unique value within the contemporary art context ^[1].

2. The “role positioning” of the “foreman” curator

In China, the roles of most independent curators are ambiguous, and many hold other positions as well. Some curators have different primary professions but remain active in the curatorial field for extended periods while others may only occasionally “guest” as curators. The composition of the curatorial community includes critics, magazine editors, university teachers, gallery managers, collectors, artists, and more. If we were to strictly identify the “identities” within this group, we would find that there are very few true “independent curators” in China. Some even argue that there are no purely independent curators existing in the country at all.

Renowned curator, Feng Boyi once expressed that the ideal state for curators is to be “directors,” while the reality is often that of “contractors”^[2]. The “contractor” style curator is primarily characterized by the way they seek out opportunities for curatorial activities, much like a contractor seeking projects. They explore various aspects of the art curation field, and once they successfully secure a project, they proceed to coordinate the various tasks involved in the curatorial process, much like distributing responsibilities in a construction project. This cycle continues, as they navigate the intricate interplay and balance between commercial interests and artistic integrity. This reflects the circumstances faced by most independent curators today.

The existence of “contractor” curators is fraught with uncertainty. They operate independently of established systems, lacking fixed job security and long-term stable sources of income. Often, after completing one exhibition, they find themselves unsure of where the next one will come from, necessitating a return to seeking new opportunities, akin to the nature of contractors. They constantly transition from “0” to “1,” and after concluding one exhibition, they revert to a “0” state. This cycle of moving from “0” to “1” not only tests their professional capabilities but also challenges their psychological resilience and resource integration skills. Pursuing curation as their sole profession without other financial support can be quite difficult, which is a significant reason why many independent curators in China hold part-time jobs in other fields. In the art world, resources and connections are crucial for “contractor” curators. They need to continually build relationships with entrepreneurs, art institutions, artists, and other groups to seize exhibition planning opportunities when they arise. This requires them to have not only excellent planning skills but also strong communication abilities and social skills. Only by excelling in these areas can they stand out in the highly competitive art market and secure more project opportunities.

Curating is akin to a large and complex project. When a curator takes on an exhibition project, it is similar to a contractor undertaking a construction job. From the moment they receive the task of planning the exhibition, they need to meticulously devise the overall framework and layout of the exhibition, determining the theme, style, and anticipated artistic effects, much like a contractor carefully designing a building blueprint^[3]. Next, curators must actively reach out to artists, art institutions, sponsors, and various relevant professionals, much like a contractor who organizes a construction crew. They communicate with artists about the selection and presentation of works, understanding their creative intentions and expectations, negotiate with art institutions for venue rental and equipment provisions, seek financial support from sponsors while ensuring a balance between their interests and the artistic quality of the exhibition, and coordinate with lighting designers, installation workers, and other professionals to create an environment that perfectly showcases the charm of the artworks. Throughout the preparation process, various unexpected problems and challenges inevitably arise. Just as a construction project may encounter material shortages,

delays, or technical challenges, curators may face issues such as artwork not being delivered on time, last-minute changes to the venue, or discrepancies between the installation effects and expectations.

At such moments, curators must tackle these problems with the same problem-solving skills, experience, and communication abilities as a contractor on-site, quickly finding solutions to ensure the smooth progress of the exhibition. Whether it's mediating conflicts of interest or dealing with technical difficulties, curators are at the forefront, navigating through various stages and working tirelessly to ensure the final presentation of the exhibition. This is why people jokingly refer to curators as "contractor curators." This title, however, embodies the numerous responsibilities and enormous efforts that curators undertake during the preparation process. Like the contractor in a construction project, curators are the key linchpins and core drivers that lead to the successful completion and splendid unveiling of an exhibition.

3. The current situation of contemporary "contractor" curators

The curatorial industry today is experiencing a prosperous period of growth, showcasing a vibrant landscape. With a surge in various cultural activities, the number of curatorial projects is increasing daily. This trend undoubtedly presents unparalleled opportunities for numerous curators, allowing them to showcase their talents on a broader stage and transform various art exhibitions into significant platforms for cultural dissemination and exchange. The government plays a vital role in the development of the curatorial industry, actively creating diverse platforms for communication and learning, and enabling curators to break through geographical and resource limitations. This fosters deeper exchanges of techniques and insights among peers, continuously broadening their perspectives and enhancing their professional skills.

In today's era, governments, enterprises, and commercial institutions increasingly value the organization of cultural and artistic activities, presenting unprecedented opportunities for "contractor" curators. Various commercial exhibitions are emerging rapidly, often focused on specific brands or products, using artistic display formats to attract consumer attention ^[4]. Thematic exhibitions are also proliferating, focusing either on particular cultural themes or showcasing the cultural style of specific historical periods. Curators are actively involved in the commercial realm, planning artistic and commercial fusion events for large commercial complexes, and enhancing the cultural atmosphere and appeal of commercial spaces through the clever integration of artworks and commercial settings. In the cultural field, curators participate in folk culture exhibitions, local exhibitions, and other activities that aid the transmission and innovation of traditional culture. In the technological domain, curators plan technology achievement exhibitions, emerging technology experience exhibitions, and more, perfectly merging technology and art to showcase the allure of technology. The curation industry has gradually become a focal area of broad social interest, with the acceleration of globalization leading to increased domestic and international cultural exchanges.

This trend has opened a door for curators to the world, providing them with more opportunities to access a rich array of international resources, including works by renowned foreign artists and cutting-edge curatorial concepts and methodologies. These valuable resources offer innovative ideas and methods for their curatorial work. Currently, the curatorial industry is in a period of benefit brought forth by the tide of the times, with numerous opportunities arriving one after another. However, the curatorial community presents a mixed landscape. Despite the abundance of opportunities, there remain many questions about whether curators can successfully plan high-level exhibitions that demonstrate outstanding capabilities. In China, a

considerable portion of curators is still in the initial stage of “contractor” curation, constituting the main force of independent curators. They come from diverse backgrounds, covering various industries, and include many individuals with non-professional backgrounds. Most members not only lack curatorial experience but some have absolutely no curation experience, leading to a vague and unclear understanding of the core connotations and essence of exhibitions ^[5].

Their non-professional and non-career characteristics make it challenging for them to contribute constructive and unique insights at the academic level, and they are unable to conduct in-depth and systematic research and exploration in the academic field. This undoubtedly restricts the overall progress of the curation industry towards a higher level of professionalism to some extent.

At the moment, the country is vigorously promoting the standardization process of the curatorial industry, adhering to the philosophy of fostering the healthy development of the curatorial community more effectively. Official organizations, professional art institutions, and university-affiliated museums have taken the lead in organizing a series of activities aimed at art curators. These efforts have successfully established a high-quality platform for mutual learning, exchange, and collaboration among curators, intending to promote the overall healthy development and professional skills enhancement of the curatorial industry.

In October 2014, the “Youth Curator Relay Project” was launched in Beijing, where the chief planner, Yu Xiangming, invited ten curators including He Guiyan, Hang Chunxiao, and Xia Kejun, while also publicly recruiting young curators to plan exhibitions within the area, with guidance and training provided by instructors. This initiative offered a platform for emerging curators to showcase their work and gain practical experience. In the same year, the Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum held the “Youth Curator Project,” and in 2016, under the promotion of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the “National Art Museum Youth Curator Support Program” was successfully launched, which has been running for seven years now. This program has become a benchmark in the curatorial field and a milestone for the growth of young curators, having supported the realization of 73 exhibitions. In 2020, the “Hedong Power—The First Jinan International Biennale Youth Curatorial Project” was an innovative attempt to structure a biennale, providing a curatorial platform for the domestic youth curator community and exploring contemporary art issues from various perspectives.

In addition to various training programs organized by different institutions, the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) Art Research Institute has organized the “Art Curators Training Class,” and the CFLAC is hosting the “CFLAC Visual Arts Curators Advanced Training Class.” Jointly promoted by the Curatorial Committee of the China Artists Association and the China Millennium Monument Art Museum, the “Curating and the Future” series of academic activities for young curators explores the group characteristics and development trends of Chinese curators. These activities either focus on theoretical research to uncover the deep connotations and values of curatorial art or emphasize practical exploration, aiming to apply learned theoretical knowledge to actual curatorial work. This teaching model that integrates theory and practice enables participants to gain a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of the latest developments and cutting-edge trends in the curatorial field. In the dual context of globalization and localization, it is essential to accurately grasp the pulse of the times, integrating traditional Chinese culture with modern artistic concepts to plan exhibition activities that embody both contemporary spirit and national characteristics.

In addition, there are projects funded by the National Arts Fund such as the “Youth Art +” project and

the “Support and Promotion for Young Artists” project. For example, from October 23 to December 21, 2016, the “Key Project of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles—National Youth and Middle-Aged Visual Art Curators Workshop in the USA” took place, where 20 outstanding young and middle-aged curators from various parts of the country embarked on a learning and exchange program in New York, United States of America (USA). This project has cultivated a group of young and middle-aged curatorial talents in China who possess high professional standards, strong communication skills, and an international perspective. Subsequently, this project was recognized as an important event in the field of visual arts in China.

The 2023 projects include “Virtual Curation Talent Training at Art Museums” and “Training for Young and Middle-Aged Visual Art Curators,” along with the 2024 project “Training for Talent Research in ‘Curatorial Theory in the New Era of China’.” The state, through the platform of artistic fund projects, has gathered active young curators from across the country for centralized training and guidance.

Apart from national policies and relevant artistic platforms focusing on the training of curators, higher education institutions have started to emphasize cultivating curatorial talents. For example, at the master’s degree level, the training of curatorial talent mainly arises from three professional directions: Arts Management, Cultural Industry, and Museum Studies. Some comprehensive art colleges have already specified “Art Curating” as a research direction and relevant research topics in their admission professional catalogs.

Moreover, many domestic art institutions and universities are placing greater emphasis on practical training for curators, providing opportunities for practical operations and internships to enhance the professional skills of students in related fields. Furthermore, the internal evaluation standards and critique systems within the industry are gradually being built and improved. The aim is to establish clear guidelines and norms to draft a blueprint for orderly operations in the curatorial industry, ensuring a healthy and fair competitive environment.

In today’s field of art curating, Lü Peng sharply points out a phenomenon that cannot be ignored: young people today generally lack resilience and perseverance. They find themselves in a fast-paced and impatient era, often unable to take the time to research and accumulate experience in curating. Most curators are unable to wait to cultivate themselves, and many young curators are eager to take on more projects, particularly those that attract attention, hoping to achieve quick fame while completely overlooking the deep foundations and long-term commitment that a career in art curation requires. As a result, they appear fragile when faced with the test of time. In contrast, the attitudes and approaches of the predecessors in the field of art curation are markedly different and thought-provoking.

Gao Minglu and Li Xianting, two pivotal figures in the art curating field, have only curated a little over ten exhibitions throughout their lives. They deeply understand the weight that each exhibition carries—not just a simple arrangement of artworks, but a responsibility to understand and communicate the essence of art accurately. Due to their cautious consideration of the current industry ecology, they are now almost no longer involved in curatorial activities. This steadfastness in maintaining their reputation and artistic pursuit reflects their high professional ethics and resilience. They approach every aspect of curating with an almost extreme attitude, from the selection and layout of works to the organization and writing of documentation, all showcasing their reverence for art and their profound professional expertise as seasoned curators. Under such encouragement and guidance, we are inspired to place greater emphasis on our own professional and ethical standards, striving to enhance the quality and content of exhibitions, and ultimately driving the entire

curatorial industry towards a more professional, standardized, and high-quality direction.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of the professional qualities required of curators, the journey of learning and growth for curators is undoubtedly long and arduous. Curating is far from a task that can be accomplished overnight. It demands a significant investment of time, energy, and financial resources. This requires curators to possess a solid theoretical knowledge foundation, with an in-depth understanding and mastery of a wide range of knowledge systems including art history, art theory, and cultural studies. They also need to have strong psychological resilience and unwavering determination. Curators must solidly establish their foundations through theoretical learning, continuously strengthen their personal qualities, and consistently enrich themselves, holding themselves to high standards and strict requirements. They should strive to cultivate an artist-like sensitivity and creativity, to uncover the deeper social significance and cultural value embedded within artworks. Moreover, young curators should have a strong sense of social responsibility, recognizing the important role they play in the dissemination of art and the inheritance of culture. They need to adopt a proactive and responsible attitude to promote the healthy development of the art sector, contributing their efforts to build a richer, more diverse, and deeply meaningful art world. In this era filled with temptations and challenges, the new generation of curators must first “sink down” and accumulate knowledge and experience before emerging onto the art stage. Only by doing so can they navigate the path of curation steadily and far, achieving a truly valuable and meaningful artistic career, and injecting continuous vitality and momentum into the prosperity and flourishing of cultural and artistic endeavors.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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