

# Dictionary *of* Museology

Edited by François Mairesse

**ICOM** international  
council  
of museums

ROUTLEDGE 

or society. The legal protection of cultural property comprises a number of international agreements and national laws that are also applicable to museums and to other institutions safeguarding cultural heritage, for example, regarding the preservation and exhibition of cultural goods as well as the use of Indigenous cultural properties by public or private institutions.

See *Cultural appropriation*.

**B.B.S.**

**CULTURAL SPOTS** (fr. *Points de culture*, sp. *Puntos culturales*), n. – Expression used in Brazil. Cultural spots or *Pontos de Cultura* (in Brazilian Portuguese) are groups, collectives and bodies of a cultural nature or with cultural purposes, which develop and organise cultural activities in their communities. These experimental cultural initiatives are recognised, certified or promoted by Brazil's Ministry of Culture through instruments of the Culture, Education, and Citizenship: Living Culture Program, established in Brazil in 2004. The initiatives, generally pertaining to minority or marginal identities or groups, do not necessarily involve museums, but they did inspire the Memory Spots Program (*Pontos de Memória*), which helped promote the social role of museums in Brazil.

See *Memory spots*.

**B.B.S.**

**CULTURE** (fr. *Culture*, sp. *Cultura*), n. – 1. An individual's general knowledge. 2. Customs, beliefs, images, languages, ways, shared by a human group – for instance, a people, nation, society – and the way this group is organised. A culture in themselves, most museums are fragmentary representations of one or more cultures. The concept of culture is contradictory. On the one hand, it is a volatile, constantly evolving state. On the other hand, it includes tangible and intangible heritage, memory and traditions seen as relatively stable and permanent. Thus, the first meaning accepts heritage infringements that the second meaning rejects – for instance, destruction, concealment and erasure, which are cultural acts that are difficult to tolerate in the name of culture. The main way out of this

contradiction seems to be reaching consensus about characterising the ambition to create heritage, preserve and perpetuate it as a major and universal cultural act of our time. Hence the emphasis on 'cultural heritage' adds an element of permanence to the constantly evolving culture.

See *Civilisation* and *Heritage*.

**B.N.A.**

**CULTURE BANK** (fr. *Banque culturelle*, sp. *Banco Cultural*), n. – Institution at the service of a local community managed by its inhabitants, whose goal is to develop actions for the protection and promotion of the local tangible heritage, but also to develop lucrative activities. The system of culture banks was developed in the 1990s in Sub-Saharan Africa, with the aim of offering villagers an alternative to selling their tangible heritage, i.e., the possibility to place traditional objects in a culture bank, in exchange for micro-credits linked to local development actions. The culture bank then showcases these objects for the benefit of the local population and passing tourists.

See *Community development*, *Ecomuseum* and *Community Museum*.

**CUPOLA** (fr. *Coupole*, sp. *Cúpula*), n. – Architectural term that refers to a *dome* with a semicircular (or parabolic) profile and a circular (or elliptical) plan. Rome's Pantheon, built almost 2,000 years ago, is arguably the most famous of all cupolas. Museum architecture has appropriated the cupola (e.g., Berlin's Altes Museum, London's British Museum), which, according to Fabianski, alludes to Temple of the Muses and to places for scholarly discussion, where the definitions of museum and academy are similar.

See *Architecture*.

**CURATING** (fr. *Curating*, sp. *Curaduría, comisariado*), n.

*Definition:* Curating designates a specific exhibition-related activity, generally in the realm of contemporary art, through which the organiser's creativity is expressed in terms

of how works are selected and arranged in the space, as well as the relational interplay and meaningful sequences elicited by their associations and forms of display. It corresponds to a transformation in the profession of curator, traditionally designating the keeper or overseer of museum collections, but which, since the 1970s, has come to encompass the notion of 'curator-as-author' or 'exhibition maker' (*Ausstellungsmacher*).

Embodied by figures such as Harald Szeemann, Seth Siegelaub, Johannes Cladders, Pontus Hulten, Rudi Fuchs and Jan Hoet, curating has gradually emerged as an independent and highly professionalised activity, and since the 1990s, has become a core practice internationally in the world of contemporary art exhibitions.

### **Towards a personalisation of exhibitions**

Curating as the expression of a personalisation of exhibitions is the result of a transformation that is far from recent, dating to at least the last third of the 19th century, when artists such as Pissarro, Renoir, Degas, Monet and Whistler were particularly attentive to how their paintings were hung and sought to individualise their solo exhibitions. The prevailing idea was to convey the artist's individuality while creating an exhibition layout that could spark connections between the works and with their environment. In this perspective, the organisation of exhibitions gradually came to be viewed as a creative activity in its own right, as illustrated by the group exhibitions conceived by the historical avant-garde movements (Bawin, 2014). The First International Dada Fair (*Erste Internationale Dada Messe*), held in Berlin in 1920, in this respect, exemplified the drive to create associations among the works so as to develop meaningful sequences and create an immersive environment for visitors.

The role of artists in the emancipation of exhibitions as an artistic medium was heightened by the efforts of a handful of museum curators in the 1920s and 1930s who affirmed their

subjectivity and vision of an 'ideal museum'. Alexander Dorner was among the first to pursue this path, in particular at the Hanover Provincial Museum, where he developed the concept of the 'total work of art' and where, in 1927, he tasked the artist El Lissitzky with the exhibition design for *Abstract Cabinet* (*Kabinett der Abstrakten*). Little by little, the role and image of the museum curator were transforming – from a senior administrator eclipsed by the prestige of a public collection to a figure able to make their mark on the museum under their care. In 1950, in his *Réflexions disparates sur l'organisation d'un musée aujourd'hui*, Willem Sandberg, then director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, wrote, 'There are no objective criteria. A museum consequently bears the mark of its overseer, who collects what they cherish. An impersonal museum is a cemetery in which objects are deposited and remain lifeless. A true museum is a work of art' (Sandberg, 1950). During this time, artists continued to blur the boundaries between exhibition and installation. Marcel Duchamp dreamt up a multi-sensory exhibition design for the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, while in 1958, Yves Klein exhibited *Le Vide* at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris in lieu of his ongoing monochrome explorations. While for some artists, exhibitions were already an essential component of their creative approach, the terms 'artist-curator' and 'curator-as-author' were not yet used at the time. This shift occurred at the end of the 1960s, gradually leading to the independence of the function of exhibition organiser.

### **An increasingly individualised and independent function**

Swiss curator Harald Szeemann embodied this transformation. Starting in 1961, he directed the Kunsthalle Bern, where he organised *When Attitudes Become Form* in 1969, an exhibition designed as a veritable environment using works and propositions derived from process-based and conceptual practices that had emerged in the 1960s. Modelled on group exhibitions organised a few decades prior by the Dadaists,

Constructivists and Surrealists, *When Attitudes Become Form* remains a reference in the history of curating, as it is what led Szeemann to assert the figure of 'exhibition maker' (*Ausstellungsmacher*) and assume the position of an independent professional no longer tied to any particular institution, but working for museums, art centres and international events.

In embracing creativity (for which he was reproached by the artist Daniel Buren, first and foremost, who, in 1972, openly denounced the liberties taken by the exhibition organiser in a creative process generally reserved for artists), Szeemann assuredly contributed to the rise of a new exhibition praxis through his personal, subjective translation of artists' work and his pioneering role in the personalisation and independence of the curator's function. But this shift in the identity of exhibition organisers was fostered by other equally decisive factors, the first of which is tied to the phenomenon of the "artification" of exhibitions. In creating increasingly tight and at times inextricable links between creation and exhibition, artists quickly began questioning the notion of the signature of an exhibition author, leading the exhibition to 'gradually don the status, if not of art work, at least of creative work' (Heinich, 2008). This was coupled with the multiplication of exhibitions themselves starting in the 1970s. The vocation of presentation, previously secondary, came to be viewed as on par with, and even more important than, that of conservation; in parallel, new spaces emerged that were no longer centred on collections but on exhibitions (art centres, artist-run spaces, etc.). Exhibitions became cultural events in their own right (able to take place anywhere), while museums' permanent collections were themselves subject to reorganisation to give them the appearance of an event. Lastly, a third factor was the specialisation of exhibitions, with historical, encyclopaedic, thematic and cross-disciplinary exhibitions being held in addition to artist retrospectives. This diversification strengthened the role and specificity of curatorial activity, and, primarily in the contemporary art world, led to exaggerated importance being placed on

the exhibition organiser's creative vision and innovation capacity.

At the end of the 1980s, this exaggerated importance affected a large number of art museums, which hired figures from outside the institution (such as independent curators, historians, philosophers, as well as writers and artists) to organise exhibitions intended to revitalise the presentation of their collections or simply to cause a stir. The expression 'curated by' also emerged at this time, clearly implying the idea of a 'signed' exhibition.

Emerging from a phenomenon of "deprofessionalisation" – where an exhibition organisation no longer necessarily called for the expertise specific to an art historian, and an exhibition curator was no longer mistaken for a traditional museum curator – curating itself grew professionalised, leading to the rise of a 'specialised body of exhibition professionals, "authors" in their own right of a creation for which they temporarily rent out their services' (Heinich & Pollak, 1989).

### **Overexposure, proliferation and professionalisation of curators**

Dominated for a number of decades by pioneers and mentors such as Harald Szeemann, Pontus Hulten, Rudi Fuchs and Jan Hoet, in the 1990s and 2000s, curating reached new heights of popularity with the rise of a new generation of curators, in which influential figures such as Hans Ulrich Obrist, Daniel Birnbaum, Jean-Hubert Martin and Okwui Enwezor distinguished themselves. Called 'uber-curators' or 'superstar curators', in reference to their authority and omnipresence in the international contemporary art world, they illustrated the phenomena of the cult of celebrity and overexposure, but also, almost paradoxically, of the 'demystification' of the curator's role (O'Neill, 2012). Starting in the early 1990s, the exhibition author became an increasingly controversial figure, accused of playing the role of the inspired demiurge and detracting from the work of artists for his own benefit, using exhibitions as pure instruments of power. Obrist, reputed for the

sometimes-excessive personalisation of his exhibition projects, was among the first to seize upon this process of demystification, which is why he quickly refuted the status of author or exhibition maker, preferring that of catalyser, intermediary or collaborator at the service of artists.

Since the 1990s, curating has been marked by the proliferation of several concurrent phenomena explaining its high visibility on the global stage. These firstly encompass the proliferation of international events devoted to contemporary creation (biennials, fairs, festivals), with the obvious consequence of a rise in the number and importance of exhibition organisers. There has also been a proliferation in discussions, research and publications devoted to curating (curatorial studies) and in curating schools. Lastly, while the term 'curating' – which has several accepted uses in English – has imposed itself as a practice and activity in its own right in the field of international contemporary art, in French, it has also sparked the creation of a new use for the term *curateur*.

Rather than simply a Gallicisation of the word curator, the term *curateur* – also meaning a 'guardian' or person appointed by law to administer the property and protect the interests of another person – became widespread in the contemporary art world in the early 2000s to establish a distinction from the more traditional figure of the *commissaire d'exposition*. Drawing from the Latin etymology of the verb *curare*, 'to take care of', critics also saw the term as less police-adjacent and authoritarian (*commissaire* also means 'superintendent' as well). While pitting these two terms against each other may appear artificial (Glicenstein, 2015), as *commissaire* and *curateur* ultimately designate the same function, and often the same person, there is nuance in terms of status. A sociological study by Laurent Jeanpierre, Isabelle Mayaud and Séverine Sofio (2015) demonstrated that there is no consensus on the definition of this profession, even among those who practice it, due to the persistent rift between those who believe that curatorial practice is a lucrative professional activity and those, in greater numbers, for whom it is occasional and subject to variations in opportunity (Chaumier &

Rousel-Gillet, 2017). This process of defining and structuring the term 'curating' in French is thus shaped by struggles around recognition, both symbolic and purely economic.

Julie Bawin

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See *Exhibition*, *Exhibition curator*, *Curator*, *Author*, *Artification* and *Artist-curator*.

**CURATOR** (fr. *Conservateur*; sp. *Conservador*), n.

*Definition:* The curator's role varies widely among museums, depending on their status and the type of museum involved (art, science, community museums, etc.). Traditionally, the term 'curator' was used for scientists in charge of the management of a museum and responsible for its scientific, public and administration tasks. This remains the case for some museums, although in major establishments,