

Episode 1: Curating is more like making dinner for friends

Rosa Zangenberg: You are listening to Taking Art Apart, a podcast presented by West Den Haag.

I am Rosa Zangenberg, visual artist and writer.

Yael Keijzer: I am Yael Keijzer, philosopher and writer.

We're launching an experimental series of themes that one may come across when stepping into the artworld, whether as a young artist, established institution, or curious viewer.

In this exciting first episode, we look at the mediation of art. How do we understand what is communicated in an artwork, when every perception is subjective? Who is the mediator, and what is the role of a curator? When artists make art, they most likely want to say something with their art, whether it is an emotion, or a political statement. Whether intentionally or not, there is possibly something they are communicating. The question remains to what extent this communication has to be visible, and what are the leading factors that facilitate the art experience.

Rosa: It is Monday afternoon and, despite the museum being closed to the public, there is a lively and hectic atmosphere. Not one, but several exhibitions are being set up and all the work needs to be done by Friday for the grand opening.

Rosa: So what is it that you are doing right now?

Tom Vink: At the moment we have been hanging wallpaper here in the corridor, and at this moment we are cleaning up and cutting away leftover pieces of paper from the ceiling and the floor. So, very precise work.

Rosa: I am interested in knowing how the buildup of such exhibitions work. Obviously, it is not only about placing the works.

Steven: No, because supposedly now in the exhibition we're setting up here, all the works are very expensive. So it's kinda a very strange thing of knowing how we work, which is not clumsy - It is careful, but it's like a lot of dirty work

and a lot of kind of... Yeah, dirty work. I mean you're surrounded by the stuff that, if I damage it without insurance, I will probably never, ever manage to repay it. But then you've kind of got this notion of the value of the art as an artwork, but then the value of art as commodity, as this object, and the value of the time that you put in trying to pay your bills by working here? I mean, it depends, obviously, on what you're doing. It depends on at what point of this build up you're at. But often, it kind of starts off with really kind of messy, very, very crude work. Such as, I dunno, carpeting, painting and this and that. And you're just like, you know, completely dirty and covered in mess. And then at some point, and it's funny, cause you see it happen at different phases, depending on what, with different people, depending on what you're working with. But at some point, your colleagues transcend into this clean phase of work, when you're still stinking and shit, carrying around the dirt and the paint. And then, they're in this kind of character: clean hands and really careful. This is kind of two worlds. And then it's like that you can't really have interaction anymore cause it's, you know, they've come into the light, you're still in the basement and they come into the light.

Rosa: I also come across one of the artists who is in the finishing stages of installing his exhibition, namely Asad Raza. And I find my moment to ask him what is the importance of curating an exhibition.

Asad Raza: I mean, curator is an interesting word, I guess, because it comes from "curae", which means to take care of. So it has the root of taking care but I see curators as people who take care of an exhibition, an artwork, or an institution or artists. And so, sometimes when I've curated, and co-curated shows, I see the job as relating to trying to take care of the situation and to create a ground out of which other things can happen. So I see that there is a link between that and these caretakers or cultivators who I have in my works. In my works, I like to work on the idea of dependency that objects do not exist autonomously and alone, but that they are together with human beings creating meaning. Um, and it's always the case, even in the case of a static object-based artwork, obviously the meaning is not created until a visitor is there in front of it, and then the meaning is

created as a phenomenon in their mind. And in my work I often have people who are performing some sort of process. So there's something going on during the entire exhibition-period, rather than a process that stops at the moment that the exhibition starts. You know, you make the artwork and then you put it in the museum, and then now everything stops. And people come and look at it. I see my work as trying to set in motion a process that doesn't stop and maybe it doesn't even stop when the exhibition ends. So in the case of the soil piece that we're standing in right now, *Absorption*, in this case it's subversion called *Breuer separation and integration*. The piece, in my opinion, continues when the visitors take the soil home and use it to grow things in their own balconies and flower pots and gardens and allotments. It's the process that's just continuing.

Rosa: In that case, do you then also consider the visitor as part of the curation role and as part of, maybe even, the artist role?

Asad: I wouldn't say that the visitor is part of the curating or part of the artist, but they're part of the artwork. The artwork is some sort of a collaboration between an artist, some materials or some actions, and a visitor that is somehow overseen or taken care of by a curator usually.

Um, and so I see the visitors as both the site where everything really happens ultimately, but also a necessary part of a dependent and vulnerable system that is set up in which some process or metabolism is kind of occurring, and in this metabolic process, the visitor has a role to play.

Rosa: Finally, I am on my way to the last exhibition which is in the process of being installed. The person who I meet here is Akiem Helmling, who defines himself as an initiator rather than a curator. I ask him to elaborate.

Akiem Helmling: Yeah, curating means to take care of something and to make something happen. But you know, if something happens and something great happens and you initiate it, that's nice. If you're responsible that it's there, you don't have to be the one who is responsible for the content. You know, others are making the content, but you know that

something that happens is the responsibility of the curator, not of the artist.

Rosa: So you don't think a curator's role is so much to form a specific narrative out of what they get.

Akiem: No.

Rosa: It's more like respecting the artists?

Akiem: The curator, the best curator is the one who is capable of making unique projects happen. And in that way, you know, if there's a unique project and the curator manage to make people enthusiastic about this project and to get the money for that, then he's a good curator.

A curator is somebody who initiates to make sure that everybody has something to eat, that people are invited and that it's happening. You just said the curator adds a different layer. And I would more like to say that the curator is responsible for that there is a layer. That's the job of the curator, that there is an exhibition. So, I see it also as a responsibility for the curator to make sure that there's the money. And I think that's totally overlooked by many people. If a curator wants to make an exhibition, of course, one big important role is also that he has to make sure that there's the money. Like, who else is responsible to gather the money? You know, somebody has to fight for that. That's also, I think, a curator.

Yael: The guests you just heard were from various people involved in everything surrounding the mediation of art. Rosa went on a tour through the buildup for multiple shows at West Den Haag, and tried to be a 'fly on the wall', recording the soundtrack to an otherwise serene exhibition space. Builders, technicians and cleaners are all intricate parts to these almost sacred environments, with dust, cluttered tools, smells of construction materials and trash omnipresent for the weeks leading up to the lively openings.

Now we hear Rosa with her essay 'The Caretaker'.

Rosa Zangenberg - *The Caretaker*

Rosa: *Thinking of a narrative. Connecting with the artist, selecting the works, making a composition, measuring the height, width, and depth, adjusting the light and temperature, building the frame, building a wall, painting the wall, removing the trash, dusting the ceiling, vacuuming the floor, wiping the surfaces, the windows, the screens... making the art presentable. Where does a curator's role start and where does it end?*

My first encounter with a curator, and probably also the whole concept of a curator, is very visual. A skinny man in his 30s who shows that it's possible to hang a TV-screen on a wall vertically to challenge its typical, generic horizontal format. Next to the vertical screen, placed on a white wall inside an, otherwise, empty room with polished concrete floor, he explains things that are too complicated for me to understand, and does so as if it is the most widespread, conventional information. Such as, when he briefly mentions the fact that the content showing on the vertical screen is made by an artist from an artist collective, and my mind immediately wanders off to try and put an image into what an artist collective means.

This was a couple of years ago. Given my lack of experience back then with regards to what a curator is and does, I obviously gave this version of a curator a lot of significance. I also implemented a lot of prestige to this figure with the small beanie inside of my head, as his assumed knowledge, connections and experience, seemed far superior to what I had ever experienced in the context of the contemporary art scene. Nonetheless, what he actually did remained very mysterious to me both during the time but also later in life. I knew his office was situated on the floor above the room with the vertical screen, and I think I saw it once or twice - always with a slight confusion, since this room was very empty - which, at the same time, only emphasized the mystery of his profession.

To this day, I will admit that the profession as a curator appears a bit unclear to me. Mainly because I have discovered its broadness. I have collected more experiences since my first insight into a curator profession - they are all

entirely different. I can no longer attach this visual image to the curator without this image immediately being confronted by the bigger library of visuals that now reside inside my head. No specific uniform is required to be a curator.

On the contrary, the unique expression of an individual curator is of great importance: this can be in regards to on what basis they invite artists to exhibit for instance: is it based on a historical common narrative, are the artists visually or materially linked, or is it rather a topical interest that connect these artists? Then there is the working method: how does this curator come up with a curation that makes sense to the time, the space, and the selected artists? Is the curator trained, with an academic background in curating or do they come from another background - are they, perhaps, an artist themselves? Is their work method politically, historically, or philosophically motivated? Is the curator's working approach very text based, or do they prefer no text at all? Is a curator tied to a specific museum, a specific group of artists, or do they travel across countries to make their curatorial mark in a new context, with a new artistic ensemble? Do they remain somewhat true to their curatorial style throughout the years or do they prefer to explore as many styles they can think of?

So slowly, while still feeling rather intimidated by their all-encompassing knowledge of art, I start to connect the understanding of a curator with a certain ambiguity - curators can be many many things. And because of that, I want to go back to the basics to, first of all, understand this abstract word - that is 'the curator'.

The word curator originally derives from the latin word 'cura', which means to take care. So in that sense, a curator could be understood as a caretaker of arts. If we consider the curator as a caretaker, it adds a fundamental layer to the role of the curator - namely, the role of serving the arts - which does make a lot of sense, to be fair. Surely, the curator must see it as a high priority to treat the art they are curating well. I also like the thought of connecting the job of a curator to that of a caretaker as it adds compassion and empathy to the word. But, whereas the role of a caretaker has been a recognizable profession for centuries, the role of

the curator that we know of today was only starting to be defined during the mid 20th century while the creation of academic programs in curatorial practice only started to appear in the late 80's.

From having been a profession mainly defined as a keeper of collections, curators began to define themselves more distinctively in the art field. One of these curators was the Swiss Harald Szeeman. Today, regarded as a pivotal figure for the development of the curatorial practice, he understood exhibitions as creative works in their own right. That was greatly visible in his own work as he often played with the exhibition format, transforming the experience of art into theatrical spectacles - something which was not common at all for his time. Szeeman, who regarded himself as a mediator, took his role seriously - he really worked with the artists, visited them in their studios to talk with them about their work and their process. He ignored the art historical canon by joining artists together, regardless of their differences and various art movements. These are not necessarily uncommon attributes to a curator in today's art scene, especially since curating has become an acknowledged, even necessary part of art exhibitions.

Curators do indeed have an important role in an exhibition. They are, as Szemann would call it, the mediators between several factors, if not all factors incorporated in the exhibition: between the object exhibited, the maker of the object, the viewer, and the space. Their role can be more or less determining for how the viewer will conceive the object, the maker, and the space. In a sense, to go back to the notion of curators as caretakers, a curators' most noble role is to serve the arts. That is, to make the intended artwork communicate most successfully in the space, regardless of taste, interests, motives, and background.

And to go back to the question I asked in the beginning: Where does a curator's role start and where does it end? I approached a young curator Julija Mockutė, currently working as curatorial assistant for Kunstinstituut Melly. Besides being a curator, Julia is also a professional cook, creating an exciting combination of professions which I am curious to hear more about.

Rosa: Hello Julija.

Julija Mockuté: Hi

Rosa: Thank you for coming. I'm really excited. So to begin with it would be nice if you can make an introduction, a brief introduction about yourself?

Julija: Yeah, thanks for inviting me. I'm a little nervous. I've never done something like this before. But, yeah, I'm Julija Mockuté. I'm now working as a curatorial assistant at Kunstinstituut Melly in Rotterdam. I still find it weird to call myself a curator, but I guess I have been a curator for a few years now. I would feel like probably the start was when I made my first exhibition at Van Abbe museum during my internship there. So yeah, I'm interested in creating contemporary art and, specifically more, socially engaged art, I would say. So I've been working at different places, yeah different institutions in the Netherlands that are more socially engaged and focused on, yeah, rather than just presenting art, but to also create some kind of collective learning experience with it as well.

Rosa: So, when I talked with you some time ago, you mentioned that you associate the role of curating with the role of caretaking, which is actually something that was already spoken about in this podcast previously. So I want to hear a bit about how you see this, um, this caretaking and the curating aspect, like what, how do you define this? How do you use this, perhaps, in your own practice?

Julija: Indeed, for me, curating is care. And yeah, when we had the conversation before you said, like, how do you take care of art? But for me, it's not like, I don't really think about it as taking care of art, but it's taking care of people. So first I think as a curator, the most important thing is to take care of the artist and then second is to take care of the audience. A curator cannot exist without artists. And an artist can very well exist without the curator. And I think that's something that I, at least, really take to heart. So my role, then, is really about facilitating the artist. And then of course, yeah, like as a creator, you can get a job at some point in an institution that gives you some kind of power

and stability while as an artist, there are practically no opportunities for something that is so stable. So I think it's important to make sure that that power that the institution can provide is given to the artists. As a curator, you choose or accept suggestions of who's gonna exhibit, but then in the end, the, what is being said, I think that's the power that you give to the artist. And then the audience. Taking care of the audience. So when museums started like these, what we now have as museums and institutions kind of started in the 19th century together with the forming of the nation state. And it was really like this place where you came and you learned to know what it is to be a citizen, a good citizen. And that it's this really top down approach. And I think now it's important to turn it upside down and rather to see how we can accommodate the audience. And it still facilitates some kind of learning process. I think there's still an educational part or role that, uh, an institution plays, but it's more collective learning, learning together rather than like, "oh, come here and we'll tell you what is good, what is bad and how you should act".

Rosa: So in a sense, you also learn from the audience. Or that is just as valued as the audience learning from you, perhaps?

Julija: Yeah. As a curator, I see it more as like yeah. You bring them together and make a conversation rather than you sit in your ivory tower and tell.

Rosa: It would be nice to hear something a bit more concrete. Like, is there some exhibition you are very proud of or maybe not the outcome of an exhibition, but is there something that's stood out to you in an exhibition-making process or curating process?

Julija: Mm-hmm so I'm, I would say I'm very much at the start of my career. So most exhibitions I've worked at weren't exhibitions that actually I created. Like that I was the main curator, but I was the main curator of two exhibitions. And one was a group show and one was a solo show. So of course, very different things. And with the group show, there were more of my ideas, but I really am proud of the solo exhibition I made, with the artist Diana Halabi, 'Delivered home with no eye contact'. It was, um, in Rotterdam at this space called Growing Space Wielewaal. Why I'm particularly proud of it is

that I felt like the process of making it was exactly how I envision the process of making an exhibition together with an artist. That it felt like a conversation between us and part of the text was, indeed, like an interview I did of Diana. And yeah, it's always like there's so many compromises that you have to make and here it felt like we didn't have to make compromises, rather everything was a great outcome and yeah, it was just such a nice process. She asked me herself to create the exhibition and then, yeah, from the interview to, I don't know when we were installing it, but we were installing it ourselves with the help of a friend. It all was just so organic and caring so I really enjoyed that and yeah, I'm trying to continue to work in a similar way.

Rosa: Um, and are there any artists or any yeah concepts or something that has influenced your practice?

Julija: Mm, I really approach creating as like a lived experience. I don't know if that makes sense in that way that I don't really feel like I can read about it. And then it's gonna be like, I'll I'll know. So I feel like my inspirations have been more, the people I've worked with. I decided to become a curator because I did an internship at Framer Framed in my second year of university and I love the process so much and how it combines all these different modes of working and that it's about care, but also there's research and different things. So yeah, I would say my inspirations have been mainly at people that could have been seen as my mentors. Like at Van Abbe Museum was Annie Fletcher who is now the director of IMMA and, uh, and now at Melly, a lot of strong women like Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, Rosa de Graaf, Vivian Ziherl, I would say, seeing how they work.

Rosa: That it's a kind of inspiration.

Julija: Yeah

Rosa: It's also nice that you got to know it really from the hands on. And especially since I think there is a notion of curating as being quite something very academic or especially since now, you can even study curatorial practice. But I wonder which method is the best way to approach curating if it's, uh, through learning through going to university, or if it's through the practical, the matter of actually curating.

Julija: I think it's what kind of curator you wanna be, right? There are some who are more research based. And then, I would say, all great curators are still very much based in theory. And there is a lot of academic knowledge that you need, but I don't know, I guess, because for me, it's really important to like, not have that top down approach. And like, for example, when you're writing an exhibition text, the number one priority is that everybody would understand it. It would not feel like something like in your essay, you said, you know, like that there's immediately all these, like the curator had these words and then you felt confused and that made the relationship feel unequal, and distant. And you do have to have ideas behind it's more important to translate them in an accessible way. So it's a little bit of both the research and the, and then like, of course, if you're making an exhibition that is based on research, especially, if you're making a solo show with an artist, then really it's about trying to, indeed, mediate and facilitate their ideas and their narrative rather than trying to say something yourself. So again, like really depends on the kind of exhibition and the kind of institution, and what the institution is trying to say.

Rosa: It's a balance of not being too invested in your own theoretical world, but at the same time also, of course, be aware of it that there is, there are concepts and there is something going on, that needs to be addressed.

Julja: Yeah. And if you don't know anything, you're going to then do things that have already been done.

Rosa: That's also a very practical thing. Actually there was something I wanted to ask you. I find the combination of being a curator and being a cook quite nice and a bit also not so common and I wanted to know if you are considering this in any way, or if you see a connection between those professions.

Julija: For a long time, did not see it, actually. It was like somebody from the outside told me, "oh, but why don't you combine this?" For a very long time, I saw cooking as a side job that I do to sustain myself. Although I love cooking. People who know me, I think I get even more excited when I talk about food than anything else, honestly. But in an ideal world or in an ideal restaurant, you also take care of your guests the same way.

Rosa: Catering to the audience.

Julija: Yeah, exactly. So why I didn't want to continue being a cook is mainly just because the system is so exhausting. Like there's very, because the margins are so tiny, there's very little space for that care that I would wanna do when I'm cooking. Like, my favorite thing is to cook for my friends or now I've actually, I even cook for artists at Melly.

Rosa: Oh, nice.

Julija: I've done that a couple of times now and then it's a very different relationship you have with the food, because then you cook while thinking about that person or the people that are gonna eat it and in more like fast-paced restaurant environments, you lose a bit that connection. So, for me, maybe curating is more like making dinner for friends rather than cooking, you know, a hundred of the same dish in one evening, then you... yeah.

Rosa: You lose a bit of that touch, I guess. And it becomes a bit more like a repetition or mechanical or yeah, I can definitely see that. It was actually another guest who compared the role of curating to a cook also. He said something that in a restaurant, like in a good restaurant, the reason for why they are good is because the food is good. It's not about how well assembled the food is, or how, uh, creative it is with the combinations of the different types of food. Like the basics have to be good. And that's why that restaurant is good. And that was then he compared to being a curator, that to make a good show, the art has to be good. You cannot make a good show with bad art, no matter how, how you put it together or how much money you get to put it together, the art has to be good.

Julija: In that way, yeah, a curator and a cook are very similar because indeed like, if that was the case, that if it's, if it was just about the produce, then why do you need the, like the cook? Or if it's just about the art, why do you need the curator? I don't know the best restaurants I've been to are the ones that, yes, the food is amazing, but it's also like a whole experience of how you feel there. You could just Google it and look at that art on your screen, on your home, why do you go to an exhibition space? Why do you go to an

institution to look at it? There is something about being there and the experience and the interaction with, yes the art in person, but also the people that are there. And then, you know, with the cook it's like how you cook it.

Rosa: And speaking about cooking up the show, how do you relate to playfulness or like how much playfulness do you allow in, because in the text, I also mentioned again that Harald Szeeman regarded the show, as a creative work in their own right and I wondered if you, first of all, like agree with this statement, and second of all, how much this statement applies to you in your practice?

Julija: Definitely. I mean yeah, you have the art and then, but it's all like a playful conversation in a way with the artist. For example, if you're commissioning an artwork you're in conversations and bouncing ideas and then through that the art takes shape and then the next conversation is then how are you gonna specialize it? How are you gonna put it in different spaces? What kind of story's gonna tell, or if it's a bigger solo show, then it's like, what do you choose from the artist? Which artworks will you choose? And how will you present it? Because it kind of tells the story in a way. So, like when I said, what I really enjoyed with the process with Diana, indeed, was that it felt playful, like throwing the ball back and forth. Um, now I'm working on an installation that's gonna open in May. With a Rotterdam based artist, Maïke Hemmers, that has been a really, really lovely process. Because again, it was, it's very playful and, and she even talks about how it's important for her in the process of making art, that there is care, love... I think what drew me to contemporary art, because I don't come from an art history background. I studied sociology for my undergraduate, but what really draws me to art is specifically that in my research, I looked into trauma and I looked how to... compared a more historical representation, a historical museum representation to, a contemporary art exhibition and contemporary artwork representing trauma. And I argued that indeed it is the possibility of making your own connections and drawing your own conclusions that an artwork offers that that's where the power lies. That there is the possibility that somebody will connect with one thing and another person can connect to another thing and it's gonna connect to their subjective

experience and a new meaning can be created. And of course there are clues and there are ways of leading within the artwork to inspire these connections. But then, in the end, because it's subjective and each person that comes in contact with it, has their own subjectivity. That meeting point can be very magical.

Rosa: I think it's a great way to end the conversation. So, thank you very much for coming.

Julija: Thank you so much for inviting me.

Yael: That was it for the first episode of Taking Art Apart.

Special thanks to: Julija Mockutė, Steven, Tom Vink, Akiem Helmling, and Asad Raza for taking part in this episode.

If you want to know more about the guests and their practices, as well as extra source materials, please have a look at our description box. This podcast is made possible by West Den Haag.

Thanks for tuning in, and we hope you join the ride for the next episodes, where we cover several more aspects of art: namely the material, the reception, the rejection, the business and the future of art.

Coming up in the next episode is the question: does art have to be a physical medium? Are NFT's, non-fungible tokens, of artworks still art? And the Medium is The Message - what does that even mean?

Guests in this episode:

Julija Mockutė, <https://julijamock.com/>

Thom Vink, <https://www.haagsekunstenaars.nl/cv/2063>

Akiem Helmling, https://underware.nl/about_us/akiem/

Asad Raza, <https://berlin.bard.edu/people/profiles/asad-raza>

Further references:

'Coalescence' with Asad Raza at West, http://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/22_03_Asad_Raza

'Everybody is an artist, but only the artist knows it' with
Pierre Bismuth at West, [https://www.westdenhaag.nl/
exhibitions/22_03_Pierre_Bismuth](https://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/22_03_Pierre_Bismuth)

Bruce Altschuler: "A Canon of Exhibitions", MJ -Manifesta
Journal, No. 11, Spring/Summer 2011 [https://www.scribd.com/
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Nina Simon: "Co-Creating with Visitors" in The Participatory
Museum

<https://www.participatorymuseum.org/> (Online version is
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