

WHY THIS WORK?

An essay on curating, visibility and responsibility in the age of artificial intelligence

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I am a curator, and a considerable part of my professional life consists of making choices. I choose artists, works, themes, spaces and ways of presenting them. I decide what will be placed in the centre of a room and what will remain at the edge. I write texts that offer visitors a particular way of entering an exhibition. I speak to artists, listen to their explanations and sometimes ask them to remove something that they consider important. At other times, I insist on keeping a work that initially seems insignificant. Described in this way, curating can sound almost like a system of selection. There is a certain logic to it. We have professional criteria, experience and knowledge. We consider the quality of a work, its relevance to a particular exhibition, its historical and cultural context, the artist's previous practice and the relationship between one work and another. Yet the longer I work as a curator, the less convinced I am that the most important decisions can be explained entirely through criteria.

Sometimes I enter an artist's studio and see a work that I do not immediately understand. I may even dislike it. I continue looking, talk to the artist, leave and go on with my day. Then, two or three days later, I realise that I am still thinking about it. It may be a face, an uncomfortable detail, a colour, a badly painted hand, a sentence or an object whose meaning I did not understand. Sometimes I cannot identify what exactly has remained with me. I have learned to take this seriously and to return. This does not mean that intuition is always right. It certainly is not. Curators make mistakes, and I have made mine. I have been enthusiastic about things that later seemed less convincing. I have overlooked artists whose work I subsequently understood differently. I have changed my mind after conversations with colleagues, after reading, or simply after seeing a work again several years later. For me, this possibility of being wrong is not an unfortunate defect in curatorial practice. It is part of it.

Perhaps this is why the arrival of artificial intelligence in culture interests me so much. It is easy to reduce the discussion to whether artificial intelligence can create art. I find that question less interesting every year. Clearly, machines can already produce images, texts, music and video. The quality varies enormously, just as the quality of human production does. Some results are banal; others are visually impressive. Sometimes I recognise immediately that something was generated. Sometimes I do not. I use artificial intelligence myself. It would be strange for someone working with contemporary culture to pretend that these tools do not exist. I can use them to search, translate, organise material, compare information or work on a text. They save time. They also occasionally produce connections that make me reconsider my own assumptions. The more interesting question for me is not whether artificial intelligence can produce something that resembles art. It is what happens when it begins to participate in selection.

This question concerns my profession directly. There are more artists than I could ever meet, more exhibitions than I could visit, more books than I could read and more images than I could see in several lifetimes. No curator works with everything. We work with fragments. Until relatively recently, those fragments were limited partly by geography and circumstance. You knew the artists you encountered through institutions, galleries, academies, residencies, colleagues, magazines, travels or personal recommendations. The internet changed this radically. Artificial intelligence may change it again. A system can examine quantities of material that are physically impossible for me to process. It can compare images from different periods, recognise recurring visual structures, analyse texts and

find connections between artists working thousands of kilometres apart. It can translate an artist's statement written in a language I do not speak. It can help reconstruct missing information and make archives searchable in ways that were unimaginable not very long ago. As an art historian, I find this exciting. As a curator, I find it slightly uncomfortable. The discomfort begins when assistance becomes selection.

If a system can analyse ten thousand portfolios and suggest fifty artists who correspond most closely to the concept of an exhibition, what exactly happens to my role? My first reaction is not to defend the curator as some mysterious figure possessing a uniquely human sense of beauty. I do not believe in such romantic ideas about my profession. Curators are influenced by education, fashion, institutions, personal networks, funding structures and the art market. Our choices are never completely independent. We also have biases. We return to familiar names. We trust institutions we know. We may notice an artist more easily if another respected curator has already noticed them. We may unconsciously prefer a familiar visual language. We can reproduce the very hierarchies we claim to question. An algorithm did not invent these problems. We did.

This becomes especially important when I think about artists whose work is often approached through their biography before it is approached as art. I have worked with artists with disabilities and with inclusive cultural projects. I have repeatedly encountered a simple problem: once a diagnosis appears beside an artist's name, it can become more visible than the artwork. The audience is told that this is an artist with autism, a blind artist, an artist with an intellectual disability or an artist with a psychiatric diagnosis. The information may be relevant. Sometimes the artist wants it to be known. Sometimes the circumstances in which the work was created are essential to understanding it. But something can happen almost imperceptibly. The audience begins to admire the fact that the person created anything at all. The standards change. A painting is no longer simply a painting; it becomes evidence of overcoming something. The artist disappears behind the diagnosis. I have always found this deeply problematic.

A diagnosis is not an artwork. Neither is a passport. Neither is exile. Neither is trauma. I say this as someone who has had to reconsider the meaning of home, belonging and professional identity after leaving the country where I was born. Migration inevitably changes the way one looks at culture. You begin to notice categories that previously seemed natural. You discover that the same biography can be read differently depending on where you are standing. Suddenly, you are not simply a curator. You are a Belarusian curator, an émigré curator, an Eastern European curator, perhaps a curator at risk. Each description may be factually correct, but none of them is sufficient. This experience has made me increasingly attentive to what categories do to artists.

Categories are necessary. Museums use them. Archives use them. Funding programmes use them. Researchers use them. I use them. Artificial intelligence also needs categories, although on a scale that is difficult for a human being to imagine. The problem begins when a category stops being a tool and becomes an explanation. If I search for “artists with disabilities”, a system can provide names. If I search for “Belarusian artists in exile”, it can create a list. If I ask for “female artists working with memory and migration”, it can narrow the field further. All of this can be extremely useful. But what happens to the artist who does not describe herself using the expected language? What happens to the

person whose work is difficult to classify? What happens to the artist who has almost no digital presence? What happens to someone who has never learned to write an impressive statement, does not speak English well, has no gallery representation and has never been mentioned by an influential publication? In other words, what happens to the person whom the system has very little reason to recommend?

Curators have always faced a version of this question. We simply called it visibility. One of the responsibilities of curating, as I understand it, is to notice what has not yet been made sufficiently visible. This does not mean searching for obscurity for its own sake. Being unknown does not make an artist interesting, just as being famous does not make an artist uninteresting. It means remaining aware that visibility is produced. Someone decides what enters an archive. Someone writes the article. Someone makes the acquisition. Someone sends the invitation. Someone places the work on the wall. Someone turns on the light. An exhibition is therefore never simply a collection of objects. It is a sequence of decisions about attention.

This is what makes curatorial work ethically complicated. Every exhibition includes and excludes at the same time. If I select ten artists, I have not selected hundreds of others. If one work occupies an entire room, another may not fit. If the budget is limited, someone receives production support and someone does not. We rarely put these absences on the wall. Visitors see the finished exhibition. They do not see the rejected proposals, abandoned ideas, unsuccessful conversations, practical compromises and works that were removed at the last moment. The exhibition looks inevitable only after it has been completed. Before that, almost nothing is inevitable.

This is why I hesitate when people speak about the possibility of an “objective” curatorial selection. I am not sure I want one. Objectivity sounds attractive because subjectivity can be unfair. A curator can make a bad decision. Personal preferences can become prejudices. Institutions can exclude people systematically. But replacing human subjectivity with a system does not remove selection. It changes where selection takes place. Someone still determines the criteria. Someone determines which information matters. Someone determines what the system has learned from. If previous visibility becomes evidence of relevance, the already visible may become even more visible. This possibility concerns me more than the prospect of an AI-generated painting.

The production of images has never been the only problem in art. There have always been more images than museums can show and more artists than institutions can support. Attention is the scarce resource. Perhaps artificial intelligence will make that scarcity more obvious. If millions of new images can be produced every day, the important question may no longer be, “Who can create?” It may become, “Who will be seen?” For a curator, this is not an abstract philosophical question. It is a professional responsibility.

I remember working with artists whose circumstances made it easy for others to speak on their behalf. This is another danger of curating. A curator is given language, institutional access and public authority. It becomes very easy to explain another person's work so confidently that the artist's own voice becomes secondary. I have become increasingly suspicious of this authority. A good curatorial text should open possibilities rather than close them. It should provide context without pretending that

context exhausts the work. It should help a viewer look rather than tell the viewer exactly what must be seen. This sounds simple. It is not. Language is powerful precisely because it frames attention.

Artificial intelligence is remarkably good at producing this kind of language. Give it an artwork, some biographical information and several references, and it can produce a plausible interpretation almost instantly. I know because I have experimented with it. Sometimes the text is useful. Sometimes it is even elegant. What troubles me is not that the machine can write elegantly. It is how quickly plausibility can begin to resemble understanding. Curators have the same problem. We can write beautifully about things we have not understood. Perhaps artificial intelligence is not introducing an entirely new danger into cultural work. Perhaps it is making an old one easier to recognise. We have always been capable of mistaking fluent interpretation for knowledge.

There is, however, something that I continue to value in the physical encounter with art and artists. A studio visit is inefficient, and this is one of its virtues. You travel somewhere. You may get lost. You drink coffee. You talk about things that have nothing to do with the work. You look at unfinished objects. The artist shows you something that was not in the portfolio. Perhaps the most interesting work is leaning against a wall behind another painting. No search engine would have selected it because nobody had uploaded it. No database knew that it existed. Perhaps the artist did not consider it important. You look at it anyway. Sometimes this changes everything.

I do not want to romanticise physical presence. Important encounters can happen online, and geographical access has always been unequal. Digital tools have allowed me to discover artists and projects I might otherwise never have encountered. Nevertheless, there is something useful about situations that have not been optimised. Curatorial work depends partly on accidents. A conversation goes in an unexpected direction. A work looks different when its scale becomes physical rather than numerical. A person says something that contradicts the statement they sent you. You misunderstand each other. You reconsider. These are not necessarily obstacles to knowledge. Sometimes they are the way knowledge appears.

This is one reason why I am reluctant to define the difference between human and artificial intelligence simply in terms of creativity. Creativity is too vague a word, and humans do not possess it equally or continuously. I am more interested in responsibility. When I select an artist, I am responsible for that choice. When I write about someone's work, I am responsible for the language I use. When I place a diagnosis in a wall text, I am responsible for what that information does to the viewer's perception. When I describe an artist primarily through nationality, gender, displacement or disability, I am responsible for deciding that this category matters in that particular context. When I exclude someone, even for perfectly practical reasons, that is also a decision.

Artificial intelligence can assist with all these processes. It may eventually make some of them better. It can reveal patterns of exclusion in a collection. It can help identify artists who have been overlooked. It can make archives accessible across languages. It can question assumptions by showing connections a curator did not see. I want those possibilities. I do not want a return to an imaginary world before technology. But I also do not want responsibility to disappear behind the technology.

Suppose an institution uses an algorithm to select artists from an open call. Thousands of applications arrive, and there is not enough time for the curatorial team to examine every one carefully. The system reduces the number to two hundred. The curators then make the final selection. Who rejected the other applications? The institution? The programmers? The dataset? The curators who chose the criteria? The machine? This question matters because cultural decisions affect real lives. An exhibition can provide an artist with money, professional recognition, new contacts and future opportunities. Being repeatedly excluded can have the opposite effect. The phrase “the system selected it” is therefore not neutral. Systems do not remove responsibility. They can make responsibility harder to locate.

Perhaps this is the point at which my relationship with artificial intelligence becomes most personal. I am willing to share many tasks with it. I am willing to ask it questions. I am willing to let it challenge my writing, organise information and show me things I have missed. I am even willing to let it disagree with me. What I do not want is to use it as a place to hide. If I make a curatorial decision, I want to remain capable of explaining why I made it: not because an artist's work received a high relevance score, not because their biography contained the appropriate keywords, not because the system predicted strong audience engagement, and not because the work resembled successful works from previous exhibitions.

Why this work? It is one of the simplest questions a curator can be asked. It is also one of the most difficult. Sometimes my answer will be intellectual. I will be able to explain the historical context, the conceptual connection and the relationship to the exhibition. Sometimes the answer will be less comfortable. I saw it and could not forget it. I initially rejected it and then returned. I did not completely understand it. I wanted other people to see it. I believed that placing it beside another work would change both of them. I may have been wrong. There is no shame in that final sentence. For me, the possibility of error is connected to responsibility. If I cannot be wrong, I cannot really be responsible.

This is perhaps what I would like to preserve as artificial intelligence becomes increasingly present in cultural institutions. Not the curator's authority, certainly not the mythology of the curator as a person with superior taste, and not the right to control what counts as art. I would like to preserve something much less impressive: the obligation to answer for a choice. There is another reason this matters to me. I have spent much of my professional life thinking about visibility: who is represented, who is absent, who is spoken about, who is allowed to speak, and what happens when institutions attempt to include people who were previously excluded.

Inclusion is a word that appears frequently in cultural programmes. It can become another comfortable category. Real inclusion is less comfortable. It requires institutions to reconsider not only who appears in an exhibition but who makes decisions, how people are described, what forms of knowledge are recognised and whether an artist is being invited because of the work or because the institution needs a particular kind of representation. Artificial intelligence will not solve this problem for us. It may help us see it. It may also reproduce it with extraordinary efficiency. The difference will depend on the decisions we make about how these systems are used.

Perhaps, in twenty years, an exhibition curated entirely by artificial intelligence will not seem unusual. Perhaps it will find relationships between works that no human curator would have noticed. Perhaps visitors will love it. I would go to see such an exhibition. I would probably enjoy arguing with it. But I would still want to know how the decisions were made. Why this artist? Why this work? Why here? Why now? These questions are not valuable because only a human being can answer them. A machine can already produce convincing answers. They are valuable because someone must take responsibility for the consequences of the answer.

This distinction may become increasingly difficult to maintain. Perhaps future generations will consider my concern old-fashioned. Every generation tends to protect some aspect of its professional identity when technology changes the conditions under which it works. I accept that possibility. Art history is full of technologies that were initially treated as threats. Photography did not end painting. Film did not eliminate theatre. Digital images did not make physical objects meaningless. Artificial intelligence will not end art. I doubt that it will end curating either. But it may force us to define our work differently.

If creation is no longer sufficient proof of human uniqueness, and if analysis, interpretation and selection can also be automated, perhaps we should stop trying to prove that human beings are better at these things. Perhaps that is the wrong competition. I do not need to produce more images than a machine. I do not need to read more quickly. I do not need to remember every fact. I do not even need to insist that my judgement will always be better. What I need is to remain present in the decision: to look carefully enough to notice when a category has replaced a person; to recognise when efficiency is eliminating uncertainty that might have been useful; to return to a work after initially dismissing it; to listen when an artist tells me that my interpretation is wrong; and to change my mind.

When the exhibition finally opens and somebody asks why a particular work is there, I want to resist the temptation to hide behind professional language. I want to be able to say that I saw it, spent time with it, doubted it, considered what it might mean in this particular place and beside these particular works, and chose to make it visible. Perhaps somebody else would have chosen differently. Perhaps, years from now, I will choose differently too. But this was my decision, and I am responsible for it.