

Irish Museum of Modern Art talk

This talk was written for a general arts audience – it contains the first seed of thinking about curation as care. The following has been transcribed by Otter.ai from the video of this event – I couldn't find the original written text. I've left in the generated keywords because they're interesting.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

curator, artists, activism, role, work, curatorial, exhibition, curation, art, evening, feminism, traditional, grassroots, digital, multimedia artist, manifestations, represented, change, queerness

I wanted to give some background to the artists talks this evening. And around my role in this project and the role of curation.

Digital art and creativity have a really central role in the Full Stack Feminism project. There are artists, poets, coders and curators on the team and artists have been a core part of the interviews carried out for the project. We have two artists in residence, one from Ireland, which is Roibí and you'll be hearing from her later, and one from the UK, Jamila Prowse. We had initially planned for Jamila to be with us this evening but unfortunately, due to ill health, she can't be, we wish her well. Roibí and Jamila are currently making work for a Full Stack Feminism exhibition in September. And it will be in Brighton in the UK. So, if you happen to be in town, please do come and join us. They'll be joined by six other artists, including I'm very happy to say Lauren, and Yarli, who are with us this evening. And the slideshow that is happening behind me shows all the eight artists that will be involved.

One of the central research questions of the Full Stack Feminism project regards the decentering of traditional voices in the digital arts and humanities. I think we'll get into the question of what we mean by traditional later, I'm sure everyone has a view of what that word means in this context. But that question has informed the planning of this evening's event and the curation of the project exhibition. Thinking about that question and working on Full Stack Feminism alongside my doctoral research has offered me the opportunity to start to think a little differently about the role of the curator and what it means in the 21st century. It's a word and a role has a long history and has meant different things over time. The word curation comes from the Latin word *curare*, meaning to take care of, and the curator has largely been fixed on taking care of things. In ancient Rome, *curatores* were civil servants overseeing public buildings, such as aqueducts, and in medieval times, the *curatus* was a priest devoted to the care of souls. Slightly later, a curator was a trustee of an estate. And into the 19th century and the 20th century, we had the role defined as taking care of museum objects. And now in the 21st century the word is widely used across many sectors.

In the dynamic of the art world specifically, the role of the curator has historically been positioned as somewhat passive, playing second fiddle to the object or the artist. Renowned curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has said 'artists and their works must not be used to illustrate a curatorial proposal or premise to which they are subordinate' He has also somewhat dismissively separated the role of exhibition maker from the more traditional curatorial role.

In my mind, the role is less passive, has more agency, or at least it should, and the curator or exhibition maker, and I'm very happy with that designation, has a more direct role to play in making change. And change is the critical focus here. It's foundational both to my work and to the Full Stack Feminism project, making change is important. Why else are we here, and change is needed. The art world beyond the practice of digital art is inherently and historically undiverse. The 2019 study of the collections of museums and galleries across the US showed that 85% of artists represented were white, and 87% of them were men. I recently read that the collection at the National Gallery in London is a 97% by male artists. And just a reminder, it's 2023 and it's like July already.

If we accept there is a grassroots to institution pipeline, then we must understand that making change at the grassroots now is the key to future institutional change. But we also need to recognize that those changes at the grassroots do not just happen. And this is where the agency of the curator comes in. We can agree that the role of the curator is to take care of something historically museum objects or aqueducts, might we not redefine that something in order to change the framework within which curatorial practice functions. I increasingly think of curation as an act of care, an act of caring. And I'm thinking about this curation, caring in two ways. One is tangible. It's about care and support for artists who are generally less represented in the art world. And the second is caring for and securing something more abstract but equally critical, which is the need for digital arts and the wider art world in fact, to be better, to represent more perspectives to be less siloed in its representations, which make it to my mind richer and more meaningful to more people.

This is some of the thinking, as I said behind this evening and behind the curation of the exhibition for the project, which you see behind me and which I titled Manifestations, because manifestations are the embodiment of abstract ideas and they are allied to activism, a manifestation is a demonstration. I mean, quite literally in French. I'm increasingly starting to see curation and activism as having identical meanings and purposes. To borrow from curator Terry Smith, curation is about being together in a site of concentrated meaning, and so is activism.

Beyond the question of what traditional voices are, this evening, I'm also interested in exploring how intersectionality plays out in the work of these artists, how their lived experience informs that work and how they and we, as a society, can square the use of tools built by mega corporations with a kind of neoliberal profit motive for a heart to make promote an exhibit art and ourselves. Are there alternatives? That's a really big question and I don't know that we're going to answer it today. But it's something to think about.

I'm going to introduce the artists now very briefly, because it's generally better to hear from them. And I essentially lifted this from their websites anyway. Yarli Allison, is a Canadian-born, Hong Kongese art worker based in London, and Paris, with an interdisciplinary approach that traverses sculpture, installation, CGI, moving image drawings, poetry, tattooing, and performance. Lauren Kelly, is a visual artist from Dublin, primarily working in performance art from a place of social engagement. Lauren approaches her practice as a mode of activism. Using the unlimited landscape of performance arts speak politics, with rationality to the oppressed states of the body. Roibí O'Rua is a multimedia artist and self-proclaimed pop star, using music, video animation and digital media to explore ideas of queerness as it exists within Gen Z. What their work shares is activism,

activism that comes from lived experience, and that's what makes their work attractive and fascinating to me, and it's a really good basis for our discussion this evening.