

## EXPLORING THE CURATORIAL POSSIBILITIES IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE

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Fig:1 Melange- a spectacular show of contemporary sculptors from Bengal at Shridharani Gallery, Delhi, 2016



Fig:2, Fictive- a contemporary show at Range Gallery, Kolkata, 2016

**Abstract :** Contemporary art has evolved significantly in many ways over last three decades. It is noteworthy that the changes have occurred not only in the art forms, mediums and concepts but also in the ways in which art need to be shared, showcased and brought within the circuit of art market as well. In this context, emergence of curator has gained huge prominence because of the increasing importance it achieved over the years. The role played by curator has significantly shaped and redefined contemporary art practices providing appropriate conceptual frameworks. The task of curator is challenging as it ranges from conceptualizing a show to right up to the display strategy. Moreover, the learning experience of a curator is achieved only by curating shows and reflecting upon every detail and aspect of the project. The present paper explores the experiences of such different curatorial projects conceived and executed by the author.

**Key words:** Curator, Curatorial, Contemporary, Art, Display, Display strategy, Conceptual, Painting, Sculpture, Installation, Multimedia, Gallery, Museum

'A curator is not a creator but a facilitator for both the audience and the artists and a messenger who delivers ideas from contemporary society. A good curator needs to understand the audience and to fully communicate with the artists to let their work speak out to the public.'

Kwanyi Pan (Beijing based curator)<sup>1</sup>

### Curator's role:

In contemporary art practice the role played by a curator in conceptualizing a show has gained a significant importance over the years for many reasons. As the contemporary art practice itself has grown wide and deep over last few decades by transgressing the limits of conventional modernism and by incorporating interdisciplinary ideas and mediums of expressions, showcasing these art works has increasingly become a task that demanded the active role of a designated curator. Further, most of the contemporary shows now require an appropriate conceptual framework for the viewers to have a more meaningful

communication and dialogue. A curator by his/her capacity to understand and contextualize the art works serve the purpose of outlining the conceptual contours of an exhibition which may comprise one or two artists or even a group of artists who practice in diverse mediums or similar methods. However, a curator is not only there to conceptualize the show but also to conceive and execute the physical display of the art works in a given space of a gallery or museum space. A curated show in the present-day context does not only mean to be seen but a contemporary art show is also meant to be experienced intellectually, visually and historically. This is also the reason why informed and educated viewers look for the meaning of contemporary art not only in the objects of art but also in the curatorial interventions. In other words, curatorial interventions more often than not provide additional meaning by contextualizing and planning the show and by questioning the status-quo of a common non-curated show.

A curator of contemporary art, in other words, play the role of an art historian by pre-scripting the history of contemporary art while shaping the individual moments through exhibitions and shows. As a student of History of Art, I have always found the role of curator very engaging mainly because there is always a significant scope to not only deal with established artists but also with the upcoming artists and artists who are yet to be discovered. Therefore, curating a show is not about just conceptualizing and displaying; often it is also about discovering and rediscovering artists. Curator thus often plays the role of contributing to the history of contemporary art practice by their findings and enriching the practice by adding value to them. A large part of this experience and knowledge to me has come from my own practice as a curator and the challenges I faced on various occasions.

### **Empirical Report**

Right from my student days while studying art history I was interested in curating shows. During my student days I tried out with my minimum ability and almost no experience to curate three shows of students' works. These shows were first attempts and learning experiences for me. In the process I learnt how difficult and challenging curating shows are in real space and time. However, being a student of art history, I was also following how art has changed the notion of curating shows over a period of time. This was evident that this change in the role of curator went hand in hand with unprecedented changes in art forms and art practices. However, my professional journey as a curator began after I completed my Masters' in Art History in 2014.

The types of shows I have curated so far are - Solo show, Group Show and independently Conceptualized show with selected artists. The main concerns or lookouts of my curatorial ventures are - (a) Types of shows: Painting/ Sculpture/ Multimedia / Installation. Depending on the forms of the shows the curatorial process would necessarily have a different planning and conceptualization. (b) Mediums: In relation to the types of shows, the mediums also vary and medium-specific works right at the outset provide a certain framework within which the curatorial idea is formed. (c) Space for showcasing the art works: The gallery space or the museum space with its physical dimensions and available light conditions and electrical illuminations become extremely important to consider while planning the show physically in tandem with the curatorial concept. At this point this needs to be emphasized that the physical planning of a show in the given space is not that comes after the conceptual framing. Ideally speaking, the physical planning and the conceptual construct should develop and evolve hand-in-hand mutually feeding each other. (d) Display strategy: As a further extension to the previous stage display strategy is certainly an important part of the curatorial process which enables the curator to execute the entire scheme successfully. A successful or at least an effective display strategy implies mainly two things - (i) to justify the works and the curatorial concept and (ii) to ensure meaningful communication with the viewers. While the former aspect takes care to establish and valid the works and thereby the curatorial concept in the physical space, the latter aspect attempts to salvage the conceptual framework of the curatorial idea from the mere cerebral space to the real display space. And finally (e) Concept note and display text: It is essential to keep a concept notes as well as



Fig:3 Unveiling at AM Gallery, Kolkata, 2018



Fig:4 Inside the Fiber- works with paper by seven contemporary artists at ArtsAcre Museum, Kolkata, 2019

display text put up on the walls to enable the viewers to read and comprehend the idea while they are also looking at the works. Though art works are primarily visual objects meant to be seen and experienced visually, in contemporary art practice the idea or issue or concept play a vital role in shaping works of art. Therefore, it is the demand on part of the artworks as well as the curatorial interventions that texts - written of course in lucid manner - are made available as part of the show. Even the posters or publicity materials of a show also play important role in creating a dialogue in advance with the curated show. Beside the publicity factor, the main purpose of the exhibition poster is to communicate the essence of the show.

After completing my study my first professional curatorial project was a show in 2015 at Shridharini Gallery, Delhi. The show was a commercial show where I had to select the works from the collector Kallol Bose who organised the show. The main challenge of this exhibition was to showcase the important painters and sculptors who comprised established masters and young promising artists. This combination is itself challenging as the tone and temperament of works often belong to widely different mindsets and creative genres. The name of the show was 'Bengal Panorama- the legacy and the continuity'. So, the display strategy and the historical contextualization was very important for this show. As a curator I had to maintained the history of evolution in Bengal art and at the same time the main concern was to create an ambiance that could ensure that the viewer could easily communicate and understand both the legacy and continuity of Bengal art.

In 2016 I curated another show titled 'Melange- a spectacular show of contemporary sculptor from Bengal' in the same gallery and organised by the same person. But it was conceived as a sculpture show and it was meant to be a commercial show too. There was no single theme, no theoretical concept and as a curator my only focus was on the display and the biggest challenge was of course to make the show commercially viable. So, as a curator I had to select artists from Kolkata and Delhi keeping in mind the market dynamics of the art world. The curator's job here was to ensure the aesthetic richness as well as market ability of the chosen works; in other words, to make the show attractive and worth collecting for the professional collectors and buyers. The gallery space was huge and we had approximately thirty works. Yet to break the monotony of the display the sculptures were exhibited on the pedestal and a few on the floor. So, the challenge was to arrange the pedestals in a manner that the one work should not overlap with the other. The most important objective here for the curator was to make the display visibly a spectacle where each art object demanded an exclusive presence. (Fig.1)

In the same year 2016 I curated another show in Kolkata at gallery Range. It was a show of paintings and sculptures. The name of the show was 'Fictive- a contemporary show'. For any curated show the title of



Fig:5 Inside the Fiber- works with paper by seven contemporary artists at ArtsAcre Museum, Kolkata, 2019

the exhibition is very important. Here my curatorial idea was to showcase such works which were developed on either direct or indirect narratives. I chose young artists who dealt with narrative art with a new approach which went beyond story-telling yet condensed in their images the life and the experiences of human beings and objects in distinct socio-cultural spaces. There were works which even experimented with the materials thereby changing or bringing a new dimension to the fictions - real or imagined. Since the gallery space was huge and had many walls, as a curator my main concern was to display on the wall and on the floor neatly and tellingly so that each and every artist got sufficient space to express and communicate through their works. Despite the fact that it was a commissioned show I got sufficient freedom in terms of selection of the artists from all over the India and the display. (Fig.2)

The most challenging and exciting show I curated in 2018 was at A.M gallery, Kolkata. It was a solo show of Soma Chakraborty's sculptures titled '*Unveiling*'. Before talking about the show, I would like to introduce the artist first. She was a sculptor from 1980's who completed her study from Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan. She used to do her sculptures in soft materials which was very unique from her time. Those days the general concept of sculpture was mostly about hard and solid materials but Soma Chakraborty went beyond that and created a new language in her own way with soft materials. She used soft materials like cloths and other fibers using stitching and sometimes by applying paint and color on them. Her works are mostly huge in scale and mostly evoked the inner pain and violence referring to the life of a woman. The name of the show *Unveiling* is justified as I had to search and bring an unknown and important artist to the fore front and make her seen by the viewers. The word unveiling also suggests the revelation of the artist's inner pain and it also signifies the moment of this show when her works were revealed to the public after many years.

The challenging part of this show was that the gallery space was very small while most of her works were quite large. Hence selection of the art works was quite critical for this show. I have to select those works which can justify her way of working and the content and it had to be taken care of that it should not be dominate or suffocate the small space. The selection of the work and the available gallery space played a very important role in this show to keep the viewers engaged intimately. (Fig.3)

'*Vama*' was another one of my curated shows I did at ICCR, Kolkata, in 2018. This show had a special purpose as it was organized for celebrating and commemorating women's day. In this show I had to select only the women promising artists irrespective of their contents. I had selected those artists who were quite forthcoming about their emotions through their creativity. Addressing their personal experience was my main concern in this show. Every work and medium were different and hence the display was very





Fig-6 Earthen Virtuosity at Arts Acre Museum, Kolkata, 2020

important so as to give each one their due importance, space and yet bind them in single existential concern. Especially in this show the ten women artists had ten types of visual implementations and depicted in different shapes of supports and surfaces. So while planning the display I had to play with the visual language as well as the different two dimensional shapes to ensure that it did not look monotonous or clumsy.

In the same year Arts Acre Museum organized a curated show with ten contemporary artists. I curated that show keeping this singular agenda in mind that this show primarily wanted to focus on young promising artists. Arts Acre Museum has a permanent collection of the art of Bengal and also India. It was crucial on part of the curator to select artists and conceive a show that this existing museum space was able to accommodate. The name of the show was 'Inward Vision- an exhibition of ten contemporary artists', suggesting a fresh search for artists who tried to go beyond depiction and representation and explored the realm of ideas and concepts connected deeply to their inner beings. Both painters & sculptors from across the country took part. Each of the participating artists created a different language in contemporary art in terms of concept, medium and expression. As we know the architecture of the museum is usually huge and Arts Acre is no exception. For that reasons my curating challenge of covering a very big space had to be met. I had to choose a maximum amount of two-dimensional works for two reasons - first to cover up the wall that it should not look empty and the second one was to justify the artists' expressions and linguistic modes. In case of three-dimensional forms, I preferred to select life size works because otherwise the works look vague in the huge ceiling of the architecture. For any kind of curated show architecture and the scale and dimension of the display space of the gallery play a vital role and the curator often select the art works keeping in mind the architectural demand.

'*Inside the Fiber*' is one of my research based curated shows. This show also held in Arts Acre Museum, Kolkata, 2019. This fundamental idea of this show was material specific. I selected paper as the material as the theme for this show with the aim of exploring how different artists experimented with paper as their mediums and thereby creating a new language. Thus, the main objective was to explore a single material - paper - through different mediums like painting, weaving, needling, stitching, papier-mâché etc. The challenge was to retain the thematic interest by giving liberty to each artist to retain their style and medium while maintaining the unity of the material throughout the show in terms of display. In this show the viewer got the chance to witness a wide range of experimentation in paper. Here the material was important but the concept of the art works was equally important. Moreover, this show also tried to discover the gradual shaping of a contemporary art language through the different approaches to the same material by different

artists. Responses to a single material formed the core idea around which the curatorial concept was developed. Therefore, through the process the material specificity of this show graduated to a conceptual idea incorporating the ideas of interpretation and transformations. (Fig.4 and Fig.5)

In 2020 I curated another show titled *Earthen Virtuosity* which was also material specific. In this show fifteen ceramic contemporary artists exhibited their works exploring single material-based medium - ceramics - an age-old medium yet being continuously reinvented till today. The works were both in two- and three-dimensional form. This show was also held in Arts Acre Museum, Kolkata. Ceramic has two quality one is functional and another creative. In this show my main focus was on the creative expressions of the ceramics and therefore the display strategy became a crucial concern for the curator. Some works demanded pedestals while some other works demanded wall. Some works required enough space around them while some works demanded an intimate space. Above all, the main challenge here was to make the ceramic works express and communicate their creative self as clearly as possible to the viewers. (Fig.6)

In the recent pandemic time when physical shows are closed temporarily curating shows in physical space received a major setback and on the other hand this unprecedented situation also prompted the curators and galleries and of course the artists to think differently. Thus, a new curatorial language arrived in the art scenario where all the exhibitions began happening online, on virtual platforms. In 2020 I have curated two online shows with Ganges art gallery. One is titled *Femme Quartet* and the other one is called *Moulded Sublimity* and naturally both the shows did not have any display challenges in physical space of the gallery. The only challenge was to select the works and create a thematically balanced concept. This was a completely new challenge for the curators as well as for the artists.

From my above experiences of curating shows what transpired was a sense of a curatorial journey from a commercial venture to commissioned show to one's own vision. It also revealed that every curatorial project is a learning moment, creating a distinctively different paradigm to suit that particular show. It became evident that despite certain commonly shared challenges and even solutions, each curatorial venture always carries its own set of peculiar problems which eventually lend themselves to form the most qualified ground to develop the concept of that show. Last but not the least, any curatorial project is incomplete without the feedback and responses from the viewers - for which a curator conceives a show. Communication effectiveness thus becomes a matter of great anxiety on part of the curator leading to an incessant dialogue with the viewers who ultimately enrich the vision and objective of a curator. A curator's ultimate commitment, in my view, is aimed at this communication.

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