New Curator guest post from N. Elizabeth Schlatter

You, Yes YOU Can Be a Curator Too!*
(*Not Really)

In preparation for a lecture in early June at the National Museum of Iceland, I had a minor epiphany—that the spectrum of what can be defined as "curatorial activity" is simultaneously being expanded in two diametrically opposed directions. At one end, the word "curate" is being used to describe myriad activities not pertaining to museums or art, while at the opposite end is the increasing specialization of the practice as exemplified by introspective theorizing and institutional criticism as well as proliferating academic programs.

Two recent posts illuminate this dichotomy. "Overwhelmed? Welcome to the Age of Curation" by Eliot Van Buskirk for a *Wired* magazine blog takes Forrester Research analyst Sarah Rotman Epps to task for suggesting that Apple "curates" the software allowed on iPhones and iPads. Van WhoBuskirk says that in reality Apple polices the software on these devices. But he admires how Epps cleverly manipulates her point by employing the word "curation" and then goes on to give several examples of how "Curation is already fundamental to the way in which we view the world these days ..." listing Facebook, news outlets, and devices like smart-phones as examples.

Meanwhile, in his article "Art without Artists " for the May 2010 issue of *e-flux Journal*, the artist and e-flux co-founder Anton Vidokle warns of the tendency towards self-inflation and self-infliction within the curatorial profession. Vidokle criticizes the dangers inherent in the concept of the "curatorial" which according to a recent conference on the topic, is "a practice which goes decisively beyond the making of exhibitions," and which Marie Lind, director of the graduate program at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies, has partially described in an Artforum essay as, "an endeavor that encourages you to start from the artwork but not stay there, to think with it but also away from and against it." According to Vidokle, "Movement in such a direction runs a serious risk of diminishing the space of art by undermining the agency of its producers: artists."

My intention with this post is not to bolster or argue against either of these permutations of "curator," which could be oversimplified as the amateur (a Facebook user) versus the academic (an over-educated, overly-theorized professional curator)—hence the title of my post. But I do want to note the concurrent existence and continued escalation of these developments. I can't effectively argue that there is a causal relationship between the two, but I do think that the increasing use of the word "curate" to describe functions outside of the traditional curatorial profession does enhance the desire for insiders to study what it means to curate to the extent of conceptually formalizing the activity, as in the "curatorial."

The optimist in me hopes that this increasing spectrum of what can be called curatorial activity ultimately makes our profession more relevant within the art and museum worlds and to society at large. As mentioned in my January 2010 Museum magazine article this trend is already off and running and we might as well embrace it.

My main concern in both these developments is simply that they each move further and further from what was the initial focus of curatorial activity, that being art (or historical objects or natural and physical specimens to make this more applicable to the museum field at large). If either end of the spectrum glorifies the act of curating above and beyond what is being curated—be it paintings, data, or performances—then we move into precipitous territory. I don't want to halt the process, but rather want to suggest we proceed with "care," which, as many curators know, is at the very heart of their profession.