

Conference Paper

Optimizing Curatorial Rules in Performing Arts Festival: Strategy to Sustain Cultural Values in Disruptive Era

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Abstract

Indonesia as a multicultural country has a rich range of performing arts. These assets encourage artists and the government to conduct festivals, exhibitions, and cultural exchanges. However, the programs are not always managed optimally, particularly with regards to curatorial management. This paper presents a study aiming at: (1) identifying the roles of curator in conducting performing art festivals to sustain the culture; (2) investigating challenges faced by the curators in doing their tasks. A descriptive qualitative method in the form of a case study was employed using three instruments, namely field observation, interview, and documentation. The collected data were analyzed to define the principles of curatorial management and its role in conducting performing art festivals. It was revealed during the interviews that there were no standard operational procedures (SOP) yet in doing curatorial tasks, so the curators identified and undertook tasks under their own initiative. Some curators stated that their lack of curatorial knowledge made them lack the confidence to invite the well-known artists. As a result, they tended to invite the artists based on pre-existing familiarity. A further challenge was the lack of official authority which hampered the execution of curat

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1. Introduction

The last 20 years have seen huge changes art works and performances, starting from fluctuating budgets to advances in technology and evolving audiences expectations. These improvements were then considered as a number of challenges for the some parties involved in arts, particularly in term of utilizing some opportunities that did not exist previously.

Broadly, the role of curator continues to develop- they are not only becoming an expert but also taking care of collections, selecting artists and their works, as well as making exhibitions which encompass audience collaboration and participation. Integration of curators and technology also improves the accessibility and creates new narrative, either physically or virtually.

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In regard with this, Indonesia as one of tourism countries in the world provides various traditions, popular tourism destinations, and art performances. Performing art in Indonesian cultural contexts becomes an exhibition accomodating artists to perform their own creation. It is commonly conducted every year in some cities, such as Jakarta and Surakarta, Central Java.

There are also some themes performed in some events dealing with the local city policy, such as Go Green program, cultivating traditional and local product to art in the 21st century. Conducting the program for some reasons is not an easy job, particularly in selecting the curators. It is due to the routines done by the committee that the invited artist in the event are usually selected based on their close relationship. They do not consider some key factors in handling their tasks, such as their educational background, art reputation, popularity, experience, and talent. Consequently, the committee select the curators randomly without following certain rules.

In contrast, there are some points that should be followed by curators in conducting their job, such as: (1) using theoretical frameworks in assessing the artists and arts performed; (2) identifying the needs of visitors to the arts; (3) creating an innovation combining the philosophy of the arts with the trending issue. Considering this phenomenon, this paper aims to present a research paper dealing with some points to optimize the curatorial rules in performing arts as a strategy to sustain cultural values in disruptive era. It emphasizes on some rules that guide the curators in accomplishin their tasks, including selecting the proposed art, preparing the performance/events, writing the literary review of art, and evaluating the events to create meaningful events.

2. Literature Review

Some studies on performance art majorly focus on textual studies that put performance art not only limited to the key features of art, but also how an art correlates with the socio-culutral life in society. Sedyawati (1981) highlights that performing art is an art that has been found in later pre-historic times and it has been developed into some purposes, namely educational purposes, affirmation of social integration, entertainment, etc.

From the basic definition, the word of curator comes from the absorption of English “curation” which was later developed into “curate”, “curator” and “curatorial”. According to Webster’s New 20th Century Dictionary, the word “curation” itself comes from Latin “cura”, “curatum” which means keeping, caring for, or someone who is in charge

of maintaining, caring, and watching over things like public libraries, museums, art collections, etc.

Regarding the procedure of work, the curator goes through several stages, such as making an exhibition/show proposal, submitting a contract with the gallery and other artists, proposing a draft budget needed for a show or interest in exhibition. Meanwhile, according to Hujatnikajennong (2015), the way of working and the approach taken by the curator in reducing an exhibition or show are different. However, their scope of work is similar, including writing introductory of catalogues, leaflets, exhibition halls, and giving lectures or introductory speeches at the opening of the exhibitions or shows. Although this field of work has long been carried out, the presence of introductory writing in the name of curator in an exhibition is a new tradition that emerged in 1990 in Indonesia (Hujatnikajennong, 2015).

Furthermore, Hujatnikajennong (2015) elaborated in the past ten years, the term of curator has often been used in the context of art in Indonesia. However, at the same time, several other adapted terms explain the definition of curator, namely: (1) verbally “taking care” means being a curator; (2) nouns are “curated” which means the result of the act of curing; (3) “curatorial” adjectives relating to curators and/or mitigating actions. In contrast, Paul O’Neil as cited in Gaskill (2011) indicates that the use of verbs to curate in English is actually a new subject that is still under debate.

Specifically, in the context of art, the term of curator has developed far into the broader connotations of practice. It is supported by a number of facts that show the expansion of the notion of curators. Hujatnikajennong (2015) defines that the use of the word is attached to people who work to select or select something, not only for exhibition purposes, but also for other types of spectacle, such as performing arts (art performance).

Curators according to O’Neill (2008) were not merely behind the scenes arranging for the clear and attractive display of objects but started to be open to curatorial criticism. This is also supported by Buchloh (1989) who mentions that art practice is doing and curating necessitated a discourse as “speaking” or “writing” in order to be acknowledged in the institutional superstructure at the level of discourse. This is due to the spread of international group exhibitions who were changing the populist perception of the curating activity where the curator currently manages projects of variously and more professionally. Curator of contemporary art have become “principal representatives of some of our most persistent questions and confusions about the social role of art (Strauss, 2007).

Moreover, Yakel (2007) also claims that curators in the 21st century have moved outside the realm of museums and galleries, working independently and being generators of their own projects. As a result, they work as intermediaries across an everexpanding number of context, from the gallery to the public realm and the local community and from the mass media to online art (Beaudoin et al, 2009). Yakel (2007) believes that there is no consensus as to the role of the curator just as there is no single definition of what constitutes art. This is metaphorically depicted as something that is fluid and temporary, constantly changing, evolving, unpredictable and in continuous progress.

3. Methodology

This paper employed descriptive qualitative method with case study as a research design. This is due to the aims of this study to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within natural setting. The investigated phenomenon is a curatorial strategies in the 21st century in the performing art context. Holistic inquiry involves collection of in-depth and detailed data that are rich in content and involve multiple sources of information including direct observation, participant observations, interviews, audio-visual material, documents, reports and physical artifacts. The multiple sources information provide the wide array of information needed to provide an in-depth picture.

Regarding the data collection done in this study, it utilized three research instruments, namely field observation, interview, and documentation. Observations were conducted several times by looking closely to the selected curators while they were doing their works. It aims to gain the data related to the strategy and roles of the curators. Interviews aimed to support the data collected from the observations and obtain direct opinions from the curator regarding the works that they have done. Meanwhile, documentation analyzed some documents related to the curatorial works, including brochure, pamphlet, assessment sheets, and rundown of the program. These three research instruments were completing each other to answer the formulated research questions. The collected data were then analyzed based on the principles of curatorial management and their roles in conducting performing art festivals proposed by Hujaratnikajennong (2015).

4. Findings and Discussions

Referring to the data analysis results from three research instruments, it was found that the role of the curator in the last decades has been gaining more importance and responsibilities. Curation is not only introducing an art work to a certain institution, but

it is far more complex phenomenon in which curators may provide a platform to realise artists' ideas and interest. According to Fowle (2007), a curator must be responsive to the situations in which it occurs and he or she should address timely artistic, social, cultural, and political issues creatively. Therefore, a curator is sometimes considered as an ideologist who can find various topics and analyse them thoroughly. The curator also performs his/her work of an artist-analyst.

In detail, data from the field observation reveal two types of curators, they are freelance curators and institutional curators. Freelance curators do not work in a specific institution and they usually related to the notion of the free creator formed by the avant-garde movement. They claimed that their main jobs are collaborating with galleries, funding institutions, being mediators between institutions and artists. The freelance curators are often involved in independent activities and curate what they want or they like.

Meanwhile, institutional curators are working for specific galleries, museums, or event specific art performances. They are basically dependent on the policy conducted by the institution and they become the representative of it. According to Fomina (2008), their creative freedom can be slightly limited and the role of each curator from one organization or institution is different.

This is depicting that the curator is not only a custodian and supervisor, but also a creator, art critic, and manager. He or she might be responsible for a lot of actions and events. It is supported from the result of the interview with one curator as the following:

“Basically, we have to be a multi-tasker, meaning that we can do a lot of things in a time. We are not only an artist or art critic, but we are the main element in an event”.

(Interview with curator A, Thu/20JUN/2019)

However, the findings from the interview with another curator reveal that the curators in accomplishing their projects tend to work conventionally without following certain curatorial models, such as self-reflexive, sampling, traditional, decentralisation curation, virtual curation, artist-curation, and collaborative curatorial platform.

Self-reflexive curation deals with curatorial process based on the assumptions and knowledge of the curators (Hujatnikajennong, 2015). It is developed from the idea that the role of curator was to taking care of a collection of the objects (Muller, 2015). It also emphasizes that art practices have moved away from a focus on static objects and the role of curators has become similarly dynamic. O'Neill (2007) claims that the

curator is no longer simply a career and behind the scenes aesthetic arbiter, a curator should be creative and active in the production, meditation, and dissemination of art. In contrast, this point seemed not to be identified yet in the field because the curator did not consider it as one of the requirements in curatorial projects. One factor noted was the power possessed by the curators as if they could do everything as they wanted without involving others as recorded from the interview with one of the curators below:

I think we are used to do this work and everything is going fine. So, self-reflection is not that really so important, or I personally think it is over-impressed, even sometimes it seems that we are not really well-experienced in doing this task.

(Interview with curator C, Tue/21MAY/2019)

In addition, the curators also acted as the central for many artistic developments as they concern on the role of the audience. In interactive media art or art performance, the audience is the major element that plays the roles so that the curator should bring them in the moment of the events and increase the dynamic situations. The curators, in this case, should become the facilitator of encounters between audience and artwork (Jonathan, 2001). Data analysis results from the observation to some extent has included needs from audience that were obtained either directly or from the written requests. It was notified before the events begin and it came from individual suggestions and comments for their familiar relationship with the curators as it was gained from the document analysis showing that curators played roles as audience although the pictures were taken while curators watch the performance art events in other places.

Collaborative curatorial platform, on the other side, dealing with social and collaborative practices. It means that the curating process should be based on brokering the relationship between an artist's process of making and the audience's process of experiencing. In this case, the curator also has to deal with the introduction to complex technologies to exhibitions and museums and the audiences' rapidly developing literacy in technological interaction.

In contrast, the investigation results showing that technology, especially digital technology usage was not yet optimally utilized. It can be seen from the way the committee communicated to the artist, either orally or through a formal letter. So, the media of technology was not well-functioned in curatorial process.

Regarding the challenges faced by the curator, they had difficulty in adjusting the needs of the organizing committee to the needs of artists who would perform in the event. It influenced to the selection of artists where the curator only choose low-skill

and experience artist. The audience also thought that the performances in the event was not in accordance with the proposed theme, so some of them were dissatisfied to the event.

Another challenge is the difficulty of building communication between the curators and artists who will be involved in the performing arts activities. The main influencing factor is the curators do not understand how to integrate technology in organizing performing arts activities. Furthermore, the curators acknowledged that they did not understand how to operate computers, optimize internet, or use mobile phone in contacting artists and other performers. As an impact, there were some misunderstandings found between the curators and artists, so they could not attend the event.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that a curator plays a significant role in performing arts activities. The tasks and roles of curator determine their status in performing art events. A curator can be categorized as a freelancer if they are not working to a particular institution and do not have ongoing assessments. Meanwhile, institutional curator is a person who works in a certain institution and has ongoing tasks or responsibilities toward the institution.

In accomplishing their tasks, the curator also found several challenges, particularly related to the integration of technology and internet in organizing performing arts activities. The curators admitted that they did not understand how to operate a computer, use the internet to share information, and utilize mobile phones to contact artists and performers. It has an impact on the number of artists who were able to attend the event since they misunderstood in receiving the information from the curators.

As a suggestion, 21st century curators in conducting their tasks should be able to integrate technology and have a clear jobs description so as to minimize misunderstanding. Living a life in 21st century requires us to always be connected to one another through technology and internet. This also influences the success of performing arts where curators and artists have to be aware of information and understand their roles.

They also have to work collaboratively and creatively in organizing the program.

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