Curating Sackville

Exhibitions need not only take place in galleries, need not only involve displaying objects. Art can appear where we expect it least.

–Hans Ulrich Obrist, Curator

Curating is translating the artists’ visual or conceptual languages into a language, which is comprehensible for the public.

–Silvia Gaetti, Curator

Curating has become the new buzzword in social media these days, to the extent that bloggers write about curating their wardrobes, their playlists, their food choices, the list
goes on and on. This makes the professional role of the curator more challenging and subsequently became an integral aspect of a seminar class on curating art and critical writing I taught this last year in the Fine Arts Department. The fine arts and art history students are particularly interested in curating as an aspect of contemporary and professional practice within both disciplines and this course provided a complement to their art history and studio courses.

After fifteen years of teaching at Mount Allison I now develop seminars on areas of current interest that engage my own development as well as those of my students. This advanced seminar evolved out of my own interests in curating as a practice and as a profession. As an art history professor at Mount Allison I have worked closely with the collections in the Owens Art Gallery and produced a number of historically based exhibitions from their permanent collection of art. I have also curated exhibitions of contemporary artists and worked closely with several galleries to realize some thematic group exhibitions. It was from this experience that I decided to shape a fourth year seminar around curating art and developing students’ awareness of the importance of critical writing within the discipline.

**FINH 4091 Curating Art and Critical Writing**

This fourth-year seminar was developed from Gemey Kelly’s *Museum Studies* course, offered every other year, as a related course that built on that knowledge base. Also I was responding to another seminar I have offered, “Art & Archives”, where students were
assigned the task of curating an installation of archival material from the Mount Allison Archive related to its visual culture.

To have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”

–Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

The resulting exhibition “Archive Fever”, after Jacques Derrida’s book of the same title, was installed in vitrines in the library lobby and supervised by the Mount Allison archivist David Mawhinney. The success of this archival project and of Gemey Kelly’s museum studies class gave me the confidence to offer the following year a course that was more focused on the understanding and practice of curating art and the development of critical writing around exhibitions.
The Project – Curating Sackville

As part of the advanced seminar, Curating Art and Critical Writing, the project, Curating Sackville, was group-led with students curating art/archival material for exhibitions on campus and within the community of Sackville. In the class, students developed conceptual and practical knowledge on topics involving curating, galleries, and artist-run centres, through critical writing and reading, and guest speakers from Sackville, the Owens Art Gallery and within the Maritimes. The student teams then developed their exhibitions over the semester on campus, including the Purdy Crawford Centre, and in other venues in town.
This class of twenty students was divided into seven groups with each deciding their venue, the artwork they wish to present and organizing the task of writing a pamphlet on the exhibition and designing a poster for display around campus and in town. They negotiated with different members of the public, including the Sackville businesses Rags of Time, Blooms, Thunder and Lightening, The Black Duck, the University Library and archive, the University Chapel, and, the Purdy Crawford Centre. Other students used alternative spaces to show the artwork in, both on campus and in town.

Students were required in groups to conceptualize, organize and run an exhibition for the end of term. This exercise taught the students resourcefulness, group work, design elements (posters, catalogues, blogs), coordinating dates, openings, closings, curating artwork and other skill sets.

The project was innovative and allowed the students freedom to work within groups leading the way in contemporary curating practices. This was an important component of their class, along with a curatorial blog for disseminating information regarding class material or project progression. Curating art is an exciting and creative opportunity for students to demonstrate both in class and in public their leadership skills in a group dynamic and show their abilities to formulate and organize an exhibition in a professional and applied manner. The course was designed to heighten student awareness of the professional aspect of curating and critical writing. The process of working together on campus and in the community was challenging, but a rewarding, experience. The blog
was also a creative and public site for the students to share their development and learning as curators.

*Curating Sackville* fulfilled a number of ideals including collaborative group work, working within a community, both university and town; producing innovative ideas within their exhibition strategies and deployment; using community artists and the archives to represent culture to the various publics; using creativity and taking risks by applying ideas and theories explored in class to a real-time exhibition. The students developed their leadership skills in articulating the group needs, in writing and design, how to publicize their show and negotiate with artists, venues, and real timelines. Students also adapted and developed interdependent relationship within each group dynamic that builds trust and mirrors the reality of curating as a professional, as much of it is driven by team work.
everyday MAGIC


Fig. 5 everyday MAGIC exhibition detail of Jasmine Keillor’s paintings at Rags of Time bookshop, Sackville, photo Laura Watson, http://www.lwcuratorialblog.blogspot.ca
caerimonia

One group of three students, after several attempts to secure a gallery space, decided on one of their houses located on 38 Main Street. This was one of the more conceptual exhibitions were the students had selected their artists and conceived their thematic thesis. One student wrote of their title in her curatorial blog:

We also got real about the name, we are going to go with:

caerimonia

words uttered, gestures performed, objects handled

Caerimonia is the Latin for, according to wikitionary

religious ceremony, ritual
sacredness, sanctity
reverence, veneration, awe

The sub-phrase I found in some of my research, and is attributed to famed anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss as his definition of ritual. I think it sums up what we are trying to achieve with this exhibition, with having performative elements in the poetry reading (words uttered), the stick and poke tattooing (gestures performed), and objects handled (artworks).

–Posy Legge, https://posyleggecuration.wordpress.com

Fig. 6, Caerimonia, exhibition catalogue, photo Posy Legge, https://posyleggecuration.wordpress.com
Note: will provide better image.
The show has been installed! We are presenting the exhibition to the class today, so we installed Sunday night and Monday. We ran into a few blips, moved some things around, measured and leveled everything, and I think it looks good. Harry has been amazing with having the set-up at his place, everytime I leave and come back all of the supplies and tools have been nicely reorganized on the table.

We ordered the exhibition circular going clockwise, in the order of the classifications of ritual we set up in our catalogue, from Catherine Bell’s *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997): Rites of exchange and communion (Laura in the foyer), Rites of passage (Alix), Calendrical and commemorative rites (Laura, Lisa), Rites of affliction (Liisa, Karissa), Political rituals (Izzy, Taylor), and Rites of Feasting, Fasting and Festivals (Noelle). We are setting up Karissa in the middle of the room, and she will perform her poetry reading both tonight.
and Friday. Noelle kindly made some jellies for the class for tonight, and we plan to have wine. –Posy Legge, https://posyleggecuration.wordpress.com

selfie

Another conceptually developed exhibition was the group show entitled *selfie*. The curatorial thesis behind this show was to revive a historical tradition at Mount Allison where graduating BFA’s paint a self-portrait that became part of the Owens Art Gallery collection. This history has often been a feature of exhibitions at the gallery and the students are often made aware of this legacy. They consulted with Jane Tisdale, the conservator at the Owens Gallery, who provided an extensive history and directed them to the Mount Allison Archive to do further research.

Fig. , *Graduate Self-Portraits*, 2014, Owens Art Gallery, photo Jasmine Keillor

One student comments in her curatorial blog after viewing this collection:
The history that is documented by this collection of graduate self-portraits is at once formal and extremely personal. It is formal because of the specificity of the assignment and the authoritative setting in which the works were produced. It is personal because we are presented with snapshots into the lives of young artists. The imagery captures the subject at a time of youth and excitement, yet as viewers we know that this time is long gone. Time has built up a valuable layer of distance and nostalgia between the viewer and the paintings themselves. This historical layer far exceeds the initial purpose of the paintings as simple and generic diploma pieces. We read them rather as year books, as time capsules and still shots of eras gone and forgotten. There's something romantic about this sense of outdated-ness. –Jasmine Keillor, http://gradportraits2014.blogspot.ca

It was interesting to watch this group develop their venue, originally hoping to use a downtown vacant property on the corner of Main and Bridge Streets. Eventually, they decided to use the new Purdy Crawford Centre as the venue and their poster and catalogue began to take shape around this new site.
The title itself was a real breakthrough that helped them further conceptualize this large group show of the fourteen graduating Fine Arts students. One of the curators of the show, wrote on this:

We have finally found a title for the graduate self-portrait show. It will be called "selfie". Selfie which is modern slang for a digital self portrait often taken with the cameras built into phones. We decided that while we were trying to connect with the past and the tradition of the school it was equally important to emphasize that the work was made in the present. We tried to think of the modern equivalent for the self-portrait and came to the conclusion that it would be the modern selfie. This also give us avenue to explore elements of playfulness and humour in our marketing and design elements. This was important because we wanted to find a way to lighten the academic and straightforward concept of the show.

–Dr. Alex Francheville, http://mtagradshow.blogspot.ca

Notably, this student in his curatorial blog was using the avatar Dr. Alex Francheville.

“I am a curator and art critic from New York City”.

These curatorial blogs provided another creative space for the students to track their ideas and to add documentation to their exhibitions as they developed. I had previously used
class blogs for students in other courses to act as journals, but in this seminar I was also building on my own practice as a curator for an exhibition I organized last spring in Banff, entitled MUSE. This was a show in the Banff Park Museums where four artists intervened within this historical natural history site. I used a curatorial blog to track the development of the exhibition and to allow the blog to serve as another site for documentation and dissemination.⁶

Fig. 9, Alex Francheville, photo Purdy Crawford Centre for the Arts, the new home of Drama and Fine Arts

Fig. 10, Poster of selfie exhibition, photo Alex Francheville
Fig. 10, *selfie* exhibition catalogue, work by Alix Wilson, photo courtesy Alex Francheville

**Society of Anonymous Drawers**
Fig. 1, Society of Anonymous Drawers, photo Patrick Allaby, http://secretaryofsad.blogspot.ca

Fig. 1, Society of Anonymous Drawers, photo courtesy of Patrick Allaby
“We’ve had our final class of Curating and Critical writing, my goodness it has been a fast semester, I can’t believe it’s over already. It was a really nice note to finish on everyone’s curatorial projects which everyone worked so hard on, I was blown away by everyone’s work and the amount of professionalism that went into these projects. Seriously these were some of the best shows I have seen while living in Sackville, and that is saying something because we really do get a lot of great art here. I think it was great how much variety we got to see with the projects from online exhibitions, to shows curated for private personal spaces, to shows that include installations throughout town, and even some use of a more traditional space in the new building. It was never a dull moment with any of these exhibitions.” –Kealin Lamb

*Voices in the Walls*

Another virtual exhibition was by a student who conducted a series of talks with other students and faculty within the Fine Arts Department. Entitled “Voices in the Walls” this was conceptual as it dealt largely with memory and places within Sackville.
“The purpose of this exhibition is to treat the preexisting town of Sackville as an exhibition space. The spaces within the town are pieces in the exhibition. Think of the spaces as ongoing collaborative pieces that are continuously being added to by every individual that enters the space and their experience within it.

The other pages on the site contain playlists composed of comments by multiple artists (students and faculty of the Fine Arts department at Mount Allison University) about thoughts on the space relating to their experience of it. The sound clips within the playlists are meant to create a commentary on individual spaces within Sackville and on the town as a whole. Through the combined comments of the artists we gain a more comprehensive understanding of what these spaces mean.

Towns are more than timelines of major events, they are accumulations of the experiences of the individuals that occupy those spaces. Every surface and space holds the memories of the events and people they bear witness to.
These tracks are students and faculty from the Fine Arts department at Mount Allison University talking about places that define Sackville for them.”

–Sienna Collette, curatorial blog

For example “A Comforting Place”, “The End of Bridge Street”.

“I’m really excited that I found a way to turn this exhibition into a project that I am really genuinely interested in. For the project I had to learn how to use my Sony voice recorder, I tried Audacity (hated it), Adobe Audition CC, WordPress, and SoundCloud. I think this has also opened up a lot of things for me because I think I’ve learned that I am really interested in working with sound more.”– Sienna Collette, Voices in the Wall, student blog

Reflections:

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1 Examples of exhibitions at the Owens Art Gallery I have curated that also worked as a classroom for teaching include Framing Nature: the Picturesque in Nineteenth Century Landscape Painting Likewise, The Art of the Copy, Louis Weldon Hawkins: Shades of Grez and Paper Doll, an exhibition of contemporary art that also included an archival collection.

2 Much of the group work was informed by the guest speakers, including Janet Crawford from the Fog Forest Gallery, Amanda Fauteux, programme manager at the Struts artist-run Centre, John Murchie a
curator and writer from Sackville, Pan Wendt a curator from the Confederation Centre in Charlottetown who is curating the faculty show at the Owens this October, Mike Landry, arts reporter for The Telegraph News and arts journals, and Gemey Kelly, Director and Curator at the Owens Art Gallery.

3 FINH 4091: Curating Art and Critical Writing Syllabus Assignment:
Students will form into groups of 3 and work together to curate an exhibition on campus or in town. You will work closely together to find a venue and set up the dates for your show to run 1-2 weeks. You will be required to install and de-install your show, to select the work and themes you wish to on for the exhibition. A small accordion-style pamphlet would work, and to design a poster advertising your show. Divide your tasks but come together for all the finer points so that you are all on in agreement. We will be visiting your exhibitions in class for a curatorial critique and discussion. Possible spaces to curate in Sackville, Thunder & Lighting, New Art Building, Music Conservatory, President’s Cottage, Vogue, library vitrine, alternative spaces–shop fronts, closest, site specific location, virtual space, other.

4 The project was integral to this course curriculum and the composite mark is 50%. Out of this mark 30% was allotted to the team-led exhibition for organization, professionalism, selection of work, installation of the exhibition, pamphlet writing, and advertising (posters). The other 20% was dedicated to the curatorial blog each student keeps during the term on class material on curating or critical reading or writing, guest speakers and, importantly, the progress of their exhibitions.

5 The project Curating Sackville was awarded a Leadership Mount Allison Grant, 2014, towards the costs of printing pamphlets and posters.

6 https://akovalblog.wordpress.com

7 http://kealinlamb.blogspot.ca/2014/12/final-thoughts-weve-had-ourfinal-class.html