

Curators, Their Personal Attributes, and Modes of Practice: A Historical Comparison

Susan Ostling, Griffith University, Australia

Abstract: The contemporary art curator's role is one that appears to be so radically different from its immediate forebears. Were there precedents of curatorial practice I have wondered that would lead to a greater understanding of the contemporary art curator? In a rather speculative way I consider two 'curators' (though neither described themselves as this), working approximately 400 years apart: Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) a scholarly collector from Bologna and Seth Siegelaub working in New York (1967-1972) as an 'exhibition organizer'. While the differences between the two figures' life histories are of course considerable, there are nevertheless curious similarities in their personal attributes and approach to the shared enterprise of exhibiting objects. To undertake this analysis, I draw firstly on scholarly historical accounts of Aldrovandi as well as my own observations during a recent visit to view the remains of his collection in Bologna. In addition I undertake a discursive analysis of an interview I conducted with Siegelaub, and draw on Siegelaub's published journal articles and other scholars' writing on the emergence of conceptual art in New York. Despite the asymmetric nature of this comparative study, and despite the disciplinary differences in the nature of the objects, they each exhibited, I propose there are many similarities of practice that can be brought to contribute to a greater understanding of the phenomenon of the contemporary art curator.

Keywords: Curator, Curatorship, Historical Comparison, Contemporary Art Curator



Fig. 1: Aldrovandi as Aristotle.
Ulisse Aldrovandi, From Ornithologiae hoc est de avibus historiae libri XII (Bologna, 1599).



Fig. 2: Seth Siegelaub (1969)
Photographed by Duane Michaels

Introduction

Is the contemporary art curator simply an invention of our times—an outcome of spectacularised corporate global culture, or are there precedents of curatorial practice, a consideration of which, could lead to a greater understanding of the contemporary art curator? This paper will consider the personal attributes and modes of practice of two ‘curators’ (though neither person describes himself as this), working approximately 400 years apart: **Ulisse Aldrovandi** (1522-1605) (fig.1) a scholarly collector from Bologna and **Seth Siegelau** (fig. 2), an exhibition organizer (Altshuler 1994, 236), working in New York between 1967 and 1972. This is undoubtedly a speculative study; nevertheless, through an historical comparison of these two figures and their times, I aim to build a greater understanding of the cultural function of the contemporary art curator, and to suggest that a lineage of continuity can be discerned in curatorial practices over time. What I have found is that there are links that may be drawn between the various roles played by scholarly collectors, art advisors, and curators over the centuries. Michel Foucault’s (1973, xxi; 131) theorisation of social change identifies how social and cultural shifts open spaces through changes in the perception of previous codes of *being* and *thinking*. Scholarly collectors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries I suggest, in establishing both new ways to look at objects, and also new objects to look at, begin to occupy such a cultural space.

The conventional understanding of the art curator in the West is that the role evolves in late eighteenth century in tandem with the creation of public museums (Crimp 1997, Groys 2008). In public museums, curators are largely invisible, however they gradually acquire visibility within the institution after World War I (O’Neill 2012). With the cultural politicisation of the 1960s, the art curator is seen to be fashioned anew taking on a much more significant public role (O’Neill 2012). Many authors see the ‘independent’ art curator as an invention of our own times, caught fully in the flux of global cultural economies. For instance, Ralph Rugoff (1999, 46) director of the Hayward Gallery, London says that it is global cultural events through their positioning and visibility, that have created a “conspicuous platform” for curators. Maria Lind (2011, 47), director of Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm notes that the current trend in contemporary art is “toward celebrity culture”, and the curator “in turn, has become the image of the glamorous entrepreneur”. Simon Sheikh (2009) identifies the early 1990s as the time when the art curator takes on far more of the role of creator of the exhibition (as opposed to ‘organising’ an exhibition, or ‘producing’ an exhibition). It is a role he suggests that ultimately prepares the way for an expansion of the art market. Through the leverage of current cultural and knowledge economies, the contemporary art curator is seen as a means to create knowledge, disperse influence, and generate capital. Curators function in a far more ‘independent’ manner than previously within museums; they gain authority and become prominent players in the art world. They develop skills to *package* art exhibitions, developing wider concepts or themes beyond that of an individual artist’s work. Rugoff (1999, 47) describes curatorial practice as having been “reinvented on a grand scale”, and curators are seen as initiators, and authors of “project based presentations” (Beckstette et al. 2012). Beatrice von Bismarck (2012, 64; 70) notes that from the 1990s a discernable close relation can be seen between art curators’ practices, and the interdisciplinary developments that took place in artistic practices. As well it is noted that curators have taken on board much of the critique of art institutions—initiated by artists from the 1970s (Marchant 2012, 26, 32). It is apparent then, that close ties with artists and with the ideas and aspirations of contemporary art are a core of the contemporary art curator’s practice. The other strand of their practice takes its direction from entrepreneurialism, or, as Oliver Marchant (2012, 28) puts it “a new spirit of capitalism”¹—by which he means curators work to create

¹ Here Marchant draws from Boltanski, L and Chiapello, È (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London, New York, Verso.

“innumerable temporary connections”, they network tirelessly and generate synergetic relations widely. Beti Žerovc (2005, 143) argues that there are currently particular conditions that favour the art curator. Žerovc (2008, 252) notes that with the influx of financial and infrastructural support to the contemporary art economy (the purpose of which is “to ensure the optimal and freest development for art and artists”), there is a need for people who can “manage and organize” between parties in this economy. It is the curator, Žerovc (2008, 252) says who possesses such a “contradictory sets of skills”, which enables them to “manoeuvre between artists on the one side and today’s funders of contemporary art on the other”. And, while the curator becomes professionalised and more prominent in art circles, their activities also extend beyond art exhibitions to many other areas of cultural production, that is, as Hans Ulrich Obrist (2011, 4) says “from prints by Old Masters to the contents of a concept store.” The contemporary art curator then, gives every appearance of being a creature of our own times.

Stepping back in time with the example of the humanist, and scholarly collector Ulisse Aldrovandi who lived between 1522 and 1605 in Bologna, I am firstly asserting that curators appeared on the cultural landscape much earlier than with the late eighteenth century public museum. Secondly, through a comparison with Seth Siegelaub, who referred to himself as an ‘exhibition organizer’, and who practiced briefly in New York between 1968 and 1972, I am suggesting that both Aldrovandi and Siegelaub developed modes of practice that would now be considered part of the spectrum of activities of the contemporary art curator outlined above.

Aldrovandi was appointed as the first professor of natural sciences at the University of Bologna in 1560, and in 1568 created the University of Bologna’s botanical garden (Tega 2005, 22). As a humanist Aldrovandi wanted to understand the world around him by analyzing the evidence of its wonders and marvels. Siegelaub, on the other hand, with no academic background in the arts is an early example of an ‘independent’ curator whose practice developed outside of an art museum. Siegelaub, although an outsider to the art world acquires traction in his practice, largely through friendships, effective networking, an organising ability, and innovative ways of exhibiting, and distributing artists’ work (Siegelaub in interview with author May 2005). To do this Siegelaub drew on new business models that are now commonly applied in the arts (Alberro, 2003). I have identified six categories of practice where similarities can be seen between Aldrovandi and Siegelaub. While the differences between the two figures are clearly many, it is the similarities in personal qualities and modes of practice that have caught my attention.

Places of Meeting and Discussion

Scholarly collectors in the sixteenth century integrated their collections into their living quarters, or created their museum as an adjunct to a professional space. Objects were tightly packed and hung from walls and ceilings, using every available space for display (Olmi 1993, 237-9). In these conditions, little space was made available for common objects, rather the odd, the strange and the different took priority, and collections in turn gained recognition and notoriety chiefly due to their range of curiosities or rarities (Olmi 1993, 242). While nature was prominent in collections, “art, antiquities and exotica” were all desirable (Findlen 1994, 3). Giuseppi Olmi (1993, 244) argues that the incorporation of art and antiquities with nature was not so much creating a vision of unity between all things, but rather, these naturalists and collectors were engaged in a study of all things.

Today in the Ulisse Aldrovandi Museum in Bologna, the remaining objects collected by Aldrovandi consist largely of mineral, plant and animal specimens. They were those that seemed strange and terrible like a porbeagle shark’s head, a guitar shark, a monk fish, a flying gurnard, a balloon fish, a fossil crab, a peduline tit’s nest, reptiles, or chameleons. Paula Findlen (1994, 5) clarifies that while the collection of natural specimens did not initially steer in “a new philosophical definition of and structure for *scientia*,” it did however, increase the activities and the enthusiasm for inquiry. Collectors began to link philosophical inquiry to the outcome of “a

continuous engagement with material culture” (Findlen 1994, 5). Distinct discourses emerged through humanist inquiry, which in turn informed the way objects were assembled. Methodologies for gaining knowledge from objects similarly evolved, and the manner of displaying them established. The reputation of a collection drew students, other scholars, and the social elite, creating an environment where cultural meanings were articulated, and narratives of order emerged.

Siegelaub opened his first gallery, Seth Siegelaub Contemporary Art (initially and briefly in partnership), located at 16 West 56th St, New York, in 1964, when he was twenty-three years old. The gallery closed after 18 months because Siegelaub was unable to cover the overheads, and reportedly, he found having to be in one place to operate a gallery too rigid, restrictive, and boring (Siegelaub, 2005). Siegelaub moved to a two-room apartment at Madison Avenue and 82nd Street, New York, and continued dealing in art from his apartment, although he now focused on a smaller, and more readily identifiable, group of artists (Siegelaub 2005).

An important tactic that Siegelaub used for building his reputation was to create a sense of excitement for the new art, through gatherings he held at his apartment on Sunday afternoons, to which he invited collectors, critics and museum curators to socialise with the artists he represented (Alberro 2003, 12). This “inner circle”, Alexander Alberro notes, was to play a crucial role in the promotion of conceptual art. For, while the art itself was ostensibly accessible to a wide public—for example Kosuth’s ‘advertisements’, which appeared in a number of widely distributed newspapers—conceptual art was in fact obscure and difficult, and rendered “incomprehensible to all but a small closed circle” (Alberro 2003, 57). Those who gathered at Siegelaub’s apartment, were not the educated social elite who were drawn to Aldrovandi’s museum, nevertheless they did have an understanding of art and were enthusiastic about exploring its new frontiers.

Objects as Triggers for the Immaterial

The scholarly collections in the sixteenth century were always personal and often eccentric assemblages of found objects (animal, vegetable, mineral), paintings and antiquities. Findlen (1994, 1) describes the objects in the collections as often “remnants.” They were objects that aroused curiosity, wonder and surprise. Many objects had “magical-therapeutical value”, and many possessed symbolic or emblematic significance (Olimi 1993, 241; 245).

Collectors in the sixteenth century aesthetically arranged their objects although they were usually separated into the broad categories of the *natural* and the *artificial* (Olimi 1993 237-9). Michael Baxandall (1991, 34) argues that well before labels and catalogues were a feature of display, there was always a form of “construction” put onto exhibited objects; there was always a play of “ordering propositions.” In these scholarly displays, homology was the organising principle (Findlen 1990, 306), and concordant links were applied using all manner of tropes (Findlen 1990, 310). William Ashworth (1996, 21-2) highlights the delight that Renaissance scholar-collectors took in assembling the “allegorical and adagial”, emphasising the symbolic charge in all things. The explanation for strange and perplexing objects was often given through discourses of resemblance, where the narrative and the anecdotal came to the fore and where “language and things were endlessly interwoven” (Foucault 1973, 54). The objects themselves were always a trigger for other discourses.

In a curiously complementary way, the artists Siegelaub began to represent, tended to eschew material value, and their art increasingly existed as ideas. This in turn lent to devising new and different ways of making exhibitions. A significant exhibition that Siegelaub facilitated was titled *January 5-31, 1969*, with the work of Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Huebler and Lawrence Weiner. The exhibition consisted of a catalogue and traces of works in an empty office space (on loan to Siegelaub for the month of January) at 44 East 52nd Street, New York. Siegelaub, (cited in Lippard 1997 (1973), 71) describes the terms of the exhibition: “The

exhibition consists of (the ideas communicated in) the catalog; the physical presence, (of the work) is supplementary to the catalog.” Unsurprisingly, the idea that the art work present in the exhibition was not really the *work*, or was just one manifestation of it was puzzling to many. Jo Melvin (2012, 250) suggests that this was a strategy Siegelauab was experimenting with to see whether art works could be “accessed differently and distributed cheaply through publications,” and the gallery dispensed with entirely. The *January show* exhibition space consisted of two rooms. In one sat a receptionist at a desk, in the second room there were two works by each artist. Robert Barry’s works were imperceptible FM and AM radio waves. Technical details about the waves were displayed on typed labels on the wall. Joseph Kosuth’s works were pages from newspapers where he had placed thesaurus entries (as advertisements) for the words *existence* (*New York Times*, *Museum News*, *The Nation*, *Artforum*) and *time* (*The London Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Express*, *The Observer*). Douglas Huebler placed on the windowsill thirteen photographs of the ground taken every 50 miles along the 650 miles between three cities: Haverhill, Windham, New York. Lawrence Weiner removed a 36-inch square of plaster from the wall, and poured bleach on the carpet to create *An Amount of Bleach Poured onto the Rug and Allowed to Bleach* (Altshuler 1994, 239-241). To confound matters regarding the exhibition further, all the works were identified in the catalogue as already being in private collections. There were no questions about the value of an individual’s work, or about whether it was art or not, because collectors had already staked their claim on it as art. As Siegelauab (2005) said this form of conceptual art “appealed to another ... sort of collector ... [requiring] definitely a great leap of faith, particularly in a materialistic sense.” This was because conceptual art pushed aside the “object status and commodity form,” and, any sense of “imaginary and bodily experience,” (Buchloh 1990, 107), or a sense of materiality, or of narrative. Also rejected by this art was identifiable artistic individuality, and skill (Buchloh 1990, 143). It was art that captured a changing sensibility; it rejected the visual and material pleasures of traditional art forms, and in their place was the stark, the obvious, and yet the unexpected, the deadpan, the transitory, and at times the completely unseen. For Siegelauab the objects he exhibited were an intellectual trigger to a wider questioning of social and cultural values in an advanced capitalist society. For Aldrovandi, the remnants he collected and displayed were also triggers—to past knowledge and wisdom, but also to further inquiry about the mysteries of the natural world.

Relying on Networks

Franz Mauelshagen (2003, 1) notes the way “the practices of networking” among scholars in early modern Europe created the ‘republic of letters’—a scholarly trans-European community built through “the ethos of exchange” (Findlen 1991, 6). Letter writing between scholars, accompanied by exchange gifts were the means through which trust and friendships were built, creating in its wake the foundations for scientific inquiry (Mauelshagen 2003, 2). So while gifts quite clearly signified relationships of patronage and friendship and prestige, nevertheless Findlen (1991, 6) emphasises gifts were also “an integral part of the study of nature”. Many of the scientific collections of naturalists in the sixteenth century were built through gifts; in fact, gifts mapped the social standing of the collector and the audience for a museum (Findlen 1991, 7). Gift giving was more than a form of social conduct—it was “a strategy for success, an external display of power”; it was through this ritual that scholarly collectors legitimised and facilitated their scholarly work, and confirmed their social standing (Findlen 1991, 6). Aldrovandi, Findlen (1991, 11) says kept records of promised gifts, and gifts received, such was the importance of reciprocation. As well, he was assiduous in keeping records of those who had visited his museum, organising visitors’ names by places of residence, and profession (Findlen 1989, 73). Networks then, created through “reciprocity” enabled a great part of Aldrovandi’s practice (Findlen 1991, 18).

Siegelaub, from the late 1960s had become accomplished at targeting potential collectors with personalised direct mail (Alberro 2003, 175 n.25). By day, Siegelaub is described as “tirelessly drafting promotional letters and telephoning prospective patrons,” and by night socialising and networking with artists, critics, collectors and celebrities at the Manhattan restaurant-bar Max’s Kansas City (Alberro 2003, 12). Siegelaub seems to have adeptly recognised the synergy between the major communication and distribution changes taking place at this time, and the inherent possibilities of conceptual art (Alberro 2003, 3). Innovation and reinvention were in the air; and just as the rejuvenating business culture in the United States embraced an entrepreneurial drive for new products, and new markets (Marwick 1998, 17), so contemporary art and artists (and Siegelaub), turned away from the site of the museum to embrace opportunities presented through reconsidering everyday experience (Alberro 2003, 5). What needs to be taken into account is that Siegelaub’s productive and innovative practice occurred with very little exchange of money. In fact, it seems possible that the lack of money may have stimulated and propelled much of the activity. However, despite the constant search for money, making money seems to have had little to do with his ventures. “It was about the excitement, intellectual ideas, or changing the world which was the turn on”, Siegelaub told Paul O’Neill (2006, 5). Further, Siegelaub (2005) says of the time:

... the specific art making economics were such that it didn’t involve lots of money ... it was possible with my own head of steam and organising ability or whatever you want to call it, and with one or two collectors putting in a few hundred dollars, you could do an exhibition.

Seeking creative possibilities, opened opportunities for the making and distribution of conceptual art. As Siegelaub (2005) said, “So there was sort of a...synthesis between what they were doing and how I was trying to be able to show their work.”

Siegelaub and Aldrovandi’s practices were activated and sustained through networking. For Aldrovandi, his scholarly networks affirmed his credibility and standing, and through the reciprocation of exchange gifts, the objects in his museum increased; for Siegelaub, his networks allowed things to happen in little time, with very little exchange of money.

Seeking Publicity

In the sixteenth century increasing knowledge through the study of objects transformed the discourses of the natural world, and in the process, defined the collector. The possession of objects was a show of knowledge; and, in a similar way, through the careful display of the objects, a collector “symbolically acquired the honor and reputation that all men of learning cultivated” (Findlen 1994, 3). Collections were a means through which to construct an identity, and “a means to publicize it” (Findlen 1994, 294). Findlen (1994, 295) also says that the shaping of individual identity through collecting provided a very interesting example of the “creativity of humanist discourse.” For, while scholars continued to draw on the Augustinian practices of seeking inner knowledge through introspection, a transformation of how the ‘outside’ world was viewed was taking place. No longer a temptation away from introspection, involvement with the surrounding world came to be understood as a “means of illumination” (Findlen 1994, 294). Discovery through travel and creating collections led to a deeper self-knowledge, and “displaying knowledge” (Findlen 1994, 295) was a sign of civility and courtly propriety (Tribby 1992, 140). As the symbolic value of a collection increased, so the identity of the collector became more closely linked with the importance of the objects in the collection (Tribby 1992, 152-5).

A particular example of Aldrovandi’s publicity ‘scoop’ was in 1572, in relation to the sighting and eventual capture of a two legged dragon (Findlen 1994, 17-23). This occurred on the day the future pope, Gregory XIII —whose family heraldic emblem was a “rising dragon” — returned to be invested at his place of birth, Bologna. As both brother-in-law of the Senator

responsible for initiating the capture of the dragon, and cousin of the future pope, Aldrovandi fittingly took possession of the slaughtered dragon for his collection. Of course the possession of the dragon drew many of the elite to view it, and collectors from all parts of Italy sought further information from Aldrovandi about the dragon now considered a “papal portent.” However, what is particularly of interest here is the way Aldrovandi immediately set to maximize the outcomes from this event, and turning what Findlen (1994, 21) says could have been ruinous for him into “a providential act of patronage for his museum.” Within a week Aldrovandi had sent a description of the dragon to the papal court. A month later he wrote again assuring the court of the “nobility of the unusual beast.” He had one of his artists illustrate the dragon, which was printed and ready for distribution to scholarly inquirers. Aldrovandi also set himself to write a treatise on dragons titled *Dracologia*, which was divided into seven books and completed within two months of the dragon’s capture. As well, Aldrovandi began to explain in philosophical terms the unusual anatomy of a dragon with two feet, using, as Findlen (1994, 22) says his “humanist skills” to find eloquence in the curious and strange. Thus, Aldrovandi noting that the two feet of the dragon could serve no particular purpose, was able to suggest that “through its imperfection,” the dragon “now proves to be of the highest perfection” (cited in Findlen 1994, 21).

Alberro (2003, 12) emphasises that from the beginning of Siegelau’s career as an art dealer and exhibition organiser, Siegelau recognised the importance of developing press coverage and publicity, and had the “knack” for achieving it. An example of the way Siegelau gained and used publicity is in April 1969 where the exhibition Siegelau initiated took the form of a poster. It was for Barry’s *Inert Gas Series* (sponsored by an art patron) sited in Southern California. As Siegelau said to Norvell (cited in Alberro and Norvell 2001, 33), “[w]e went out there and he made the show and I exhibited it”. The ‘show’ consisted of Barry releasing invisible gases into the atmosphere. The ‘exhibition’ consisted of a large poster mailed to 600 individuals and art institutions. And, totally fitting for an invisible artwork, Siegelau’s Californian address was no more than a post office box number, with the phone number connected to an answering service that gave a recorded description of the work.

While newspapers and journals increased publicity, and created a reputation for Siegelau, the artists, and the new art, the publicity also had the potential to extend the audience of conceptual art dramatically. Siegelau presses this point to Norvell in 1969:

... by making a piece that is an unlimited edition of, say, a million copies in the case of big newspapers ... you’ve really made your art; you’ve extended your art to a million people (Alberro and Norvell 2001, 40).

Adept Communicators

Collections required narration and scholarly collectors showed themselves to be formidable communicators. With their knowledge and erudition, collectors sought attention and recognition from patrons, other collectors, and visitors, as well as from readers of their museums’ inventories and catalogues (Findlen 1994, 294). Further Findlen (1991, 12) points out just how competitive communication was in Aldrovandi’s time. “Power”, Findlen says “lay not in institutions, but in the individuals who could best manipulate the system through carefully negotiated exchanges”. Scholarly collectors competed for the attention of patrons largely through their ability to communicate ideas and exchange artifacts. And it was their success at this social dynamic, which in turn gave “intellectual legitimacy to their science”, opening further routes to obtain and disseminate knowledge (Findlen 1991, 14). But Findlen also says another way to look at such social exchange was as “a *rhetorical strategy*”, in so far as it “constantly redefined the relations between the players in the game of science” (1991, 18); Aldrovandi then as an esteemed scholarly collector, was as active participant in a system where poetics and politics were the means to scientific inquiry (Findlen 1991, 21).

Siegelaub seems to have rapidly recognised the synergy between the major communication and distribution changes taking place at this time, and the inherent possibilities of conceptual art. While conceptual art emerged within the social unrest of the protest movements, it also anticipated the new economic paradigm of advanced capitalism, in which new forms of communication and information distribution were to play a dominant role (Alberro 2003, 2-3). Siegelaub, in recognising conceptual art was as much about dialogue and debate than as art objects, identified the opportunities that this provided for publicity. He was to use the strategy of orchestrating other people to speak about the artists' work through forums linked to exhibitions. He also used the informality of interviews or panel discussions, in which Siegelaub would be the moderator, and the artists with whom he worked, the speakers. The text would then be transcribed, edited, and then sent off to the increasing number of art journals for publication (Alberro 2003, 186 n.3; 177 n.41). For Siegelaub, as for Aldrovandi poetics and politics were entwined.

Publishing the Printed Word

Aldrovandi it is said wrote “reams” (Findlen 1994, 7) yet was unable to find sufficient benefactors for the extensively illustrated volumes that the new study of natural history required. At the end of his life he had produced 400 volumes covering topics like birds, fish, quadrupeds, serpents, monsters, stones, metals, gems and fossils. Two years before Aldrovandi died, he formalised an agreement with the Senate of Bologna that on his death his entire museum would be transferred to the Palazzo Pubblico, with the proviso that his remaining manuscripts be published. Over the next 50 years only another eight further treatises were published.

On a recent visit to view the Ulisse Aldrovandi Museum at the Palazzo Poggi in Bologna, it was the 14 cabinets—the *Pinacoteche*, containing hundreds of carved wooden blocks that I felt had a very strong presence in the space. These cabinets contained woodblocks for illustrating the specimens that Aldrovandi had identified, described, and analysed. While I felt the woodblocks carried the sense of Aldrovandi's project of publishing, poised to be realised; there were also hundreds of wooden blocks on which draftsmen had rendered artists' illustrations, ready for the engraver to carve. It was these blocks ‘in waiting’ that suggested quite strongly Aldrovandi's publication project was always to be continued, and never at an end.

Siegelaub was attuned to the fact that knowledge of art and artists circulated much more actively through the print media and word of mouth, than by actually viewing art in gallery exhibitions (Meyer 1973, 124-5). He also recognised how badly painting and sculpture fared in printed media. However, as Siegelaub says for art with little or no physical presence, “its intrinsic (communicative) value is not altered by its presentation in printed media...” such that the catalogue could even become the exhibition (Siegelaub 1973, 168). Publishing catalogues, and using the distribution power of the international mass media, increasingly created the backbone for Siegelaub's overall practice. As he said at the time, communication in art took place in three ways: “Artists knowing what other artists are doing. The community knowing what artists are doing. The world knowing what artists are doing” (cited in Meyer 1973, 124). Catalogues and books, Siegelaub believed, were the most effective way of engaging in all three forms of communication at once, facilitating, what Marwick (1998, 25) describes as, the “new ambience of international cultural exchange.”

Despite the expanded opportunities today for promotion and discussion of contemporary art presented through social media, as well as the online opportunities for interviews with curators, artists, and collectors—it is interesting that the printed word and image continue to hold sway as a vitally important component to the exhibition of contemporary art. Catalogues, now usually with several reflective and contextual essays, intended to expand on the ideas presented through the art, continue to be the means by which the temporal nature of the exhibition lives on, gains credibility, and travels through networks.

Sharing of Knowledge

Findlen (1994, 296) identifies three models of behaviour traits derived from humanist discourse, through which collectors could fashion themselves: *imitatio*, *exempla* and *inventio*. Scholarly collectors were able to excel in all of them. Both imitation (*imitatio*) and the search for exemplars (*exempla*) led collectors back to ancient knowledge and ideals, while invention (*inventio*) used the knowledge of the past to make discoveries in the present. Collectors linked themselves to “familiar narratives,” drawn from the esteemed ancient luminaries of inquiry, namely Aristotle, Theophrastus and Pliny; and invention, situated the collector as a bridge builder between past knowledge and present adaption and discoveries (Findlen 1994, 297-8). A strong strand in humanist discourse was the *usefulness* of knowledge—derived from Dioscorides (c 40—90 AD) and Galen (129-199 AD), which encouraged an instrumental study of nature leading to useful outcomes for medicine (Findlen 1994, 3). This philosophical strand of humanist discourse appears to be at the heart of Aldrovandi’s lifelong work. Tega (2005, 26) notes that there was always a “public dimension” to Aldrovandi’s “scientific activities,” desiring for his collection and books to “aid and benefit man”. Aldrovandi bequeathed his collection to Bologna Senate, in order as he said for it to continue to be “useful and honourable to the city” (cited in Tega 2005, 26).

Siegelaub’s last major art project before he left New York was the development and distribution of the “Artists’ Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement”. This project appears to be motivated by the convergence of a number of factors. Firstly, the political awareness of European artists seems to have a major impact on Siegelaub (Alberro 2003, 209 n.41). This was coupled with Siegelaub’s own increasing politicisation, through the Art Workers Coalition campaign for reforms at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Siegelaub 2005). Siegelaub was also very concerned about the future of the artwork and the future rights of artists in whose careers he had helped launch. Early in 1968, Siegelaub had created protocols that certified ownership of the most fleeting artwork (Alberro 2003, 190 n.45). Now he was concerned with issues of copyright and resale of some of that artwork. To develop a workable structure that would safeguard artists’ rights, Siegelaub consulted the art world widely in the US and Europe during 1970. Then, with the assistance of New York lawyer Robert Projansky, Siegelaub developed a draft contract, which early in 1971 was photocopied and distributed to artists, collectors, galleries and art schools requesting responses. With the feedback received, the final contract was drawn up along with explanatory notes for its use. This is what Siegelaub (2005) says about the artists’ contract:

Probably, you know, the thing I’m most proud of ... proud of I wouldn’t say, but I liked, [was] the Artist’s Contract ... and whether it’s successful or not that remains ... that’s not important, but it really asks the right kind of questions and really goes into the world in a real way.

Patricia Norvell (Alberro and Norvell 2001, 45) in 1969 pointed out to Siegelaub that it was quite curious that artists might be thinking to protect their work, just at the time when they were moving away from making material objects. There was no contradiction in this for Siegelaub, who seems to have understood from the beginning of his involvement with conceptual art, the importance of intellectual property. As Siegelaub (2005) later sums up his response:

In other fields...intellectual property, which shifts the whole discussion on to another level, you know [this] is not extraordinary...But in the art world where people are use to a certain type of finite object...[there is resistance to the idea].

The front page of the Agreement appeared on the front page of *Studio International* April 1971, with the full Agreement and details on how to use it within the journal. As Siegelaub

(1971, 144) says of the Agreement: “It requires no organization, no dues, no government agency, no meetings, no public registration, no nothing—just your will to use it use it”. Plans were quickly in place to translate the Agreement into French, German, Italian, and Spanish. “By the end of the year,” Siegelau said, “practically everyone in the art world will have seen this material and should be familiar with or at least aware of the contract” (cited in Alberro 2003, 211 n.54). There was wide opposition to the Agreement within the art world, coming from both artists and critics who saw it reducing art to just another commodity; and, from dealers and gallerists who saw it increasing the cost of art and thus a discouragement to art collecting. Siegelau argued the Agreement was conceived to protect artists’ rights and to raise the status of artists in the eyes of the wider public (Alberro and Norvell 2001, 45). It was a very progressive move by Siegelau, and while a transfer agreement (*droit de suite*) had existed in France since the 1920s, it was only in 2001 that it was made law in the European Union, with the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands and Austria following in 2006. It was introduced in Australia in 2009 (though in 2013 it is being reviewed), while the United States still resists implementing such an agreement.

Conclusion

Where then, do these identified personal qualities and similar modes of practice leave us?

Considering the way Aldrovandi and Siegelau worked from their own living places, which became centres for meeting and discussion, captures I believe the way these two figures were fully absorbed in the power and play of objects. Objects were central to defining each of their worldviews, and their standing in the world. In a similar way, I would suggest such an absorption in the currency of objects is a requirement of the contemporary art curator; for it is through their advocacy of particular art objects or artists’ works, that their identity and reputation is shaped and formed. Curiously, Aldrovandi and Siegelau were both involved in interpreting the *immateriality* of objects, their meaning and cultural value. Perhaps this was not so much a quirk of history, but rather evidence of Krzysztof Pomian’s (1990, 22-4) thesis that within every significant object is the presence of the material and immaterial; the visible and invisible. So, while situated within the visible material world, significant objects are also the symbols of the invisible world of imagination, feelings, memory, desire, curiosity, and significance. Both the remnants of nature in Aldrovandi’s collection, and the conceptual art Siegelau exhibited and promoted gained their traction, value, and fascination through ideas of the immaterial. And this continues to be a feature of much contemporary art, in the way that it moves from artisan material skill to working with installation environments or incorporating digital technologies.

The functioning of expansive networks was as important for Aldrovandi as Siegelau, and is at the centre of the practices of contemporary art curators (Virno 2009, Fernandez 2011, Marchart 2012). Marchart (2012, 28) compellingly begins his recent article “The Curatorial Subject” with “Network! Develop Projects! Keep Moving!” Aldrovandi and Siegelau both sought publicity in order to gain recognition and authority, and this occurred largely through swift response to situations—like Aldrovandi’s response to the capture of the two legged dragon, or Siegelau’s response to novel ideas like the ‘exhibition’ Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas Series*. Without doubt, the ability or ‘knack’ to gain publicity for exhibition projects through active networks is seen as a fundamental skill for contemporary art curators. It is through the mechanism of gaining publicity, contemporary art curators build reputation and notoriety for the artists they exhibit, for the supporting institution, and for themselves (Bourdieu 1993, 1996b , Marchart 2012). Adept communication skills are vital for the contemporary art curator in the dash for publicity, just as it was for Aldrovandi and Siegelau. And, just as the field of science in Aldrovandi’s time was identified as a competitive jostle for patrons, for the contemporary art curator within or outside of an art institution, the race for funding and patronage funding is foremost.

Aldrovandi and Siegelau are shown to be committed the power of the printed word to cross geographic boundaries and time; and despite the extended range of communication media available for contemporary art curators in the twenty-first century—through which to initiate dialogue about art, artists and exhibitions—it is rather telling that the printed word in the form of the catalogue, continues to be the most enduring.

Finally, I note that Aldrovandi and Siegelau shared a commitment to the importance of knowledge exchange for the betterment of mankind. I suggest Aldrovandi demonstrates this through collecting, researching and publishing studies of natural history, and finally donating his life's work to enable further study in the city where he had worked. I suggest Siegelau demonstrates this quality through facilitating exhibitions of art works that he believed interrogated, and critiqued the major social and cultural changes taking place, as well as through his efforts to raise the status of artists in the minds of a wider public, through the focus on issues of copyright and resale royalties. The contemporary art curator, I suggest is also highly motivated by a commitment to the betterment of mankind. For, beyond the fickleness of the art world, there is a strong-shared belief among art curators in the enrichment that art can bring to a society and culture.

Does this comparison across time and across disciplines, lead to a greater understanding of the contemporary art curator? I believe so, for it discourages a reactive response 'of cause and effect,' or relentless infatuation with celebrities. Potentially it encourages a more nuanced consideration of the contemporary art curator. For it is not so much that the personal attributes or modes of practice of the art curator have radically changed, it is much more that, returning to Foucault, there are different cultural spaces that have opened through changes in the perception of previous codes of *being* and *thinking*; and it is in these spaces that the contemporary art curator has come to function.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Susan Ostling: Senior Lecturer, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

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