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# Do Curators Need University Curatorial Programs?

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## Do CURATORS NEED UNIVERSITY CURATORIAL PROGRAMS?

*Gabrielle Moser on the professionalization of art curation in Canada today.*

The hyperbole that seems to accompany many negative reactions to new curatorial studies programs is based on one contentious, heavily debated theory: you can't teach someone to curate. For critics, these degrees are like doing condensed med school studies by online correspondence: Web-conference in on Tuesdays and Thursdays for six months, and we'll let you cut people open. A curatorial degree is akin to expecting your curatorial credentials to arrive in a neatly packaged box. For purists, acquiring these credentials should involve a messy, slow clawing towards the profession. In short, credentials earned by doing, not by attending school.

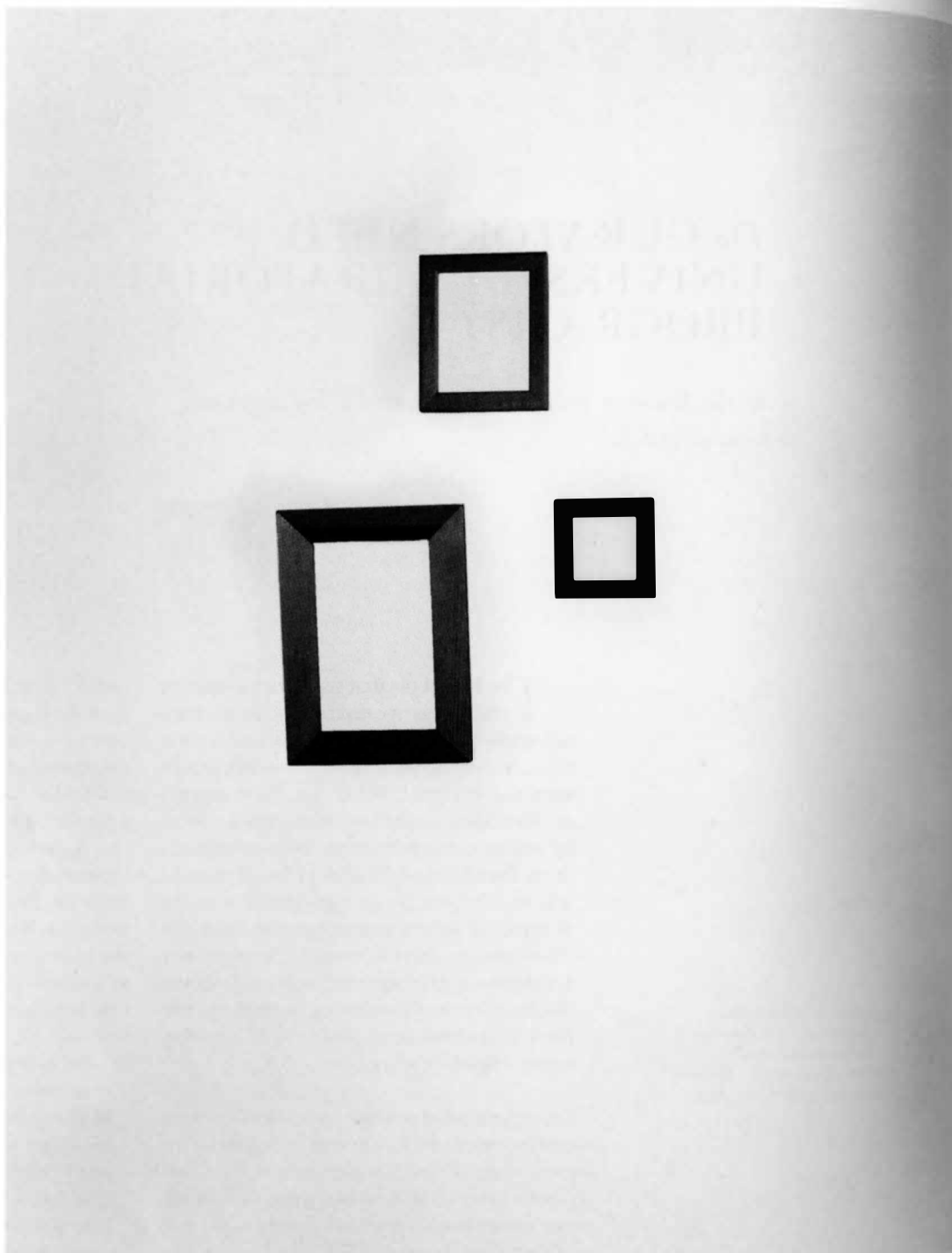
The separation of practice from instruction has recently come to the fore in discussions about the current state of, and possible futures for, Canada's university-level curatorial programs. While many curators continue to be self-taught and establish their careers by actively developing a practice, post-secondary programs meant to educate and prepare curators for the contemporary art business are increasingly common. In the past four years in Toronto alone, an incredible number of post-secondary programs for arts professionals—and for would-be curators, in particular—have been initiated by universities across the city. From York University's Curatorial Practice Diploma for art history Master's students, started in 2004, to the University of Toronto's more recently created Master of Visual Studies degree in Curatorial Studies and the Ontario College of Art and Design's new Criticism and Curatorial Practice Master of Fine Arts degree, the plethora of graduate curatorial programs that are being offered in the city marks a shift in how we think about curation. Curator and Presentation House

Gallery director Reid Shier has argued that the increase in post-secondary curatorial programs offered in Canada is not only a product of the emergence of curation as a career path and formal field of inquiry, but is also part of a shift from a museological and historical paradigm to one that actively engages with contemporary culture.<sup>1</sup> Curatorial work is therefore not only being legitimized by these programs as an active and viable profession that deals with the present rather than the history of art, but is also being constructed as a unique discipline, separate from other artistic practices and requiring a separate form of instruction.

But how possible is it to train curators when their work is not exclusively based on craft? While defining what an artist *does* is always tricky, we can mostly agree that artists create artworks: they produce objects or experiences that are in some way distinct from commodities produced in the mass market. Pinning down what a curator *does*, though, is more complicated. Aside from exhibitions and the occasional catalogue, there are few tangible finished products that result from a curator's practice. The type of activities that can be classified as "curatorial" are also increasingly diverse. Organizing and mounting exhibitions, writing and publishing critical essays, programming screenings and performances, coordinating fundraisers, conducting studio visits and even speaking in public about their work and lobbying for changes in cultural policy are now all considered within the purview of a curatorial position. The Power Plant's Helena Reckitt says this diversification results from the boom in public interest in contemporary art that has occurred worldwide over the past 25 years, which has prompted many contemporary

<sup>1</sup> Reid Shier, "Do Artists Need Artist-Run Centres?", *Vancouver Art and Economics*, Melanie O'Brien, ed. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007), 187-201, 190.

PHOTO: CHRIS LEE



<sup>2</sup> Helena Reckitt in unpublished interview with author, September 27, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> All three of the university programs mentioned — York's curatorial diploma, Uof T's visual studies master's and OCAD's criticism and curatorial practice MFA, as well as the more established master of museum studies program at Uof T, require an internship placement over the summer between first and second year.

PHOTO: CHRIS LEE

galleries to emphasize audience interaction and participation, and adopt Kunsthalle-style institutional models that do not have a permanent collection. As the Power Plant's senior curator of programs, Reckitt works on all aspects of the gallery's programs: from developing exhibitions and artists' projects, to devising talks, education series, film screenings and performances, and co-editing the gallery's new contemporary art magazine. In her words, "It's a broad job description that reflects the diversity of skills demanded by curatorial work today."<sup>2</sup> This uncertainty about what it is to practice as a curator is not only reflected in the professional curator's ever-expanding job description, but is also evident in the wide array of pedagogical

tools used by Toronto's university programs to try and teach the profession of curation.

Although each of Toronto's university curatorial programs includes some sort of methodology course aimed at teaching the theoretical frameworks of art history and curation, the ways in which students apply this knowledge are not uniform. Many programs — including the one in which I am enrolled at York — require that students complete an internship placement at a cultural organization,<sup>3</sup> but this work experience can range from inputting data at an auction house or providing research for a culturally focused television show, to assisting with exhibitions, programs

or publications at a major gallery or museum. Designed to give students a sense of the kind of careers available to them upon the completion of their degrees and provide a practical way to apply their knowledge during their studies, these placements perhaps most successfully drive home the point about how few full-time, permanent and salaried curatorial positions exist in the Canadian art world. Two programs in Toronto — U of T's Museum Studies Master's degree, established in 1969, and OCAD's Criticism and Curatorial Practice MFA — require that students plan a collaborative group exhibition at a host site, such as the Steam Whistle Gallery or the Art Gallery of Ontario.<sup>4</sup> Only the University of British Columbia's Master's in Critical and Curatorial Studies program, founded in 2001, which accepts three or four students each year, and U of T's new Master's in Curatorial Studies require that each of their graduates actively practice as a curator by planning, mounting, writing about and orally defending their own exhibitions.<sup>5</sup>

While the rise in legitimacy of curatorial programs does signal a change in popular opinions about contemporary art and its institutions, the fundamental philosophical questions surrounding how these professionalizing programs impact current curatorial paradigms is rarely examined. Writing about the growing institutionalization of artist-run centres in *Vancouver Art and Economies* (2007), Reid Shier questioned how the hiring of professionally trained art historians and curators as directors of artist-run centres might impact the way these centres operated: "If artists stop *running* artist-run centres," he hypothesized, "will they still need them?"<sup>6</sup> I want to reframe Shier's question to try and address some of the implications these professionalizing curatorial programs have for contemporary curatorial practice in Toronto: how do these programs reflect the changing conditions under which curators practice? What are the repercussions of professionalizing curation and teaching it in universities? In short, do curators really need university curatorial programs?

While the conditions under which curators practice and the trend toward professionalization of curatorial positions appear new, the artist and institutional critic Andrea Fraser has pointed out that the professionalization of all arts positions came about in the 20s as a response to shifts in the institutional mission of the museum itself.<sup>7</sup> "These changes," Fraser argues, "included a shift in the conception of museum education from one focused on connoisseurship...to one oriented toward broad public education in culture and design."<sup>8</sup> Reorganized to fulfill these public functions, it became clear that museums

would need arts professionals who were trained to fulfill these social needs as their staff. Modernist critics like Clement Greenberg further championed bureaucratic know-how and professionalism in the 50s and 60s as a way of democratizing the field. Writes Caroline A. Jones: "Seen in this generous light, his [Greenberg's] is the classless protocol of the professional, the leveling method that guides the bureaucratic apparatus of democracy."<sup>9</sup> According to Greenberg's logic, if professional education and rational, administrative capabilities became the gold standard for critics and curators, then distinctions between class would no longer determine who was successful in the art world. Instead, success would be based on skill and intellect alone.<sup>10</sup>

Greenberg's claims not only ignore the ways economic and social capital influence an arts worker's access to jobs in arts organizations, but they also overlook the fact that access to education continues to be crucial to gaining any kind of access to the art world.<sup>11</sup> Despite the obvious nearsightedness of Greenberg's claims, the notion that curators should play professional roles in museums and galleries as mediators between art and its public has stuck. In fact, in Toronto the notion of the curator as professional has had a renaissance over the past five years thanks to the adoption of Richard Florida's theories about the importance of the Creative Class' contribution to the city's economy. Not only have Florida's ideas been taken up in public discussions about the future of Toronto's cultural landscape, but they have also been explicitly cited in the City's Cultural Renaissance program. Adopted in 2003, this program provided financial support to eight major cultural construction projects, including now-completed renovations at the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario and OCAD.<sup>12</sup> Although these buildings have architectural importance, political scientist Barbara Jenkins argues that they are "better understood as both participants in, and reflections of, contemporary patterns of global economic competition and the changing role of culture in capitalist production."<sup>13</sup>

To employ Florida's rhetoric, the ideal Creative City provides a vibrant cultural milieu that attracts highly educated, creative *professionals* to "produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and broadly useful."<sup>14</sup> It is not enough just to attract "creative types" to the urban centre: these creative workers need to be willing to play by the global market's rules and to adhere to professionalism as it has been defined by bureaucratic business models. It is therefore no coincidence that the growing number of professional arts training programs available in Toronto are mirrored by the number of renovated museums and cultural institutions being built as part of the Cultural Renaissance program. As the

4 See "Faculty of Information — About Museum Studies," University of Toronto Faculty of Information website, <http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/content/view/1263/675/>, accessed September 28, 2008, and "OCAD — Academic Programs — Graduate Studies — MFA in Criticism & Curatorial Practice," Ontario College of Art & Design website, [http://www.ocad.ca/programs/graduate\\_studies/mfa\\_ccp.htm](http://www.ocad.ca/programs/graduate_studies/mfa_ccp.htm), accessed September 28, 2008.

5 See "Program Info — Art Department," Art at University of Toronto website, [http://www.art.utoronto.ca/graduates/vis/copy\\_of\\_index.html](http://www.art.utoronto.ca/graduates/vis/copy_of_index.html), accessed September 28, 2008.

6 Shier, 189, original emphasis.

7 Andrea Fraser, "A 'Sensation' Chronicle" in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, Alexander Alberro, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 179-212, 192.

8 Fraser, 192.

9 Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 10.

10 Of course, Greenberg's support for professionalizing critic and curatorial positions was meant to elevate their status so that they were equal to the implicitly white, male, educated middle-class artists they were studying and working with. As Jones notes, according to Greenberg, modern criticism was defined as a practice of the *haut bourgeois* amateur, characterized as "(self-) educated, opinionated, middle-class aspirants...Class differences between such men and the artists they wrote about were minimal." (Jones, 6). The assumption that all successful critics, curators and artists would fit these criteria precludes consideration of how race and/or gender might affect success in the field.

11 The critic and art historian Julian Stallabrass, for instance, has argued that, "the single biggest determinant of gallery-going is education...and this is partly because art at all levels (from academic to commercial) defines itself against mass culture. In doing so, it regularly uses complex references to art history that require specialist knowledge of its viewers." (Julian Stallabrass, *Art incorporated: the story of contemporary art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 170).

12 \$257 million was provided by the federal, provincial and civic governments for these projects. See Barbara Jenkins, "Toronto's Cultural Renaissance," *Canadian Journal of Communication*, vol. 30 (2005), 169-186, 169.

13 Jenkins, 170.

14 Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 34.

city attempts to compete in the new globalized service-based economy and attract members of Florida's Creative Class, a culture of professionalized arts administrators, curators and artists is being offered up to meet its needs.

At the nexus of these corporate, civic and cultural interests are the university curatorial programs, which are meant to equip curators with the tools to compete and succeed in the "professionalized art economy"—a term coined by art historian and curator Melanie O'Brian in *Vancouver Art and Economies*. In her scathing assessment of the interplay between these divergent interest groups, O'Brian states that "[t]he proliferation of professionalizing art schools reveals their programs and degrees to be part of the professionalized art economy. Art's perceived critical freedom is (literally) bought into through ownership and patronage, and the growing industries of education (art schools and universities), cultural tourism (museums), and marketing (from real estate to technology) increasingly betray the business aspect of culture."<sup>15</sup>

The popularity and success of university curatorial programs not only reflect the changing conditions under which curators practice—a new paradigm where the globalized economy dictates how the cultural sector should operate in order to compete in the market—but also have implications in shaping how curation will be practiced in the future. As graduates of these programs move into curatorial positions in the field, we are beginning to perceive the ways their university training might affect the environments where they work; as well as the distance between the kind of professional competencies they expected to use and the complex realities of working in arts organizations. Practical concerns, such as job security and making a living wage, are often at the top of this list. As Helena Reckitt pointed out, one of the effects we might have hoped to see from the influx of professionalizing university programs that has still not been realized is "higher salaries in non-profit and artist-run spaces. Experienced, highly trained professionals cannot be expected to work for entry-level wages."<sup>16</sup> While many supporters had hoped that framing curation as a career would encourage more stable working conditions and higher salaries, permanent, well-paid curatorial positions are still rare and highly susceptible to changes in government funding.

A more pressing concern has been the limitations of any university program (or any form of training that does not include hands-on experience) when it comes to adequately preparing curatorial graduates for the diverse, unpredictable and essentially social nature of the job. Kim Simon, curator of Toron-

to's Gallery TPW artist-run centre, attended Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies in Annondale-on-Hudson, New York, but feels that university training cannot substitute for the real-life experiences of talking to and working with a variety of artists, curators and institutions: "There have been plenty of experiences that I've had as curator that my education didn't prepare me for. Every project is different and there's no way university training can prepare you for how to negotiate the complex relationship between the desires and expectations of the artists, institutions and audiences you work with and your own desires in relation to your conceptual and ideological practice as a curator. I think interesting and ethical curating is essentially a social practice and as such there's no model or list of tips you can learn in a classroom that would stand in for talking to people."<sup>17</sup> The idea of curating as a social practice that intrinsically involves working with other people and their ideas is important. Curation cannot be practised in a vacuum: its ultimate practice space is the public sphere, where the curator and artists' ideas are responded to, debated and sometimes challenged.

Other critics of university curatorial programs, including the art critic James Elkins and Burren College of Art professor Timothy Emlyn Jones, have voiced more apocalyptic concerns. With the rise of professionally trained graduates from these programs, they feel that the field of curating itself will be changed: artist-run centres will become mini-institutions that are vehicles for these grads' career ambitions, radical or experimental forms of curating will be considered too risky by museums and galleries and self-taught curators and artist-curators will be pushed out of the field.<sup>18</sup> While the amount of power these critics ascribe to curators is flattering, the reality seems to be more complicated. For instance, Barbara Fischer, executive director and chief curator of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at U of T, and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Art's curatorial program at that institution was quick to interrogate the binary divisions between categories of artist-run centre and institution, educated and self-taught: "Artist-run centres as mini-institutions... is this a critique of 'institutions'? Was there ever a permanent version of curating? A historically unchanging field of practices? Did education put a stop to radical and experimental forms of anything?"<sup>19</sup> As Fischer's rhetorical questions indicate, contemporary art is, by its very definition, dynamic, shifting, innovative and unfixed. To engage with contemporary art therefore demands a similarly flexible, radical and experimental approach that is by no means mutually exclusive to a university education

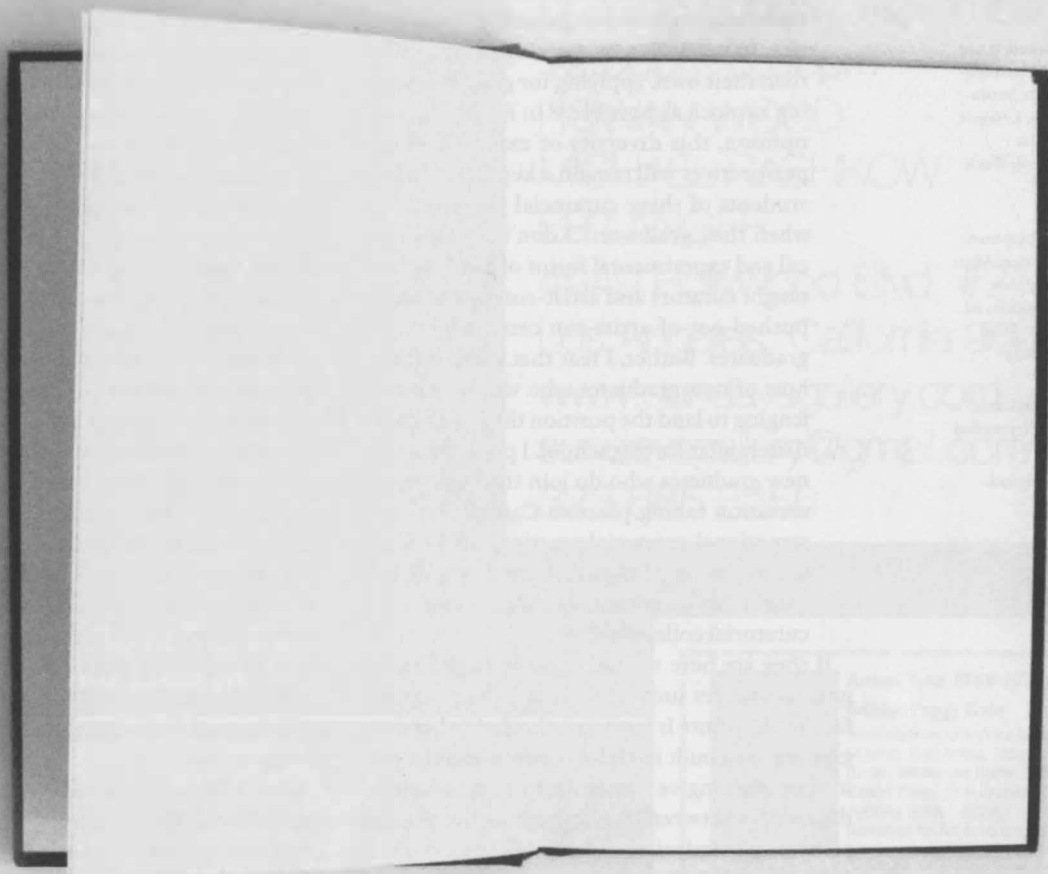
15 Melanie O'Brian, "Introduction: Specious Speculation." *Vancouver Art and Economies*, Melanie O'Brian, ed. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007), 11-26, 16-17.

16 Helena Reckitt in unpublished interview with author, September 27, 2008.

17 Kim Simon in unpublished interview with author, September 29, 2008.

18 See "The Art Seminars—First Roundtable" held at the Burren College of Art in Ireland on June 17, 2005, in *The State of Art Criticism*, James Elkins and Michael Newman, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 129-179.

19 Barbara Fischer in unpublished interview with author, September 30, 2008.



(one would hope that the best university educations would foster such an approach).

When I asked artist-curator Alissa Firth-Eagland, currently the director/curator of media arts at Vancouver's Western Front artist-run centre, how she would respond to concerns about the impact of these university curatorial programs on her field, she also emphasized how important it was for emerging curators to enhance their university education with a diverse portfolio of skills and experiences gained through practice: in particular, by working in cities other than their own, applying for grants and writing as much as possible.<sup>20</sup> In Firth-Eagland's opinion, this diversity of experiences and perspectives will remain a key factor in how students of these curatorial programs fare when they graduate: "I don't see how radical and experimental forms of curating, self-taught curators and artist-curators could be pushed out of artist-run centres by recent graduates. Rather, I fear that there will be a host of new graduates who will find it challenging to land the position they want immediately after leaving school. I predict that the new graduates who do join the current conversation taking place in Canadian and international curatorial practices will be some combination of radical, experimental, self-taught, artist-curators and/or members of curatorial collectives."<sup>21</sup>

If they are here to stay, then perhaps the biggest challenges university curatorial programs face in the future is lessening the divide between expectations built in the classroom and the realities of working as a curator, to find some middle ground between teaching competencies and providing practical experience in the field. However, requiring that students mount their own exhibitions and gain experience articulating an argument and accounting for its sense or senselessness is just one means to an end. And, despite some of the potential problems of professionalizing curation as a career, there are undeniable advantages to establishing it as a university discipline. As Andrea Fraser would point out, some of these must be advantages that benefit us—students, artists and curators—directly: otherwise, we would not be flocking to these programs in such numbers.<sup>22</sup>

By establishing a distinct curatorial studies discipline, for instance, university programs can provide a canon, or centre, against which curators can push. While James Elkins has misgivings about the implications of teaching curation as a profession, he has outlined some of the advantages to establishing criticism and curatorial practice as disciplines in the university when he argues that "[a]n academic discipline, as frac-

tious and contradictory as it may be, puts two kinds of pressure on a practitioner: it compels an awareness of colleagues, and it instills a sense of the history of previous efforts."<sup>23</sup> Making students aware of the dialogue that has come before them, and the diversity of voices that are engaged in the discussion, is key to pushing curatorial practice into new territory. This is a point made clear by Barbara Fischer who says, "Writing about art, experience of art, articulation and participation in the creation of the field of contemporary art — all these are the conditions for curatorial practice, and a curatorial degree is neither the only, nor the guarantee of access to this quizzical, ever-changing, demanding field. But, curatorial studies may expose students to critical aspects of its own history — aspects that may help young curators to move forward and/or into the as yet non-formalized, innovative, essential, needed, urgent, other directions."<sup>24</sup>

University programs can also provide a base of resources, mentorship and opportunities for experimentation, as well as the time, space and financial support for you to be curious, explore your own interests and get your hands dirty. In fact, when I asked these mid-career and established curators for their opinions about how university curatorial programs could best serve both their students and the field of contemporary curation, they all came back to the same set of ideas: the importance of learning from a diverse group of people with curatorial experience, of exploring your own theoretical framework, of experimenting by curating your own projects, and by being a prolific writer and voracious reader.

Since I began this article with an adapted version of Reid Shier's question "do artists need artist-run centres?" it seems only fitting to return to him again at the end. Shier, a critic, artist and curator, concludes his essay by providing "an important reminder that artist-run practice might find, in the act of *making* a space, one of its most evocative and fundamental forms."<sup>25</sup> And perhaps it is in this same way that university curatorial programs offer something unique and valuable to the field of curation: a new and idiosyncratic space in which to think, experiment and practice. ♦

● *Gabby Moser is a writer and curator completing her master's in art history and curatorial practice at York University. She has curated exhibitions for Vtape and XPACE, is a member of the Pleasure Dome programming collective and blogs about Canadian art and culture at gabriellemoser.blogspot.com. Gabby would like to thank Alissa Firth-Eagland, Barbara Fischer, Anna Hudson, Cait McKinney, Helena Reckitt, and Kim Simon for their help and guidance with this project.*

20 Alissa Firth-Eagland in unpublished interview with author, September 30, 2008.

21 Alissa Firth-Eagland in unpublished interview with author, September 30, 2008.

22 Andrea Fraser, "A museum is not a business. It is run in a business-like fashion," *Art and its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*, Nina Möntmann, ed. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), 86-98, 90.

23 James Elkins, "What Happened to Arts Criticism?", *Critical Mess: Art Critic on the State of their Practice*, Raphael Rubinstein, ed. (Lennox, Massachusetts: Hard Press Editions, Inc, 2006), 1-12, 5-6.

24 Barbara Fischer in unpublished interview with author, September 30, 2008.

25 Shier, 200, emphasis original.