



421 REPORT: CURATORIAL PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

The study focuses on the challenges of curatorial practice today in the UAE and what are the needs for the development of the field of curatorial practice, with a particular focus on how to encourage the entry into the profession of curating by a new generation. Drawing on experience of lead curators working and who have worked in the UAE, as well as those working independently and at various levels in the institutions, the study aims to shed light on the challenges, opportunities and needs of curatorial practice. The UAE, of course, has a rich diversity of locations in which curatorial practice work takes place. Therefore the questions of curatorial practice differ as applied to the contexts of Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi and even further a field, these questions also vary in relation to the scale and type of organizations and their mission, which the study takes into consideration. The study also includes discussion with students to assess their interest in pursuing careers in this field and their concerns. It is intended that the study would inform the development of 421 programs after several years of implementing a curatorial development program in various iterations.

A major study was undertaken by Prof. Salwa Mikdadi to look at educational needs of art history, museum studies and curatorial studies and with recommendations of how to develop the field of museum and curatorial studies, in particular the type of training programs required to meet the needs in the context of the UAE and its growing museum and arts sector, with proposition in 2017 for the establishment of an MA in Global Comparative Art History at NYUAD. In June 2015, and in her capacity as a member of the American Association of Museums (AAM) International Advisory Committee, Salwa Mikdadi organized a trip to the Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Oman, Bahrain, Doha, Cairo, Kuwait, Amman, and Beirut, in order to introduce AAM to museums in the region and to collect data on the type of programs needed in the respective countries. Information from meetings with ministers of culture and antiquities, directors of museums and

other cultural professionals shed light on the type of specialized education and training required. I also participated in a discussion on the future training of curators titled 'The Next 25 Years: Propositions for the Future of Curatorial Education,' at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco (March 2015). While in 2010, a need assessment for the UAE was conducted by the Emirates Foundation Arts and Culture Program based on interviews with art and culture institutions by Salwa Mikdadi. The report underscored the importance of establishing undergraduate programs in Art History (to include courses in Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Islamic Art) and graduate specialization in Art History and Curatorial Studies, Heritage Management, as well as other museum professions such as the MA in Exhibition Design and Conservation. In addition the report underscored the importance of Emirati Studies as an undergraduate program. While in 2008, the Emirates Foundation commissioned an international group of specialists to evaluate the status of Art and Culture education in the UAEa, they recommended establishing an Academy for the Arts. This highlights there has been ongoing research as to what are the needs of the sector and what educational programs are needed to be developed in the UAE context. Various different initiatives, were undertaken, including Abu Dhabi TCA-professional department (2013-ongoing) Nine Courses were offered to staff in following areas: Role & Function of Museums, Museum Education, Museum Community Outreach, Audience/ Program Evaluation, Museum Management Leadership Seminar, The Art Market, Introduction to Museums in Arabic, School Programs, Exhibition Design. Campus Art Dubai, Dubai Cultural and Arts Authority, intensive (2013-ongoing) 6-month course aimed at post-graduates, practicing artists, and those making a serious commitment to their practice. Members of CAD Core follow a syllabus of all-day sessions, which occur bi-monthly on alternating Saturdays and include group critiques, lectures and workshops with visiting tutors and one-on-one mentorship.

ADMAF and The British Council, The Cultural Excellence Fellowship Program, The Cultural Excellence Fellowship is a 2-year programme that seeks to inspire UAE Nationals to consider careers in the creative & cultural industries. 18-Months, half-day workshop every two to three weeks, during weekends (November to June 2015, and November to June 2016). Sharjah Museum Department and Goethe Institute 2009-2010, professional development courses General Museum Studies Workshops, Focus Audience Development And Education. Sharjah Art Museums and The British Council, 2017, Professional development: Accessibility in Museums, short course. Emirates Foundation Abu Dhabi, 2010-2012, Professional development courses 2.5 months onsite and online, in Curatorial Studies, Museum Education and Community Programs, Audiences, Role and Function of Museums open to all nationalities across UAE, initiated and organized by Salwa Mikdadi. The Paris Sorbonne University since 2011 has an MA in History of Art and Museum Studies, which includes a 3 month internship at the Louvre museums. Since 2013 Zayed University has a BA/ Minor in Curatorial Practice. The College of Arts and Creative Enterprises offers a Minor in Curatorial Practices for their multi-media design majors. (Please note all above data is from the extensive study undertaken by Prof. Salwa Mikdadi, 2017).

421 Curatorial Development Program

The 421 curatorial development program came out of the development of 421 strategic plan and mission in 2020 in which there was a re-thinking of their programs. Particularly that they were an exhibition space, but not a venue for hire for example. Their aim was to focus on the development of a particular role in the exhibition making process which is a collaborative endeavor and so the decision was to focus on curatorial practice with the professional development of a creative practitioner was a key outcome for the program. How could they structure learning about exhibition making that could be mindful and how could artists and curators develop through putting up an exhibition. The program changed quite significantly through its implementation and various iterations:

Original Concept:

An exhibition process that emphasizes the professional and creative development of its curators. Supported by our operational staff, a tightly crafted guideline/manual

document, and a structured learning process to putting up the exhibition, developed with an expert pedagogical partner, emerging local and regional curators are pushed here to hone their practice holistically and to build a well-rounded skill-set that aids them in crafting each facet of a successful exhibition. What we aim to start is a hybrid of practical and theoretical pedagogical structure that pushes, specifically, for the understanding of spatial and operational decisions not as secondary to the exhibitions curatorial concepts, but rather as equally essential to the exhibition's content, a reflection of and a tool for the curatorial premise to be further explored.

Objectives

- Provide one-on-one feedback to selected curators
- Engage curators in critical discussions with peers who share their professional and topical interests.
- Support the development of rigorous artistic practices in the UAE and the region
- Mark 421 as a springboard for local and regional narrative producers
- Produce exhibitions that explore nascent discourse across creative disciplines
- Bolster sustained long-term creative practices locally and regionally

Methods

- Announcing and annual open call for curatorial proposals
- Collaborating with a pedagogical partner to build a syllabus that addresses topics and requirements critical for the successful application.
- Structuring the program to include a colloquium, where participants with special interests in the topics addressed by the curators are invited to take part in critical discussions geared towards the development of the exhibition.
- Building in focused one-on-one time between curators and each instructor to tighten and develop various aspects of their exhibition.

Outcomes

- A professional exhibition that emerges from the practices and interests of our creative community
- A cadre of artists with detailed experience of the full process of putting together a professional exhibition
- Sustaining meaningful institutional partnerships

The first pilot was not an open call but came through the aim to develop a proposal they had received from Banat Collective for an exhibition project. In this iteration the program focused on what was the thesis of the exhibition and what was its argument. This particular iteration didn't need extensive development in practicalities of putting up exhibitions because of the background and expertise of the collective. The program has had three iterations each taking a slightly different form with the broad aim to develop curatorial practice and critical thinking. A cornerstone of the program has been the seminar colloquium with an extensive syllabi in which participants would meet online to discuss key texts related to the theme of the colloquium which for one year was *Future Perfect* and other *Screening Screaming*. BICAR mainly come from a philosophical trajectory and so texts mainly centered around critical theory and philosophy, 421 were particularly involved in working with them on the syllabi to make it relevant to the UAE context. The colloquium involved extensive contemporary and critical theory readings on the above subjects and invited speakers that included artists, curators and thinkers.

In relation to the open call the application involved various elements not dissimilar to graduate school application, because 421 the aptitude of applicants to be able to engage and commit to the program, however the result was there were only a few applicants from the UAE. The two open calls were thematic and was open to regional curators The successful curator/curatorial collective received an award of 20,000 AED and participated in a structured program in the English language, which took place over a seven month period, with specific requirements including participation in weekly colloquium and to develop a project that was realized in a exhibition and publication in the space of 421, candidates who were not successful in having their project chosen were also able to participate in the colloquium. As a result of evaluating through the

experience in one of the iterations 421 decided to incorporate curatorial mentorship alongside the colloquium for the development of the exhibition. A unique aspect of iteration was the development of commissioned works by artists in dialogue with the curator. Different models were tried out in each iteration between the colloquium from the curatorial project. In *Screening Screaming*, the participants all participated in the colloquium and were asked to develop curatorial concepts which could take the form of an exhibition, publication or public program. The colloquial had different forms, where participants would be discussants to key texts being read by the group, as well as having the opportunity in other sessions to present their ideas and concepts for discussion. Visiting artists also did 'studio visits' with the participants to discuss and evolve their projects further. Public talks were also incorporated into the colloquium. A key aspect of the program was that the mentorship voice was not singular. In the third reiteration Node curatorial platform also provided a series of workshops that looked at artists' curator relations, logistics, planning, budgets. Key questions were raised by 421 team in reflection on the program's iterations: was the high bar for the applicants one of the factors that is not encouraging applications? How could they include project based learning experience in particular how could practical and theoretical knowledge acquisition be implemented together? What were the strengths and weaknesses of each iteration? In addition key questions were raised by the institution after the implementation of the three iterations of the program, which included, How could more local curators be encouraged to apply? Should it be an open call or a themed call? How could practice based questions of exhibition making be incorporated into learning? What should be the relationship between academic theory and the curatorial development program? For the future of the program after several iteration 421 identifies what is key is to identify who is interested in this career and what are the skills that are needed.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the study involved the use of qualitative data via interviews, as well as the methodology focused on three phases: discussion with 421 representatives, one to one interviews and synthesis phase of findings, conclusions and recommendations. One to one interviews were conducted via, zoom approx 40-60 minutes in length. All interviews are anonymous in this report and were recorded for the use by the author for note taking purposes, with the consent of the participants. The initial concept was to hold focus groups with six curators, however upon reflection and discussion it was decided that individual in depth interviews would be beneficial for the purposes of the study. The data method collection involved **29 interviews** with lead curators, curators working in institutions at different levels, independent curators, emerging curators, the interviews included curators working in the UAE or who had worked in the UAE on various projects or at institutions. (In total **11 lead curators** were interviewed and **18 young curators** and students group) Many of those who participated had not worked with 421 and therefore the study provides an **unbiased and inclusive view** on the needs for the development of curatorial practice in the UAE. The interview questions can be found in Annex 2 were used for data collection among the selected target group. The interview questions were sometimes adapted as per the interviews, often several questions were answered in one question, and discussions evolved. Other questions were sometimes also included to stimulate the discussion which evolved out of the interview itself.

Annex 1 interviewees. Please see Annex 1 for a list of interviewees undertaken, including participants in student focus groups.

Annex 2 questionnaires and questions for in-depth interviews. Please see Annex 2 for detailed questions.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study were to explore:

- What are the barriers for young curators in the UAE?
- How institutions better support curators in the UAE?
- What is the understanding of different aspects of exhibition content and audiences?
- How can there be shifts to local curation, to open it up as a relative or contextual of other local contexts?

Outputs

The intended output of the report was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of curators working in the UAE and their knowledge on their roles and responsibilities, and commitments towards cultural institutions. The aim was also to open discussions about their relationship with artists and organizations. The output was also to examine the different roles of curators, and the relationship with public and audiences. The result of these being to author a report on how to better support young curators and to identify what is absent in the local art scene that is not supporting the emergence of new and young curatorial talent.

In Depth Interviews

This section focuses on outlining and consolidating the feedback that was received from one to one interviews and focus groups, the subsections are organized into the different questions of and their responses to questions found in Annex 2. In some cases in the interviews questions were answered within other questions, and additional discussion points were raised. The main aim of the interviews was to try and get an overview of the challenges faced by curators and their needs. The responses are organized into the themes raised by each question.

What are the main challenges you face in your curatorial work?

What Does A Curator Do?

Numerous participants raised the issue that there was **little understanding of what the work of a curator was, both by the general public and by institutions**. All the curators who participated suggested that it was a blanket term and that their **little understanding of the wide range of skills and jobs that fall under the work of a curator**, this was a recurring theme throughout the interview questions and discussion. Participants thought they were interior designers, curating was just hanging paintings on walls, that it was a glamorous job with little understanding of the diverse range of skills needed from the depth of knowledge needed to work with an artist and their practice to the logistics of dealing with shipments, contracts and press releases. Curators highlighted the wide range of skill sets that they required in their job, often likening themselves to film directors and producers, that they had to be front-facing having a public and diplomatic role but also that they worked closely with artists and behind the scenes in all details of an exhibition. Hence a curator had to have multiple interpersonal skills. Curators highlighted that skills required also involved **being able to understand the logistics of art production in the local context**, being able to source materials/production for artists to realize their ideas. Lead and

young curators also highlighted the need for excellent written skills in curatorial statements but also for press releases and communication. It was also said that it was important for this to be accessible and not necessarily filled with artistic jargon but that it provided insights into the work opening up paths and avenues for interpretation. Both Lead and young curators also **highlighted the need to understand the logistics of shipping, contracts, copyright, technical aspects of installing work**. Another area lead and young curators highlighted was absence of specific skill sets within institutions such as registrars or those with an understanding of preservation and restoration.

Importance of Relationships with Artists

Both Lead curators and young curators spoke of **the need to have deep and engaging relations with artists, to be able to have trust of artists and the need to bring the depth of the artists' work forth in an exhibition**. Both Lead curators and young curators stressed the need to be able to often see aspects of an artist's work that artists couldn't see, but also to be able to manage friendship, peership and developing relationships with artists they work with in their projects and exhibitions.

Opportunities for Experimentation

Both lead curators and young young curators in particular highlighted **the need for opportunities for experimentation and process**, rather than an emphasis on the outcome or a finished exhibition. Young curators highlighted the need for highly finished and high profile exhibitions and noted the **absence of venues for experimental work**. It was stressed that there were not enough in-between spaces that existed between commercial spaces and major institutions. Others suggested it would be important to be able to experiment with alternative sites and venues for curatorial projects.

Mentorship

Younger curators highlighted the pressure of executing major projects without sufficient mentorship and while learning by doing was key, they also commented that such experiences could be very stressful for young curators entering the field. In this regard young curators suggested having the **opportunity for internship with a curator or mentorship by lead curator would be deeply beneficial**. Others highlighted that having learnt in that way enabled them to forge long term relationships with their mentors who

they continued to seek advice from throughout their career and remain in dialogue about their ideas and curatorial practice.

Curatorial Fees

Young independent curators particularly highlighted financial challenges of the profession, particularly a lack of understanding of the extensive work that goes into curating. They also highlighted the **financial disparities in their fees particularly those working independently**. In addition, often research was unpaid work and recognition of the work and time that goes into research and the development of curatorial concepts was also unpaid. Independent curators highlighted they often had to enter a negotiation process for their fees, and that fees were allocated in lump sums that did not take in consideration the extensive hours they worked. They highlighted problems that arise between themselves and institutions in relation to management of expectation of what their curatorial work entails, issues arose about channels of communication between independent curators and different departments in organizations, as well as issues in relation of communication between themselves, organizations and artists and expectations of all parties.

It was suggested that there should be clear guidelines and contracts that outline the roles and responsibilities as well as lines of communication and **management of expectation from the outset of a project**. Many young curators felt they undertook work outside of their expectation of what curatorial work is, and were extensively involved in operation management, exhibition management and so forth, returning to the main point that there is a lack of understanding of what is curator. Young curators highlighted the challenges of various logistical issues in their work, in particular logistics of shipment, transportation, expertise in fabrication and art handling. **Curators were continually be folded into the work of project managers**, and working in this way often means the development of the depth of an exhibition is lost.

Research

Young curators working in organizations highlighted the **absence of time for research and studio visits to enrich their curatorial practice and that logistics took the majority of their time**.

Careers

A major challenge that was also highlighted by lead curators was that projects and positions were perceived as steps in the **career ladder of young curators** and therefore it was observed that some curators did not have sufficient investment in the institution they were working in, nor commitment to the development of that institution, this was highlighted also for the case of visiting international curators. **Young curators suggested there were a lot of artists vs much fewer curators in the UAE**.

Potential For Touring Exhibitions

It was also highlighted that a lot of work was undertaken on exhibitions, many exhibitions did not travel within the UAE or the region, nor did publications related to them circulate widely.

Accessibility to Artists

The need to have a panoramic overview of artistic practices of who is on the ground in UAE was raised and the region. As the area was seen as a region from the outside. This could be

through a website a way to have permanent presentation of artistic practices in order to avoid complications of raised of who is introducing who to what so that a mapping of the scene not many outlets for people to work.

Insufficient opportunities for young curators

The question of lack of opportunities for young curators particularly those starting their career and who would want to work on small scale projects, alongside the importance of understanding funding and funding sources. While at the same time there were issues around defining their intellectual property rights. So much that goes into the making of an artist in the region but young curators highlighted it was important to understand **the role of curator and what a curator can do for you, institutions and society.**

Open Discussions and /dialogue

An issue of the challenges that was raised by **lead curators was the difficulty of speaking about challenges, particularly within team work, the difficulty of voicing constructive criticism and learning from experiences was highlighted.**

Another area raised by lead curators was the absence of knowledge and talent in areas of curatorial practice which could not just be filled by imaging programs, that had to grow in other ways.

Cultural Projects

A key observation by young curators was that culture came at the final stage of the project often as decoration for the project. Therefore the role of culture in a project is not conceived from the outset in harmony with the project's development. To complicate things further, often it is the case that you don't want something simple, but because of time constraints it becomes what it can be and young curators believe they could achieve better results if consulted earlier. "Considering culture at the beginning, in tandem would elevate everything, it is a welcoming space, it's the utopia of the world." (independent curator)

What are the needs for the development of curatorial practice in the UAE in your view?

There were a wide range of suggestions to this question, emphasis was placed on the need of a **wide variety of skill sets and specific expertise in them**. These included, art production, work of registrar, conservation, exhibition planning and management and understanding of the aesthetics of exhibition curatorial work and its interrelation with historical knowledge the importance of local knowledge of artists practices in the UAE, region and MENSA.

Development of Writing Skills

Writing for exhibitions was particularly highlighted and the need for there to be clear writing that was accessible to audiences. The question of a critical discourse of curatorial practice was also highlighted by lead curators and some young curators. Lead curators and some young curators suggested there was not sufficient depth given to the question of content, rather events needed to be filled and created. Therefore time for planning research and development was highlighted and in comparison with that present in international establishments who had long term planning for their projects. Again this highlighted the **importance of time for research, reflection**. The importance of writing workshops for staff was suggested by lead curators and also developing tool kits for writing

thinking about the object, its materiality, artist biography the site specificity of work the history alongside being learning to be nuanced and not use generalizations lead curators highlighted , texts needed to spark curiosity and interest.

Spaces for Experimentation and Relations between Curators and Organizations

It was suggested institutions needed to create opportunities for curators outside the institution to work with them, and more opportunities generated for independent curators. It was also suggested that institutions could dedicate some of their space to experimentation and open calls for young curators. **Alternative spaces and venues for exhibitions and experimentation with curatorial practice was also seen as important for the development of curatorial practice in the UAE, initiated at a grassroots level.** It was highlighted by Lead curators that there needed to be sharpening of tools of curating, and grounding of ideas, of building curatorial practice through organic processes. It was also suggested there needed to be **processes of incubation to allow for the development of curatorial practice**, in which there could be dialogue and discussion with artists and curators, opportunities for seminars, workshops as well as experimentation with spaces. It was also suggested

by young curators and some lead curators that there was particular ambiguity about who the audiences were and that audience and the public was a wide encompassing term that was not sufficiently defined.

The need for the support of young curators work was also mentioned in relation to the demands upon them to produce a turnover of highly finished curatorial projects of the organizations they worked within. Curators like artists need a safe space to develop and experiment, outcomes always need to be finalized and so there is less room for error and development and therefore would benefit from curatorial programs that allowed that development.

How do institutions in the UAE support curators? What could they further do to support?

Professional Development

Young curators suggested they would like more **guidance and support with editing texts** as well as mentorship on execution and selection of works for exhibitions and **evaluating an exhibition's content**. They suggested institutions needed to diversify the curators they work with and there remained a lack of funding for experimental projects. They suggested access to education was important for their development and there were not enough workshops, courses, and higher education opportunities in their field. **They believed the opportunity to access residencies, develop academic writing and its relationship to practice** was all important. Young curators wanted opportunities to develop knowledge of art production, as well as opportunities for apprenticeship. Young curators suggested that institutions needed to **amplify their open calls** and provide opportunities for professional placement, and provide opportunities for different scales of curating. They suggested that there was often gatekeeping while in their view there was room for all. Young curators wanted the opportunity to grow into their responsibility. They also suggested that a platform for young curators would be beneficial. The need to understand curating is an emerging practice, and that it was important to disentangle all that goes into curatorial practice.

Discourse of Curating

Young curators suggested there was a **lack of criticality and imaginative projects** and they were confined by institutional demands. Curating was a new field and there was an absence of discourse around curating. Young curators stressed the need for mentorship, being able to use spaces of institutions. Young curators suggested more critical forums and debates were needed, alongside the need to build a sense of community through encounters with the local community. Lead curators highlighted there was a lack of exposure, and the need to go physically to exhibitions, to understand collections not to conduct research via instagram. Its important to see all types of exhibitions, "to consider how you would you do it differently, and not to just repeat what others say but to look at primary resources, don't rehash, but to be self critical and curious and challenge yourself and link it to personal passion, if you are not excited about it, then how will visitors be excited?" **Lead curators suggested it was important to develop a genuine voice of what you are trying to say**, understand how to select a hypothesis that in the end you might end up contradicting yourself but it was not a thesis. It was seen by lead curators to have openness and exploration flexibility for curating to be fluid process of research.

Apprenticeships and Fellowship

Lead curators highlighted the **temporality of internships and apprenticeship** into which time and knowledge was invested but then the individuals were only there for a short duration, therefore not creating sustainability in the field or in institutions themselves. On another note young curators suggested there were not enough hands-on internships available to them. Lead curators suggested curating is not something you can study in a course as there are so many skills needed. It was about not dead objects but **a curator needs to be a fundraiser, communicator, writer, designer, and empathy. It is important that one grows into a role, needs to be guided through professional placement**. It is also important to understand fundraising as that is about bringing communities together. curators sharing their experience, chance to ask questions about that, curators need to constantly see shows, need to have curiosity and drive to learn. It was important to give young curators responsibility and let them grow into it. It was highlighted by the senior curator the importance of watching a senior curator, learning skills sets from them and in so doing demystifying curating. Underlying again the importance of placements in museums, fellowships, exchange opportunities and opportunities to learn from local curators.

Regional Connectivity

Both lead and young curators suggested there was a need for regional connectivity and circulation of material about artists and curatorial projects in the region.

What support do you need to develop your curatorial practice in the UAE?

Lead curators inside institutions felt they were well supported for their work, while young curators in institutions wanted more **time for research, off site visits, opportunities to visit exhibitions**, as well as the ability to experiment with curatorial practice and **not have to always execute large scale projects**. Independent curators wanted the need for better understanding of their work, **more trust in their capabilities and their local knowledge**. Independent curators also wanted institutions to open up their spaces to them for opportunities to work with them and their spaces. They also suggested there was an absence of a curatorial community. Young curators suggested there needed to be clarity of scope to prevent miscommunication. Young curators also spoke of the difficulty of navigating people, artists, and places in their work. An important issue was raised by a young curator to look at the question of waste in exhibitions and to explore how that could be addressed.

How do you mentor young curators in your work?

Numerous **Lead curators mentored young curators in their work, formally and informally**, both through their positions in institutions and informally by being approached by university students, graduates or people embarking on their careers. Some highlighted that many embarking on assistantships did not know what was involved in curating or the work of a curator. **Many curators saw mentoring as being a central aspect of their practice of sharing knowledge and the growth of the field.** Curators who had been mentored found it a very beneficial experience at institutional level. Others mentored through different programs in various countries and through specific projects. Numerous curators interviewed highlighted that more opportunities for mentorship were important and needed development that would enable the growth of the field of curating with close guidance from the curator, both Lead curators stressed this point as well as young curators who saw it would be deeply beneficial to have mentorship, **many suggested that Lead curators were in institutions were often to overburdened to be able to provide time for mentorship although they wanted to provide it.** It was highlighted that many individuals embarking on the field of curating wanted to focus on contemporary practices but had little knowledge of the work of contemporary artists locally or in the region nor were they familiar with an international discourse, but were attracted as aforementioned to the 'glamor' of the profession.

The importance of the need to have a solid and grounded understanding of art history was stressed by Lead curators as well as time taken for exposure to exhibitions through travel, reading, and research. It was suggested by Lead curators that it was not necessary to intern in contemporary art but to **gain knowledge of methodologies of research and curating were important.**

What prevents the development of young curators in curatorial practice in your view?

The majority of participants highlighted that this was due to a **lack of an understanding of what curating was and what it involved, which echoed throughout different levels of society and therefore would prevent young people entering the field.** Young curators also highlighted that many people didn't understand that it was a profession, or a full time job. Overall the precariousness of the profession was raised by various young curators. **Many young curators suggested the lack of financial security and opportunities to be independent** curators was also a major contributing factor to entering into the field. Many participants highlighted the **lack of opportunities for curatorial work** in their view and that organizations either had curators employed within institutions or worked with specific curators and noted that often organizations worked with the same independent curators and there was a need for greater diversity. **Young curators highlighted that there needed to be trust placed in local curators and opportunities created for them.** Various participants also highlighted the disparities between local curators and international curators. Local curators had to perform as translators and provide context and information, they highlighted that international curators did not have knowledge of local creative practitioners or understanding of the context or the language and parachuted into the region for opportunities. This highlighted for them that there was not sufficient trust in local curators or curators from

the region, and foreign expertise was given a higher ranking over local knowledge. Young curators raised the question of how international curators could curate in a context in which they had little understanding of the histories of creative production of its culture or language. Both the young and lead curators also suggested it was important not to copy paste models from outside but for forms to develop from within the place. Some young curators also suggested it was an elitist profession. Others suggested that a fear of failure of being compared to others was an additional facet. The need for connections and networks which were not readily available to someone starting in the field. doesn't come just because you can but need to be connected, might be set a back, comparison mode, important to grow organically, only look at end result, meet up with young curators,

What skill sets do you see are in need of development among young curators?

Lead curators stressed the importance of a **knowledge of art history, academic training and the importance of understanding the history of exhibitions.** They stressed the need to have skills to conduct library and archival research in order to enrich the rigor of the research in order for there to be robust intellectual production for an exhibition. Young curators needed to build up curatorial knowledge and dedicate time to research as well as needing to be aware of the gulf region histories.

Lead curators suggested young curators needed to develop an understanding of **visual vocabulary** in that they needed to understand how works signified in a visual cultural context as well as understanding how works operate visually in space in relationship to each other and how visual relationships can be made through the curating of an exhibition. This could be enhanced through workshops and close readings of works and the in depth study of successful exhibitions. Lead curators also highlighted that it was important to take into consideration the **aesthetic and emotional experience of an exhibition and the importance of the materiality of exhibitions in contrast to the digital realm.** They needed to acquire a **global knowledge of exhibition making and curatorial practice,** which could be attained through travel opportunities and research and access to catalogs and conferences. It was emphasized that

they need to develop skills of storytelling and to remember that the **curators work towards deeper understanding of the work, curators shouldn't overshadow artist work and to remember that the origin of the word to curate comes from the word to 'care'.** Therefore their role is to give voice to artist work, rather than the dominance in an exhibition being the curator's concept. They suggested it was important for **young curators to understanding question of the voice in curatorial writing,** It was suggested by lead curator if that one knows that one wants to be a curator and has the resources they should study a subject in the humanities as curating needs and understanding of people, artists, publics, histories and storytelling, as the best curators are specialized in something. Lead curators suggested it was important to understand that Curators come with vision but so do artists and one needed to have skill to infuse these together, working together rather than seeing that each was doing the other a service, but that it was a collaboration, unfortunately curating was sometimes understood as the later.

What are the main references you depend on when embarking on your research?

Curators had different starting points for their curatorial work, some based their work on **literature, architecture theory, critical theory texts**, or a combination of several of the aforementioned. For others curatorial work came from research into **artist practices**, others **highlighted their starting point were archival or historical research**, others suggested exhibitions and **travel to biennials and major exhibitions** were an important research tool. Curators highlighted the importance of their long standing relationships with artists as an important methodological tool, and was central to their curatorial work, in particular the relationship over time with artists in which they were in dialogue and observation of their evolving practice. Curators highlighted this as a key pillar of curatorial work was their relationship with artists. Curators highlighted that their research often stemmed from particular theoretical questions, biennials, research via podcasts, publications, conferences etc were all central to the development of their curatorial work. Young curators suggested some always started from their notebook which was with them, and filled with questions as one idea sparked another.

Would they consider the establishment of a professional association or informal forum for curators?

This suggestion was warmly welcomed by all the curators who participated in the interviews, particularly the idea of an **informal forum** and workshops. Curators expressed the need to come together without institutional baggage to share ideas, resources, experiences, talk about challenges, exchange knowledge about artists, publications and so forth. The curators who participated in interviews also suggested it would be an opportunity for **curators of different levels working in institutions and independently to share their experiences, knowledge and ideas**. They believed such a forum could help with the development of the field in the UAE and the wider region. Both lead and young curators suggested it was sometimes the case that they didn't know what projects different curators were working on and they would benefit from sharing knowledge and experiences of projects. They also suggested that such a forum could provide a form of information about opportunities, artists works, emerging artists codes of conduct etc. Young curators through it could foster connections and ignite conversations while lead curators through it could build a corpus and solidarity enabling discussion in which curators would not have to defend institutional positions and it could be a formal entity with an informal approach, it could even be a global association in a local context.

Who supported you in the development of your curatorial practice and how did you come to the field of curatorial practice?

Curators came to the profession through different routes, some had undertaken formal study in curatorial studies, art history or graduate studies in arts and humanities, others came to curating through different positions in institutions or projects that they worked on. Many highlighted the **important role mentorship within institutions had played for them in developing their skills as well as learning through doing.** Curators had also come to the field of curating through their artistic practice or architectural practice.

What advice do you have for 421 moving forward with this program?

There was a different range of advice for 421 moving forward with this program that included having a **semi open call**. It was also suggested that different people in the cultural sector could **nominate individuals to participate**. It was suggested that the training period could be longer. It was also suggested that there needed to be **minimum requirements to apply as well as setting a baseline for the projects accompanied by expected outcomes, and in doing so to also raise the stakes of the outcome**. It was suggested to keep a radically diverse cohort in that it would be important to have participants in the program from different professions and backgrounds. It was suggested that **historical knowledge should also be included in the program**. Many young curators suggested the need for it to **become a residency program, which would have both artists and curators in residency side by side**. The combination of **hands-on learning alongside conceptual development was also seen to be important**. Young curators gave examples of different international programs, which enabled curators from different countries to come together to work on projects, be embedded in a city and its cultural sector and to work together on development of curatorial projects. Young curators referenced different international programs for curators which 421 could take inspiration from for their work. It was also suggested that more curatorial mentoring specifically pertaining to the details of an exhibition selection

as well as authoring of curatorial text was needed. Those who participated in the program spoke of the extensive support that was given to them by 421 and the importance of the opportunity to do the program and be mentored within it. There was also the suggestion that the outcome could be less polished and 421 could look at different models of duration for example a three month program which was shorter, more concentrated and more experimental.

What advice do you have for a young curator embarking on their career?

There was a wide range of rich advice from lead and also younger curators with careers in the field for those embarking on their career which included the following suggestions. Lead curators emphasized the **importance of research** and getting off their screens to explore other ways of researching. The importance of **expanding their temporal purview** and not only working with their own generation but to look at different generations of practitioners. Curators encouraged those new to the field to explore different aspects of curatorial work to discover which area of interest if they are interested in the field they would like to develop a career in. The **importance of storytelling** was also emphasized and that this was an important aspect of exhibition making. Dialogue with artists and **building relationships with artists** was seen as important as well as **visiting all types of exhibitions** not exclusively art exhibitions. **Travel to regional and international exhibitions and events** was seen as important to enrich their knowledge as well as the study of the history of curatorial practice and art histories. Young curators suggested those entering the field should find their curatorial identity and work in a particular niche of expertise, while they **should not be afraid of experimentation**. All stressed the importance of having friendships and long term relationships with artists to foster collaboration. Lead curators suggested the need to have **courage, believe in what they are doing** and to collaborate

with those opposite from themselves. Lead curators advised new curators to try things out and to work in areas outside of their comfort zone to be curious and inquisitive. Young curator suggested it was important not to neglect any aspect of curating but the importance of growing in a horizontal form, understanding exhibition design, writing, etc, understanding curating holistically, having a great idea was not enough and horizontal growth, rather than vertical strive was necessary.

Feedback from Student Focus Group

Students who had taken a curatorial practice class at NYUAD were asked to participate in a focus group to explore the questions of curatorial practice. When asked if they would pursue a career in curating, students commented that studying curatorial practice had given them insights into curatorial practice which they were previously not aware of, particularly the process that went into exhibition making. **As a visual art major they felt understanding curatorial practice was an important part of their knowledge base.** Even for those not planning to go into curating, studying curatorial practice gave them a different perspective to understanding exhibitions, which had changed their ways of seeing exhibitions. **The students expressed their interest in combining curatorial practice with their other subject interests** particularly those majoring in social sciences, legal studies etc. Having taken a curatorial practice class some students were very interested in pursuing it as a career and saw curating as an important platform for sharing underrepresented voices. As for support from institutions, **they found that institutions in the UAE were supportive**, offering them opportunities for example with Art Lab at the Louvre AD and 421 collaboration with NYUAD. They suggested the programs were well known for university students, but there could be **more outreach to high school students** to raise awareness of the opportunities that existed in the field of curatorial practice and curating as a profession. They expressed the importance of **having a mentor who would be beneficial for those embarking on their career in curating**, particularly someone who could share their own knowledge and experiences and that it would be great to have a mentorship program in UAE institutions for young curators. The students highlighted being able to have comfortable conversations with

lead curators would be ideal. **Being able to undertake experimentation** was also seen to be of having impact for them. As for support from institutions and curators they would like them to **facilitate access and contact with artists, and resources in order for them to develop their curatorial work** for example through having a database and possible contact details. As for the development of their curatorial practice and projects access to knowledge of curation, was key. They felt they were in a situation of always waiting for institutions and open calls and they believed **institutions should be receptive to young people contacting them** first particularly so as not to miss the opportunity for a new idea coming from interdisciplinary students, they also suggested there weren't that many open calls. They suggested that not all of them but not all of them knew what a curatorial proposal would need to contain and knowledge of how to do a budget as well as other components would be useful to learn, the question of budget limitations they felt was one of the reasons why young people don't approach institutions. Students felt that curatorial projects could be a way to support artists, and help artists to get opportunities particularly those based in third world countries through curatorial opportunities. As to what they would like to see included in a curatorial program they stressed the need for a **diverse program** which would not only introduce them to concepts in curating, but they would like a program that brought in professional curators to speak about their world. They suggested they would like projects they could work on that would build up to a final project that they developed and work on. All areas of curating interesting to them, education, public program, curating exhibitions as well as spatial design and publications. Their main recommendations to 421 was, **in regards to open calls, for it to be as simple as possible to encourage applicants** if open calls were too complicated they would be hesitant to join or they would feel they are not

up to standard to apply and participate, they would also benefit from an **info session about the program**. They were very interested in hearing about **experiences of previous attendees** and curators who worked with them or were on the program. In regards to the content of the program they wanted a diverse and wide program that would work on developing their curatorial concept as well including all logistical aspects such as working on budgets, press releases etc. Having a theoretical program alone they felt would not suffice, because theory in isolation did not provide them with tools when they came to the task of writing a press release etc. Therefore they suggested having dedicated time to expanding curatorial knowledge, and learning from other curators but also the logistics for implementing a project. Therefore **for a beginner it needed to be a well rounded program**, theoretical studies could become too abstract, especially at early stages in a career development. They concurred that society at large did not know a lot about curating, and did not see it of importance which was one of the reasons why young people shy away from going into curating as a career in comparison to well known professions. Students suggested if opportunities for support were visible there was nothing from them to prevent them doing a project or going into the field but **visibility of opportunities was needed**. They suggested it was **important to keep doing projects with students and to ensure their frequency** for the development of interest in curating and young people entering the field.

Summary Key Findings from Young Curators

- Little understanding of what the work of a curator is, both by the general public and by institutions.
- Young curators expressed the need for opportunity for internship with a Lead curator or mentorship by a lead curator
- Young curators expressed the need to be able to acquire knowledge of the logistics of art production in the local context.
- Young curators expressed the need for opportunities for experimentation and process oriented research
- Young independent curators highlighted financial disparities in their fees
- Young curators expressed the need for management of expectation from the outset of a project
- Young curators highlighted the absence of time for research and studio visits to enrich their curatorial practice as logistics took the majority of their time.
- Young curators expressed the need for support in the development of writing skills for curatorial statements but also for press releases and communication.
- Young curators expressed the need for alternative spaces and venues for exhibitions and experimentation with curatorial practice and working on smaller scale projects
- Young curators expressed the need to have evaluation and reviews of an exhibition's content for the development of their practice
- Young curators suggested more trust was needed in their capabilities and their local knowledge
- Many young curators suggested the lack of financial security and opportunities to be independent curators prevented young people going into this profession

Summary of Key Findings from Lead Curators

- The importance of the need to have a solid and grounded understanding of art history and exhibition histories and local/regional histories
- The importance of acquiring knowledge of methodologies of research and curating
- The importance to understand the aesthetic and emotional experience of an exhibition
- The importance of the materiality of exhibitions in contrast to the digital realm.
- The need to acquire a global knowledge of exhibition making and curatorial practice
- The importance of a combination of hands-on learning alongside conceptual development
- The need to develop writing skills for different forms of writing (curatorial statements, press releases, communication etc)
- To work outside one's comfort zone and temporal purview
- The need to visit exhibitions and biennials and be curious
- The need to build long term relationships with artists
- The need to understand the curatorial voice, and not to overshadow the artist work or prove a thesis through an exhibition
- To understand the importance of storytelling

General Recommendations from Interviewed Participants for Curatorial Practice in the UAE

- Through the discussions a range of recommendations arose from the curators who participated in the interviews but also from outcome and conclusions of the study and the responses to the interviews which include the following:
- Residency for curators within institutions or alongside artists (e.g SEAF) to enable them to undertake research without necessary outcomes, but to enable a period of uninterrupted research away from logistics of implementing exhibitions/events etc.
- 3-6 month residency to undertake research on local artists and the region with opportunity to develop project and return for 2nd half of residency/visit to implement a curatorial project
- Informal forum for curators for curators to come together to share ideas, participate in workshops, share knowledge of local artists, engage with questions of curatorial practice and its challenges
- Database of local artists and facilitation to connect to artist practitioners
- Curatorial Fellowships
- Opportunities for travel to exhibitions (regionally and internationally) and engagement in critical discourse and critique
- Mentorship with lead curator while undertaking the 421 program
- Greater opportunities for experimentation with exhibition form and content
- Openness by institutions to work with new curators and to receive proposals for exhibitions and projects
- Feedback and evaluation on curatorial projects
- Opportunity for exhibitions to tour within the UAE and the region
- Creating greater accessibility to published resources and publications
- Trust and support for local competences

Recommendations for 421's Program

- Consideration model of the application: open call, thematic call, semi-open call or nominations
- Defining outcomes
- Simplifying application process to encourage young curators
- ensuring diverse cohort
- Providing curatorial mentorship through the program
- Combining theory and practice
- Providing opportunity for curatorial residency
- Amplifying open call
- Enabling an experimental space with not necessarily finished outcome
- Incorporating travel and visits into the program
- Incorporating art history and local histories into the program

EXPERIMENTATION

Spaces, projects, residency scheme, amplify open calls, increased opportunities

RESEARCH

Time, resources, access to publications, visits to exhibitions and artists, travel to exhibitions

FORUM

Discussions, dialogues, shared experiences, database, informal

MENTORSHIP

Evaluation, support for writing, knowledge of art histories, local histories and language, trust in local curators

Appendix 1

Questions for Lead Curators

1. What are the main challenges you face in your curatorial work?
2. What are the needs for the development of curatorial practice in the UAE in your view?
3. How do institutions in the UAE support curators? What could they further do to support?
4. How do you mentor young curators in your work?
5. What prevents the development of young curators in curatorial practice in your view?
6. What skill sets do you see are in need of development among young curators?
7. What are the main references you depend on when embarking on your research?
8. What factors in the decision making process do you consider when developing your curatorial themes?
9. Would they consider the establishment of a professional association or forum for curators in the UAE/region?
10. What advice do you have for W421 moving forward with this program?
11. What advice do you have for a young curator embarking on their career?

Questions for Curators

1. What are the main challenges you face in your curatorial work?
2. What are the needs for the development of curatorial practice in the UAE in your view?
3. How could institutions in the UAE support independent curators?
4. What support do you need to develop your curatorial practice in the UAE?
5. How do you mentor young curators in your work?
6. Who supported you in the development of your curatorial practice and how did you come to the field of curatorial practice?
7. What skill sets do you see are in need of development among young curators?
8. Would they consider the establishment of a professional association or forum for curators?
9. What advice do you have for W421 moving forward with this program?
10. What advice do you have for a young curator embarking on their career?

Questions for Students

1. Would you consider pursuing curatorial work?
2. What interests you about curating?
3. What support would you want to receive from leading curators?
4. What support would you want to see from institutions?
5. What are your needs to develop your curatorial practice?
6. What support do you need for your projects?

