

CONTEMPORARY ART IN PRACTICE

Looking • Thinking • Making • Curating

Volunteer Training Workshop

Bridget Tay

Contemporary art is not defined by one medium, appearance or style. Artists may work through objects, performances, research, participation, sound, writing, installation, social situations and many other forms. It can be more useful to ask **how a work operates** than to ask whether it “looks contemporary.”

Instead of learning *about* contemporary art...

Today we'll learn **through** contemporary art.

- Looking
- Thinking
- Making
- Curating
- Reflecting

This workshop approaches contemporary art experientially. Looking, making, discussing and curating are different ways of understanding how meaning is produced. Contemporary art knowledge is therefore not only factual knowledge about artists and movements; it also involves developing ways of observing, questioning and interpreting.



Lee Wen (Singapore), *Strange Fruit*, 2003. C-prints, set of 12, edition 1/3, 42 × 59.4 cm (each).

Why do people find contemporary art difficult?

- "I don't get it."
- "My child could do that."
- "Why is this in a museum?"
- "Where's the skill?"

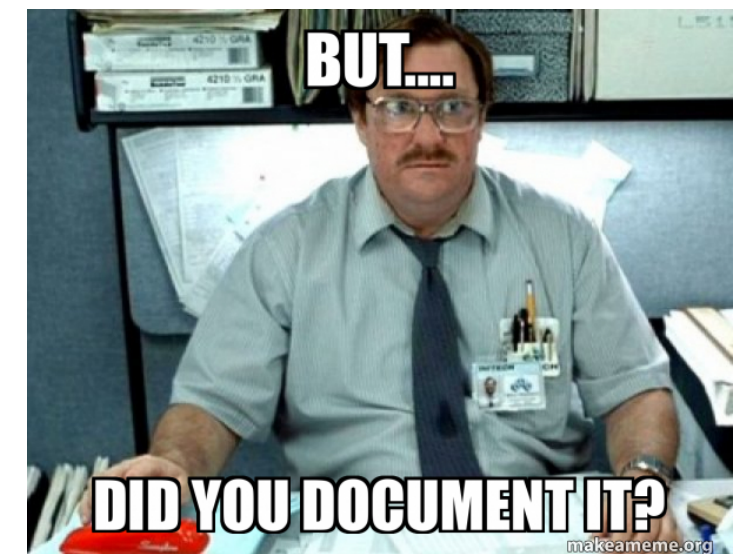
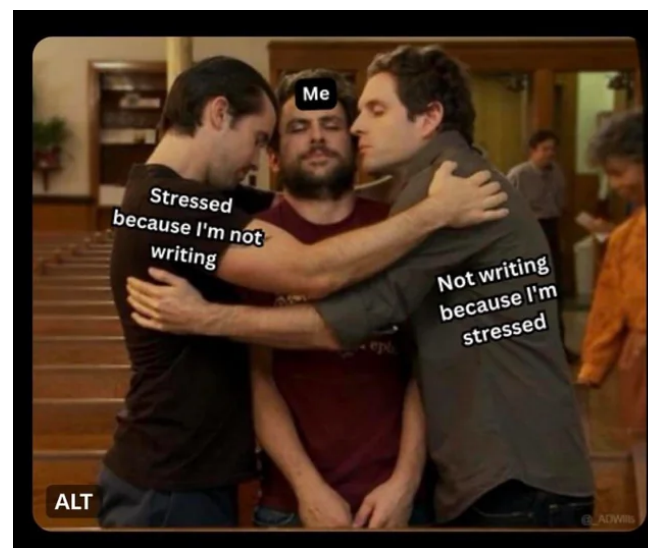
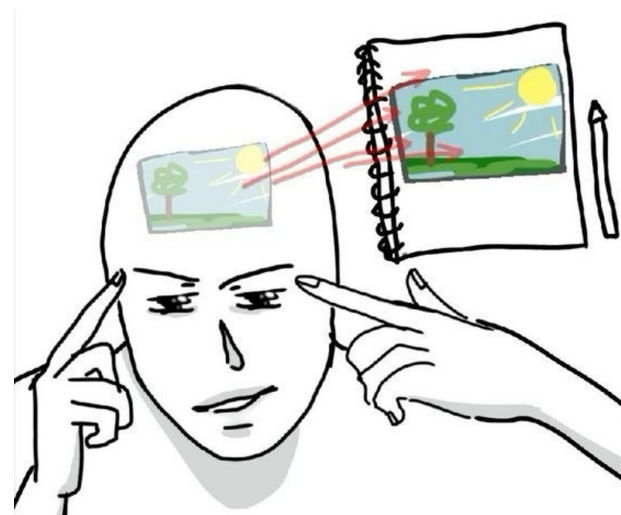
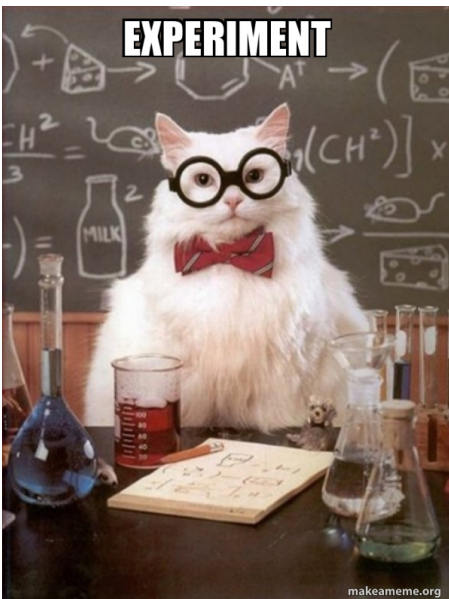
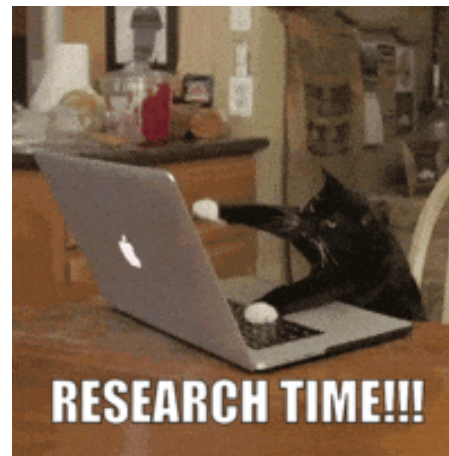
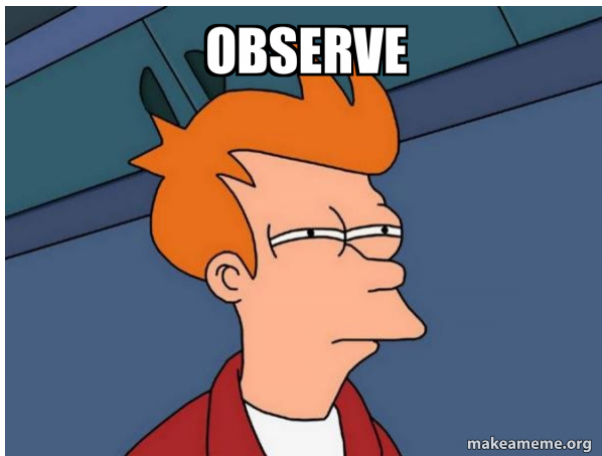


Installation view of "ANTHONY CHIN's ...S\$1.996/- S\$831.06/-...", 2021, unsuccessful art grant application, below-target donation drive result, S\$1 coins, adhesive, steel, 440 x 2.5 cm, at Comma Space, Singapore, 2021.



Questions such as “Why is this art?”, “Where is the skill?” or “What does this mean?” are useful starting points rather than signs of failure. Contemporary artworks may deliberately challenge familiar expectations about beauty, skill, permanence, authorship or what an artwork should look like. Uncertainty can therefore be part of the encounter.

What does an artist actually do?



Making is only one part of artistic practice.

Artistic practice extends beyond physically producing an artwork. Artists may research, observe, collect, write, interview, experiment, collaborate, document, revise, negotiate practical constraints and respond to unexpected outcomes. The final exhibited object may represent only one stage of a much longer process.

Anthony Chin

What do you notice?



Anthony Chin (Singapore), *S\$1,996/- S\$831.06/-*, 2021. Unsuccessful art grant application, below-target donation drive result, S\$1 coins, adhesive, steel, 440 × 2.5 cm. Installation view at Comma Space, Singapore.

Anthony Chin originally applied for an art grant to fund a project requiring **S\$1,996** in one-dollar coins to build a pillar reaching the height of the gallery. The application was unsuccessful. He then asked friends and family for donations but raised only **S\$831.06**. Rather than abandoning the project, he transformed this shortfall into the artwork itself. A precarious, incomplete pillar made from the amount he actually received.

The work examines artistic labour, funding, sustainability and the economics of making art in Singapore.



Anthony Chin's S\$1,996/- S\$831.06/- (2021) emerged from an unsuccessful grant application and a subsequent donation drive. The amount actually raised determined the height of the final column of one-dollar coins. The circumstances surrounding the work: funding, failure, artistic labour and adaptation are therefore inseparable from the final object.

Useful concepts: process, artistic labour, systems, economics, material choice, constraint.

Question to keep: *Where does the artwork actually begin?*



Detailed installation view of 'ANTHONY CHIN's -S\$1,996/- S\$831.06/-', 2021, unsuccessful art grant application, below-target donation drive result, S\$1 coins, adhesive, steel, 440 x 2.5 cm, at Comma Space, Singapore, 2021.

The process becomes the artwork.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*), 1991, Candies individually wrapped in multi-color cellophane, endless supply. Dimensions vary with installation; ideal weight 175 lbs.

Contemporary artworks are often about processes, not just objects.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was a Cuban-born American conceptual artist whose work explored **love, loss, memory, time and participation** through simple, everyday objects.

In *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), a pile of **175 lbs of wrapped sweets** represents the ideal body weight of his partner, Ross Laycock, who died from AIDS-related illness. Visitors are invited to take a sweet, causing the pile to gradually diminish before it is replenished, transforming the work into a meditation on grief, remembrance and enduring love.

In *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991), two identical clocks are set to the same time and mounted side by side. As they inevitably drift out of sync or stop, they become a quiet reflection on companionship, the passage of time and the inevitability of separation.

Rather than depicting these emotions directly, Gonzalez-Torres invites viewers to experience them through **ordinary objects, participation and the passage of time**.

The audience completes the artwork.

Gonzalez-Torres often used simple everyday objects to address love, loss, memory and time. In *“Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), visitors may take sweets from a pile whose ideal weight corresponds to that of his partner Ross Laycock. In *“Untitled” (Perfect Lovers)* (1991), two identical clocks begin synchronised but inevitably drift apart or stop. Meaning develops through material, time and participation rather than through conventional portraiture.

Useful concepts: participation, temporality, audience, materiality, loss, absence.

Question to keep: *What can an ordinary object do that a traditional portrait might not?*



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *“Untitled” (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991, clocks, paint on wall. Overall dimensions 14 x 28 x 2 3/4" (35.6 x 71.2 x 7 cm)

- What makes these ordinary objects feel emotionally significant?
- Why do you think Gonzalez-Torres chose **candies** and **clocks** instead of creating a portrait?
- How does participation change the meaning of the candy work?
- Is time simply a subject in *Perfect Lovers*, or does it become the artwork itself?
- How does knowing the artist's personal story change your reading of these works?
- Can an artwork be simple in form but complex in meaning?

The Artists Village (Singapore)



Artist Village at Lorong Gambas, 1989. Courtesy Koh Nguang How.



Tang's performance at the second *Open Studio Show* (1989) in Lorong Gambas

- Does this look like an exhibition?
- Where do you think the artwork is?
- What feels different from a museum?

Can an exhibition be an artwork?



Which part is the artwork?

- **Where is the artwork?**
- **What are people doing?**
- **What role does the audience play?**



Sometimes..

Artists create situations rather than objects.

What connects these?



What's similar?

Contemporary artworks may look completely unrelated while sharing approaches or methodologies. Anthony Chin foregrounds **process**, Gonzalez-Torres foregrounds **participation and experience**, and TAV foregrounds **situations and relationships**. This is one reason contemporary art is difficult to define through appearance alone.

Looking at contemporary art

1.

What do I notice?

2.

Why these choices?

(materials, actions, people)

3.

What information changes how I understand it?

4.

What conversations does this artwork invite?



S24

THE ARTISTS VILLAGE

NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

For a night, we are all a village ... Let's head to the coffeeshop

S-24 builds on The Artists Village's (TAV) S-23 (2023), a project inspired by the S-11 experience. S-11 was a coffee shop near the old central library and the Substation, a popular hangout spot for the arts community.

In collaboration with National Gallery Singapore, S-24 utilises the coffee shop as a site and method to explore non-dominant and diverse perspectives in Singapore art history. For one night, we invite you to join us at a Geylang rest stop after dusk to experience this creative convergence. You will actively participate in our cultural kopitiam rituals, connect with artists and their friends, and create new art pathways, making us all a community for the night.

7:00 p.m. - Community Dinner
Goh Beng Kwan and Seng Yujin
Join artist Goh Beng Kwan and Seng Yujin in an intimate conversation about his work and his experiences revolving around coffeeshops.

7:00 p.m. - Yes Tonight, Josephine
Jennifer Teo
Bring your stories, photographs and gossips of "Bye, Bye Albert", Hock Hiap Leong and other coffeeshops to this conversation on memories, archives and collective experiences.

9:00 p.m. - Delicate Resonance of Amusement
Arif Ayab(REEF)
An interactive tabletop gaming experience with Chess, Checkers, and Chinese Chess, featuring manipulated live sounds via microphones.

11:00 p.m. - Ethnocacophony
SGPK (Kai Lam)
A workshop by SGPK (Kai Lam), exploring sonic art performance, while showcasing diverse cultural interactions through organized chaos.

9:00 p.m., 11:00 p.m. - Artspace Endgame?: The Substation Townhall
The Artists Village
Rally as artists and activists to save The Substation, navigating closure and redevelopment of the independent art space in a narrative-driven RPG.

9:00 p.m., 11:00 p.m. - Art vs Art
The Artists Village
In this card game, you lead an art society in 1960s Singapore, striving for relevance and recognition. Recruit members, face challenges and shape cultural influence in a dynamic era.

8:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m. - Art Bluff
The Artists Village X NGS
Play a fast-paced bluffing game where players deceive and detect lies using National Gallery Singapore's art collection.

A useful approach to unfamiliar artworks is to move between four kinds of questions: **What do I notice? Why these choices? What information changes my understanding? What conversations does the work invite?**

Observation and interpretation are related but different. Beginning with what is actually visible can prevent contextual information or wall text from completely determining the first encounter.

Context doesn't replace observation.

Useful Vocabulary

- **Process:** the actions and decisions through which a work develops.
- **Materiality:** how the physical qualities and associations of materials contribute to meaning.
- **Participation:** situations where audiences actively affect or complete a work.
- **Installation:** work conceived through the arrangement of objects, images, sound or other elements within a space.
- **Site-specific:** work developed in relation to a particular location or context.
- **Documentation:** records of an artwork or event; in some practices, documentation may itself become part of the work.
- **Context:** historical, social, personal, spatial or institutional information surrounding a work.
- These terms are tools for describing what a work is doing rather than fixed categories.



Teresa Margolles

En el aire, In the Air, 2003/ 2011

Installation, bubbles produced with water from soaked fabrics that had been braced in places of violent acts in the periphery of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

Variable dimensions

This example demonstrates how contextual information can radically alter an encounter with an artwork. The installation initially presents a visually playful environment of floating bubbles; additional knowledge about the materials introduces associations with mortality and violence.

Important distinction: Context does not automatically erase an initial response. Different readings can coexist and become more complicated as more information is introduced.

Question to keep: *Did the artwork change, or did our relationship to it change?*



Did the artwork change?

Observation



Context



Interpretation

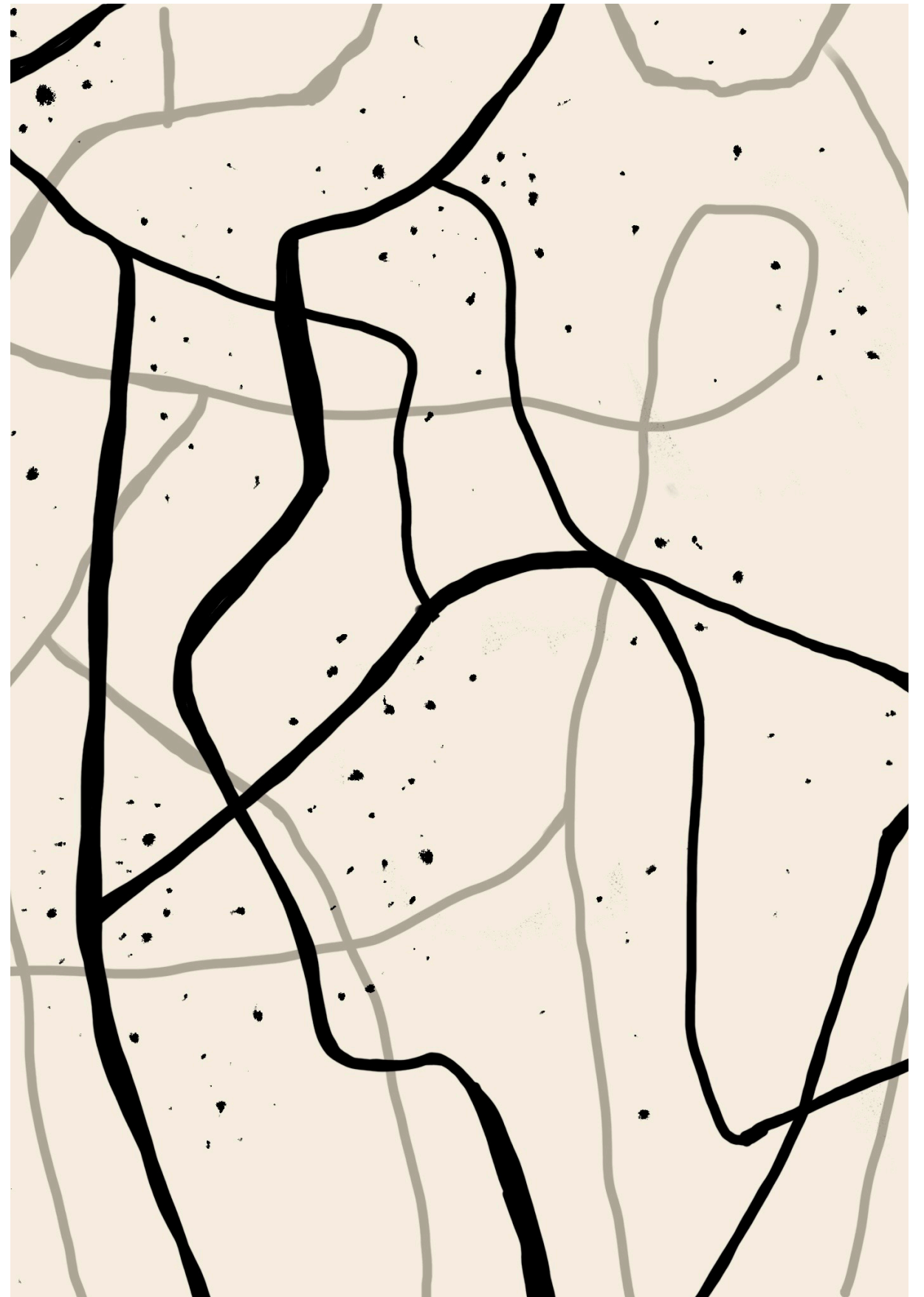


Discussion

This afternoon...

You're not trying to make
beautiful art.

You're trying to make
meaningful decisions.



Lets warm up!

Line as Experience

Materials

- A4 paper
- Two coloured markers

Will everyone's artwork look the same?

Everyone gets

- the same materials
- the same prompt

Everyone begins with the same prompt and similar materials, yet the outcomes differ because each participant makes different decisions about line, colour, density, repetition, scale and composition. This demonstrates that an idea does not have one predetermined visual solution.

Key thought: Artistic intention influences a work, but intention does not completely control how others will experience it.

Waiting

Reflect.

- Write down
- One decision you made.
- One thing you changed.
- One thing you would continue exploring.

Respond to your drawing

Respond to Drawing 1 by changing **one** of the following:

- rhythm
- scale
- density
- direction
- colour

Not the idea.

The visual language.

Context Changes Meaning

Swap

Write a 30-word exhibition label

What does a curator actually do?

CURATORS



What my friends think I do



What my mom thinks I do



What society thinks I do



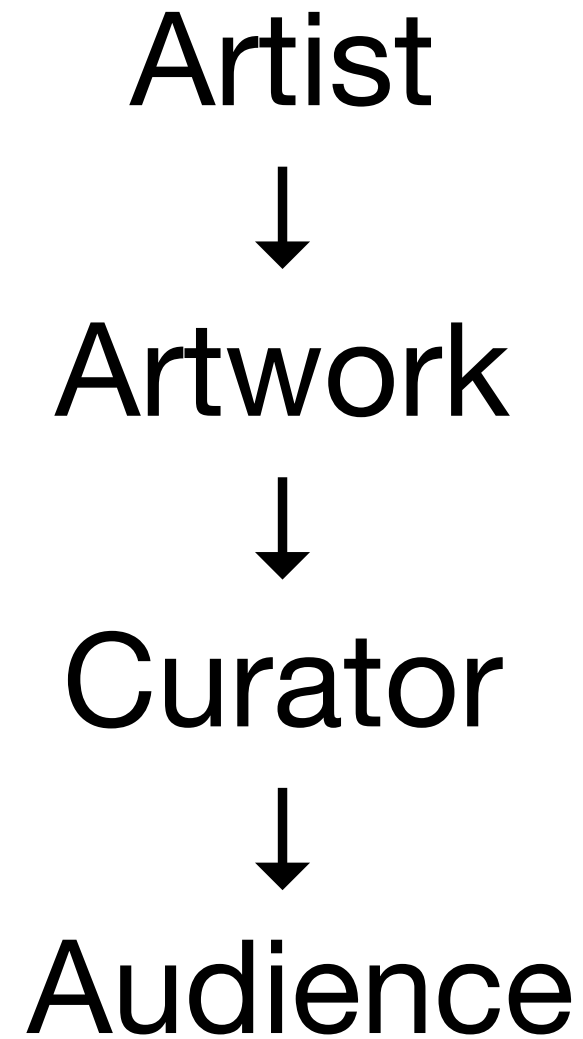
What artists expect me to do



What I think I do



What I actually do



Curatorial practice includes research, selection, interpretation, working with artists and shaping exhibitions. For this workshop, the key idea is that curators create **relationships between artworks, ideas, spaces and audiences**. Curatorial decisions affect how an artwork is encountered even when the artwork itself remains unchanged.

They shape how we experience it.

Where do you think the curator's influence begins?

Curating Meaning

The same artwork.

Different exhibition.

we will be taking turns

As a group, discuss:

- Which drawing should visitors see first?
- Which works need space?
- Which works belong together?
- Which work changes meaning when placed beside another?
- What journey do you want visitors to experience?

Exhibition walk

While viewing, ask yourself:

- What story is this exhibition telling?
- Which relationships did you notice?
- What surprised you?
- Which work changed because of where it was placed?

Reflection

Contemporary art does not always offer a single message to decode. It can create questions, experiences, relationships or situations through which meaning develops. Understanding may therefore be an ongoing process rather than a final destination. A useful shift might be from asking only “**What does this artwork mean?**” toward asking “**What is this artwork asking me to notice?**”

So... what is a volunteer's role?

Great conversations often begin with simple questions.

Every exhibition is a conversation.

Between

artist



curator



artwork



visitor



you

Not because you have the answers.

But because you're part of that encounter.