

Curators and their audience

September 2014

[Pauline Hadaway](#) , [Sarah Perks](#) , and [Wendy Earle](#) helped unpick the changing role of curators and how we could save them from becoming museum pieces



In line with many aspects of work in the arts and humanities today, the role of the *curator* has been re-configured in a political and philosophical environment which increasingly values the external impacts of art – social, economic and therapeutic, against its meaning as an intrinsic aspect of human experience and culture.



In [Art as Therapy](#) , a depressingly narrow and instrumental manifesto for improving visitor experience in art museums, Alain de Botton and John Armstrong argue for curators to abandon scholarship acquired in the ‘secluded privilege’ of the traditional museum, in favour of discovering the therapeutic value of art.

Curators in de Botton’s new *therape*

utic art museum

should programme exhibitions designed to help visitors find resolution for 'life's difficult issues'. Whilst art history may seem remote from everyday life, de Botton and Armstrong's proposition that museums and galleries abandon belief in the value of scholarship in favour of more immersive, visitor focused experiences denigrates the idea of the audience as an intelligent, enquiring public.



The fashion in museums to move from the **particularity of objects** as the primary way of conveying knowledge, towards a more

experience orientated

approach has been well documented. The contemporary museum loudly proclaims its role as a 'site for social, community and individual transformation'. Speaking at the

[Museums Association 2013 conference](#)

, Carol Rodgers, executive director of education, communities and visitors at the National Museums, Liverpool, spelt out the therapeutic role of museums, including the need to build '*sustained relationships with the health and social care sector*'

. Meanwhile, introducing a discussion on 'the emotional museum', National Museums, Liverpool director, David Fleming noted approvingly that museums were finally waking up to the fact '*that academic, sterile and dispassionate approaches to display are no longer acceptable to the public or funders*'

While many criticize the new museum's assimilation of quasi commercial, marketing, tourism and branding strategies, often in competition with rival tourist entertainments, only a brave few defend the museum's role as custodian of centuries of human culture, and the **role and responsibility of curators**

for sharing their knowledge with the wider community. Besides some lingering nostalgia for the

patrician style of 'retro' art historians like Kenneth Clarke, faith in people's desire for knowledge, understanding and enlightenment through art has become literally '

so last century

'. When a major, much loved art institution like Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum subjects its public to the 'therapeutic interventions' of de Botton and Armstrong, shouldn't we be campaigning for the belief in the transcendent quality of art rather than this ubiquitous banality of relevance?

In the face of a ***relentless and instrumentalist culture*** of accountability, employability, social impact and relevance, the role of the curator as a public intellectual engaging audiences with artists continues to be diminished. This retreat of the curator throws

questions of judgment

onto visitors who often feel unequipped for the task. Denied access to the curator's knowledge which could deepen our understanding and enjoyment of the art on show, are our experiences as visitors being diminished? Most of us respect, appreciate and want to share in the curators' authoritative knowledge which is no more elitist than being an authority on engineering or medicine, so why have so many museums and galleries – with some honorable exceptions - become so defensive about their role? How can we reconnect and rebuild trust between curators and audiences?

Some background readings and viewings

[The Art of With](#) , by Charles Leadbeater, Cornerhouse March 2009

[If the Museum is the Gateway, who is the Gatekeeper?](#) by Bernadette Lynch, extract from Inclusion under Pressure, Winter 2011

[A perverted view of art](#) , Tiffany Jenkins, spiked 10 April 2013

[Let's stop being defensive about the value of arts degrees](#) , by Wendy Earle, The Guardian 29 May 2014

[David on whether London is overrated as a place for artists](#) , by Dave Bowden, IdeasTap 2 April 2014

[Art Is Therapy review – de Botton as doorstepping self-help evangelist](#) , by Adrian Searle, The Guardian 25 April 2014

[Audience ejects crowd-surfer from classical concert](#) , by Miranda Prynne, The Telegraph 20 June 2014

[Pubic hair – now officially offensive](#) , Ivor Jones, spiked 15 July 2014

[Exhibit B: a guilty pleasure](#) , by Tiffany Jenkins, spiked 2 September 2014

Watch video of the speaker and audience comments below. Thanks to Dan Clayton the [documentary filmmaker](#) from Leeds for this.

Discussion Partners



The [New Mills Festival](#) is a 2-week annual celebration of community and cultural spirit through a diverse range of activities from talks and walks to concerts, gigs, exhibitions and an

impressive lantern procession. The overall aim is to enrich the community's experience of and participation in different creative activities.