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How to Curate an Art Show

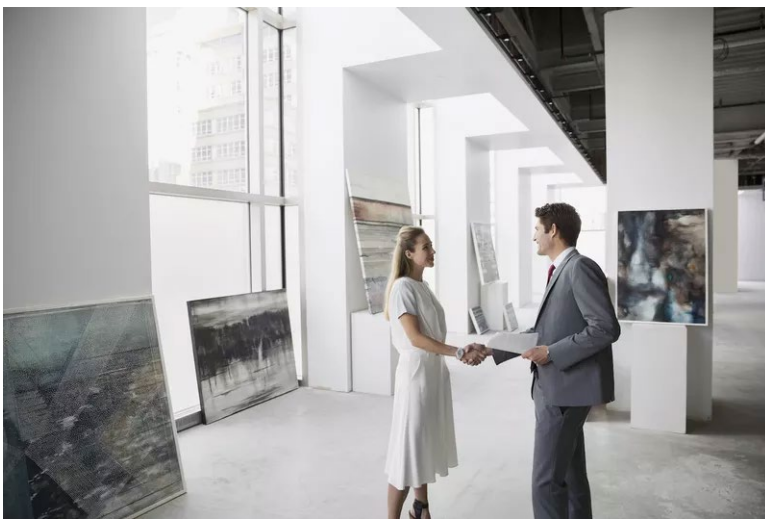
By Susan Kendzulak | Updated November 20, 2019 | extracted from thebalancecareers.com

In today’s art world, you do not need to be a museum staff member to curate an art exhibition. You could be an independent art curator and work independently.

A curator’s job is like a movie director’s in that you need to oversee every detail of the production. So, it helps to be extremely organized and that you can work well with others as it takes many skilled people to put on an exhibition.

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach but various methods. Here is one simplified process to put on an exhibition from start to finish. If feasible, give yourself at least six months to arrange all the necessary details.

01 Conceptualize the Exhibition



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For many curators, this is the fun and creative part of the job. Think of the idea and the overall theme for your exhibition. Write a mission statement. What is the purpose of your exhibition: a survey show, a showcase of new talent, a cross-cultural exchange, an illustration of a theme or topical issue?

Before you begin, you need to think through every exacting detail and leave nothing to chance. It requires a lot of preliminary research on your part.

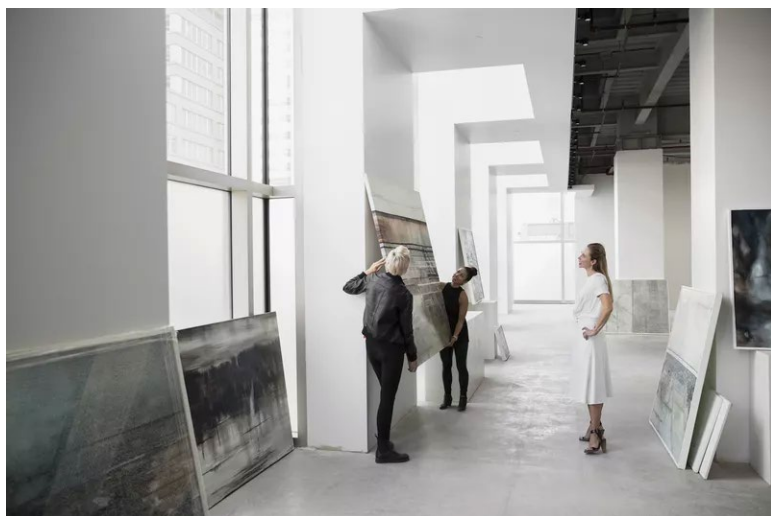
For Beijing-based independent curator Kwanyi Pan, who has curated exhibitions around the world, recommends researching the country's artists and audience. It will help you understand the environment you are working in and what subsequent issues may arise. She says working as a curator in Asia is different from working in the west in that the social context is “totally a money-driven phenomena.”

Select the artists for your exhibition. Will they make new works which add to your budget or will they exhibit older works? Are you working entirely with local artists? If not, will you need to arrange travel, accommodation, and visas for your visiting artists?

Where is the exhibition site? If it is in a museum or gallery, how much will they sponsor? Is it in a traditional gallery space, or is it in alternative venues such as public parks and shopping arcades? Will it travel around by taxi?

Consider intriguing juxtapositions between artworks. Create an interesting dialogue amongst the works and the audience. Imagine the space in your mind. Is there a logical flow between the works? Will the audience understand what you are trying to convey?

02 Reserve Exhibition Space and Dates



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Get floor plans and start mapping out the layout of the exhibition. You need to get to the nuts and bolts of your exhibition when curating an art show. What goes where? Some curators build 3D models of the gallery space and artworks, while others use software like [SketchUp](#).

Work with the gallery or museum staff to create a positive and productive environment for all involved. Along with short deadlines go short tempers. Try and make the experience as stress-free as possible by having everything

planned out beforehand.

Set the opening and closing dates of the art exhibition. Mark your calendar with deadlines for each facet of the project. It can be helpful to work backward from the opening date and schedule the necessary steps needed to put on the exhibition

03 Consider Your Audience



Oliver Strewe/Getty Images

The art audience is one of the foremost concerns of the curator. Kwanyi Pan says, “A curator is not a creator but a facilitator for both the audience and the artists and a messenger who delivers ideas from contemporary society. A good curator needs to understand the audience and to fully communicate with the artists to let their work speak out to the public.”

When she curated a show at [Mission Gallery](#), a government-owned space in

Wales, her focus was on the audience and what they could receive from the exhibition. Her overriding concern was to allow for audience interaction with the artwork.

04 Procure Funding and Allocate Budget



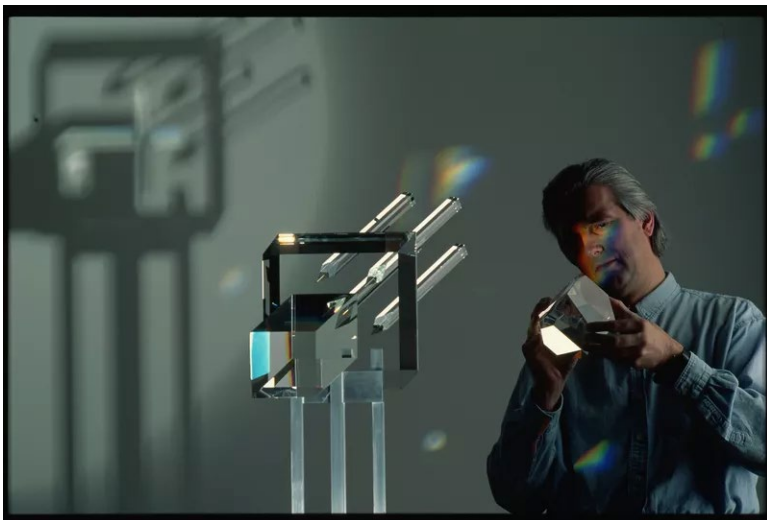
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Procuring funds when curating an art exhibition is one of the most daunting tasks of a curator. [Apply for art grants](#) through government and non-profit agencies. Be thorough in your research and follow any possibilities in receiving support. Seek corporate sponsorship and loans of equipment such as computers and digital projectors. Get local support from schools and neighborhood organizations. Getting the community involved in your exhibition can help give you extra support.

Include in your budget: artists' fees, project fees, overhead, advertising, printing catalog and invitations, shipping and handling, customs duty, framing, installing, lighting, and opening expenses. Putting on an exhibition can quickly add up.

Kwanyi Pan said when she worked as a [curatorial assistant](#) at the non-profit art space PS1, the key to procuring funding was to demonstrate co-operation with the funding body to let them clearly know what they will receive in return. "It is a give-and-take situation."

05 Assume Nothing



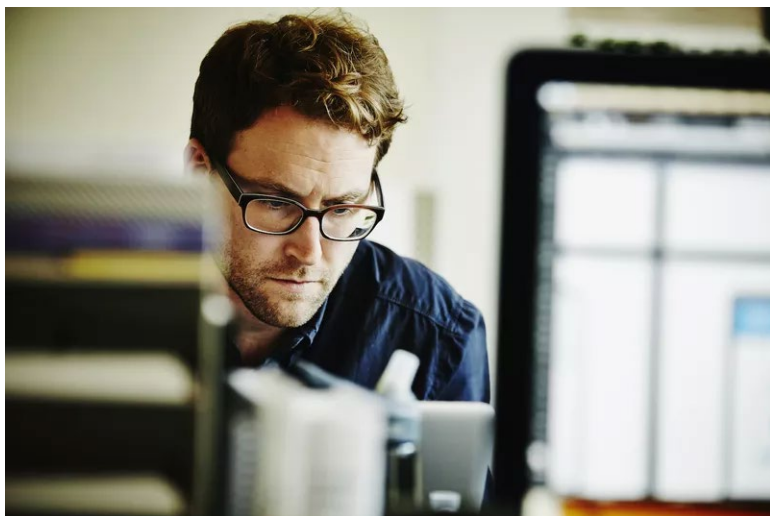
James L. Amos/Getty Images

Neil Webb, current director of Arts East Asia at the British Council, warns, "First and foremost -- Assume nothing! Make sure you're absolutely clear about who's responsible for delivering and paying for what. Some of the many items to consider include the inward freight, return freight, installation, dismantling, curator's expenses, translation costs, catalog, opening reception, design, press, and marketing costs.

It is those extra costs that a curator needs to keep an eye on. Webb advises, "Be sure to apply for a carnet to avoid

being hit with unexpected Customs duty. Be sure to get written confirmation of insurance before the works take to the seas/skies.”

06 Write Essays and Publish a Catalog



Thomas Barwick/Getty Images

Writing well is a necessary skill for an art curator. Publishing a catalog of the exhibition is one of the tasks involved when curating an art show, plus a catalog is a great documentation and promotional tool that can lead to future projects.

However, in some situations, you may have to be careful about what you write. Neil Webb says, “When working in countries where censorship is an issue, be sure to obtain all necessary permissions/permits before anything goes to print. And try to discourage your

curator from doing anything which is likely to get them arrested.”

07 Advertise and Mail Invitations



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You have spent a long time researching and organizing your exhibition in the process of curating a show; now you want to maximize the attendance for your exhibition and make it a memorable event.

Advertise in newspapers, [art magazines](#), and on the Internet, broadcast announcements on the radio and TV, display street flags and pay for public transport ads. Do radio and television interviews. You need to get the word out.

Snail mail the printed art invitation and e-mail all the people you know. Hand out invitations. Also, telephone the key people such as journalists and collectors whom you want to attend your opening.

08 Site Installation



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Site installation is a key task when curating an art show. Typically one week before the opening, you and your team will need to do the on-site installation which includes the construction and painting of walls. The artists and assistants will install the artwork, and the technicians will set up the lighting and technical equipment.

If the artwork was shipped, carefully unwrap the crates, bubble wrap, and other packaging materials as you do not want to damage any of the work with a box cutter.

A museum will have its staff to [set up the installation](#). However, if you are starting out, you will need to do DIY. Artists are pros at setting up their work, and there are also art installation companies for-hire.

09 Press Conference, Panel Discussion and Workshops



Hans-Georg Roth/Corbis/Getty Images

Hold a pre-opening press conference with [complete press kits](#) that contain written texts explaining the show's concept, the list of artists and a CD of images. Have the curator and artists say a few words. If you want good press coverage, it is best to provide journalists with detailed text and images and good sound bites.

Organize a panel discussion of the artists and other experts during the opening week when interest in the exhibition is high. Have local professors and students get involved in the talks. Engage the local community with

walking tours and hands-on workshops and activities for families.

Neil Webb says, "Allow time and budget in order to be able to effectively contextualize the work -- this might include interviews with the curator/artist(s) for local media, commissioned pieces of writing, blogs and additional support/materials for the gallery/museum's education teams."

Kwanyi Pan says, "A good curator does thorough research and archiving about society phenomena while organizing an interesting program to guide audiences you want to speak to."

10 Grand Opening



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When curating an art exhibition, make your art opening fun, exciting, and memorable. You want to create an exciting buzz so that people will keep coming back for the exhibition. Schedule your opening for the evening when most people are free to attend.

Begin the opening with a live art or music performance or light show, and

then introduce the curator, artists and other significant figures to the audience. Serve refreshments and let the visitors see the artwork.

Artists should be near their installations so they can answer any of the visitor's questions. Have volunteers, who wear identifiable clothing like matching shirts, stand in the various rooms of the exhibition to help explain the work and make sure it does not get damaged.