

Ways of Perceiving – Curation Essay

Student Name: Iulia-Adina Hulea

Student Number: 2005277

Programme of Study: Fine Art: Studio Site and Context (BA)

Module: ADAD4019

Lecturer's Name: Ryan Moule

Word Count: 1642

Since my induction into the art world and everything it entails, I became quite fascinated with how curators judge and decide which pieces of art to have on the white, pristine walls of a museum or in the old, rusty walls of a warehouse.

I am aware of the fact that I curate unconsciously whenever I choose what works to post on social media, what music to listen to, what clothes to wear, and so on but I never envisioned myself as being a full-time curator. I identify with what Douglas Huebler wrote when he contributed to Seth Siegel's Xeroxed booklet exhibition because I "do not wish to add any more" (*January Show*, 1969)¹, possibly out of the fear that I would judge artworks based on my feelings, not on the way they were made, the technique used, etc. But is that as inadequate as some people make it seem? In these times, "'curating' is being used in a greater variety of contexts than ever before" (Obrist, 2014, p. 26)² and making an exhibition come to fruition seems easier now than it was 30 years ago, probably because people started to own up to the fact that they do *not* need to have serious, world-changing perspectives behind their judgement.

Around this time the terms *curator*, *curating*, *curated* and *curation* started becoming more widespread – and changed their meaning. As a Curator of Fashion and Textiles at the V&A, Oriole Cullen told me: 'Anyone can be a curator now, especially as it has come to be understood as personal choice. Today the word curation means personal choice.'

(Bhaskar, 2016, p. 64)³

When I began my research for this assessment, I was easily overwhelmed by the colossal amount of art that lined up with my ideal exhibition. Going from Marc Chagall's romance-infused paintings to Abbas Kiarostami's heart-wrenching documentaries to Betye Saar's honest and expressive works, I concluded that my exhibition will be based on two concepts: *melancholy* and *empathy*. "The enjoyment of art is a sign of affluence; it belongs to the good life" (Isaak, 1996, p. 70)⁴ is a quote that particularly determined my choice because it holds so much meaning within itself; we constantly chase "the good" in life, without acknowledging feelings or experiences that may represent "the bad". Through the process of curating this exhibition and what will result from it, I want to remind the viewer that we, as people, are not meant to always be happy or excited or in love; we have the right to hurt.

¹ *January Show* (1969) [Exhibition]. 44 East Fifty-second Street, Manhattan. 5 January 1969–31 January 1969

² Obrist, H. U. (2014) *Ways of Curating*, Penguin Books

³ Bhaskar, M. (2016) *Curation: The Power of Selection in a World of Excess*, Piatkus Books

⁴ Isaak, J. A. (1996) *Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, Routledge Press

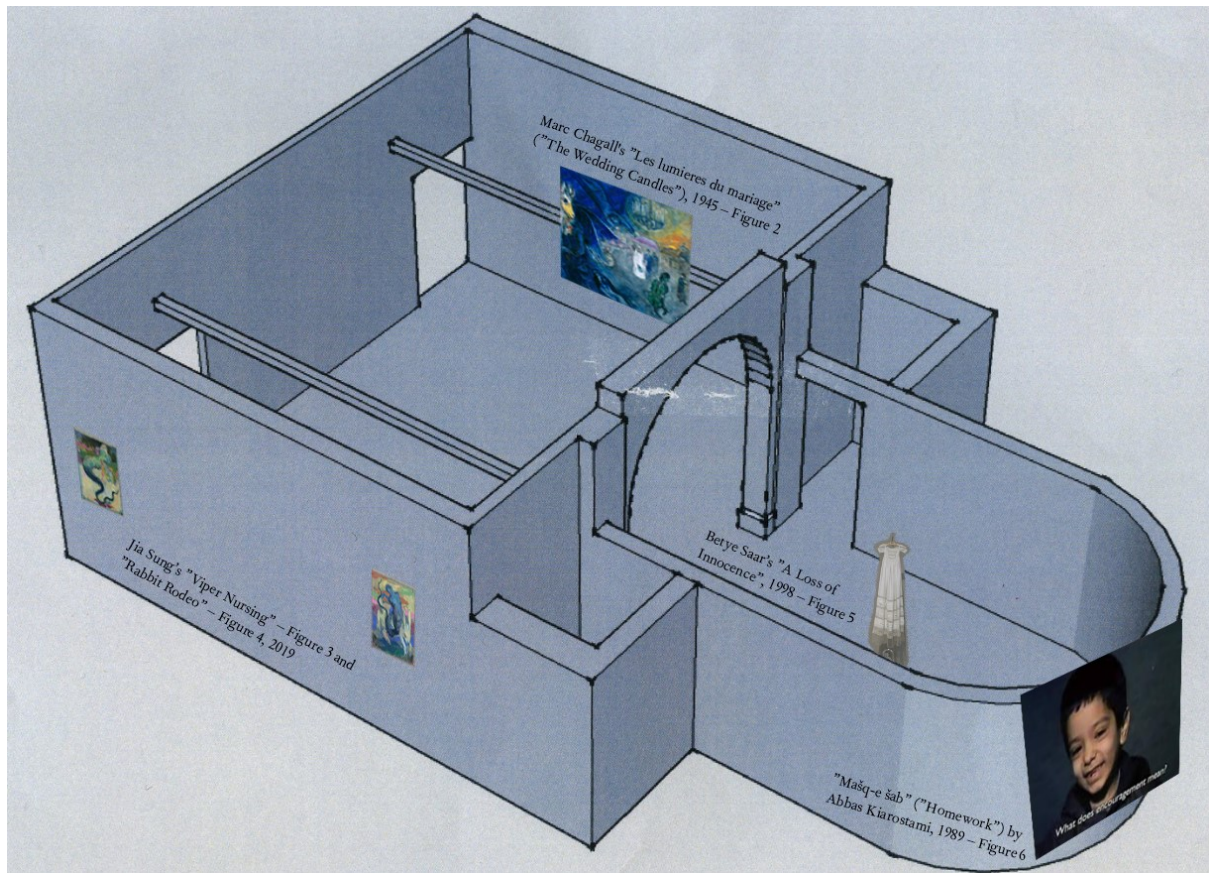


Figure 1. Mission Gallery, Swansea – Artwork placement map

The exhibition will take place in Mission Gallery, Swansea – Figure 1. I think that this building, with its mixed structure of a rectangle and long arch, is perfect for the general atmosphere I want to achieve. The walls will be painted in a dark, greyish mauve. The artworks will be lit from above, in warm tones. "Nevertheless, what exhibitions offer is the opportunity to mix media and to draw from different disciplinary traditions, and in the process to explore their differential potentials." (Basu and Macdonald, 2007, p. 8)⁵. I wanted to have works from both living and deceased artists in my exhibition because I want to show how melancholy and empathy are inherently human – we can relate to people that are still here and people that are not, only based on the common experience of existing.

⁵ Basu, P. and Macdonald, S. (2007) *Exhibition Experiments (New Interventions in Art History)*, Blackwell Publishing



Figure 2. Marc Chagall's "*Les lumieres du mariage*" ("*The Wedding Candles*"), 1945

In the exhibition space, I first envisioned having Marc Chagall's 1945 painting, "*Les lumieres du mariage*" ("*The Wedding Candles*") – Figure 2, on the left wall. I chose this painting for its story, which is a painful one, but one that needs to be acknowledged nonetheless: "Bella's death was a dreadful loss for Chagall. With her a world disappeared and for months he was unable to work." (Meyer, 1963, p. 466)⁶. The composition and colours drew me in, too, because I enjoy the duality created by using cold and warm colours in a painting. Looking at this work brought me a range of emotions: solace, peace, but it also made me feel incredibly out of place – partly because I do not know anything of the artist's suffering myself, but everyone has suffered on their own enough to share the feeling of loss imbued in his work. This piece measures 122.2 x 120 cm and would fit perfectly on the middle of the wall, giving the viewer enough elements to capture their attention, to be inviting.

⁶ Meyer, F. (1963) *Marc Chagall: Life and Work*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

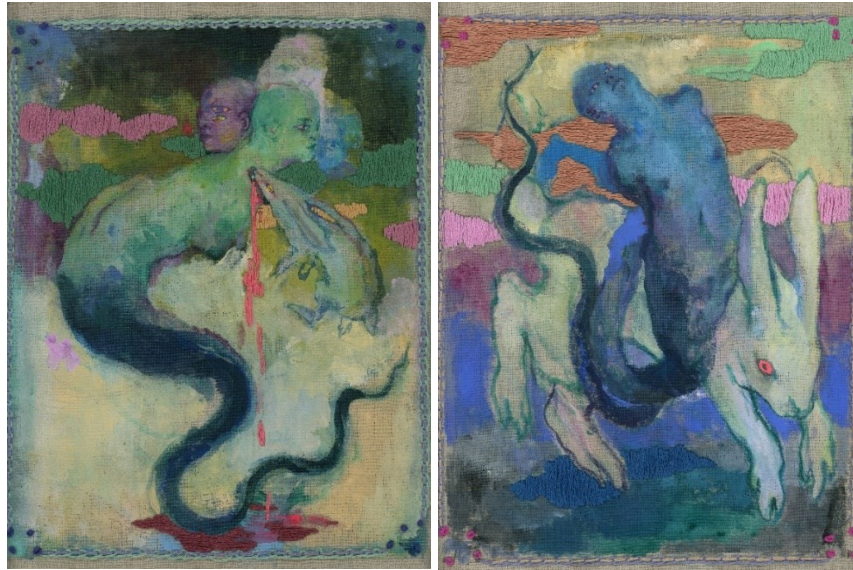


Figure 3. Jia Sung's "Viper Nursing", 2019 Figure 4. Jia Sung's "Rabbit Rodeo", 2019

The next pieces of art I want to have in this exhibition are Jia Sung's "Viper Nursing" – Figure 3 and "Rabbit Rodeo" – Figure 4, both from 2019. What I admire the most about her works is how she flawlessly combines different mediums in order to represent subjects such as gender identity, feminism, and sexuality, to name a few, and all of them burst with feeling and life – even those that may seem crude at first glance. Most of the colours used in these pieces are muted, but they only amplify the message: on the other wall, Chagall's painting sings of a love lost and then found, of a calm life even in the face of grief, but Sung's "Viper Nursing" and "Rabbit Rodeo" show the viewer an alternate ending to a love story. They show suffering, but not death, because death does not equate to healing. Both pieces measure 22.86 x 30.48 cm and I see them being situated on the farthest sides of right the wall, to create the illusion that something is missing between them, and that may or may not be Chagall's painting. We all can agree that there is "a distinct aesthetic ecology" (Grønstad, 2020, p. 22)⁷ in art, ideas can be recycled – that is why I chose to have these three artworks opposite of each other; they are based on similar ideas that each artist recycled and reinvented.

Henri Lefebvre wrote in his 1991 book, "The Production of Space", something akin to my thoughts when I chose these first three pieces of art:

Even illness and madness are supposed by some specialists to have their own peculiar space. We are thus confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on.

(Lefebvre, 1991, p. 8)⁸

⁷ Grønstad, A. S. (2020) *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture: The Poetics of Opacity*, Palgrave Macmillan

⁸ Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*, Basil Blackwell Ltd.



Figure 5. Betye Saar's "A Loss of Innocence", 1998

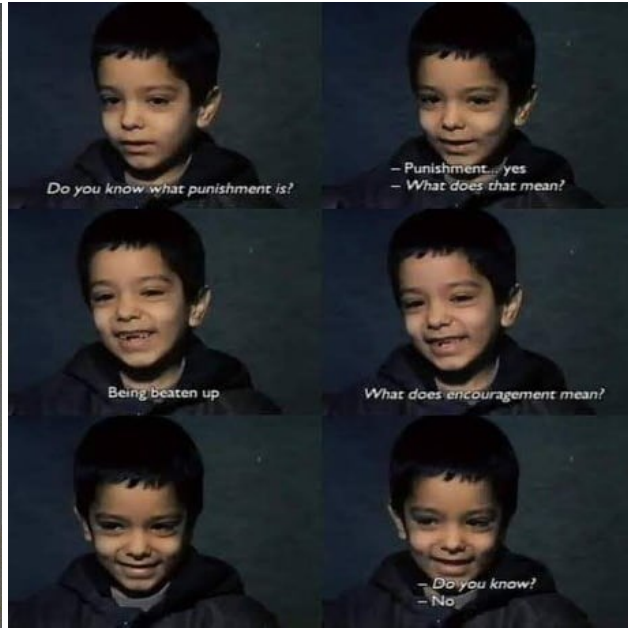


Figure 6. Excerpts from "Mašq-e šab" ("Homework")

by Abbas Kiarostami, 1989

In the arched portion of the gallery, I find it fitting to have Betye Saar's 1998 "A Loss of Innocence" – Figure 5 and a projection of the 1989 documentary "Mašq-e šab" ("Homework") by Abbas Kiarostami – Figure 6. "A Loss of Innocence" would be in the centre of the room, standing tall at a size of 7 feet, a silent and faceless effigy, for which "Mašq-e šab", projected on the whole arched wall, will speak – an easy relationship forming between the two. I came in contact with Saar's work way before I truly understood what turmoil and exhaustion people of colour go through, and I will admit that it helped me in getting over my ignorance. The installation that I chose is insightful and honest, and it threads through years of violence with quiet, but effective, contempt – it "suggests the fragile innocence that is lost – not only historically but also to this day – as Black children grow into adults facing racism in its many guises." (The Morgan Library & Museum, 2017)⁹. Kiarostami's documentary "is about children, who we always see, but it's also about adults, who we only sometimes see." (McGrath, 2020)¹⁰. I find the sensibility of his films inspiring, and "Mašq-e šab" will shock you, not through ominous music or jump-scares, but through the cold reality that is presented in it. "[...] it's easy for the silences endured by others to sting us mildly [...], but these stings are surely good for our empathy." (Scott, 2015, p. 63)¹¹. Both "A Loss of Innocence" and "Mašq-e šab" speak of violence, be it one of the people that were minoritized with the passing of time, or one that is passed intergenerationally.

⁹ The Morgan Library & Museum (2017), *A Loss of Innocence*. Available at:

<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/betye-saar/loss-innocence> (Accessed: 12 April 2021)

¹⁰ McGrath, K. (2020) 'Lying About Homework' Review of *Mašq-e šab (Homework)*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami. Available at: <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2020/cteq/homework-abbas-kiarostami-1989/> (Accessed: 12 April 2021)

¹¹ Scott, L. (2015) *The Four-Dimensional Human Ways of Being in the Digital World*, William Heinemann Ltd.

Lastly, all the works I chose, along with the concept of the exhibition, represent an initiatory path – a path to life, as ugly and cruel as it may be, but in which melancholy and empathy reign. From these two derives true life, and the viewer will get to experience a wide range of emotions, based on their own opinions, on the way they saw the world until this point. I hope that through experiencing this exhibition, people will look differently at art and, as a conclusion, will feel it differently. Mary Oliver summed up what I want to get out of people with her poem "I Ask Percy How I Should Live My Life":

Love, love, love, says Percy.

And run as fast as you can

along the shining beach, or the rubble, or the dust.

Then, go to sleep.

Give up your body heat, your beating heart.

Then, trust.

(Oliver, 2008, p. 68)¹²

¹² Oliver, M. (2008) *Red Bird*, Beacon Press Boston

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Figures

Figure 1: Mission Gallery, Swansea – Artwork placement map

Figure 2: Chagall, M. (1945) *Les lumieres du mariage* [Oil on canvas]. Available at: <https://www.marcchagall.net/the-wedding-candles.jsp> (Accessed: 20 March 2021)

Figure 3: Sung, J. (2019) *Viper Nursing* [Gouache, fabric medium and embroidery on linen]. Available at: <http://jia-sung.com/viper-nursing-rabbit-rodeo> (Accessed: 3 April 2021)

Figure 4: Sung, J. (2019) *Rabbit Rodeo* [Gouache, fabric medium and embroidery on linen]. Available at: <http://jia-sung.com/viper-nursing-rabbit-rodeo> (Accessed: 3 April 2021)

Figure 5: Saar, B. (1998) *A Loss of Innocence* [Installation] Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale (Viewed: 12 April 2021)

Figure 6: Kiarostami, A. (1989) *Mašq-e šab* [film], Available at: <https://123movies.page/movie/homework-65011> (Accessed: 7 April 2020)