

FOR ME, “CRITICAL CURATING” MEANS reflecting on practices and platforms that have not traditionally been privileged in Euro-Western art institutions or canons. I come to this position through the research and writing I have done on craft, craftivism, feminist art, documentation, and performance art. Guiding questions include: How do certain practices come to exist “on the margins” and what happens when they move into or towards the centre? How do the power dynamics at play in institutional structures and methods get articulated in relationship to what is *not* there? How do curators/institutions use, adapt, absorb, appropriate, and benefit from the inclusion of politically engaged works? And how do they get pushed, opened, shaken up, and provoked by the inclusion of practices and exhibition strategies that may not be a comfortable fit?

Both craft and performance art are fields of practice that have been (and still are) especially important to women, BIPOC, and queer folk. These ways of working often foreground live bodies, materials, process, domesticity, labour, politics, care, and community—subjects traditionally excluded from or intentionally practiced outside of the purview of fine art. With the increased permeability between art and craft, high and low, inside and outside, social practice and activism, it is important to ask: How might we (as curators, critics, historians, cultural workers, audiences) acknowledge the history of these exclusions and refusals, while also moving forward with dialogues around inclusivity, sovereignty, hybridity, and materiality?

I have spent most of my career working in artist-run centres. I have been lucky to work alongside colleagues (from

administrators to artists to maintenance workers) who were interested in (re)thinking how these spaces function, how they might best support artists, and how they represent and serve their broader constituencies. This is a line of questioning related to curatorial practice that can and should be taken up outside of artist-run models and that deserves more consideration in larger institutions. For me, this goes hand-in-hand with talking openly and frequently about equitable working conditions across the cultural sector, as well as practices of collaboration, risk, site-specificity, ephemerality, failure, and non-hierarchical models of governance.

I recently attended an expansive and generous talk given by Los Angeles-based curator Hamza Walker, who encouraged the audience of emerging curators to think about how we engage with our communities. He told us to get out there, to figure out what we are interested in as curators, and to pursue it—to not worry too much about what was popular or who would become famous, but to develop strong social networks and enthusiastic interests. Walker also pushed us to think about what we were not seeing or not paying attention to and summed up this approach with the phrase “look behind you.” His words have been ringing in my ears ever since, and I borrow and riff off them here as an additional answer to the question, What is critical curating? Let’s keep looking all around us. ¶

Nicole Burisch is Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art, at the National Gallery of Canada.  
—nburisch@gallery.ca