



## Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

# Some of the Limits of Engagement Curating: Notes from the Field

Solana Chehtman, Joan Mitchell Foundation, USA

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**Abstract:** Engagement curating can be a key tool for cultural organizations to spearhead the needed changes to raise up to the current societal demands. This practice entails identifying and establishing a profound connection with the diverse communities that cultural organizations are poised to serve, through unique collaborative relationship building with artists, and has the potential of fostering meaningful dialogue and long-standing relationships, weaving these insights from various backgrounds and perspectives into the fabric of thoughtful curatorial and programming decisions. However, the practice of engagement curating frequently struggles to harness the agency and leadership required to translate its ambitions into tangible impact. This article analyzes some of the main limitations or challenges that engagement curators might find in the day to day of their practice, particularly in the context of large US-based predominantly white organizations, and it aims to present some strategies or solutions from the field.

**Keywords:** *Engagement Curating, Dialogue, Care, Strategies*

## Discussion

In the current context of a society and a cultural sector in crisis,<sup>1</sup> cultural organizations need to be reimagined.<sup>2</sup> They ought to reshape their relationships with their constituencies if they want to continue to be relevant and, ultimately, sustainable. Beginning at least as far back as the 1960s and particularly intensifying within the last decade, cultural organizations have been cyclically confronted with unmet calls for systemic transformation, coming from emerging cohorts of arts administrators via open letters (see Pogrebin 2020; Bishara 2020) and unionizing processes (Seymour 2022), grassroots community-based organizations and cultural organizers (see Vartanian 2018; Regan 2017; Cascone 2018), and, in certain cases,

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<sup>1</sup> In both the US and around the globe, the pillars of democratic participation, access to financial opportunities, proper healthcare and education, and safety are facing significant challenges stemming from racial biases, wealth inequality, and discrimination based on national origin and immigration status.

<sup>2</sup> While originally conceived and presented as bastions of enlightenment and truth, cultural organizations have, for far too long, weaponized culture for dominant groups to preserve their central role in the power structure and contributed to the widening chasm of inequality in the nation (Walker 2019). Operating under the guise of “democratizing culture” and “educating” people, these entities have however refused and failed to “connect art to life” (Cotter 2017). It is obvious by now that the histories they tell are neither complete nor neutral.

even from artists or activists (see Jensen 2020; Di Liscia 2023; Walters 2018). Acknowledging the considerable power in the hands of these public institutions, these demands press for increased relevance, representation, inclusivity, transparency, and overall equity and accountability.

Engagement curating can be a key tool for organizations to spearhead these changes. Although not the most radical, it might be one of the most solid. The practice entails identifying and establishing a profound connection with the diverse communities that cultural organizations are poised to serve and has the potential of fostering meaningful dialogue and long-standing relationships, weaving these insights from various backgrounds and perspectives into the fabric of thoughtful curatorial and programming decisions. These can gradually help pave the way for more extensive and profound transformations.

One of the pivotal factors that underlines the exceptional potency of engagement curating is the collaborative partnership it can have with artists.<sup>3</sup> Artists are usually part of the communities we are interested in connecting with. They not only have a direct line of communication and a unique sensitivity and understanding of how these communities operate, but they also have an unparalleled sense of the issues that matter to those communities and how to cultivate relationships with them. They have the ability to become ambassadors of the organization within the community and advocates and emissaries of the community within the organizations. Notably unburdened by institutional constraints, they also emerge as agents of innovation, prompting new avenues of thought, management, and engagement.

Collaborating with artists thus transmutes the dialogue between organizations and their audiences into a discourse enriched by diverse lived experiences and modes of thinking. Artists have a singular capacity for critical thinking and for dissecting, contextualizing, and articulating the world we live in as well as envisioning alternative futures where people can thrive. They can generate immersive, sensitive, and meaningful encounters that allow for increased awareness, contemplation, and engagement among the public. The effect is that artists often provide broader audiences with a model of action that resonates more profoundly, in opposition to institutions that can sometimes appear distant, scholarly, and formal—even performative. Conversely, collaboration offers artists a platform with resources and a reach that frequently they do not have on their own.

Although I have never officially held the title of “engagement curator,” this new-ish and niche-ish term is probably what would best describe my work throughout the last decade since I arrived in New York. I joined the Public Engagement team at Friends of the High Line—the non-profit that manages the industrial reuse project turned elevated park located in the far west side of Manhattan—in 2014 as Public Programs Coordinator. I left my role as Vice

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<sup>3</sup> “When the artist designs the program as well as the work of art—or shall I say when the artistic strategies become one with the educational events, we have a new way of thinking about the purpose of the work. The process that involves all of these activities needs to be recognized as the central part of the work of art. We’re not just talking about a final product to which all else is preliminary. The artist him- or herself as a spokesperson is a very different kind of role” (Jacob 1995, 40, on Suzanne Lazy).

President of Public Engagement in 2019 to serve as Director of Civic Programs and later Director of Creative Practice and Social Impact at The Shed,<sup>4</sup> a multidisciplinary cultural organization born as part of a redevelopment process in the new Hudson Yards area.

In April 2020, a month after the pandemic hit, we launched a digital commissioning series at the The Shed called *Up Close*. We wanted to support artists—some of the hardest hit by canceled or delayed jobs and the absence of a regular paycheck and healthcare. We also wanted to create a space of respite and processing for the public. The invitation, mostly issued to artists we had been working with, was to create digital pieces “of this time, for this time,” and as much as possible, we tried to offer audiences a (virtual) gathering opportunity. I approached Troy Anthony and Jerome Ellis, two composers who had connected well while working on parallel projects in the building. Based on a recent death in Jerome’s family and the inability to attend the wake in person, they created an evening of ritual, poetry, and music, in which more than three hundred people shared personal stories, mourned and honored their dead ones, and connected over the condemnation of racialized and gendered injustices. The artists guided people in the expression of their shared grief, as well as in celebration, building a true safe space of togetherness. For another project in the series, Brothers Sick (Ezra and Noah Benus), Danilo Machado, and Yo-Yo Lin collaborated on a portrait of a disabled journey of COVID-19 through an intervention of The Shed’s website. The piece included a Zoom get-together where more than two hundred people, in the most part members of the New York-based disability arts community, shared space deeply and intentionally through movement, music, poetry, American Sign Language, and audio descriptions. Both pieces were preceded by “care packets,” accessible PDFs written by the artists, where they shared with audiences what to expect as part of their respective events as well as guidance on access. During the gatherings, most people had their cameras on and were actively exchanging ideas and feelings over chat.

Curatorial work is, by definition, concerned with “care.” In traditional curating, this is largely focused on objects, collections, and art historical narratives. For engagement curators, instead, it is a people-centered endeavor. This means regarding artists as catalysts for the creative process and conduits of societal conversation.<sup>5</sup> This approach requires compensating artists fairly, embracing the value of divergent viewpoints, and creating an environment where artists can assert their unique perspectives, champion their chosen causes, and navigate their creative journeys unimpeded—even, or especially when, that looks like institutional critique. This, in

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<sup>4</sup> The Shed is a large, multidisciplinary arts organization opened in New York’s Hudson Yards in 2019. It was the result of a rezoning and real estate development of the area, led by Dan Doctoroff, former Deputy Mayor during Bloomberg’s terms. It is located in public land and was consistently supported by public funds and Bloomberg Philanthropies. For more information, see <https://theshed.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> “At the end of the day (or maybe at the beginning), the earliest change is understanding the curatorial practice as that of steward of people, of living artists, not only their work but their full selves. Their ideas, their questions, the problems they are looking at, researching, and expanding on” (Braceli and Camnitzer 2022).

turn, demands a reconsideration of organizational norms and the frameworks that sustain them, necessitating engagement curators to embrace (and protect artists from) the discomfort that can often emerge from these processes, particularly in organizations that prioritize outcomes, tangible objects, aesthetics, and unwavering consistency and homogeneity.

A common approach within engagement curating is to work with social practice artists—individuals for whom this type of engagement with publics and communities resides at the heart of their methodology and philosophy. However, I have been heartened to uncover a similar inclination within a multitude of younger contemporary artists—both visual and performing. Although they might not explicitly categorize themselves as such, their creative approach is infused with a profound dedication to the communities they stem from, a commitment to social justice, and an inherently innovative and unconventional spirit. This was the case with Open Call, a multidisciplinary commissioning program for New York-based emerging artists that I oversaw during my time at The Shed. Based on a decentralized curatorial procedure, involving over sixty artists and peers from the field in each edition's selection process, we were able to identify, support, and amplify dozens of vibrant artistic projects that resonated deeply with audiences while challenging conventions. Most of these artists exhibited a heightened awareness of how their work was received and by whom, along with a keen interest in fostering dialogues with their audiences.

The other critical characteristic that defines engagement curating is its singular and intentional approach to establishing relationships with diverse publics through relevant and authentic content and experiences (Simon 2016). This entails efforts to render cultural organizations more radically welcoming, inviting, culturally competent, and accessible to multiple publics—valuing them as experts of their own lived experiences, interests, and curiosity. It takes shape by inviting collaboration, feedback, and, whenever possible, holding space for collective reflection and active exchange, with the aim of building understanding, empathy, and solidarity among diverse communities. Ultimately, the (possibly unattainable) goal is to promote self-determination, creativity, and leadership, getting us closer to what Caron Atlas (2002) has defined as cultural democracy.

However, most large, predominantly white, cultural organizations do not ask themselves who they intend to serve, and when they do, many times the answers are built on assumptions or dominated by biases and generalizations. Audiences are understood mostly as ticket buyers (marketing), potential members or funders (development), or even as mere numbers to show to the board, to a collector, or to an institutional/corporate funder to demonstrate success and popularity. It is rare that curatorial and programming content, as well as deeper collaboration tools such as (neighbors) councils, are intentionally built in order to “matter more to more people” as Jon Moscone expresses in the introduction to Nina Simon's *The Art of Relevance* (2016).

When I arrived at the High Line's public engagement team in 2014, several years after its opening, we worked hard at specifying and understanding<sup>6</sup> who was not coming and why they did not feel interested, or, most often, why they did not feel welcome. Since its opening, this industrial reuse project has displaced thousands of people living in the surrounding area and heavily contributed to the neighborhood's gentrification (Bliss 2017). We decided to focus our efforts on some key local constituencies as well as other historically underrepresented communities from New York city at large. The first step to establishing a connection was to shift the focus on to the neighborhood within the institutional narrative. Thus, on the occasion of the opening of the third section of the park, we organized a large-scale procession in partnership with the collective Processional Arts Workshop that paid homage to the different aspects of the neighborhood—from food markets to architecture and art. Neighbors were invited to town halls and were involved in informing the themes. Once the artists had created the processional objects' design, neighbors were again approached to participate in workshops to craft the colored paper lanterns, ribbons, and puppets, and they were finally convened to lead the procession and be the first ones to walk the full length of the High Line. From the lessons learned in that process, we designed a multi-pronged strategy that we sustained over the following five years, aimed at creating multiple entry points and finding people where they are. We created opportunities for low touch, sporadic engagement and for deeper, more sustainable ones.

For the last project we initiated during my tenure at the High Line, we invited social practice artists Alicia Grullón, Lizania Cruz, Finnegan Shannon, and Betty Yu to collaborate with communities that surround the northern end of the elevated park—an area we had not had enough contact with. Each of the artists selected a community they were interested in working with, such as seniors from public housing, POC LBTQ+ youth, disabled communities, and laborers, and they worked with them in different ways, such as through archives and ephemera, dialogue and interviews, art workshops, and collective poetry. As an organization, we were able to tell the story of the neighborhood in the neighbors' words through traffic signs amplifying their quotes installed at street level in partnership with the New York Department of Transportation.

Similarly, during my time at The Shed, we noticed that individuals with disabilities were seldom in the audience. Understanding how important it was to make our programs accessible way beyond compliance, I spearheaded the creation of a Disability Arts Integration Council. We invited six individuals with disabilities, all of them artists or arts administrators, to join a subsection of staff members from every department in the organization. In quarterly meetings the staff presented the projects ahead and consulted the members for feedback and input. The staff was trained, and American Sign Language and visual descriptions were

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<sup>6</sup> This was done through iterative surveys that the organization had been implementing with an external consultant since its inception as well as through anecdotal information that allowed us to deepen and contextualize that hard information.

incorporated as offerings in several of the main curatorial projects. Instead of simply hiring companies that provide these services, we mostly hired artists, people of color, and Deaf people as access workers. However, we were not able to have enough influence on other curatorial or visitor experience teams' decision-making for decisions such as gallery lighting or the construction of immersive pieces to be fully accessible nor for budgets to include these costs as part of the projects from early on.

Part of the issue is that, within the present landscape of the field, the practice of engagement curating frequently struggles to harness the agency and leadership required to translate its ambitions into tangible impact. Engagement work is most times relegated to a "side event" (Preciado 2017) in support of a central or conventionally art historical curatorial agenda. Its role is frequently confined to "seeking out" and "reaching out" to audiences in relation to content that has been centrally and unilaterally defined. The common absence of a deliberate, long-term engagement strategy agreed upon by all teams within an organization tends to create a gap between a passive, conceptual acknowledgement of the value of this practice and its actual integration into the institutional agenda (as well as budgets and core decision-making) of cultural organizations. To note is that engagement, despite its potential transformative influence, remains largely absent from the curricula of curatorial programs as well as from many museum studies and arts administration programs.

Furthermore, engagement curating initiatives tend to receive forceful pushback from traditional leaders, patrons, and even artists who perceive their influence and agency diminishing within the cultural world. They tend to focus on aesthetic claims, as if they were naturally opposed to social claims. This fragility is quite aligned to that of white supremacy. Interestingly enough, on the other end of the spectrum, the practice gets questioned by scholars and certain activists who claim it is not transformational enough. From this perspective, organizations should ideally invite communities to "occupy"<sup>7</sup> and lead their decision-making and operations. In this case, although well-meaning, values-aligned, and conceptually interesting, it is unclear how these strategies and institutional implosion could ever be representative enough or successful.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, I am convinced that radical restructuring and diversification of organizations' governance and funding—including a complete reshaping of the role and functioning of boards as well as a larger redistribution of

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in "Palace in Plumberland," Claire Bishop (2018) stated: "The surge of occupations that have taken place since 2011 have something in common with von Hantelmann's performance exhibitions, at least formally: They are not governed by the appointment or opening hours, and are durational and provisional. Yet food, chairs, blankets, selfie sticks, and protest signs are welcome. And unlike a cultural event, embodied assembly has the capacity to constitute a people, as Judith Butler reminds us: Occupations are not window dressing for real-estate investment, but the forging of alliances among disparate groups who enact and oppose precarity. New York doesn't need another curated cultural venue. We need to reclaim public assembly."

<sup>8</sup> An example of an organization that tried a version of this is Performance Space New York (Burke 2020). Although possibly cut short in part by the COVID-19 pandemic, the results might not been as satisfactory as initially hoped for, although no public report on it has been shared.

resources within the cultural eco-system—is ultimately needed in order for cultural organizations to genuinely realign their missions, functioning, and content to the values and aspirations demanded by societies. However, I also trust that change can also be incremental yet powerful and solve real issues for real people. As long as large, predominantly white cultural organizations keep existing and concentrating resources and opportunities, why not take advantage to guide those in the right direction, partnering with, supporting, and amplifying the work not only of key artists but also of smaller culturally-specific and community-based organizations?

Possibly the main limit, however, is engagement curating's lack of sustainability. The fact that it is so commonly assigned a subordinate role translates into engagement strategies and programming frequently being allocated budgets as mere subsets of main exhibitions and performing art projects. This, in turn, results in a disregard for costs that might appear obscure or perplexing to traditional curatorial teams and organizational leaders, ranging from seemingly trivial expenses like snacks for participants to the coordination intricacies involved. In certain instances, engagement initiatives are even relegated to an afterthought, which, as mentioned, happens often in scenarios involving disability integration and accommodations. The result is that these considerations are marginalized and discarded as soon as the budget for the “principal” project grows or fundraising efforts fall short. Ultimately, this underfunding invariably constraints decision-making latitude for engagement curators and imperils the intended and deserved quality and longevity of such efforts. Ironically, there is considerable potential for targeted fundraising within this area; governmental, institutional, and even corporate support is increasingly forthcoming for such interventions.

Concurrently, many organizations gauge time mainly through the lens of project production, repeatedly failing to comprehend that engagement operates through trust, and trust takes time. Engagement processes ought to unfold slowly and methodically in order to be (and feel) authentic, embracing a long-term trajectory, most times (ideally) untethered to actual exhibitions or programmatic projects. At the same time, because they are not income-generating, these efforts tend to be allotted minimal visibility in comparison to the prominence enjoyed by primary curatorial programs. This puts their success at risk.

Finally, engagement professionals mostly find their place within education departments and get no or limited access to curatorial decision-making. As in most education areas, they usually harbor a wealth of cultural competencies as they tend to encompass some of the highest representation of individuals from diverse backgrounds alongside visitor experience teams. Yet, they frequently fall victim to tokenization, both internally and externally. These teams consistently grapple with disproportionately lower compensation for their staff, accompanied by understaffing due to limited resources and headcount. Tragically, they are also often the first to be affected by downsizing, as evidenced by the distressing wave of layoffs witnessed since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis (Kenney 2021; McCarthy and Siegel 2020; Alfonseca and Zahn 2023).

Adding to these challenges is the evident threat to personal sustainability within these roles, a factor that poses a substantial liability to the long-term viability of these efforts. Engagement teams routinely work on weekends, evenings, holidays, and throughout summers—directly engaging with the public; this relentless schedule contributes to burnout, making it difficult for individuals to sustain such positions over extended periods. Given the high turnover of these roles, when one person who is passionate and is driving these processes leaves an organization, then the whole strategy may collapse and the relationships based on personal trust—internally, with the community, and with artists—get broken.

In summary, the placement, recognition, and sustainability of engagement curating efforts underscore the imperative for leadership teams within cultural organizations to shift their focus, elevating the practice and furnishing it with the requisite freedom, resources, and amplification to carry out its mission. At the same time, this demands that engagement professionals dedicate time and effort to creating a strong internal narrative and a sophisticated organization-wide strategy while identifying and cultivating robust alliances with their counterparts across the organization who share values and are enthusiastic about advancing engagement objectives as integral components of the broader organizational strategy. By dismantling the constraints that impede the autonomy of engagement initiatives, by nurturing targeted fundraising avenues, and by fostering a nuanced appreciation for the gradual, trust-centric nature of engagement, we can truly unleash the potential of these transformative endeavors.

There is an opportunity to make change happen, and for setting a new agenda of discussion. Definitely, the organizations that have started doing this work are much better off than those who have not. At the end of the day, as Henry Timms, the Executive Director of Lincoln Center, stated in regard to cultural organizations, “Changing with the world isn’t just the right thing to do morally. It’s the right thing to do strategically” (Hernández and Pogrebin 2023).

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## **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Solana Chehtman** is a cultural producer and curator born in Buenos Aires and based in New York City since 2012. She is committed to creating equitable opportunities and platforms for artists' work and career sustainability as well as avenues for public participation and agency within the arts. She is currently the Director of Artist Programs at Joan Mitchell Foundation, where she supports visual artists with unrestricted funding, career development opportunities, and the strengthening of a national community of practice through the Joan Mitchell Fellowship as well as their long-term career stewardship through the Creating a Living Legacy (CALL) program. In the last decade, Chehtman served as inaugural Director of Creative Practice and Social Impact at The Shed and as Vice President of Public Engagement at Friends of the High Line. Chehtman was an adjunct Professor at the MA in Arts Administration at Baruch College, City University of New York between 2018 and 2021. She received a BA in international studies at Universidad Torcuato Di Tella and holds an EdM in education policy from Teachers College, Columbia University.

Email: [schehtman@gmail.com](mailto:schehtman@gmail.com)