

CO-CURATING on 18/09/2026



Mediated PASSIVITY

Friendly-faced and inviting, art appreciation offers to explain art to those who lack the confidence to develop their own opinion on the matter, and would rather trust the assistance of specialists. Generally, to avail oneself of professional knowledge makes sense. Why not use the dedicated services that are on offer, when one is interested?

Yet it would make even more sense to reflect on the merit of these services. Are they helping me to become more confident and form my own opinion about artworks and art movements which, unlike curators and historians, I have not studied in depth? Or are they feeding me with the knowledge I lack, thereby aggravating my lack of confidence and making me dependent on an expertise I admire and am grateful for, but can never question. However brilliant and witty the lecture or the guided tour, however interesting and accurate the information it provides, it may worsen an existing reliance on “real experts” who “know best”. Is knowing best quoting from acknowledged sources or creating an independent opinion? I am not suggesting that the two options cannot be complementary or that they contradict one another, but I suspect that art mediation seldom fosters the latter and often, as a profitable business in its own right, peddles the former.

Best case SCENARIO

My favourite gallery guided tour has to be the one I witnessed in a Spanish museum. A primary school teacher instructed a very well-behaved class of small children to sit on the floor in a circle, and look at the paintings surrounding them quietly. She then asked simple questions about shapes, colours, and motifs. When a child gave a thought-provoking answer, she measured and praised it as such. Though she never provided factual explanations about the artist and his body of works, the teacher was able to build an awareness and an appreciation of art in a very young audience enjoying abstract paintings by Wassily Kandinsky.

Worst case SCENARIO

A guide stands next to a Rubens and explains the relatively obscure mythological subject the artist depicted for his learned patron. You could almost hear sighs of relief. How else would the (captive) audience have figured out what the painting was about? They haven't read Ovid. Yet, one could also ask, are shapes, colours, and motifs in a Baroque painting less significant than in twentieth century abstraction? Does the correct reference to a narrative alluded to in a figurative composition decode an artwork? Does it crack its meaning?

A guide stands next to a Rubens and explains that a work formally attributed to the Master is in fact a product of his workshop. Peter Paulus Rubens corrected mistakes made by his apprentices and he painted a few heads and other difficult parts himself, but most of that painting had been executed by his team. Call him a genius if you like, he certainly was a business genius, in a way the Steven Spielberg of his time. Big studio in Hollywood, big studio in Antwerp, and money bags piled up for lavish productions. “She was good; I liked the way she explained that mythology scene.” The

audience has reasons to be appreciative. “I liked the way he compared Rubens to Spielberg. The two are very different, but just as talented; that’s true, really.”

ABSOLUTE WORST CASE SCENARIO

A guide stands next to a Rubens and explains away what he or she considers to be the most significant aspects of the work. The audience is looking at his or her face while listening. They are not looking (or hardly look) at the painting. Then he or she moves them swiftly to the next major work in the collection, where the same system is implemented. Look at me, concentrate, try to remember what I said, have a quick look at the artwork and let’s move to the next so you see all the best ones. In the end the audience has actually spent more time looking at a guide’s face than at the artworks that person commented on. They will remember the face, not the artworks. Audio guides have no face, but they also prevent viewers from concentrating in silence. Do I listen to an interpretation of a poem when I am reading that poem, or before or after I have read it? Do I benefit from interruptions? Is it detrimental to look at an artwork without interference?

CURATING

Curating ranges from doing research prior to an exhibition to posting stories on Instagram, and making sure politically correct noises are heard by the right people. Art and art mediation have always been a type of business; they cannot function otherwise. Nonetheless, both may choose to relativise their proceedings or risk of becoming a caricature of themselves.

Curating offers a finished product: a selection of artists and artworks, catalogues, postcards and additional trimmings in the shop. Mostly this whole product is alluring; one can see in one place a range of exhibits carefully put together. I am not battling against curating, perish the thought. If reflecting on art has to be critical to be valid, the same applies to curating.

CO-CURATING

As I (re-)discovered on the 11th of September during my first performance at KunstPart, even though my audience appeared to be well accustomed to forming their own opinion about art and other topics, they made demands about an informative input. I had to lecture first and was only then welcome to do a performance. So, if a sophisticated public wishes for a didactic component to an art event and explicitly expresses this preference, what about a less educated and less confident attendance? They are less likely to voice their specific need for a clear introduction that should fully prepare them for the event.

Once the introduction was over, both audience and artist had a reciprocal understanding of their expectations and could proceed to the performance. As I lifted every drawing from its supporting rod and turned it around, twenty already seen drawings gradually disappeared, and twenty unseen drawings appeared. The same audience in the same place discovered a new exhibition while staying in the same exhibition room.

A further comment was helpful. The gallerist and I had placed the double-sided drawings in a specific order that was based on their exhibited side. By reversing that side, I did not maintain but disturbed the logic of that order. Someone had to restore a balance in the placement of the exhibits, and that someone was the public. The first instructions I received concerned sequences according to size, thereafter according to contrast. When the viewers started discussing further hanging possibilities between themselves, the performance gained momentum. They reached the conclusion without consulting me, that a drawing should be moved to another side of the gallery or should stay at the same place, but in a different position. I was listening to their proposed changes and enacted them as instructed. And as they did, I was looking at my work, and I also saw it in a way it had not been seen before.

An incidental consequence of the drawings being shuffled from one place to another affected the titles that were not moved with them. Titles and drawings no longer matched. Christine Vogt, the gallerist, conscientiously repositioned them and restored the correct relationship between labels and exhibits. The action was quite entertaining.

CO-CURATORS

- Are you sure you're happy with that group over there?
- Yes, it works like a triptych.
- No.
- Why not?
- It's too vertical. The central piece should hang horizontally.
- Do you agree?
- Maybe.
- Yes, I think one horizontal piece would be better in the middle.
- Let's try it.
- Nean, can you move it sideways?
- Yes, of course.
- Are we all happy with these three pieces? Do you want to make an adjustment?
- No, I like it like that.

THE TWO PERFORMANCES

On the 11th of September the exhibition had been co-curated by a Swiss group and the outcome of that evening stayed unchanged until the second performance. On the 18th, when a group of Basel-based expats altered the Swiss group's installation, they determined what visitors of the gallery would see until the end of the exhibition.

Text: Nean
29th September 2026

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Photos: 1st: Kevin Kohler, 2nd: Nean
Basel Spalenberg, 18th September 2026