

The protean potential of curating

(4 minute read)

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This article is about *Protea* – our international curatorial exchange programme. You can find out more about *Protea* on our website [here](#).

The word ‘curator’ has been so broadly deployed – guest editors curate a programme or magazine issue, DJs curate a session, influencers curate their bedrooms – that it’s easy to forget the individual responsible for cataloguing, collecting, conserving and interpreting artefacts and sites of cultural value. In popular culture, curating has become synonymous with a performative subjectivity that mirrors the insidious blur between editorial and opinion evident in much of our media. This misreads the act of service to others – alive and long dead – that lies at the true heart of curatorship.

In creating *Protea*, a unique international curatorial exchange programme, John Ellerman Foundation recognises both the vital role curators play in preserving, promoting, and presenting culture. The programme, which launched in December 2021, is one of five initiatives designed to celebrate the Foundation’s 50th anniversary. You can learn more about those [here](#).

In naming our programme after the *king protea*, the national flower of South Africa, I wanted to highlight the active philanthropy of the Foundation’s founder Sir John Ellerman II in South Africa as well as the UK and allude to the impact (Proteus was a god of transformation) that effective curating can have on people and their understanding of cultures. Its focus on curatorial development draws on the focus of the Foundation’s Museums and Galleries Fund, now in its ninth year.

In devising a residential exchange – as opposed to an online exchange of views – we recognised the value of being on the ground, of seeing and noticing things that aren’t ‘presented’ for view. Essentially an auto-ethnographic exercise, it underscores the impact of self-reflexive immersion – albeit for a limited 10-day period – in situations that stimulate inquiry, insight and innovation. It encourages discovery – including ours: we really don’t know what will be produced, but that’s the point. It’s for the curatorial candidates to create their value. What we ask is that they find ways to share this that best communicates their experience.

Our one-off programme was ambitious, I knew, and it begged key questions. What would curatorship look like in both countries? Would curatorial concerns be mirrored, or priorities differ? How would pandemic fatigue and the consequential funding drought affecting cultural sector organisations worldwide result in listless interest? How could an exchange happen in a pandemic full of uncertainty about travel, access and availability?

In sounding out people across the museums and galleries networks in both countries, it was clear that the pandemic has wreaked havoc across entire organisations, with significant numbers of people talking despondently about partially or fully retrenched staff.

But curators are like yeast to beer or dough – they’re the critical agent that activates their medium, converting it to something that can effervesce, rise up and nourish. (Self)-belief in this is critical to survival, as is an entrepreneurial attitude to seizing the moment.

What I hadn’t expected is how *Protea* would quickly light a touchpaper, particularly in South Africa: we’ve had applicants from major national museums – natural history, art, social science – as well

as regional specialist museums, commercial art galleries, legislative authorities. Freelance curators, too, with a wealth of interests including fashion, social justice, environment, heritage, contemporary art, photography.

In the UK, we garnered interest (and applications) from national and regional museums, municipal authorities and universities in areas as diverse as Northern Ireland, Scotland and England. Many indicated existing relationships with UK or South African institutional partners they wanted to deepen through the residency, or to form from the outset. Some particularly enterprising freelancers had already paired up with colleagues in the other country, identifying an original area of research that both would drive from each end of the exchange.

Our Project Description – the main document informing our call for applicants – had mentioned our preference for candidates with around a minimum of five years' curatorial experience. Having taught curating at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels at the University of the Arts London, I know how important opportunities for early-stage experience can be for new curators. However, in this instance, we felt the responsibilities involved in undertaking an international residency and our duty of care to all concerned merited our decision to focus on mid-or-senior level career applicants.

Applicants were asked to submit a short Expression of Interest – we extended the end January deadline by two weeks, as we'd detected a general operational malaise in the sector bilaterally as both countries blinked their way through the end stages of the pandemic.

We've received more than 50 high quality applications, which in the wider international circumstances is very pleasing. We have made our initial selections, with all those who've made it through to the second stage now asked to submit a response to our Request for Proposals. The final six curators will be selected on 25th March, so I look forward to publishing information on our international exchange cohort shortly afterwards.

What difference does an exchange like this make? It affirms belief – in the purpose and value of curating, in being open to change, in activating and forming something that recognisably matters to people. In being *protean*. I'll raise a glass to that.