Report: Delegated Curation

Background [Reality]

Events curation, a process involving the organization of creative artistic experiences to achieve an integrated event experience, is an important role in sustaining and developing artistic cultures. The role can be obtained in various ways such as founding the initiative, funding the initiative, credibility in organizing other concepts, or even volunteering from a place of passion or belief in the vision of a community.

In my case, I have participated in this role through being a founder of two artistic development spaces, TCHNO, a platform catering to the development of artists and contributing to growth of the Techno culture in Kenya and BYTE, a platform developing artists in the art of creative coding. I am also engaged in a curatorial team programming Kilele Music and its Technology Symposium. This is due to my continuous participation contributing to the music technology scene in Nairobi and through my seven years of involvement in the scene. This has placed me in an optimal position to observe how various curators have been developing their communities.

The curatorial role is significant as curators make decisions about who is trusted to make use of shared resources available to that culture and community. The curator also takes an individual approach to the cultivation of a community in the form of performances which benefit both the curator at an individual level while also advancing the artistic dialogue. The more time they are able to spend developing and contributing to these communities, the more impactful their work of provisioning resources to those communities becomes. There exists a problem, though. Due to increasing demands to produce more lucrative events in increasingly strenuous economic conditions and the increasing complexity of administering the resources necessary to produce those events, curators spend more time engaged in the repetitive aspects of trust administration and less time participating in, and contributing to, their communities.

Delegated Curation is the first step in a wider reconsideration of the role that curators play in the development and sustainability of artistic communities they serve and participate in. This first iteration has taken a very straightforward approach towards governance minimization. The project makes use of a tool called Shuffle, a software program/app collaboratively developed for this fellowship with [Mukewa Kanarelo](#).

Shuffle works in cycles. It aims to streamline the most repetitive and non-creative aspects of curatorial decision-making through automation. This involves scouting for opportunities within an ecosystem using a discovery algorithm, selecting a potential artist from a pool of subscribers using a shuffle algorithm, and organizing communication for scheduling via SMS (Short Message/Messaging Service). The project also introduces an element of randomness to the curatorial process with the shuffle algorithm assigning resources and opportunities based on the decisions the artists make such as whether they accept or reject an opportunity, and running a weekly status check to select who to shuffle for the next upcoming opportunity. Once artists sign up to access the opportunity, the subscribers acquire the pending status, i.e., one who has not yet been selected for an opportunity. When an artist is selected, they receive a prompt via SMS to choose whether or not they would like to take the opportunity. If they choose yes, they gain the status 'accepted'; if they reject, they gain the status 'skip' and are moved to the next cycle. In between, the algorithm considers giving time for decision-making such as 'awaiting response' status that is capped to a number of hours, considering the opportunities are time-constrained in that an event has to take place and an artist has to perform at a set date. If the artist does not respond, they acquire the status 'expired,' and the algorithm shuffles artists again to present the opportunity to another artist.

Through the cycle, each time the shuffle algorithm runs, it takes into account a selection criteria to avoid selecting the same artist over and over again, giving other artists who have not yet been selected a chance to utilize the opportunity. Shuffle checks for:

- artists who have no pending requests,
- whether they have already performed within the past (x) weeks,
- whether they have not skipped an opportunity, and
- those who have not gained the expired status in (x) weeks.

Based on this, a list of those who meet the criteria is generated, and the algorithm randomly selects the next artist. This has the effect of more equitably distributing resources among a set group of artists that the curator trusts, producing scheduling and programming that a curator might not expect, and increasing the overall diversity of programming. The process has the potential to spark new concepts for a curator, and ensures the curator is able to spend time doing what matters most to their role and their community: participating, contributing to, and learning from their communities through the practice of art making.
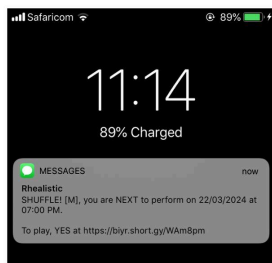
Automated Artist Organization with Shuffle: SMS Demo

Use Case: *Designed with curator and tech administrator at [Santuri East Africa](#), [James Ler](#).*
Scenario: [Jenga Jungle Restaurant](#), Friday night events curation.
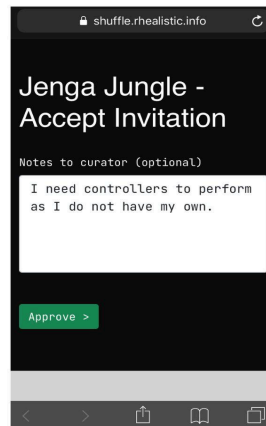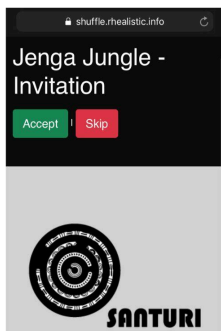

Sign Up Message Confirmation

SHUFFLE! [M], thank you for signing up. We will communicate via SMS, keep your phone close for opportunities every week.

SMS received by artist selected by Shuffle

SHUFFLE! [M], you are NEXT to perform on 22/03/2024 at 07:00 PM.

To play, YES at https://biyr.short.gy/WAm8pm

Or SKIP at https://biyr.short.gy/IFNQBd

Decision Making by Artist

Jenga Jungle - Invitation
Accept   Skip

Jenga Jungle - Accept Invitation
Notes to curator (optional)
I need controllers to perform as I do not have my own.
Approve >

SHUFFLE! [M], you have SECURED a slot for performance on (22/03/2024). Have any special needs/requests? Reach the curator at +254700000000

Jenga Jungle - Skip Invitation
Reason (optional)

Notes to curator (optional)
Skip Invitation >

Discussion

Fully automating decisions on the one hand might make artists feel left out and create situations that force curators to accept choices they wouldn't normally make. On the other hand, it helps challenge some of the biases curators might have. This means artists are more likely to be picked without bias from curators, either through their personal perception of the artist, their perception of how an audience will perceive the programming, their perception of what the event partners want, who they favor more, or even through socially constructed forms of preference that often lead to establishments of concentrations of power. The artists being curated through the system are also able to experience what it is like to be programmed without a curator biasing the decision-making process.

At the same time, with this governance minimization, the curator might use their newfound time and energy to explore metagovernance to set broader guidelines for artist selection; how they

influence the system of decision-making processes to be played out rather than through direct intervention and participation in the decision-making processes. For example they might establish criteria for selecting artists that prioritize diversity and inclusion shaping the overall framework and context in which decisions are made, the curator influences the direction and impact without needing to micromanage every detail. Involving other curators in this exploration can provide new insights as Antye Greie-Ripatti shares in her comment on inflicting personal bias while curating during "Probing the Curators Mind" conversation: a discussion I held at the Darmstadt Summer Festival in Germany with various curators from around the world. She observes that, "The problem with personal bias is that you don't know that you have it. So sometimes having someone else to look at what you've done and give feedback is a way to make sure that your curation is giving some new insight." She also adds,

> The curation is not only about who is in my program, but also who is not in my audience. Right? That is true. Unfortunately, it's sometimes out of control. The best example I have is a show in Berlin organized by women. It was promoted as a feminist event. We looked around, and I counted. There were eight women in the venue and about sixty men. So, where did that fail, basically? And I found it interesting to see all these men supporting that event, and the women not being there, there was a problem.

In addition:

> Actually having quotas, keeping track of numbers in order to reference what you have and what you are doing. Because it is very easy in the excitement of curating a program to be engaged in this and this and ideas come up and in the end you're like, look the curation has all white men. Sometimes you have to check in and be like where are we at? Okay, we seem to have really gone in this direction this year. Do we need to balance that out in some way?

The above instances share how creating space to think of informed metagovernance strategies can be important and assist in establishing more effective frameworks to guide curation.

However, conflicts may still occur if a decision made by Shuffle is not acceptable to either a curator or community participants. In such cases, neither the communities nor the curators are able to directly intervene to resolve these conflicts. They must either contact the software administrators, myself and Mukewa Kanarelo, or the curator must communicate with everyone involved, which can invalidate the perceived legitimacy of both the curator and the software's decisions, and create more administrative work for the curator than if they hadn't used the system at all. While this version of Shuffle isn't explicitly designed for self-governance, it serves as a governing tool for its members. Paradoxically, its role in reducing human bias involvement in artistic curation could prompt a greater demand for self-governance should governance minimization and automation falter. Looking forward, our focus with Shuffle is to initiate broader discussions within communities about their organizational structures and mechanisms for governing artists and resources, ensuring that future developments align closely with the evolving needs of curators and their communities

Current Observations

The time spent in my journey through The Groundwork Fellowship has allowed me to gain perspectives into certain observations around the underground electronic music scene in Nairobi and themes around curation such as the ways that genre marginalization can act as a barrier to the growth and development of scenes as a whole. Genre marginalization is limiting the types of genres that can be played or performed. The reasons behind genre marginalization may include: the music the curator wants for their event, or what is able to make their event lucrative. However, almost all curators go for the genres that are more popular or easily consumable within this scene, while there are genres more popular worldwide and could fit the scene's palette though have not been given the space to exist. For example, Jungle Culture, a community promoting Drum and Bass, and Jungle music, where the curators faced rejections when they pitched the music in various popular event spaces, continues to grow and attract bass music lovers. They recently celebrated their one year anniversary being the first full Drum and Bass curation collective in Africa.

What I have observed is a dynamic where on one hand, the curators have played a role in delivering to audiences what they are already familiar with, which makes the audience accustomed to the sound and makes it harder for them to appreciate more variety or even sub genres of that sound. And on the other hand, in some international scenes, curators go out of their way to explore more music variation, presenting audiences to new musical cultures and developing an expectation and culture of experiencing emerging genres.I recently heard one curator say, "The audience is not ready for this other sound." This was strange to me, as it has been about four years now since I heard curators say the same thing. For instance, Techno music has been around for a long time, though it is still making efforts to carve its own space in the highly concentrated House music scene. We now have TCHNO and EN.CODE making efforts to expand the scope for Techno artists development and new experiences for the audience, alongside TEMPLE which has been around for ten years as the only public space providing Techno music. However, establishing new avenues comes with challenges such as low attendance in the initial stages, programming consistency, attracting the right audiences, and growing the community organically. This is one of many aspects curators should keep in mind.

I have also witnessed more efforts of inclusivity with the emergence of femme led and femme only lineups such as Sirens and WanaWake. Also through the academic lens, Santuri East Africa's music education program, Santuri Electronic Music Academy, includes a criteria of prioritizing a high percentage of femme and non-male identifying persons in their programming, responding to and addressing gender imbalances in the scene. Sayankah, a fellow curator, shared his thoughts following a question on whether there is a problem with the curatorial processes in Nairobi, stating:

> There are loopholes in regard to inclusivity, it is not as inclusive given that it is a niche scene, it is not expounded or dealt, with a purpose to serve. Also, it only revolves around certain people making the progress that is stagnant, as it is revolving around certain circles while there is so much to discover. James Ler adds on to this question.

People like to program the friends in their network, which is tied to wanting to protect the niches they have developed. There is also an attempt towards open minded curation like [The MIST](#), a venue accommodating alternative and experimental music curations, though the scene has been gatekeeping for a long time.

Zakiya Leening shared an interesting point during "Probing the Curators Mind" discussion on how curators could think about curation exploring inclusivity,

> How many times are you in a space where people do not look like you? That is how you know a challenge, do you go into the city to find a new band, hear a new composer? Does everyone look like you when you are there? And try and seek out those spaces where you are in the minority, seek out other spaces, and that means often going to community centers, finding other parts of the community that I do not have access to. That is one strategy.

Another strategy is community research. Zakiya adds:

> I actually situate myself in spaces where I feel comfortable enough to inquire of alternative curations such as, what if I did a performance about women composers talking about my intersectionality as a woman of color, would you come? And people respond. And then, I'll propose another gig and this one is actually about new music and such. So I seek the appetite out, it's tricky, and it's a tiring process, but that is how I usually do it.

With marginalization, the need for inclusivity arises. The above successes in carving out spaces with curators taking matters into their own hands, giving space to accommodate new developments, calls for curators to continue their efforts to accommodate their vision of the scene, and building alternative curations to ensure that communities who haven't made the same advancements can work in a way that works best for them and their culture.

Delegated Curation envisions empowering discovery and opening up opportunities as a system utilized by the wider scene. There is a potential network effect where curators engage and connect their concepts, creating a symbiotic relationship. Curators can use the system to aid their curation, bringing artists into the network. Once artists are in the ecosystem, they benefit as other curators discover them, thereby creating a greater impact on the scene's development.

Being a curator is a wonderful position to be in, creating opportunities, seeing artists and communities grow through those opportunities, developing networks and ecosystems, however, it calls for awareness, being able to discern when one is steering away from a neutral perspective in making decisions. Delegated Curation by taking the approach of governance minimization, hopes to ignite these thoughts and awareness into the minds of curators and the communities they participate within.

Keep In Touch: https://linktr.ee/delegated_curation