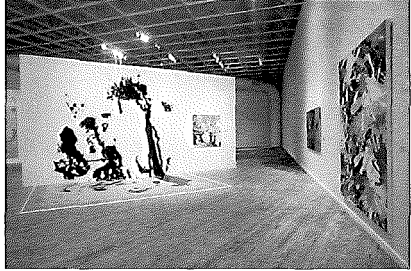


# Dana Friis-Hansen

## Notes to a Young Curator

Works by Ingrid Calame, Polly Apfelbaum, Beatriz Milhazes, and Aaron Parazette in *Abstract Painting, Once Removed*, 1998



Think of curating an exhibition as a series of interrelated and overlapping steps, which include—but are not limited to—research, thematic conceptualization, selection, contextualization, strategic arrangement, and interpretation. Multi-tasking is required for this job.

Begin with the artwork, then the artist. Study an object and try to understand where it fits within the artist's oeuvre, how it relates to the work of the artist's peers, and its historical context. Think of what it might convey outside the art gallery, too; the best work gains strength outside of protective custody. Get to know the artist factually and instinctually—by studying past works; reading as many reviews, interviews, or artist's statements as you can find; and, when possible, visiting the studio. Try to meet at least twice: once to look at the work, and a second time to have a more thorough discussion and delve deeper into key issues.

Individual works are building blocks that must fit together to create a shaped, focused experience of an exhibition for the visitor. The goal should be a sensual, stimulating, richly layered, multifaceted experience. A great exhibition is like a seven-course meal with good wine and fascinating conversation, not a stew in which many ingredients have been tossed together and boiled until each is indistinguishable from the whole.

Resourcefulness is required. Of course, you will not get every loan you request; your budget will not cover all "necessities" to fulfill your ideal plan; and the gallery will always be too small, the ceilings too low, or the doors in the wrong place—but here's your chance for creative problem-solving. In my experience, installing the show is both the best and worst part of the process, as this is where the imagined exhibition and the real objects come together, and the gaps between the two must be dealt with, using creativity, thrift, and timeliness.

A curator serves as an interpretive bridge. For every exhibition you should write a text, whether it is a short introductory wall text or a photocopied brochure or a more scholarly catalogue that documents the show. And gallery talks by the curator are vital ways to communicate our ideas and enthusiasm to those who are eager to learn more. Writing and public speaking should be a regular part of the curator's routine, and practice brings improvement. Read and re-read essays by the curators whose ideas most excite you; find colleagues who can read the preliminary drafts of your text or listen as you practice your talk to get candid criticism; invite friends to your talks and get them to provide feedback. Take as much care with your language about art as the artists do with their materials.

When presenting international art, the cultural context within which an artist works must be handled sensitively. I've learned too many times how a local community projects expectations onto any foreign art set in front of them. A curator working across borders must have a solid understanding and experience of both cultures, so that he or she can work both with and against stereotypes to enable the art and the artist to communicate most clearly. Including a voice indigenous to the region being presented, such as an interview with the artist or a text by a curator from that region, can provide vital cultural context. Too often, non-Western art is exoticized and sensationalized well beyond its basic, direct essences, and its home-grown resonances are lost in the spectacle of difference.

Just as art cannot be understood if separated from the context in which it is made, so, too, must the practice of curating take into account the physical, temporal, institutional, and community frame-

work in which one creates and shows an exhibition. The viewer is also part of the context. Curating cannot exist within a vacuum, and most of us work within institutions that serve various constituencies. One's audience might be considered as a series of concentric circles, the innermost circle consisting of those people most connected to the organization (such as colleagues and trustees), and, radiating outward, artists and regular art aficionados, then occasional visitors, and finally those who have never entered the gallery before. Each must be welcomed, but served in different ways by the various (visible and invisible) aspects of the exhibition's organization and presentation.

Curating is a daunting job to start with, and as we rise in the ranks we are expected to provide inspiring scholarly leadership and to offer aesthetic analyses instantly, while gracefully juggling myriad administrative duties. Savor the true challenge of this calling, which is to set the stage for transformative art experiences in the creative ways we bring art and ideas before the public.



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**Former positions** include senior curator, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas; associate curator, Nanjo and Associates, Tokyo, Japan.

**Selected exhibitions:** *Takashi Murakami: The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning* (co-curator, 1999, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York); *Abstract Painting, Once Removed* (1998, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston); *LA: Hot and Cool* (1998, M.I.T. List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts); *TransCulture*, in *Venice Biennale* (co-curator, 1995). **Selected publications:** "Nan Goldin: The Party's Over," *Parkett*, no. 58; "Adrift in the Pacific: Filipinos in the Asian Contemporary Art Scene," in *At Home and Abroad: 20 Filipino Artists* (San Francisco, 1998)

# words *of* wisdom

A Curator's *Vade Mecum* on Contemporary Art

Edited by Carin Kuoni

Independent Curators International (ICI)  
New York

This book is published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Independent Curators International (ICI), New York, and funded, in part, by a grant from the Liman Foundation.

ICI is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the understanding and appreciation of contemporary art. Collaborating with a wide range of eminent curators, ICI develops its program of innovative traveling exhibitions and substantial catalogues to introduce and document new work in all mediums by artists from the United States and abroad. Since its founding in 1975, ICI has created nearly 100 exhibitions that have included work by more than 2000 artists and have been presented by over 400 museums and other arts organizations in the United States and eighteen other countries.

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New York, NY 10003  
[www.ici-exhibitions.org](http://www.ici-exhibitions.org)

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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2001089702  
ISBN: 0-916365-60-3

Text Editor: Stephen Robert Frankel  
Designer: Bethany Johns Design  
Translators: Marguerite Feitlowitz and Linda Philips (text by Mellado);  
Karen Hanta (texts by Block and Curiger); Brian Holmes (text by Marf);  
Susan Schwarz (texts by Ammann, Breitwieser, and Szeemann);  
Jan Teeland (text by Lind)

Printed in Germany by Cantz

Distributed worldwide by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers  
155 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10013  
Tel. (212) 627-1999  
Fax (212) 627-9484

Cover:  
Simone Martini, *Saint Luke*, 1330s  
Tempera and gold leaf on panel, 22 1/4 x 14 1/2  
Courtesy J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles