

I Hope This Message Finds You Well, Kris Dittel & Eloise Sweetman

Jingle:

Hope well finds message, you finds message. This message, I well you, find you. I hope well hope. Message this I you. This this well finds you finds. You hope, you this I well.

Speaking:

Eloise Sweetman:

Hi, welcome to *I Hope This Message Finds You Well*. I am Eloise Sweetman and with me is my colleague and friend Kris Dittel.

Kris Dittel:

Recorded in July 2020, today's episode is an excerpt from our conversation where we discuss why we become curators, and freelancers in particular. We talk about what curating means for us, our expectations we have towards ourselves, and our relations to artists, audiences, and institutions.

E. S.

We often talk about art and we will in future episodes, but this time we decided to focus on how we became curators, on how leaving our home countries influenced our professional trajectory and our approach to curating. We also discover that we both try to make sense of the world through and with art and artists. Let's begin.

Jingle:

I hope this message finds you well.

Speaking:

E.S.

I feel like the idea was always there for this podcast, except I don't think we ever talked about doing a podcast ever. But the format in some way, was always there, to do/talk about curating, freelance curating, because of the invitation that you gave to a few people in Rotterdam, to come and talk about problems or worries, or to share ideas about curating, to pool resources. I don't know if that's what you imagined, which was quite successful for a time, but then it's stopped because everyone gets busy or whatever. But then I was listening to another podcast, and they were talking about the importance of like, sharing resources and using the podcast format as a way to do that, And suddenly I was like, oh my God, this is such a good idea, Kris and I should do this! As an extension of, or as a way of inviting other people to join in the conversation about what is curating. But also because curating is... can be anything.

K.D.

Yeah, that's definitely what you mentioned earlier, about these curatorial meetings, which we then called 'support group'...

E.S.
-laughs-

K.D.
...was definitely about sharing doubts and worries, but also resources, and help each other out, maybe with some of the questions we had within our own projects, or in general.

E.S.
Because we can use the podcast, as like, the white cube. There is no time, there is no set location. I think what is also important to talk about is this question of vulnerability. I mean, I think it's a question of vulnerability in art, generally, but there is something that we talked about a lot – not so much talked about vulnerability, but talking about doubt and sharing that kind of worries and concerns of work in an industry or a sector, or whatever you want to call it, that requires or expects this professional, perfect veneer.

K.D.
Yeah.

E.S.
Like, it's okay if the artist perhaps – this is also a question we can discuss later – if he artist is, you know, eccentric or the stereotype or, the artist that cannot meet a deadline, but the curator is supposed to be the one that meets the deadline and pushes things along, which is also you know, bullshit. It's not true.

K.D.
Yeah, and be extremely organised and oversee everything, the budgets and the production... What I thought is also interesting or important to talk about is how curatorial work is so much individualised, in a sense of 'excellence', as a curatorial brand that as an individual brings to the table, or a freelancer to an institution, and I think it's also important to unpack that and even question that idea, because, first of all, we all always work collaboratively, even if only you are named as a curator. There are of course, in the first place the artists, people who work in the institution and then others who are constantly in conversation with. But then I think also there is maybe more and more curating or working collaboratively. Like, just now as we are discussing what we are doing when we are so-called curating.

E.S.
Yeah, yeah.

K.D.
I think it's also important to talk about what this individuality means, this kind of 'genius curating', which of course also implies to artists and artistic labour. I see [curating] more and more as a collaborative process and I think we should also acknowledge that. And then, along the way, it's also important to talk about the hardship of the profession in a sense, I don't mean it as a whining... But I think curators, especially even more so as artists, who are stereotypically seen as, you

know, 'the poor artist who doesn't have the means, but still has this inner motivation to work', which of course we know is bullshit. It should be completely broken, down this image. I think for curators, what implies is the opposite, that you're always ready for a new job, ready for a new challenge to work 24/7 around the clock...

E.S.

... with your rolling suitcase.

K.D.

Yeah, with your rolling suitcase, going to every biennial, and also writing very elaborate press releases, and giving talks and tours, and being there for the artists and blah, blah, blah – all of that, all the time, full on. And what that means in terms of finances, what that means in terms of energy, in terms of mental health, in terms of collaborations, in terms of all these other support structures that are necessary to make it happen, and that are also not available for everyone. I think it's also important to talk about.

E.S.

Yeah, definitely.

K.D.

We are based in the Netherlands, we are both not Dutch, and it is an incredible privilege, I think, to work in this field as a freelancer and in some way still make a living, even if modestly. I know many of my colleagues elsewhere or not even elsewhere, but you know, you constantly have to support your income also from other ways.

E.S.

I actually was listening to – because I listen to a lot of podcasts – an interview with two women, art workers, who had, I think, recently been fired from a museum in America. They were talking about their work in the museum, and how as art workers, there's this general idea – and I think we both can relate to this as curators – that we asked for the hardship. In their case, they're talking about many other aspects specific to America also, about unionising and this sort of thing, but that we ask for the kind of the bullshit that comes along with being in the art world, because we have a certain sense of freedom we can do 'whatever we want', which actually is not true. If we could do 'whatever we want' I think, perhaps we would be paid more and the artists that we work with would also be paid more. I mean, it's not even about money – it's also about being women and if we could do 'whatever we want' then, I wonder where we would be. So I think it's important to talk about these sorts of questions.

K.D.

What you've mentioned right now, and also with COVID, and the crisis, which is yet to come, I believe, maybe it's also a good moment to rethink what we are doing.

E.S.

Yeah

K.D.

But not only as individuals, but also as professionals. I think many of us, curators or people working in the art field, take this time also to rethink what we're doing and how we would like to maybe continue. So maybe this podcast can also offer us some ways to unpack that.

E.S.

I think, to be honest, if we continue as we were before, that would be arrogant somehow. But I also don't know how I could even change it. Even though I know things need to change and having these other people also come in [to join the conversation] is going to be really interesting.

K.D.

Thinking of both of our curatorial work and how we became curators, I think what connects us is that both of us have a focus on artists or were led into this through contact and discussion with artists. And then suddenly realising like... or in your case, even having an art education, so being much more grounded in the field itself...

E.S.

[Laughter]

Arts management was not grounded in art at all, more management.

K.D.

I think in my case, I didn't even know about the profession such as curating, or an independent curator. I put 'independent' always in a quote, because we're always dependent on something, somewhere.

E.S.

Codependent!

K.D.

[Laughter]

So I didn't know that it existed until like my late 20s. I was just hanging out with artists in their studios. It was not even always visual artists, but more people from theatre, and being in that circle, and then deciding to leave my job and education in economics and social sciences behind, and actually study art theory, and kind of take up something that until then I considered...not even as a hobby, it was just much more like... that's life. And then there is work. So then how to make this life also part of the profession, so to say. But even then it took me a really long time to find this position, like 'I can be a curator', and then you become this middleman between an institution and artists. Maybe that's also interesting to talk about, this role of the middleman, because it feels like... you're in a very thin spice, grinded by all kinds of requirements. But anyway, going back to my initial point, I think both of us have this very much art and artist driven practice. Whereas I wonder if that is always the case. Because I know, my education was really – and I still consider it my education – was through my friends, and theory and art history kind of supplemented that. But what would have happened if I had the possibility to go and study art history from the

beginning? Would have I ended up here and would I still have the same ways of working as I do now? It just made me wonder. And I don't know, I don't have any set ideas about that. But I was just wondering if there might be some people who entered curating, either freelance or institutional, much more as a professional goal. And maybe they wanted to be a curator of a museum collection, or being an institutional director, rather than wanting to be in this process with art and artists. And there is not... I don't mean it as a prejudice, I'm just wondering.

E.S.

So, then perhaps there are other curators who are more object-oriented than artist-oriented or whatever. I would say that my main interest – I was thinking about it before I came, what is my main interest, because I know that you're very clear that you are an artist-oriented curator – I think I'm really interested in exhibitions, which only can come about because of artists and artworks. But I think if I really zoom out, in my work, I am interested in what role the exhibition can play in terms of thinking about what a community can be. And also then zooming back in, how the artist kind of transfers some sort of idea, or collections of meanings through material, or whatever to an audience that then can go out into the world. So I'm actually really interested in this kind of collections of material and material relations and this sort of thing, but I wouldn't say I'm necessarily super focused on the artist. Do you know what I mean? I wonder though, is that kind of bad? Because I'm also really interested in the artwork, once it's been made, and the artist... perhaps maybe not so interested in any more. There's interest in it, but I'm also really interested in rethinking these contexts through the exhibition and what it can mean to an audience. I know that you were really interested in the process that the artist is in, in the making of the work and I like that it's allowed in curating that we can have these differences. You know, that you're attending to the artist in this actually very vulnerable moment that they are in, when they don't know how, or maybe they do know and it's very emotional. Whereas for me, it's like, almost 'you deal with this, and I'm going to go on and do another thing'. I actually was thinking about if it is really self indulgent of me to be super interested in having alone time with an artwork, and then later on talking to the artist, 'this is what I like, this is my relationship with your work'. But then at the same time, most of the artists I work with, even though I invite them to show existing work, and I really say 'please don't make anything new'...

K.D.

[Laughter]

E.S.

But most often they will. But on the other hand, first of all, I can't afford it. Second of all, I feel like often, artists are asked way too much to make new work because... This would be something I would like to know what you think. There's maybe an unspoken or maybe spoken pressure to produce new work all the time and also, the process of doing it is very quick. And maybe they don't have time to really... funding only becomes available like two months before the show. But also, I don't know how to deal with an artist in their process of... you have to take a lot of responsibility and care for the artist and I don't know if I'm ready yet.

K.D.

There is certainly a lot of emotional labour involved in the process of negotiation and so on. And I remember we talked about this earlier how I really enjoy commissioning new work.

E.S.

Yeah.

K.D.

Whereas you prefer working with existing works. I think for me, this process is also really... it's possibly also selfish, it's a way of learning and thinking together. But most of the learning, I feel like this process is pushing me somewhere too and, of course, it also requires that there is a good click with the artist who I work with. Of course... different situations require different approaches. But I noticed I often somehow naturally end up working towards a new piece, or even an adaptation of an existing piece. I really enjoy that. On the other hand, what you also raise is that there's overproduction in art, which is definitely a problem. Like, [having to] always come up with new ideas, one thing after the other, never stop, you know, be actual, and fabulous, and whatnot. I think this applies just as much to curatorial work as to an artistic one.

E.S.

What I really like is also being in an exhibition with an audience and talking about the work. Also suddenly, maybe I understand the artwork better. Because sometimes I feel like I'm so caught up with being *right* in front of the artist, like I don't want to misunderstand their work and I want to be what they want me to be as much as I want what I want them to be for me, particularly when the artist is a new collaborator or person to work with. Whereas with the audience, you can kind of be free, to be amongst or with the work in a way. I also really like to spend a lot of time with an artwork in the exhibition. Because... you can learn about yourself in different ways. I can put up with a lot of background noise from an audio work or, you know, all that it's changed the way how I'd write about something or...

K.D.

...I can sit for a really long time on a very uncomfortable bench. [Laughter]

E.S.

Yeah, exactly! Exactly, how you can endure! But also I am really interested in how an artwork or an exhibition can change the way that I will look at the world but also at my work practices, and then a talk about that with an artist develops. That is how I experienced you working this way. I find those conversations really interesting, but I also think that perhaps as I progress in my career, and I gain more experience, then maybe commissioning artists will be something that I do, but I find it very scary.

K.D.

It's risky, I guess, in a sense that you need to find a way how much you can be involved in a process.

E.S.
Yeah.

K.D.
And it's not always possible, and then it can be very disappointing, and it can be very... selfish. I know it is selfish.

E.S.
I don't know... there are artists that want that sort of engagement and there are artists that don't and it is interesting. What I really love about curating is discovering more and more about the profession, or whatever you want to call it. I remember distinctly understanding that some artists need a curator, you know? And whether they see it or not... in terms of exhibition making. There are some artists that really need that help, or vision or whatever, whereas other artists are really almost curators in their own way.

K.D.
Or dictators? [Laughter]

E.S.
I also think a lot of the freelance curators that I know, the best, the ones I really admire, actually turned out to be artists as well, because they have a different relationship with material and I really liked that.

K.D.
What I came to realise very quickly after I entered this profession, that a lot of my ideas about learning and thinking and developing blah, blah, blah, and connecting with people... that how naive I could be. And there is of course, something [to be said] about a kind of over-professionalisation, both for curators and artists. At one point, it just becomes this *thing* and maybe it has to do with what we've mentioned before, with the overproduction, that you just have to work like on an assembly line.

E.S.
Yeah.

K.D.
...with new catchy ideas, which are easy to digest, not too much, not too difficult.

E.S.
Yeah.

K.D.
Being too difficult is something I hear a lot, in a sense of not being too difficult as a person, but too difficult in one's writing... you want too much and so there is a lot of this pushback... you have to, I mean, I had to... it was a reality check. Of course, it is an industry and that is something I constantly acknowledg, before I feel I catch myself becoming too idealistic, but then there is still some kind of drive that does not

really allow me to think outside of it. Because I think even if I would quit curating in its professional meaning, I would stop exhibiting in institutions and applying for grants and so on. I think I just couldn't [really stop]... I think it has such an impact on the way I am and on my social network, and the people who are important in my life, that in some way, that will always be there. What I've also realised, what drives me a lot, and maybe this relates to the discussion around the process of curating – either commissioning or showing existing work –, what really drives me is narrative. You mentioned that a lot of curators you work with, or you admire, are artists or have a very close relationship to artistry. For me, I realised what drives me a lot is narrative, that I'm always really interested in the contextualising, how a work emerges.

E.S.

Oh yeah.

K.D.

Less maybe in the material and form but rather wanting to know where the person was, what happened around these... and what they have to say. I realise I'm very interested, actually in the person behind. That's why I can't just focus so much on the object itself. At the same time, I also will acknowledge how this kind of narrative confession – also how it emerged in literature in the past... what? 20 years? – how it also becomes a sort of asset, and how this can then very easily be used as a symbol or become a reduced catchphrase. So where is this balance between, like, a personal background of someone, either an artist or a curator, and it becoming a selling point.

E.S.

Yeah, I would say that it depends on where we are in the exhibition, thinking about a relationship that had been built within the studio with the artist or within the actual exhibition itself. I would say that I am very interested in how to convey to the audience about how an artwork came about and also the biography and this sort of thing. What I really like, and I would like to say that it really has to be shows that I spend a lot of time within, how I see them in dialogue with each other. And then talking about that with the artist, with the audience. Also, you said something about being naive and I would say that my kind of maturity, as a curator hasn't really... I would say that I developed as a curator but I do constantly come back to this question of community and what the power of an artwork. And the way I see myself being part of... adding my work to a history of curating, and to artists who are engaged with... world changing and this sort of thing. I see this as being totally naive at the same time, but I like being that idealistic. When I see an artwork, like Charlotte Posenenske's, she gave up her practice, because she felt like her work could not change society and yet, when I first saw her work it completely spoke to me in a way that changed my whole trajectory. Isn't that also enough? To talk about change... perhaps it is not the world as in... 'we as a global people', but as a person – a personal perspective, their world in the individual sense is changing. I'm really interested in this transfer or this exchange of how one projects onto an artwork, whatever it is that they see, and vice versa. That is kind of my overall, overarching interest as a freelance curator. Somebody said to me once 'Oh, I'm not interested in

community, like community art blah, blah'. That's not what I'm talking about. I mean community art is actually very important, but when I talk about community, I'm not talking about that kind of community. I'm talking about a community of objects or the community of an audience that comes together with an artist in an artist talk, Hannah Arendt kind of 'space of appearance'.

K.D.

There is always this net of relations, no? That is being created around an artwork, in that sense, and it can involve very direct relations, such as the makers, the curators, the art audiences, but then there are also these kinds of incidental, accidental encounters... it does make an impact.

E.S.

I was thinking, just before we met today, about exhibitions that were important to me, but I don't know if I necessarily remembered them. One of them was The End of Money at the Witte de With. It was one of the first exhibitions that I saw in Europe and I couldn't believe how quick it was, in 2009. The financial crisis had just happened, months beforehand, and yet they already came up with a show so quickly to respond – I assume – to the global financial crisis. I was so impressed. I think it was a pretty good show, but actually I can't really remember the show itself. But I was thinking also, a lot of your work has been on value and the voice and... these.

K.D.

[Laughter]... that's my thing.

E.S.

Yeah, but I mean, you are looking at and engaging with something that cannot be grasped. Value cannot be touched, the voice cannot be touched and yet it moves. Maybe you'd like to say why you were... because I assume this also comes from your studies in economics, but is it?

K.D.

Yes and no. It's very easy to attach it to this title of an economist, but it's almost like an excuse. Because even the fact that I did study economics and social sciences, it came from this drive to... you know when you're like, 17-18 years old, you want to understand the world.

E.S.

Yeah, yeah.

K.D.

So it comes from that, to grasp these abstract concepts and have some idea about all this flux around us, so, that sounded like an interesting thing to study. So in a way, that's still happening, the way I think about curating or the topics I approach. Indeed, it's always like a 'hard to grasp' or a very slippery concept, or even a contested concept, like the value, and the voice, most recently. I always thought that these are like these two research tracks, but in fact, I think it's a very good observation that it comes from the ungraspability of these concepts. Even though they are both very

abstract concepts, they're also very material, very bodily concepts that definitely have an impact in the world. So in some way, these curatorial interests very much come from a personal quest for something. And I don't think my aim is to arrive at an answer, I'm always very hesitant to give a thesis or a manifesto, or some sort of conclusion of sorts in an exhibition or in a book, but I'm much more interested in making it more complex, complicated, or raising different questions. I know, it's always a little bit vague, but...

E.S.

I mean, how can you resolve value and the voice? They cannot be, but I know you mean. Outside of the shows that I do with Shimmer, which are generally undefined in terms of the thematic. Most of my shows are to do with hope, or not knowing, or intimacy and the like, but they also aren't those things. I don't know how actually to articulate the shows like that, I just know in some way that these works have to be together. It is also interesting to hear from the artists, what they think about the other artists in the show, and it's very validating somehow that they also see themselves with these artists. I try not to define too much what I mean by intimacy, or not knowing, or hope. Hope is really a new thing and I'm not too sure if that is something that I really... because it's also a bit cheesy? But I also think, on the other hand, I don't think I really have to understand what I mean by any of these things. But I know what I mean when I see the exhibition. I feel like I really understand when an artist says they don't know how to explain how something came about in words, that they'd need some time to understand what it is, when it has come into existence. That's the same with my shows. I can't see myself as an institutional curator, because I would have to quickly define the things that I am doing.

K.D.

That's an interesting point you raise, because I feel like there's often a lot of pressure and responsibility on curators to interpret, 'what is it'?

E.S.

Yeah.

K.D.

'Answer! What does the artist mean?' Or not even as simply as that but to give some sort of framing to the works. I find that kind of thing a burden.

E.S.

Yeah.

K.D.

Which is like, 'who am I to say this'? I don't want to be an authority figure, and also often artists expect you to say something really smart about what they've been making, even though the thing can exist on its own, without me. So then it becomes the question of 'okay, so what is my role, then?'. I don't want to pretend that I'm smarter than I am, or that I have some answers to everything. Whereas most often I have more questions. But some of our colleagues, they do define, they are able to give well formulated and very clear... give you certain answers. But I don't know,

even with this podcast, right, we are... creating questions. Perhaps we are being too elusive at times, but I also understand that we can't just be completely evasive, because if it is doubts, rather than answers that we have, maybe we have to be brave enough to say that. Like what you mentioned earlier, making projects about not knowing.

E.S.
Yeah.

K.D.
I think it's quite a courageous thing. Whereas you're expected to know and to interpret all the time.

E.S.
It's also funny how much I actually have to define, I am forced to define what *not knowing* is because people assume that I'm talking about being ignorant and how I think ignorance is really important. And that is completely, not what I mean.

K.D.
Not knowing sounds, I guess, it is not about not taking a stance or, but it's rather about allowing different possibilities to enter, or getting rid of the arrogance of...saying 'I know'.

E.S. [36:13]

Yeah, definitely, it's like 'let me step in and give you the answer right now.' It's also how I like to think about the exhibition as well. The exhibition is this place that can become anything, but it also requires space and time and it's also not forever going to be something. It disappears and changes its form and moves between space and time. But people don't necessarily like that. Because... 'There's so many uncertainties in the world, can't you just take a position?' I think it's important as a curator to take a position and to kind of put something out into the world. You know, if I'm asking an artist to talk about something, show their vulnerability or talk about intimacy, or whatever, I feel as a curator, I need to reciprocate in kind.

K.D.
But that's the question of ethics, right? Rather than...

E.S.
It's also a style, I think. It's also a brand, to be honest. I'm not so much talking about branding, but... I made a joke with somebody the other day about how I really like to share negative, fucked up memes. But yet, if I do it's really 'off brand' for... you know, everything's shit and all... But so I can't because it's 'off brand' and how can I talk about everything being shit if I have shows about hope?

K.D.
Yeah, there is a thin line, just like with everything when pointing out things that are unjust or not working, or that are just clearly fucked. At the same time finding some drive to go on. I think it applies to everything but also to our profession, which, yes,

we are part of this industry, which can be very discriminatory, it can be based on privileges, it can be very unjust. But at the same time, there is still something in it that we can do that perhaps elsewhere we couldn't. A lot of institutional troubles, either as employed or freelancers, that we find we will also find in other fields, like in academia, or if we would move to a more commercial field and so on. So in a way, how to acknowledge them, how to deal with them, and then how still have some stuff done.

E.S.

I wouldn't say that when I think something's shit... If I really think if it's not a kind of a dark joke or a joke in bad taste, even when I do shows about intimacy and not knowing, giving space to other voices and other bodies and other beings, I have to take a position and say 'I don't think that institutions should act this way or treat people unjustly' – that is part of hope. So that would fit with a 'brand' but at the same time I really believe these things. I believe that art, as I've said, this will probably be the third time, I really believe that art can do change the world in some way. So many other disciplines rely on art to convey what they cannot convey themselves. In Buddhism, in science, in politics, there's a heavy reliance on art to be able to be the intermediary between the masses and something obscure. I believe that as a curator, if you want to take that position in your work it can't be thematic, it has to actually be how I want to live my life, which is difficult. It's difficult to know when sometimes... I find it difficult to know if somebody is really treating me badly. I can see if the institution is treating the artist badly, but I often find it hard to tell if I'm being treated badly. Suddenly, years later I realise. As I grow older as a curator, if I really believe that the world needs to be a certain kind of way – which I think can change, in terms of taking a position, a position should be able to change and develop as you grow – why would I want to give my work to an institution that does not meet my ethics? They rely on artists and not curators.

K.D.

Even if they rely on freelancers, it is often a one-off invitation, just to come up with a different voice in their programming, but then immediately also go back to the usual ways of working.

Jingle:

I hope this message finds you well.

Speaking:

E.S.

In the next episode, we interview curator and cultural worker Lara Khaldi and besides other topics, we talk about collective ways of working, care work and relationships of power. It gave us a possible approach to creating a network of support, also building from Lara's point about finding ways to support carers and families in the arts.

K.D.

If you have feedback, we would love to receive your email at ihopethismessagefindsyouwell@gmail.com. You can also follow us on Instagram @ihopethismessage and find us on SoundCloud under the same handle. Our jingle was made by the band Difficult and sound engineering was done by Nick Thomas.

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