A Study on Personal Firsthand Lived Experiences in Self-organizing in Curating Profession Around 2000-2020s in Sweden

The Phenomenon of the Swedish Curators’ Association

Sona Stepanyan

The Phenomenon of the Swedish Curators’ Association

Sona Stepanyan

Abstract

With the outbreak of COVID-19, the Swedish government allocated specific financial support to cultural practitioners, however, excluding curators from this assistance. As a result, a group of engaged professionals formed the Swedish Curators’ Association, marking a recent effort in curatorial self-organization. This study aims to understand and illuminate the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization and how the experience of self-organizing is understood by curators in 2022. It investigates the past and current personal lived experiences of four curators through phenomenological methodological, and theoretical approaches. Next, the study explores how their perception correlates with the current curatorial lifeworld. At the core of this study is the hypothesis that in a consolidated lifeworld, curatorial self-organization becomes a model of a joint phenomenological body, functioning as a mechanism of sustainability, balance, and orientation due to the diversity of curatorial practices and experiences of its members. Archival materials and four interviews are at the core of the research. Study results showed that curatorial self-understanding and perception of self-organization are formed very individually; therefore, it would be inaccurate to generalize the phenomenon without having that in mind. Additionally, several internal and external factors played a significant role in the latest formation and perception of the phenomenon. The study also revealed that previous experiences of curatorial self-organizations have not been present in today’s active curatorial lifeworld, existing as familiar yet distant memories. Finally, the study goes beyond its initial hypothesis to find that the current attempt to self-organize curatorially in Sweden can be equated to a tool for curators to self-define, articulate the changing curatorial roles, and re-understand the essence of the profession.

Keywords
# Contents

## Introduction

1.1 Notable examples of curatorial self-organizations ........................................ 2
1.2 Aim and research questions ................................................................. 5
1.3 Theory ................................................................................................. 6
1.4 Material ............................................................................................... 7
1.5 Method ................................................................................................. 8
1.6 Previous research ............................................................................... 10
1.7 Delimitations ..................................................................................... 13
1.8 Disposition ......................................................................................... 14

### Chapter 1, Familiar Strangers ................................................................. 15

1.1 Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige ........................................... 16
1.2 Institutet För Konstnärer & Konstförmedlare ......................................... 19
1.3 Nordic Curators United ......................................................................... 21
1.4 Analysis and Conclusion ..................................................................... 22

### Chapter 2, Swedish Curators’ Association and Changed External
Contextual Parameters ............................................................................. 27

2.1 The Swedish Curators’ Association ...................................................... 28
2.2 External parameters ........................................................................... 33
  2.2.1 Destigmatization of curatorship .................................................... 34
  2.2.2 Cross-institutional work ............................................................... 35
  2.2.3 Global precariousness .................................................................. 36
2.3 Analysis and Conclusion .................................................................... 37

### Chapter 3, Internal Existential Parameters that Resulted in the
Maximum Grip of the Curatorial Role in the Need for
Self-organization ..................................................................................... 40

3.1 Power Ekroth ...................................................................................... 41
3.2 Jonatan Habib Engqvist ................................................................. 42
3.3 Marianna Garin ............................................................................... 44
3.4 Anna Johansson .............................................................................. 46
3.5 Analysis and Conclusion ................................................................... 47
Introduction

The umbrella term ‘self-organization’ refers to various practices, processes, and phenomena that involve artists, curators, and other art professionals organizing themselves and their activities horizontally, outside, and sometimes in opposition to traditional institutional frameworks, without the need for external control or central authority. Self-organizations in the field of contemporary visual art can take various forms and formats – from alternative education and exhibition platforms, support groups, activist and anti-capitalistic organizations to survival methodologies, adaptive systems, and autonomous self-defining structures.

In self-organizing systems, order and complexity emerge through the interactions and behaviors of the involved autonomous individuals rather than being imposed from the top-down. Self-organizations are often characterized by the principles of non-linearity, horizontality, grassroots and rhizomatic activism, adaptation, flexibility, cascading outcomes, experimentation, collaboration, and unconventionality. Self-organizations often operate voluntarily and rely on shared resources, skills, and knowledge, whereas the created roles are often interchangeable. Decision-making processes are democratic, with collective participation and consensus-building. Self-organizations, as temporary and nomadic endeavors, challenge conventional notions of permanence and exclusivity in the art world.

The life span of such self-organizations is often unpredictable, and it depends on various external, contextual, and internal organizational and interpersonal factors and circumstances. Often, the growth of self-organizations is politically driven – seen as an opportunity to resist the established institutional system in a strive for structural and systematic change.¹

This thesis uses the concepts of self-organization and curatorial self-organization interchangeably. Self-organization in this work is primarily understood as a structure and distribution of power, working, and organizational characteristics, not the scale, legal or economic status exclusively. It is essential to note since the legal and financial understanding of the term in different contexts will primarily be associated with local legislative, financial,

social, and political institutions, whereas the above-described characteristics and working methodology unite self-organizations in art worldwide.

Curatorial self-organizations differ from similar artistic ones as, historically, the role of the curator is inextricably linked with an institutional or private collection. This is partly why many curatorial self-organizations in Nordic countries are relatively young, having previously been rooted in more general unions for cultural workers, such as the DIK in Sweden. However, this trend has been shifting with the growing popularity of curatorial programs, the changing nature of the curator’s work, the uprooting of the figure of independent curators, the transition to the neoliberal labor market, the gig economy, and greater political polarization. For example, the Norwegian Association of Curators has been active since 2011, the Danish UKK was formed in 2002, and the Finnish Society for Independent Curators in 2012.

**Notable examples of curatorial self-organizations**

A few notable examples of international curatorial self-organizations include the famous Independent Curators International (ICI) — a non-profit organization that supports the role of curators in shaping contemporary art and exhibitions. It provides platforms for knowledge exchange, networking, and collaborative projects, empowering curators to work independently and self-organize their exhibitions and programs. The organization operates actively in the US.

One of the oldest examples — the International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art (IKT), was founded in 1973 and supports curators globally. It fosters collaboration among its

---

2 Numerous studies support this argument, among them: Schubert’s *The Curator’s Egg: The Evolution of the Museum Concept from the French Revolution to the Present Day*, 2009; O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube*, 1986; O'Neill’s *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 2016; Misiano’s *Five lectures on Curatorship*, 2014; Terry Smith’s *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 2012.

3 DIK represents the interests and rights of about 20,000 Swedish professionals working in the culture, communication, and creative sector. See [https://dik.se/om-oss/det-har-ar-dik/about-dik](https://dik.se/om-oss/det-har-ar-dik/about-dik)

4 Norwegian Association of Curators also works on a national level. It is a politically independent entity promoting the legal and economic conditions of its members in direct contact with policymakers and cultural institutions. See [https://www.norskkuratorforening.no](https://www.norskkuratorforening.no)

5 UKK is a professional organization for artists, curators, and mediators in Denmark. See [https://ukk.dk/da](https://ukk.dk/da)

6 SKY Suomen Kuraattorien Yhdistys has emerged from an educational programme for curators and operates both on institutional and independent levels. See [https://kuraattorit.wordpress.com/sky-ry/](https://kuraattorit.wordpress.com/sky-ry/)
nearly five hundred members from Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas. Its democratic structure ensures active member involvement in shaping the organization's direction. Its early members included outstanding curators such as Eberhard Roters, Eddy de Wilde, and Harald Szeemann. The changing art landscape drove the establishment of IKT, the need for professional support, and the aim to strengthen curators' and exhibition makers' positions in the art world.7

What, How & for Whom (WHW) — is a curatorial collective based in Zagreb, Croatia. Founded in 1999, they operate without a fixed gallery space and organize exhibitions, public programs, and collaborative projects. WHW is known for its critical engagement with social and political issues through its curatorial practice.

The Mistake Room (TMR) — is a Los Angeles-based curatorial initiative that focuses on presenting exhibitions and programs featuring emerging artists and underrepresented voices. It operates outside traditional institutional structures, allowing for greater flexibility and experimental curatorial approaches.

The French Curators Association (CEA) was founded in 2007 to bring together exhibition curators of contemporary art in France and worldwide. Its main objectives are to promote and reflect on curatorial activities and to organize projects in this field. With around three hundred members, CEA fosters a professional network and provides resources and tools for curators, such as invitations to tender, audio and video archives of conferences, contract examples, and a guide to fair practices and tariffs. The association also works to raise awareness about the challenges faced by independent curators and offers expertise and advice on curatorial practices8.

Organization for Kunsthene, Kuratorer og Kunstformidlere (UKK) is a professional organization of artists, curators, and art mediators in Denmark. UKK articulates the accessibility of resources and diversity key to its mission and makes visible the work of cultural workers with different forms of disability as part of the organization’s main mission. UKK emerged in the spring of 2002 as a reaction to cuts by the Ministry of Culture, which particularly affected the young art scene. Until 2018, the organization was called “Young Artists, Curators, and Art Intermediaries.” “Young” meant a membership restriction that

7 See https://www.iktsite.org/about
8 See https://c-e-a.asso.fr/en/discover/a-propos/
lasted fifteen years after graduation. Today, artists, curators, and artists of any age can apply for membership.\textsuperscript{9}

Parallel Curatorial Platform — an initiative that supports emerging curators and artists across Europe. It fosters connections and collaborations among participants from different countries, encouraging self-organization and cross-cultural exchange through exhibitions, residencies, and educational programs.

Self-organizations within the Swedish contemporary art realm are no exception. The diversity of Sweden's artistic self-organizations is widely represented and studied from year to year at SUPERMARKET — Stockholm Independent Art Fair.\textsuperscript{10} Curatorial self-organizations, which are of particular interest in this thesis, have yet to be studied in depth, especially focusing on first-hand personal experiences of the involved curators. However, there are examples of curatorial initiatives and platforms in Sweden similar to the international ones described above. A few include KLISTER — a nationwide network of small and medium-sized contemporary art institutions in Sweden that regularly publishes and highlights working conditions, difficulties, and advantages for small and mid-scale organizations and Bildkonst Sverige — a collective voice for actors in the visual arts field and a key supporter of improved conditions in the field. Bildkonst Sverige includes and supports everything from major art institutions and commercial galleries to independent art actors and self-organized activities throughout the country.\textsuperscript{11}

Since 2019, with the outbreak of COVID-19, the Swedish government, represented by the Swedish Art Council (Kulturrådet), has acutely allocated SEK 350 million to support the country’s cultural practitioners in various fields. Another governmental body, the Swedish Arts and Grants Committee (Konstnärsnämnden), distributed anti-crisis grants twice during 2020 and once in the first half of 2021, totaling 650 million kronor, to ensure the survival of many cultural actors in the country.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{9} See https://ukk.dk/en/Information/Organisation
\textsuperscript{10} See https://supermarketartfair.com/about/
\textsuperscript{12} See https://www.kulturradet.se/nyheter/2022/350-miljoner-i-den-sjunde-krisstodsomgangen/
\textsuperscript{13} From a report Consequences of the corona pandemic for artists’ conditions, published on 2021-06-30
\end{flushleft}
Unlike other creative freelance professionals, like cinematographers, editors, critics, choreographers, composers, and theater directors, to whom curators are traditionally compared, curators were deprived of the possibility to apply for financial support. This became another proof that long-term functioning, more substantial self-organizations did not exist in the context of the advocacy for the curatorial profession. In reaction to this lack of support, a group of engaged professionals formed the Swedish Curators’ Association in August 2021 to represent, safeguard, and promote curators’ professional, economic, and social conditions. The profession-internal conversation about the lack of support during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed and raised long-standing issues, circumstances, working conditions, and awareness associated with the work of curators in Sweden, which triggered an attempt to self-organize.

However, this was not the first attempt by curators to unite in Sweden. Previous attempts by freelance curators to self-organize resulted in initiatives of various formats, including an association — Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige (FOCS), an institute — The Institute for Artists and Mediators (IKK), and an online social media page — Nordic Curators United. Many actors, including those involved in the Swedish Curators’ Association, shared these efforts. These organizations’ formative and most active years cover the period from the early 2000s to today.

### Aim and Research Questions

The present study aims to explore and illuminate the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization and how the experience of self-organizing is understood by Swedish curators in the 2020s. Focusing on the Swedish Curators’ Association (Svensk Curatorförening), the study investigates the personal firsthand lived experiences of the four
curators, how it correlates with the current curatorial lifeworld, as well as contributes to understanding how the perception of the curator’s role has developed in Sweden the last twenty years with an emphasis on self-understanding.

To accomplish this goal, the following research questions were asked:

- What were the previous experiences of self-organization among curators currently involved in the Swedish Curators’ Association?
- What internal and external parameters have changed and hence reshaped the lived experiences of curators, resulting in the formation of the SCF association?
- Has their experience in self-organizing changed their perception of their current curatorial role?
- How do the Swedish Curators’ Association curators perceive their current professional role?
- How does understanding an individual curatorial practice correlate with collective goals of self-organization?
- What constitutes and encompasses the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization in today’s curatorial lifeworld?

The primary hypothesis guiding this thesis is that in collective, consolidated lifeworlds, curatorial self-organization becomes a model of a joint phenomenological body, the function of which becomes a support for this body as a mechanism of sustainability, balance, and orientation due to the diversity of collective curatorial practices and experiences of its members.

**Theory**

To understand curators’ first-hand lived objective and subjective experience, reveal its complexities, and depict how curators understand their role and position themselves in regard to the newly formed Swedish Curators’ Association, this thesis follows the hermeneutic phenomenological school and implements Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception.

Phenomenology seeks to understand the reality-vision dichotomy and comprehend the various entities, objects, activities, and situations that the world presents to human subjects through everyday experience. It focuses on the lived first-person subjective experiences in which the
truth or phenomenon becomes conscious, appears, and manifests in the lifeworld — a world that subjects can experience together, live, and act in. It is the world of immediate experience, the world already there, pregiven, the world as experienced in our everyday and natural attitude. Lifeworld, however, is something more than simply the physical environment. It is, rather, a set of experienced meaningful contexts that are irreducible to purely physical objects (Gallagher, 2022; Husserl, 1954; Peoples, 2020). Originating in Germany with Edmund Husserl (1856-1938), the phenomenological school of thought was later developed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and other contemporary scholars.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty further develops Heidegger’s concept of dasein, which refers to being simultaneously present with others in various contexts or circumstances. He introduces the notion of the phenomenological body, arguing for the body being regarded not as a mere biological or physical unit but a combination of existential sensory-semantic cores, which structure and orient one’s situation and experience within the lifeworld. It is the phenomenological body as a temporal synthesis that allows, according to Merleau-Ponty, to detect its opacity and historicity in the phenomenon; it is assimilating, integrating, and absorbing all the metamorphoses of the experience (Podoroga, 1995). Developing this idea, he concludes that physicality manifests in the language of an artwork. According to Merleau-Ponty, an artwork is not just a set of meanings or visual imagery, but the interweaving of the author's physicality into the world of the artistic language and inspiration is nothing but “the breaths of being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). This approach can be extended to the result of the activity of all creative actors, including curators and curatorship, which has long been recognized as a creative authorial enterprise of meaning production (Amundsen & Morland, 2015).

**Material**

Archival materials, organization documents, and interviews are at the core of this study.

Detailed interviews were conducted with four of the curators involved in the activities of the studied organizations:
(1) Power Ekroth, currently an independent curator, a member of the Interim Board and Nomination Committee of the Swedish Curators’ Association, and a co-founder of FOCS;
(2) Marianna Garin, currently an independent curator, a Chair of the Swedish Curators’ Association, and a former active member of FOCS;
(3) Jonatan Habib Engqvist, currently an independent curator, a member of the Interim Board and Nomination Committee of the Swedish Curators’ Association, and a co-founder of Nordic Curators United;
(4) Anna Johansson, a commissioned curator by IKK; currently curator at Malmö Konstmuseum and a Board member of the Swedish Curators’ Association.

Interviews, followed by follow-up questions, took place online on Zoom during the period of December 2021 to December 2022.

Organization documents consist of statuses of the Swedish Curators’ Association published online, FOCS’s archival PR materials and website draft texts shared by Marianna Garin, and Nordic Curators United’s self-introduction text published online. In addition, IKK’s official correspondence has been shared by its founder Emma Reichert. Lastly, clippings from Dagens Nyheter issues from 1999 were provided by one of the interview participants, Power Ekroth.

**Method**

This thesis uses a qualitative approach within the umbrella of the hermeneutic (Heidegger, 1971) phenomenological methods in phenomenologies (Gallagher, 2022). More specifically, this thesis implements Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA (Smith & Nizza, 2021).

At the core of these phenomenological methods is an attempt to understand, recognize, and describe the universal essence of a particular phenomenon. It consists of intuitive, thorough, descriptive, and analytical identification of differences and bringing clarity to the phenomenon (Yampolskaya, 2018). Furthermore, the IPA approach investigates analyses and generalizes the common meaning for several individuals of their multiple lived experiences of a specific phenomenon, how they make sense of it, captures emotions, and illuminates ambiguities and tensions in peoples’ reactions (Peoples, 2020; Smith & Nizza, 2021). Some
phenomenologists argue for a problematic character of implementing the term “data analysis” in phenomenological research since “analysis” means “breaking apart”, while phenomenological methods strive to understand the phenomenon as a whole, where the parts inform the whole and vice-versa (Peoples, 2020).

Searching for a pattern or universal features (Gallagher, 2022) in the IPA allows for collecting and illuminating detailed descriptions of the individual experience as closely as possible, identifying trends, and seeing the bigger picture when starting with a small, non-random sample size. The method is also appropriate when a thorough analysis of a phenomenon is required to investigate a complex process and shed light on the diverse and complex nature of human experience (Creswell, 2013). These features characterized the suitability of the chosen method and established the choice of whom to collect data from for this thesis. The participants selected for this study are four curators based in Sweden, working internationally with experience in building self-organizations in the past and currently establishing and maintaining the Swedish Curators’ Association.

The implemented research techniques included interviewing (Bevan, 2014) online in the case of this study. The instrumentalization of semi-structured in-depth interviews with follow-up questions allowed to keep the balance between focusing on the research topic and the authenticity of the experience, as well as addressing any misinterpretations and unclear or missing information (Smith & Nizza, 2021). The collected interviews were first recorded and later transcribed.

Due to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach of this study, it was unnecessary to use bracketing or other methods of phenomenological reduction (Peoples, 2020).

To analyze the collected material, this thesis followed the IPA steps of creating exploratory notes (descriptive, linguistic, conceptual) that later were formulated into experiential statements for the cross-case analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2021). In other words, I have analyzed the situated experience into thematic narratives for each participant individually and synthesized cohesive general descriptions. The extracted themes were organized into different chapters of this study.
While IPA has been effectively implemented in various fields of study, it is still important to acknowledge its methodological limitations. Limitations of the IPA include the risk that interpretations might be influenced by the researcher’s professional knowledge and/or experience (Smith & Nizza, 2021, p. 38). It is highly descriptive and intertwined with language and subjective in nature. Hence, it is essential to remember that two studies implementing the same data might have different conclusions (Tuffour, 2017). Other limitations within phenomenological research include small sample size, participant bias, and time limitations.

**Previous research**

This study combines an interdisciplinary perspective, considering simultaneously several strands of knowledge, such as curating, embodied knowledge, self-organization, creative economy labor, and precariousness. A significant amount of academic phenomenological papers are profoundly relevant and fundamental to the topics above and widely applicable in the social and natural sciences. Parallely, there is a massive volume of apt research-based texts and knowledge in curation and artist-run initiatives, often produced within the field for the field, however only occasionally scientific in nature. Still, almost no academic texts consider the development and changed professional perceptions within curating in Sweden, specifically focusing on self-organizations and self-understanding within phenomenology. This self-awareness serves as an addition that nuance and complicates the understanding of the professional role in qualitatively another way. This added perspective goes beyond the ways in which individual curators have traditionally presented or positioned themselves in monographic works, especially in terms of promoting specific working methods or approaches. In other words, this is not a study on individual curatorial methods, but it fills the gap in how curators develop a self-understanding that also feeds into their way of working.

By building on existing works and providing original and beneficial material to the field through research, this thesis attempts to fill the existing gap and material still developing curatorial theory with practice.

**Curatorial self-organizations**
Many anthologies explore a wide variety of points of view on self-organized curatorial models, formats, and strategies, providing an international understanding of that phenomenon, investigating and revealing labor markets and working conditions, and giving a historical overview of specific geographies. The most notable and latest systematic studies include *Open Systems: Self-Organized Art Initiatives in Russia, 2000–2020* (2020), published by the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. This publication highlights associations of artists and curators who have been working independently to create physical and intellectual spaces to address the need for new institutional models. *Self-organized* (2013), edited by Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen, discusses how to position the notion of self-organization in regard to institutions, mutual dependency of contradicting interests, and implementation of institutional models in self-organizations in an attempt to self-recognize within art history. In *100 Years of Now* (2019), Olga von Schubert suggests encompassing different types of collective curatorial approaches and processes within cultural institutions. Published in Sternberg Press in close collaboration with Aarhus University and ARoS Art Museum, the book aims to try to facilitate the development of collective curatorial processes. The latest publication of the Swedish art institution network Klister, *I hope you are still well / Hoppas allt är bra med dig* (2022), is a collection of essays from cultural workers on going through COVID-19 and the pandemic's effects on the cultural field. Another recent report that follows the post-pandemic investigation and includes the Swedish Curators’ Association and the need for curatorial self-organization in Sweden — *Från Kris till Kraft. Återstart för kulturen* (2021) — is represented by SOU 2021:77. Finally, in *Bildkonstens Arrangörer. Stark Konstnärlig Utveckling Men Svag Infrastruktur* (2023), Tanja von Brünken summarizes and highlights important structural changes that have occurred in the field of Swedish visual contemporary arts over the past 15 years, including the role of curators. In fact, this area is gaining traction, as demonstrated by the ongoing Ph.D. research of Uppsala University's Meryem Saadi, who studies self-organization in rural Sweden.

However, to date, the existing information about curatorial self-organization in Sweden is not presented in any significant quality in published materials and has so far been ignored for detailed research at the academic level and is still in its nascence.

**Labor and creative economy**

A contemporary view of the economic and social context of cultural production is widely considered in the works of Pascal Gielen (b.1970) and Guy Standing (b. 1948). Relying on
Marxist theory and the works of authors like Žižek, Virno, Boltanski, Negri, and others, *Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude* (Gielen, 2010) and *The Precariat The New Dangerous Class* (Standing, 2014) explore the processes, relationships, and ambivalence of the post-Fordist neoliberal creativities market. By considering notions of ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2014), ‘multitude, and ‘nomad’ (Gielen, 2010), the authors emphasize the opportunistic and vulnerable character of creative labor at a micro individual level, meso organizational level and macro level of society in general.

**The Nordic Labor Relations Model: Labor Law and Trade Unions in the Nordic Countries — Today and Tomorrow** (1992) presents a historical overview of the notions of labor and union in the Nordic states. By looking into background data of different organizational models, legislation in Nordic countries, linguistics and use of terminologies, discrimination, and positive steps toward equality, the book discusses issues and the unions’ role, focusing on challenging new trends. *Self-Organizations and New Social Movements* (2019) focuses on and traces concepts of self-referentiality, self-organization, and autopoiesis systems within various social sciences disciplines. Published at the University of Bielefeld, the book touches on the self-understanding of social groups inside academia, how the concepts above have been developed, came into contact with one another, interconnected, and became part of a research program and discusses some specific issues on the use of these concepts in the field of social sciences. Another approach to trade unions within academia has been presented in *Building More Effective Unions* (2009) by Paul F. Clark and published in Cornell University Press. Chapter three is particularly interesting for this paper, which examines how behavioral research can help unions organize their new members and maintain their current memberships. This book complements previous research from a perspective that seeks to understand one’s personal experience, but still not in curating particularly. Finally, two studies conducted by Swedish curators worthwhile contribute to the understanding of creative labor within the time and geographical scope of this study. *Reality and Visions for independent curators* (2009), published by non-existing, anymore practically oriented curatorial residency in Sweden (Far Away So Close), sheds light on the working conditions of freelance and institutional curators in Sweden. *Work Work Work. A Reader on Art and Labour* (2012) highlights a concern about the commodification of creative production and suggests a critical perspective on how artistic expression can be commercialized and treated as a marketable product. The publication recognizes that the meaning of “work” has transformed due to social
and technological changes and suggests a better understanding of the artist's role and agency within a shifted context.

**The essence of the experience of curating**

The essence of the experience of curating in the field of contemporary art is well reflected in numerous books, including those written by the curators themselves, which are devoted to the world of curating and its significance. They show how curators play a vital role in shaping the narratives of art, strengthening meaningful connections between artists and audiences, and influencing the cultural discourse surrounding contemporary art. Curatorial academic programs at universities around the world play an important role in writing books with an emphasis on experiences and the evolution of the profession. Among the most notable, recent, popular, and accessible books covering the essence of the profession through the primary experience of the curator, key to this thesis, are *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (2012), written by Dr. Terry Smith for Independent Curators International *The Curatorial Condition* (2022) by Beatrice von Bismarck; a series of books with an interior by Hans Ulrich Obrist including *Ways of Curating* (2014), *A Brief History of Curating* (2008); *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating: But Were Afraid to Ask* (2011). A similar methodology to that of the present study using not only interviews with affected and involved voices but also personal memories and curatorial essays can be found in the books *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, published at Goldsmiths University in 2013; *Curating After the Global* (2019), *How Institutions Think. Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse* (2017), both printed at Bard College. Research on the perception of the curatorial profession, specifically in Scandinavian countries, is notably sparse. However, in one of the more recent and noteworthy contributions to the field, *Curating beyond the Mainstream* (2022), edited by a group of student curators in the CuratorLab program under the guidance of Maria Lind and Joanna Warsza, in-depth interviews are used to share the practices and legacy of outstanding Swedish curators Carlos Capellan, Elisabeth Hagglund, Gunilla Lundahl, and Jan-Erik Lundström, launching them into the international and academic spotlight.

**Delimitations**

Using the phenomenological tradition, this thesis illuminates the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization in Sweden by investigating the firsthand lived experience of the
self-organization of four curators. Currently involved in the creation and maintenance of the Swedish Curators’ Association, they had previously been involved in similar structures as The Institute for Artists and Mediators (IKK), Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige (FOCS), and Nordic Curators United. One of the delimitations of this study is its geographical attachment and temporal attachment. The time frame covered by this study is limited to the period from 2006 to 2022 and considers exclusively past attempts by Swedish curators to self-organize and the period of formation of a new organization; this study does not focus on the analysis of the manifestation of the upcoming campaigns of the Swedish Curators’ Association or any work done previously. Additionally, this study does not focus on studying initiatives other than the listed above self-organizations or experiences of those other than chosen curators who are participants on the Board of the Swedish Curators’ Association.

This paper applies the term ‘self-organization’ to illuminate crucial features of the investigated groups, such as grassroots initiatives and the nature of flat hierarchies, experimental formats and process-oriented work, volunteer labor, and the absence of fixed office spaces and hours (Máselníková & Ribbung, 2017). The term also captures under its umbrella various organization structures, both legally formalized and informal, e.g., an association, an institute, or an online social media closed-membership group\textsuperscript{15}.

**Disposition**

The thesis is structured into two main chapters. The following chapters are organized as follows. Chapter one chronologically introduces three past self-organizations and four first-hand lived experiences of curators involved in them. The second chapter keeps in its focus the personal experiences of the participating curators and introduces the latest phenomenon of curatorial self-organization, i.e., the Swedish Curators’ Association, as well as formative external contextual parameters that have shaped the understanding of the phenomenon. Chapter three presents internal parameters and grasps the perception of the role of the curator in need of self-organize. Lastly, chapter four presents and discusses the study results. Interview questions used in this study can be found in the Appendix.

\textsuperscript{15} Legal formalization entails registered organization numbers from the Swedish Tax Agency, that implied a billing account, address, differentiation of the positions inside the organization (Chair, Cashier, etc) and other formalia varying depending on the form of the organization.
Chapter One: \textit{Familiar Strangers}

This chapter will look at and relate how the phenomenon of self-organization has manifested within the past lived experiences of four curators through participants’ intentions, perceptions of themselves, and the essence of the need to self-organize in situations that were not of their making. Besides the recently formed in 2021 Swedish Curators’ Association, each selected curator participated in the creation or was involved in at least one other self-organization in the past. One of those other self-organizations is taken as the basis of each subchapter.

Thus Power Ekroth was involved in the creation and the activities of two self-organizations. First, from 2005 until 2008 in FOCS, together with Marianna Garin; later, from 2014, together with Jonatan Habib Engqvist, she has been administrating an online platform Nordic Curators United. Anna Johansson, in her turn, was previously an active member of IKK around 2007.

The study of past self-organizing experiences and their placement at the beginning of this paper’s narrative is not exclusively connected to the need to preserve the linearity of events and historical timeline but also with the need to acknowledge them academically and to recognize their past agency in order to bring the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization out of its precarious mystified state of familiar strangers. This definition (en känd okändis) was used in an interview with Power Ekroth in April 2007 in relation to FOCS by the critic and Ph.D. in aesthetics at Uppsala University Rikard Ekholm\textsuperscript{16}. However, the concept of a familiar stranger (Wolff, 1950; Milgram, 1972) has been known and used in sociology and philosophy since the 50s due to experiments and critical writing of Georg Simmel (1858-1918) and Stanley Milgram (1933-1984). Among the forming characteristics of this concept within the framework of human relations, both researchers distinguish proximity and remoteness, shared a connection, and similar social and occupational features. Familiar strangers stand for more than simply complete strangers. Similarly to someone or something one knew, but managed to forget, or someone one never knew but seemed familiar when mentioning. A certain mystery and oblivion envelop this state. Familiar stranger, as a metaphor, gives the title to an entire chapter of the thesis and recalls the fragmentary knowledge and complexities of still yet-to-be-written Swedish history of curating. Along with

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16}Ekholm’s blog page SARTS, aimed to bring a critical perspective with a personal angle on Swedish art and art debate. See \url{http://sarts.blogspot.com/2007/04/intervju-med-power-ekroth.html}}

15
this, the metaphor refers to a similar but not completely identical experience of self-organization in contemporary art. Therefore it becomes essential to keep in mind what was actually behind each organization labor-wise, structurally, emotionally, and legally when investigating the phenomenon of the Swedish Curators’ Association, its implications, and its perception by the study participants.

1.1 Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige — FOCS

Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige (FOCS), translated by its founders as “Organized Curators in Sweden,” was established in February 200517 by several generations of graduates of the curatorial educational program at Konstfack18 and had a mailing address at a private apartment at Vanadisvägen 6 in Stockholm. FOCS's first Board of Directors consisted of its initiators – chairman Stella D'Ailly, employed at that time at Mossutställningar; Power Ekroth, an independent curator; Marianne Hultman, back then a curator at Norrköping Art Museum; and Veronica Wiman, an independent curator. In her interview, laughing, Power Ekroth recalls an inside joke about the title:

Ekroth: We called the association FOCS, which we thought was funny because we were foxy ladies. But it was Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige, of course.

When describing and positioning themselves in relation to the contexts of that time and the urge for self-organizing, both interviewees and former FOCS members Garin and Ekroth emphasized the vividly growing Swedish institutional scene, their involvement in international cultural discourses, and at the same time, frustration with the absence of structural support for freelance curators, which would include at least stipends, residencies, and project grants. Additional difficulties contributed to feelings of alienation, loneliness, and exhaustion and accelerated the creation of FOCS, such as an

---

17 In interviews given by Power and Marianna it varies as 2002, 2003, 2005. The date was taken from the press-release and archival screenshot of a homepage of FOCS.
18 The University of Arts, Crafts and Design since 1999 has been hosting the oldest curatorial education course in Sweden. See https://www.konstfack.se/sv/Utbildning/Fristaende-kurser/CuratorLab-60-credits-2023/
incomplete understanding of the role of the curator by institutional colleagues and policymakers and the impossibility of representing oneself in order to be seen.

Garin: In parallel, there was this global content and context of collectivity and connectivity. Artists were working with these topics, relational aesthetics, the whole idea of a platform, laboratory, and institutional critique. The scene became more internationalized; Iaspis\(^{19}\) opened here, which was the time of work together, joint power forces. It came later to Sweden because Bourriaud’s book was published in the 90s; still, it was very vibrant, Tensta\(^{20}\) had its program, and Konsthall C\(^{21}\) became more institutionalized.

Ekroth: Iaspis started in 1997, and OCA started in 2001, I think. Moreover, they looked at how Iaspis and Konstnarsnamnden did it and wanted to do a similar thing because Iaspis was such a success story. Nevertheless, OCA\(^{22}\) managed to include curators in their grants programs, so they could apply for funding and be sent to international residencies like Berlin and New York. It was a crucial change factor. I remember sitting at a debate in Moderna Museet, an official seminar with Maria Lind, who was representing Iaspis at that moment, and talking about FOCS, problematizing the position. Talking about being stuck in between. We were never artists nor academics. They did not understand what we were. It was a sort of fighting all the prejudices; very exhausting, followed by precarious jobs.

---

\(^{19}\) IASPIS, the Swedish Arts Grants Committee's international initiative for Visual and Applied Arts, supports professional artists in diverse fields like visual arts, crafts, design, and architecture. Their multifaceted program includes residencies, public and expert programs, publications, and archives, all geared towards enhancing international connections, fostering artistic growth, and expanding career prospects. Regularly collaborating with invited international curators, Iaspis up to date doesn’t have a programme supporting Swedish curators. This issue has been repeatedly present in every respondent’s interview, as well as in public materials of the Swedish Curators’ Association. See [https://www.konstnarsnamnden.se](https://www.konstnarsnamnden.se)

\(^{20}\) Tensta Konsthall is one of the most internationally acclaimed centers for contemporary art in Sweden. See [http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/se](http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/se)

\(^{21}\) Konsthall C is another notable center for contemporary art, located in the South of Stockholm in an old laundry that now hosts vibrant international and local art exhibitions and events with a focus on social development. See [http://www.konsthallc.se](http://www.konsthallc.se)

\(^{22}\) OCA, Office for Contemporary Art Norway is a operating in the field of contemporary art to strengthen contacts between Norwegian artists and foreign contemporary art with government funding since 2009. According to Garin and Ekroth OCA found an inspiration in Iaspis’s model. However from the very start it included curators as an integral part of their programming and vector of support. See [https://oca.no](https://oca.no)
Garin: That is the phase when we started thinking, ok, but how do we represent ourselves, how do we work, how do we exist? We needed to do something about it.

Being a member-led organization with an annual entry fee of 150 SEK, FOCS was considered a forum for meetings and discussion on cultural and political issues, writing articles and letters addressing politicians and institutions about the curator’s situation. Following the logic of a forum, it was open to freelance as well as institutional curators for sharing working experiences and ideas between its members.23

Ekroth: It was not a union in that aspect. Union partly, but more of a get-together group because we are working really independently and analog, sometimes building up structures with homemade situations. So it was related more to the practical issues of project-making and collegial social structure.

The final version of the press release found in the FOCS’s archive suggests making visible changes and struggles in the Swedish labor market for an increasing number of emerging curators24. Other aims listed were pursuing young curators’ interests for better working conditions, better distribution and recruitment for existing positions, and cross-institutional work to create more opportunities.

In 2006, the organization had 23 members. Data on membership after 2006 has not been preserved in the archives of the organization, as well as much other material previously available on the now-defunct website of the organization.

Members of FOCS published numerous online interviews, articles in newspapers, sent a letter to the Minister of Culture Leif Pagrotsky, who never responded, organized an international Nordic Curatorial Summit, and “made noise and network as well.” 25 Nevertheless, after almost three years26, the organization ceased to exist. Garin, who found herself at some point being the only person involved in maintaining the organization, concludes:

23 From FOCS’s archival documents shared by Marianna Garin and Power Ekroth
24 Another curatorial program was started at Stockholm University in 2003. According to Marianna Garin there for a short period was a third programme, connected to Färgfabriken Konsthall around the same time
25 From the interview with Marianna Garin
26 The last meeting protocol in the archive is dated 19.09.2008
Garin: The problem with FOCS was that we worked like hell, but people were dropping out. They got tired in weak precarious positions. We were pretty lonely. We needed to pay rent and needed jobs. Sadly FOCS dropped down.

1.2 Institutet För Konstnärer & Konstförmedlare (IKK)

Located in Malmö, Skåne County in Sweden, IKK, the Institute for Artists and Mediators, was founded in April 2003 by Emma Reichert, Nilsagnus Sköld, and Anna Wessman. The IKK primarily highlighted the social, economic, and professional situation of artists and art mediators, including under the mediator umbrella freelance and institutional curators, creating debate on the social conditions of contemporary art in Sweden today. Applying a holistic approach, the IKK found its niche in the development of contemporary art, where artists, curators, critics, and educators have increasingly come to collaborate and cross each other's professional fields (Thierfelder, 2006), where the position of curators was similar to that of others, or even worse (Johansson et al., 2009).

In 2006, the IKK made its first attempt to study freelance curators’ labor market and working conditions by initiating a working group and later commissioned a full-scale investigatory survey led by Anna Johansson and Emma Reichert. When remembering her first impression of being involved in the survey, Johansson emphasizes the feeling of working on an important and compelling assignment. She describes the survey as a source of emotional and collegial comfort in the precarious curatorial multitude and a reminder of their existence for the state representatives.

Johansson: I think it was a vital and important task that I think confirmed expectations. Nevertheless, I remembered it confirmed that I was not the only one in this vulnerable situation and that, I guess, is important to this collective work; you should not feel alone. You become stronger.

---

27 From personal correspondence with Emma Reichert. However, in invitation letter to participate in IKK’s survey found in FOCS archive the foundation year is 2006. There are several other alternative dates present online. See https://docplayer.se/6709984-Konstorganisationer-i-skane.html; https://www.allbiz.se/institutet-för-konstnärer-040-12-70-74

28 The survey resulted in a publication and a practical seminar Time for Change. Reality and Visions for Independent Curators, held in Malmö Art Museum in January 2009.
Johansson: The region, as such, did not know about curators. I think I do not know if the region is giving money to freelance curators, but now at least, they are aware of the existence of curators.

Johansson also emphasizes the sense of belonging and acceptance by her colleagues in Stockholm, not being marginalized by being distanced in the south, perhaps because she had also previously completed the curatorial program at Konstfack. The survey was not Johansson’s first freelance job; she also recalls her active involvement in other self-organizations, mostly artist-run, and the need to be in a group as one of the characteristics of the work before. According to Johansson, her position provided both a sense of freedom and a sense of insecurity about the future.

Johansson: I did not feel distanced; I felt I was a part of the art scene both in Malmö and Stockholm. And I did not think of that kind of border; I was also involved in projects in the south and the Stockholm area. Of course, you needed to be an organization; as a single curator, you were not seen or able to do anything. But I collaborated with artist-run spaces, commercial spaces, and institutions.

When conducting the survey for the IKK, Johansson remembers having a realistic approach without any expectations of being surprised at the end with the results. Moreover, she remembers knowing and foreguessing them since she experienced curating to be an ambitious, sharp-elbow, and hard-working profession. As a result, she was satisfied with people’s engagement in the survey, even though they were few in number.

Johansson: So it was no news; we already knew what we would come up with. I remember that we were disappointed that no more people answered. Somehow we were not that many curators back then. There were 20 who responded, and I think it was ok.

Johansson finishes evaluating her experience in joining the organization as necessary for survival, where presenting oneself as part of something bigger opened up opportunities, and she and her colleagues played by the rules.

Johansson: I was small; you kind of needed to be a formal organization, but it is still kind of informal. Everybody knows each other.
In his turn, Habib Engqvist recalls being present at one of the IKK’s public presentations and the reaction of colleagues to the knowledge brought by IKK.

Habib Engqvist: I remember it was my first or second Samtidskonstdagarna\(^{29}\), and I was working at Moderna Museet. And there was a Danish freelance curator who was presenting this material, if I remember correctly. At that time, there was an initiative called *Far Away So Close*. I was there with a colleague from Moderna, and there was this Danish person presenting this material. I distinctly remember that my colleague, who was an employed curator for 20 years or something, keep rolling her eyes and saying OMG, these freelance curators. No one asked you to do that; why are they keep complaining?

The IKK was closed down at the end of 2011.

### 1.3 Nordic Curators United

Another form of self-organization that this thesis examines is a private page on Facebook titled Nordic Curators United. The group aims to share job opportunities or be a platform for searching for working partners and information.\(^{30}\) Created in October 2014, the group currently has 1,400 members. The demographics and geography of the group mostly include cultural workers who professionally worked or have been working *in or with* the context of Nordic Countries, the Baltic States, and Russia or correlating themselves with them regardless of their current base\(^{31}\). Personal experiences of the two founders and current page administrators – Power Ekroth and Jonatan Habib Engqvist – are of particular interest to this subchapter.

---

\(^{29}\) Samtidskonstdagarna is an annual conference for cultural practitioners across Sweden, as one of the projects by the StatePublic Art Agency. See [https://publicartagencysweden.com](https://publicartagencysweden.com)

\(^{30}\) See [https://www.facebook.com/groups/nordiccuratorsunited](https://www.facebook.com/groups/nordiccuratorsunited)

\(^{31}\) Nordic hemisphere is a definition used by the page administrators themselves: “This page is for curators in the Nordic hemisphere to use - to list job opportunities or interesting information, to look for working partners, ask questions for colleagues or any other thing that might be of interest for the rest of the group”.
Habib Engqvist: I've been pushing this idea that Local means Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Island, Norway, Baltics, and possibly down to Berlin. Local is not Sodermalm.

However, the nomadic nature of the curatorial practice, the gig economy of contemporary art production, and the question of center and periphery make it possible to challenge and debate this definition further.

According to Habib Engqvist, self-organizing has been a major methodology of his practice. He never defined himself as being a “solo player” and was always striving for and encouraging ideas, knowledge, and perspectives exchanged on a professional level, regardless of his institutional or freelance position. For Ekroth, who deliberately did not have a permanent curatorial position, self-organization made more sense as a possibility for professional support, whether on a practical or theoretical level. As a result, the group was formed with the idea of inviting their professional circles and of building a horizontal connection between them without formalizing it into something more than Facebook infrastructure would offer. This idea was supported and developed by participants bringing in their own networks.

Habib Engqvist: We basically created the page and invited our network. People invited their networks.

They recall that in the beginning, they had to do most of the posting themselves before the participants became active. Their current role has been reduced to administrating the page nominally.

Habib Engqvist: It kind of takes care of itself; I think it is really cool. It is a simple infrastructure.

### 1.4 Conclusion and Analysis

This chapter described and examined the constitution of the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization in participants’ lived experiences through phenomenological premises of
intentionality, dasein, natural attitude, and lifeworld. It investigated the past first-hand experiences of four curators and answered this study's first question: What were the previous experiences of self-organization among curators currently involved in the Swedish Curators’ Association?

The chapter began by emphasizing the importance of understanding the curators' past experiences and their legacy and agency in order to unveil a state of unfamiliarity and precariouslyness. It also highlights the need to consider the structural, emotional, and legal aspects of these organizations when further studying the Swedish Curators’ Association. The chapter’s narrative was structured in a linear, chronological way to preserve the historical timeline, to grasp participants’ awareness and directedness toward the phenomenon, and show the natural experience of perceiving it in the lifeworld of each participant at different stages of professional development and self-organizational models. When speaking of situations of not one's own making or given, phenomenologists designate the term “natural attitude”. Being in a natural attitude pertains to one’s ordinary manner of encountering and understanding the world in daily life, taking for granted the existing and established order of life: love, birth, death, and loss. It embraces the ways of experiencing and perceiving the world, including emotions and constructed scenarios of being in a family, having a job, paying taxes, etc. (Husserl, 2006; Peoples, 2020; Gallagher, 2022). The natural attitude is volatile and considers one's specialized experiences (Gallagher, 2022, p.31). Experiences of institutional, freelance, and independent curators differ; however, in the curatorial natural attitude, one researches, selects, interprets, communicates, takes care, exhibits, preserves, commissions, sells, buys, archives, and others.

The chapter then focused on three self-organizations: Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige (FOCS), Institutet För Konstnärer & Konstförmedlare (IKK), and Nordic Curators United.

FOCS, established in 2005, aimed to address the lack of support for young freelance curators in Sweden. It provided a platform for sharing experiences and ideas among curators, but it faced challenges such as limited resources and dwindling participation. On the other hand, IKK, founded in 2003, focused on advocating for the social and professional conditions of large, including curators, under the umbrella of art mediators. It conducted a survey to study the labor market and working conditions of freelance curators, providing a sense of belonging
and raising awareness about curators' existence. Finally, Nordic Curators United, a private Facebook group created in 2014 and active until now, serves as a networking platform for sharing job opportunities and information among cultural workers with connections to Nordic countries and neighboring regions. The founders of the group, Power Ekroth, and Jonatan Habib Engqvist, explain their motivation for creating it and how it evolved through participants inviting their networks. The group now operates independently with minimal involvement from the founders.

The interviews showed that for each of the four participants, awareness of the decision to self-organize was inextricably linked with their professional surrounding reality, local and international art contexts, and their subjective perception and experience of it at the moment. Speaking in transcendental phenomenology terms, intentionality is inseparable from subject-object relations because humans are always embedded in the world with others in the circumstances of each one’s own existence, i.e., they dasein. (Heidegger, 1988; Peoples, 2022).

In the case of FOCS, the above is supported by Ekroth’s and Garin’s embeddedness in the context of curatorial education but experienced in two separate ways, given the personal lived experiences of each individual. However, both, being among the first graduates of the curatorial programme in Konstfack, they experienced frustration and loneliness without existing infrastructural support for freelance curators, in contrast with the larger theoretical discourse of that time of connectivity, collectivity and institutional critique as a possible future for independent curators. Besides the limited professional possibilities after graduation, they remember being deprived of having collegial support within the local art scene in answering or getting instruments when it came to actual down-to-site individual questions related to exhibition production. The reality-vision dichotomy clearly manifested their lifeworlds. So FOCS was intended to be a platform that would address these issues and became the first representation of the collective independent curatorial body and identity outside of the educational infrastructure in Sweden. Nevertheless, this collective mechanism did not succeed in a situation where the members encountered difficulties related to dropouts, precarious employment, financial concerns, and a sense of loneliness. These challenges ultimately led to FOCS’s discontinuation.

Johansson, who is also a graduate of Konstfack’s programme, however, did not experience tough competition or the absence of support infrastructure. Her frustration of being vulnerable
as a curator was connected more to her institutional role and uncertain curatorial role among other institutional colleagues. When it comes to her intention to initiate and conduct the survey on curators’ working conditions, she refers to it as an important task that would serve and benefit the whole field at large and be visible to international colleagues. So a contribution to the understanding of the role and working realms of the curators in Sweden supported Johansson’s intention.

By contrast, for Nordic Curators United, the constitution of the phenomenon can be seen throughout Engqvist’s understanding of his subjective curatorial methodology on the one hand and the emergence of the internet, global networks, and social media accessibility on the other hand. In addition, for Ekroth, it became a possibility to build a less hierarchical structure without any binding formalizations and bureaucracy, unlike FOCS. Again, both embeddedness in global contexts and personal experiences informed, shaped, and were meaningful for the curatorial lifeworld.

In practice, Garin and Ekroth faced two key challenges. First, because they were quite young, they had to establish their own reputations as emerging individual curators. At the same time, they were actively advocating for the rights of curators and thus needed to raise public awareness within the discipline quickly. Thus, they were forced to juggle their efforts as part of their organization with their personal journeys in the professional world.

By contrast, the IKK had a more union-like general structure that also focused on research and surveys as tools. However, the IKK did not explicitly mention curators but rather included them under an umbrella term of mediation. This also led to Johansson’s intention to be in a group.

The boom of traveling star-curators, the logic of the biennale, gig-economy, and seeing themselves as a global curatorial discourse and nomadic network informed the understanding and structuring of Nordic Curators United as a constellation of networks of independent curators growing towards the global south and changing the understanding of the Nordic by going beyond national borders.
When it comes to self-organizational structures, it is interesting to look at how the perception of the phenomenon shaped the structural and organizational forms and linguistics. FOCS was aiming to be seen as a strictly curatorial mechanism of high-level expertise to represent and advocate for their needs. It communicated outwards with clear institutional and political intention by using words such as board of directors, summit, report, agenda, and by releasing press releases, official letters to the Ministry of Culture, and meeting protocols. The decision-making, representative, and opinion-building role of collective entities is clearly manifested. By contrast, in the case of Nordic Curators United, participants see themselves in less of a hierarchy and pressure down the responsibilities and visibility by being simply page administrators.

It is also worth mentioning that much was created and done by the study participants very intuitively, spontaneously, and by coincidence. Due to the beginning of careers, and the lack of any long-term or significant, tangible curatorial experience, their actions rather reflect ideas and visions about curatorship. Simultaneously, selected curators’ legacy represents a kind of hidden timeline of curatorial branding and positioning. If, in the 90s, it was necessary to be playful and “foxy”, to outline the territory, then in the 2000s, it became vital to follow trans-territorial and network trends. Recalling Maria Lind’s interview with Terry Smith, one can conclude that back in the 90s and early 2000s, while still considered emerging curators, the study participants were already “working curatorially,” which implies doing things with a sensibility and urgency as to why they are being done a precisely certain way, precisely at a particular moment and in relation to urgent questions that art context raised or proposed. Lind believes this work modus is based on an ambition to go beyond the status quo (Lind in Talking contemporary curating, Smith, 2015).

The chapter shed light on the experiences of curators in self-organizing and the challenges they faced in the Swedish art scene. Overall, the chapter underscored the importance of recognizing and understanding the historical experiences of four curators in self-organization as a foundation for investigating the Swedish Curators’ Association. It revealed the complex dynamics of the art scene, the challenges faced by freelance curators, and the significance of collective self-organized efforts in creating better conditions for curatorial practice.
Chapter Two: *The Swedish Curators’ Association and changed external contextual parameters*

This chapter continues to study the personal experiences in self-organizing of curators Power Ekroth, Jonatan Habib Engqvist, Marianna Garin, and Anna Johansson through the lens of the Swedish Curators’ Association - the latest phenomenon of curatorial self-organization in Sweden, in which all the interviewed persons overlap in their current work to maintain the association. In transcendental phenomenology, according to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, human temporal and bodily experience is characterized not only by a static linear progression but by a dynamic movement that goes beyond the subjective sphere, which can be described as the displacement or dispersion of the subject from his inner space to establish a connection with his environment and other subjects, both living and dead. Such a perspective implies that the human perception of time and body is not limited to an isolated inner consciousness but is inherently connected with the world, history, and other individuals. In other words, human existence is characterized by versatility and a constant desire to go beyond oneself, establish connections with other people and the environment, and is shaped by the historical and cultural context (Cox & Lund, 2016).

When applying this perspective to the research materials, it seems necessary to try to unravel the tangle of these connections, to analyze and identify among them external contextual and internal individual parameters that could contribute to the creation and perception of the phenomenon by respondents, as well as to their understanding of the new curatorial role in relation to the phenomenon. To start, this chapter will closely look at the phenomenon’s organizational structure and goals and the involved curators’ intention to keep it coherent with the logic of the previous chapter. Later, the chapter’s focus will shift to external contextual factors. To keep a clear and thorough analysis narrative, internal individual parameters and perception of the new role will be the focus of the following chapter.
2.1 The Swedish Curators’ Association

According to the association’s website, the Swedish Curators’ Association is a politically independent non-profit organization with the aim to represent, safeguard and promote curators’ professional, economic, and social position by:

- Initiating professional forums that can highlight a public discussion about contemporary curatorial practice and its history
- Representing and supporting the members in matters concerning both practical and intellectual work/property
- Creating opportunities for both national and international collaborations
- Monitoring, defending, and upholding freedom of expression and democratic principles, as well as countering all forms of discrimination

The initiative to create the association came from Jonatan Habib Engqvist and Power Ekroth, who recall their private conversation in a Facebook chat as a decisive moment. They describe themselves as being under one of the COVID-19 lockdowns without the possibility of applying for crisis funding and having their independent ongoing projects postponed or canceled. They both felt anxious for the international art community and Swedish colleagues in particular. These feelings of precarity and disconnectedness informed their intention. Shortly before that moment, Habib Engqvist recalls participating in another attempt to address the working conditions and possibilities for Nordic curators. Still, according to him, it was the genuine conversation with a friend (Ekroth) that made him realize he wanted to bring back this topic publicly again.

Habib Engqvist: When it comes to organizing curators specifically in the way that we have done now, I have not seen that need until right before the pandemic. Power was much earlier with this idea of unionizing in that way, and I was more into the exchange. I had a very genuine discussion with Power; we realized neither she nor I were good at maintenance; that is probably why we are independent. Rather we are very good at getting things started. My concern was for younger, less experienced, less

---

32 From the Association’s webpage. See https://www.svenskcuratorforening.se
33 Together with curators Abir Boukhari and Ashik Zaman. The initiative didn’t take any form. From the interview with Habib Engqvist
34 Habib Engqvist refers to FOCS.
networked colleagues; because it became so clear that there were systemic falls, they were risking their whole life situation. For someone who is dependent on that, it was horrible.

Ekroth: We were desperate; we could not get crisis stipends or anything. And for me, it was just exhausting, you know, again and again.

Ekroth also mentions as a predetermining factor another conversation which, together with her despair regarding the same repeating precarious situation in her 20 years of practice, reinforced her understanding of the need for a new organization. According to her, in that conversation with Magdalena Malm, it became clear that in a moment of crisis of COVID-19, that was more than simply unemployment, no one was there to represent to the policymakers the interests of curators who worked independently or had temporary contracts, while other cultural workers were protected either by the institution in which they were employed or by unions. This absence of an organizational body was crucial since policymakers did not talk to or consider individual issues, per the report on the consequences of COVID-19 for cultural workers that Malm was commissioned to conduct.

Habib Engqvist: Before the pandemic and even more now, my frustration is about the lack of international solidarity between peers, not so much thinking about labor conditions vis-a-vis governmental structures and institutions, but more vis-a-vis in political precarity, lack of interest in colleagues working in completely different conditions in the global souths, or under a totalitarian regime, blindness for discourses beyond the boundaries of Stockholm or Sweden. From my perspective, Scandinavian curators are least precarious, you know, compared to globally. Also, acting in support has been the driving force behind much of my work. That’s why I wanted to send curators to Egypt, or elsewhere, to plant an awareness that we are extremely privileged and we need to use it in a way that is responsible; it sounds moralizing but it’s more about ethics. Maybe also more ad more been talking to the neighbors. I've been pushing this idea that local means Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Island, Norway, Baltics, and possibly down to Berlin. Local is not Södermalm.

---

35 Swedish curator and cultural development consultant. Between 2019-2021 Malm worked as a director of the cultural department of Regeringskansliet, where she was leading a governmental inquiry on the consequences of COVID-19 for cultural workers.
Ekroth: I went back to Jonatan and Marianna Garin again. Eventually, Jonatan and I decided - why don't we try again? At least we are sitting at home; I knew I didn’t want to start alone. So this is how it started.

When discussing their experience in participating later in the report and being interviewed by state representatives, Habib Engqvist mentions that he found himself alongside four or five other people representing the field. The interview took place on Zoom, and the questions asked were significant to the cultural policy of an entire country. He expresses their dissatisfaction with the lack of structure or direction in the interview; it felt arbitrary and lacking in a clear curatorial focus. He believes that there should have been a more organized approach, with predetermined questions or topics of interest. He mentions that the experience highlighted the arbitrary nature of the selection process.

Habib Engqvist acknowledges the need for individuals to take responsibility for their own voice in such situations instead of solely blaming the institutional curators or authorities for the lack of fairness or representation and becoming that voice won over the disadvantages of the survey or the despair.

Habib Engqvist: I remember when I started, it was the Wild West in terms of the fees, contracts, and regulations. And, that is I guess still, the case; maybe we just accepted the Wild West more. I believe with this curators union, if we compare it to IKK, a difference now is the importance of bringing them together to not create this tension; there is more openness and understanding today; people like myself who were employed and independent can see both; because it’s not all that easy with being employed either. There is an understanding of the differences.

In March 2021, using the Nordic Curators United Facebook page, Ekroth and Habib Engqvist invited those interested in self-organization to participate in a poll.\textsuperscript{36} Curators interested in supporting the idea were invited to a Zoom call, and on May 2021, the Interim Board\textsuperscript{37} of the association had its first online meeting. By the midsummer of 2021, the first public

\textsuperscript{36} The poll consisted of three short, straightforward questions and was addressed to Sweden-based curators only: 1. Are you a curator who wants to be organized? 2. Are you willing to help out organizing this? 3. Are you totally uninterested in the existence of this type of organization? See Habib Engqvist’s post form March 31, 2021 at https://www.facebook.com/groups/nordiccuratorsunited/

\textsuperscript{37} Five curators, including Ekroth and Habib Engqvist. See Facebook post from May 28, 2021.
constituting meeting had taken place, and the first operative Board was selected by the participants. In August 2021, the association was registered with an address in Boden.\textsuperscript{38} The association’s Interim Board, assembled by the results of the poll, compiled the statuses of the association. This study highlights a few articles from these statuses, which seem to be particularly important to the study as a direct consequence of the past self-organization experience of the participants.\textsuperscript{39}

Articles 3 and 20 are dedicated to the decision-making bodies and the selection of these bodies during the annual meeting. They suggest engagement and service of a different length for each of the board members. For example, half the number of Board members are elected for a period of two years, the president of the association is elected for a period of one year, two auditors together with two deputies for a period of one year, and two members of the Nomination Committee for a term of one year, one of whom shall be appointed as convener. In the context of the respondents' past experience of self-organization, this decision is seen as logical not only to prevent abrupt abandonments, smooth transfer of cases, and entry into the service of new board members but also to distribute responsibility and care in regard to physical and mental labor of the board, especially understanding the volunteer nature of this work.

Article 10 gives a definition of a curator, as understood by the association. It claims that a curator is a person with a documented history of curatorial activities or a person with a curatorial degree, or someone who currently participates in such training. In addition, article 10 defines a member of the association by including any Swedish curator or curator active in Sweden. Such a broad understanding and perception of the curator makes it possible to include both institutional and independent contractors in the association to ensure a balance of positions, opinions, and experience and provide more broad and diverse advocacy possibilities. Such a constellation was possible due to the diverse experience gained in a few decades of practice, as well as the different educational backgrounds of the respondents, where only three of them had experience studying in a curatorial program. As well as The inclusion of curator-students also indicated the understanding of the precarious status of young graduates, which has not changed much since the graduation of respondents, according to their own words. It is also worth noting that any Swedish curator or curator active in

\textsuperscript{38} See https://www.svenskcuratorforening.se/about
\textsuperscript{39} English translation is my, the statuses can be seen here: https://www.svenskcuratorforening.se/stadgar
Sweden characterizes not only the nomadic and international nature of the work of the interviewed curators but also shows the diverse origin and identity of curators in today's Sweden.

This study does not further focus on the remaining articles of the statuses and does not discuss them alongside the achieved work results by the association since the main focus of the study is the personal first-hand experience of the four selected curators.

The Swedish Curators’ Association continues its work with Power Ekroth and Jonatan Habib Engqvist as a Nomination Committee. Marianna Garin and Anna Johansson, both current Board members, have been invited by the Nomination Committee in 2021 and 2022, respectively.

When recalling her first encounter with the organization through the Facebook poll, Johansson highlights considering the association not to be a place for her. Johansson’s curatorial position at Malmö Konstmuseum defined her perception of not belonging to it. However, when an offer was made to join the organization with an emphasis on her institutional role and experience as a beneficial factor for the association, she joined. It became vital to Johansson to bring into the light different hidden and unrecognized aspects of the curatorial position, like the invisible labor in institutional curating today, alongside her voice representing the Skåne region.

Garin emphasizes the importance of joining after growing up professionally and gaining decades of experience for colleagues in need. She was encouraged by the interest and engagement of curators who responded to the poll; some of them had positions in the country’s leading institutions. That, in her opinion, would make it easier and step up the association’s work to a new level.

Currently, the Swedish Curators’ Association has 51 paid members, seven of whom make up those elected by the members Board with a broad representation regarding age, family, background, area of activity, and geographical domicile.

The current Board consists of:

1. Marianna Garin, freelance curator and chairperson of the Association.
4. Magdalena Malm, freelance curator and general secretary of Bildkonst Sverige
5. Martí Manen, director of Index Foundation, cashier of the Association.
7. Sarah Rodrigues, freelance curator and student representative of the international MA programme in curating at Stockholm University.
8. Finbar Krook Rosato, curator and project coordinator at Region Stockholm’s art department.

2.2 External parameters

The analysis of the interviews shows that for the interviewed curators, the intention and structure of the experience of self-organization and the perception of that experience is inextricably linked with the trajectory and paths of their professional development. However, for a complete and objective picture, it is impossible to ignore the embeddedness of curators in the world, i.e., natural attitude, which is changeable a priori and is considered in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty not as a separate world but as a continuation of one’s body. “One’s own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 209). This primary indistinguishability of the body and the world (Podoroga, 1995, pp. 9-20) contributes to this chapter’s examination of external contextual factors mentioned by the interviewed curators as influential to their decision to self-organize. It should be noted that the list of these factors and the context of Swedish contemporary art is much broader. However, the selection of it is determined by the initial selection of respondents, their perception, and the study’s material only.

2.2.1 Destigmatization of Curatorship

The destigmatization of the curatorial role in the Swedish contemporary art context is one of the contributing factors to self-organization identified while conducting and analyzing all four interviews. This process is characterized by several tendencies simultaneously. One of them is
changing to a more tolerant attitude towards the role of curator by the artists themselves. According to Power Ekroth, today, a young curator is no longer a curiosity, potential threat or a figure of power, or of a subjective and exclusive selection for a young artist but rather an expected colleague in the modern work environment, while the original description may still remain relevant for artists of an older generation. Ekroth recalls one of her first curatorial experiences – working on a Christmas show while studying at Konstfack – as challenging since she had to persuade and take care of artists who mostly did not even want to talk to the curators. Today, artistic and curatorial collaboration is fostered and is natural from the first year of their study. For example, in the Swedish contemporary art context, students at the Royal Academy of Art Mejan are naturally asking undergraduate and established curators for help or conducting studio visits; the annual graduation show from BA and MA has a tradition of being curated. Therefore, it can be concluded that the natural attitude of artists has shifted, thus changed the current curatorial lifeworld as well.

Ekroth’s example, which involved a small curatorial group, was symptomatic in a way that is difficult to imagine today for larger-scale processes in terms of scope, political weight, and depth of stigmatization. Several consecutive issues of the newspaper Dagens Nyheter, provided by Ekroth, from June-July 1999, unfold public debates between artists, employees of leading Swedish institutions, and art historians regarding the emergence of the new omnipresent figure of independent curator, whose creative potential undermines the historical inviolability of artistic expression.40 Perhaps the opinion of some of the debate participants has not changed today; however, the absence of such scandalous accusations by artists in relation to the curator is already imperturbable not only to envision but also to publish in one of the main news sources of the country. It is noteworthy that Ekroth saved newspaper clippings, digitized and meticulously assigning numerical identifiers to dates to ensure chronological integrity. This documentation from her personal archive demonstrates the communicative dynamics between curators and artists during the late 1990s, not only the speed of information dissemination was different, but also the mode of publicity and boldness of statements. Within the framework of the current study, this observation assumes

40 See articles in DN: Curatören är medbrottssling by Daniel Birnbaum; Konsten att vara konstnär by Marianne Lindberg De Geer; Det är otidsenligt med konstnärer by Anders Johansson; Konstnärer pervest företrädda by Dan Wolgers; Konsten måste paketeras by Lars Vilks; Konstnärer är priveligerade by Matts Leiderstam & Gertrud Sandqvist; Bra konst känns igen by Anna Brodow; Alla vägar kan leda till konsten by Ingela Lind; Kurserad roll by Ernst Billgren; Naiv dröm om att konsten inte behöver ord by Ola Billgren; Kanske konsten ska skiljas från sig själv by Jessika Kempe; Min uppgift är att ha fel - inbland by Pontus Kyander and Det är vi som har publikkontakt by Marianne Lindberg De Geer.
significance concerning the online logic of the Nordic Curators United while also highlighting the vulnerability from exposure that both Ekroth and Garin encountered while being in FOCS.

According to Garin and Ekroht both, the destigmatization of the curatorial role was also supported by including curatorial studies in the Swedish academic educational system. Consequently, dozens of graduates became employed in administrative and managerial positions in various municipal institutions, which also contributed to destigmatization from the state bureaucracy perspective. However, to them, this also indicates an overabundance of curators in institutions and the reluctance of graduates to work more artistically as freelancers due to the harsh conditions of survival.

2.2.2 Cross-institutional work

Simultaneously, Habib Engquist notices the standardization in the practice of including and inviting freelance curators to curate exhibitions or public programming at institutions across Sweden, thus erasing the once-rigid boundary between these two roles (institutional and independent). As a consequence, he argues that some freelance curators obtained and adjusted to new survival strategies and opportunities: for example, “touring” or constantly transitioning from one institution to another or from one region to another for temporary employment contracts. Another external factor that contributed to his awareness to self-organize and that is related to that of cross-institutional nomadism. Habib Engquist sees it as the emergence of new ethics between colleagues, concerning even more loyalty and subordination of institutional curators to the institution, as well as greater freedom to express personal curatorial positions among temporary contractors. Much better awareness regarding the financial situation, contract-making, and economic processes in general by institutional colleagues has become another contributing factor due to involving freelancers into institutional processes, even temporarily.

In addition to the cross-institutional development, Ekrot emphasizes the recent tendency to mention curators’ names both in exhibition spaces and PR-related materials. To her, this tendency helps to share and bring equal responsibility between freelance curators and inviting freelancers.

---

41 The International MA in Curating Art was founded in 2003; CuratorLab at Konstfack University was established in 1999.
42 According to them, the problem is not really that too many curators are trained, but rather that the livelihoods for them are so poor.
Institutions when it comes to both poorly or well-done work, idea recognition, benefits, and visibility that previously stayed with the institution only.

Another attempt to self-organize was informed for the participants by the value of the accumulated knowledge and awareness among policymakers produced within the last decades by other union-like sister organizations, especially KRO, Bildkonst Swerge, and Klister, which have been informing and bringing transparency and a better understanding of cultural workers’ life and practice-related practicalities into legislative and economic sectors. Lastly, among other contributing factors to the need for the establishment of a new advocacy-related structure was initial support, when conducting the Facebook poll, from opinion-makers and institutional curators such as Magdalena Malm, Frederick Liew, Mariangela Mendez Prenke, Marty Manen, Corina Oprea, and others, as well as the interest from the new generation of yet undergraduate students-curators of Stockholm Universities curatorial programme.

**2.2.3 Global precariousness**

The interviewed curators also distinguish several global features of contemporaneity as decisive factors prompting curators to self-organize again, among them the arrival of the logic of the biennale to Sweden, greater polarization in society and global political precarity, a post-pandemic world in which things seem not to be engraved in stone anymore. According to them, all these have shaken confidence in the future, even for the institutional employees in Sweden who aspired to listen to those who have long been insecure.

---

43 Biennale can significantly transform cities positively through cultural enrichment and international exposure, but they can also introduce great challenges like increased costs, commercialization, gentrification, displacement of local communities, unequal distribution of benefits, and potential exploitation of local art scenes. Thus when speaking about the biennale logic, one should take into consideration both aspects. See *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: A History of Exhibitions, and Making Biennials in Contemporary Times: Essays from the World Biennial Forum No. 2 and Globalization and Contemporary Art for a more detailed description of characteristics of bienniale and its impact.

44 Among the divers factors indicated by scholars it are notably social media and echo chambers, media fragmentation, political extremism, identity politics, distrust in institutions, economic inequality, nationalism, populism and other. See *Polarization in Sweden*, Democracy council report 2021 by Center for Business and Policy Studies, *The Great Divide: Unequal Societies and What We Can Do About Them*, *The Populist Temptation: Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era* for a more detailed description of characteristics.

45 Covid-19 pandemic brought transformations to the old order of life, like remote working culture, transformation of healthcare systems, altered travel patterns, greater reliance on technology, digitalization of services and others. Some of which long term yet need to be researched. See *How Life Could Get Better (or Worse) After COVID, Aftershocks: Pandemic Politics and the End of the Old International Order, The World We Want to Live in After COVID* and others for detailed implications of post-pandemic reality.
2.3 Conclusion and Analysis

In phenomenology, there is a distinction between a “natural attitude” and a “phenomenological attitude.” (Gallagher, 2022, pp. 31-36). The natural attitude refers to one’s everyday way of experiencing and perceiving the world. This is a practical and functional approach that helps humans navigate their lives and can be equated to a mechanism of survival. For example, a natural attitude is characterized by acceptance of the world as given. However, the phenomenological attitude does not mean rejection of the natural attitude. On the contrary, in transcendental phenomenology, followed in this thesis, navigating between these two attitudes helps to critically explore the underlying structures and meanings of one’s experience, gain a deeper understanding of someone’s subjective experiences, ultimately shedding light on the fundamental nature of consciousness and how people perceive the world. Continuously moving back and forth and navigating between the natural and phenomenological attitudes helped better grasp the phenomenon’s subject, form, role, and essence. That is why an attempt to analyze the respondents' embeddedness in a changeable objective world became necessary for this chapter when describing and analyzing their perception of the phenomenon.

Thus, this chapter revealed and examined the changed external contextual factors behind establishing the Swedish Curators’ Association. In addition to them, this chapter has studied in detail the organizational structural and functional characteristics of the newly created self-organization and the perception of this phenomenon by the involved curators themselves.

It highlights a significant shift in the way young artists perceive today the role and work curators bring to the art community and ecosystem. According to the respondents, artists have become more open to collaboration and see curators as colleagues rather than usurpers of the system or competitors. From today's distance of almost half a century since the profession’s foundation (Misiano, 2015, pp. 12-17), this statement may seem somewhat funny at first glance. However, even 20 years ago, during the formation of the curatorial careers of the study respondents, these conversations were present both in the main newspapers of Sweden and in academic publications. Thus, in addition to the previously listed debates in Dagens Nyheter and round table discussions at Moderna Museet, noted in interviews, it is worth
mentioning also a book published by Stockholm University. In *Expositioner: Antologi om Utställningsmediet* (Helander et al., 2000) artists and curators oppose each other, passing verdicts for and against curatorship. After 22 years, the trauma has not yet healed to the end; however, if before the healing process was of an unsystematic, one might even say expressive nature, when recalling activities of FOCS, today the Swedish Curators’ Association increasingly resembles a well-coordinated mechanism managed by experienced specialists. It is mature, not only because of founders’ growth over time but also because of their ability to connect colleagues of different ranks and capabilities, make thoughtful decisions, and interact with others in a balanced and considerate manner with respect to one’s time and free labor.

The above finds confirmation in the association’s statuses: Board members’ lists, visible presence on the Swedish art scene, and interaction with policymakers. The latter is seen by the study respondents also due to the integration of curatorial practices into the academic system. Alongside the numerous graduates who tend to get a job at public governmental institutes in artistic service, support, production, and management, as it provides a stable income. Often, it is these graduates of academic curatorial programs, who contribute to changing the understanding of curatorship from within the system, and yet often negligently seen as “apparatchiks” (Lind in Smith, 2015) rather than curators. The latest is yet to be researched, unveiled, and destigmatized, including curatorial and academic writing.

However, as in the previous three self-organization cases, the intention of the founders of the association was reinforced by a great sense of insecurity and fear for the future. Still, in addition to personal, this fear was also existential; it contained feelings for collective professional survival and existence, also threatened by global pandemic, precarity and polarization. To some extent, this can be seen as a direct consequence of the well-established understanding of independent curatorship as an immaterial labor that goes beyond the traditional and even old setups of exhibition production within museums seen as factories (Misiano, 2015, pp. 25-28). Following the liberation and the post-Fordist way of production, curators, like other representatives of the creative industry, created new non-museum formats for themselves. It is this understanding of independent curating that is partly observed in Habib Engqvist’s statement on being good at initiating but not always in systematic long-term and consistent continuation to maintaining work. Another external factor that contributed to the creation of the phenomenon, according to the respondents, is connected to the establishment of different Swedish biennales and opportunities to work in various institutions, which have blurred the boundaries between institutional and freelance curators,
prompting many Swedish curators to adopt a nomadic strategy and constantly move from one institution to another on temporary contracts.

Lastly, awareness of the accumulated knowledge from sister organizations and cultural worker advocacy structures has also prompted curators to establish the Swedish Curators Association. This also demonstrates a desire for better representation and support for curators in the legislative and economic spheres.

For each of the four participants, the phenomenon’s essence is acknowledged, determined, and framed by a combination of several external factors and parameters that serve as a common denominator in their decision to self-organize. Swedish Curators’ Association embodies a situation of a maximum grip of the essence of the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization by all four interviewed curators. According to Merleau-Ponty, by the time people are experiencing something, they haven't yet fully realized it but only lived through the experience. When they can describe and identify the experience, they have succeeded in understanding the experience's structuring essence. The retrospective view becomes crucial since the phenomenon is manifested and inherited in experience (Romdenh-Romluc, 2016). This premise, combined with phenomenological attitude and knowledge of the phenomenological body, makes it possible to see the association as an extension of the curatorial collective body and creative voice within the curatorial lifeworld, in contrast to something in a vacuum from past experience. However, it is also possible to claim that the personal subjective experiences of participating curators are very individual, even when being involved in the same organization; therefore, it could be inaccurate to generalize the phenomenon without remembering and emphasizing the unique lived experiences. Thus this thesis further focuses on the respondents’ awareness of their changed individual parameters, perception of personal role, and persona of the curator concerning the changed external contextual circumstances.
Chapter Three: *Internal Existential Parameters that Resulted in the Maximum Grip of the Curatorial Role in the Need for Self-organization*

Vector, dramaturgy, directing, and acting of a single curatorial practice are continuously connected with the curator's personal vision and understanding of one’s role in the profession and their situatedness in contemporaneity. Heidegger describes this interconnected system of engagement and calls it a network of involvement, where one element leads or relates to another. Phenomenologically speaking, dasein is informed by this interconnectedness between interiority and the external world (Gallagher, 2022, p. 22). Considering the study participants’ experiences of previous involvement in self-organizations and their current roles taken in the Swedish Curators’ Association, this chapter illuminates how attitudes and awareness regarding the four studied curatorial roles have changed over time via analyzing internal existential parameters that have changed and hence influenced their perception of the phenomenon.

While the previous chapters considered the experiences of the participants through the lenses of organizational models, goals, contextual shifts, and where the narration was built as a dialogue between curators and an attempt to highlight the common ground for a multi-voiced polyphonic experience, this chapter is presented as four single voices or monologues. To avoid hierarchies and misinterpretations, the order of the subchapters is alphabetical.

**3.1 Power Ekroth**
The entry point to the curatorial practice for Power Ekroth was her education at Konstfack, where she studied for one year between 1999-2000. When remembering herself at that time and her expectations about the profession, Ekroth notes an initial interest in the artists and artworks rather than the opportunities, influence, and power that the profession might provide. However, she quickly understood that curators, indeed, have a strong influence within the art world.

Ekroth: My attitude changed from not really caring that much about what a curator did (I was more interested in the artists and their work) to understanding that they, in fact, were shaping and, in ways controlling the art world, and I started the journey with a dream of ultimately one day becoming one.

She also complements that, at that time, she did not realize how much work was associated with the curatorial role and believed that everyone who worked in the art world was equally and adequately paid.

Ekroth: Well, I suppose I had not yet realized how much work was involved in the curatorial role at that point. Also, I had an idea that everyone who actually worked within the art world got paid. Nevertheless, it is difficult to remember what ideas and fantasies about the role of the curator were that long ago.

While speaking about her perception of the role of the curator today, Ekroth brings to the fore the difficulty of the issue and the special precarity and vulnerability of the current moment for her. She also worries that today she is not so much a curator in its romanticized old-fashioned way as an administrator since her current position is more related to human rights issues. Partially, this connects with her role in establishing the Swedish Curators’ Association and being an emergency residency coordinator at Artist at Risk. This advocacy activity and the current role leave almost no space and time for Ekroth’s individual curatorial projects, drawing her attention to a larger and urgent questions of preserving one’s art and artistic practice’s integrity in times of financial precarity and life threat. Ekroth emphasizes that

---

46 Ekroth refers to the absence of stipends and support grants for curators during and after COVID-19.

47 In March 2022, the Russian Federation invaded the territory of sovereign Ukraine. As a result of the war, cultural workers across the world, including Sweden, mobilized their resources to support fleeing artists and preserve the cultural heritage and art of Ukraine. SWAN - an open national network of residencies across Sweden, together with Artists at Risk, an international institution at the intersection of human rights and the arts,
her true curatorial passion is working on her projects to enable artists to keep working rather than fighting for people’s rights.

Ekroth: This is a tough question in a very precarious moment for me. I also fear that I am less a curator than an administrator today as I have dedicated so much time and energy the past year to work for Artists at Risk and SWAN, trying to help artists at risk from the war in Ukraine get shelter and a new place to be; I have my head so deep down in more human rights issues than good old fashioned curating. Having said this, I feel that a curator's role is to mediate and help artists reflect the world we live in, and the job as a curator is to make it possible for artists to keep on working, so in the line of this, my work with Artists at Risk fits perfectly in, but I wish this would change from matching artists at risk with emergency residencies to what I have the most passion for — being on the floor producing and installing works of art to their best potential for an audience, creating content and contexts.

Looking forward to the future with hope and persistence to continue working on her projects, Ekroth claims she still finds curating the best job in the world.

Ekroth: Hopefully, the war will be over soon, and I will not feel so bad about working on my own projects again, because this is where my passion lies. I can say that I still find it to be the best job in the world. One can say I am a bit slow or simply just stubborn.

3.2 Jonatan Habib Engqvist

Unlike all the other interview participants, Jonatan Habib Engqvist does not have a curatorial education. He studied philosophy at Södertörns Högskola and an interdisciplinary programme titled Art and Technology at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. Therefore, his first awareness of himself as a curator is very much connected with his work as curator of educational programs at Moderna Museet, Stockholm around 2008-2009. However, he also

became the most extensive network of such supportive structures among the Swedish cultural organizations. See more at https://www.swanresidencynetwork.com/

48 See https://www.sh.se/institutioner--amnen/institutionen-for-kultur-och-larande/filosofi
49 See https://kkh.se/sv/
emphasizes that while working on his Ph.D., he had many conversations with artists, organized small exhibitions, and did in every way what curators do. However, back then, according to him, few people called it curatorship in Sweden.

Habib Engqvist: And at some point, I was doing a show at Moderna Museet. I do not remember how it happened. But I was doing many exhibitions, so they kind of knew who I was, but I think. I really slipped in quite quickly into working for an institution, and I was employed there for two years. I think that is like when I was looking at my card saying I was a curator.

He also recalls that he felt extremely uncomfortable in this position. As a result, he lacked meaningful conversations with artists, despite the education department having more creative freedom than the exhibition department of the museum.

Habib Engqvist: In the institution, it was another form of contact with the artists. While not meeting so many, I dealt more with performa and bureaucracy. We did some great things because I was working in the learning department, and we never called it an exhibition; we called it a program, and we did not have to go to the exhibition council of the museum. So we kind of quite quickly could find allies and code the system so that I could do more exciting stuff, but two years was enough.

Another curatorial emploi and a new awareness of institutional curator job limitations came with Habib Engqvist’s position at Iaspis, where he worked for five years from 2009. As a project manager for the visual arts department, he was restricted from doing enough shows within the house or in exhibition-making in parallel. Eventually, however, Habib Engqvist went into independent curating because of general frustration and the understanding that the institutional ceiling was getting lower every year for him since he had already been working at two of the most prominent international institutions of contemporary art in Sweden by then. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that curating was and remains for him a convenient definition of what he likes to do in life and what brings him an income. It does not, however, seem that for Habib Engqvist’s perception and understanding of the curatorial role have changed since then. Instead, he argues that the field and environment have changed, emphasizing external contextual factors.
Habib Engqvist: For me, it is a handy word to describe in a simple way what I mainly do for a living. I never aspired to become a specific occupation. I think that is a generational thing, maybe. It becomes so integrated with who you are. Stop doing this would stop being me somehow. But on the other hand, I do not care what it is called. I found it incredibly liberating to have a word that could describe the complexities of what I do, that is great, and in the last couple of decades, more people know what it means, great! I will continue to be a curator as long as other people keep calling what I do curating, as long as it meets the definition.

He also notices that as a curator, he feels lucky and happy in an existential sense, partly because he had not gone through the post-graduate frustration of the curatorial program. He finds it problematic that the fantasy of one’s progression is dictated and promoted by curatorial education and the art system in a way that “one goes from being independent, then they move an institution door a bit, and eventually - museum director.”

Habib Engqvist: I think I was super lucky in the existential sense; my first proper job was in the very end stop, for many people.

3.3 Marianna Garin

Garin's attitude towards curatorship and self-awareness in the profession came to her long before receiving a curatorial certificate. She remembers being involved in the exhibition production first in a gallery by the Faculty of Art History and then in the small space she founded. It became an experimental platform in which she tested her knowledge in photography, moving images, and new media and could go beyond the familiar-art history by predominantly working with her peers and artists from the Academy of Arts.

Garin: I realized that this was something I really could relate to more than Renaissance frescoes, medieval altarpieces, baptismal fonts, or churches. There were no curatorial studies back then, but we had a gallery space in the art history department, and this is where I first stumbled upon the profession of exhibition-making in a very low-key basic way of producing with a very low budget.
Garin recalls her uncertainty about her role as a curator and frustration in regard to the creative process even after completing the highly competitive curatorial program at Konstfack. It seemed to her that the system was initially misleading and asked her to position and brand herself, to find her inner curatorial voice, in search of which she was moving further away from the artistry.

Garin: We had mentors in our program, and that was helpful, and we also studied the curatorial practices of established so-called star-curators (Green & Gardner, 2016) to comprehend what has been done. I guess the challenge is finding your voice and going through an intense moment of disorientation before finding your grammar. Perhaps I’m still looking for that inner voice or, if you call it, vision in a way.

Garin mentions that rather than constantly trying to build a brand for herself, she finds it more interesting to implement curatorial knowledge as a critical tool in exploring and understanding the world around her.

Garin: I think it becomes more relevant to consider what I can do from my position in each given situation and from my interest in my practice. It might sound vague, but I want to be less confined and free to redefine myself depending on the situation and the people I work with.

However, according to her, one of the obvious implications of that freedom becomes a constantly recurring situation, where an undefined curatorial role leads to re-negotiations with institutions of one’s artistic interests, payments, responsibilities, recognition, or even copyright.

3.4 Anna Johansson

Johansson remembers being involved in curating more due to sporadic coincidences and circumstantial decisions in her life. Curating was not her first choice; she recalls her initial interest in architecture when she started her first job as a guide at a contemporary art exhibition. That followed another job as an art educator at an institution where she worked for
two years.

Anna Johansson: When I look back on what I was interested in when I was studying Art History, it was not contemporary art. I was much more into architecture and I always wanted to be an architecture historian. But somehow I think it was much, what do you say, the circumstances.

Finally, Malmö Art Academy commissioned her to co-curate its 10th-anniversary celebration exhibition with 120 participating artists, which required large coordination work.

Johansson: I have been involved in exhibitions before as an assistant. I don't remember if I reflected that much about what actually the work was, but I think that was the first time when, you know when I started to think about what I was doing as curation.

Being involved in various activities, Johansson emphasizes the inability to determine the exact boundaries of the definition of curating just by looking at the work curators did. After dedicating some time to studying curating at the CuratorLab programme at Konstfak, she went through the turbulence of both freelance, institutional, and unemployed experiences at the beginning of her curatorial career. Johansson also highlights the poor condition of employment and payment for curators’ work already back then, as well as an inability to apply for state unemployment social benefits programme, since it did not suit part-time or contract work, curators were mostly offered. Nevertheless, the financial difficulties associated with the profession were not a big discovery for Johansson since working with artists before studying, she understood the challenging fees in the art field.

Johansson: I sometimes really appreciated that there was some sort of freedom, but I remember the stress of constantly being without economic backup.

Her perception and understanding of her role have transformed a lot after being employed as curator at Malmö Art Museum for many years. She defines her current role as being more of a public servant and communicator who is working on behalf of the inhabitants, the citizens, and the public collection. She also emphasizes that sometimes she needs to fight to be seen by policymakers as someone who actually produces knowledge and for the collection to be seen as an active and vital instrument to explore and storytelling.
Anna Johansson: It’s a lot about communication and communicators. What can I say? Today I work much more with the collection and issues dealing with what a collection is and can be and the new acquisitions. What kind of stories can we tell about the past, the present, and the future from the collection? It is different today, not just because I have a steady position. Society looks different today; I’d say it’s much more polarized than as I remember it back in early 2000. Of course, I also relate to that when I work with exhibitions. But I also try to work more with existential questions that are relevant for us today as much as it was 20 years ago.

Nevertheless, Johansson argues that inquisitiveness and the possibility to learn, discover and doubt the surrounding environment are her current motivations for identifying herself as a curator today.

Johansson: There is some sort of curiosity that always opens new doors and worlds. It’s endless work to discover, you know. The possibility of having a work where you can use your curiosity I think that's something that keeps me continuing.

3.5 Conclusion and Analysis

The third chapter of this study considered the changed internal existential parameters of individual curatorial lifeworlds and their perceptions of the role of the curator in the need for self-organization. When speaking about intentionality as a characteristic of consciousness, it is impossible to talk only about the subject on which it is directed. In transcendental phenomenology, there are always two interrelated components of the lifeworld — the perceived and the perceiver. Merleau-Ponty referred to artists (in this case Cezanne specifically) as “painters of perception rather than of the perceived” This notion gives agency to the artist, thus activating his vision, perception, and body when translating directly from the retina to the surface, which in its turn helped depict the physical experience of things, rather than its appearance (Klein, 1981, pp.186-187). If we try to expand this notion on curators as creative actors, it becomes possible to claim that the subject (in this case, the curator) and the object of perception (the professional role) are inseparable and thus unique. However, in the same essay, Klein (1981) also criticized Merleau-Ponty for his inability to see the
“autonomous reality of the work of art and its belonging to separate art history rather to philosophy and language” This criticism makes seems especially interesting for curators, to whom the language is one of the essential tools. So when thinking and talking contemporary curating within self-organizations, one depicts personal perception to a collective canvas.

This chapter shed light on how study participants’ personal attitudes and perceptions of their roles as curators have changed over time. The chapter’s focus on self-understanding helped to comprehend and analyze how curatorial perception might influence one’s decision to self-organize.

When analyzing Power Ekroth's perspective deeper, we can follow several critical aspects of her curatorial journey and her understanding of the curatorial role. Ekroth's entry into curatorial practice and her initial expectations of it were motivated by her interest in working with artists and artworks rather than the potential opportunities, influence, or power the profession might provide. This initial perspective showcases Ekroth’s genuine passion for art and artists, indicating a sincere commitment to curatorial practice. However, being a relatively new profession in Sweden, curatorship was full of misconceptions and frustration, especially for young professionals, who had to follow and adopt given ideals and norms. (Larsson, 2012). Ekroth's initial belief that everyone working in the art world was equally and adequately paid demonstrates an initial lack of awareness of the financial challenges and precarity often faced by curators that are rarely brought to the surface, or, perhaps, the lack of transparency within educational programmes towards future precariousness. This misconception contributed to a period of frustration and disillusionment when she faced the realities of the curatorial profession.

Ekroth's understanding of the role through her current involvement in human rights issues and her position as emergency residency coordinator at the SWAN, emergency residency network, together with the Artists at Risk, reflect the broadened engagement beyond traditional curatorial roles and norms, as well as beyond the star-curating logic, towards more inclusive and related to article 10 of the Swedish Curators’ Association statuses. It also showcases her adaptability and willingness to explore different aspects of cultural work while maintaining a connection not just simply to traditional curating but being true to her own understanding of the profession — to mediate and help artists reflect the world we live in, to make it possible for artists to keep on working thus bringing a change. Ekroth’s acknowledgment of the current
special precarity and vulnerability within the curatorial realm and her role in it suggests that she is cognizant of the challenges faced by curators in the present moment. This awareness also shapes her decision-making, work approaches to her work, and role evolving. Despite the challenges and shifts in her curatorial practice, Ekroth still identifies curating to be the best job. This reaffirms her deep passion, commitment to the profession, and the value she places on her role as a curator. However, it also confirms and emphasizes the volunteer and ideological nature of the work that has become entrenched in self-organized communities.

Jonatan Habib Engqvist is the only one of the study participants who did not go through the system of curatorial education. Instead, he became aware of his role as a curator by reflecting on his activities in parallel with studying philosophy at Söderton University in Stockholm, through conversations with artists and organizing small exhibitions. However, his first “proper” curatorial positions were within the educational department of Moderna Museet and as manager at Iaspis. It was a valuable experience in institutional curating for him. Nevertheless, he also expressed discomfort and frustration with certain aspects of institutional work, such as bureaucracy and limited interactions with artists. This experience likely influenced his decision to transition into independent curating. Habib Engqvist identifies himself as a curator in a broad sense and finds the existence of the term “curator” liberating to describe the complexities of his work, which also brings him income. He feels lucky to be a curator, avoiding the postgraduate frustration often associated with curatorial programs.

Habib Engqvist highlights his resistance to the traditional career progression within curatorial education and the art system. He rejects the idea of moving from being independent to becoming an institutional curator and eventually a museum head, emphasizing the importance of maintaining his own identity and approach to curating. This freedom allows him to explore and define his practice to suit his interests and engagements, making curating an essential part of his identity. Habib Engqvist expresses a sense of luck and happiness in being a curator, indicating a deep existential satisfaction with his chosen path. This contentment likely plays a significant role in his continued commitment to curatorial practice.

Overall, Jonatan Habib Engqvist's viewpoint displays an experience of self-discovery and adaptation inside the curatorial profession. His unconventional background, experiences in specific curatorial settings, and rejection of ordinary professional trajectories show a robust feel of autonomy and authenticity in his strategy for curating. His existential pleasure with
being a curator similarly reinforces his dedication to the occupation and willingness to
discover and redefine his curatorial identity continually.

Anna Johansson's meeting with the curatorial lifeworld can be characterized as serendipitous. Johansson's initial involvement in curating was not a planned career choice or a passion but rather a series of coincidences, circumstances, and curiosity, an opportunity to learn, discover, and question the surrounding environment. Her interest in architecture and art history led her to work as a guide at a contemporary art exhibition and later as an art educator. These experiences eventually led her to co-curating an exhibition at Malmö Art Academy and later to a curatorial programme at Konstfack. This serendipitous entry from the beginning suggests a flexible and adaptable approach to her personal curatorial journey.

When it comes to the perception of the curatorial role, Johansson's perspective reflects a fluid definition of the role and an evolution of her understanding of curatorial practice. She believes that curating cannot be strictly confined to specific tasks or activities, and her involvement in various contexts has shown her that the boundaries of curating are flexible and adaptable depending on the situation. This open-minded approach allows her to engage with curating dynamically and exploratively. Furthermore, her experience working at the state-run Malmö Art Museum has transformed her perception of her curatorial role, similar to Ekroth. She now sees herself as more of a public servant and communicator, with a focus on serving the inhabitants and citizens while caring for the institution's collection. This institutional experience has likely shaped her sense of responsibility and the broader impact of her curatorial work within a public context. However, despite her role in knowledge production and public service as a curator, Johansson acknowledges the need to fight for recognition in some instances. This highlights the challenges curators may face in advocating for the significance of their work and the value they bring to the cultural landscape.

Marianna Garin's experience reflects a nuanced and introspective journey in understanding her role as a curator. Garin's entry into the curatorial practice came through her involvement in exhibition production in a gallery at the Faculty of Art History and a small space she founded. This experimental platform allowed her to test her knowledge and work closely with artists from the Academy of Arts, which eventually led her to realize that curating was something she could relate to more than traditional art history.
Garin's experience after completing the curatorial program at Konstfack was marked by uncertainty and frustration, similar to Ekroth’s. She felt the pressure to find her curatorial voice and position herself within the art world's structures, leading her away from her artistic interests. This struggle highlights many curators’ challenges in navigating their identities and curatorial practice within the larger art ecosystem and established power relationships in independent curating.

Interestingly, Garin's perception of her role as a curator has shifted over time. While she used to search for her inner voice and vision as a curator, she now finds attraction in using curating as a critical tool to understand the present, different contexts, and surrounding life. This change in perspective indicates a maturation in her understanding of the curatorial practice, shifting from a focus on self-definition to a more contextual and adaptable approach.

Garin also highlights the importance of being less confined and more free to redefine herself depending on the situation and the people she works with. This flexibility in approach allows her to negotiate with institutions and collaborators, seeking recognition, payment, and credit for her work. The freedom she seeks, however, also comes with challenges, such as constantly redefining her role and navigating the practicalities of curatorial practice.

Overall, Marianna Garin's experience as a curator exemplifies the complexity and introspection that curators often undergo. Her journey illustrates the ongoing process of finding one's curatorial voice, the balance between creative interests and institutional demands, and the evolving nature of curatorial practice in response to changing contexts and personal growth.

This phenomenological analysis allowed us to gain insight into the selected curators' consciousness, reflecting their changing perceptions of their curatorial roles over time. These individual narratives contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the development of the internal existential individual parameters that influenced the formation of the Swedish Curators’ Association. It would not be possible to discuss further the essence of the phenomenon without keeping in mind the diverse curatorial perceptions of themselves and their present roles.

However, what happens when the curatorial multitude attempts to talk in one voice? How
does the understanding of an individual curatorial practice correlate with the collective goals of self-organization? And finally, what constitutes and encompasses the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization in today’s curatorial lifeworld? These questions became the basis for understanding the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization and formulating the findings discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.
Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

This chapter discusses and reflects upon the findings of the analysis of the phenomenon of curatorial self-organizations in Sweden, focusing particularly on the examples of Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige (FOCS), Institutet För Konstnärer & Konstförmedlare (IKK), Nordic Curators United and The Swedish Curators’ Association. Personal experiences and perceptions of four curators, Power Ekroth, Jonatan Habib Engqvist, Marianna Garin, and Anna Johansson, formed the basis of this study, thus informing the aim of this study — to understand and illuminate the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization in Sweden and how the experience of self-organizing is understood by Swedish curators around 2020s. The conclusion chapter gradually tests and answers the study’s hypothesis and research questions, compares the finding with observed literature, and interprets the results. It will also review the limitations of this study and suggest opportunities for further research.

The essence of employing phenomenological methods lies in comprehending or gaining insight into a particular phenomenon or lived experience. Phenomenological methodological and theoretical approaches were applied to answer the following research questions and initial hypothesis:

Self-organizations in the consolidated curatorial lifeworld curatorial self-organizations become a model of a joint phenomenological body, the function of which becomes a support for this body as a mechanism of sustainability, balance, and orientation due to the diversity of collective curatorial practices and experiences of its members.

- What were the previous experiences of self-organization among curators currently involved in the Swedish Curators’ Association?
- What internal and external parameters have changed and hence reshaped the lived experiences of curators, resulting in the formation of the SCF association?
- Has their experience in self-organizing changed their perception of their current curatorial role?
- How do the Swedish Curators’ Association curators perceive their current professional role?
How does understanding an individual curatorial practice correlate with collective goals of self-organization?

What constitutes and encompasses the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization in today’s curatorial lifeworld?

Various dictionaries agree on understanding the meaning of the “phenomenon” as a word used to describe an outstanding event or situation, both natural or human-made, that is observable and can be studied or experienced. It refers to an occurrence that captures people's attention due to its uniqueness, rarity, or impact. However, in phenomenological science, “phenomenon” as a term takes on a specific and nuanced meaning. It refers to an object or event that appears in one's consciousness or is experienced by one. This can include not only external objects but also mental states, emotions, perceptions, and thoughts. Phenomena are considered to be the perceptual objects of human experience, and the goal of phenomenological inquiry is to describe it and grasp the essence, structuring that experience. According to phenomenologists, including Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenon, as a form, is manifested in experience. When trying to take away the experience, the form decays and disappears (Romdenh-Romluc, 2016). This knowledge not only confirms the necessity and scientific relevance of all previous chapters of this thesis but is also fundamental to each of the study results of this work.

While conducting and analyzing the first interviews with the study participants at an early stage of their careers, it became clear that the previous experience of self-organization was not present in today's current collegial curatorial life world as an active memory. Rather, this knowledge was preserved exclusively in the memory of the respondents in a fragmentary and not always factually accurate but emotionally vivid and colorful. This result is confirmed in the methodological collection and analysis of the material.

Methodological features of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses (IPA), such as creating descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual exploratory notes when analyzing the material, revealed several patterns typical to all respondents. All four study participants do not always accurately remember or often confuse the dates of the creation or functioning of

---

50 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/phenomenon
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/phenomenon
https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=phenomenon
https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/phenomenon
organizations; they often refer to time as the prescription of years and mention several times their emerging, inexperienced role when saving materials and data or building the organization structure. They do not always emphasize a direct link between their experiences and the experience of colleagues, as contributive and therefore relevant for paying attention in the past.

At the same time, the emotional charge of the past experience is well preserved in the memory of respondents and their interviews, thereby contributing to strengthening and reinforcing the perception of the most recent self-organization phenomenon — the Swedish Curators’ Association.

An auxiliary factor for the precarious status of past experience is the lack of discussion of past experience today in the professional field, primarily in written form; the lack of time for respondents to articulate past experience due to high expectations from the curators of the constant production of new material, keep up with the rapidly changing world and balancing between vulnerable professional situations. Thus the latter has long been a post-Fordist trap (Virno, 2004) for cultural workers as the leading producers of immaterial labor. The Dutch sociologist Pascal Gielen lists the main characteristics of such labor and speaks of high mobility, flexible work schedule, project-oriented logic, playful character of work, blurred and broad specialization, as well as high adaptability. In other words, the non-material production factory employees can be accepted to the job and involved in any type of project at any time (Gielen, 2015). In their turn, in a study dedicated to the working conditions of freelance curators in Sweden, Anna Johansson and Emma Reichert emphasize the difficulty of getting and giving up such jobs. However, in their vision, the possible way out of the situation can be a collective refusal, understanding of the contagion of the codependent chain, and consolidation (Johansson & Reichert, 2009).

Overall, this study’ first and unexpected result can be summarized as follows: previous experiences of curatorial self-organizations have not been present in today’s curatorial lifeworld as active memory; rather, they exists in the precarious status of familiar strangers.

However, according to Merleau-Ponty, distance and perception create a situation of optimal recognition and the maximum grip of the experience. He argues for a body to have a lead when experiencing an artwork in a museum in order to see the maximum clarity, form, and
details, etc. This distance can be both spatial and temporal due to the embodied experience of
the phenomenon and the fact that our existence is a bodily existence (Dreyfus, 2016;
Romdenh-Romluc, 2016; Gallagher, 2022). The second finding and result of this study are
supported and confirmed by this premise as well as by the fact that there is a nearly
two-decade distance between the first and the recent attempt to self-organize by curators.
Analyses of the interviews suggest the result as follows: changed individual existential
internal and contextual external parameters played a significant role in the latest formation of
the phenomenon.

If we try to summarize these factors, then their list will include a more tolerant attitude
towards curators from the artists and greater openness for collaborations with curators from
their side; inclusion of curatorial studies into the academic educational system in Sweden;
cross-institutional curatorial work, erasing the rigid boundaries of institutional curators
functions; cross-institutional nomadism of curators; new collegial working ethics; better
awareness regarding the financial situation between colleagues; standardization and
routinization of having contracts; dependency of mentioning and bringing up curatorial names
in public related material; global precariousness and grater polarization in Swedish society;
growth and matureness of personal, professional experience; career development of former
members of previous self-organizations.

While predicates for the emergence of the Swedish Curators’ Association phenomenon, these
factors in parallel characterize and indicate larger shifting processes on the Swedish
contemporary art scene and global landscape. So the figure of the nomadic expert-curator,
who indulged in globalization processes loudly and proudly traveled to international art
events, now stays at home, focuses on solving local problems, and even takes on the role of a
public servant, administrator, and artistic rights advocate, consolidating with colleagues. Their
star and old exclusive understanding of the profession is fading along with the end of
globalization, even greater world polarization, and new economic and political challenges.
The new nomadic creative class, which was ranked by economist Gay Standing among the
precarious only due to its exception to the rule, has now ceased to be dangerous and has
aligned itself with the unprotected strata of society (Standing, 2012).

In parallel, during the last two studied decades, the figure of the institutional curator has also
undergone maturation and accumulated enough critical comments for worthy narrower and
professional representation in the face of economic and political challenges, thus consolidating with independent and more precarious. This was expressed in cross-institutional curatorial work, erasing the rigid boundaries of institutional curators’ functions; cross-institutional nomadism of curators; new collegial working ethics; better awareness regarding the financial situation between colleagues; standardization and routinization of having contracts. Additionally, the inclusion of curatorial studies into the academic educational system in Sweden, brought followed by a significant number of graduates, advanced the curatorial presence within state cultural beaurocracy on different levels: city, municipal, regional, and state.

The falsity of the subject-object dualism and the interpretive nature of experience in phenomenology conditions curators’ understanding of their professional role and its significance. Self-organization as a phenomenon is inextricably linked with this insight. If this premise is natural or given for an individual case of embodied experience, then in a collective, consolidated scenario, curatorial self-organization serves as a supportive mechanism for a collective phenomenological body. Its function resembles a mechanism of sustainability, balance, and equilibrium, due to the diversity of collective curatorial practices and the perception of experiences and their roles by its members. From the above, we can distinguish the third result of this study, which is relevant for all four studied self-organizations.

Finally, the phenomenological analysis of the interviews has also shifted the study hypothesis’ initial perspective to where the self-organizing phenomenon goes beyond just being a support mechanism. It is actually also a tool for curators to self-identify professionally in today’s Sweden. In this case, the Swedish Curators’ Association becomes a survival and translation mechanism not only into the language of bureaucracy and policymakers but also a possibility to redefine the role of the curator by bringing a new definition. When resources become very limited, it becomes critical to be able to fight for one’s rights and convey as much as possible what one is doing and suggest an inclusive yet transparent and precise clear definition of the profession. However, the once fashionable tendency to poetically expand and generalize curatorial functions is still not ultimately a thing of the past. Still, often in the curatorial literature, one can find vague definitions of the curatorial role and its comparisons with other professions that introduce uncertainty for people outside of the profession and serve
exclusively eloquence within the profession.\footnote{One of the arguments of the curators in a conversation with Swedish policymakers about the exclusion of curators, as creators, from financial support during the coronavirus period was the fact that the curator's profession is similar in function and ability to see a whole picture with other creative ones. For example, orchestra conductors, theater directors, editors of publications. This tendency to simplify the multifaceted and complex work of a curator for an external audience is supported everywhere, including those recognized by international curators. For example, in an interview with Terry Smith, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev calls herself a traffic controller, and Maria Lind - a seismographer. Daniel Birnbaum, in a conversation with a Obrist, claims the importancy for curator, as an exception, to keep unclear definition at all. See Talking Contemporary Curating and A Brief History of Curating.}

During one of his lectures on the phenomenology of perception, Hubert L. Dreyfus (1929-2017), a philosophy professor at the University of California, Berkeley, refers to Merleau-Ponty's ideas and argues that there can be nothing more difficult than describing someone's experience and describing what you see (Dreyfus, 2013). Echoing their sentiments, it's crucial to acknowledge the complexities inherent in composing this thesis, primarily residing within the ethical realm. The approach of this study entails grappling and cognition with a substantial number of personal narratives and, sometimes, quite vulnerable information that needed to be carefully and meticulously navigated throughout the thesis without compromising the bestowed trust from participants. This scientific endeavor bore similarities to a curatorial process, marked by meticulous concern and conscientious handling of exhibit materials. At the same time, the collected stories from much-experienced colleagues put a considerable challenge for an emerging curator. This brought to mind the endeavors of the advocacy work done by FOKS and IKK, despite young Ekroth, Garin, and Johansson jeopardizing their nascent careers. Another limitation of this study pertained to the novelty of the context of the Swedish contemporary art scene and the constrained timeframe available for comprehending and delivering the research. Lastly, a lack of proficiency in the Swedish language not only limited the use of existing literature but simultaneously also led to greater dependence and reliability on the methodology and theory employed in this study, thereby enhancing the capacity to discern and comprehend the limited available material.

This study attempted to reveal the phenomenon of curatorial self-organization in Sweden in the first quarter of the 21st century. It has the potential to contribute to both academic knowledge and practical applications in the field of curating and the broader art and cultural landscape in Sweden. Some of the research outputs provide an understanding of the curatorial practices, trends, and dynamics during the period of the emergence of curatorial education as well as the establishment of institutional critique and liberation of independent curating in...
Sweden. The research insights could also offer insights into the interplay between curatorial choices and societal, political, or artistic developments. The thesis might refine existing theoretical and methodological approaches to explain curatorial self-organization. It could also enrich discussions on self-organization, artistic freedom, and creative agency. The analysis of curatorial self-organization in Sweden could be compared with similar trends in other countries or regions, contributing to a more global perspective on curatorial practices.

The findings could offer practical insights for current and future curators to enhance their self-organizational skills and navigate challenges effectively. The thesis could also be transformed into educational resources to train emerging curators about self-organization and the historical context of curatorial practices in Sweden. Finally, cultural policymakers and Swedish funding agencies could use the research to understand better the needs and challenges faced by curators, potentially influencing decisions related to financial support and advocacy.

This study serves to address the issue of insufficiently represented firsthand curatorial experience in Sweden, thereby enriching comprehension regarding the multifaceted essence of curatorial labor—both as a solitary, distinctive endeavor and a collaborative united undertaking. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that this study delved to a profound extent, cautious against overgeneralization, recognizing the intricacies inherent within each instance.

Some of the future study’s recommendations include further research and development of the concept of the collective curatorial phenomenological body through combination with posthumanism, transhumanism and IT perspectives. The first proposition comes from the side results of this study, in which it became clear that time, chance, serendipity, and intuition were formative non-human actors, and their influence also shaped the understanding of the essence of the profession. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's perspective that a body serves as a compass for orientation and ultimate coping mechanism, together with bringing the notions of crutch, adaptation, and transformation in transhumanism and building upon this study's discovery of curatorial self-organization functioning as an extension of the individual curatorial body such an integration holds promise for valuable insights.

The latter proposition emerges due to the very practice-oriented and product-based character of curatorial work and labor, despite being material or immaterial. Given the study results on
the past experience of curatorial self-organization and the involvement of almost the exact group of participants (a.k.a. coders, developers, etc.), one could reasonably infer that the latest phenomenon of curatorial self-organization represents an evolution akin to an upgraded software version, building upon past experiences. Both insights are a by-product of the research and do not directly correspond to the objectives of this thesis. Nonetheless, both assumptions hold the capacity to yield noteworthy novel insights within the realm of curatorial research.
Summary

Through its exploration of the Swedish Curators’ Association and informed by the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this thesis has identified and analyzed the shifts within the curatorial profession in Sweden throughout 2000-2022 with a strong emphasis on self-understanding. Additionally, this study determined the opportunities, challenges, and implications of working with self-organized curatorial contexts by researching, preserving, and illuminating the legacy of four curators: Power Ekroth, Jonatan Habib Engqvist, Marianna Garin, and Anna Johansson. Lastly, the study introduced a concept of familiar strangers within the curatorial domain to unveil a state of unfamiliarity and precariousness for three self-organized Swedish curatorial initiatives such as Föreningen Organiserade Curatorer i Sverige (FOCS), The Institute for Artists and Mediators (IKK), and Nordic Curators United.

To begin with, the study collected through interviews its primary material, which was later analyzed and synthesized with the implementation of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The analysis resulted in a rigorous investigation of the study participants’ personal firsthand lived experiences by following recommendations of IPA scholars, namely Peoples, Nizza, and Smith. Further creation of exploratory notes and their later interpretation by suggesting experiential statements, let in their turn to forming the study chapters and structure.

To continue, the study focused on comprehending and testing the first initial results and overall research data through a phenomenological theoretical perspective. The study extracted, finalized, and built the presentation of the final results based on writings of notable and contemporary phenomenologists, including Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, Heidegger, Yampolskaya, Podoroga, Gallagher and others. Guided by the leading principle of phenomenological inquiry, which could be summarized as describing rather than solving a problem, this study always focused on the participants’ perceptions and self-understanding of lived experiences.

Finally, the study attempted to interpret the findings and implement them within the curatorial theoretical field by building a dialogue with Swedish and international curators, including Maria Lind, Antonina Trubitsita, Camilla Larsson, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Viktor...
Misiano, Terry Smith, and others. This, in its turn, resulted in suggestions for a possible further academic contribution to the curatorial field.
Bibliography


Kakkori, L. (2020) Hermeneutics and Phenomenology Problems When Applying Hermeneutic Phenomenological Method in Educational Qualitative Research. ResearchGate. DOI: 10.7202/1072329ar


Larsson, C. (2012) *Curatorns ordning: En diskursanalys av curatorns yrkesroll*. [Degree project/Master's thesis/Södertörn University, School of Culture and Education]. Södertörn University DiVa portal. http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?aq2=%5B%5B%5D%5D&c=271&af=%5B%5D&s earchType=SIMPLE&query=&language=en&pid=diva2%3A604343&aq=%5B%5B%7B%2 2categoryId%22%3A%22%7D%22%22%7D%5D%5D&sf=all&aqe=%5B%5D&sortOrder=auth or_sort_asc&onlyFullText=false&noOfRows=50&dswid=5020


Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2016, December, 8). *Science in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology*. [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCY-edDd4_g&list=PLrhF9qFzVoxmN6qLenDl7_S8hAzC8EHp&index=16](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCY-edDd4_g&list=PLrhF9qFzVoxmN6qLenDl7_S8hAzC8EHp&index=16)


**Unpublished sources**

Ekroth, Power. Interview by Sona Stepanyan. Stockholm, December 3, 2021 and December 2, 2022

Garin, Marianna. Interview by Sona Stepanyan. Stockholm, February 22, 2022 and December 2, 2022


Appendix (Interview Questions)

Power Ekroth

1. Do you remember how you decided to become a curator? How it felt?
2. Please tell me more about your background in curatorial education, expectations from it, future professional dreams and how it felt.
3. Has your attitude, awareness, understanding of the profession changed since then?
4. Do you remember the first time you wanted to self-organize other curators? How it felt?
5. Do you remember how and why you started FOCS?
6. How it was to be in FOCS? Tell me please more about the organization, its structure, aims.
7. Why do you think curators before your initiative had no need to organize themselves?
8. In 2006 similar to FOCS organization (IKK) did a survey regarding the working conditions of curators and they asked institutional and freelance curators. What was your position in regards to that moment? Do you remember their survey? Did you participate?
9. Have you ever had an institutional position?
10. Now, let’s speak about the Swedish Curators’ Association. Do you remember how you decided to start and self-organize again? And why? How it felt?
11. Did involvement in SCF change your understanding of your curatorial role?
12. What is your sense of being a curator today? How do you position and explain it to yourself?

Jonatan Habib Engqvist

1. How did you start, Jonatan?
2. Do you remember the moment when you told yourself, OK I want to become a curator? How it felt?
3. Have you ever had an institutional position?
4. Has your attitude, awareness, and understanding of the profession changed since then, and how?

5. But you had a few attempts to self-organize. Do you remember the first time you wanted to self-organize other curators? Why? How did it feel?

6. Then in 2006 IKK did a survey regarding the working conditions of curators, and they asked institutional and freelance curators. What was your position in regard to that moment? Did you participate?

7. Have you ever been FOCS’s member?

8. Now, let’s speak about the Swedish Curators’ Association. Do you remember how you decided to join another curatorial self-organize again? And why? How did it feel?

9. Did involvement in SCF change your understanding of your curatorial role?

10. What is your sense of being a curator today? How do you position and explain it to yourself?

**Marianna Garin**

1. Do you remember how you decided to become a curator? How did it feel?

2. Please tell me more about your background in curatorial education, expectations from it, dreams, and how it felt.

3. Has your attitude, awareness, and understanding of the profession changed since then?

4. Do you remember how and why you joined FOCS?

5. How it was to be in FOCS?

6. In 2006 similar to FOCS organization (IKK) did a survey regarding the working conditions of curators, and they asked institutional and freelance curators. What was your position in regard to that moment? Do you remember their survey? Did you participate?

7. Have you ever had an institutional position?

8. Now, let’s speak about the Swedish Curators’ Association. Do you remember how you decided to join another curatorial self-organize again? And why? How did it feel?

9. Did involvement in SCF change your understanding of your curatorial role?

10. What is your sense of being a curator today? How do you position and explain it to yourself?
Anna Johansson

1. Can we go before 2006? Can you tell me about the choice of being a curator? Do you remember that moment, how it felt?

2. Please tell me more about your background in curatorial education, expectations from it, future professional dreams, and how it felt.

3. IKK mentions region’s working conditions’ can you describe the region at that time? Why IKK used the term mediators and not curators? Was there a general feeling of being marginalized as a curator, also in regards to not being as ‘central Stockholm’?

4. What can you remember about other similar parallel initiatives, like FOCS, for example? Did you have a relationship with it?

5. How did you feel about the task/commission?

6. What was the process of gathering material like? What were your feelings? Did you conduct it from Malmö?

7. Why do you think curators before your initiative had no need to organize?

8. How did your perception of curators/curating change after the survey?

9. Please tell me more about your background in curatorial education.

10. Now, let’s speak about the Swedish Curators’ Association. Do you remember how you decided to join? And why?

11. How do you see your curatorial role these days? How it differs from the previous?