Cecilia Dean on curation as a creative act

October 26, 2016 - Cecilia Dean is one of the founders of *Visionaire*—an art and fashion publication that, for the past 25 years, has put forth a kaleidoscopic notion of what a magazine can be. This includes everything from an issue comprised entirely of uniquely-designed scents, a "Forever" issue constructed of metal plates, and a "Sound" issue made up of 12 vinyl albums accompanied by a toy car that plays the records by driving across them.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2769 words.

Tags: Writing, Art, Curation, Inspiration, Multi-tasking, Success, Beginnings.

How do you go about condensing 25 years of *Visionaire* into one book?

We wanted to take the strongest images, and the ones that talked about creative freedom, since that's what's at the core of *Visionaire*. It's always been about creative freedom; even when we get into these fancy formats and new technologies and crazy ideas, at the end of the day, it's still about creative freedom and about pushing people to do new work or to be experimental. We encourage people to do something that they couldn't necessarily do for anyone else.

Now that we're branching out into film, we're still keeping that DNA. It's still about creative freedom, and it's been a topic very much on our minds, because we're also trying to figure out the direction of our website, which is a little all over the place simply because we haven't paid enough attention to it.

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Mostly we've been thinking about everything we've done and examining our history. Putting together this book has forced us to go back 25 years and relive and rethink a lot of things. Trying to succinctly boil yourself down into a couple words and a few images is hard to do, but it's important that you can do that. That's a bit how we were editing, and then we wanted to make sure we had all of our favorite contributors in it, too.

We've literally worked with tens of thousands of people at this point. It's crazy. It's something you don't think about on a daily basis, but when we were putting together the book it suddenly becomes *all* you think about. When we tell people that we're going back and examining our first 25 years everyone's just like, "25 years! That's a shit long time to be doing something." And it is.

It speaks to the mutability and changeability of the project that it can go for 25 years and not feel stale.

I think that's precisely why we've been able to do it for 25 years, because it's never been the same thing twice. Especially now that we're doing *Visionaire* once a year and we're *really* getting crazy with it and we're also starting film. It's such a natural evolution of what we do and how we see things. I feel like we're constantly keeping ourselves entertained and slightly stressed out at all times. If we don't feel like we've bitten off more than we can chew, we're not doing something right. We're constantly feeling like we're in over our heads. We feel it *all* the time, but I think that's a good thing. You should always feel that way, otherwise you aren't reaching far enough.

Curation as a creative act is a concept a lot of people don't understand.

I feel like most people don't understand it. I also feel like the words "curating" and "editing" mean very different things for most people. I think people imagine that curation involves being given 20 different things and then you've got to say yes, no, yes, no. It's so much more than that. You have to come up with the whole concept as well as the entire space and context for where that stuff—the art and content that will be created—is going to live. That's the hard part. Then you get the artists onboard to be part of it.

With the *Visionaire* publications, is it usually a process of working backwards? For example, do you first need to envision the final object—a selection of artist-created fragrances and corresponding images—and then work backwards from there? Here is the thing we want to make…now, how do we make it?

That's how I work. I think other people work differently, often in a more abstract way, but for us, we can have an abstract thought. "Oh, wouldn't it be great to smell everything in the issue?" But until you can somewhat visualize it, it's hard to work on. I can't work on it unless I have an image of it, and then you have to allow for that image to evolve. With the scent issue for example—was it scratch and sniff? Is it solid scents? Is it like what we ended up with-vials with liquids in them? You consider the myriad of ways you can contain and present a smell, but eventually I need to have a somewhat solid, "Okay, it's going to be a case and there's going to be bottles of liquids and then there's going to be some images." And then you work towards that.

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How all of that ends up coming together is the process, but I have to at least have that in my head, or else it's impossible to work on because you don't even know who to call. I always say, you can have these amazing concepts or abstract ideas, but you have to be able to ration it down to your list of phone calls, and until you can get to that point, it will be very hard to make it happen.

What do you think it is about your personality that makes you well-suited to doing this kind of work?

I don't know. I feel like I can't do anything else.

Were you always that way? Even as a kid, were you a project person? A maker?

No. I was very organized. I have a very organized mind. I was always very goal-oriented, and I think maybe that's why I have to be able to picture it in order to know where I'm going—getting from step A to point B. So much of making a concept into reality, it's about hyper-organization. It's about being able to plan your steps in order and figure out what e-mails and phone calls to make. They're quite banal things, but it's all those little banal things that blossom into something big.

In that respect, I enjoy coming to the office and tapping away on my computer. We sit here at the office tapping away. We accomplish so much by doing that. Again, these are sort of banal things—the endless emails, the endless inquiries. It's not very glamorous or exciting a lot of the time. We're not always making any huge movements, but all those

things added together become something big. So much of the process is simply research.

It's still a creative act, though. For some people, the artist, it's about physically creating an object. For the curator, it's about stepping back and looking at the bigger picture, which is its own kind of creation.

I always feel like artists are working from a place deep within their psyche. They have visions or messages that they're compelled to get out of their body physically through painting or sculpture or whatever medium they choose. I always picture it as quite a visceral existence. Obviously I can only speak for myself, but it would seem to me that a curator or an editor or someone who's assembling these things within a context doesn't have that visceral, emotional… I don't want to say connection, but it's not the same imperative to create on that level.

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It's more like you're looking at all this stuff in the world. There's just so much stuff and visuals and messages and you're trying to make sense of it. You're kind of like, "Oh, how can I put these things together and for it to make sense?" There's just so much going on. I feel like in some ways, every single person is a curator and an editor. You are curating your surroundings at all times. Everything in your life is a choice. We've just happened to have made a career out of it.

It must be satisfying when you get to see the prototype of something that you've been imagining and working on for months. When it becomes something that you can physically touch and hold and think about.

I wish those moments came more often and lasted for a longer time. There's something really amazing about seeing a final prototype. Very often, they are not final prototypes. We're like, "Oh, but that's wrong," and, "Oh, that's going to get changed," or, "Oh, we've got to tweak that," but there is something like, "Oh, okay. It finally went from inside all of our heads into this thing that we can actually hold and show and sell," which is really great. It's funny, because with so many of the past *Visionaire* issues, all I can see now are all the things that we compromised on. A lot of times it's like, "Oh yes, that looks great, but ideally it's really supposed to be like *this*," but for various reasons, it couldn't be that way.

I appreciate that the *Visionaire* objects approach technology in a playful way. In the end, you're still producing an object—a thing that people can touch and hold and interact with—but can you imagine doing things in the future that only exist in a digital realm?

Absolutely. Totally. I think that will be fascinating. I think there's something really interesting about the ephemeral, especially in this day and age. Digital is so ephemeral. There are artists out there who only do digital work, so if you buy their artwork, you're buying a URL. It's weird. It's so outside of the traditional structure of gallery sales. There's nothing to put on the wall. You can put a screen on the wall, I suppose, but it's not exactly the same thing.

We've always been into experiences. We haven't made a big deal out of that, but it just keeps coming up because everyone talks about things that are experiential. It's like that. It's the word of the moment, or has been for years now. We're totally into making issues of *Visionaire* an experience. You kind of have to deal with them. It's very hard to understand them from the website or just looking at photos. You can't smell it or taste it, in some cases.

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The idea of doing experiences in real time is fascinating for us, and again, it's something super ephemeral. If we can make an issue out of an event, that's an interesting concept. We're using technology like 3D capture. Actually, our next issue is called *Rituals*, and it involves sculptural candles, so we worked with Bruce Weber on sculptures and we used 3D capture, which is the latest in capturing technology. It was fun to do with a photographer like Bruce Weber, who generally only uses film. We're using technologies in the background, but then the final piece looks totally old world, and I think that's a lot of fun.

Now that the possibilities of virtual reality are becoming more accessible, it's interesting to see what people are doing with it. Lots of people are making work you can only experience under specific parameters.

I love that. That's wild. On one hand, you're limiting your reach because everyone has to show up at a certain place or time or experience something under very specific parameters—so there's a lot of people who aren't going to either be able to show up or be willing to put up with it. On that level, it's a little limiting. I love digital because you can reach a huge audience very quickly if you want to, but I feel like we love experiential because so many people are just sitting there tapping away on their laptops all day. They are eager to experience something that takes them away from that, to have their other senses engaged.

Being able to help someone bring their creative vision to life—to organize these kinds of visions into something people can see and experience—I honestly can't think of anything better.

I'm really into performance art, mostly because you never know what you're in for. Sometimes it's like, "Oh god, this is so terrible," but even when it's terrible it's usually interesting. I think it becomes really interesting when you start to analyze it. That's the fun part. It's like, "Okay, why did I like this?" Or, "Why did I hate this?" I try to figure out the very specific things I reacted go, so that then you can try to use those ideas in your own life or work. It's like going to see performance art or going to galleries or museums or movies… For me, it's like a workout for your brain. We'll all go to the gym, but too often we neglect our brain.

Cecilia Dean Recommends:

Ryan McNamara: He's a performance artist, who most recently curated "Back to School," a take-over of the entire PS1 building. McNamara lectured on the 2008 financial crisis through participatory choreography.

Creative Time and Pedro Reyes' *Doomacracy:*. Creative Time puts on some of the best public art I have ever experienced, like *Fly by Night*, the pigeon performance by Duke Riley (this past summer) and Kara Walker's *Marvelous Sugar Baby* at the incredible Domino Sugar Factory (2014).

Katharina Grosse's painted house at Fort Tilden, Rockaway.

Visionaire's "AUTOPORTRAIT" exhibition is a car assembly line robot re-programmed to draw your portrait.

Whit's End at the Riis Park Beach Bazaar on the beach in Rockaway (open all winter). It is an adventure getting out there, but the food is worth the trip. And I love the beach off-season, so grey and desolate and other-worldly.

Having worked with all different kinds of artists, is there some sort of commonality you've experienced in dealing with creative people?

I think you and I are probably in a very privileged position in that you're interviewing people who want to be interviewed. We're up for it. You've asked us, we've said yes, and we're embracing the moment and going to have a good time, which is great. I'm sure there's a lot of interviewers who are assigned to interview someone who doesn't want to be

interviewed who has to because it’s part of their contract to promote their film or their album or whatever. That’s probably really difficult and a huge drag, but that’s something that I’m not really ever confronted with, because I’m asking artists to participate in a creative project, whether that’s an issue of *Visionaire* of a film or one of our exhibitions. If they say yes, we’re going to work together and it’s going to be a somewhat enjoyable experience because we’re both up for it. It doesn’t mean it’s a heap of fun and it’s stress-free, but we’re in it together. We’re in the same boat. We have the same goal, and we’re going to do what it takes to make it happen.

I’m never in a situation where I’m working with someone who doesn’t want to work with me, because the moment they say, “I don’t want to work with you,” you’re like, “Okay, that’s fine. I’ll call you for the next opportunity.” And that really is totally fine. My experience with creative people is incredibly positive mostly because I think they’re amazing. I just have so much awe for artists. I just think they’re amazing and what what comes out of their head is just so unique and has such a personal perspective on the world and it makes you see things differently. It’s eye-opening every time. It’s a privilege to be able to work with creatives in the capacity I work with them, so I never take it for granted. Being able to help someone bring their creative vision to life—to organize these kinds of visions into something people can see and experience—I honestly can’t think of anything better. I get to enable creativity. I’m a creative enabler.

Name
Cecilia Dean

Vocation
Curator, Tastemaker

Fact

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Photo: Francois Nars