

On staying open to the world around you



Curator, cultural worker, and film programmer Lydia Ogwang on turning her long-time love of art into a full-time career, finding inspiration everywhere, and the importance of knowing yourself.

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As told to Jessica Kasiama, 2442 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Curation](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

Can you tell me about the path that led you to where you are in your career today?

Growing up, I was [always interested in art] and was a voracious reader. I went to business school for university, which I didn't love, but it was nice to integrate so many different disciplines, especially once I got into the marketing and branding kind of conversations [in the later years of business school]. After graduating, I didn't take the traditional path. The things that were most exciting to me were the work that I was doing in independent publishing outside of the day jobs that I had.

I worked for a couple of different magazines, including an alternative fashion magazine based in Toronto called WORN Fashion Journal, which was so exciting. I started writing for WORN and then writing book reviews. From book reviews, I got into writing film criticism. I was lucky for [the writing that I did on film] to be noticed by people who thought that it was interesting and encouraged me to move further into a career in film. After that point, I started working in film distribution, and then from there, I moved on to TIFF Cinematheque in Toronto, which is really where I started dabbling in film programming, or at least learning the ropes.

There's such specificity to Toronto's art and culture scene. What was it like to leave that to work in New York City?

I think the biggest shift for me was moving from a not-for-profit world to a for-profit model. Coming from that not-for-profit context to working in New York, it's been an exciting opportunity to learn a new curatorial language, because you're having to [rise to the challenge of] servicing different audiences.

I like to physically be at the theater a lot, even if I'm not seeing or introducing a film. I just want to see who's there, what are the vibes? Is the audience skewing older or younger? Is there a certain ethnic demographic strongly represented for a certain screening? All of these different things are information that you should be using to inform what you're doing. It's that commitment to being a sponge. I find a lot of times if I introduce a screening, at the end of the screening, I'll stand in the lobby and a lot of people will just come up to say hello and to just chat, say thank you, or, "This film made me think of this." Being present and creating the opportunity to have those interactions has been important for me in adjusting to this new context.

I don't think that you can be a film programmer in New York and be working in a silo. I think that you need to be going to theaters across the town, you need to be going to the micro cinemas, you need to be just checking out the scenes, seeing who's there, seeing what works in different spaces or for different audiences, and just

knowing that you're there to learn. I think that has been key in becoming more confident about the transition.

What are the frameworks, goals, or guiding principles that you stand by in the work that you do as a programmer and cultural worker?

I'm always surprised at how simple the work can be. It's just understanding why you respond to something and then figuring out how to translate that externally. If you can do that, you can speak to different audiences or provide different experiences. It's context-specific but if you can get comfortable with, "What is the thing in the work that I'm responding to?" and then figure out how to communicate that, I think that will serve you in any curatorial position.

As much as it's about knowing yourself, it's also about understanding that this work is service work in a lot of ways. You have a duty to your audiences. In an ideal scenario, you are providing them with something that they didn't know that they needed or wanted to see. Your job is exposing them to that magic.

There is no framework for me. It is just getting to the essence of whatever that thing is in a work and figuring out, "Okay, who's going to respond to this? Who needs to see this? How do I reach those people? How do I get those people to the screening that I'm planning?" All of that will come together if you have a clear sense of what the work is offering and what you are offering by putting that work on a pedestal.

I used to identify as someone who was very suspicious of documentary film but that shifted for me after watching Black Mother by Khalik Allah, which I discovered through your writing. You've written about and programmed so many other groundbreaking documentaries, including Mur Murs by Agnès Varda and Garrett Bradley's Time. What draws you to documentary film?

For me, all of film is an opportunity to see the world how someone else sees it, whether it is narrative, nonfiction, short format, or long format. I think that is what is exciting about the medium in general. Documentaries can get closer to that feeling or closer to someone literally showing you what life is for someone else.

Whenever filmmakers find different ways to narrativize within the documentary form, I think that's very interesting, too. A kind of bending of reality. That's what a good documentary-viewing experience feels like for me. Khalik Allah is a great example because he is first and foremost a very gifted photographer. So, is he shooting anything much more than people that he's encountering on the street or people in his community? Not necessarily. But you can't deny that there's quite a bit of magic in the way that he's done that. And I think examining how that magic comes to be is a very potent space as a viewer and programmer.

In past interviews, you've alluded to the omnipresence of the white male critic and film spaces being dominated by consensus opinion. What has your journey been like in cultivating your taste, and learning how to trust it?

Even though I'm quite early in my career, I feel like I couldn't have done it when I was younger because so much of becoming a good curator is knowing yourself. I'm just now getting to a place where I have a good enough sense of myself that I can understand why I am responding to something. And because I know why I'm responding to it, I can kind of intuit how other people might respond to it who are different from me in some ways or similar to me in some ways. That deep inner reflection is at the core of curatorial work for me. When an idea clicks or comes together, I can feel it. It's so striking and electric and undeniable. Emerging curators should familiarize themselves with that feeling and welcome it.

I've been so fortunate throughout my short career to be working with some of the best people to ever do it in terms of repertory film programming or contemporary film programming, but that's a lesson that I had to learn for myself. And since I've had that realization, it's unlocked an entirely new phase of artistic and curatorial engagement for me. Film programming is not a thing that exists in a vacuum, you have to bring yourself to the work, and that's the only way forward. I don't think there's any way around that.

There's something very exciting there about trusting a somatic feeling. What happens to you in the aftermath of watching a movie? When the screen fades black, do you immediately try to get your thoughts down? Do you give yourself a moment to sit with it?

I always watch all of the credits roll at the end of a film. I'm not trying to chat with my neighbor or the person I came with. I actually prefer to go to screenings alone because the experience is about me and the art. And I think for someone who programs for a for-profit movie theater, that's maybe an interesting take because, of course, you do want the theater to be a communal space and a space where people can come and see their friends and all of that and meet other people. But for me I just like to sit with what I am feeling.

What are the tools that you've learned to employ in making the theater feel oriented around connection and community-building?

The thing that I was saying earlier about just being a familiar face goes a long way. I've always loved it when I've gone to a theater that I don't often go to but every time I'm there I see the same front-of-house person or you see the curator standing in the back, the same way that I do. I also think making space for all types of people, even just in the physical space, is important. Physically having a space that is open to the public with no strings attached is important.

In terms of things that I can do myself, when I'm at the theater, having dinner upstairs, or introducing a film, I want to be cognizant of the energy that I'm bringing into this space. I'm someone who needs a lot of alone time and this job is quite social. You are in meetings all day or hosting filmmakers, whatever it is. Even if you are on the street outside, sometimes, and it's so lovely when this happens, someone will come up to you and tell you, "I saw a screening that you did a couple of weeks ago and this is what it meant to me." You do have to be open and receptive to those kind gestures.

I make sure that when I'm around, I have positive energy. That means that if I've had several social engagements during the week and I'm feeling overwhelmed or in need of alone time, I won't come to the theater. In that sense, work-life balance is a big part of this. Just knowing what you need and knowing that people will remember the energy that you brought to the space or the impression that you left on them, matters as much in community building as what the physical space looks like and offers.

I also want to demystify and understand the more solitary parts, like the research processes. What tools and resources do you turn to when you're in the early stages of planning a new series, for example?

What I always want to impress is how singular or solitary a lot of the work can be because I know on the surface it can look like this very glamorous lifestyle.

In a lot of film programs or any kind of curatorial engagement, you're building projects from scratch. These are essentially just pet projects, and you are the only one that can push it forward. It doesn't have any shape before, you create that shape. It can be just reading books by yourself for hours and hours. A lot of my evenings and weekends are just me in Wikipedia wormholes, for example. It is just deep diving into things that you think are interesting and trying to figure out a way to translate that magic. Getting to that place, when you're starting from zero, can be a kind of lonely journey but the exciting part is that you are pulling inspiration from all over.

It's exciting how freeform that work can be. Maybe I'm listening to a song, or curating a playlist, and I'm inspired by the way that certain sounds rub up against each other. I'm thinking about the way that each of those individual works is activated by being in proximity to each other, and that can inspire me about the structure of a shorts program, which recently happened to me. All of that is rooted in just being sensorially open. So, in terms of the tools and resources, it's the world. Every single thing around you can be inspiring in a curatorial sense.

I'm curious about how being sensorially open helps you to keep the spark alive in your relationship with film.

I feel like it's a commitment to remaining open to inspiration or messages through any kind of art, or forms of knowledge through art, and committing to seeing things in new ways. It's about paying attention to art in general, not just film, because engaging with creativity of all kinds is going to sharpen your senses. For example, curating playlists and also starting to DJ, especially working with vinyl and having that kind of tactile relation with the artwork, has reinvigorated my interest in moving images, just thinking about how all the sounds work together and all of that.

I've also been really into design and architecture lately and thinking about how film is such a sensorially rich way to present design and architecture, especially when you are in a theatrical setting. You're sitting there looking at the scaffolding of a building on a huge screen in front of you. It's hard not to be stunned by that, just based on the scale.

Everything that you are taking in is going to inform the work that you're doing. You have to understand that and live your life in a way that facilitates those experiences. I think that if you can tap into that, you're always going to remain inspired.

What makes you feel hopeful about the future of film programming?

In general, I'm inspired by things being interdisciplinary. And I think we're seeing that not just on the curatorial side, but I would say we're also seeing it from the creator's side. Films aren't just living in movie theaters as they traditionally might have been, they're also living in galleries. I'm excited by how curators can uplift the work that artists are doing by re-imagining ways of exhibiting those works.

And I look forward to whatever I am going to be doing in five years because I'm very inspired by the work that I see other more experienced curators doing around me.

Lydia Ogwang Recommends:

[Soukous archives on YouTube](#)

Lemons—for the best chance at a pleasing life, always have two in the kitchen.

[Jamaica Kincaid](#) books

["Muana Bangu" - Empire Bakuba from Empire Bakuba \(1985, LP\)](#)

Moving your body—this usually helps.

[Name](#)

Lydia Ogwang

[Vocation](#)

curator, cultural worker, film programmer

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