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On the Tip of Creative Tongues

By [ALEX WILLIAMS](#)

THE Tipping Point, a store in Houston that calls itself a sneaker lifestyle shop, does not just sell a collection of differently colored rubber soles, along with books, music and apparel. No, its Web site declares, the store "curates" its merchandise.

Promoters at Piano's, a nightclub on the Lower East Side, announced on their Web site that they will "curate a night of Curious burlesque."

Eric Demby, a founder of the Brooklyn Flea swap meet, does not hire vendors to serve grilled cheese sandwiches, pickles and tamales to hungry shoppers. He "personally curates the food stands," according to New York magazine.

And to think, not so long ago, curators worked at museums.

The word "curate," lofty and once rarely spoken outside exhibition corridors or British parishes, has become a fashionable code word among the aesthetically minded, who seem to paste it onto any activity that involves culling and selecting. In more print-centric times, the term of art was "edit" — as in a boutique edits its dress collections carefully. But now, among designers, disc jockeys, club promoters, bloggers and thrift-store owners, curate is code for "I have a discerning eye and great taste."

Or more to the point, "I belong."

For many who adopt the term, or bestow it on others, "it's an innocent form of self-inflation," said John H. McWhorter, a linguist and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. "You're implying that there is some similarity between what you do and what someone with an advanced degree who works at a museum does."

Indeed, these days, serving as a guest curator of a design blog, craft fair or department store is an honor. Last month, Scott Schuman, creator of The Sartorialist, a photo blog about street fashion, was invited to curate a pop-up shop at Barneys New York.

The term “curator” was not intended to be hyperbole, said Tom Kalendarian, the men’s fashion director for Barneys. Consulting closely with the photographer, a former fashion retailer, the store stocked just the right items to help shoppers achieve the elegant, eclectic look The Sartorialist regularly features on its site.

“It was precisely his eye” that made the store want to partner with him, Mr. Kalendarian said. “It was about the right shade of blue, about the cut, about the width of a lapel.”

Curtis Macdonald, a Brooklyn musician, also says that “curate” precisely describes his job: hiring bands for a local site.

“When given to opportunity to curate an evening of music, choosing the right bands is very similar to curating a museum,” Mr. Macdonald explained in an e-mail message. “Since I, the ‘curator,’ choose personnel based on a particular aesthetic, I am able to think of creative ways of presenting music beyond the traditional ‘call-up a venue and ask for a gig’ way of presenting.”

Indeed, invoking the word can be good for one’s image and business, said Karuna Tillmon James, 30, who has a background in fine-art photography and recently opened a consignment shop selling designer clothing in Brentwood, Calif. It’s name: Curate Couture.

“I knew that people in the know would gravitate toward it,” Ms. James said. The name signals that hers is not just another secondhand-clothing shop, she said, “selling stuff that was gross and old and had been crammed in trunks for years. It would have very specific pieces, selected purposefully.”

Summon the word “curate,” she added, and “people know you’re going to get it.”

Pretentious? Maybe. But it’s hardly unusual for members of less pedigreed professions to adopt the vernacular of more prestigious ones, said Geoffrey Nunberg, a linguist at the [University of California, Berkeley](#).

For instance, he said, the term “associate” originally tended to connote a partner or a work colleague who shared “a position of authority with another,” as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it. The description has expanded to include employees at all levels of the organization, including sales and customer service associates.

In the case of curate, which the Oxford dictionary simply defines as “to look after and preserve,” its standard “museum” meaning dominated until the mid-’90s, when references to curating hotel libraries and CD-of-the-month clubs started to pop up in periodicals, said Jesse Sheidlower, a lexicographer with the Oxford English Dictionary.

After 2000, nontraditional usage of the word took off. And as it continues to grow in popularity, others must adopt it, too, or face the consequences. For example, if all the rival nightclub promoters are “curating” parties, Mr. Sheidlower said, you don’t want to be the one left “hosting” one.

On the Web, the word — and the concept — have taken particular hold, not a surprise given the Internet clutter. Etsy, the shopping Web site devoted to handmade and vintage goods, routinely brings in shelter magazine editors, fashion designers and design bloggers to serve as “guest curators.”

Even news-aggregator Web sites, like [Tina Brown](#)’s Daily Beast, promote themselves as cultural curators.

“The Daily Beast doesn’t aggregate,” Ms. Brown says in a statement on the site. “It sifts, sorts, and curates. We’re as much about what’s not there as what is.”

In fact, curatorship of photos culled from Flickr pages, or of knitted scarves on Etsy, can be an artistic pursuit in itself, said Virginia Postrel, a cultural critic and the author of “The Substance of Style.”

“Because there are more things to put together,” she said, “the juxtapositions become a big part of the interesting experience of those things. It is a creative activity in itself.”

The talent for choosing among countless objects is not very different from the work of collage artists — or top D.J.s, explained Scott Plagenhoef, the editor-in-chief of Pitchfork, the music Web site.

“Certainly things like structure, flow, revelation, juxtaposition and other elements of D.J.-ing and mixing are considered an art,” said Mr. Plagenhoef, who served as an unpaid “curator” for the All Tomorrow’s Parties music festival in England. “Remix culture is a form of creative expression in its own right.”

And what of actual museum curators themselves? Are they offended by the democratization of their title?

“Maybe the use of ‘curate’ to refer to extra-museum activities is just metaphorical, akin to the way we use the word ‘doctor’ as a verb,” Laura Hoptman, a senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, wrote in an e-mail message. “If we doctor a script, we are only theoretically operating on it.”

“It doesn’t really bother me,” she said of the trend. “Actually, I’m hoping its popularity will spawn a reality television show — maybe ‘Top Curator’?”

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