CURATING

How a dust-covered word took over the world.

(Intelligent Life)

You may not have heard of Curate Africa, but when it comes to ambition its organisers are in a league of their own. This "major project of photography and curation" encompasses the entire continent and aims to "mark a departure from histories of representation concerned with African people, places and realities". What this is supposed to mean is anybody's guess, but one thing is certain – the verb "curate" has come a very long way.

Twenty years ago, it was a candidate for the least fashionable word in the English language – used only by a small band of art-world professionals, and evocative of dusty showcases in the nether regions of half-forgotten museums. Dictionaries, unless they ran to several volumes, didn't even list it. The idea that it might become common currency would have been considered ludicrous.

But in the last few years, like the keyboard symbol "@", it has risen from the verge of extinction to become almost ubiquitous. People don't just curate exhibitions – they curate everything, and believe it cool to do so. This year's Bestival music festival is "curated" by the DJ Rob da Bank; a Japanese restaurant in Idaho offers "a collection of sushi curated by the chefs"; the networking organisation Editorial Intelligence runs a workshop on "curating your knowledge". (At £500 for a half day, this apparently involves "working out what information you do and don't currently take in… and avoiding overload".)

"I have grown to detest this innocent word," sighs Sara Hawker, a senior lexicographer on the "Oxford English Dictionary". "It's a form of self-inflation, used to convey the idea that the person concerned has some expert knowledge that you can trust, and generally accompanied by an adverb such as 'meticulously' or 'professionally'. It's one of those words that started by just occasionally cropping up and then all of a sudden was everywhere. It's now so widely used that it's become just a way of saying 'select'."

The verb derives from the much older noun "curator". This first appeared in the fourteenth century as an alternative – confusingly – to the noun "curate", meaning a priest's assistant, but later came to used in the secular sense of "a person in charge". By the mid-seventeenth century it had acquired a scholastic and artistic dimension ("the officer in charge of a museum, library, or other collection"), and a few decades later the verb "to curate" appeared. For some 200 years, however, it was stuck with the ultra-obscure meaning of "to provide a

record of curation". Not until the end of the nineteenth century did the definition "act as the curator of" come to the fore, and even then the word seldom appeared outside museum catalogues.

Essential to this incarnation was having physical objects to look after in a particular place: the title "independent curator" (claimed by several participants in this year's Art Basel fair) would have been nonsensical. But in the early 1980s came a shift, barely noticed at the time, to encompass the performing arts. Ian Brookes, a consultant editor on the "Collins Dictionary" attributes this to the rise of multimedia: "The distinction between music and fine arts began to blur, so it was possible for the word to seep across." The first recorded example in the "OED", from the *New York Times* in 1982, related to a music festival – and since you can't dust musicians or put them in a climate-controlled case, the emphasis was now on the selection process.

So slow was this usage to take off that ten years later the "Concise Oxford Dictionary" still didn't think "curate" worth including as a verb. How, then, did it finally hit the big time?

The boom in the contemporary-art world seems an obvious answer. Suddenly curators were perceived not as shabby old men peering at Etruscan pots, but as young arbiters of taste who hung out with Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin – and many people who inhabited completely different spheres were keen to be seen in the same light. Since contemporary art and pretentious language go hand in hand, there should have been little surprise when "curate" started to acquire ever more far-fetched usages. In 2008, for example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* declared of Robert Rauschenberg that he "didn't give a fig for curating his reputation".

According to Sara Hawker, however, it was a completely separate development which made the verb's fortune: the internet. With great quantities of random information circulating in cyberspace, webmasters found themselves labouring to sort out what was useful from what wasn't – and the word they hit upon to describe this was "curate".

"It took on a new life in the early 2000s with the coming of Web 2.0," explains Hawker: "now it's frequently applied to tweets, apps and playlists." News organisations have also embraced it: as the funding for old-style news-gathering shrinks, editors find themselves increasingly "curating" reports from other media and citizen journalists who range from the reliable to the insane.

In such contexts the verb's artistic dimension no longer applies – but the connotations linger, which explains why some people are so keen to use it, and why it often seems ridiculously pretentious. We don't want to be told that a firework company is "curating" a

Guy Fawkes display when it is simply letting off bangers as it has always done, or that a store is “curating” its own pop-up shop. But for every usage which elevates the mundane, there is another which is abstract to the point of fantasy: for New Agers, the key to feeling stronger and more vibrant is “curating the self”; the city of York is accused of “curating its own failure”; the hip-hop star Kanye West invites his Twitter followers to “Curate your life.”

Some examples are more irritating than others. For a cultured polymath like Stephen Fry to “curate” a festival of Verdi and Wagner at the Royal Opera House seems fair enough, but it comes as a shock when a collection of Clash recordings is “curated” by Paul Simonon, or Cerys Matthews describes Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie as “people that have curated music”. Would these hard-bitten folk heroes have had two minutes for such namby-pamby terminology?

One can’t help feeling sorry for the traditional art curators whose language has been hijacked in this way. Indeed, their whole vocation is undermined by a competition launched this summer by the Fondazione Prada and the Qatar Museums Authority. Called – imaginatively – Curate, it is based on the premise that “we are all curators. Everything we choose and collect to surround us has meaning.”

On these terms, having a cup of tea (“One lump or two?”) is an act of curation; and recent evidence suggests that even the dimension of choice is disappearing from the verb. A travel show offers hoteliers advice on “curating your crowd”, when it actually means “creating demand among customers”; a cookery writer reports that she has been “asked to curate [ie run] a food blogging masterclass”. At this rate “curate” will soon double, like a blank piece in Scrabble, for anything you want.

Significantly, the organisers of this year’s Royal Academy Summer Exhibition refused to be described as “curators”. They asked to be known as “co-ordinators” instead.