Institutional Engagement and the Growing Role of Ethics in Contemporary Curatorial Practice

by Irene Campolmi

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Museum ethics are generally considered a collection of precepts and rules that set standards of practice for all areas of the museum in order to coordinate and organise its work internally and with other institutions. In this perspective, museum ethics define the set of practices and actions through which the institution takes responsibility to pursue certain tasks, including the preservation of material and immaterial aspects of art and culture and the dissemination of new knowledge by fostering new research approaches through cataloguing, curated exhibitions and collection displays.

Curatorial practice is rarely considered among those museum practices that are subject to ethics, despite being very much shaped by an ethical framework. Curating is the primary means through which museums set standards for interpreting, displaying and contextualising artworks either within an exhibition space or within the social, political and cultural context. If curating, as a museum practice, is influenced by ethics, then it is highly important to discuss and analyse what role ethics play and under which circumstances. Although there are no specific precepts dictating how exhibitions should be curated, there are unspoken principles that could be collected in a code of ethics, which could become an authoritative source for practice. These principles articulate the ways in which temporary exhibitions and museum collections are thoroughly researched in order to provide interesting, pleasant and educational aesthetic experiences. Theoretically, the more exhibitions and collections abide by these unspoken ethical

principles, the better the institution should work, and the more it should be trusted by contemporary critics and the general public. Trust between the museum and its interlocutors (the public, artists, critics) is built through the responsible choices that curators make when planning exhibitions and other kinds of initiatives—in other words, the art pieces chosen for display and the way they are displayed affect how they are interpreted and historicised by critics, and, in turn, acknowledged by the public.

Thus, the practice of art and curation entails taking decisions responsibly, thinking through the ethical potentialities of the artistic expression and how it is presented. When it comes to making exhibitions and displaying collections, curatorial choices are indeed dictated by circumstances, although in principle they abide by aesthetic, ideological and ethical decisions. The choice of including an artwork or setting a particular thematic interpretative framework for an exhibition is generally guided by the desire to explore new sensorial or discursive aspects of knowledge and engage with contemporary technological, historical, cultural, political and social issues that touch upon society.

In recent decades, art museums have displayed interest in 'engaging' with their surroundings in a different way: guided by the ethical principles of creating new forms of knowledge through exhibitions and public programming initiatives, they have tried to develop forms of engagement and collaboration with artists and audiences aimed to create social impact. As suggested by French theorist and activist Chantal Mouffe, these forms of engagement have gradually established relationships of mutual trust between institutions and their interlocutors, i.e. artists, the

public, and the critics, on how to interpret, communicate and display their collections holdings. Institutional engagement—whatever form it takes—implies taking on the responsibility to interact with these interlocutors according to ethical principles.

This article will present new forms of institutional engagement to discuss how the role of ethics has increased within the art museums in recent years. The aim therein is to explain how curating exhibitions, organising collection displays and developing public programming initiatives are curatorial processes intimately shaped by the surrounding political, cultural, social, and environmental contexts and driven by ethics. By activating what American sociologist Jack Mezirow defines as 'transformative learning', art museum exhibitions and initiatives create experiences that can potentially initiate reflective processes—ones that significantly impact visitors' 'frame of reference'.

Mezirow suggests that knowledge production hinges on either creating new frames of reference or adjusting existing ones to the contingencies (Mezirow 1997, pp. 5–6). This assertion is supported by the assumption that museum knowledge should be first and foremost experienced rather than passively absorbed. For Mezirow, associations, ideas, emotions, beliefs, and instincts are part of a larger set of assumptions that inform the 'line of action' through which we make sense of our experiences. If exhibitions succeed in activating such 'transformative learning', it is because curators have found a way to connect the exhibition's content or their own curatorial approaches to the contingent historical, geographical, political, cultural and/or social contexts in which the show is situated.

Methodology:
Curatorial ethics

In this article, institutional engagement is discussed and presented as a means by which the museum articulates its ethics. As such, is central to the methodology that has determined both the research questions and the selection of case studies. In the past, ethics have generally been referred to as a code of norms and rules that museum curators and staff should follow for the good of the institution's operations. However, in recent years, renowned scholars in the field of museology such as Janet Marstine *et al.* (2016) have re-conceptualised ethics, tending to now view them primarily as a 'discourse' that is developed through practice, which touches upon—and is shaped by—current political, cultural, social and economic events surrounding the museum.[1]

According to Marstine, museum ethics are inherently contingent and mutable, since they are formulated in relation to the historical moment and context in which institutions are situated, and change in relation to these contexts. Resilience, that is to say adaptation to a constantly changing society, is a key component that characterises the institutional model of the modern and contemporary art museum since its inception. When, back in the 1970s, artists criticised and contested the museum institution's western modernist approach to art history for excluding those artists who did not abide by specific characteristics of gender, race, colour, religion, and sexual and political orientation, the institution of the art museum has gradually acknowledged and included those critiques in the curatorial practice by rethinking the initial assumptions of the exhibitionary canons.

Drawing on this perspective, one could establish an ecological metaphor in two directions to describe museums' ability to adapt to different situations and scenarios. On the one hand, the institution could be considered as part of a larger cultural ecosystem, where it is the museum that has to adapt to the changes that affect the cultural sphere in order to survive and continue functioning. On the other hand, the art museum could be viewed as constituting an ecosystem in itself where internal organisms (staff, the artworks exhibited and held in the collections, the artists and the public) have to deal with changing cultural trends. Both these metaphors are useful to understand the resilience of the art museum as an institution capable of adapting to external changes that consequently modify internal components. In recent years, art museums have taken on the responsibility of engaging with relevant social and political topics both via exhibitions and public programming initiatives, showing increasing interest in the social, political and cultural changes around them. In this way, by demonstrating engagement with the changes in their surroundings, art museums have implicitly invited audiences to also engage with the initiatives proposed by the institution.

The notion of engagement to which I refer in this paper is indebted to Chantal Mouffe, who criticises philosophical attacks on public institutions like museums by theorists such as Hardt and Negri (2004). In the book *Multitude* published by the post-Marxist philosophers, 'desertion' of and 'escape' from traditional institutions are celebrated as a means of freeing oneself from all forms of institutional belonging. In their critical framework, museums are defined as 'monolithic representative forces' from which society should withdraw. In Negri's and Hardt's perspective, no critical or radical artistic practices can exist successfully within an institutional framework, and any attempt to reform or change this framework would amount to nothing more

than a 'dismissed reformist illusion' (Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 248–349).

According to Hardt and Negri, the 'exodus' from public institution is a process of 'subtraction' from those relationships established by the capitalist society in which art institutions are completely embedded (Hardt and Negri 2009, p. 152). In the publication *Commonwealth* (2009), the last of the trilogy that includes the books *Empire* and *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri suggest that the political project of the multitude, which consists of gathering together in a 'common' to fight against the 'empire', is actually an ethical gesture. The creation of a commonwealth depends on the ethical gestures that are pursued by all individuals who are part of the society. In Hardt and Negri, the political project of creating a commonwealth as an alternative model to the predominant structure has ethical connotations. The successful realisation of the commonwealth depends on everyone's personal ethics (Hardt and Negri 2009, p. xi). In a way, Hardt and Negri deny institutions any capacity to bring about change, and suggest that modifying individual ethics is the only strategy to achieve alternative models of an anti-capitalistic commonwealth.

By contrast, Mouffe suggests that society should imagine that institutions—including museums—might instead serve as vibrant sites for contemporary political and ethical intervention, even though the complex economic and political forces that allow museums to exist may, in some cases, prevent them from achieving this objective (2015, p. 18). Mouffe proposes to empower museums by engaging with their activities and objectives, and by establishing relationships of mutual trust between the institution and its interlocutors (the public, artists and critics). However, two questions remain: how are these relationships of trust and engagement fostered,

nourished and maintained, and why are such relationships the foundation of current museum curatorial ethics?

I will answer these questions by arguing that museums can take responsibility to engage with contingent socio-political and cultural contexts in numerous ways, from organising exhibitions on crucial (or neglected) artistic, cultural or political problems, to tailoring public programme activities so that they are responsive to contemporary issues and events. In this manner, museums shape their own ethics according to the changes that occur to contemporary society, even as these affect their curatorial practice. Rather than devising a code of norms and actions to be followed to the letter in all circumstances, curatorial ethics outline the stance that each curator endorses in organising an exhibition. Therefore, curatorial ethics are defined when curators engage with the circumstances under which they speak for the institution. A new sort of curatorial ethics is therefore characterised by a strong sense of responsibility—be it towards the artworks, the artists, the institutions, the public or the critics—in rendering the museum's programme and activities relevant.

Engagement, responsibility and trust: Features of a new notion of ethics

The concept of responsibility underlies modern and contemporary ethics more broadly. Over the past 50 years, contemporary European philosophers such as Joan-Carles Mélich, Knud Ejler Løgstrup, Emmanuel Levinas and more recently, Alain Badiou and Simon Critchley, have emphasised that the notion of ethics has too frequently and erroneously been associated with morality. Instead, they prefer to link ethics to the notion of responsibility. Mélich considers ethics as a set of behaviours deriving from the ethical

experiences of the subject—one marked by a sense of responsibility. Instead of setting or following fixed tasks, the subject assumes agency in questioning the status quo and takes on the responsibility of searching for alternative ways of approaching issues that reflect the imminence of the circumstance in which the subject lives (Mélich 2010, p. 37; Hernández-Navarro 2012). Drawing from Mélich, one might also say that curatorial ethics consist of unlearning what is already known about the works of art and artists' stories to research and develop numerous possible interpretations.

This ethical approach has characterised the curatorial approach adopted by European contemporary art museums and international biennials that have flourished under the influence of post-modernism, post-colonialism, queer and feminist values and critiques. Through curating, they have committed to expanding the communicative potential of artworks in an age of fast change. By discerning which interpretations and curatorial approaches are the most relevant for the time and the context in which a given artwork is presented, curators assume the responsibility for proposing alternative interpretations of the collections. Consequently, by assuming responsibility for the choices made through curatorial practice, contemporary curators define new ethical standards that influence and shape the curatorial approach of art museums.

According to Simon Critchley, engagement and commitment are at the foundation of any ethical experience (2010, p.26). Therefore, one could read the attention of curatorial practice to the contemporary situation as a means of understanding and discerning what is meaningful, urgent or relevant about the contexts in which an exhibit or a public programming initiative are situated. Similarly, in *The Ethical Demand*

(*Den Etiske Fordring*), Danish philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup suggests that ethics are never self-imposed, but created by the interaction between two or more subjects. This is an idea that Emmanuel Levinas had explored earlier (1987, online; Løgstrup 1956).

In this article, ethics are presented as a set of ideas and practices constructed around relationships of mutual trust—relationships that characterise any curatorial practice. For example, artists trust curators with the presentation and interpretation of their works; in turn, curators trust artists and listen to their suggestions; institutions trust curators who speak for them; curators trust the public and their desire to engage with the exhibition on various levels. Ultimately, curatorial ethics, and the ethical principle of trust and responsibility endorsed by curators and institutions, are always dependent on the political and social climate in which the exhibition or the collection display take place. Entrusting artists, institutions and the public should not refrain curators from keeping a critical distance from the subject treated in the exhibition or the artistic approach endorsed by the artist. Trust and criticism are features characterising curatorial practice, and should never be thought as conflicting. In fact, when criticism does not meet trust, curatorial approach could end up operating completely detached from its context, and thus perceived not relevant by the public, the artists and the institutions.

The emergence of curatorial ethics

In the framework presented throughout this paper, ethics are embedded in curatorial practice, and thus, for convenience, referred to as 'curatorial ethics'. Curatorial ethics broadly refer to practices informed by flexible attitudes and perspectives, which remain sensitive to changing

surrounding conditions. This perspective draws on theories from French postmodern philosopher Alain Badiou, who describes ethics as a 'mode of inhabiting the world', which is not dictated by fixed parameters or prescriptive codes and is instead influenced by the circumstances in which it operates (1993, p. 18). While the most prominent concept of ethics draws from the Aristotelian search for a 'good way of being' and a wise course of action, Badiou contends that there is no absolute 'good' or 'wise', and argues that these parameters can only be established in relation to the circumstances under which they are confronted. Rather than being rooted in notions of morality, Badiou's ethics point towards defining a way of being, thinking and acting that is shaped by circumstances (Badiou 1993, p. 18). Museum curatorial practices can accordingly be viewed through the lens of Badiou's ethics, since, by the time an exhibition is presented, it has already been shaped by the socio-political contexts in which it is staged. In turn, the exhibition's impact on its artistic and social environment influences 'what is going on'—that is to say, the social, cultural, technological and political contexts in which the exhibition is presented. Put briefly, Badiou also views ethics as a system responsive to particular contexts. In his conception of ethics, good is sought after, but is only truly achieved when it is measured against particular conditions of the present and their demands.

In this article, I argue that curatorial practice is driven by such an 'ethics of contingencies'. As a mode of operating, it is sensitive to surrounding circumstances and contexts and committed to forging, through exhibitions and public initiatives, a space in which institutional needs meet those of the artists and the public, and one in which those diverse needs are defined in relation to specific socio-political, cultural

and environmental circumstances. As a result, exhibitions and public programming initiatives demonstrate a profound engagement with the contemporary world. Over the past 15 years, curatorial practices in contemporary art museums have increasingly focused on the question of public impact, and on how art museums respond to social, political and cultural issues. More recently, exhibitions have become the central means through which art museums re-conceptualise the ethical role of both artistic and curatorial practice, and connect curatorial experiments with larger socio-political developments. It is not the purview of this paper to discuss social-artistic practices in depth or to delve into debates about socially engaged practices currently underway between art historians and critics.

However, the concept of curatorial ethics that is hereby presented is indebted to the discussion on the role of ethics in artistic practice that involved two prominent art historians and critics, Claire Bishop and Grant Kester. The discussion that these figures initiated in the early 2000s is helpful in introducing the role of ethics in artistic practice and the museum curatorial approach. Kester defended the ethical orientation of certain artistic practices while Bishop criticised it. In her article entitled 'The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents', published on *ArtForum* in 2006, Bishop argues that the ethical turn to certain socially engaged artistic practices such as those proposed by Jeremy Deller, Lucy Orta, Thomas Hirschhorn or the Turkish artistic collective, Oda Projesi, has prompted a similar problematic turn in art criticism. Taking particular issue with Kester's assertion that socially engaged art 're-humanises' society and strengthens social relationships (2004), Bishop notes that Kester defines as 'ethical' any artistic practice aimed at producing a positive—and therefore politically relevant—social effect.

Bishop appears sceptical about including social impact and 'ethical' gestures among the indicators that could be used to judge or criticise about the quality of artworks and artistic practice.

I, too, am aware that in recent years, curators have privileged curatorial solutions that favour collaborations with artists, involvement of the public and promotion of social inclusion through artistic practices. The difficulty is to understand if these curatorial solutions produce new forms of knowledge while at the same time creating a social impact. The question could be reformulated in these terms: can ethics play a role in defining the research questions of any curatorial practice, and if so, what is the role of ethics in judging the outcome of experimental curatorial approaches?

Curating and knowledge production

Museum exhibitions or collections are often conceived as vectors of knowledge. To weave meaning around an object requires prior interpretation, which determines their relevance to collective knowledge. It is therefore important to delineate when exhibitions make statements of knowledge, and whether specific ethics guide this curatorial process. Here I would open a small parenthesis to reflect on how exhibitions can play an ethical role while still producing knowledge. A museum exhibit generates knowledge when the content and placement of objects is informed by thorough research, and when new material or unexplored perspectives are brought to the surface and confronted with contemporary society through strategic presentation in displays. Nothing precludes this new knowledge from emerging through research driven by ethical demands, but this ethically driven research must at the same time be aesthetically consistent.

As Hans Ulrich Obrist underlines in 'Ways of Curating', exhibitions do not illustrate reality: they instead produce new realities themselves and therefore create their own knowledge and methodologies (Obrist 2014, p. 167). Museums are institutions that generate knowledge through various forms of curatorial research, yet they continue to struggle to measure their research outcomes. As pointed out by Claire Bishop, this is the reason why it is difficult to understand whether social impact can be considered among the indicators through which artworks are evaluated. Drawing on Bishop's critique, which underlines the unhealthy influence that certain artistic practices driven by ethical principles have had at times on art criticism and curatorial practice, I will now explore whether ethics has the potential to impact both artistic and curatorial practice at the same time, and what type of relationship exists between the two.

Maintaining relevancy in the 21st century

In recent years, vigorous debates have formed around how curatorial research practices can yield knowledge and, at the same time, have a relevant ethical impact on society. How can curators and other museum professionals pursue research that results in knowledge and abides by ethics? What criteria can be used to evaluate knowledge and the ways in which it is produced? Does a connection exist between exhibitions that have a social impact and ethics? What kinds of exhibitions increase the impact and value of museums on society? What sort of value are we even talking about—social, economic or cultural? In dealing with issues such as the value and social impact of museums, scholar and museum consultant Emlyn Koster has argued that maintaining a sense of relevancy is a way for museums to generate value and ensure impact on society (Koster 2006).

For Koster, relevancy entails a comfort with controversy that, in turn, implies endorsing practices that broach difficult questions and analyse a variety of subjects (Koster 2006). Accordingly, one could say that it is by exploring and researching relevant contemporary issues, topics and contents that museums produce knowledge with a genuine social impact. The notion of relevancy in relation to museum practices first appeared in the 1960s, when museums had to deal with presenting artistic practices that showed increasing social engagement. Later, during the 1990s, the concept was broadened to include socially engaged museological practices.

Today, 'relevancy' is a term commonly used in curatorial practice. A 'relevant' exhibition or programme is one that explores social, artistic, political, cultural, environmental or technological issues that touch upon, or are shaped by, contemporary events. Curatorial practice is thus deemed 'relevant' when it shows awareness about 'what is going on' in contemporary society and discourse. This is because, as Italian artist and designer Bruno Munari explains, as long as art is unrelated to life issues and problems, it is likely to only affect a few people (1966). However, funding bodies face significant challenges in setting criteria for evaluating the social impact of museum research. In this regard, Sarat Maharaj, professor at the Mälmo Art Academy in Sweden and co-curator at Documenta 11 (2002), underlines the value of 'artistic knowledge', emphasising how visual arts allow people to form knowledge in specific ways, and develop knowledge around different objects, as compared to other forms of knowledge acquisition (Sarat 2009).

Let us presume, then, that curatorial ethics and the research questions that arise within an exhibition are nowadays increasingly articulated around contingent facts that impact society. As a mode of operating, curatorial ethics are sensitive to surrounding circumstances and contexts. Curatorial ethics are committed to forging, via exhibitions and public initiatives, a space in which institutional needs meet those of artists and of the public, and one in which those diverse needs are defined in relation to specific socio-political, cultural and environmental circumstances. As a result, exhibitions and public programming initiatives demonstrate a deep engagement with contemporary events.

Exploring concrete examples of curatorial ethics

In the following paragraphs, I will present as a case study the curatorial approach of a museum in the UK, Tate Liverpool, which has placed ethics, engagement and social impact at the centre of its curatorial practice as a fundamental tool to formulate research questions. In the vast landscape of museum curatorial practices, and particularly those whose research questions have been driven by the 'curatorial ethics' outlined in this paper, Tate Liverpool deserves special mention.

Since 2013, when Francesco Manacorda took over as artistic director, the museum curatorial staff has conceived and given shape to a thought-provoking view of the art museum as a 'learning machine' wherein institutions and the public enter into a relationship of mutual trust: one in which each party learns something from the other (see Manacorda 2015 online). The museum engages with the public just as intensively as the public engages with the institution. This is possible thanks to the institution's curatorial ethics, which shape and determine the research questions that the museum set as targets to be explored. Over the past three years, Tate Liverpool's curatorial team has re-conceptualised the museum's collection displays, collaborated with architects, artists and designers, and, last but not least, explored ways to

work collaboratively with the public through practices of co-curation as well as through public engagement projects.

These forms of engagement are oriented towards creating shared, collective scholarship: scholarship that constantly evolves according to the interactions of those involved in its construction. Using curatorial practice as a means to conduct research, Tate Liverpool explores whether and how exhibitions and collection displays can function as sites for live *knowledge production*, instead of remaining the spaces through which a certain kind of knowledge—produced by the art museum—is distributed and passively absorbed by visitors. Tate Liverpool is a good example of a museum whose curatorial ethics—paying attention to its surrounding cultural, political and social contexts—has defined a new kind of research approach, while developing specific engagement practice through exhibitions and public programming initiatives and bringing together curatorial practices as well as ethical and social concerns. However, some central questions arise in such a practice: namely, what criteria should be used to evaluate the outcomes of practice as research?

Secondly, can practice as research exist as a collective project that is shared with the public, and that might eventually have a function in the political sphere? In the following case studies, I will attempt to trace some potential responses to those questions—i.e. re-conceptualising the collection display, collaborating in curatorial practice as research with artists, architects and designers and reaching out to audiences to debate on curatorial relevancy with them and involve them in the practice of curating. This can be done by showing how the Tate has engaged in curatorial ethical practice as research, and encouraged the general public to become involved themselves in the curatorial process.

Re-conceptualising collection displays at Tate Liverpool (UK)

Over the past 15 years, contemporary art museums have re-invented the narratives guiding the display of their collections. In the past, art museums most frequently displayed their collections according to chronological or stylistic divisions. However, since the early 2000s, a substantial number of museums of modern and contemporary art have re-hung their holdings according to bold new narrative and thematic approaches—ones that invite perspectives and interpretations of artworks that had until recently been left unexplored.

The first museum presenting a yet unseen thematic collection display was the Tate Modern in London, which opened its doors in the year 2000. The Tate's unconventional approach—likely inspired by the MoMA, which just a year before had attempted a similar thematic approach with the collection exhibition *Modern Stars*—questioned the notion of the permanent display of collections (see Bishop 2013). Assigning its different museum galleries polarised themes such as *Poetry and Dreams, Structure and Clarity, Energy and Process*, it created temporary exhibitions that displayed diverse artworks through the lens of temporal, geographical and art-historical narratives.

In the early 21st century, Tate Modern inspired other European museums of modern and contemporary art to re-display their own collections thematically, which became central to the new strategies of such institutions. Museums including the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), Tate Liverpool (Liverpool), Moderna Museet (Stockholm), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

(Humlebæk), Mathaf (Doha), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Contemporaneo Reina Sofia (Madrid) and the Moderna Galerja (Ljubiana) have all exhibited their collections in series of rotating exhibitions. They now embrace an ethos which holds that a collection's mobility is the basis of any modern and contemporary art museum in the 21st century. As suggested by Moderna Museet's artistic director, Daniel Birnbaum, 'the concept of a permanent exhibition of the collection is no longer relevant, since mobility is built into the museum's way of presenting both temporary exhibitions and works from the collection' (Moderna Museet, online). Echoing this assertion, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Contemporaneo Reina Sofia in Madrid has over the past six years abandoned certain traditional presentations of its collection, rethinking the collection's political narrative and 'the presumptions about property and patrimony embodied by the collection' (Villel Borja 2009, p. 83). The Reina Sofia's artistic director, Manuel Borja-Villel, interprets museum collections as 'archives of the common', and views artworks as relational objects that preserve the memory of political, social and cultural history: a history that the public can read and interpret without any prior education in art history (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Contemporaneo Reina Sofia, online).

In this evolving curatorial scenario, Tate Liverpool's reworking of its own display narratives takes inspiration from Tate Modern's thematic displays; but rather than framing the collection display around dialectically opposed themes, the Tate satellite museum instead conceived of visual constellations of artworks. In these displays, individual works are related to each other according to a logic of conceptual affinity described by word clouds printed on the walls of each constellation display. While the

majority of the word clouds were designed by Tate Liverpool's curatorial team, others were created through a public programming initiative, and were informed by audiences who took part in this. The initiative included drafting the word clouds through an experiment in 'user-generated knowledge', which attempted to understand how Tate Liverpool could best incorporate this knowledge into the collection display. Groups of people who visited the galleries were occasionally invited to suggest words for the words clouds printed on the gallery walls. Unfortunately, the experiment was not repeated more than a couple of times, and did not become integral to the museum's curatorial approach.

However, the collections display *DLA Piper Series: Constellations* offers an experimental framework that attempts to encourage as many different interpretations as possible (Tate Liverpool, online). The curatorial approach, in this instance, is one that draws unexplored connections between major contemporary works and other, less well-known but equally outstanding pieces. The display also attempts to expand conceptual affinities between works of art that evoke similar feelings, affects and imaginative associations. The most renowned works are located in the centre of the room, serving as 'triggers' of imaginary constellations that attract other, lesser known works of art that conceptually relate to them—across time, space, geography, gender, political content and/or medium. Such a solution allows for curators to circulate works within an exhibition more frequently. It also explores new ways to historically and conceptually link works of art between well-known and lesser known artists, whose work, when considered outside any art historical interpretations, offers great possibilities for unexplored perspectives.

Fig. 1. Constellations, or how to create aesthetic and historical correspondences between diverse works of art.

This type of museum display explores new perspectives on art and artists by experimenting with innovative curatorial frameworks for presenting exhibitions and collection displays. Tate Liverpool's Artistic Director, Francesco Manacorda, sees the museum as a 'magazine' that advances a changing, dynamic notion of knowledge, rather than as a book that preserves secular knowledge (Manacorda 2014a and b, online). In a magazine, one can find a variety of different articles linked to the publication's specialised area, the contents of which vary over several issues, exploring different issues that are relevant to its readers. In a similar way, museums explore artistic, cultural, social, and technological trends and issues that are relevant to visitors, and collaborate with artists, architects and designers to differentiate exhibition narratives and propose heterogeneous public programming initiatives. The 'magazine principle'—as Manacorda defines it—informs all of Tate Liverpool's activities (Manacorda 2014a, 2014b, online).

Engaging in curatorial research as a practice with artists, architects and performers

In 2014, Tate Liverpool invited experimental architect Claude Parent to transform the Wolfson Gallery on the museum's ground floor, as one of the initiatives of the Liverpool Biennial (see Liverpool Biennial, online).[2] Parent designed a space comprised of slanted floors and ramps that visitors had to climb and move through in order to view the artworks on display. The intervention provided audiences with an exciting opportunity to experience the museum visit anew, moving through a space that engaged them on a bodily level. The unconventional structure of the gallery was meant to offer a unique setting of geometric architecture inspired by the works of art that it framed, which included pieces by Edward Wadsworth, Gustav Metzger, Francis Picabia and Gillian Wise.

More recently, Tate Liverpool has integrated exhibition displays with performances made by performance artists like Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuş or dancers, for example, from the English National Ballet and the contemporary classical ensemble *Epiphany*, thus experimenting with new approaches to integrate curatorial and artistic research.[3] The museum commissioned these performance artists and dancers to perform new pieces for the public event, *2053: A Living Museum: Works to Know by Heart,* which took place in coordination with the exhibition *Musée Imaginaire/An Imagined Museum*—itself organised by Tate Liverpool in collaboration with the

Centre Pompidou and MMK. The exhibition brought together over 60 post-1945 artworks from the collections of the aforementioned prestigious museums, and displayed works from Marcel Duchamp, Claes Oldenburg, Bridget Riley, Dorothea Tanning, Andy Warhol, Rachel Whiteread and many more.

The concept behind the public event, *2053: A Living Museum: Works to Know by Heart* drew on Ray Bradbury's 1953 science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451*, a dystopia in which works of literature are burnt; the only way to save them was to learn them by heart. Similarly, set in 2053, the event narrative imagined a time in which the museum's exhibition displayed artworks were about to disappear forever. The title of the event, *2053: A Living Museum: Works to Know by Heart,* referred to a museum, which, having lost all the works of art that comprised the history of its collections, was replaced by individuals who engaged with art and cultural history to preserve the memory of the missing artworks. The public event was conceived as a *mise en scène* that consisted of asking the artists and the public to choose a work of art from the exhibition and to memorise this work, committing to keep its memory alive in the future. The mentioned artists and the public were then invited to re-enact selected artworks at the show's finale event, *2053: A Living Museum: Works to Know by Heart*.

Engaging with the public

In 2013, Tate Liverpool presented *Art Turning Left: How Values Change Making (1789–2013),* a thematic exhibition that examined how, from the 1789 French Revolution to the early 2000s, politically left-wing values such as collectivism, equality and the search for alternative economies influenced artist practices and the subjects of

their artistic production. The exhibition was constructed around the notion of collectivism, and the narrative display was designed in a way that 'obliged', rather than 'invited', audiences to read the exhibition through questions addressed directly to spectators or with placards on stage explaining the play and giving out instructions that frequently interrupted the narrative flow. The exhibition's curatorial approach was inspired by Berthold Brecht's theatrical technique of 'distantiation', which Brecht employed to expose the fictionality of the play, and in so doing established a direct dialogue with the audience.

In *Art Turning Left*, artworks were accompagnied by poems and masterpieces of the past considered alongside lesser-known works of contemporary art. The distantiation technique was used to encourage viewers 'to abandon conventional readings of the image and rethink its role in society' (Manacorda 2014b, online). In an article published in the immediate aftermath of the exhibition's closure, Manacorda emphasised how the exhibition had given the curatorial team the opportunity to learn about different collaborative artistic processes (Manacorda 2014b, online). The exhibition was ambitious both in its objectives and in the curatorial strategy employed to achieve these. Works in the show were arranged under headings that were formulated as questions, inviting multiple interpretations from audience members.

According to Manacorda, the exhibition was conceived as an unfinished essay and presented more as a draft of questions, which could be completed only by the collective cooperation with the public. Therefore, the introductory text was replaced by a 'user guide' suggesting how the visitor/user could employ the questions presented throughout the exhibition and complete some parts of the show. The exhibition also experimented with the 'live' component by

creating the so-called 'office of useful art' in collaboration with artist Tania Bruguera, where other people could plan the public activities related to the exhibition, with students and associations gathering in workshops. In this regard, the museum allowed people to move artworks and bring them into the seminar room to discuss certain topics in front of the original pieces. The room was also open with windows facing the exhibition, so that anybody visiting the exhibition could simply walk into the office and join the groups of people gathered inside. This room was conceived as the space where co-creation of knowledge could happen within the exhibition.

Co-curation: A democratic curatorial practice or a delegation tool?

Art Turning Left was a curatorial experiment that showed how, by asking audiences to engage in the museum's activities, curators can not only pose new questions, but also delegate to the public the responsibility to answer them. Co-curation can therefore be seen as a democratic curatorial practice allowing everyone to participate in knowledge production, but, in turn, it also represents a delegation tool by which museum curators withdraw from the responsibility of providing coherent and researched interpretations. By delegating questions of curatorial responsibility to the public, Tate Liverpool asked audiences to engage with the institution and 'act like curators' to make sense of art themselves (Smith 2012). However, the size of the exhibition and the chronology that it covered made the audiences' search for meaning complex and difficult. The natural question that a co-curated exhibition such as this one posed is whether it is genuinely *ethical* to leave the public in the potential predicament of not knowing how to answer the questions asked by curators throughout the display. If it is legitimate

that exhibitions should present their public with critical questions, museums arguably also have the ethical responsibility to respond—at least tentatively—to some of the questions their exhibits pose. Failing to do so risks disengaging, rather than engaging, the public.

In the history of curatorial practice, the delegation of curatorial responsibility was first conceived, in provocative fashion, by Francesco Bonami for the 2003 Venice Biennale *Dreams and Conflict: The Dictatorship of the Viewe*r. Bonami delegated the curation of the exhibition to other experts in the field, including art historians, artists and curators. On the one hand, Bonami set aside a position of authority that would have given him license to decide on the interpretative framework of the exhibition. On the other hand, by delegating curation responsibilities for the Biennale to others, he eschewed the responsibility of making a statement around the exhibition. The consequences of a similar expedient can be dangerous, insofar as artistic and curatorial practice are always done politically, and—in some cases—ethically.

As artist Thomas Hirshhorn explains, an artist must be always committed to their work, because this is the only way to achieve something with their art. Acting politically or ethically means responding to questions such as: Where do I stand as an artist or a curator? What kind of results do I want to pursue through my practice? What gives meaning and coherence to my actions? As Hirschhorn suggests, doing art politically—and ethically—does not imply being political or ethical in one's art, which purely reflects what happens in current political, social, cultural and ethical debates. On the contrary, it implies taking a position in relation to the issues that frame artistic and curatorial practice. Thus, by eschewing responsibility for making a statement

around the exhibition, the curator and the institution lose the chance of participating in knowledge production and, at the same time, of bringing forward relevant activities, statements and initiatives.

Bonami's concept was subsequently imitated by other curators, turning his experiment into an accustomed practice, although at times with no specific motivation. In 2005, artist Anthony Gross organised an exhibition project called 'Biennale' in a warehouse in London. He invited international curators to select a single-channel video work by one of their favourite artists. Gross used the title 'Biennial' ironically, calling attention to the trend among contemporary curators (which—as in this case—had also affected the artists) of delegating to others the curation of the exhibition they were initially responsible for organising. Unfortunately, I was unable to find accounts of public reception. Two years later, the renowned curators Hans Ulrich Obrist and Stephanie Moisdon designed a similar co-curatorial format for the 9th Lyon Biennial in 2007, inviting 49 curators to select single artists they considered 'vital' to the present decade (see O'Neill 2012). Although these gestures were often intended as self-reflexive comments on the limits and possibilities of curating, they also underlined how one might easily escape from engaging with curatorial ethics and practice.

Conclusion

This article has described how ethics are becoming an influential component of the curatorial practice of 21st century art museums to such an extent that one could almost call it, for convenience, 'curatorial ethics'. These ethics ask museums to set aside traditional curatorial practices and define research questions and

methodologies, and to forge new kinds of relationships based on mutual engagement and trust among artists, critics and the public. As part of any curatorial practice, curatorial ethics is informed by flexible attitudes and perspectives that are sensitive to social change. As a mode of operating, it is committed to forging a space in which new research questions are formulated inspired by a sense of ethical responsibility for relevant socio-political issues, through exhibitions and public programming initiatives. As a result, these activities demonstrate a profound engagement with contemporary artists and audiences and a commitment to proposing new interpretations of the collection narratives.

Tate Liverpool is a remarkable example of an art museum that has conceived knowledge production as a process driven by the kind of curatorial ethics described above. Through forms of institutional engagement, the museum has formulated a new narrative for collection display; involved artists, designers and architects in the creation of the new narrative; and developed forms of co-curation with the public. In this way, Tate Liverpool has demonstrated that when curatorial practice is informed by such curatorial ethics, it is more likely to be perceived as relevant by artists, critics and the public, thus increasing its social impact.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank Janet Marstine for allowing me to read this article prior to its publication in October 2014.

2. See more about Claude Parent's intervention at Tate Liverpool at: http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibiti.on/liverpool-biennial-claude-parent.

3. On the day of the re-enactment, artists Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuş presented a performance work entitled *Ongoing Perishable Objects*. This live work examined the role of the public museum as an institution that collects, historicises and displays cultural artefacts. It was intended to rethink the relationship between spectator and artwork, positioning the body as a carrier of cultural and social information, while simultaneously asking us to consider the methods by which museums preserve and value art.

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