**Institutional Engagement and the Growing Role of Ethics**

**in Contemporary Curatorial Practice**

**Abstract**

In recent years, generating social impact through less conventional curatorial practices has become a primary target and a remit among contemporary and modern art museums in Europe. These particular curatorial practices have involved three characteristics: formulating a new narrative for collection display; involving artists, designers and architects in the creation of these narratives; developing forms of institutional engagement with the public. Modern and contemporary art museums are increasingly rethinking the potential role of exhibitions and public programme initiatives to substantively engage with the audience formulating curatorial research questions that hold an ethical drive. The paper looks at and analyses how, in recent years, ethics has had a strong influence on curatorial practices leading to new forms of institutional engagement that have fostered social impact. Recently, museum’s ethics has been reconsidered under the light of a more dynamic museum program which has ensured to everyone – from the public to the artists - the opportunity to engage with the work of the museum. The paper critically analyses the influence of ethics on curatorial practice and the features characterizing curatorial ethics as a form of institutional engagement shaping either curatorial practice, research questions or research methodologies. Specifically, it investigates Tate Liverpool’s curatorial initiatives that have demonstrated how through different forms of institutional engagement the museum produces social impact while achieving a new ethical role.

**Keywords:** curatorial research, curatorial ethics, co-curation, curatorial practice, collections, exhibition display

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The text should be introduced by presenting the overall argument, providing a brief outline, explaining the author’s intentions, in no more than 500 words.

# Institutional Responsibilities and the Role of Ethics in Contemporary Curating

*“(…) the artist’s work is to turn dreams into responsibilities.”*

Carl André, *Dada Forgeries* (1960s- 2000s)

It is generally thought that museum ethics consists in a collection of precepts and rules that set a standard of practices for all areas of the museum’s job in order to coordinate and organize the work of the museum internally and with other institutions. Under this perspective, museum ethics indicates the set of practices and actions through which the institution takes the responsibility to pursue certain tasks, including preserving material and immaterial aspects of art and culture, and disseminate new knowledge by fostering new research approaches through curated exhibitions and collection displays. Curatorial practice is hardly ever considered among those museum practices that are subjected to ethics, even though it is very much influenced by it. Curating is the primary means through which museums set standards for interpreting, displaying and contextualizing 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 analyze what role ethics plays and in which circumstances. Museum ethics regulates those tasks that museums have to conduct responsibly and according to specific precepts and principles. According to this definition, curatorial practice could be considered among these tasks. Although there are not specific precepts that tell how exhibitions should be curated, there are unspoken principles that could be collected in the guise of a code of ethics that should be observed or at least considered any time one is curating an exhibition. These unspoken ethical principles look at the ways in which temporary exhibitions and museum collections are thoroughly researched, thus providing interesting, pleasant and educational aesthetic experiences. Theoretically, the more the exhibitions and the collections abide with these unspoken ethical principles, the better the institution -supposedly- works and the more the latter is trusted by contemporary critique and the general public. Obviously, the trust between the museum and its interlocutors (the public, the artists, the critique) is built through the responsible choices that curators do when planning exhibitions and other kinds of initiatives. In other words, the art pieces that are chosen for the display and the way they are displayed effects how these are interpreted and historicized by the critique, and, in turn, acknowledged by the public. The quote opening this article is extracted by an artwork called "Dada Forgeries" that minimalist artist Carl Andre realized as an ongoing process between the 1950s and the early 2000s. The art piece consisted in a series of sentences written on a postcard in a period where Andre was very interested in postal correspondence as an unusual poetic and artistic medium. In this quote, he emphasizes how the artists’ job is to take on the responsibility to make art that materializes dreams and collective visions. Likewise, the curator’s work is to assume the responsibility to make exhibitions that turn the artists’ work into an aesthetic, intellectual and – why not- ethical experience.

Thus, practicing art and curating is about taking decisions responsibly thinking through the ethical potentialities held either by the artistic expression or by the ways of presenting these. When it comes to making exhibitions and displaying the collections, curatorial choices are indeed dictated by the circumstances, even though in principle they abide with aesthetic, ideological and ethical decisions. The choice to include an artwork or to set a particular thematic interpretative framework for an exhibition is usually 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 the past decades, art museums have shown 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 programme initiatives they have tried to develop forms of engagement and collaboration with artists and audiences 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. the artists, the publics, the critique and their collections holdings. Institutional engagement – in any form it is materialized - 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. This paper will unveil how curating exhibitions, organizing collection displays and developing public programs 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 stage 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, and not passively accepted. For Mezirow, associations, ideas, emotions, beliefs, and instincts are part of a larger set of assumptions that inform our ‘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

Throughout this article, institutional engagement is discussed and presented as a means through which the museum articulates its ethics. The notion of engagement is central to the methodology that has determined both the research questions and the selection of case studies of this article. In the past, ethics has 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 (2016) have re-conceptualized ethics, tending to now see it 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]](#endnote-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, which is to say adaptation to a constantly changing society, is a key component characterizing the institutional model of the modern and contemporary art museum model since its inception. When back in the 1970s institutional critique artists contested the museum’s western modernist approach to art history because it did not include in art historical narration those artists who did not abide with specific characteristics of gender, race, colour, religion, 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 on two directions to describe museums’ ability to adapt to different situations and scenarios. On 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 envisaged as constituting an ecosystem in itself where internal organisms (from the people working in the institution to the art works exhibited and held in the collections, the public and the artists) have to abide with cultural trends when they change too. Both these metaphors are useful to understand the resilience of the art museum as an institution which is capable to adapt to external changes consequently modifying 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 programme initiatives showing more and more interest in the changes occurred to the social, political and cultural changes around them. In this way, by showing to be engaged with the changes occurred to their surroundings, art museums have implicitly invited audiences to also get engaged with the initiatives proposed by the institution.

The notion of engagement to which I refer in this paper is indebted to Chantal Mouffe, who criticizes philosophical attacks on public institutions like museums from theorists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004). In the book *Multitude* published by the post-marxist philosophers, ‘desertion’ of and ‘escape’ from traditional institutions are celebrated as 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 successfully exist 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 Negri and Hardt, 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, pp. 152). In the publication *Commonwealth* (2009) the last of the trilogy which includes *Empire* and *Multitude*, Negri and Hardt suggest that the political project of the multitude, which consists in gathering together in a ‘common’ to fight against the ‘empire’, is actually an ethical gesture. The creation of a common wealth depends on the ethical gestures that are pursued by all individuals who are part of the society. In Negri and Hardt, the political project of creating a common wealth as an alternative model to the predominant structure has ethical connotations. The successful realization of the commonwealth depends on everyone’s personal ethics (Hardt and Negri 2009, pp xi). In a way, Negri and Hardt deny to institutions any possibility of bringing change, and suggest to modify individual ethics as the only strategy to achieve alternative models of an anti-capitalistic commonwealth. On the contrary, responding to their assertions, 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 publics, the artists and the critique). 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 on the changes that occur to contemporary society, and, at the same time, these affect their curatorial practice. Rather than devising a code of norms and actions that should be followed to the letter in all circumstances, curatorial ethics outline the stance each curator endorses when organising an exhibition. Therefore, curatorial ethics are defined when curators engage with the circumstances in which they speak for the institution. A new sort of curatorial ethics is, therefore, characterised by a strong sense of responsibility––whether towards the artworks, the artists, the institutions, the publics or the critique––in rendering the museum’s programme and activities relevant.

**Engagement, Responsibility and Trust: Features of a New Notion of Ethics**

Responsibility is a concept that pervades 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. Joan-Carles 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 instead assumes agency in questioning the ‘status quo’ and takes on the responsibility to search 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 consists in unlearning what is already known about the works of art and artists’ story to research and develop numerous possible interpretations. This ethical approach has characterized the curatorial approach adopted by European contemporary art museums and world-wide spread biennials flourished under the influenced of post-modernism, post-colonialism and feminist values and critiques. Through curating they have committed to expand the communicative potential of artworks in an age of fast changes. 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 taking on the responsibility of the choices made through curatorial practice, contemporary curators define new ethical standards that influence and shape the art museums curatorial approach. According to another philosopher, Simon Critchley, engagement and commitment are characteristics 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 to understanding and discerning what is meaningful, urgent, or relevant about the contexts in which an exhibit or a public programme initiative are situated. Similarly, in the book *The* *Ethical Demand* (Den Etiske Fordring), Danish philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup suggests that ethics is never self-imposed: rather, it is created by the interaction between two or more subjects. This is an idea that the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas had explored earlier (1987, online; Løgstrup, 1956).

In this paper, ethics is 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 experience of trust and responsibility endorsed by curators and institutions, is always dependent on fluctuating circumstances.

**Curatorial Ethics: A Definition**

In the framework presented throughout this paper, ethics is embedded with curatorial practice thus, for convenience, called ‘curatorial ethics’. Curatorial ethics broadly refers to practices informed by flexible attitudes and perspectives, ones that 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 Aristotelian search for a ‘good way of being’ and for 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 in which they are confronted. Rather than centring in notions of morality, Badiou’s ethics points toward defining a way of being, thinking, and acting that is shaped by the circumstances (Badiou 1993, p. 18). Museum curatorial practices can accordingly be envisaged through the lens of Badiou’s ethics, since by the time an exhibition is presented 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’, which is to say the social, cultural, technological, and political contexts in which the exhibition is presented. In turn, Badiou views ethics also as a system responsive to particular contexts. In his 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; it is committed to forging, through exhibitions and public initiatives, a space in which institutional needs meet those of the 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 program 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. In recent years, exhibitions have become the central means through which art museums re-conceptualize 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, nor to delve into debates about socially engaged practices currently underway between art historians and critics.

Yet, the concept of curatorial ethics that is hereby presented is indebted by 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 saw these figures initiated already in the early 2000s is arguably helpful in introducing the role of ethics in the artistic practice and the museum curatorial approach. Kester defended the ethical orientation of certain artistic practices while Bishop critiques it. In the 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 Santiago Sierra or the Turkish artistic collective, Oda Projesi, has prompted a similar turn in art criticism: one she does not deem as salutary. Taking particular issue with Kester’s assertion that socially engaged art ‘re-humanises’ society and strengthens social relationships (2004), Bishop notes how Kester defines as ‘ethical’ any artistic practice aimed at producing a positive––and therefore politically relevant––social effect. Bishop appears skeptical about including social impact and ‘ethical’ gestures among the indicators that could be used to judge or express a critique about the quality of artworks and the artistic practice. Likewise, the author of this paper is aware that in recent years, curators have privileged curatorial solutions that favor collaborations with artists, involvement of the public and promotion of social inclusion through artistic practices. Though, the difficulty is to understand if these curatorial solutions produce new forms of knowledge while, at the same time, create a social impact. The question could be reformulated in these terms: can ethics play a role in formulating the research questions of any curatorial practice, and if so, what is the role of ethics in judging the outcome of experimental curatorial approaches? 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 center of its curatorial practice as a fundamental tool to formulate research questions.

**Curating and Knowledge Production**

Museum exhibitions or collections are often conceived as vectors of knowledge. To weave meaning around an object requires prior interpretation. Such interpretation 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. I would open here 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 to contemporary society being strategically presented in displays. Nothing excludes that this new knowledge is generated through a research that is driven by ethical demands, but this ethically driven research has to be aesthetically consistent at the same time. 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 art works are evaluated. Drawing on Bishop’s critique who underlines the unhealthy influence that certain artistic practices driven by ethical principles had had on certain art criticism and curatorial practice, this paper sets the target of exploring whether ethics has the potential to impact both artistic and curatorial practice at the same time, and what kinds of relationship between the two exist.

**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 onto society. How can curators and other museum professionals pursue research that results in knowledge and that abide with 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 –is it a social, economic or cultural one? In dealing with issues such as the value and social impact of museums, scholar and 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). Drawing on Koster, one could say that it is by exploring and researching relevant contemporary issues, topics, and contents that museums produce knowledge that has 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. 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 to develop knowledge around different objects, when compared to other forms of knowledge acquisition (Sarat 2009). Earlier, in 1918, Benjamin Ives Gilman, one of the founders of the discipline of museum studies in English-speaking countries, addressed similar questions in *Museum Ideals: Purposes and Methods* (1918, online). In a chapter entitled ‘The Triple Aim of Museums’, Gilman suggests how the ultimate aim of fine art and the museums that curate it is to teach people how to learn, and so how to reflect on their ways of learning. Referring to the French words for the verb ‘to know’, he suggests that there are two radically different ways to denote knowledge: ‘Je connais’ and ‘Je sais’, which both mean ‘I know’ (Ivi 1918, pp. 82-83). ‘Connaissance’ designates an active relation to the real – the interpretation of a phenomenon or object – the result of which is ‘savoir’, i.e. a corpus of accepted and transmitted notions, which have been rationally scrutinized and validated. ‘Savoir’ thus designates objective certainty, and as such, scientific knowledge (‘connaissance’) epitomizes ‘savoir’. If a different interpretation of an artistic phenomenon, object or practice is endorsed which abide with ethics, then a new corpus of accepted and transmitted notions are collected and kept. Just as, in French, the notion of knowledge refers to two distinct ways of ‘knowing’, so too can research––the act of acquiring knowledge––be understood as unfolding in two distinctive ways. Simon Sheikh, professor at Goldsmiths College, London and participant in the research network project ‘Former West’, has pointed out that the word ‘research’ translates in English both the French term *recherche* and the German word *Forschung* (Sheikh 2014, pp.35-37). While *recherche* refers to a journalistic way of conducting research – a term whose meaning is very similar to the word *enquête* that translates the English ‘investigation’ or ‘enquiry’, *Forschung* denotes a more scientific method that involves investigating a thesis by collecting evidence to demonstrate or discredit its validity (Sheikh, 2014, pp. 36-39). For the purpose of this article, curatorial ethics is defined as driven by the first kind – a more journalistic one - of research method and approach as it leads to formulating research questions in relation to contingent facts that occur in contemporary society.

Therefore, one could advance the proposal that contingent facts that occur to contemporary society are becoming influential in defining curatorial ethics and the research questions that rise within an exhibition. As a mode of operating, curatorial ethics is sensitive to surrounding circumstances and contexts; it is committed to forging, through exhibitions and public initiatives, a space in which institutional needs meet those of artists and of the publics, 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 program initiatives demonstrate a profound engagement with contemporary events.

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# Exploring Concrete Examples of Curatorial Ethics

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 at Tate Liverpool, 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 fact that the institution’s curatorial ethics 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 (*Ibid*.): one 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 programs’ 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 function in a political democratic sphere? In the following case study sections, I will attempt to trace some potential responses to those questions––i.e. re-conceptualising the collection display, collaborating with artists, architects and designers and reaching out audiences to share with them questions of curatorial relevancy and involve them in the practice of curating––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.

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## *Re-conceptualising collection displays at the 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. Tate’s unconventional approach––probably inspired by 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 polarized 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 years of the 21st century, the Tate Modern inspired other European museums of modern and contemporary art to re-display their own collections, making thematic displays central to the new strategies of these kinds of institutions. Museums including the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), Tate Liverpool, Moderna Museet (Stockholm), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (Humlebæk), Mathaf (Doha), Centro de Arte Contemporanea Reina Sofia (Madrid), and the Moderna Galerja (Ljubiana) have all exhibited their collections in series of rotating exhibitions—now embracing an ethos holding that a collection’s mobility lies at the foundation 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 Centro Naciónal de Arte Contemporanea Reina Sofia in Madrid has over the past six years abandoned certain traditional presentations of the collection, rethinking the collection political narrative and ‘the presumptions about property and patrimony embodied by the collection’ (Villel Borja, quoted in Smith 2013, p. 83). 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 art-historical education (Centro Naciónal de Arte Contemporanea 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 opposing 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 program initiative, and were informed by audiences who took part in these. The public program initiative through which the word clouds were drafted was an experiment of «user-generated knowledge», which attempted to understand how Tate Liverpool could best incorporate this knowledge into the collection display. Groups of people who attended the galleries were occasionally invited to suggest words for the words clouds printed on the galleries walls. Unfortunately, the experiment was not repeated more than a couple of time and did not become integral part of the museum’s curatorial approach. However, the collection 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 which attract other, lesser known, works of art that conceptually relate to them-- across time, space, geography, gender, political content, and/or medium. Such a display solution allows for curators to circulate works within an exhibit more frequently. It also explores new ways to historically and conceptually link works of art between well-known and less-known artists, whose work, when considered outside any art historical interpretations, offers great possibilities for unexplored perspectives.

This type of museum display dynamically 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 2014, 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 programme initiatives. The ‘magazine principle’–– as Manacorda defines it––informs all Tate Liverpool’s activities (Manacorda 2014, online).

### *Engaging 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]](#endnote-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: displayed works included pieces by Edward Wadsworth, Gustav Metzger, Francis Picabia, and Gillian Wise.

More recently, Tate Liverpool has worked with performance artists such as Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuş[[3]](#endnote-3), as well as dancers from the English National Ballet and the contemporary classical ensemble *Epiphany*. The museum commissioned these performance artists and dancers to perform new pieces for the public event *2053 A Living Museum: Works Know by Heart,* organised in coordination with the exhibition *Musée Imaginaire/Museum without Walls*––itself organised by Tate Liverpool in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou and MMK. Set in a hypothetical 2053, the exhibition narrative imagined a time in which the museum’s displayed works of art were about to disappear forever. The concept behind *An Imagined Museum* drew on Ray Bradbury’s 1953 science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451*, a tale of a distant future in which works of literature are banned; the only way to save them is to learn them by heart. The title of the event *2053: A Living Museum* 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 *mise en scene* consisted of asking the public to choose a work of art from the exhibition and to memorise it by heart, committing to keep its memory alive in the future. They were also invited to re-enact selected artworks at the show’s finale event. *An Imagined Museum* brought together over 60 post-1945 artworks from the collections of the aforementioned prestigious museums, and displayed works from [Marcel Duchamp](http://www.tate.org.uk/artists/marcel-duchamp), [Claes Oldenburg](http://www.tate.org.uk/artists/claes-oldenburg), [Bridget Riley](http://www.tate.org.uk/artists/bridget-riley), [Dorothea Tanning](http://www.tate.org.uk/artists/dorothea-tanning), [Andy Warhol](http://www.tate.org.uk/artists/andy-warhol), [Rachel Whiteread](http://www.tate.org.uk/artists/rachel-whiteread), and many more.

### *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 had influence the artists’ practice 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 juxtaposed with texts of poetry, and masterpieces of the past considered alongside lesser-known works of contemporary art. This 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 immediately following 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 exhibition 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 use the questions presented throughout the exhibition and complete some parts of the show. The exhibition experimented also the ‘live’ component by creating the so called ‘office of useful art’ in collaboration with Tania Bruguera, where other people could plan the public activities related to the exhibition: there were students and associations who gathered in workshops. In this regard, the museum allowed people to move artworks and bring them in 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 everybody visiting the exhibition could just walk inside the office and join the groups of people that were gathered in it. This room was thought as the place 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 to knowledge production but, in turn, it also represents a delegation tool through which the museum curators withdraw from the responsibility of providing coherent and researched interpretations. By delegating questions of curatorial responsibility to the public, Tate Liverpool asked the 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 of meaning hard, complex and difficult. The natural question that a co-curated exhibition like this 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 its 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 Biennal to others, he eschewed the responsibility of making a statement around the exhibition. The consequences of a similar expedient can in some cases be dangerous, as artistic and curatorial practices have always a political and an ethical drive. By eschewing the responsibility of making a statement around the exhibition, the curator and the institution lose the chance of participating to 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, though sometimes even 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. Basically, Gross called the exhibition ‘biennial’ ironically stressing the attention on the fashion in vogue among contemporary curators (which –as in this case- had affected also the artists) of delegating to others the curation of the exhibition they were initially responsible of organizing. Unfortunately, there are no testimonies on the way this show was received by the publics and what kinds of critiques it rose. Two years later, famous 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 sorts of 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 21st-century art museums curatorial practice to such an extent that one could almost call it, for convenience, ‘curatorial ethics’. This ethics asks to museums to escape from the comfort zone of traditional curatorial practices to set new research questions and methodologies, as well as to forge new kinds of relationships based on mutual engagement and trust between artists, the publics, and the critique. As part of any curatorial practice, curatorial ethics is informed by flexible attitudes and perspectives that are sensitive to changing surrounding conditions. As a mode of operating, it is committed to forging, through exhibitions and public initiatives, a space in which new research questions are formulated inspired by a sense of ethical responsibility for relevant socio-political issues. As a result, exhibitions and public program initiatives demonstrate a profound engagement with contemporary artists and audiences and a commitment in 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 as it is 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; developed forms of co-curation with the publics. In this way, Tate Liverpool has demonstrated that when curatorial practice is informed by this kind of curatorial ethics, it is more likely to be perceived as relevant by the artists, the critique and the publics with whom it is confronted, thus increasing its social impact.

**Notes**

1. I would like to thank Janet Marstine for allowing me to read this article prior to its publication in October 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
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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   . [↑](#endnote-ref-3)