

Article

Learning to Say No, the Ethics of Artist-Curator Relationships

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Abstract: The article suggests that the perceived ethics of curatorial practice are not often in balance with operative ethics, and analyses the problem by focusing on the curator-artist relationship. Contemporary art curators constantly find themselves in a situation where they have to choose between the needs of the few and the many. Counter-hegemony theory is used to examine the curator's duty toward the many, while the reading of Jacques Derrida's concept of responsibility toward an individual and Alain Badiou's 'singularity of situations' suggest that the few are to be considered first. In this article, I suggest that curators could learn to say no in order to be able to balance these different demands.

Keywords: curating; ethics; collaboration; counter-hegemony; commissions

1. Introduction

Once again, I find myself in a situation where, in the middle of a curatorial project, I ask myself *why did I agree to this project?* Even if my instinct told me that it would be better to say *no thank you*, I found, after all, many positive aspects to the project and decided it would be worth doing. It was simply too tempting to pass.

The question of curatorial ethics, for me, is strongly connected with practice, my practice as an independent curator, and more recently as a director of an artist-led gallery. It is important to acknowledge that I write as a practising curator. Practice is a catalyst for theory, it raises questions, issues, and problems, that also need to be examined in writing, or spoken word, to delve deeper into them. In the following article, I will be using my experience of working with artists from 2010 onwards. The exhibition projects have mostly been new commissions taking place in Finland, the UK, and Germany.

With this in mind, I would like to briefly describe the situation where the aforementioned question came to my mind. I had asked an artist to do an installation in a gallery, even though I knew it would be very unlikely that I could secure them an artist fee. I was upfront about it, and they accepted the opportunity nevertheless. In hindsight, alarm bells should have gone off for me at the mention of no payment, for in my experience, it often is connected to other problems as well, but the optimist, and opportunist, in me decided everything would be ok. While no payment is a significant problem in the contemporary art field, and in particular with emerging artists and smaller art spaces, it is only one of the many dilemmas curators, artists, directors, and others working in the sector encounter. This particular project ended with an exhibition the artist and I were very pleased with and the local press wrote a positive review of it. Despite the apparent success, the curatorial process left a bad taste in my mouth as I could not consider it ethical. The dilemma of no-payment (ethically questionable) vs. no-show (not being able to deliver a project) that was so apparent in this particular project, echoes very common problems in the field of the curatorial today and is at the core of curatorial ethics, highlighting the challenges of curator-artist relationship. The lack of payment is a structural issue, and should not therefore be primarily examined as a curator's personal responsibility. However, as I will be arguing in this article, the individual curator cannot renounce their responsibility toward the artist because of structural flaws.



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In this article, I will be examining curatorial ethics by focusing on the relationship between artists and curators¹ in the global north. By concentrating on this relationship, which can find many different forms, I am not asserting that a curator works in a vacuum, unimpacted by other people working on the same project or exhibition, but wish to focus on this often very delicate relationship between the artist and the curator. I will provide examples of some of the projects I have been working on, in order to be able to analyse a relationship that is commonly left undocumented in detail and therefore mostly inaccessible. The focus on the artist-curator relationship does not intend to negate the role of the institutions, museum directors, or the public, merely to examine an aspect of exhibition-making that has been left virtually unexamined in the study of ethics in contemporary art.

My research questions are: How can curators be ethical when it comes to their relationship with artists? How do curators make a decision between the public good and their responsibility toward the artist?

In order to answer these questions, I will be making a distinction between perceived curatorial ethics and operative curatorial ethics by providing some examples of recent exhibitions organised in the global north, and referring to a few upheavals amongst museum employees in the USA. After establishing these different aspects, I will be analysing them within curatorial practice, using counter-hegemony theory to understand curators' duty toward the public (perceived ethics), and analysing the collaborative aspect of curatorial practice (operative ethics). In order to find a way for curators to balance between these two demands, I deploy Jacques Derrida's concept of responsibility toward an individual. Finally, to address the challenge of following established, normative ethical guidelines, Alain Badiou's 'singularity of situations' will be used.

2. Public Opinion

Museum ethics, in connection with contemporary art museums, have been much discussed in recent years², and the critique of institutions has found many forms. This is not a process that could be separated from the different waves of institutional critique but is part of the continuum. In 2019 there were many concurrent incidents that could be loosely connected to the theme of museum ethics, and thus also curatorial ethics. The Whitney Biennial was rather political in content, although some reviews criticised it for being too safe [1], and many of the participating artists were protesting against Warren Kanders, Whitney trustee over his involvement in military weapon trade [2]. The same year Guggenheim's art installers and maintenance workers fought for their right to join a trade union [3]³. Also the same year, a Google spreadsheet with museum employees' salaries circulated on the internet highlighting the poor pay of assistant curators, for example [4]. In 2020, contemporary art museums received heavy criticism from activists supporting the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of George Floyd, with protestors complaining about museums boarding up their windows instead of giving them refuge [5,6]. This list, by no means comprehensive, provides a glimpse into some of the ethical dilemmas the contemporary art museum sector in the western world is currently dealing with. It is worth noting that the aforementioned instances are focused around operations rather than the actual contents of exhibitions, educational work, etc.

At the same time, when contemporary art museums are criticised over potentially unethical operative practices, there is a perceived moral imperative for exhibitions⁴. Nanne Buurman's concept of 'moral imperative of exhibitions' resonates with a kind of 'artificial

¹ Here, the term curator is used to signify a contemporary curator, who may or may not work within the realm of museums or other institutions. There is an abundance of literature available on curatorial practice and the definition of contemporary curator.

² Museum ethics have also been widely discussed in the context of historical museums, for example the case of Elgin Marbles at the British Museum. However, this article focuses on contemporary art museums and other art institutions.

³ See Forensic Architecture's website for information on "Triple-Chaser" which was made when Forensic Architecture were invited to participate in the biennale.

⁴ Nanne Buurman used this term in a conversation we had on curatorial ethics on 3 May 2019 in Leipzig, Germany.

responsibility', a concept developed in her analysis of the ambivalent political implications of moral imperatives in exhibition making [7].

The 2019 Whitney Biennale, despite its artists actively protesting against the museum's board member, was perceived as too unpolitical, and that the *curation* was considered too safe [1]. Also, institutions are increasingly aware of the request for showing a broader diversity of exhibiting artists and have been reacting to these demands. For example, The Miracle Workers Collective represented Finland at the Venice biennale in 2019. The Finnish Pavillion's contribution to the biennale included artists from very diverse backgrounds despite Finnish population being very homogenous [8].

Despite the increased interest in ethics in the contemporary visual arts field, there is relatively little research done on exhibition ethics, or curatorial ethics. As is well known, the key points of reference on exhibition ethics are the Code of Ethics from the American Association of Museums (AAM), International Council of Museums (ICOM), and Museums Association [9–11]. These codes of ethics mainly concentrate on collection activities and the institutions' service to society as the dedicated organisations to preserve culturally important objects and making them available to a variety of audiences. However, these codes of ethics also leave much out and are not relevant to many contemporary curatorial practices, which often take place outside or in the fringes of formal institutions, are not necessarily exhibition-focused, and often work with ephemeral objects and materials that are never meant to be preserved in collections.

In the abovementioned glimpses into recent ethics related issues, a rough division can be drawn: on the one hand, there are ethical dilemmas connected to operative issues, and on the other, the perceived moral imperative of exhibitions, which is in a way implicated in the Code of Ethics as a way of consolidating institutions' service to society. There is a difference between a museum ethos (i.e., the ethical imperative of an institution in general) and the operational ethics of a museum (i.e., the ethical conduct of an institution and/or its curators). The ethos concerns the stated or perceived (more than representational) ethical direction of a museum, whereas the operational ethics concern the day-to-day ethical practice of a museum or curator irrespective of any general, stated, or perceived (institutional) ethos.

In *The Curator's demand: Towards an Ethics of Commitment*, Miguel Hernández-Navarro discusses the different demands the curator faces in their work: the institution, artwork and the public, which form the curator's triple ethical demand [12] (p. 9). The curator is torn between the demands coming from three different directions, and has to navigate between them, not forgetting their own practice. Although Hernández-Navarro's conception of the triple ethical commitment provides much needed understanding on the demands of contemporary curatorial practice, I would propose a rearticulation and a reorganisation of these demands as an attempt to further analyse the ethics of artist-curator collaboration, and deploy the previously articulated division between ethos and ethics, or between stated and operational ethics.

Although I have constantly used the term museum in the above discussion, Hernández-Navarro's focus on the institution needs to be challenged, and the question of curatorial ethics brought away from institutional practices. Museums and blue chip galleries are not the arbiters of truth or the only relevant authority on exhibition ethics. In a very recent addition to the literature on curatorial ethics, *Curating as Ethics*, Jean-Paul Martinon expands the scope of curating beyond the realm of institutions [13]. I consider this very relevant in particular in relation to curatorial ethics, as much of curation happens outside large scale institutions and in small organisations that are much less hierarchical and bureaucratic. Also, due to their non-museum status, they are not bound by the code of ethics. It would be beneficial to also consider the smaller spaces, the emerging, independent curators, artist led spaces etc. that whilst often overlooked in the literature are nonetheless prevalent in all thriving cultural scenes. Considering that in a city like Berlin, for example, there are

approximately 170 museums [14]⁵, and possibly twice or thrice as many galleries, we cannot ignore the smaller, less established, less organised spaces or initiatives and their curators. The shift in focus also makes it possible for us to analyse a more universal concept of curating than that attached to a particular setting, such as a museum with standardised and hierarchical management structures, set audiences and exhibition galleries, even if they might try and challenge existing customs.

If then, the institution is cast aside from Hernández-Navarro's triple demand, we are left with the artwork and the public. However, in contemporary curatorial context, which is often based on new commissions, the artist-curator relationship exists before the artwork; the artist-curator relationship comes first. Therefore, I would argue that the focus could be placed on this relationship rather than the artwork as such. The somewhat passive art object is replaced by the process, the ever-evolving relationship between the artist and the curator.

The "public" in Hernández-Navarro's triple-demand is more involved with ethos, that is, with the stated or perceived aspect of the practice. As I suggested above, the curator's ethical dilemma is between operational and stated ethics, the first encompassing artist-curator relationship and the latter exhibitions or other public facing outcomes, signifying that the curator's duty toward the public is manifested in exhibitions⁶. One way to understand the depth of this duty is to examine it within the framework of counter-hegemony, which elevates the curator to the role of an active agent.

3. Counter-Hegemony

Why do we curate? Why do we make exhibitions? We know about the etymology of the word curator; the curator means a custodian whose duty is to take care—their work is through and through about being responsible. This is also what makes curatorial work fundamentally about ethics, for responsibility as a concept is an integral part of contemporary ethics, as Irene Campolini summarises [15] (p. 71).

We also know *what* the curator does, the many aspects of the practice and the different approaches and emphases. Curating is, amongst other things, selecting, organising, and creating connections. Curators bring objects, ideas, and people—both artists and audiences—together. They, alongside artists, participate in creating culture. Simon Sheik points out that curators have the potential to produce "other subjectivities and other imaginaries"; it is their responsibility to use the format of an exhibition and their practice for this purpose, if they are not content with the state of the world they live in [16] (p. 182). According to Sheik, the contemporary curator is not only responsible for the artworks, they also are responsible for taking part in creating a better world.

A curatorial practice creates, promotes and propagates culture. According to Oliver Marchart, it can be used to homogenise culture and strengthen existing cultural hegemony, or it can be used for counter-hegemonic purposes. Curators, through exhibitions and other public events, can facilitate the creation of a space where counter-hegemonic practices can be conducted [17] (p. 44).

Hegemonic practice aims at making order in society, and maintaining it [18] (p. 2). In the words of Thomas Bates, hegemony "means political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class" [19] (p. 352). Hegemony is power used by the ruling class through its institutions. The power has been given to those in charge, for example the board of an artists' association has been given the power by its members.

According to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's poststructuralist reformulation of counter-hegemony, reality and the social do not exist, they are constructed. Hegemony is a discursive practice, and consequently, there always is a possibility of rearticulation,

⁵ This figure also includes other museums than art museums.

⁶ The term "exhibition" functions as a placeholder for the product of curator's work. Here it means the public facing outcome of a project, something that is created for the audience to be consumed in one way or another.

providing a tool for a new counter-hegemonic struggle [20,21] (p. 967; p. x). The process is never-ending, and it enables the existence of a plural democracy, which takes into account the complexity of the society it serves [21] (p. 61).

Whilst hegemony is political leadership, it is not only contained in the political arena, but spreads into its institutions. The cultural field is not exempt from the fight for political power, on the contrary; it is an important tool in preserving the hegemonic order. According to Mouffe, “artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order, or in its challenging, and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension” [22] (p. 91). Although the far-reaching grasp of hegemony, and its spread into social structures strengthens hegemonic power, on the flipside it has the consequence that a counter-hegemonic struggle can be fought on many different fronts, even simultaneously. The fight for hegemonic dominance is not only reserved for the field of the political, it can also take place in museums, galleries, and even social media.

Acknowledging the hegemonic power of museums and their counter-hegemonic potential has played a significant role in my curatorial practice. In 2013, I started a curatorial project, *Archive Play*, at the Finnish Museum of Photography. The museum houses a collection of fine art photography, but it also contains other types of photographs, such as the remains of commercial photographers’ archives, and a small selection of amateur photographers’ collections [23]. The latter was of great interest to me, as those often are the images not deemed interesting enough to be displayed in exhibitions. For the *Archive Play* project, I chose to work with the Helvi Ahonen collection (collection name “d1988:105 Helvi Ahonen”) that had been donated to the museum in the 1980s after the amateur photographer passed away. The collection, which spans from the 1940s to the 1980s contains approximately 5000 negatives, but only a handful of prints. The collection contains a variety of topics ranging from very mundane domestic settings to more skillful compositions depicting Finnish nature. There are also some interesting repetition of certain motives, such as photographs of the balcony, people on the balcony, or view from the balcony. Ahonen (1909–1987) did not have descendants and that is probably the reason her negatives were donated to the museum’s collection [24]. The collection had not been catalogued, but was apparently partially rehoused at some point, although there is no record of that. After that, the collection was subsequently forgotten. It did not fit the museum’s exhibition profile and was not interesting enough for an extensive research project.

This, however, was precisely the material I was interested in discovering in the museum’s collection. When a similar imagery is taken from an archive and shown over and over again, what kind of a picture does it give of the past? Helvi Ahonen’s collection provided a glimpse into a virtually unedited record of her past, of the way in which she wanted to remember her past—and potentially the way in which she wanted to be remembered. With this curatorial project, together with artists Hertta Kiiski and Niina Vatanen, we embarked on a subtle, but significant mission to change the way in which the museum utilises the collection in their exhibition programme, and this counteracted with the museum’s hegemonic power.

4. The Curator as Organic Intellectual

In the hegemonic struggle, in every re-articulation of the hegemonic order, one important role is that of the organic intellectual. The organic intellectual differs from the traditional intellectual, this member of the intelligentsia, who comes from a privileged background [17] (p. 44). For example, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, leaders of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement have gathered large masses and taken them to the streets. According to Thomas Bates, a human mass “will not distinguish itself” and become independent and active without a leader, which is the role of the organic intellectual. A human mass has power, but it needs someone to organise, initiate, and push forward [19] (p. 360).

Marchart likens the role of the independent curator to an organic intellectual [17,22] (p. 44; p. 104)⁷. In the counter-hegemonic struggle masses are divided into ‘historic blocs’ who share their values and participate in the hegemonic struggle. The ‘historic bloc’ is where a collective will is formed, and is the driving force behind a counter-hegemonic incentive. According to traditional hegemony theory, the historic bloc is formed following class alliances. People belonging to the same class, i.e., the working class, for example, formed a historic bloc, as a collective—working class—will [21](p. 56). After Gramsci’s reinterpretation of the term, historic blocs are no longer formed according to class alliances, but, as Simon Critchley explains, through other communal channels [25] (pp. 90, 101). Significantly, for the work of the curator, the counter-hegemonic struggle has moved away from the political and into the intellectual and cultural sphere. The shift toward alliance according to cultural and intellectual interests provides not only cultural institutions, but curators too, unprecedented power and responsibility. Curators, in collaboration with artists, are given the possibility, through the medium of exhibition, to create an argument—or a position as Marchart calls it [17] (pp. 45–46)—around which a class-less historic bloc can begin to form. An exhibition can function as a space where new ideas are pronounced and made public. Within their role as an organic intellectual, the curator can take part in making structural changes, trying to create a society in which, for example, the artists get paid. For those curators and assistant curators working in large institutions, the aim of making structural changes may seem utopian, but even small deeds can have an impact.

The Archive Play project, that is, the newly commissioned artwork responding to the Helvi Ahonen collection, was first shown at the Finnish Museum of Photography as part of their Project room exhibition programme and a few months later at the Golden Thread gallery in Belfast, UK. It also became a book, published by Kehrer Verlag. Individual works were exhibited widely in different exhibitions, at fairs, and festivals. Equally as important, to me, was that the project did have an impact on how the museum utilizes their collection: the Helvi Ahonen collection has since been incorporated into their exhibition programme also in other contexts, and some of Vatanen and Kiiski’s works were acquired to the museum collection, finding a place with the amateur photographer’s collection that initially was deemed not important enough to be even catalogued.

The curator takes on, either willingly or unwillingly, the burden of politics in each and every project, in every aspect of their practice. As Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen propose, curatorial practice is always either reactionary, conforming to the existing hegemony, or proactive, taking up the role of the organic intellectual and driving for change [26] (p. 26). With the Archive Play project, I intentionally created a curatorial project that would counteract the museum’s hegemonic role. Together with the artists, we were bringing visible archival material that was never shown before, using the amateur photographer’s negatives as a source and inspiration for an artistic project, showing that museum’s collection also contains material produced by ordinary people and that such material is valuable.

As suggested earlier, in an institutional setting curators are unquestionably participating in delivering a service to the public, taking part in fulfilling the code of ethics as agreed upon by the museum field. However, from a hegemonic institution’s point of view, the proactive curator, that is, the organic intellectual, is creating a space for antagonism [17,22] (p. 43; pp. 95–100)⁸ and thus could hardly be seen as doing a service to the public. Curators buying into the canon created at warp speed in biennales around the world and used to reinforce the existing hegemony, could be argued to be reactionary. They reproduce exhibitions proven to be popular, attracting large audiences, instead of taking risks and trying to show to the audiences new approaches and lesser known names⁹.

⁷ Mouffe suggests that all people working in the arts and culture are organic intellectuals.

⁸ Marchart and Mouffe both agree that art in itself cannot produce counter-hegemony, or antagonism, but it can create a pluralistic public space.

⁹ Unquestionably also the art market plays an important role in large galleries’ and museums’ programming.

5. Curator-Artist Relationship

As an organic intellectual, the curator is a leader who participates, through exhibition-making practices, in gathering the masses for a counter-hegemonic struggle. The masses—as a historic bloc—have the power. An organic intellectual does not exist without the masses, as they have nothing to lead. At the same time, curators also depend on artists, for without the artists there is no art. Curators can only fulfil their curatorial function with artists¹⁰; they only exist in connection to other entities, be it the historic bloc or the artists they collaborate with.

Much of a curator's work is communicating with artists, and curatorial projects are often done together with living artists—this collaboration is what forms the everyday practice of curating. It is important to note that artist-curator collaborations can take many forms, there is no one set model to follow. Many collaborations take the form of commissions, where an artist is invited to contribute to an exhibition. For example, Maria Lind invited Liam Gillick to function as a 'catalyst' for the exhibition "What if" she curated for Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 2000 [27]. However, collaborations can be much more subtle and less pronounced; they can consist of a dialogue between the artist and curator—an organic element of an exhibition project. Commonly, a new exhibition project includes at an early stage a studio visit, where a dialogue between the artists and the curator commences, establishing a collaborative working relationship.

Using counter-hegemony theory as a framework for curating is contributing to the understanding of what curatorial ethics might potentially mean. However, as Marchart writes, the focus is on the outside, on the public event or place, rather than the methods, everyday practices, systems, and logistics. Collaboration, whether voluntary or involuntary, is part of curating within every institutional context, but also outside of institutional parameters [28] (pp. 7–10)¹¹. These collaborations take many forms, although one of the most central ones, for curators working with contemporary art, is collaboration with artists. When deciding to commission an artist, or stage an extensive solo show, the curator chooses to collaborate, and cooperate. Curator-artist collaboration is often taken as an obvious part of a curatorial process, it is mentioned in acknowledgements and forewords, and it is praised in opening speeches, but a detailed analysis of the relationship is often lacking. Also, it is an area that falls completely out of the remit of the various codes of ethics written for museums, for they focus on the object and the audience, rather than the creator of the said object.

The focus on the outcome, be it either a detailed quantitative analysis of the representation of minorities in exhibitions, or qualitative critique of the content of the exhibition, the curatorial selection and arrangement, or the reading of individual works of art, commonly forgets about the artist, the human being behind the art. The artist is a fellow human being, with feelings and needs. In a collaborative situation we all bring ourselves, as individuals, into the working relationships.

The Archive Play project was part of my PhD research, which examined the potential of artistic interventions into photographic archives and the curator's role in the process. I commissioned two artists to work independently, but collaboratively, producing two bodies of work that were in communication with each other. Hertta Kiiski's *Present (Thank you Helvi Ahonen)* 2014 and Niina Vatanen's *Archival Studies/A Portrait of an Invisible Woman*, 2014 were visually very distinct, although both photographic, the artists' working processes were different, yet the bodies of work contributed to one another. The starting point of the process was rather formal, as I had set the parameters even before meeting the artists: I had started by selecting the collection and counterfactual historiography. However, once the collaboration was initiated, the form also relaxed and our working relationship became

¹⁰ As stated before, this article focuses on contemporary curatorial practice and curator-artist collaboration. It is possible for a curator to install an exhibition without artists, but this is seldom the case.

¹¹ The use of the term "independent"—to describe curators whose primary modus operandi is working with several institutions and organisations simultaneously—does not relieve them of institutional affiliations.

dialogical. We worked side by side, me cataloguing and rehousing the collection and the artists selecting frames for digitisation because the museum was not able to process the entire collection. The conversations continued over lunch, when we had more formal meetings, and together with the museum staff on coffee breaks. Being able to accompany the artists throughout the process, hear the excitement in the voices when they told about an image they had discovered made it possible for me to understand their needs and concerns regarding their work and the exhibition. The convivial nature of the collaboration taught me to listen to the artists and do my best to assist them, sometimes by asking them critical questions, at other times listen to their concerns with the progression of the work.

In dividing curators' demands into three categories, Hernández-Navarro places the work of art before the artist. He insists that the "curator must guarantee that the work—the artist and his discourse—finds its best, optimum way of speaking" [12] (p. 9). The artwork, the outcome of the artist's creative process encompasses the artist and his discourse but is not a primary concern for the curator. However, thinking about new commissions, the artist-curator relationship predates the existence of the artwork, and the curator's ethical demand toward the artwork is only present as a duty towards the potential realisation of the work. As a commissioning curator, the work only exists as something that is not yet there. In my role as curator I am conscious that it will be my duty to present the soon-to-be artwork in the most responsible way possible, however as long as it is not there yet, it only exists in its potentiality. In my experience, this is an important aspect of artist-curator relationship, for the curator's responsibility is to create a situation in which the artist can focus on creating the best possible artwork. In a dialogical relationship the curator and artist enter a reciprocal relation that often helps to find new ways to think about their practice and the project in question. The Archive Play project began with rather strict parameters and sets of questions in mind, but with time, through conversations, it started finding new trajectories that carried it.

Maria Lind, in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*, suggests the use of the term collaboration as an umbrella for the many different ways in which people work together. It is:

an open-ended concept, which in principle encompasses all the others. Collaboration becomes an umbrella term for the diverse working methods that require more than one participant. 'Cooperation', on the other hand, emphasises the notion of working together and mutually benefiting from it. [29] (p. 17)

The request for a cooperation to mutually benefit both the artist and the curator, appears to be fair, an indication of an ethical way of working together. However, there are many different ways of "mutually benefitting," without it signifying that it is necessarily ethical. Is this not how all unpaid opportunities are advertised? In a trade-off for creating something new, the artist will get visibility. And both parties benefit. Despite the positive definition of the term cooperation by Lind, it does not by default signify an ethical way of working together.

The changing role of the curator, due to the emergence of contemporary curatorial practices, and the impact they have had on the authority of the curator, has been widely criticised by artists [30]¹². In the past couple of decades the authorial role has given way to alternative curatorial models that use performative and dialogical methods [31] (p. 8). These methods have been unquestionably inspired by various forms of artistic collaborations since the 1960s [32,33] (p. 19; p. 55). As Lind points out, artistic collaborations were central "in the transition from Modernism to postmodernism" [29] (p. 16). Collaborative methods borrowed from conceptual artists combined with the influence of institutional critique have led to alternative curatorial practices that critically examine the curator's agency not only within the institution, but also in a curator-artist relationship.

Collaboration has become such a rudimentary aspect of curatorial practice, that its deeper implications are not to be ignored. In *Postscript from Rene*, Rene Gabri questions

¹² Daniel Buren's critique of Documenta 5 in 1972 accuses the curator Harald Szeemann of not caring about the artist.

“under what terms” do we work together every day. He challenges the contemporary idea that collaboration and collectivity is in itself the aim, the end, even more important than the purpose of a cooperation [34] (pp. 127–128). Whilst he does not negate the occurrence of collaboration and its potential, he highlights the importance of critically examining the conditions and terms under which we work with each other; why collaborative processes take place, and how we actually work ‘with others’. From this point of view, returning to Lind’s thoughts on cooperation as being mutually beneficial, it does not seem to be a sufficient ethical guide for a curator; being mutually benefitting does not automatically guarantee fair terms and conditions. The curator’s demand to take care does not only begin with the work of art, but it also demands to take care of the artist.

In addition to understanding how we work together, we also need to acknowledge the ulterior motives behind collaborations. According to Charles Green, collective practices have often been connected to countercultural ideologies, and the increase in collaborative curatorial projects can also be seen as an indication of a more fundamental shift in the ethos of present day curatorial practices [35] (p. 106).

Inspecting this comment in relation to hegemonic discourse, the ulterior motive behind collaboration is clear: The curator cannot participate in the creation of counter-hegemony without a historic bloc, which is formed out of a collective will. The artist-curator collaboration geared toward forming an exhibition that people visit and might be influenced by the art in the exhibition, is, together with other exhibitions, creating a space in which a historic bloc can be formed.

Even if it is questionable whether a singular exhibition can have a transformative power, curators commonly have a longer trajectory, an overarching approach, behind their practice. One exhibition after another, project after a project, articulate a curator’s counter-hegemonic standpoint, which is formulated through diverse collaborations with artists. Like artworks inspire new artworks, also exhibitions inspire new exhibitions and together these exhibitions participate in the creation of a space where counter-hegemonic practices can take place. As pointed out by Laclau and Mouffe, the spread of hegemonic power outside the political arena signifies that the counter-hegemonic struggle can take place on many fronts simultaneously, the cultural field being one of them.

6. Curator’s Duty as Practice

If, then, curator-artist collaborations occupy such a central role in curatorial practice, both from practical and ideological perspectives, how do we estimate whether a project has been ethical or not, or ethical up to what degree? In *Curatorial Activism*, one of the few texts produced in recent years on curatorial ethics, Maura Reilly provides a very close reading of statistics, considering the amount of female artists exhibited in exhibitions etc., which is much needed and gives us an understanding of the problems in the field, making the practitioner acknowledge underrepresentation of minorities in contemporary art in particular [36]. However, even if an exhibition consisted completely of female artists’ work and the subject matter of the art included, and the focus of the exhibition itself contributing to counter-hegemonic struggle was feminist, is the curatorial practice behind it ethical if the artists have not been treated fairly?¹³ Examining curatorial ethics using quantitative methods marginalises the role of curator-artist relationship, which is collaborative in nature, and can be only partially used for estimating the ethicality of an exhibition, or a curator’s work.

Returning to Andreasen and Bang Larsen’s claim that curators are either reactive or proactive in their practice, we can request curators to take part in counter-hegemonic struggle; urge them to pick a side, either choosing the existing hegemonic power, or counter-hegemony. Existing ethical codes used by museums are produced by the institutions that

¹³ This question also expands beyond the artists. Other collaborators, people who make the exhibitions possible, also ought to be taken into consideration as well as what goes into the “no art” section. Are the cleaners paid fairly? How are the materials sourced? Although much of the operations are beyond the curator’s control, their role in the decision making at at-large institutional programmes can be minimal.

use their hegemonic power. A curator taking on the responsibility of fulfilling their role as an organic intellectual would, then, appear to be put in a situation where they must also question the existing ethical codes. And by doing so, they must develop and adopt new modes of ethical practices that are in line with the counter-hegemonic movement [37]¹⁴.

As the dominant hegemony can always be challenged, counter-hegemonic practices can become dominant, and challenged again by other counter-hegemonies. The ethical codes agreed upon by the counter-hegemony turned into hegemony, will thus also be seen as flawed and challenged¹⁵. I see here a parallel between counter-hegemonies turning hegemonic and positive ideas of the good turning evil, as put forward in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* by Alain Badiou. He observes that there is a common belief that although the “ethical ‘consensus’ is founded on the recognition of Evil, it follows that every effort to unite people around a positive idea of the Good” eventually “becomes in fact the real source of evil itself” [38] (p.13). The Nazis, for example, developed their own idea of the “good” for the German people and yet that “good” turned evil. According to Badiou, consensual ‘ethics’ exists due to the acceptance of a status quo, however, a consensus, and thus also consensual ethics, are destroyed by “every emergence of hitherto unknown possibilities” [38] (p. 13).

The rearticulation of ethical codes does not do away with the dilemma of a curator’s multiple duties; their duty toward the audience and society as a whole, and their duty toward the artist. These duties do not necessarily at all times contradict each other, but nevertheless have different needs. As Hernández-Navarro writes, each one of a curator’s ethical demands “is an infinite demand that cannot be completely fulfilled... The curator therefore finds himself at the crossroad of the demands that are incompatible with one another, demands that would cancel each other out” [12] (p. 10).

This brings the problem of curator’s competing duties back to the very old dilemma between the larger good and individual good. As stated also in the museums’ ethical codes, the institution’s, and thus also the curator’s responsibility is toward society in general. If, then, the institution and society in general represent the larger good, benefitting the many, it can be challenging for the curator to justify being ethical in their relation with the artist, the few, if it contradicts the larger good.

The curator as an organic intellectual, the collaborator who does not exist outside of collaborative relationship, is first and foremost acting for the benefit of the society they serve by trying to create a space in which counter-hegemonic practices can take place. Thus they, by default, work ethically, fulfilling their curatorial duty. The curator as an organic intellectual, by partaking in the creation of counter-hegemony, is attempting to create a better world.

I wish to briefly return to the project mentioned in the introduction, the exhibition that was the starting point for this article. I do not wish to identify the institution where the project took place as it is not my intention to tarnish anybody’s reputation. At the invitation of the said institution, I initiated an exhibition project that was meant to be based on a commission. However, due to the artist’s practice and the difficulty of realizing a new commission in the physical space of the institution, no new works were created specifically for the exhibition. Despite the non-commission aspect of the exhibition, the curator-artist relationship was close and dialogical. We met several times, did a site visit together and arranged studio visits. I tried to listen to the artist and support them in whichever way I could. The biggest problem with the project was not the lack of funding, but the feeling that the artist’s work was not appreciated and valued by the institution. Unfortunately, this was also not kept from the artist. The issue was encountered relatively late, at a point where it would have been difficult to withdraw as the artist had already put a lot of work into the exhibition. It is challenging to detail how this lack of appreciation manifested itself

¹⁴ If the acts opposing the existing hegemonic order are purely antagonistic, they are not providing a re-articulation that is necessary for counter-hegemony.

¹⁵ The mores of the previous ruling class are replaced by the mores of the new dominant ideology.

in minute details, short moments that went almost unnoticed. These fleeting instances are often left undocumented, which was also the case here. The institution's interest appeared primarily to be in the artists' capability to increase the institution's revenue and visitor numbers. I had brought the artist into a situation where they were treated unethically. On this project, I had a curatorial responsibility to take care of the artist, yet I was incapable of doing so.

In my own practice I ask myself whether I am acting ethically by curating a counter-hegemonic exhibition, even if I am only able to do it under circumstances where I cannot be ethical toward the artist? Even if counter-hegemonic curatorial practice aims at making structural changes, and thus potentially benefitting the artist in the future. When it happens, the collaboration is not automatically ethical.

In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida delves into the problem of our responsibility towards an individual (the other) and towards all others. Derrida questions the priority of the general ethical order by analysing Søren Kierkegaard's essay *Fear and Trembling* and the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. He suggests that the primary place for responsibility is a singular moment in which decisions are made [39] (pp. 60–61). According to Derrida, focusing on one thing, activity, or an individual—filling our duty—I am “sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligation” [39] (p. 69). It is only possible to be responsible to an individual at the expense of the others. Even if fulfilling their duty by taking seriously their responsibility toward an individual, the curator is betraying their other obligations. For Derrida, ethics is connected to singular decision making processes, to individual responsibility rather than acting out of duty toward the general ethical order [39] (pp. 63, 70).

Campolmi, in *Institutional Engagement and the Growing Role of Ethics in Contemporary Curatorial Practice*, has built upon the concept of context specific ethics after Badiou, arguing curatorial practice to be driven by what she calls ‘ethics of contingencies’. She considers curatorial ethics as “practices informed by flexible attitudes and perspectives, which remain sensitive to changing surrounding conditions” [15] (pp. 72–73). In this setting, it is challenging to have fixed ethical rules or guidelines that cannot react to the situation and needs of individuals. Badiou even argues that ethics prevent us from “thinking the singularity of situations as such, which is the obligatory starting point of all properly human action” [38] (p. 14).

7. Conclusion: The Duty of Saying No

In these singular situations, the priority is given to individual encounters. I would suggest, after Derrida, that the curator's main responsibility should thus be towards the artist, the other. Paradoxically, this could lead into a situation of not doing anything, not being able to do anything. If the curator cannot act responsibly toward the artist, maybe they should not make an exhibition. Not doing anything might in many cases be the more responsible choice, particularly in reference to curators relationship with artists. However, at the same time, by not doing anything, the curator is not able to fulfil their curatorial duty, to create a space in which counter-hegemonic practices, aimed at making structural changes, can take place.

By refusing to curate, the curator fails to provide a space for artists coming from underrepresented groups, or artist belonging to minorities. *No* is a powerful word for those in power; it has the potential to stop production, to stop processes in which the curator cannot act responsibly toward the other. Saying no is a critical act that creates a pause long enough to reconsider, an act that might make others to also stop and think. However, the pause created by uttering the word ‘no’ is only brief, and before we notice, new exhibitions and projects have sprung up everywhere, facing the same ethical problems the curator has tried to avoid.

The curators and artistic directors of large-scale exhibitions and biennales have reached a place of power that only a few members of the curatorial community can ever reach. They have been given an opportunity to fulfil their (counter-hegemonic) curatorial duty,

virtually without any limitations. But is it really the sense of curatorial duty that they are following in such instances? Do curators use the opportunity to fulfil their role as an organic intellectual, or is it their ambition that they follow?

Instead of stopping the process, maybe curators could re-evaluate the motives behind their curatorial drive. As curatorial statements accompanying exhibition projects seldomly contain the confessions of the curator's ulterior motives, I can only speculate what they might have been. I am quietly confessing to being guilty, at times, of putting my ambitions before my curatorial duties. The need to make bigger and more impactful shows, curating exhibitions the art press write about, can be disguised as an altruistic act; a curator fulfilling their duty of creating a better world. Whereas under the pretext of moral imperative of exhibitions, the project is driven by less altruistic curatorial ambitions. Beyond the curatorial duty of making exhibitions that matter, the drive to make exhibitions as good as possible, is also the mark of a professional ambition, hoping, for example, that a project leads to the next gig, the next big opportunity.

Therefore, I propose that the curator *primarily* needs to learn to say no to ambitions disguised as duty. And *secondly*, say no to those projects where it will not be possible to balance the various demands, where power-relations are not in check. Uttering the word 'no', instead of 'yes', in the first instance, gives time to pause, to weigh in on the options, to look at the individual and their needs. Learning to say no, to slow down, to look at the big picture, to listen to the other, and assess the situation. However, when commissioning new work, it is impossible to know whether the curator can fulfil their counter-hegemonic duty in the end, for the work does not yet exist. The outcome of a project is never guaranteed, whether at the start or even during its development.

For Badiou, not only is the present—a specific situation—important, but also the unknown future, what cannot be known or even anticipated. In contemporary curatorial practices, which rely heavily on new commissions, the focus is often on the potential, on what is to come. The future is unknown and out of reach. In these instances, the curator makes choices about working conditions etc., thus making decisions in the face of the unknown. In dialogical, collaborative processes, the change is constant, and it is impossible to know what comes next, where does everything lead. As the artworks are not ready at the moment of making decisions, we cannot know the impacts of our decisions for the many. In the singular moment when the decision is made, only the few are present.

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