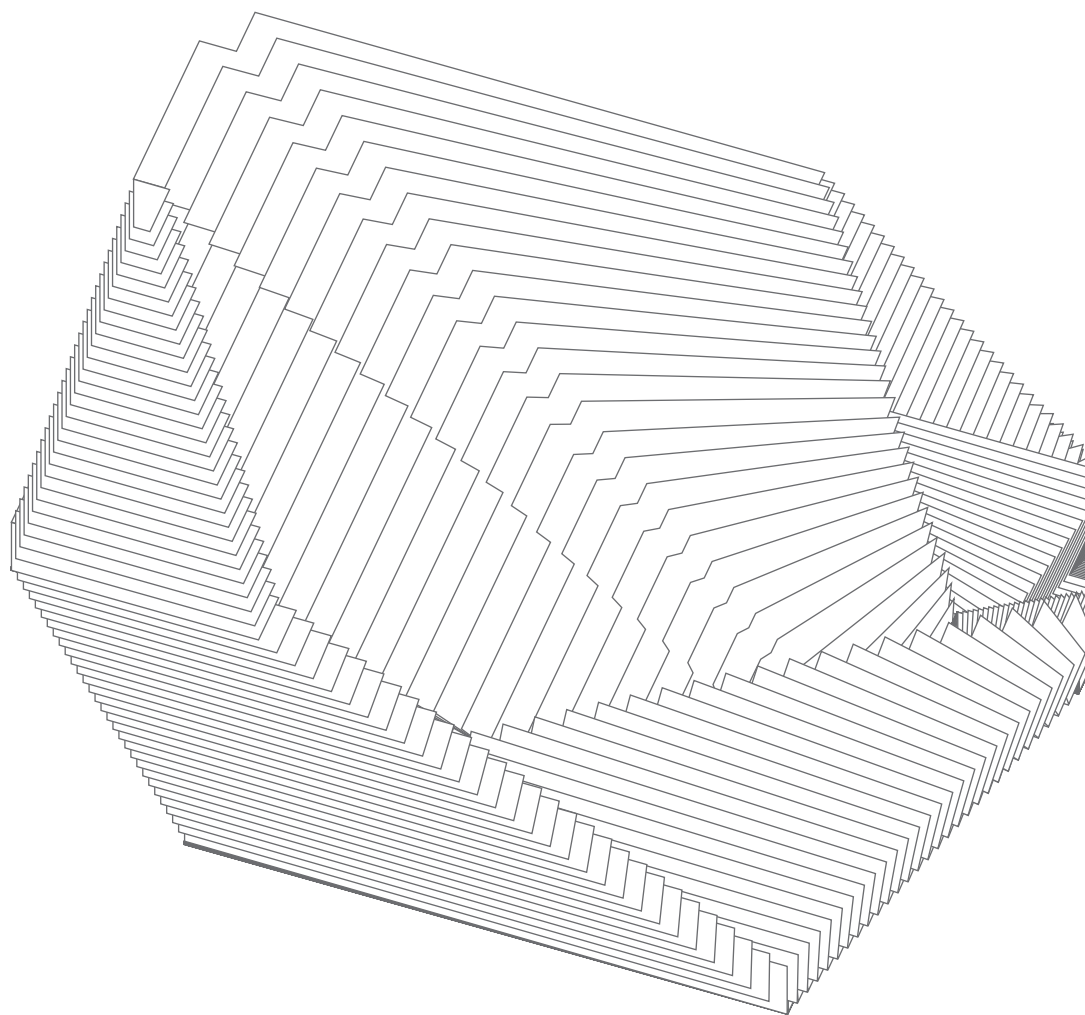


EXHIBITIONARY ACTS OF POLITICAL IMAGINATION

ACTE EXPOZIȚIONALE DE IMAGINAȚIE POLITICĂ

Edited by / Editori: Cătălin Gheorghe, Mick Wilson





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INFRASTRUCTURES OF THE EXHIBITIONARY

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Taking a stirred-up understanding and use of knowledge as a given of the contemporary art world is one of their [educators, theorists, and practitioners who assemble around notions such as “practice-based research” and “the curatorial”] shared premises, as is the belief that the institutions and “para-institutions” filed under an expanded notion of contemporary art are the potential sites of responding in new and necessary ways to the constant and inescapable crises inflicted upon the earth and its human and nonhuman inhabitants by industrialization, modernization, colonialism, fascism, and neoliberalism (to name only a few of the numerous reasons for the current condition).¹

If exhibition stands for a display of objects, *the exhibitionary* is the network of ongoing exposures—material and immaterial, of physical things and abstract ideas—where exhibitions take place.

Exhibition-making and curating have been tightly intertwined since the emergence of curating as a practice in the contemporary art world. Curating, loosely defined as the practice of making exhibitions in a museum or gallery setting, has gone through a process of intense transformation and debate, at least since the last sixty years or so. Historically, these debates have articulated the role of curating as the display of selected objects by means of proposing a new narrative or idea (or even revisiting a particular topic in art history). More recently, curating has become an arena from which to engage knowledge and concerns, materials and affects, in the expanded field of the artwork. The practice of exhibition-making has expanded—hand-in-hand with the development of curating and the curatorial²—to engage with the tensions and continuities between ideas and artefacts, the nonlinear relationalities between materials, and the mobilisation of the aesthetic regimes that surround and inform us. Aesthetics is understood here, not only as what is displayed or given-to-be-seen but also the forms and underlying mechanisms of visibility and their political implications, therefore, in this articulation, we can begin to consider the outside of the circumscribed perimeter of the museum.

Today, without generating much controversy, we could assert that an exhibition is more than just a (curated) display of objects. It is by taking this statement as an initial standpoint that I would like to revisit the cultural and epistemic capacities of exhibition—or what I prefer calling the “exhibitionary” (a term that becomes clearer below)—beyond exhibition-making. We must insist that the field of exhibition encompasses much more

[1] Tom Holert, *Knowledge beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics*, Sternberg Press, 2020. p. 13.

[2] Curating and the curatorial are both related to the practice of exhibition-making. However, there has been a rich debate in the last 15 years that situates the curatorial in the expanded field of exhibition-making, with a role that exceeds the curation of exhibitions, and points towards the interpretative and epistemic functions of cultural production. Some of the authors who have elaborated on these topics are Maria Lind (2011), Irit Rogoff (2013), Jean-Paul Martinon (2013), Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (2015, 2017).

than just the making or study of exhibitions in an art setting. Until today, various projects and practitioners have explored the generative potential of curating by exploring formats that disseminate the exhibitionary through multiple forms of cultural engagement. Here I am thinking, for instance, of the research-led curatorial programme at the House of the World Cultures (*Haus der Kulturen der Welt*) in Berlin, which has been exemplary and instrumental in experimenting, in a comprehensive institutional level, with the curatorial as an investigative practice unfolding in an extended temporality and making use of the formats required to provide different curatorial entry points to critical and urgent questions (through long-term critical forums, exhibitions, publications, working groups, commissions, etc.)³

[3] For more information on the House of the World Cultures in Berlin, see: <https://www.hkw.de/en/>. Accessed 27 August 2021.

What we still need to explore in greater detail is not so much where to identify new settings for the making of exhibitions and curatorial formats; I think this has been explored extensively with the rehabilitation of derelict warehouses, the proliferation of pop-up exhibitions in closed commercial spaces, and the internet, just to name a few instances. What this essay aims to explore is how to mobilise exhibitionary tools (aesthetic, spatial, theoretical, epistemic)—as a way of intervening and producing meaning—and to apply them to the juxtapositions of materials that surround us. In other words, I want to investigate the epistemic and cultural potentials of bringing exhibitionary tools to a non-exhibition setting to provide new modes of production, engagement and interpretation of and within expanded cultural fields.

This essay aims to locate “exhibition instances” outside the strict realm of art display, museums and galleries, in parallel with other modes of knowledge production (academic and non-academic epistemes), and of intervention in human and non-human worlds. By acknowledging the exhibition mechanisms in the expanded field of the art exhibition we can recognise the exhibitionary qualities of the forms and materials set up intentionally and/or unintentionally as being-in-relation—in an *ecosystemic* scale—and which subsequently inform our experiences and shape the way we make sense of the world and create new meanings. This text discusses the possibility of mobilising the “infrastructure of the exhibitionary”—as the network and mechanisms of *ecosystemic* exposures of forms and materials that constitute our ecologies—to carve out an arena of practice and research in the Arts and Humanities to analyse and intervene in the field of aesthetics and its politics. This attempt does not ignore the valuable developments in art history, art criticism, museum studies, curating and art practice. Rather, the expanded notion of the exhibitionary, which I am advocating for, complements work realised within these fields, at the same time that it recognises the perimeter of its intervention to be in close dialogue and proximity with the analysis of cultural phenomena provided by cultural studies and visual cultures.

In order to elaborate on some of the principles of what may be termed an expanded exhibitionary mode as a site of inquiry, the first part of this text focuses on the centrality of galleries and museums in producing exhibitions, establishing and maintaining aesthetic values, racial and gender stereotypes, and maintaining uneven power relations. Moreover, it focuses on the radical correlation between aesthetics and forms of political and social life. In this way, the text draws upon critical studies on the birth of museums in the nineteenth century and the colonial exhibitions to identify the porosity and interchange between the project of the Enlightenment,

the colonial enterprise, and institutions of display. We do this because, while we claim an exhibitionary inquiry as a basis for new modes of cultural and political engagement, it is of prime importance to acknowledge the coloniality of “curating-as-exhibition-making”, before assigning it a political potential and naively assuming that its aesthetic-political efficacy comes with it as a default.

In the second part, the essay looks at institutions of display today, their increasing neoliberalisation, and how to implement models that refuse the autonomy of the field and the mere territorial expansion of the sector towards “non-traditional” spaces for exhibitions. Examples of territorial expansion of exhibition-making are frequently provided by grandiose exhibition enterprises, such as European Capitals of Culture, commemorative festivals, and biennials. The text argues that opening up the field of exhibition as an epistemic arena of practice in which cultural meanings get constituted and troubled, displaced and reinvented, can provide insights to the reimagining of the institutions of display—museums and galleries—towards transdisciplinary curatorial/research hubs. This reflection aims to tap into debates on the curatorial and practice research, including, the claim for the generative research capacities of the curatorial and how practitioners and institutions of display are well equipped and placed to respond to our current crisis.

Aesthetics Outside of the Domain of Art

In the field of contemporary art, exhibitions are seen as operating at the level of aesthetics (formerly defined according to notions of beauty, style and genre; nowadays actualised with curatorial and epistemic capacities.) By taking a look at the writings of philosopher Jacques Rancière, more specifically *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2014), one finds an important qualification to the definition and remit of aesthetics—considerations which are for the most part absent in art criticism. For this author, aesthetics does not solely refer to the field of artistic practices, nor just to the thinking about art and the theory of art. Instead, aesthetics is understood as a domain of social and political life in which the forms of the sayable, the thinkable, and the doable are part of how we experience and make sense of the world. Rancière argues that “aesthetics acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity.”⁴ Rancière rightly points to the domain of aesthetics as operative in all the forms of political and human experience, also extended to all abstract and physical forms, e.g., from pixels and molecules, to non-human beings.

A more open definition of aesthetics immediately triggers a series of concerns related to the materiality and abstraction of ideas, forms, displays, experience, and, moreover, concerns that are not reduced to the confined arena of artistic forms. For that matter, a decolonial reading of the autonomy of the art object and aesthetics locates this separation as a construct of the project of modernity, a reading that has been extensively articulated by decolonial scholars.⁵ According to sociologist Rolando Vázquez, this separation is only possible within the logic of “colonial difference.”⁶ Among the most striking of these divisions are those between knowledge and the arts; culture and knowledge; human and nature; and the violence of racial and gender borders. This modern division is an artificial separation in the colonial episteme whereby the world is segmented into groups that are set

[4] Jacques Rancière and Gabriel Rockhill, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Bloomsbury, (2014) [orig. 2004]. p. 19.

[5] Modernity/Coloniality group was formed in a conference of Latin-American scholars in Caracas, 1998. The term was first used by Anibal Quijano (2017) and later expanded by Walter Mignolo (2007) and others. See more here: <https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/colonialitymodernity/>

[6] Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary*, Mondrian Fund, 2020, p. 117.

apart and disjointed. This disjuncture is responsible for the establishment of an epistemic and, one could add, aesthetic separation between constitutive elements of the world that, despite being radically interdependent, were set apart by the project of modernity. The consequences of the widespread implementation of this artificial divide became even more apparent with the tangible implications of racial capitalism, the Anthropocene and the devastating impact of climate change.

In Vázquez's most recent publication, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and The End of The Contemporary* (2020), the author brings to our attention the modern/colonial order of aesthetics and its intricate relation to the apparatus of control over the representation and experience of world-historical realities. Vázquez's argument contributes to the debates around the ways in which aesthetics and representation are intertwined with historical and situated political regimes. Vázquez's argument claims that we cannot have a complex reading of coloniality if the critique of epistemocentrism is not interpellated and complemented with the broader field of aesthetics. Vázquez writes:

We refer to aesthetics not solely as the field of artistic practices, nor just as the thinking about the arts. We understand aesthetics as a domain of social life equivalent to epistemology. While the question of epistemology is concerned with the modern/colonial control of knowledge and representation, the question of aesthetics brings to the fore the control of perception and representation.⁷

An analysis of the politics of aesthetics in the expanded field of exhibition-making is a crucial complement to the reassessment of the colonial and neoliberal regimes that govern forms of life (and non-life) across the planet. What I would like to propose here, is the immanent continuities between the forms of art and the forms that constitute the world—a symbiosis always recognised, and evidenced, in the themes of artworks (e.g., figurative painting and sculpture) or in the political agendas of exhibitions.

Equally, it is important to turn our attention to the politics of exhibitions and their institutional framework, more precisely, the issues that emerge at the intersection between the birth of institutions of display and the modern institutions of control. This critical work provides a much-needed perspective with which to investigate the coloniality of curating-as-exhibition-making. From the vantage point of the exhibitionary, and the expanded notion of the curatorial articulated here, the positing of curating-as-exhibition-making as a neutral construction or operation is a premise that is rendered highly questionable, if not downright untenable.

There is no neutral act of exhibiting and no neutral exhibition space. Any consideration of the genealogy of museums and exhibitions cannot overlook the first European museums and the international World Fairs. Both formats are known for playing an important role in the consolidation of the colonial episteme of racial superiority, ontological differences, which refused to recognise the intellectual and cultural complexity of non-European peoples. With this project came also the formation of disciplines, discourses and colonial paradigms that differentiate peoples, geographies, knowledges, and experiences. Among the rigorous scholarly work in this field, scholars such as Douglas Crimp,⁸ Tony Bennett,⁹ Brigitta Kuster,¹⁰ Wayne Modest,¹¹ and Dan Hicks,¹² have provided compelling analyses of how the apparatuses of display informed the production, reception and interpretation of art,

[7] *Ibid.* p. 7.

[8] Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, MIT Press, 2008. [orig. 1993]

[9] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, 1995.

[10] Brigitta Kuster, "Sous Les Yeux Vigilants / Under the Watchful Eyes. On the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris 1931", *Transform EIPCP, Art and Police*, 2007.

[11] Wayne Modest, Nicholas Thomas, Doris Plić, and Claudia Augustat (eds.), *Matters of Belonging: Ethnographic Museums in a Changing Europe*, Sidestone Press, 2019.

[12] Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, Pluto Press, 2020.

disciplinary knowledge, historical narratives, and epistemic paradigms. Moreover, these authors allow us to theorise how recoded and rebranded imperial rhetorics continue to legitimise the ownership of looted objects (and memories) today.¹³

Most of the aforementioned analyses draw notably upon Foucault's elaboration of the modern institutional technologies that control and discipline forms of social and political life.¹⁴ For example, Tony Bennet in *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), gives an account of a modern institution of control that Foucault left untheorized. Bennett provides a focused genealogy of the modern public museum tracing its formation and early function, as well as its policies and politics:

The emergence of art museums was closely related to that of a wider range of institutions—history and natural science museums, dioramas and panoramas, national and, later, international exhibitions, arcades and department stores—which served as linked sites for the development and circulation of new disciplines (history, biology, art history, anthropology) and their discursive formations (the past, evolution, aesthetics, man) as well as for the development of new technologies of vision.¹⁵

For Bennett, the foundational task of the institutions of display was more than the display of a set of objects and the access provided for an audience. Bennet named the concatenation of disciplines, knowledge, discourses and power relations immanent—arguably invisible to the general audience—in the emergence of these institutions as “the exhibitionary complex”. The unapologetic (and not-so-invisible) continuities between colonial modes of display and today’s formats are obvious in the contemporary heir to the colonial World Fairs, i.e., the EXPO. A popular format in European metropolitan centres since the nineteenth century, the World Fairs used the stage of exhibition to display and promote national and imperial industrial progress, the colonial territories and assets, and, more appallingly, to exhibit the peoples from colonised territories. Far from having critically distanced itself from its earlier problematic historical formations, without any sense of irony and unapologetically, the EXPO project’s website announces:

The first World Expo—the Great Exhibition—took place in London in 1851. The concept became popular and was repeated across the globe, demonstrating an unparalleled power of attraction and a record of world-class legacies.¹⁶

In the contemporary era, the *Bureau International des Expositions* took up the colonial project under a new name, EXPO, and renewed its imagery and identity. Former colonial World Fairs are now presented as mega-exhibitions dedicated “to improve humankind’s knowledge, [taking] into account human and social aspirations and highlights scientific, technological, economic and social progress.”¹⁷ Arguably, this statement is not so dissimilar to the rhetorics or the ethos of the original colonial project in the nineteenth century. However, the current large-scale event seems to have adapted to the new neoliberal logics, accepting not only applications from nation-states, but also from private companies to be represented by their own pavilions.

The EXPO demonstrates the continuities of the modern/colonial project of exhibition-making as a political staging of Eurocentric power relations and upholds an actualisation of this apparatus of power for use in the

[13] On this matter, there are two recent publications that directly reflect on the continuities of the coloniality of museums and collections in Western museums: *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* by Dan Hicks (2020) and *The Metabolic Museum* by Clementine Deliss (2020).

[14] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, 1979.

[15] *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

[16] Bureau International des Expositions url: <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/about-world-expos>

[17] *Ibid.*

present. Simultaneously, the new model capitalises upon the historical discourse of the apparatus of the exhibition to actualise a neocolonial discourse premised on the nation-state, identity and progress. These examples demonstrate that exhibition-making cannot be decoupled from the institutional mechanics that govern display and the discourses that constitute it—historically and materially—including not only what is made visible, but also what is made invisible through the means of the exhibition (e.g., power structures and cultural paradigms.) Moreover, when calling today for the political role of curating, we have to be mindful of these genealogies and aesthetic-political legacies. At the same time, we need to do the work of insisting that the exhibitionary encompasses much more than just the study of exhibition spaces. Opening up this field recognises the epistemic and cultural capacities of exhibition outside of itself, and allows us to delve into the politics of exposure and the expanded meanings and operations of making visible.

In the next section, I aim to mobilise the term exhibitionary beyond Bennett's original formulation, in order to propose a site of operation for the understanding of cultural phenomena through the mechanisms of the exhibition, understood in an expansive way. To offer a possible location for this inquiry, I shed light on the role of cultural institutions and cultural practitioners, today, in the enactment of critical exhibitionary practices outside of the museum and in tandem with new modes of political imagination for cultural practices. I aim to actualise the exhibitionary, no longer to look at the coloniality of exhibition-making, but to open up its field to provide a lens through which the aesthetics of our political landscape can be analysed and the curatorial can offer new modes of intervention.

The Empty Exhibition Space and the Exhibitionary

As indicated above, the display of objects in an exhibition can be seen as the symptom of a wider network of relations whereby disciplines, discourses, management, and power relations, are constituted—Bennett's "exhibitionary complex." This construct is incredibly helpful, as most of these processes and formations take place in the backstage of the well-lit gallery and, thus, away from the spectators. We can argue that Bennett's "complex" also includes a critique of the occularcentrism of exhibitions, encompassing as it does an entire range of dynamics despite their arguably invisible condition—here one can think of the sonic, the spatial, the textual, and the ecological interplays. The exhibitionary complex also offers a wider spatiality for the exhibitionary, since it is not only centred around the display—what is made visible—but also opens to less visible phenomena. Animated today, the exhibitionary complex is capable of exceeding the spatial and physical limits of the gallery, and the formal display of objects, as well as its centrality. The mapping of these activities and consideration of the multiple formations requires a different setting—no longer the bi-directionality established between object/spectator, but a multidirectional scene understood as a sequence of continuous exposures of cultural and curatorial interactions, materials and juxtapositions.

Now, with this new decentred, spatial and scenographic understanding of the exhibitionary in mind what would happen if we were to take this notion to the wider context of what surrounds us, to the *ecosystemic* network of material and immaterial cultures; if we were to mobilise the site and the tools of the exhibitionary to provide new meanings about the complex

activities and formations outside of the autonomous space of the arts; if we were to open the field of exhibition to a series of curatorial tools to produce new meanings in a socio-political-environmental scene; if we were to provide an exhibitionary interpretation of the juxtapositions of materials of a particular social, political and cultural phenomenon?

As much as we need to insist that the exhibition provides the epistemic tools for an analysis of our surroundings, we also need to insist that our institutions of display and research may be able to help with this task. Before trying to find the answers elsewhere, the efforts and progress made for the curatorial in the last 15 years are remarkable, with programmes moving away from curating-as-exhibition-making towards the epistemic and investigative capacities of curation. These include the work of colleagues from programmes such as: Curatorial / Knowledge PhD at Goldsmiths University of London (where I did my doctoral studies) led by theorist and curator Irit Rogoff; the long-term curatorial quests at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, in Utrecht; and the aforementioned Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, just to name a few.¹⁸ The curatorial initiated a process aiming to give materials (physical and abstract) the same relevance and capacity to articulate new narratives and legitimise non-traditional sites of inquiry. To “make sense” of the multiplicity of materials, the curatorial drew from exhibitionary gestures, which include the non-linear juxtaposition of materials, the staging of discreet stories, the convergence of different entry points to the subject matter, and the refusal of pre-set methods and disciplinary limits. Notably, some of the practitioners and researchers within the programmes identified above, have inserted their practices in the interstices of disciplinary boundaries and media, blurring the limits between theory and practice, and operating between the academy and the cultural sector.

However, while we think about (and practice within) the modes of these engagements, a question as to the infrastructures available to host this enterprise requires more attention. At first glance, given their expertise and experience in exhibition-making, aesthetics and the arts, cultural practitioners and institutions are very well equipped to set up an exhibitionary inquiry into cultural formations—or exposures, as the ceaseless state of being exposed or in radical relation to something. However, many obstacles pave this tortuous way. I would like to draw our attention to the constraints imposed upon us, by the expansion of the neoliberal model in museums, largely oriented by performance indicators, impact, metric management and the imperatives of (unsustainable) growth, i.e., more exhibitions, more footfall, more income, more funding, more impact.

As I have argued elsewhere, the neoliberal business model for cultural institutions and universities makes it difficult to maintain the flexibility required to accommodate the ever-changing landscape of the arts and its modes of engagement.¹⁹ In the cultural sector, the funding system is marked by the imperative of growth and sustainability, which translates into income generation and the demand to diversify the funding sources (private and external) with increasingly weaker public investment. This neoliberalisation means that exhibition spaces, and multi-purpose rooms (that would otherwise be available for programming, and to practitioners and local communities to meet and work) are now offered for commercial hire. Cafes in public cultural institutions have newly opened, or been rebranded in a fancier and more expensive fashion. Museums’ have expanded their shops, and those museums without retail outlets have created them—usually to

[18] For more information about these projects visit: Curatorial / Knowledge PhD, Goldsmiths, University of London <http://ck.kein.org/>; and BAK, basis voor actuele kunst at <https://www.bakonline.org/>; and <https://www.hkw.de/en/>

[19] Carolina Rito, “Trust Without Evidence: Post-Truth, Culture Policies, and Funding Dependency” in Carolina Rito and Bill Balaskas (eds.), *Fabricating Publics: Dissemination of Culture in the Post-Truth Era*, Data Browser & Open Humanities Press, forthcoming.

occupy a prevalent space between the entrance and the reception of the institution.

Without alternatives, institutions channel a substantial part of their resources (staff time, etc.) to funding applications—hence, the now familiar and extensive presence of development teams in museums' structures. Institutions are kept busy grappling with funding applications and reports, often to the detriment of cultural programming. The fundamental issue here is that, due to the dependence on external funding, a significant part of the strategic decisions around cultural activity and an institutions' vision is determined outside of the sectors' qualified expertise: determined that is, in short, by the criteria of funding schemes. The consequences of this model are dire, as it hijacks the flexibility to establish new directions and priorities in line with the most recent developments in the field—including the recognition of changes in cultural patterns, e.g., the fact that exhibitions are no longer the primary cultural format in the expanded field of art practices. This model keeps institutions away from themselves, externalising not only the funding mechanisms, but, inevitably, the design of the present and future of their priorities and directions.

Despite the wide expansion of artistic and curatorial engagements (educational, performative, editorial, etc.), the hegemony of the exhibition model persists. Arguably, incapable of responding to the changes in the field, institutions keep exhibitions of artefacts as the core activity of contemporary art centres and all that gravitates around their programme, i.e., residencies, collections, public programming, etc. A cursory look at museums' architectural plans provides a clear indication that the space occupied by exhibition functions in comparison to rooms available for other cultural activities is expressive of the priority given to exhibition-making. In like manner, the distribution of funding across the various curatorial activities of the museums (i.e., exhibitions, public engagement, public programming, learning) is uneven.

As if the situation was not grim enough, the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying restrictions (including the most disruptive one for the sector: the physical distancing) have forced institutions to close temporarily. With empty galleries and without audiences in their premises—arguably the two key elements that sustain exhibitions—institutions had the opportunity to take the temperature of new models of contemporary cultural engagement and reassess their *modus operandi* during and (in anticipation) after the pandemic. Instead, the crisis only reinforced the underlying systemic issues, with a devastating impact on the sector, putting some at the verge of closure. A recent study revealed that 60% of the museums in the United Kingdom fear for their survival after the pandemic.²⁰

In the face of the pandemic and its restrictions, it seems like institutions rushed to push content online to perpetuate the very same formats despite the radical change of the conditions of production and dissemination. The digital technologies and the Internet seemed to provide an easy and cheap answer to urgent questions. Unsurprisingly, the most popular formats ranged from exhibitions rendered in VR and the proliferation of pre-recorded or live events online. In short, the resources went to the replication of old models in a new (or not so new) environment. However, as we have learnt from Philip K Dick in the post-apocalyptic sci-fi novel *Do Androids Dream Electric Sheep?* (1968), despite seeming similar on the surface, humans and androids require very different conditions and resources and cannot be

[20] Geraldine Kendall Adams, "New lockdown leaves museums 'fighting for survival'", *Museums Journal*, 22 January 2021. url: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/01/new-lockdown-leaves-museums-fighting-for-survival/>

taken as equivalents. Similarly, physical and digital exhibitions should be thought of according to their different apparatuses of display, production and fruition, instead of seen as direct equivalents.

Elsewhere, I have reflected upon the importance of maintaining spheres within our institutions for critical thinking and practices, to ring fence the time needed to entertain difficult and urgent questions, and to resist the imperative of growth and deliverables.²¹ I elaborated on the process of critical management and caretaking by presenting a condensed version of a long-term project in which I was involved over three years, while leading the Public Programmes and Research department at Nottingham Contemporary—a contemporary art centre in Nottingham, United Kingdom. I have argued that claiming “research” from the standpoint of cultural institutions has the stimulating capacity to create a more expanded temporality for the required engagement with complex materialities and their ecosystems; as well as provide the exhibitionary tools to undertake those investigations. At Nottingham Contemporary, I created a series of programmatic gestures—that I call infrastructures of the curatorial—to enact the work. This infrastructure includes a digital-first and open-source journal for transdisciplinary practices (*The Contemporary Journal*), long-term research strands to drive the curatorial activities, and a series of collaborative, experimental research projects with academic and non-academic practitioners.²²

To conclude, my current position is that the expanded field of cultural production in the arts is well equipped to mobilise the epistemic and cultural capacities of the exhibitionary, and develop unique tools to provide new exhibitionary meanings from the aesthetics and the politics of what surrounds, and never excludes us. While we witness the rampant metrification of practice research in academia and a further precarisation of the galleries and museums’ sector, we are to bring efforts together and mobilise the resources we have at our disposal to claim the validity of exhibitionary modes of knowability and intervention in the world. The intersection between academia and the cultural sector seems to provide a possible answer, allowing for porosities, collaborations, and the refusal to engage with unfruitful protocols. And, hopefully, if we are to do this, in the next pandemic (or as we grapple with urgent issues around racism and xenophobia, and climate change for example), cultural practitioners and practice-researchers are not again going to be seen as dispensable and invalid interlocutors in an ecological and humanitarian crisis—as in the context of the latest COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, I believe that political and ecological scenarios require more than just a scientific response. A shift of such a magnitude demands from us an understanding that the crux we are living through is a matter of paradigm change and radical epistemic and ontological realignment. While scientific solutions for the climate crisis continue being ignored, we require a radical reframing of epistemic and aesthetic forms of life. The exhibitionary has a role to play in shaping the forms of that new imagination. For that to become a reality, we need to render available the current infrastructures for cultural production and their institutions, and expansively reimagine them beyond displaying objects and counting attendees to comply with metrics and performance indicators. To come back to Holert, by way of concluding, the expanded field of contemporary art and its institutions are “potential sites of responding in new and necessary ways to the constant and inescapable crises inflicted upon the earth and its human and nonhuman inhabitants.”²³

[21] Carolina Rito, “What Is the Curatorial Doing?” in Carolina Rito and Bill Balaskas (eds.) *Institution as Praxis: New Curatorial Directions for Collaborative Research*, Sternberg Press, 2020. pp. 44-61.

[22] *The Contemporary Journal* can be visited here: <https://thecontemporaryjournal.org>. For more information about the Public Programmes and Research department at Nottingham Contemporary and the research ethos, visit: <https://nottinghamcontemporary.org/exchange/research/>; and Carolina Rito, (2020) “What Is the Curatorial Doing?”, in: *Institution as Praxis*.

[23] *Op. cit.* p. 13.

