

**A manifesto of an (un)ethical Curator: from a
curator as a person — to a curator as a process**

By

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ABSTRACT

The thesis suggests a profound move in the paradigm of curating. From understanding 'a curator' as a fixed professional identity of a person — to recognising 'a curator' as an implicated, entangled, pluralistic and non-hierarchical process, which lasts for the duration of a singular curatorial project and redefines the terms of authorship, acknowledgement and power of its participants from within and each time anew. With regard to the researcher's first-hand experience of curating professionally for over 10 years, 'a curator' is depicted as an emergence cohered through encounter, while curating is moved away from Neo-Liberal ethos, administrative, managerial and branding exercises, performed by a self-isolated subject.

Within this new paradigm, by focusing on 'curatorial ethics', the researcher explores how the personal drives and meanings, brought by an individual to the curatorial process intervene with the collective standards, expectations and definitions of authorship and power, imposed on a curator by institutions and other parties they choose to collaborate with. Accordingly, the aim is to identify and map a hybrid professional-curatorial ethic that emerges due to this intervention — using the researcher's own practice as a case study.

The key outcome of this research is a method for formulating an ethic (in a suggested form of a manifesto) which is applicable to a wide range of curatorial practitioners who work beyond exhibition-making. It was developed by adapting the framework of "The Reflective Practitioner" (by Donald Schön, 1983) to the condition of a contemporary art curator via practice-based autoethnographic methodology and curation of three original art projects.

Table of contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
1. INTRODUCTION	6
Research context / Researcher's position	6
An inquiry into "curatorial ethics"	10
Aims and objectives	12
Research questions	13
Methodology	14
Autoethnographic-curatorial research	14
Data collection	16
Method: survey of the relevant specialist sources	16
Method: reflective exhibition-making	17
Method: field notes	19
Data evaluation	20
Method: autoethnographic-curatorial writing	21
Method: understanding the constants of one's practice	22
2. SPECIALIST DISCOURSE SURVEY	25
"Curatorial ethic" as a professional ethic	25
Curatorial ethics as a part of museum ethics	28
Emancipation of Curatorial Ethics	31
The role of "curatorial ethics" in determining standards of practice (the first outlook)	32
"Curatorial ethics" as developing practices of self-accountability (the second outlook)	38
Teaching "curatorial ethics"	41
The state of "curatorial ethics": conclusion	45
3. DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION	48
Choosing "practice-based" research	48
The three curatorial projects: criteria	49
Overview of the Three Projects	51
<i>AND ALSO (don't tell anyone) Love is a Crime (2016)</i>	51
<i>When Air Becomes Breath (2016)</i>	52
<i>What can we make and become (2018)</i>	53
Formulating "my ethic" as a curator: a three-step sequence	56
Step 1: Mapping a curator as a constellation of roles	57
The notion of "role framing" (Schön)	57
Application in my projects	58

Step 2: Defining core values	61
The principle of the constancy of appreciative systems (Schön)	61
Identification of values	62
Core professional-curatorial values	63
Defining curatorial “honesty” and “transparency”	64
Defining curatorial “excellence”	68
Step 3: Understanding one's repertoire as a curator	71
The notion of a “professional repertoire” (Schön)	71
Curatorial sensitivity	73
Note-taking as my recurring curatorial technique	75
Application in the three projects	77
Completing the sequence: a curator's oath	80
 4. THE RESEARCH FINDINGS IN CONTEXT	 83
Owning one's ethic, revisiting the discourse	83
Revising the helpful questions	83
Defining “curatorial practice” as knowledge-making	85
Defining “curatorial practice” as relating	90
Defining “curatorial practice” as becoming someone else	92
 5. CONCLUSIONS	 97
Contribution to knowledge	97
A Manifesto of an (un)ethical Curator	99
Applicability of my approach	101
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 104
 Appendices 1	 116
Appendices 2	134
Appendices 3	153

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research context / Researcher's position

The inspiration for this PhD came from a desire to reflect on the experience of becoming a professional art curator at a time when the word “curator” means almost nothing without a detailed context. Around the world, across industries and disciplines, the term “curating” is currently used to designate a wide range of activities and acts of spotting, selecting and arranging that add value – by refining, explaining or contextualising an initial overload of information. There are curated exhibitions and art collections; but also curated wardrobes, holidays, playlists, menus, and many others. Curating as a practice seems ubiquitous; it is at work everywhere, from art galleries to data centres, from shopping malls to personal profiles in social networks. My own career in curating illustrates this state of things. At the beginning of my career, in 2010, I did my first internship as a window showcase designer at Selfridges; I then worked as an assistant in the fashion archive at Alexander McQueen, cataloguing items for an upcoming exhibition; later, as part of the IT department at Net-a-porter, I worked on converting a private collection of fashion videos into a user-friendly searchable database. In each of these examples my actual day-to-day work routine was different, requiring different sets of skills (from operating customised software to dressing mannequins for shop window displays) and different kinds of subject knowledge (programming, fashion-styling, cataloguing, archiving procedures). Yet in each case my title was “curator”, and there was a significant shared feature: that is, my personal perspective mattered. I was hired to arrange things *my way*. According to V&A curator Oriole Cullen, today “anyone can be a curator” because curating “has come to be understood as personal choice”: “the word curation means personal choice” (Bhaskar 2016, p.73). Based on my experience at the time, this seemed true. Becoming a professional curator (i.e. getting paid for choosing) was about finding a brand, an industry or an organisation to which I could act as an ambassador of taste and values. It was not about adjusting my vision, but rather about finding the right niche. Also, it seemed that no specialist curatorial training was required: I did all these jobs before I actually graduated as a curator.

Further to Cullen's perspective, it is not only that everyone *can* become a curator that is symptomatic of our times; it is also that everyone *wants to* either become a curator themselves or hire a professional curator. As Lou Stoppard of *The New York Times* recently suggested in this regard, "the proliferation of 'curating' speaks of a generation anxious for authority and authorship, and also for meaning" (Stoppard 2020) – and I cannot agree more. It was belonging to the generation that have been granted excessive access to unranked unfiltered information (thanks to the internet), at the same time as living under constant peer pressure to form and share an "expert" opinion on the world's burning issues, that initially helped me develop the habit of "curating" the world around me: that is, to demonstrate my perspective and taste in all possible situations.

It was in 2014, as I started a MFA in Curating at Goldsmiths College, that I first faced the current crisis of the multiple definitions of "curating" and its ramifications. In its original use, curating (emerging from a Latin word *curare*, meaning "to treat, to care for") implied taking care of, and preserving, something. In this way, citizens of the Roman Empire were appointed as *curatores* of public facilities (Julius Caesar was himself a curator); a medieval curator was a priest who took care of the spiritual welfare of a parish; since the emergence of museums in the 17th century, a museum curator has been a keeper of the national heritage, taking care of artefacts in the collection. The problematic position of the contemporary curator, as I understand it, is not that the "old" meaning of the role, associated with caring, has been *replaced* by the "new" definition (choosing and arranging), which has therefore caused a shift in the foundational values associated with curatorial work, as Michael Bhaskar suggests (Bhaskar 2016). Rather, it is that these two profoundly different definitions currently *co-inhabit* the same term: they *both* legitimately mean "curating".

Another dualism maintained in arts academia has been the imposed distinction between "curating" and "the curatorial". Notably, at Goldsmiths there even were two separate post-graduate programmes for an aspiring curator to consider. The MFA in Curating (which I undertook) was designed for those "who wish to take up the challenge of contemporary curating as an artistic, social and critical undertaking, and who wish to develop their professional practice in this

area”¹: to organise exhibitions (collections, private and museum collections, databases) in a way that would add value. In contrast, MPhil/PhD in Advanced Practices (which was called the Curatorial/Knowledge programme when I attended) “responds to the growing importance of practice driven research within knowledge production, public exhibiting, and cultural organising” and brings together “different sources of knowledge, methodologies, and models of making public”² (including Curatorial Knowledge). Notably, in arts academia (in the EU and the UK), apart from Goldsmiths there is only a handful of courses where “the curatorial” (or “curatorial knowledge”) is taught: the Summer Academy of Fine Arts in Salzburg, the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig, and the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. The majority of programmes that provide specialist training to curators refer to curating as practical exhibition-making and the production of cultural and artistic public events — without taking detailed account of the ideological context and conditions within which these activities take place.³ I will look into the curricula of these courses in the next chapter (*Specialist Discourse Survey* —> *Teaching “curatorial ethics”*).

As I discovered in the course of my studies, the tradition of keeping these two aspects of curatorial practice separate was generally nurtured in specialist curatorial discourse. The curatorial theorists who inspired my practice – Suzana Milevska and Beatrice von Bismarck – built their critical curatorial frameworks by affirming and addressing this duality. In concert with this, there were two pathways in which one’s curatorial practice could go. One could aspire to be a globe-trotting, jet-setting curator-networker who hunts for projects 24/7 internationally and wears black like the fictional curator Christian in Ruben Östlund’s film *The Square* (2017). Otherwise, one can aim to succeed at the art of achieving the quintessentially self-reflective position of a “thinking subject in

¹ According to Goldsmiths University website, MFA Curating course description, https://www.gold.ac.uk/pg/mfa-curating/?qclid=Ci0KCQiA3smABhCjARIsAKtrg6LHPPrCKuSOIA_cL6ZQPNWehlx32vn8XQ-N9Wn9QI2fC5UZUyvvw_UaAplcEALw_wcB.

² According to Goldsmiths University website, MPhil/PhD Advanced Practices description, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/pg/mphil-phd-advanced-practices/>

³ This conclusion was made after my review of the curricula of the following programmes: MA Curation Practices at the University of Leeds; Curating and Exhibition Management short course at City University; Curating Culture short course at Birkbeck College, University of London; MA Curating at Bristol University; MA Curating Art and Public Programmes at LSBU; BA Culture, Curation, Criticism at CSM.

the world” (as Suzana Milevska described the experience of “becoming-curator”) and try to work out for oneself how/whether to monetise it.

Returning to curatorial work after graduating from Goldsmiths was an interesting educational experience in itself. As soon as I started working as an independent art curator, the need to choose between “curating” and the ideology of “the curatorial” collided: unsurprisingly, neither existed in the real world of curatorial jobs. Furthermore, the requirement to speak up and define my curatorial position (which was presented as an essential practice throughout my studies), was almost immediately replaced by the market’s requirement for a vague self-description. In this way I could potentially adjust to any kind of a project and thus, strategically, be in higher demand. Consequently, as my CV and professional geography expanded accordingly, my confidence in the “meaningfulness” of my own practice started to fade. I felt disappointed in myself as a curator. I couldn’t find a balance between quality and quantity in my projects; between my personal and professional values, and between the topics that interested me personally and those which were considered important on a global scale.

I undertook my PhD research driven by the aim of restoring “meaningfulness” in my curatorial practice and revising my curatorial subjectivity. Redefining curatorial practice and formulating a new theory of curating, I based it on my first-hand experience of curatorial practice and its analysis. In my research, I worked to move the notion of curating away from administrative, managerial and branding exercises — and rethink *that what gives an individual curatorial practice its meaningfulness*, on a personal and interpersonal level. I revisited the notion of ‘becoming a professional curator’, commonly understood as gaining a fixed professional identity of a self-isolated subject (“the other party” in the art world, as differentiated from an artist, an institution or an audience member). Instead, I redefined ‘a curator’ as a product of an implicated, entangled, pluralistic and non-hierarchical encounter, enabled by a singular art project. Based on my experience, I described it as mode of creative engagement with a collective, that distributes authorship and power amongst its parts — based on internal and momentary ‘rules’, established within the collective. As a process, in which an individual

engages for a duration of a singular art project as they ‘become its curator’. This process is limited in time: it terminates once the project is completed. And it has contingent, collective nature: in the next art project, it starts anew — in a new configuration, determined by a new set of collaborators.

In my research, I looked into the operation of a curator as a process, not as a person (a fixed identity). I considered the principles at its base; categorised variables and constants (for further application of my finding by other curators); and reflected on the profound changes this new definition brings to understanding the notions of (artistic/curatorial) authorship, acknowledgment and power. The research process and outcomes are presented in the four chapters of my thesis and the appendices.

An inquiry into “curatorial ethics”

I arrived to this research to reflect on the years of my experience of working as a curator in search of meaningfulness. I felt the urge to systematise and make accessible to other curators that what I was doing intuitively: challenging the norms, roles, expectations and limitation, commonly associated with a professional position of a curator. Notably, as I worked in this fashion, my practice was often called “unethical” by other parties, involved in a project with me: by representatives of the institutions I collaborated with, artists I worked with, members of the audience, art critics. Moreover, my curation was called “unethical” in the professional environment where there was no given “curatorial ethics” in place, but only its plural arbitrary definitions. That seemed to me paradoxical and curious, as — in my view (which I shaped during the MA Curating programme at Goldsmiths) — I was doing exactly the opposite: interrogating the principles and values at the foundation of my curatorial practice. Namely, I was searching for *my* curatorial ethic.

In response to this paradox, as I formulated the key questions for my research, I have chosen to inquire into “curatorial ethics”: to explore how the personal drives and meanings, brought by an individual (i.e. myself) to the curatorial process intervene with the collective standards, “best practices”, expectations, limits of “authorship” and “power”, imposed on a curator by the contemporary art world. I wanted to identify and map the hybrid professional-curatorial ethics that emerge due to this intervention — using my own practice as a case. Ultimately, I aimed to profoundly rethink a curator through this lens: to formulate a theory of curating as a process of emergence and encounter, which bridges what an individual curator consider their ethical position — and the pragmatics of engagement with the other parties in a shared (art) project.

Generally, a professional ethic is a system of guidelines that “prescribes how professionals are to pursue their common ideal so that each may do the best she can at a minimal cost to herself and those she cares about (including the public...)” (Davis 1991, p.153). With respect to this definition, it is the professional ethic of independent⁴ (institutionally unaffiliated, freelance) curators – like myself – that is addressed in this research. Unlike the professional ethic of, say, a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer, that is composed as a formal code (or its alternative) and is presented to a young practitioner as a part of their specialist education (Edson 1990, p.8), from the early days of their career a young curator is encouraged to develop an ethic for themselves. The curatorial courses are organised in a way that encourages students to identify, access and make sense of their drives and desire to curate. Consequently, the major concern of curatorial ethics – as it is taught – would be the formation of an individual position that can be identified as a *curatorial* position.

Through this lens, the possibility of a professional ethic appears not in the form of some generic code of conduct for all curators to share, but rather as an individual urge to define the position from which they wish to speak; to

⁴ Unlike institutional curators, whose role and responsibilities are defined in their contracts and who are usually “supplied” with a code of practice by an institution-employer, the practice of independent curators develops in the conditions of professional-ethical indeterminacy. Nothing is formally prescribed to them: to either take it on board or argue and act against it. It is therefore the absence of any kind of formalised professional ethic for independent curators, on the one hand – and the mixed range of (controversial) ethical expectations simultaneously coming from artists, institutions and other parties they encounter and/or collaborate with, on the other hand, that results in such indeterminacy. I continue to experience the tension of this in my work as an independent curator, and observe it in my colleagues.

contribute to the description of a curatorial position at large as captured by the curatorial discourse, and to develop certain techniques through which they can deliver such contributions as an integral part of their curatorial practice. I had an epiphany regarding my curatorial ethic when I understood that I should stop trying to convince people why this or that subject is generally important at this time and place, and explain instead *why it is important to me*. It was the moment when I reminded myself that, as a human being, a massive amount of baggage has naturally informed my “version” of a curator: my upbringing, gender, race, biases, the lived experiences, the theories I have read and resonated with – all of which would affect the ideas I am capable of producing, the subjects that seem important to me, and ultimately, the kind of projects that I am capable of bringing to the world as a curator. It is thus my responsibility to own up to it: to interrogate it with criticality and sensitivity; to understand where my reactions, drives and decisions come from; to deconstruct my desire to do some projects and stay away from others. Through this gradual process my curatorial ethic is configured. Hence, the overall question that grounds my PhD project is: how to do this practically, in a systematic way that can be further employed by other curators?

Aims and objectives

The overall concern of this research project is to develop and test a method for formulating the professional ethic of the independent contemporary art curator, while taking into account *both* the knowledge “about” curatorial practice they obtain theoretically (through reading and education) and the tacit knowledge they develop through their practice (by actually “curating” projects). In this way, the thesis aims to effect a new kind of marriage between an applied knowledge of curatorial ethic(s) (that which curators obtain discursively) and an individual ethic developed “on the job” (in regard to the unique configuration of their professional curatorial practice).

My first objective is to trace the formation of the concept of a professional ethic for the contemporary art curator through the art-curatorial discourse. To do so, I will place the notion of a “professional ethic” in the context of an art-curatorial practice and examine the emerging specificities associated with it. I will examine how the role and functionality of an

independent contemporary art curator is different from that of an affiliated curator (i.e. a museum curator subjected to a museum's code of conduct) in terms of their respective professional ethics. To do so I will review the specialist literature, multimedia publications (i.e. video and audio documentation of conferences, seminars, talks) and institutional policy documents (i.e. relevant museums and universities' codes of ethics) — and use these to map the evolution of the concept of a “curatorial ethic”.

The second objective is to access and describe the process of learning about the ethical dimension of a curatorial practice, as experienced by an individual curator through their daily work: to understand how an independent curator learns about the commonly accepted practices and norms of professional curatorial performance within the professional community. To do so, my research is strategically practice-based and grounded in the knowledge obtained by closely observing my own curatorial practice over three years (2016-2018), coinciding with the data collection stage of my PhD research.

The third objective is to analyse how, throughout this period, my curatorial practice and understanding of “curatorial ethics” developed under the influence of certain thinkers who inspired my work and enabled me to formulate my definition of curating. Specifically, I will investigate how the theories of curators Beatrice Von Bismarck and Suzana Milevska arrived at and started to influence my curatorial practice and research.

Research questions

With regard to the aims and objectives above, there are three research questions that I will answer:

1. How can the implicit insights and values of an individual contemporary art curator be captured in the explicit form of a professional ethic?
2. What new understandings of the notion of a “curatorial ethic” can the professional practice of an individual curator generate, which may not have been revealed through speculative approaches?

3. In what ways do the specific theories of curating which inspire a curator's practice impact on their definition of a "curatorial ethic"?

Methodology

Autoethnographic-curatorial research

To address the above questions, I have chosen an autoethnographic framework for my research. Autoethnography is generally defined as research that seeks to describe and systematically analyse the researcher's personal experience in order to understand the cultural experience of the society or a group to which the researcher belongs (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011). In this way, it marries the autobiographical dimension of their practice with "the cultural, social and political" (Ellis 2004, p.xix).

The research method of autoethnography incorporates the following six propositions (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015, pp.1-2) that I will be enacting in my practice-based enquiry into curatorial ethics. First, "it uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences" (p.1). Second, it "acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others" (ibid.). Third, it "uses deep and careful self-reflection [...] to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political" (p.2). Fourth, it shows people "in the process of figuring out what to do" (ibid.). Fifth, it "balances the intellectual and methodological rigour, emotion and creativity" (ibid.). Finally, it "strives for social justice" (ibid.). In configuring my autoethnographic methodology alongside these propositions, I will be instrumentalising my unique twofold position: that of a practising contemporary art *curator* exposed to the questions of professional ethics on daily basis throughout my work, and that of a *researcher* who approaches the notion of a professional curatorial ethic analytically. I will therefore be providing an account of a curatorial ethic from an "insider's perspective" that will reveal "the practices, meanings and interpretations" shared by curators immersed in the same professional environment as myself (p.31). Specifically, these will be graduates of university curatorial programmes who work internationally and on

short-term contracts, are not affiliated to an individual art institution, and who design individual curatorial methodologies as an integral part of their daily practice.

Instead of designing a brand-new set of tools to interrogate my research questions, I made the decision to reframe the curatorial devices and practices that I have been using extensively in my work as *the research methods* — to maintain efficiency in the research process and keep it as close to my usual curatorial practice as possible. Furthermore, it is anticipated that in this way tacit curatorial practices will be assessed and interrogated in terms of their origins, operations and contexts. As a curator, I have been using these intuitively throughout my career; now as a researcher, I will be able to make sense of them and understand their effects on the outcomes of my practice. For example, my focus on interpersonal relationships between artists and curators and the ongoing self-reflection that is integrated into the development of my projects is the foundation for my curatorial methodology.

The research questions will be addressed through the making, evaluation and analysis of three art-curatorial projects, sequentially completed as the part of this PhD: this includes the processes through which the projects were planned, as well as the outcomes produced. In opting for an autoethnographic framework, I acted upon the assumption that the “lived experience” of curatorial practice is “socially constructed” (Denzin 2014, p.41). I therefore used the conventional curatorial practice of exhibition-making to initiate, observe and analyse the relationships — collaborations and dialogues — with the parties within the contemporary art community whose understanding of a professional curatorial ethic impacts on its understanding by the curators themselves (myself included). These parties were the artists I collaborated with, the institutions that hosted and/or commissioned the three projects above and the heterogeneous audiences who responded to the projects in a number of ways.

My take on autoethnographic methodology was inspired by the self-reflective curatorial practices beyond exhibition-making espoused by curators Suzana Milevska and Beatrice von Bismarck. It is Milevska’s understanding that a person moves towards curating as a semi-voluntary decision, which follows the uneven flow of their career in the arts (Milevska 2013) that I resonate with, and this is how I see my own path to curating. Also, I share and enact von Bismarck’s understanding of curatorial responsibility as “the awareness of

interrelations with which [one is] necessarily dealing with when [he/she] deals with curatorial practice”, and that accounts for the reasons that underline their actions “in a kind of a self-reflexive mode” (von Bismarck 2015). Both Milevska and von Bismarck write about their practice in a specifically autobiographical style that employs anecdotes as literary tropes and conversations with philosophers and theorists whose work has inspired their curating. In writing this thesis, I will be appropriating some of their writing strategies, while developing my own style of autoethnographic narration.

Data collection

The overall intention regarding the data collection aspect of my methodology is to create a setting in which the formation of an individual curator’s definition of their curatorial ethic can be observed. It is crucial that the setting created in this way is close to the original conditions of the curator’s daily practice (i.e., my everyday working routines), and is framed by “conventional” perspectives in relation to that which an ethical curatorial practice implies (i.e. as suggested in the specialist curatorial literature). In line with the requirements of the research ethics protocols of UAL, the participants (artists, institutions) will be aware of the academic research dimension of the projects (i.e. consent is obtained, and the question of curatorial ethics is aligned with the overall intentions and format of the project).

Method: survey of the relevant specialist sources

There were three kinds of specialist sources I analysed in order to contextualise my lived experience and understanding of what a “curatorial ethic” may stand for:

- foundational texts on the subject of the professional ethic: its purposes, functionality and definitions for different disciplines (i.e. general theory concerning “professional ethics” for non-curatorial, non-museum professions).

- sources that address the ethics of institutionally affiliated art curators (i.e. specialist publications concerning “museum ethics”; exhibition catalogues and policy documents — museum codes of conduct, university research ethics).
- specialist literature addressing the practice of unaffiliated art curators driven by individual methodologies (i.e. curatorial course curricula; conference papers; interviews and articles by philosophers, curators, sociologists, artists and art historians).

My review indicates key moments in the history of independent art curating when conventional wisdom has been questioned and new ideological formations have arisen, through the assimilation of new ideas, theories and imperatives towards “ethical curating”. I establish the difference between the condition of indeterminate independent curatorial practice and bureaucratic-institutional practice that supports the curating and exhibiting of cultural artefacts – which would result in different understandings of “curatorial ethics” for institutional and unaffiliated curators. As a result of my analysis, I produced an explanatory theory of how the notion of “curatorial ethics” evolved.

Method: reflective exhibition-making

My method of reflective exhibition-making is informed by Donald Schön’s methodological framework outlined in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983, 1995); specifically, by the method of reflection-in-action. Reflection-in-action involves “think[ing] about doing something while doing it” (Schön 1983, p.54), so that the reflection is performed in “a stretch of time within which it is still possible to make a difference to the outcomes of action” (Schön 1995). According to Schön, reflection-in-action is naturally activated by a practitioner when they find themselves in a situation that appears to them to be unexpected or troubling. For example, in case of my exhibitions, these are situations that reveal a conflict of interest or values, disagreement between the project participants, or an internal conflict that I myself register. In order to make sense of such situations, I will be analysing my own responses to the uncertainty by

posing questions about my actions, decision-making and judgement – in real time, while curating the exhibitions. The following questions will be repeatedly asked in the course of my work: *What features do I notice when I encounter this or that response/event/thing? What criteria underlie my judgment about the situation? How exactly do I decide what to do? What procedures do I perform when I translate my judgment into my practice?* Keeping track of my answers, I will also reflect on how I have aligned my actions with my judgment: i.e. I will analyse what *can be done* in a situation — and compare it to my understanding of what *should be done* in a situation, and why.

The three art-curatorial projects organised as the part of this research are:

- AND ALSO (don't tell anyone) Love is a Crime, with poet and performer Dr. Alev Adil⁵ (2016);
- *When Air Becomes Breath*, with multimedia artist Margo Trushina⁶ (2016);
- *What can we make and become*, with a group of 14 postgraduate art students⁷, hosted by Exposed Arts Projects — the art-research organisation I initiated and currently run (2018).

The process of planning, organizing and evaluating the three projects was primarily concerned with the extent to which they contributed to the aim of interrogating how a professional ethic is developed and integrated in the practice of the individual curator. In this sense, during the planning and organisation stage it was important that each project acted as an example of my ongoing curatorial practice: i.e. that it enacted my professional principles, aspirations, curatorial methodology and expertise (partly established and partly in a state of formation and change). In line with the framework for conducting reflexive arts-based research formulated by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (2010), the critical value of my research will be attributed to its capability to

⁵ Consent from Dr. Alev Adil received on 05/14/2015.

⁶ Consent from Margo Trushina received on 24/11/16.

⁷ Consents from Lara Geary, Lois Bentley, Isabel Bonafe Carrasco, Aleksandr Tishkov, Harley Price, Susanna Brunetti, Tere Chad, Carla Benzing, Lexi Sun, Theresa Gößmann, Niloofar Taatizadeh, Yajing Hu, Jolanta Basova and Orna Kazimi received on 7/12/17.

generate a subjective, emergent approach that can be contributed to the field of contemporary art-curatorial practice, to be further applied, consulted with, or built upon by other curatorial practitioners and researchers. It is thus crucial for its fruitful completion that my research-curatorial inquiry is “predicated on an alternative logic of practice that results in the generation of new ways of modelling meaning, knowledge and social relations” (Barrett and Bolt 2010, p.3) in the field of contemporary art curating. It is furthermore expected that the enquiry is “motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns” (p.4), which makes it possible for the curator-researcher to bring into view the particularities that reflect “new social and other realities either marginalised or not yet recognised” (ibid.) in the established curatorial discourse.

It was also important that the projects were planned and organised consequentially, so that the experience and knowledge generated in one project could inform the planning and realisation of subsequent projects. This also allowed me to use the knowledge gained to keep my research questions updated throughout the practical part of the research.

Method: field notes

In autoethnography, the use of note-taking has been the major method of generating material for the study, as a way of reflecting on situations and revisiting the researcher’s experiences (Ellis 2004; Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015). In my daily work, I utilise note-taking as a method to record emergent experiences and information, while not yet knowing what I am looking for. In this case, taking notes is useful for recording, capturing sensations, and making sense of things in a state of flux that take place in my practice. For example, I take notes to create visual “portraits” of conversations and exhibitions made up of names, dates, quotes, and other loose bits of information; to collect what I have heard, experienced or read for the purpose in the course of shaping a project. The very act of taking notes in this sense corresponds to situating my voice, taking a certain position, prioritising and excluding information. It stands for deciding what kind of information to put down, how much of it is enough, and how to organise it all together. The notes capture those encounters that happen in real time, without a delay – helping me

to make sense of them and respond to them in a productive way. In my curatorial practice, these encounters emerge from the dynamics of a collaborative art project; the simultaneous enactments of multiple roles held by a curator within a single project; the development of certain ideas or theoretical frameworks; relations between contexts, and links between theory and practice in my research.

The notes I take come in different formats, appropriate to the experience or encounter I want to capture. They include written or typed bits of text; emails I send to my collaborators; marks made in books, annotations and writing in the margins of texts; annotated photographs, collages, mood boards; drawings and diagrams. Since I always date my notes, it is possible to produce a chronological account of each project; the variety of formats used in my notes enable the capture of the multi-sensory experiences and inputs (i.e. personal thoughts, bits of conversation, visuals, things heard and read). Importantly, in my practice the notes taken in the course of one project can be considered as affecting the conception and development of each of the following projects — by mapping the unexplored territories of contemporary art curating that require, and invite, further practical examination.

Data evaluation

The autoethnographic proposition that underlies my research is its relatability to the work of other contemporary art curators whose practice structurally resembles my own (i.e. unaffiliated curators who graduated from art-curatorial courses) and who are concerned with the ethical dimension of their practice. As my perspective suggests, the configuration of the professional ethic of any individual curator will be unique, as it is determined by the unique configuration of experiences collected and the tacit knowledge produced throughout their education and career. However, the steps taken in “distilling” their professional ethic from their curatorial practice can be universal for contemporary art curators in general. Thus, the overall intention for the data evaluation aspect of my research is to use the information about my practice – its underlying theories of curating, recognised significant experiences and impactful encounters – first, to distil a version of an individual professional curatorial ethic (“my ethic”); and second, to formulate the steps for so doing that

can be applied by other curators: hence, the methods are designed to meet these objectives.

Method: autoethnographic-curatorial writing

As I initially approached my curatorial practice as an ongoing manifestation of my ethical curatorial position, my challenge as a researcher was to find a way of thinking and writing *with* the process, instead of merely reporting its outcomes in my thesis. In this regard, equal importance was attributed to conceptualising the process of evaluation (my analysis) and action (my curatorial practice), while acknowledging that the two affect the formulation of my professional-curatorial ethic equally, since it is not only what I do that matters, but also how (on what basis) I judge myself: how I contextualise and evaluate my activity. Recognising the entangled relationship between curatorial action and its evaluation gave rise to a new process in my curatorial practice, which I propose to call *autoethnographic-curatorial writing*.

Thus, as my written reflection on curating the three projects will demonstrate, by paying attention to the process of configuring my curatorial role in each project – by considering the differences in the ethical dilemmas I faced – I managed to “encounter” my ethic and observe it. I narrated my projects not to document the events as chronological and/or factual, but rather to capture their effect on my understanding of both the scope of the notion of “curatorial ethics” in general and my own ethical-curatorial position: to find out something about them which was not evident prior to writing. Approaching autoethnographic-curatorial writing, I acknowledged that my subject position as a curator-researcher located me right in the middle of the phenomenon that I was seeking to interrogate (i.e. the formulation of a curatorial ethic). This prevented me from accessing my own subjectivity and adequately analysing my own intentions from a position of critical distance that would be characteristic of a conventional research object-subject relationship. On the other hand, this enabled a new, more responsive and sensitive connection between myself, my data and findings. In this way I have identified the two intertwined parts that constitute my writing process: *writing as practice* (represented by my research diary, correspondence with artists, notes, artwork and play scripts, an interview,

curatorial texts to accompany the exhibitions, etc.) and *writing as analysis* (corresponding to the three linear narratives of the key events and participants' actions in the course of each curatorial project). It was thus my intention to represent the connection between, and simultaneity of, these two parts of writing, by interweaving them in a singular autoethnographic text – that is included in the appendices to my thesis. The method of autoethnographic-curatorial writing thus enabled me to distil my ethic from my discursive-material curatorial practice: by looking at the ways in which I define “curatorial ethics” in general, what I identify as ethically complex situations in my daily work, and how I respond to them in my curatorial decisions and actions.

In producing autoethnographic-curatorial writing, I avoided a distanced, retrospective rationalisation of my actions. I concentrated on what drove my narration of each project, instead of focusing on its “objective” representation and contents. For example, I noted which events I felt it was important to mention and recognise as “curatorial”; at the same time, I looked into the situations that for various reasons I had chosen to silence as irrelevant to curating. I deliberately rejected the approach of occupying a position of an ethical arbiter and instead placed myself in the middle of the ongoing interaction between the multiple outlooks regarding the dynamics, ethical challenges and important events of each project, as observed by the different project participants. I maintained an awareness that even though the participants enacted their ethics through their actions in the course of the projects, my written documentation of their activity could by no means correspond to their actual decisions and actions. Instead, my intention was to capture the meanings of their actions, *which I had made* — by using *my ethic* as a tool for judgment and interpretation that manifested in my actions at the time.

Three complete entries of curatorial-autoethnographic writing, that correspond to the three projects, are included in the Appendices.

Method: understanding the constants of one's practice

By analysing the processes of curating the three art projects as a continuous flow – as recorded via autoethnographic-curatorial writing – I will aim

to identify the “constants” of my professional practice, to use the term suggested by Schön (1983). These will be the specific patterns, captured in my autoethnographic writing and approach to exhibition-making, that make my particular values explicit in the kinds of art-curatorial projects that I am capable of producing. As expected, these constants will distinguish my approach to curating from that of a normative art-curatorial dramaturgy, that begins with the selection of the project’s theme, is followed by selection of artists and artworks to respond to it and ends with the mounting of an exhibition or the holding of a public event. To do so, I will remodel Schön’s theory of constants (Schön 1983, p.270) and use it to analyse my curatorial practice. Specifically, I will evaluate the recurring patterns, themes and curatorial devices as they appear in my exhibition-making and writing. To perform such an evaluation I will look for the following:

- the specific media and language I use to describe and address the contemporary art environment and its participants: i.e. the recurring themes, narrative structures and curatorial devices that distinguish my curatorial practice and methodology;
- the appreciative systems which I repeatedly bring to my problem-setting: i.e., when I choose what problems and/or aspects of a problem to address in my projects, and what my position is towards them;
- the overarching theories I use to make sense of the contemporary art environment and to situate myself within it: i.e., the theories of curatorial practice and ethics with which I resonate;
- the role framework within which I understand my position of a curator and enter relationships with my project collaborators.

To distil the constants of my curatorial practice in this way, I will evaluate the information collected and accumulated through my extensive note-taking in the course of the three projects and my autoethnographic writing for each project. By revising these flows of information about each project, I am hoping to understand what appeared to me as significant details, noteworthy

experiences and encounters. I will then attempt to organise those moments of significance in relation to the number of dimensions in which any individual curatorial practice can be potentially converted, in order to be cross-examined and compared to any other curatorial practice. With the help of such constants, it will be possible and effective to translate — or even code — the private (tacit) knowledge of an individual curator into the professional knowledge (competence) that can be shared and commonly understood within the professional art community. This will further enable curators in a wider context to engage dialectically with curatorial tradition, histories, values, virtues, excellence and professionalism, while departing from a shared, non-normative understanding of a curatorial ethic as determined by an individual curatorial methodology.

2. SPECIALIST DISCOURSE SURVEY

“Curatorial ethic” as a professional ethic

My research enquires into the kinds of professional ethics of independent contemporary art curators that currently – either formally or informally – guide the decisions and actions of individual practitioners in their daily work. In this way I will specifically consider professional curatorial ethics, as distinct from philosophical ethics (the moral principles that govern a person's behaviour) and everyday ethics (theories regarding what it means to live a good life). After examining the general theory of professional ethics, I have identified the four key points that distinguish a professional ethic from other branches; further in this chapter I will consult with these points, as I will be analysing the current state of “curatorial ethics”.

First, since at the start of their career most specialists are young and inexperienced, one of the key tasks of a professional ethic is to provide some collective, time-tested wisdom to new professionals. It is thus usually the case that young specialists learn about their professional ethic in two ways: via “education” and via “codification” (Edson 1990, pp.8-9). Education is delivered through a variety of methods, such as professional training at all levels (i.e. courses, programmes, qualifications), professional publications and meetings, informal interactions with peers and exchanging professional expectations (Edson 1990, p.8). Codification corresponds to providing young specialists with a formal code of practice that emanates from the profession and is advocated by all its practitioners (ibid.).

Second, format-wise, a professional ethic usually comes as a *system* of norms that guide the behaviour of an individual or a group specifically within the professional setting: helping to understand the scope of specialist knowledge and powers and navigate their employment, build professional relationships and detect and avoid potential conflicts of interests between the parties (Bayles 1988; MacIver 1995). Such a systematisation of behavioural norms provides professionals with the general context for their practice and guidance in determining their decisions and actions (Reeck 1982). It indicates the appropriate behaviour in situations within the specialists' community as much as between a specialist and a person outside the group, in this way serving both

the professional community and the public (MacIver 1995). While the guidance in itself is not capable of solving the particular moral dilemmas that both specialists and the public face, it works to raise the awareness of the possible dilemmas and encourage particular ways of dealing with them (often referred to as “good practice”). It does so, on the one hand, by communicating the fundamental professional values to be embraced by the specialists, while on the other it serves as a channel for announcing the ethical principles and values adopted by a profession towards the public (Beyerstein 1993).

Third, in accordance with a professional ethic, the personal values of an individual practitioner are typically replaced by the ethical values associated with the role they occupy in the workplace. As philosopher Thomas Nagel wrote in this regard, “what is morally special about public roles and public action” is that “they alter the demands on the individual”: since “the content of public obligations differs systemically from that of private ones” (Nagel 1978, pp.77-78). For Nagel, while the professions were established to advance certain public interests (such as, for example, wellbeing, justice, education or safety), those who chose to occupy a professional role would automatically accept the obligation to serve those interests and fulfil public expectations in ways defined by their profession (p.89). In accepting professional obligations, the individual thus would “correlatively reduce their right to consider other factors, both their personal interests and more general ones” (p.79) — i.e., not related to their profession. Today, notably, even though the applied working methods and expertise that characterise the different professions vary, core values are shared by specialists from diverse fields. In this way, for example, the primacy of social justice, integrity, truthfulness, competence, the minimisation of harm and maximisation of public good, independence of judgement, acting with care, as well as respect for diversity, is something that unites healthcare professionals, journalists, social workers, teachers, lawyers, and engineers, amongst other professionals.

Finally, fourth, a professional ethic comes as one of the elements required for the overall institutionalisation of an activity and its recognition as an autonomous profession. For many authors — sociologists (Parsons 1968; Newton 1982; Heinich and Pollak 2004) and philosophers (Ozar 2004) — it is recognised as an essential attribute that helps to distinguish professional from merely occupational behaviour: by marking the transition of the activity’s status

from barely or not at all professional to fully professional. In this way, for instance, in their article considering the professionalisation of the role of a museum curator, Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak shared Parsons' perspective, highlighting the need for a defined competence and mechanisms of self-regulation. They regarded professionalisation as "the formalisation and uniformity of recruitment and criteria of competence" that goes hand in hand with establishing the "ethical regulations governing professional competence, formalised by a deontological code" and "self-control throughout the various associations" (such as the International Council of Museums) (Heinich and Pollak 2004, p.167).

* * * *

With these four points in mind, in the following sections I will provide a detailed account of the current state and applications of the notion of "curatorial ethics". Starting with the historical context, I will look into the formation of museum codes of ethics as examples of a univocal code of practice delivered to curators as a kind of a ready-made systematic guidance, in line with the "traditional" route of a professional ethics outlined above. Next, I will review the emergence of the independent art curator — an unaffiliated curatorial practitioner — as an event that coincided with the first "ethical turn" (or rather: "ethical detour") in curatorial practice. Without imposed museum-specific ethical guidance, it was the independent curator who faced the need to decide and choose for themselves and to consider the conditions of their choices: the many coinciding forms of ethical guidance and expectations that come from other parties engaged in a project together with the curator (such as institutions, artists, audiences, critics, etc). Next, I will associate the second "ethical turn" with the emergence of a "curatorial ethics" discourse in the early 2000s: the period when the notion started to appear more frequently in the specialist curatorial writing, topical conferences and formal and informal debates. In this regard, I will review the two key trends of defining curatorial ethics that crystallised accordingly in those discussions: the recognition of a "curatorial ethic" as a system of norms, and the approach to a "curatorial ethic" as an ability to pursue critical self-awareness and self-accountability as a part of a curatorial practice. I will conclude this chapter by reviewing the current nature of

learning about curatorial ethics within the specialist educational setting. To do so I will talk about my own experience as an MFA curatorial student at Goldsmiths University and reflect on how “curatorial ethics” appear in the syllabi of various curatorial courses⁸.

Curatorial ethics as a part of museum ethics

Initially, the role of a curator was not recognised as separate from their role within a museum. A curator’s professional values, decision-making strategies and responsibilities were prescribed by the code of museum ethics – a guidance document offered to museum staff to communicate the principles of the museum profession and align individual performances with accredited, time-tested standards of practice. The German Museums Association was the first national organisation to adopt a code of ethics: in 1918, it published a code of behaviour relating to art dealing and the public (Meijer-van Mensch 2013). In 1925, the American Association of Museums adopted its first Code of Ethics for Museum Workers. The ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, which is currently recognised and consulted by the international museum community, was first adopted in 1986 and has been revised regularly since then, to respond to the changes in the professional environment and its new challenges. In line with creation of professional associations, proliferation of professional publications and handbooks, organisation of specialist conferences, and emergence of curatorial training courses, the formulation of codes of museum ethics was an important step towards the wider professionalisation of the curatorial role (Heinich and Pollack 2004).

From the beginning, the function of codes of museum ethics was to define the notion of “professionalism” for museum workers, including curators, and to suggest how it should be manifested in their daily work. As observed by Alexandra Bounia, with the help of the code, “the universal principles that define museum ethics (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, leadership)” acquired applicability as they were shaped into “lists of

⁸ I looked at the instruction manuals presented to early-career curatorial practitioners (i.e. University Research Ethics guidance, the codes of ethics of art institutions and museums) and academic “reading lists” consisting of specialist curatorial literature. This theoretical survey was also supported by my own experience of the MFA Curating course at Goldsmiths University (2014-2015).

notions that help museum professionals position themselves towards ethical dilemmas” (Bounia 2014). A code thus made ideas that were initially equivocal, and values that were abstract, more concrete. It has been updated regularly to reflect the current state of museum practice and acted as a formal standard for consultation about best practice. The three key purposes that are widely shared by museum codes of ethics can be identified accordingly.

Firstly, the codes operate as educational devices which introduce young specialists to the core values and principles that underlie museum work. When it emerged, the curatorial role generally consisted of safeguarding cultural heritage, embodied in the artefacts in the museum collection. Curatorial duties consisted of maintaining the conditions for the preservation of the existing collection, selecting new works, contributing to the discourse of art, and organising the display of exhibitions (Obrist 2014, p.25). It was common practice for people to join the profession of curating with no prior professional training; they would acquire this on the job after entering the museum. While basic methodological and technological knowledge was learned relatively quickly with the support of mentors' instructions, it was the notion of becoming "a true career" – "a person dedicated to the ideals of museum profession" (Sola 1997, p.169) – that first raised the question of ethics in regard to curatorial practice, and consequently led to the need for formalisation of ethical guidelines for curators. Otherwise, commented Sola, without these "written expectations", the "ideal ethical profile of a museum curator" would have remained blurred (ibid.). Today, in specialist programmes in museum studies, museum codes of practice are taught as the foundation for understanding the mission, purposes and responsibilities carried out by museum professionals. As the laws, conventions and technologies change, the standards acquired also provide young professionals with a foundation for assessing the new and unprecedented ethical challenges to be faced in the future.

Secondly, a code of museum ethics is aimed at the internal affairs of the museum community, intending to bring a sense of self-worth to those in the field by drawing attention to “the conceptual unity of the profession” (Bounia 2014). The sense of unity and shared responsibility which is implied by the acceptance of the code further determine the mechanisms of its enforcement. Museum codes are not legal documents: that is, not enforceable by law – they function through peer-to-peer pressure and are monitored by accredited organisations

that consist of museum workers themselves. From 1906, the American Alliance of Museums has led the development of “best practices and advocating for museums” in the USA (American Alliance of Museums). Since its creation in 1946, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) “establishes professional and ethical standards for museum activities” internationally (ICOM 2017). Since 1977, the Museums Association has acted as the guardian of museum ethics in the UK. With these membership associations and non-governmental organisations in place to monitor the professional performance of museum workers both nationally and internationally, the “loss of accreditation and banning from the museums association are two typical penalties”, while the professional isolation that follows is supposed to “bring embarrassment and shame at a more personal level” to unethical practitioners (Bounia 2014).

Third, the codes of museum ethics define acceptable conduct and the responsibility of those working in museums towards the society they serve (Edson 1997, p.10). The way in which the first codes of museum ethics were formulated — the language they used and the definition of the curatorial role they implied — revealed the tendency to look inward to techniques and professional behaviour rather than outwards, to serving society. This tendency began to be critically addressed in the 1970s, with the growing awareness of the social role of museums evident in many parts of the world, resulting in new concepts of professionalism involving new approaches to professional ethics. As Tristram Besterman stated in this regard, “developed from within the museum profession, museum ethics is an expression of the continuing debate about the responsibilities that museums owe to society” (Besterman 2006, p.431). This shift in perspective was motivated by the recognition of museums as inherently political institutions — so that correcting legacies of oppression requires the inclusion of diverse human experiences and the democratization of their appeal, access, and construction of knowledge. At the same time, preserving the high degree of public trust that museums have long enjoyed and their reputations for presenting accurate information in responsible ways began to be perceived as key ethical duties of museum workers (Besterman 2006; AAM; ICOM 2017). The museum space has been increasingly recognised as a place for encounter and dialogue for various parties with different pasts. The ideal expression of the new paradigm is a museum that genuinely opens up its narrative for user-generated content and co-creation. The role of the curator has been redefined accordingly,

with the emphasis on the task of furthering diverse community interests (Waterton and Smith 2010, p.11) and undertaking the role of a facilitator in the exchange between the various parties involved in the process of knowledge and meaning production.

Emancipation of Curatorial Ethics

The separation of curatorial ethics into an autonomous branch of discourse – its separation from museum ethics – was initiated by the emergence of independent art curating in the 1960s. Driven by the values of “demystifying” the art world, its processes and structures, this new subject position in the environment of the art market profoundly affected the role of professional ethics for curators. Reflecting on the state of the art community from which independent curating emerged, Seth Siegelaub noted the shared value of demystifying “the role of the museum, the role of the collector, and the production of the artwork” and “the hidden structures of the art world” (O’Neill 2012, p.13). Thus, the notion of “independence” referred to a curator as a non-affiliated, autonomous agent: a self-determining subject position outside of the institutional infrastructure, emancipated from its code of ethics (O’Neill 2006; Misiano 2015) and thus able to critique it. As reflected by Victor Misiano, “as they were leaving the institution behind, independent curators automatically left behind the fixed moral guidance and encountered the freedom, or rather necessity, to choose and decide for themselves [...] each time anew” (Misiano 2015). The necessity to navigate the individual processes of decision-making – understanding their underlying strategies and responsibilities towards various parties within the contemporary art community – has been approached as the key purpose of the curatorial ethics. Notably, the perspectives on how exactly this kind of navigation should proceed have varied between curators ever since.

Reviewing the specialist literature on the subject suggests that, although the debates go back to the 1960s, the body of writing addressing “curatorial ethics” as something separate from museum ethics started to take shape in the early 2000s, while attempts to bring various opinions together in an organised discussion only came at the end of the decade. A systematic debate on curatorial ethics – as differentiated from the ethics of art museum professionals – was launched in an issue of *Manifesta Journal* in 2010 that inquired into

whether something as specific as “curatorial ethics” even existed. Various potential answers to this question were considered, including whether ethics is a secondary consideration for curatorial work or a significant part of the curator’s intellectual self. As if in response to this question, two different outlooks on curatorial ethics started to take shape. While both associated curatorial ethics with the social responsibility of the curator in respect to other parties involved in the contemporary art field (artists, artworks, audiences, institutions, etc.), they projected a different understanding of how the fulfilment of this responsibility should be monitored. According to the first perspective, this can be done by determining a set of essential curatorial values and curatorial best practice to be implemented by individual curators – following the example of museum curators when presented with the museum code of ethics. With the second outlook – since the necessity to make choices and be accountable for them can be in itself understood as the essence of curating – the values and best practice should be established *by the curator themselves*, with the ongoing process of self-accountability and self-reflection recognised as curatorial best practice, ethically speaking. I will now elaborate on these two outlooks.

The role of “curatorial ethics” in determining standards of practice (the first outlook)

Advocates of the first outlook understand the primary purpose of curatorial ethics as providing individual curators with established standards of best curatorial practice to be implemented in their daily work. Accordingly, they consider the various possibilities of introducing (formal or informal) guidelines that would frame the practice of contemporary art curators more widely. It was in this spirit that these issues were raised at the Curatorial Ethics conference held in spring 2015 at Kunsthalle Wien. In his opening speech, the conference host curator, Nicolaus Schafhausen, highlighted that “the time is ripe to talk about a curatorial *code of ethics*”: to ask “where are the boundaries, what are the grey areas?”; and how to handle the “relationship between public and private collections, together with the handling of the latter, in the relationship between the institutional art establishment and the art market, and finally in the relationship between curators and artists” (Müller and Schafhausen 2015). The thirteen discussion panels that brought together international representatives from various sectors of the art world were set the task “not so much to discuss

deficiencies and problems, but instead to fundamentally acknowledge that these exist" (ibid.). Later that year, partially readdressing the questions raised by the Kunsthalle Wien panellists, the *Curating under Pressure* symposium took place in New Zealand, focusing on curatorial ethics in the context of the biennale model. The symposium lasted for four days in various locations around Christchurch, which at the time was hosting the SCAPE Biennial of Public Art. The discussion addressed "the role of biennials as the most successful current model of international art exhibitions worldwide", focusing on the principles and responsibilities that underlie the relationship between curators and biennale publics: "Is there a responsibility towards the audience, and if so, how could it be described? What are art's promises towards the audience? [...] What are the consequences for an ethics of curating?"⁹

In the same year, 2015, an anthology on ethics in contemporary art was published as a part of the Whitechapel Gallery's 'Documents of Contemporary Art' series, in which some twenty per cent of the essays were written by curators. In his introduction to *Ethics*, following the philosopher Alain Badiou, the artist Walead Beshty referred to ethical principles as both concerned with "immediate action" (and in this way distinct from morality – "reflexive action"), and as having a social foundation in their desire for the maximisation of the common good, characterised by the site of their deployment (Beshty 2015, p.18). Placing this definition in the context of contemporary art, he questioned the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, pointing out the key difference between the criteria of social efficiency and artistic efficiency. According to Beshty, "not only is the former much easier to define in fixed terms, but also a successful social project can easily have little or no aesthetic value" (p.16). In regard to the growing currency and application of principles of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 1998) in individual curatorial methodologies, Beshty asked what criteria ought to be applied to works (artistic and curatorial alike) that "make active use of their dependence on systems of distribution and social traffic" (Beshty 2015, p.16). While Bourriaud's relational aesthetics suggested a comprehensive methodology of aesthetic analysis that incorporated human relationships, Beshty highlighted that the very relationship between the aesthetic

⁹ According to the *Curating under Pressure* symposium press-release, <https://www.artandeducation.net/announcements/106347/international-symposium-curating-under-pressure>

and the social realms had never been properly addressed, and that it was thus this shortcoming that the authors of the anthology were addressing.

In editing *Ethics*, Beshty attempted “to outline a methodology for a discourse on art, specifically a methodology which accommodates the dynamics and variability of social exchange, which [...] is implicit in all art works” (Beshty 2019). Structured as a single ongoing conversation, the texts in *Ethics* act as an effective summary of the various artistic and curatorial perspectives that have emerged in the last decade on how the relations amongst the various parties in the contemporary art field can be modelled. Thus, in revising curatorial responsibility and the principles that underlie curatorial actions, some authors asked whether a curator needs to be ethical, and asked what ethics would mean in relation to the societally-driven aesthetics of contemporary art (Bourriaud, Lunghi, O'Neill and Ruf 2010). Others considered what the consequences of the institutionalisation of the curatorial position are for curatorial ethics (El Dahab 2006; Katrib 2008); and what recent shifts have taken place in the understanding of curatorial care and duties (Triple Candie 2005). Notably, shortly after *Ethics* was published, Beshty compiled *Unethical*: a book of his own, in the format of an anthology, that was intended to include all the text that had been edited out and omitted when he worked on *Ethics*. The volume *Unethical* thus came as an elegant demonstration of how ethical principles work in the first place: as a parallel expression of the same set of choices, through inevitable exclusion and bias, to which the curator (of a publication, an exhibition, or else) is subjected in order to convey meanings.

An issue of *Moscow Art Magazine* (Autumn 2017), published by the ex-editor of *Manifesta Journal*, Viktor Misiano, once again returned to the social foundation of curatorial responsibility – urging curators to accept it as *the* fundamental value of curatorial ethics. In comparison to the ethics of artists, which were considered as “object-oriented” ethics (Misiano 2017, p.3), the propositions for curatorial ethics gathered in the magazine recalled that “we still predominantly exist in the realm of people, not objects” (ibid.); and are faced with the urge to acknowledge the actual living conditions of different social groups (Aleshin 2017). In responding to this state, it is the curator – once again personified in the relational aesthetics of art (Timofeeva 2017), who is responsible for the social dynamics within the art process (Konyushihina 2017), and who emerges in response to the ongoing changes within contemporary

culture (Burkhanova 2017) — who leads the search for new values during the period of “moral catastrophe” currently being experienced by society at large (Budraytskis 2017; Falkovsky 2017).

Although the proponents of this outlook on the task of curatorial ethics rarely suggest that there is a need for a strict code of conduct, it is the absence of *any* general regulations issuing from the professional curatorial community that they consider highly problematic, due to the emerging patterns of undesirable curatorial behaviour that has failed to be restricted by the existing means. It can be suggested that many of these problematic behaviours have been initiated by a new kind of temporal, fluid, unregulated institutional relationship, such as those facilitated by art fairs and biennales.

In this regard, for instance, the last edition of dOCUMENTA, curated by Adam Szymczyk, initiated a new wave of calls to define the principles underlying curatorial actions. As critics Piero Bisello and Stefano Pirovano asserted in their recent article, the very status of dOCUMENTA as “the blueprint for contemporary art exhibitions in the five years that follow it” (Bisello and Pirovano 2017) charges a curator who directs it with a certain responsibility. As for the legacy of Szymczyk’s curation, it consisted vaguely of obscure language and unfulfilled promises to the viewer (Bisello and Pirovano 2017), that neglected the artists and undermined the artworks on display (Fulton 2017), as well as demonstrating some examples of curatorial favouritism in choosing artists for the show (Perlson and Halperin 2017). As Bisello and Pirovano reported after visiting dOCUMENTA 14, the biggest problem was the language used to communicate with the audience via the press releases, essays, artwork labels, and the content in the exhibition catalogue (in which even the artists’ biographies were eschewed). Even though some curatorial claims either addressed the issue of ethics or were ethical in nature, they were poorly communicated and never put into practice, barely leaving the domain of mere words. No matter if we agree or disagree with the particular claims made by dOCUMENTA 14, Bisello and Pirovano concluded, Szymczyk’s primary responsibility consisted of making these “with clarity, since more clarity means delivering claims more effectively to the other, which is by definition is what ethics is concerned with” (ibid.); a responsibility they suggested he had failed to take on.

In reflecting on her experience of dOCUMENTA 14, Jeni Fulton (editor-in-chief of *SLEEK* magazine) accused Szymczyk of enacting a celebratory maximalist moto — “oh yes, let’s have five curators! And 199 artists!! And 70 venues in two cities! And an ‘encounter point’ for lunch with Athenian normies! And a radio station! And a Parthenon made of books wrapped in cling film!” (Fulton 2017) — with no consideration of how these miscellaneous objects, mediums, spaces and narratives may relate to, and illuminate, each other “beyond chocolate box identitarianism” (ibid.). As she noted in her critical reflection on Szymczyk’s curatorial statement, “coining neologisms is not the same as generating new ideas”; it rather appears as unreasonable obfuscation (ibid.). Fulton’s closing comment addressed the use of the exhibition’s budget (€37.5 million). For her, since this edition of dOCUMENTA never resulted in new ways of showing art (“it ceased to be an exhibition, it was a collection of more or less interesting objects, whose relationship to another remained shrouded in nebulous, half-baked statements”), the major disservice Szymczyk did was in relation to all the underpaid labour he utilised to enable the project to actually happen: to the people for whom he was first and foremost responsible.

In an article published by *Artnet*, journalists Hili Perlson and Julia Halperin considered Szymczyk’s curation of dOCUMENTA to be a case study in curatorial favouritism — not an isolated example, but one of a growing list featuring biennale curators worldwide. As Perlson and Halperin observed, when the curator included his partner (the choreographer Alexandra Bachzetsis) in the exhibition programme, and thus “illustrated the extent to which the art world is built on close personal relationships between artists and curators”, it was no longer possible to neglect the situation of unregulated conflicts of interest in the field. Namely, the dOCUMENTA situation questioned “the wisdom of these curators’ choices at a time when nepotism and conflicts of interest are increasingly scrutinized and the art industry has grown more professionalized” (Perlson and Halperin 2017). The article goes on to highlight the fact that while obvious conflicts of interest are present in the relationships between artists and curators today, they paradoxically manage not to “violate any code of conduct” (ibid.), since there are no formal regulations at work. Unlike other industries, in which one’s professional qualification can be displayed in one’s CV, the field of art is extremely subjective. As long as it is not required of the curators to explain

their choice of artists and artworks, and justify their decisions, when “something like that happens, it’s because we allowed it to happen – we never questioned curators about their choices” (ibid.). The absence of at least some formal regulations has to be remedied for good, the article concludes, for the sake of uncompromised artistic merit and to give some standards to the notion of curatorial expertise.

The final example, representing the thinking that underlies the first outlook mentioned above on curatorial ethics, is Maura Reilly’s book *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Reilly 2018). It emerged as an attempt to answer to the core question: “How can we get people in the art world to *think about* gender, race, and sexuality, to understand that these are persistent concerns that require action?” (Lippard 2018, p.7). The book itself is organised as a compilation of reviews of significant museum exhibitions in which the issues discussed above were addressed by curators, and which in many ways broke the rules and policies of large-scale art institutions by introducing politicised identity-driven social problems to their conservative art-for-art’s-sake audiences. In this regard, in Reilly’s own words, the term “curatorial activism” designates “the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principal aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art” (Martinique 2018). Addressing this as a core principle of curatorial ethics, Reilly reflected on it as a necessary curatorial commitment to give voice to those social groups that had been silenced by Western art history in the past: i.e. women, artists of colour, non-Euro-Americans, and queer artists. It comes as no surprise that the curators who have enacted this approach up until now always worked under a degree of reputational risk, while their highly controversial counter-hegemonic exhibitions have rarely been understood by the general public. Nowadays, however, Reilly suggests, it should be the ethical responsibility of each curator to tackle this problem, since “most curators today don’t seem concerned with equality in representation or a diversity of voices”; neither are “they acknowledging that the contemporary art world is sexist, racist, oppressive” (ibid.). For this turn towards equality to be possible, however, the initial changes should be made in the “mainstream (non-activist) curatorial practice” (ibid) by establishing new norms and standards to replace the existing malfunctioning system.

“Curatorial ethics” as developing practices of self-accountability (the second outlook)

While the protagonists of the second outlook on curatorial ethics do not deny the problems that result from the lack of mechanisms to control and justify curatorial actions, they articulate a different understanding of what should be done in response to this situation. In this regard, *self*-regulation, incorporated into the specific methodology of the individual curator, has been proposed as a foundation for curatorial ethics. For the second outlook, it is the position from which the curator chooses to speak, and the conscious enactment of this position in their actions, that should be addressed as the foundation of curatorial ethics.

Becoming a curator, understood as enacting a particular position of a thinking subject (rather than a mere choice of profession), would have its own ethical implications. For the protagonists of this second outlook, it would then require an ongoing practice of self-reflection. In this way, for Beatrice von Bismarck, a curator appears as “the epiphany of relational position in the art field”, since it is the position in which an individual is obliged to take into account all the relations that exist within the field, and to do so “in a kind of a self-reflexive mode” (von Bismarck 2015). Notably, von Bismarck talks about “ethics in the context of curatorial work”, rather than as presented by a set of norms or standards, suggesting that ethical practice corresponds to “the awareness of interrelations with which [a person] necessarily dealing with when [they] deal with curatorial practice” (ibid.). For her, what curatorial ethics requires, therefore, is a particular kind of sensitivity and ability for self-reflection that would enable the curator to look into the effects of the different activities that they choose to take on.

As Adrian Piper put it, self-reflection enables self-identification and individuation, which necessarily proceeds via self-doubt and the ongoing questioning of one’s own intentions and actions. Piper outlines the dynamics of this process in the following way:

Doubt entails self-examination because a check on the plausibility of your beliefs and attitudes is a check on all the constituents of the self.

Explanations of why your falsely supposed "X" includes your motives for believing "X" (your desire to maintain a relationship, your impulse to be charitable, your goal of becoming a better person); the causes of your believing "X" (your early training, your having drunk too much, your innate disposition to optimism); and your objective reasons for believing "X" (it's consistent with your other beliefs, it explains the most data, it's inductively confirmed, people you respect believe it). These reveal the traits and dispositions that individuate one self from another. (Piper 1981, p.34)¹⁰

In a different way, curatorial ethics as self-reflection was discussed by Rajdeep Singh Gill, who referred to "being conscious" and "conscious living" as the "key aspect of ethical creativity" of a curator (Singh Gill 2013, p.15). The importance of knowing and being aware of what they are doing as a curator, he explains, comes from the difficulty of putting a new consciousness into practice, since a curator tends unconsciously to reproduce the patterns of actions that are conventional in their practice. The "old" established curatorial practice thus appears to be the hardest to change and, out of the few tools that may enable the curator to escape it, self-accountability is the easiest to activate and the most effective if employed properly. "Being conscious", Singh Gill writes in this regard, "involves radical honesty of thought and action, deep receptivity and communication", which becomes "a transformative experience that has incredible creative potential" (ibid.), while its realisation appears to be the curator's major responsibility.

In establishing the philosophical foundation for self-reflection, some protagonists of the second outlook (Thacker 2006; Fowle 2007) have applied Michel Foucault's notion of "care of the self" to the situation of contemporary art curators. This proposes that the practice of self-reflection, as well as continuous work upon oneself, should, of necessity, be performed by someone who curates (although there are different opinions on what this would actually imply, due to the various interpretations of Foucault's original texts by different curators). Thus, as Eugene Thacker explains, the notion of *epimeleia heautou* (translated

¹⁰ The original article was reprinted by ONCURATING journal (09/2011), suggesting its relevance for the contemporary curatorial practitioners.

from ancient Greek as “care of oneself”) not only implies a particular approach towards oneself, others, and the world as such, but also refers to “a constant practice of self-observation and self-examination” (Thacker 2006, p.172). In Foucault’s own words, quoted by Thacker, this kind of care would involve the “actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, transforms, transfigures, and purifies oneself” (ibid.). Importantly, the object of care in this sense was not the self as a unitary stable subject, but its very opposite: the self that remains undone, unfixed, and constantly in the process of formation. Thacker then defined the act of curating as “the point where control and transformation intersect” (Thacker 2006, p.173), as it is precisely in this act that the practice of framing, bonding, bridging and regulating coincides with that of unbridling and undoing “the very control it seeks to establish” (ibid.).

In a different way, the concept of “care of the self” was interpreted by curator Kate Fowle as concerned primarily with the social impact of curating and dealing with its symbolic heritage. Fowle observed that with the charge of “researching, acquiring, documenting, and publicly displaying art”, curating gradually turns into the powerful propagation of data, knowledge, and certain examples of taste (Fowle 2007, p.12). It is therefore essential that “during this process one also has the opportunity to further refine oneself” and cultivate oneself (ibid.). This practice of self-refining, in Fowle’s interpretation of Foucault, would correspond to a certain way of curating that employs “procedures” and “formulas” which people “reflected on, developed, perfected and taught” for a long time, within the shared culture or one’s professional community (ibid.). While “care of self” was presented by Thacker as a tool to prevent the self-destruction that may occur as an outcome of the perpetual transformation and destabilisation of the self (Thacker 2006, p.173), Fowle highlights the social responsibility that underlies “caring for oneself” – regarded by her as a “social practice” that is passed from person to person, which gives rise to “relationships between individuals”, “exchanges and communications” (Fowle 2007, p.12). For Fowle, therefore, the ethical task of curating resides in continuing this thread of communication and relationship – with self-awareness and responsiveness to others engaged in it, together with the curator.

With all that said about the practice of self-reflection, it is important to acknowledge the meaningfulness that is required from it. In this way curatorial ethics, grounded in self-reflection, should not be confused with an isolated state of self-interest and professional egocentrism, in which curatorial self-reflection would become the ultimate product of a curator's activity. In this regard, as curator David Dibosa has observed, in times of cultural austerity, curatorial "reflections on questions of ethos" can easily turn into "idle pursuits or lofty concerns preoccupying those who have the luxury to follow them" (Dibosa 2016, p.12). It thus becomes the curator's responsibility to restrain from self-reflection for its own sake, developing a different approach to self-accountability. Today, Dibosa explains, in the skillset of a curator the gamut of practical knowledge – i.e., of exhibition-building, finance, insurance, and marketing – increasingly outweighs the conceptual and contextual framing of the project. Moreover, with the growing need for pragmatic thinking and acting amongst contemporary art curators, with the demands for efficiency, value for money, the urgency to economise and downsize, it is not what one actually does, but the way one appears in public, that is considered more critical. It is therefore important to remember: *working ethically* and *looking ethically* may be two different things. In this regard, the perspective outlined by Dibosa is indicative of the current context, grounded in pragmatism: curators are urged to leave behind a romanticised vision of an ethic as good practice, or a practice of "idle" self-reflection, and instead "look for motivating factors" (ibid.), paying attention and registering the experiences that would "drive, coax or force" (ibid.) them into curating. It is exactly those experiences that would then reinstall meaningfulness to the curatorial practice. Working to this end would, for Dibosa, mean to move away from the questions of pragmatic evaluation, such as "how?", "when?" and "how much?" and to head towards a more fundamental question, "why?", that is not asked often enough by curators (p.11).

Teaching "curatorial ethics"

When it comes to the academic setting, it is the second outlook on curatorial ethics that is favoured in the curriculum — in those few instances when "curatorial ethics" is being discussed at all. To give some examples, in

2015 the Curating and Ethics course developed by curator Jean-Paul Martinon¹¹ was launched at Goldsmiths College, University of London. The body of texts selected by Martinon effectively mapped “curatorial ethics” as a term that today remains open to multiple interpretations – as if suggesting to his students that it is therefore the responsibility of each individual curator to establish an ethical position and enact it. Today it appears that the distinction between the philosophical aspects of curatorial ethics and the notion of “best” professional practice is not often made. As a result of the colloquial unspecified use of the term, unrelated viewpoints are merged together, confusing the understanding of what distinguishes curatorial ethics today, and what the philosophical foundations for these different perspectives are. Addressing these gaps in knowledge, the reading list for the Curating and Ethics course was produced by Martinon as an assemblage of theories on ethics by prominent philosophers, grouped together with selected texts on curating and exhibition-making, but with only a few texts that addressed “curatorial ethics” directly¹². To give another example: at the time when she was preparing to lead the curatorial course at the Summer Academy of Fine Arts in Salzburg in 2018, Ruth Noack anticipated that even though “curating can’t be taught in two weeks”, she still hoped that there would be enough time to instil “a kind of curatorial ethics” (Bambić Kostov 2017) in her students. As she further explained, Noack was “hoping to instil [...] people who understand that they really need to want to do what they’re doing and [...] not make compromises in that” — if they really want to become curators (ibid.). Once again, it follows from Noack’s usage of the term that she associated a curatorial ethic with an individual’s ability to identify, access and make sense of their drives and desire to curate.

The idea of instilling an ethic – i.e. some foundational principles and values – in curatorial students is also key for the Cultures of the Curatorial course at the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig, and the MA in Curating Contemporary Art at the RCA. At the same time, these two courses expose a profound difference in their understandings of the contexts from which those principles and values should come. With a focus on curatorial criticality, the Leipzig course invites

¹¹ Please see <https://jeanpaulmartinon.net/pedagogy/teaching/> for details.

¹² Please see <https://rl.talis.com/3/gold/lists/9F11979F-30BD-3528-CA4E-2EAA01B00FC8.html?lang=en-GB> for the full reading list.

aspiring curators to experiment with — and experience — the potential of working within utopian settings which do not represent the current state of the (art) world, rather suggesting productive alternatives: inviting them to imagine and test how things *could have been*. In this way, for example, curating students are encouraged to work against unfixed project deadlines, an environment that is barely possible, not only outside (art) academia but also within it. This vision is communicated to prospective students on the course information page, where it is explained that curatorial practice “goes decisively beyond the making of exhibitions and has emerged as a genuine method of generating, mediating and reflecting experience and knowledge” – so that, apart from “methods of conceiving, organizing and realizing curatorial projects”, the programme is designed to provide students with “the means for analysis, reflection and elaboration of exhibitions and other form of cultural mediation in a transdisciplinary and transcultural context”¹³. Likewise, the course at the RCA understands curating beyond exhibition-making: it is designed to increase the students’ “awareness of wider socio-economic contexts and an understanding of transnational contexts and issues of diversity and inclusion” in which their practice will take place. However, unlike the Academy of Visual Arts’ methods of speculation and thinking experiments, at the RCA a more practical approach is favoured. During the second year of the programme, the students are integrated into “live projects” by the University’s partnering institutions, so that curatorial practice can be understood and experienced “in a context defined by the project partner’s ethos, programme and audience”¹⁴. The primacy of an institution’s ethos that should be taken into account as the context for a curator’s engagement is notable, and I personally find it problematic. This is, perhaps, due to a different understanding of the curatorial role that was instilled in me during my own professional training.

As for my own experience of obtaining an MFA in Curating from Goldsmiths University, while I cannot recall the notion of “curatorial ethics” being addressed in class, in the discussions the essence of curatorial practice was often associated with an individual urge to define the position from which

¹³ According to the course description on the university website: <https://www.hgb-leipzig.de/en/teaching/culturesofthecuratorial>

¹⁴ According to the course description on the university website: <https://www.rca.ac.uk/study/programme-finder/curating-contemporary-art-ma/>

one wants to speak: to consider how those individual descriptions can further contribute to the wider curatorial discourse. In a way, it is the opposite of the way curatorial students are taught to position themselves at the RCA; and it is also a more pragmatic, market-oriented approach than the one taught on either the MPhil/PhD Advanced Practices (Goldsmiths) programme or the Leipzig Academy of Visual Arts' curatorial course. Instead, in the Goldsmiths MFA course the focus was put on developing one's ability to formulate a cohesive position and communicate it to the world via one's work. It was during our regular student project discussions that I had the epiphany regarding my "curatorial ethic". It was the moment when, after my presentation to the class, the tutor suggested: stop trying to convince us why this subject is generally important at this time and here, and explain instead *why it is important to you*. I was reminded that as a human being I have naturally carried massive baggage to the classroom: my upbringing, gender, race, lived experiences and biases — all of which would affect the ideas I am capable of producing. It is thus my responsibility to understand where my reactions, drives and decisions come from, and deconstruct my desire to do some projects and stay away from others. Through this gradual process, as I understood it, my curatorial ethic could be configured.

It is symptomatic, however, that the courses outlined above (one of which I was lucky to graduate from) represent only a handful of programmes in which the question of a professional-curatorial ethic is raised in the curriculum. As my review of the UK-based programmes in curating contemporary art and culture revealed,¹⁵ it is common that an "average" curatorial course is designed to nourish practical, intellectual and critical skills in students; neither the legal nor the professional-ethical dimensions of practice are considered. While the focus is usually on the topics of audience engagement, exhibition/event organisation and management, object handling and installation skills, it is the attempt at understanding the foundational principles and limitations of curatorial work that

¹⁵ I reviewed the curricula of the following courses: MA Curation Practices at the University of Leeds; Curating and Exhibition Management short course at City University; Curating Culture short course at Birkbeck University of London; MA Curating at Bristol University; MA Curating Art and Public Programmes at LSBU; BA Culture, Curation, Criticism at CSM. In compiling this selection, I specifically selected courses in the general curating of art and culture — neither including more subject-specific courses (i.e. Fashion/Design/Film/Museum/Collections/etc. Curation), nor those in related disciplines (i.e. Art Management, Art/Exhibition History, Archiving/Conservation, Art Theory, Museology, etc.).

is missing in the syllabi. Importantly, this is not to say that such principles *can* be actually formulated today (i.e. as a code), but rather to suggest that the ongoing attempts at their formulation should be incorporated in one's curatorial practice, as a kind of a professional habit. In this way, the act of questioning and professional self-doubt would be more helpful than a single answer which is determined once and for all. As I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, for many professions such a habit of self-accountability is traditionally established via specialist training. Yet, for curatorial practitioners their profession appears to be an unaccompanied enterprise, that an individual practitioner undertakes with little structure or guidance to consult and a significant amount of controversy to address and embrace.

The state of “curatorial ethics”: conclusion

As will follow from my analysis above, there are various perspectives on how to define “curatorial ethics”, and even less agreement regarding how to teach it to curating students, and, indeed, whether it should be taught in the first place. Taking this state of affairs as a context, rather than a problem to be solved, the enquiry that leads my PhD research concerns the experience of an individual curator who is seeking to establish what *their* curatorial ethic is: where it comes from, how is it composed, how is it manifested in (and affected by) the day-to-day curatorial practice. Since my research is practice-based, it is my own experience that is thus being analysed. In answering this question, I naturally expose myself to opinions from the specialist literature on curatorial ethics, discussions with my peers, observations of my colleagues' practices, amongst other sources of information concerning “curatorial ethics”. My research thus seeks to understand and navigate this multilayered process and establish whether there are any constants to it which can be distilled and further interrogated.

In assessing recent research projects concerning curatorial ethics, I noticed that, although new statements on curatorial ethics continue to emerge in specialist literature and academia, they aim to practically solve the riddle of “curatorial ethics”: that is, to suggest a coherent definition or a set of principles that would make sense to curators in general.

To give examples, in the past eight years there have been at least three completed PhD projects that have considered curatorial ethics: one proposing a normative theory of curatorial ethics as the ethics of care (Fisher 2013), and the other two suggesting different perspectives on ethics as curatorial self-accountability (Singh Gill 2013; Szreder 2015). While each of these projects succeeded in producing a consistent theory of ethics, their authors did not attempt to deal critically with the creative co-presence of multiple theories of curatorial ethics (to which they had contributed) in their own practice. They looked into the consequences of specific curatorial behaviours (suggesting how a curator *should* behave), yet overlooked the fact that “beyond the different styles, techniques, or themes that characterise [curators] work” there are alwaysalready “different codes of conduct that guide the way they act or behave”, as curator Anthony Huberman noted (Huberman 2011, p.190). All in all, although they aimed to define how a curator ought to be in some utopian scenario, they failed to consider *how a curator is* at present, as determined by the professional discourse and culture within which they evolve.

To fill this gap in my research, I consciously avoided taking sides in the debate regarding the definitions of curatorial ethics (asking: what should a curatorial ethic be?). Instead, I wanted to assess how *it already manifests itself in the practice of an individual curator*. Namely, instead of judging curatorial behaviour against some standards or norms, I considered how the very notion of a “standard”, “norm” or “best practice” emerges in an individual curatorial practice. Practically, this required me to restrain from “judging” individual curatorial performances against a range of standards, and instead consider them as demonstrations of curators ‘belonging to a particular professional culture at a certain time: i.e. as *always already* following certain principles and procedures, even mechanically. Thus, in developing my methodology I considered how my various kinds of professional behaviour, particular choices and actions, can be interrogated as the limited potential manifestations of the contemporary culture of art curating to which I belong. It is by analysing these as a continuous flow, as responses to the contingencies of a curatorial occupation, that individual curators can access their ethics. Importantly, it is not designing a brand-new set of principles that I propose to curators. Rather, it is accessing and making sense of those existing principles – announcing them and

owing up to them – that I suggest can be identified as formulating their professional curatorial ethic.

3. DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION

Choosing “practice-based” research

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how — in relation to the “official” discourse of curatorial ethics (discussed in the previous chapter) — an individual curator/myself can operate with the knowledge about their curatorial ethic. Essentially, the complexity of such knowledge will be acknowledged: it will be understood as acquired both through professional training (formal: i.e. courses; informal: i.e. self-education) and actual curatorial practice (i.e. projects and experiences one undergoes as a curator). The intention is thus to demonstrate what learning experiences I eventually accumulated as a curator, and how it is possible to formulate some (provisional) guidelines that relate to my experience and celebrate both its pragmatic and its contingent aspects. Working on the previous chapter I familiarised myself with the full range of “ethical” agenda setting (as it appears in the reading lists for curatorial courses, codes of museum ethics, specialist and semi-specialist publications) and outlined its main principles and vectors. In so doing, I aimed to map the names of “curatorial ethics” theorists and inspirational commentators; to represent what is considered to be accepted wisdom and trends in defining “curatorial ethics”.

As I move on to writing about my own ways of arriving at recommendations for the realpolitik of curating, my intention is to show how I have arrived at an “ethic”: what particular circumstances of theoretical grounding, pragmatic experience, reflective, existential distillation of wisdom and processes of decision-making and communicating my aggregated wisdom have arisen from the first-hand experience of working as an independent art curator. I will thus consider how a curator's ethical sensibility is formed by their pragmatic and emotional responses to the encounters and events in their own practice. These responses, I propose, will be determined by their personal understanding of what a curatorial ethic is, yet at same time affected by the knowledge about curatorial ethics, obtained discursively. My investigation of the events and responses in my own practice will therefore consider the multiple ethical perspectives I have been exposed to through my work and training, and their co-existence.

Importantly, it is not my aim to either establish new norms or offer some standards of “best curatorial practice” to curators more generally. As my

perspective suggests, for individual curators, an articulation of the commonly accepted rules and understandings based on a priori principles, as well as a kind of 'case law', would be neither implacably governed by regulations, nor solely based on subjective impulses. Rather it is a unique configuration of principles employed by a curator to respond to the (regulatory) limitations they encounter throughout their work that I will look for – and ultimately identify as a curatorial ethic.

The method of autoethnographic-curatorial writing (described in the Introduction), from which the following analysis of the three art-curatorial projects has emerged was chosen as being highly empirical, inductive and self-aware: as such, it met the objectives of this part of my research. In my autoethnographic-curatorial writing, “my ethic” thus appears as contingent, situated, tactical, and enveloped in each project’s particularities. At the same time, as my analyses further disclosed, there are certain aspects of my practice that can be systematised and observed in all the three projects. I will be reviewing these later in this chapter.

The three curatorial projects: criteria

Implementing the above intentions and perspective on “curatorial ethics” in the curation of the actual projects required that a number of practical steps were performed in the organisation, recording and evaluation of the projects. First, planning the curatorial projects to be used for the purposes of this research, I aimed at configuring them as examples of my *ongoing* curatorial practice: as enacting my already established professional principles, aspirations, curatorial methodology and expertise — that can be monitored, analysed and challenged in its course. That is, as enacting and manifesting “my” curatorial ethic. In this way, I used the following four criteria to guide my choice:

- My curatorial role and duties enacted throughout each project should be undetermined at the beginning, so that they respond, and are shaped, during the course of the project. In this way I could monitor the formation of my curatorial role and its aspects from an early stage until the very end of each project.

- The participants' awareness of my enquiry into curatorial ethics was established from the beginning, so that it could be integrated into the project itself, serving as its secondary "theme", to be further used as a central narrative thread when I present the projects in this thesis.
- The outcomes of each project should not be limited to curating a display of works, but encompass the resulting relationships that I establish with the miscellaneous participants, such as artists, members of an audience, representatives of institutions/collaborators.
- The projects should be organised across the different cultures of curating: i.e. take place in different countries, be hosted by/associated with different kinds of art institutions, and demonstrate different hierarchies of power among the project participants. In this way, it is anticipated, the approach that is developed in formulating an ethic will be applicable widely to unaffiliated contemporary art curators and acknowledge their varied practices).

Second, as I was writing about the projects (autoethnographic-curatorial writing) I let go of the habit of making a dualistic judgement on my decisions and actions as either "ethical" or "unethical", in terms of my arbitrary understanding. Instead, I aspired to look at my practice without assumptions: I aimed to identify the underlying facilitative principles of my actions and responses, without further labelling them as "ethical" or "unethical". I attempted to *evaluate* what I think, say and do as a demonstration of my particular way of being in the world *that is disclosed* by the thoughts, words, feelings and actions that I am capable of *at a certain moment, under certain circumstances*.

Finally, third: as I analysed my projects and writing, I focused particularly on the emergence, configuration and transformations of my role as a curator in each case: *What did it imply? How did it differ in different projects, with respect to the relationships established between myself and other project participants? What different ethical challenges and dilemmas were revealed in each project?* As my enquiry was guided by the questions above, my analyses did not pay attention to other important aspects of curatorial work and its outcomes. Specifically, I provided no art-historical or exhibition-historical context for the

projects I curated, focusing instead on their relational and political aspects. Likewise, I considered the relational, social value of the artworks over their aesthetic and commercial value. These limitations of my perspective were intentional and were based on the conditions of my research.

Thus, for the data collection part of my research, I organised three art-curatorial projects; these were realised in the period between 2016 and 2018, in Moscow, Zurich and London. Format-wise, each of the three projects resulted in a public presentation of works produced by the artist-participants; its photographic documentation is included in the thesis (see Appendices). At the same time, the socio-material relationships developed between me and other parties engaged in these projects was captured by the miscellaneous data collected in their course: this included notes, emails, drawings, photographs, references and research diary entries. These materials helped me to disclose a curatorial process that exceeded the conventional settings of exhibition curating and project-related decision-making – consequently disclosing the complexity and scope of an individual curatorial ethic. The application of these is explained in my autoethnographic-curatorial writing (see Appendices).

The completed autoethnographic writing presents the practical-experimental experience of my research in the course of three projects. It demonstrates the practical implementation of the aforementioned criteria and principles into my practice; it also documents it, making it available for further analysis and, possibly, useful and applicable for my fellow curators in search of their ethic.

Overview of the Three Projects

AND ALSO (don't tell anyone) Love is a Crime (2016)

The first project, *AND ALSO (don't tell anyone) Love is a Crime*, was a play script, produced in collaboration with poet and performer Dr. Alev Adil (2016). It was staged in various media for different audiences — as a performance, a reading, an exhibition, and a number of conference papers. It was the first experimental project I curated to investigate the formation of my complex position as a curator-researcher taking place within the overlap between several (possibly conflicting) relations, agendas and roles. To do so, Dr.

Adil (Principal Lecturer in Visual Culture and Multimedia Poetics at the University of Greenwich) participated in my curatorial project *as an artist* — while *at the same time acting as the supervisor* of my research. As I put it in my PhD proposal at that time, the aim was to “interrogate the formation of the complex relations between an artist-supervisor and a curator-student as capable of corrupting the traditional distribution of power and responsibility within the contemporary art field, and thus enabling the emergence of unprecedented hybrid ethics and art forms” (Burkhanova 2014). The conflict of interest between the various subject positions, which Dr. Adil and I occupied simultaneously, was initially among the themes that needed to be considered critically. Consequently, as we happened to conflate the multiple, often conflicting, responsibilities and “standards” of practice in realising AND ALSO, we intended to investigate them from within – and make this investigation a part of the research methodology and the resulting art project itself.

Thus, my curatorial role and subjectivity evolved within the overlap between the two threads of relationships formed by the artist and myself: at the university, Dr. Adil acted as supervisor of my PhD research; prior to studying or working with Dr. Adil, I had developed a fascination with her work, becoming an admirer of her work before I first met her and started to work with her. These two sides of our relationship ultimately impacted on the configuration of my overall curatorial engagement in the course of the project.

Please kindly refer to Appendix. 1 for the autoethnographic-curatorial writing, photo-documentation and additional materials related to this project.

When Air Becomes Breath (2016)

The second project, *When Air Becomes Breath*, was a solo exhibition of works by artist Margo Trushina that included sculpture, photography, neon installations and a sound piece. It was organised to meet the objectives of two art institutions simultaneously: the 5th Moscow International Biennale for Young Art, and a commercial art gallery (OSNOVA, Moscow).

The project was initiated by Margo Trushina, who invited me to act as curator of her show to be hosted by the gallery in Summer 2016. With its established taste, representative of the interests of collectors of emerging Russian art, the gallery had specific requirements regarding the works to be placed on display and in principle did not need a guest-curator to organise Trushina's exhibition. For the artist herself, however, it was important to work with a curator in order to participate in the parallel programme of the Biennale, which called for the submission of *curatorial* projects. Also, due to the politics of the Biennale that, according to its website, "focuses on a young generation of artists and curators aged up to 35 years" (youngart.ru), it was important that the curator met the age criterion. This project came to me as an opportunity to initiate a working relationship with the gallery, since typical examples of my curatorial projects and the artists I work with (suitable for museums and project spaces) would not usually meet their sales-driven agenda.

Consequently there were two conflicting subjectivities, which coincided in my curatorial position and decision-making as I realised *When Air Becomes Breath*. First, prior to working together, we developed a friendship with the artist, which created a strong bias that affected my actions and responses throughout the project. Second, due to the cross-institutional nature of the project, in my own choices and activity I had to negotiate between the agendas of the two institutions that hosted the project: a commercial gallery and a biennial.

Please kindly refer to Appendix. 2 for the autoethnographic-curatorial writing, photo-documentation and additional materials related to this project.

What can we make and become (2018)

The third project was set up as a collaborative art project with postgraduate students at Central Saint Martins (CSM), University of the Arts London, driven by the two questions that came to matter in the projects with Dr. Adil and Trushina: *What is it like for a contemporary art curator to work in the space, in which several roles overlap? What art project can be made in a specific artists-curator- institution configuration?* While in AND ALSO and *When Air*

Becomes Breath these questions were formulated in the course of making the projects (i.e. after I started working with Dr. Adil in the double capacity of a student and a curator; and after I accepted my friend Margo Trushina's invitation to curate her exhibition), with *What can we make and become* I included them in the project proposal that was sent to the artist-participants, so that they were aware of my curatorial methodology from the start, manifesting them as my curatorial agenda. Also, unlike the other two projects, in curating *What can we make and become*, I aspired to interrogate whether a creative empowering connection can be established between artists and a curator who are complete strangers to each other.

Working to that end, I launched an open call at CSM, aimed at postgraduate students who would be willing to dedicate five months of their time to an extra-curricular art project. In organising this project I aimed to create a convenient setting for monitoring and interrogating the phenomenon of curatorial practice where, once again, there would be an overlap of several ethical perspectives that were likely to be in conflict with each other. As for the specificity of this project, I placed myself in the context of a joint art production with the CSM students, who were – like me – subject to the University's code of practice. In this case, the University acted simultaneously as the site of artistic production and the authority imposing the boundaries on the creative process. The resulting multiple ethical framework was thus interrogated as conditioning my curatorial performance, as I specifically considered its effect on my decisions and actions.

This project evolved over six months and consisted of two main stages. During the "workshop" stage, the group met to discuss the art practices of its members, plan for the forthcoming exhibition, and, importantly, make the key decisions together (at this stage I primarily acted as a moderator of the group discussion). Then, during the "installation" stage, we gathered in the space and spent time together organising the display. In curating *What can we make and become*, I had to accommodate two eventually conflicting roles: that of a manager of the space that hosted the project (Exposed Arts Projects, London); and that of the project participants' fellow-student at the university, expected to comply with the university's code of ethics (a researcher, driven by the agenda to collect the necessary data). Notably, after *What can we make and become*, I reevaluated the mission of Exposed: from a display space it turned into " a

cross-disciplinary research hub – or a 'think-and-do tank' – to bring UK-based artists, scientists, philosophers and other researchers together for discussion and collaboration”¹⁶. In the course of *What can we make and become* it thus started to work as a catalyst that responded to, enabled and reacted to the multiple, sometimes antagonistic, agendas of the project's participants, while making the process of their co-presence and co-activation visible for evaluation in the way in which it was re-launched and has functioned to date.

Please kindly refer to Appendix. 3 for the autoethnographic-curatorial writing, photo-documentation and additional materials related to this project.

* * * *

It is important to state at this point that the threads of relationships, identified and co-activated in the formation of my curatorial role in the above projects, are not claimed to be unique or unusual. For example, it is common in commercial galleries for a curator to be, effectively, a promoter of the artist (as I was in *When Air Becomes Breath*); it is not unusual for curators to act as artists' advocates and devoted supporters (AND ALSO); more and more curators engage in academic-educational work as a part of their practice (*What can we make and become*). It is the increasing popularity of these practices amongst contemporary art curators that is significant here, since it is due to the numerous enactments by other practitioners that one can detect the difference in their different underlying motives, enactments and evaluations: in other words, in the different ethical-curatorial positions that underly them. The intention of my practice-based research, therefore, is to establish and comprehend the scope (areas, aspects, etc.), within which such *difference* emerges, by taking the example of a singular curatorial practice and deducing from the findings the current state of curatorial practices in a wider context.

¹⁶ According to the mission statement at the organisation's webpage:
<https://www.exposedartsprojects.com>

Formulating “my ethic” as a curator: a three-step sequence

I started the analysis of my practice by identifying the similarities in the methods I used to steer my decision-making process throughout the three curatorial projects as well as in the course of my writing about them. As I was looking for such methodological repetitions, I consulted Schön's notion of constants that was designed to track the patterns and similarities in decision-making observed across professions (Schön 1983, pp.267-283). Notably, my research project is the first instance of Schön's method being used to assess the practice of an independent art curator.

According to Schön, when faced with a new phenomenon or a situation, a practitioner would usually try to draw “on some element of his familiar repertoire”, which they would treat as an “exemplar” or “generative metaphor” for the new case (Schön 1983, p.269). Only after they recognise the similarities do the practitioners move to develop new ways of acting – in response to the unfamiliar elements. Notably, these new ways of action, if successful and satisfying, would then be remembered and added to the practitioners' repertoires – making the progress of their practice a flow, rather than a compilation of dispersed reactions and unconnected actions. Systematic learning, analysing their experience in productive ways and generally evolving as a professional would therefore mainly rely on the existence of constants, developed by a practitioner in the course of their career. Schön further connects the importance of identifying the constants of practice to the degree of freedom, creativity and experimentation which becomes available to the practitioners who know *how* and *why* they do things. In this way, by identifying the constants of their practice, a practitioner produces for themselves some “relatively solid references, from which he can allow his theories and frames to come apart” (Schön 1983, p.270). They would thus secure for themselves a more or less safe environment for professional experimentation, in which they will be protected from losing their voice, style and perspective (the *how*), and will not forget their professional drive (the *why*). From this perspective, becoming a curator will be primarily associated with an act of professionalisation of a person's (political, ideological, personal) position: it will be then manifested in their professional

decisions and actions and openly analysed throughout their practice. It will realise their inner urge to make it public. Hence, the purpose of the three-step sequence I am proposing here is to help individual curators to identify and make sense of the principles that underlie their practices – which I propose to refer to as their curatorial ethic.

As I developed the sequence for formulating curatorial ethics, I consulted with the dimensions in which a professional practice can be systematically analysed, according to Schön. These dimensions can be used to differentiate between practitioners within an individual discipline (Schön 1983, p.270), and proved to be applicable to a wide number of professions – i.e. architects, therapists, engineers, managers and developers (p.271). Adding a new entry to the list of professions, I employed those dimensions to evaluate the constants of contemporary art curatorial practice. In the following sections I will demonstrate the applicability of my approach to the professional condition of curators in general, without attempting to homogenise individual curatorial practices and artificially eliminate their inherent variation. Identifying the constants of their practice would thus provide a curator with tools for interrogating the scenarios they find themselves in, recognising the shifts and turbulences in their practice without distancing themselves from these or separating and delaying reflection from the actual process.

Step 1: Mapping a curator as a constellation of roles

The notion of “role framing” (Schön)

The first step implies identifying the constellation of the role framework within which the individual curator understands their powers, and through which they position themselves towards their collaborators – and within the institutional context. As noted by Schön, “all professional roles are embedded in an institutional context, but not all practitioners take it seriously” (Schön 1983, p.274). He offers an example of a mechanical engineer who primarily recognises himself as an expert in technical problem-solving, while treating his relationships with clients and collaborators as secondary, non-professional activity (ibid.). Being critical of such separation, Schön argues for the need to reunite the various aspects of a professional role, encouraging individual practitioners to “construct a theory of [their] own” (ibid.), instead of following the standardised

theories of their professions. Analysing the specialist curatorial discourse and contextualising my own practice within it, I observed a similar problem to the one discussed by Schön. There are two understandings of art curating – as a pragmatic professional activity and as an enactment of a personal ideological position – that are often addressed in isolation from, and even in opposition to, one another.

That is to say, a curatorial position in any given project would conflate two distinct dimensions of curatorial practice. On the one hand, there will be tasks associated with administration, organising, selecting, obtaining funding, making public and networking – understood as essential for the curatorial profession. Based on the specificity of each given project, this list of “common” technical tasks would also be expanded through atypical assignments (as I will demonstrate in the next section). This first aspect of curatorial engagement determines the ways in which a curator, quite literally, makes their projects, in terms of formats, venues, public relations and target audiences.

On the other hand, there will be a more abstract set of tasks associated with the curatorial acts of manifesting a particular worldview, that distinguishes individual curatorial methodologies and choices of projects. After Beatrice von Bismarck, I will regard this aspect of curatorial work as “connection-making”: between “works of art, artefacts, or informational materials, but also between them and different sites (such as studios, collections, or museums), people (artists, collectors, sponsors, curators, gallerists, critics, or theoreticians), as well as discursive, social, cultural, economic, or political contexts” (von Bismarck 2010). This second aspect of curatorial engagement corresponds to the ways in which curators make meanings, position themselves within a project and in relation to an artist; how they contextualise their projects on a global scale, in response to the current state of the world.

Application in my projects

In this way, in curating AND ALSO, the practical context for my engagement was affected by my position as the artist’s research student at the time that our project took place – and the limitations and hierarchies associated with it. From the start, our project was approved by the university as a proposition for an innovative mode of a student-tutor collaboration that would

develop an immersive research-educational setting (i.e. conceiving, organising and realising a public art project together). Thus, along with the commonly recognised curatorial tasks (project research and development, contacting venues, exhibition planning, etc), my curation required the structuring of the project as an art-educational activity (which can be then potentially undertaken by another student-supervisor team), developing a research paper presentation (to deliver it to the academic community as an experimental art-educational methodology), complying with the University's Research Ethics regulations, keeping appropriate documentation (photos, audio and video recordings) throughout the project.

At the same time, the way in which I “made connections” alongside the meanings, objects and contexts associated with this project was significantly affected by the relationship between Dr. Adil (the artist) and myself that had been established prior to the project. For a long time before our collaboration took place, I was inspired by her writing and art practice; I was a “fan” of her work. I found the transition from an admirer to a curator difficult to perform: learning to be critical of her art practice and to advise her on how to present and reformat it for the purposes of our project was hard. Since the traditional way of curating proved dysfunctional (i.e. as a curator I could not distance myself from my affection for the artist's works and provide a more or less objective perspective), Dr. Adil suggested on merging my curatorial and art student position. Namely, she invited me to co-author the play script with her – and then to co-stage it together, so there would be no separate “artist” and “curator” in our project.

In *When Air Becomes Breath*, the practicalities of my role were associated with my task as the artist's “ghost writer”. Apart from organising the exhibition, my curatorial tasks included writing a script for her artwork, developing its theoretical foundation (i.e. bringing in relevant critical theory and contextualising it within contemporary art movements and ecofeminism) and developing the overall discursive image for the project (i.e. the specialist language and references we used as we talked about the artworks). At the same time, my curatorial “connection-making” part was linked to my role as the intercultural translator: I had to adapt the exhibition to the requirements of the two institutions, with radically different agendas, cultures and audiences, which co-hosted it — a commercial gallery and an art biennale. In order to make a

successful exhibition, I created a “model” that combined the *minimal* requirements of both institutions — in terms of the project’s theme, form, artworks on display, design (that would acknowledge the peculiar architecture of the gallery), and public programme (that would be interesting to both art professionals and amateur collectors).

Finally, in *What can we make and become*, the practical aspects of my engagement were affected by my role as the director of the art space (Exposed Arts Projects), where the project was developed and exhibited. In terms of its ambitions and methodology, *What can we make and become* was conceived as an open-ended experimental project (“Can a group of artists with different media and research interests form a sustainable art collective – one creative organism – if their differences themselves will be taken as a foundation for sustainability?”). As an art space director, I was responsible for nurturing the project’s openness and unpredictability of its outcomes: from the start there was no theme, no final format agreed, and the artworks were to be made in the course of the project. But I also had to ensure that it was realisable within the given time frame, I was responsible for securing funds and equipment, advertising it to the audience in advance, aligning its description and graphic design with the overall mission and visual presentation of the art space. In addition, the “connections-making” aspect was affected by my role as informal “supervisor” of the artists’ research projects, since for the majority of participants the timing of our project coincided with their graduation MA projects. As such, for most artists, participation in *What can we make and become* came as an opportunity to deepen their research, discuss it with their peers and a curator (myself), and get valuable feedback to be further applied in their graduation projects. This ultimately put me in the position of being their academic research adviser, so that the recommendations I provided as the project’s curator primarily concerned their methodologies and ways of writing about them. Eventually, the final exhibition at Exposed featured exactly that: a range of diverse artistic methodologies and individual approaches to identifying and exposing those to the audience, based on the experience of each artist-participant and formulated with my help.

While these two aspects of the curatorial role – the technical-practical and the relational (connection-making) curation – tend to be separate in curatorial discourse, my experience of the projects discussed above

demonstrated the ongoing correspondence between them. It is thus the act of rethinking and reuniting the practical-professional and personal-relational ('connection-making') aspects of curatorial engagement that, I suggest, manifests the first step in defining a curatorial ethic – and it should be performed by an individual curator.

Step 2: Defining core values

The principle of the constancy of appreciative systems (Schön)

According to Schön, the “constancy of appreciative systems” is essential for the continuity of a professional practice, and further, for performing professional self-reflection, because it “makes possible the initial framing of the problematic situation” and permits the enquirer to re-appreciate it “in the light of its back-talk” (Schön 1983, p.272). Likewise, the constancy of an appreciative system is essential for a curatorial practice, so that it proceeds – and is perceived – as a continuous flow of related activities performed by a curator with respect to past experience and an anticipated future.

Naturally, different curators respond to events and ideas from certain standards of fact and value that constitute their appreciative systems. They will consequently choose different kinds of projects to either engage in or avoid in their work. These appreciative systems are repeatedly brought by curators to their problem-setting, either deliberately or unconsciously. Importantly, they do not describe the reality of an individual curatorial practice, but literally shape it. This process is facilitated by the emergence and repetition of certain norms and standards of practice, which are imposed by curators onto themselves. These would be an individual's answer to the question “*what a curator should be/do?*” that results in a specific image, which an individual will be aiming to fulfil. These images would stabilise over time, triggering the emergence of patterns of behaviour and response that would be associated with the curatorial profession.

An appreciative system is shaped while the personal experience of a curator is being contextualised in their general knowledge about the curatorial profession obtained via reading, observation, discussions with peers and formal training. Certain recurring practices, insights and values that are associated with curating are eventually integrated into their everyday professional performance. As curator Carlos Basualdo wrote in this regard, in their daily work an art curator

is “limited by the ephemerality of [their] interventions”: meaning that “any statement needs a certain degree of repetition in order to become apparent” (Basualdo 2001, p.27). A curator is therefore likely to find themselves confined by a system of conventions which they had accepted for themselves. They then end up “being the very embodiment of those conventions [...] of an academic or commercial nature”, repetitively doing what they are “supposed to do” as a curator (p.26) — according to themselves. Hence, the proposed second step in the sequence: to identify the patterns of behaviour and values associated with professional curatorial behaviour that would constitute the appreciative system and a person’s own specific image of a curator.

Identification of values

Traditionally, when it comes to a professional ethic, personal values are replaced by the ethical values associated with the role a person occupies in the workplace. As philosopher Thomas Nagel noted in this regard, since the professions were established to advance certain public interests (such as, for example, wellbeing, justice, education, or safety), those who chose to occupy a professional role would automatically accept the obligation to serve those interests and fulfil public expectations in ways defined by their profession (Nagel 1978, p.89). In accepting the professional obligations, therefore, a person would “correlatively reduce their right to consider other factors, both their personal interests and more general ones” (p.79) not related to their profession.

As revealed by my research, in the wider curatorial discourse, the two aspects of a curatorial position (practical-curatorial and personal-relational) are associated with different sets of values. Consequently, the attempt to combine them often results in a conflict of interest, which cannot easily be resolved: it is up to the curator to choose which values to prioritise and enact in their decisions and actions — and it is exactly this need for an arbitrary, personal choice to be integrated into their professional decision-making that is specific for an understanding of a curatorial ethic. Unlike other professions, in art curating it is the assemblage of personally determined values that become “professionalised”: that is, converted into a foundation for a professional ethic. This consequently determines a curator’s choice of methods and strategies for achieving their aims, as well as decisions to collaborate with some

organisations, individuals and funding bodies in order to realise those aims, while strategically avoiding others. Hence, the task of this second step of the sequence is to depart from the romanticised image of the curator driven by abstract ideals of social justice, the minimisation of harm and the maximisation of public good, and instead look for those factors that motivate curators personally, paying attention to and registering experiences that “drive, coax or force” them into curating (Dibosa 2016, p.12). And to perform such a review of values, as artist Mark Hutchinson put it, “The curator [...] must ask herself not, Am I being a good curator (am I wild enough, am I orthodox enough, have I said and done the right things)? But, What kind of person do I want to be?” (Hutchinson 2006).

Core professional-curatorial values

While the logic for identifying a curator’s values described above may suggest a high degree of heterogeneity amongst the sets of values of individual curators, in reality – as my inquiry into the specialist-curatorial discourse demonstrated – there seem to be recurring core values: “excellence” (competence), “honesty” and “transparency”, identified by a range of individual specialists. The importance of these values for the curatorial profession in general is supported by the fact that not only were they listed by independent curators and theorists (I will discuss these in detail in the following sections); they are also considered to be key values of institutional curating, as indicated in codes of practice. According to the American Association of Museums, for instance, amongst the values formally associated with curating are “to serve the profession” at large by “practicing excellence, honesty, and transparency in all professional activities” (American Association of Museums Curators Committee 2009, p.4). Likewise, the ICOM Code of Professional Ethics requires that “professional responsibilities [...] should be assigned to persons with appropriate knowledge and skill” (ICOM 2017, p.14). As part of honest, transparent practice, it also encourages practitioners to “inform and educate the public about the aims, purposes, and aspirations of the profession” (p.40); to openly object to “practices that are perceived to be damaging to the profession” (p.41); and to avoid conflicts of interest of any kind (pp.43-44).

While the core curatorial values seem to be common to both, the main difference between the positions of an institutional and an independent curator would be the way in which those abstract notions are further defined and whose interests are prioritised accordingly. The overall task of an institutional curator is “to serve the institution” and further its mission (AAMCC 2009, p.4). This requires them to “follow the policies and procedures of their employing institution” (ICOM 2017, p.41), maintain their “loyalty to colleagues and to the employing museum” (ibid.), and “be conversant with relevant international, national and local legislation and the conditions of their employment” (ibid.). Unlike their institutional colleagues, independent curators lack an unambiguous agenda to further contextualise and determine the aforementioned values. They set agendas and justify their actions themselves, by defining the underlying values with respect to their own principles and in response to the multiple, often conflicting definitions of “public good” coming from other parties (including institutions), with whom they are engaged in an art project.

And this is where the diversity of curatorial perspectives becomes apparent: the same core values of excellence, honesty and transparency are often interpreted differently by different curators. This difference became even more pronounced as I compared my own interpretations (as manifested in my three art-curatorial projects) with those of other curators (identified via my specialist discourse analyses). While the interpretations are multiple and arbitrary, there is no single standard interpretation for independent curators to consult. I therefore propose that the very act of interpreting the core curatorial values of honesty, transparency and excellence is considered as an important step in formulating an ethical position of a curator. This leads to the second step in formulating a professional ethic: to determine what *exactly* these values mean — i.e., how they manifest and translate — in an individual curatorial practice. I will now support this proposition with examples from my practice.

Defining curatorial “honesty” and “transparency”

There are many definitions of honesty and transparency, linked to prioritising different aspects of a curatorial role. The ambiguous value of “honesty” has been well-articulated by curator Dieter Roelstraete, who prioritises solidarity within the professional-curatorial community and is critical

of blunt honesty for the sake of it, which removes individual curatorial actions from their original context. He does not deny that today many curators are “unethical at work” (whatever that attribution implies in different contexts). And even though whistle-blowing and warning one’s colleagues about their actions may look like the most logical response, he openly rejects “ratting” on another curator and sees it as profoundly unethical in itself (Roelstraete 2011, p.20). Another definition of curatorial transparency and openness as “the act of laying bare one’s research as it unfolds” (Howard 2013), was suggested by curator Lindsay Howard. Howard’s interpretation has acquired increasing currency in the contemporary art world, as it prioritises the engagement of various audiences in the curatorial process and its democratisation. Transparency is practically enacted in the desire to make every step of the curatorial process public: making it possible for audiences not only to trace the curator’s decisions and ideas in the making, but also to intervene by providing recommendations and feedback. (Howard links the emergence and expansion of this practice to the increasing utilisation of social platforms – “blogging and reblogging” (ibid.) – in the curatorial production.) Yet, Howard notes, the downside of interpreting curatorial transparency along those lines is the increasing risk of psychological trauma for the curators themselves. The radical openness of a curatorial process removes the “feeling of release surrounding a major reveal” when, after “months or years of privately composing thoughts and works, the research culminates in a public presentation” (ibid.). The psychological importance of the project’s closure is thus linked to the otherwise uncertain life-work space and temporality in which the contemporary art curator operates. The act of transition from the research and development of a project to making it public constitutes one of the few ways available to a curator to plan and navigate it. It enables a curator to separate the working process from resting, and therefore restore the mental and physical energies required for the project’s accomplishment. Without it – that is, without those moments of non-transparency, in which “a trail of failures, small successes, false starts, and complications” (ibid.) take place, a curator would end up in a state of slow-burning anxiety about overexposure that would ultimately paralyse their work.

As I looked into my practice to define what honesty and transparency mean to me, I partly resonated with both Roelstraete’s and Howard’s definition. Namely, I have never linked “honesty” to the practice of whistle-blowing that

would inform a wider audience of the actions of my colleagues that I personally recognise as “unethical” (importantly, not illegal). In fact, the very possibility of curating AND ALSO was grounded in my ability to make choices that prioritised “my ethic” over the ethical code of the university. This was the intention of this art-curatorial experiment and research project: to place myself in the situation of conflicting interests, where I would have to choose between the institutional guidance and my own curatorial perspective — and then deal with the consequences of my decision. In *When Air Becomes Breath*, throughout the project I found myself in a number of situations in which my authorship was minimised by other parties (i.e. my authorship was removed from the article about the exhibition; the artists did not credit me for co-producing a sound installation). At the same time, I chose to accept this behaviour towards me as the steps that secured the realisation of the overall project in its best form: that is, with strong publicity, a well-developed theoretical base and artworks. As that required me to do some of the jobs without credit, I accepted that condition, driven by the desire to have an outstanding curatorial project as an outcome.

In accordance with Howard’s definition of curatorial transparency, I felt the urge to document my working process on-the-go and explain my decisions (both to myself and to the potential reader) in the form of a research diary, photos and video and audio recordings. This interpretation, which I established in my work prior to this research, also manifested itself in my choice of the method of autoethnographic-curatorial writing, which translated the activities that I had been already carrying out as part of my curatorial practice into the systematic research methodology. Importantly, the enactment of curatorial transparency via writing is not aimed at judging my practice against predefined standards of curatorial practice; instead, it is aimed at identifying those standards in the practice itself. In this sense, the notion of a standard would correspond to the recurring tendencies associated with their practice for an individual curator to be aware of: for further accepting and nurturing, or fighting against. In this way, for example, I have identified and examined the tendency of opportunistic curating that prevails in my practice by writing about its enactments in my three curatorial projects as a part of this thesis. Opening up about my opportunistic behaviour via writing enabled me to put it into context and determine my perception of it, so that I am now capable of talking about it

openly with my colleagues, employers and audiences and present it as an aspect of my curatorial engagement.

In the context of my work, opportunistic curating comes as the realisation of my ability to seize opportunities as determining my decisions and actions. To be flexible and able to accommodate my projects in diverse contexts and institutions, I never work on an idea alone – by myself – but rely on the feedback of my actual and/or potential collaborators. My curatorial ideas develop when I speak to someone about them, or receive an invitation from an artist to collaborate. AND ALSO started with Alev Adil's proposal to make an experimental project in which I would simultaneously act as her research student and curator. In *When Air Becomes Breath*, it was Margo Trushina (who already had a relationship with the gallery-host) who invited me to curate her show. Finally, in *What can we make and become*, the primary objective of the project was to explore what an emergent artistic collective is capable of creating in a specific configuration, as opposed to departing from a clear curatorial idea or concept. In each case my curatorial engagement proceeds as a dialogue with institutions, artists, writers, and other curators. At the same time, I would never miss an opportunity to attract as many diverse audiences as possible to my projects. This explains the inherent cross-institutional nature of the projects I choose to curate. AND ALSO travelled internationally and was presented to audiences in Moscow, London, Dublin, Rome and Zurich. *When Air Becomes Breath* brought together young biennale-goers and established collectors. In *What can we make and become*, the artistic and research communities were invited to share the discursive space outside academia.

Contextualising my experience within the specialist curatorial discourse, I do not perceive opportunistic curating as “unethical” in itself, as long as it is honestly and openly claimed as a curatorial position. I see it as a distinct feature of the contemporary culture of curating: that is, determined by an individual's urge to work internationally and realise short-term projects (Gielen 2009), the need to respond to the uncertainties of unaffiliated independent curating (Misiano 2015), and as a pragmatic decision to engage with neoliberal ideology (Spangberg 2014; Szreder 2015). In my work, opportunism is enacted as a logic that makes my very practice possible. Immersed in the chaos of events, I am dependent on serendipity, lucky coincidences, interesting offers or encounters all of which may help me to realise my long-conceived projects. Acting

accordingly, I often accept the majority of proposals that come to me, but end up only choosing the most promising one. I network and make connections on any possible occasion, yet I am capable of developing truthful relationships and friendships with my collaborators. I am always anxious and emotionally exhausted by my search for opportunities, yet I cannot imagine working as a curator otherwise. While acting as an opportunistic curator, I nevertheless aim for a professional performance that is invested with criticality and process without cynicism. In this way, I take into account the interdependency of the individuals and collectives involved in the projects with me and aim to act for shared rather than individual benefit. While I am driven by the opportunities to curate as many projects as I possibly can around the globe, this is due to my passion, ideology and values – and not for the sake of cost-benefit calculations.

Defining curatorial “excellence”

The notion of curatorial “excellence” is another value widely associated with contemporary art curating, yet equivocally defined in relation to it. It is therefore another crucial notion for an individual curator to define for oneself – and to be able to explain how it is translated into one’s professional curatorial values. The traditional museum-curatorial definition associated excellence with expert knowledge in art history and museology, gained via extensive education and an art-institutional career. As my analysis of the specialist-curatorial discourse reveals, in the case of independent curating, excellence is associated more with an ability to tell the difference between productive openness, flexibility, not-knowing – and ignorance, incompetence, lack of expertise (Heinich and Pollak 2004; von Bismarck 2015). It is further linked to a curator’s ability to engage with the definition of curatorial competence which is also equivocal, balancing on the border between provocation and expertise, and to enact both in their practice (Huberman 2011; Martinon 2013; Deliss 2015).

In their 1989 essay sociologists Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollack captured the evolution of the definition of curatorial excellence well. They presented contemporary art curating as an activity that has on the one hand been gradually becoming a profession, while on the other has remained deeply grounded in amateurism (Heinich and Pollack 2004). “Academics, philosophers, critics, public-relations consultants, artistic directors and theatre and film

directors now have the opportunity – as well as the desire – to act as exhibition curators”, observed Heinich and Pollak; “Such a development inevitably exacts an upheaval, in relation to content [...]” (Heinich and Pollak 2004, p.237).

Specifically, they argued, this has resulted in “[...] a form of 'deprofessionalization' of the exhibition curator's function” that is “[...] marked specifically by deregulation in access to the job, a deinstitutionalization of the criteria of competence (its not being necessary to hold a specific diploma or position), an expansion in the social milieux [...]”, and, importantly, “[...] an individualization of product where a 'signature' becomes much more apparent and a redefinition of competence in terms of singularization (originality) rather than the implementation of collectively recognized rules” (p.238).

Even though the text by Heinich and Pollak is from the late 1980s, a period of rapid change for curatorial activity, it still adequately reflects the ambiguity of the notion of curatorial excellence. It seems critical for a curatorial practitioner today to “avoid [the] reproduction of [the] profession” of a museum curator, with the latter’s standardisation, repetition and homogeneity, in order to remain capable of “methodological experimentation” on a daily basis (Deliss 2015). For a curator to establish one’s position, *not knowing* what and how to do it would be much more important and beneficial than knowing, since it makes one more responsive to the unstable environment in which one works (Huberman 2011). One’s decision on how to differentiate this productive not-knowing from incompetence is always ethically charged, and comes as a key responsibility. In a different way, deprofessionalisation can be understood as a “desire to enter the discussion as ‘provocateurs’ rather than as ‘experts’” (Martinon 2013, p.75). As observed by curators Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff, “historical and other expertise is easily converted into the legitimization of market-driven spectacles and therefore cannot provide the self-reflexive speculation” that appears foundational for curatorial thinking and that cannot simply be sustained by “a series of professional protocols” (ibid.).

In response to the way my curatorial practice evolved, I link the notion of curatorial excellence to the ability to respond to the practices and agendas of my collaborators in configuring my own practice. This is not simply a case of adjusting my agenda to the interests and demands of an artist or an institution I work with. Rather, it is the evaluation of my ability to change, open up and “become with” them, which takes as a prerequisite the assertion that, prior to a

particular collaboration, the subject position of a curator does not exist as such: i.e., it is not yet configured as an assemblage of the certain role framework (discussed in the first step of this sequence). The collaborative art production, in this regard, is understood as the formation of a curator. It is a complex project, one that is continuously being co-constituted, in which one cannot be held as a fixed referent for "identifying" the other (i.e. identifying a curator as "the other" to an artist).

As exemplified by my three art-curatorial projects, when art practitioners collaborate it may happen that they compose a more powerful whole, and in so doing reinforce each other (as occurred with *What can we make and become*); it may also happen that one party is deprived of energy and agency by another (as took place in *When Air Becomes Breath*). In this regard, I understand curatorial excellence as the skill of addressing both scenarios in terms more complex than "empowering, enriching" or "transgressive, diminishing" (i.e. as either "benefiting" or "not benefiting" an art practitioner). It is about designing a working alternative to the binary logic of capacity/incapacity, enablement/disablement, success/failure (a logic of 'either/or'), and instead taking the emergent structure and environment of an individual project as the logic in itself. It is not about judging the process in terms of "right" and "wrong" decisions and actions after starting it, but about enquiring into the attractiveness of the project as such at first (Do I actually want to curate it?) and, if the answer is positive, considering the desired outcome (What do I want from this project?) and the possible options for its achievement (What can be done to make this happen?). According to this perspective, the most crucial would be the curator's answer to the question of whether they want to engage in a certain project, while taking into account the agendas and values of its other participants: do they accept them? would they be able to respond? In this respect, the act of cancelling, or boycotting, some projects should be also considered as a manifestation of a professional-ethical position that is available to the curator.

My curatorial engagement in *When Air Becomes Breath* can be revisited as a manifestation of such a perspective. My acceptance of the role of "ghost writer" may seem diminishing and unworthy to many curators; however, I did not perceive it as such. Prior to engaging in the project, I made myself aware of the agendas of my potential collaborators and accepted them as the structural elements of *When Air Becomes Breath*. I responded to them in configuring my

practice, which required me to partially relinquish credit for the project's curation: i.e. not having my name written under certain texts. At the same time, my ability and willingness to respond enabled me to achieve the desired outcome: namely, the inclusion of my project by two institutions with contrasting agendas (an art biennale and a commercial gallery) and its acceptance by their two respective audiences – which in the long run brought me more professional prospects, practical knowledge and insights into the operation of the institutions and actors involved.

In AND ALSO, it was my decision to abort my research project as my prerogative, as a Greenwich University student, to openly express my disagreement with the University's decision to act against its own ethical research guidelines. Cancelling my engagement with Greenwich University (and moving my PhD research to CSM), importantly, became a significant "closing chapter" of the AND ALSO narrative. It enabled me and the artist to problematise and publicise a specific conflict within an institution that would have otherwise remained undisclosed. Without "ratting" on my institutional colleagues (to use Roelstraete's term) by naming names and making personal accusations, with the help of fictionalisation and storytelling exhibition-making, I curated a space where people (from both artistic and non-artistic backgrounds) who had ever suffered pressure or the abuse of power in such a situation felt comfortable to share and reflect on their stories, by "inhabiting" the fictional characters of AND ALSO that were offered to them.

Step 3: Understanding one's repertoire as a curator

The notion of a "professional repertoire" (Schön)

As the third step in the sequence, I suggest it is essential to establish the elements of the professional repertoire of a curator: the media and language a curator routinely uses at work when processing information, developing ideas and perspectives and consequently making them public (i.e. as exhibitions, publications, programmes, articles, etc). The reason for this is that curatorial roles, values and skillsets are materially manifested in the repertoire of curatorial methods.

As Schön put it, “together they make up the ‘stuff’ of inquiry, in terms of which practitioners move, experiment, and explore” (Schön 1983, p.271). In this way, the very skills of manipulating the media, language and repertoires are as important for a practitioner’s “reflective conversation with [their] situation” as their skills in manipulating “spoken language” are “essential to ordinary conversation” (ibid.). To illustrate his concept of the practitioner’s repertoire, Schön brings in the examples of a designer and an engineer. The appearance and perception of the products of a designer’s labour would primarily rely on his feel for the sketchpad, the scale model, and the “drawing/talking language” in which he works (p.271). In order to make sense both to himself (as he works) and to his clients (as he presents his designs to them), he would always use a certain combination of media and language to research, develop and communicate his ideas – which would act as both the means of representing those, as well as imposing certain limitations onto them. Likewise, an engineer’s ability to experiment with forms would depend on their “feel for the behaviour of metals under varying conditions of temperature, exposure to air, or immersion in water” (p.271). Because of the importance of “feeling” the materials they work with, to use Schön’s terminology, a practicing engineer or a designer thus would not be able to fully convey the art of their practice to a novice by simply describing their procedures, rules and theories. Likewise, the unique way of thinking developed by a seasoned professional cannot be passed on to a novice merely via description or demonstration. Both the way of thinking and feeling as a professional is something to be developed by the novice through their own work.

As I explained at the beginning of this thesis, I understand curating as the practice of meaning-making that is performed by bringing previously disjointed things and agents into proximity – led by the personal perspective of a curator. This definition is significantly informed by Beatrice von Bismarck’s notion of curating as connecting “works of art, artefacts, or informational materials”, but also “different sites (such as studios, collections, or museums), people (artists, collectors, sponsors, curators, gallerists, critics, or theoreticians), as well as discursive, social, cultural, economic, or political contexts” (von Bismarck 2010). In line with this definition, *connecting dispersed pieces of information* – in order to generate new knowledge – appears to be the primary unit of curatorial action, similarly to the way in which model-building is the basic action of a designer,

and manipulating metals is that of an engineer (to follow Schön's examples). Just as different designers and engineers develop their own ways and iterations of these basic actions, so do different curators. It is therefore likely, as Schön notes, that because of "the differences in feel for media, language, and repertoire", the ways of one practitioner would seem opaque to another, "obscuring their underlying similarities", (Schön 1983, p.271). The answers to the question *how exactly do I make connections as a curator?* are, likewise, rarely on the surface. Yet, since the different ways of connecting even the same pieces of information, as performed by different curatorial practitioners (i.e. who would hold different roles and act on different professional values), are likely to result in profoundly different outcomes, I underline the importance of increasing their awareness of their repertoires — as contributing to the overall formulation of their professional curatorial ethics.

Curatorial sensitivity

As discussed earlier, there are no standard roles that can be unequivocally associated with the curatorial profession today that would be applicable to the situations of most specialists in the field. It is the unique combination of personally determined professional roles and values that constitutes a competitive, sustainable contemporary art-curatorial practice. The notions of curatorial repertoire and skilfulness are determined accordingly. As curator Lianne McTavish observed in this regard, "those who describe their work as a form of curating within this new knowledge-intensive and client-driven world do not attempt to appropriate the professional aura of 'real' curators [...] on the contrary, references to curating offer them a strategic way to engage with an economic landscape in which few workers can expect to pursue a single, stable career, much less a professional identity." (McTavish 2017, p.182) With no standardised image of a curator-connoisseur, members of online and offline audiences increasingly recognise curating beyond the art museum, art exhibition context: they associate it with cooking, blogging, arranging playlists and assembling images on social media (ibid.). From this angle, the exclamation "everyone is a curator!" comes not so much as a criticism of curatorial deprofessionalisation, but rather as a sign of some critical changes in defining a legitimate curatorial repertoire.

Following Schön's definition of a professional repertoire and McTavish's observation, I suggest that a curatorial sensitivity – that is, a specific feel for the things a person curates – is considered to be a foundational skillset for young curators to develop. They should do so from the early days of their careers: as they formulate their own position in the (art) world via collaborating with miscellaneous artists, publics and institutions; learning to think across various disciplines; and making themselves aware of the variety of antagonistic perspectives and agendas of different parties who are affected by their projects. This will consequently determine their repertoire of curatorial methods, which they will arrive at after clarifying the scope of their role framework and professional-curatorial values.

This “unique sensibility” is increasingly perceived as a curator's “selling point”, as the art critic Jack Castle put it. It is not what curators like that matters, so much as “the way in which they like it” (Castle 2015): i.e. *how* they present it in the exhibitions, *how* they write about it, *how* they make it public. Castle goes on to compare the principles of curating to those of conceptual art, in which the object happens to be secondary to the meaning it can have, suggesting that “whoever can ascribe their meaning to [an object] most convincingly takes the prize” (ibid.). In this scenario, holding a unique curatorial sensibility, it is suggested, detaches the curator's ways of generating curatorial knowledge from the possibility (and need) to explain their actions rationally. Critic Andy Miller shared a similar observation, depicting a contemporary art curator as “someone who may know a lot about art but does not necessarily know what he likes or why” (Miller 2016). As long as the outcome of curatorial production “works” (i.e. the professional art community deems it to be a meaningful, thought-provoking and transforming exhibition, public programme, or publication), there is little requirement to explain why the thing was done in this particular way.

No “how/why” questions are usually asked of a curator, as long as the curatorial arrangement fulfils its function. It is essentially because of the lack of requirement to assess their repertoire in the current art-curatorial work environment that the habit of doing so should be recognized by curators. I thus propose this as the third constituent element of the curator's professional ethic. As I suggested earlier in regard to the other two elements (role frameworks and professional values), it is through identifying, making sense of, and consciously applying certain methods and techniques in their work that the curator becomes

responsible for their choices and actions. As with establishing their roles and defining their professional values, their choice of tools for engaging with information is neither neutral nor innocent. In the short term (i.e the duration of a single project), it determines the message they bring into the world and plant in the minds of the audiences. In the long term (their whole career), it brings continuity to their practice, establishing a reputation, reflecting a unique “signature” style, and manifesting a personal attitude – all of which affect the kinds of projects, audiences, colleagues and collaborators the curator will be attracting (and turning off) in the future.

Once the desire to assess the techniques in a curatorial repertoire presents itself, how does a curator actually proceed with identifying these? Simply put, this would require responses to the questions: *how do I proceed information and make connections?* Thus, by paying attention to the toolbox they use to curate (positioning objects in space, relations with collaborators, incoming information, emergent ideas, etc.), the curator will gradually develop a habit of looking closely into their daily working process. This would be indeed a practical skill that can be mastered, constituting curatorial sensitivity. To illustrate the above proposal, I will now provide an example of a technique that had for a long period of time (in fact, since the beginning of my curatorial career) grounded my curatorial repertoire. I will explain the importance it had for the process and final appearance of the three art-curatorial projects in themselves, as well as for my ability to write about them autoethnographically. The technique is *note-taking*. Importantly, it is listed here as a sole reference for other curators to consult, in their own journeys of exploring the foundation of their repertoire.

Note-taking as my recurring curatorial technique

My notes capture the curatorial “knowledge in practice”, to use Schön’s term (Schön, 1983, p.151). It is the kind of knowledge that would result from my engagement with real situations, in which the significance of experimental outcomes is defined by the participant (myself). In the context of my research, “the discovery of new features, which give the situation new meaning and change the nature of the question to be explored” (ibid.) will be thus driven by the first-hand experience of the curator, with note-taking used as an efficient technique to record it. In all my curatorial projects, I engage in note-taking

strategically, to let my irrational, personal responses to a project's dynamics manifest themselves. The specific content and structure of my notes help to capture the things I recognise as meaningful, relevant, and important for my project in the moment, but which are not necessarily directly connected to its subject matter.

The notes I take come in different formats, as appropriate to the experience or encounter I want to capture. The very act of noting – of paying attention to something – can manifest as a question mark on the page of a book, a highlighted sentence, or a screenshot. The range of my notes includes written or typed bits of text; writing in the margins of books; annotated photographs, collages, mood boards, drawings and diagrams. The variety of formats used in my notes allow the capture of multi-sensory experiences and inputs: personal thoughts, bits of conversation, visuals, things heard and read. Since I have a habit of dating my notes, they are always helpful for enabling me to produce a chronological account of each project. I have also developed a system for classifying and arranging my notes in sections, using hashtags, colour-coding, or keeping separate notebooks for different projects. These three qualities of my notes — variation in formats, chronological order, and systematic classification — have enabled me to efficiently translate this curatorial technique into one of my methods for conducting this PhD research. As a researcher I have chosen autoethnographic methodology, prioritising the method of field notes as the major way of collecting the required data, to accentuate the practice-based configuration of my PhD.

Importantly, my application of notes does not result in an intimate journal – a narrative of the self, or reflections on my daily life as a curator. It is not aimed at documenting events with a degree of objectivity. Rather, the aim is to be able to identify, record and date my responses on an *ongoing* basis, as a continuous practice. In this respect, I found it useful to explain my approach to note-taking by referring to Foucault's notion of the "hupomnemata" (Foucault 1983). Unlike merely taking notes as "a memory support, which might be consulted from time to time, as the occasion arose" (ibid.), my note-taking constitutes "a material and a framework for exercises to be carried out frequently" (ibid.): of ongoing writing, reading, re-reading, meditating on what has been read, and writing more. In my practice, it has proved to be an effective way to map the formation of my subject position, as well as forming temporary hierarchies of importance,

which I establish by interpreting the incoming information, attitudes and events in a particular way. In this way, my notes enable me to “capture the already said” and “collect what one has managed to hear or read” for the purpose of “shaping of the self” (ibid.). My technique of note-taking also resonates with the diagrammatic “thinking like clouds” technique coined and utilised by Hans Ulrich Obrist and referred to as a way of creating “visual portraits of conversations or exhibitions made up of names, dates, quotes, and loose bits of information entangled with wavering lines and undulating scribbles” (Dier 2014).

Application in the three projects

In AND ALSO, to keep track of the simultaneous enactment of two threads of relations established between myself and Adil (“student-to-supervisor” and “admiring curator-to-artist”), I came up with a specific iteration of my note-taking technique. I assigned two notebooks to reflect on each side of my relationship with Dr. Adil. In the first notebook, called ‘STREAMS’, I collected notes linked to the experience of acting as the artist’s admirer, and organised it as an ongoing play-script (to copy the genre of writing used by the artist herself). The second notebook, entitled ‘NOTES’, covered my experience as the artist’s research student. These were notes taken in an academic setting and included my tutorial notes (handwritten or audio-recorded). In the middle of the project, I started the third notebook, ‘DIARY’, in which I revisited the other two notebooks and re-arranged the notes to create a new semi-fictional semi-academic narrative, to show the complexity of my artistic-curatorial collaboration with Adil. In AND ALSO, the approach to note-making was inspired by the plot and structure of Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a novel introduced to me by Dr. Adil. It tells the story of Anna Wulf, a writer who recorded her life in four notebooks marked by colours: the black one covered Anna’s existence before and during World War II; the period from which the inspiration for the novel came; red one included her journals while she was a member of the Communist Party; the yellow one recounted a love affair and the blue one acted as a personal journal, in which Anna recorded her dreams and emotions. She then attempts to revisit and link the four together in a fifth, the golden notebook. In the resulting narration each notebook is thus revisited four times, creating a playful, non-chronological sequence of sections that interact and overlap with

one another. Applying a similar technique to create my third notebook, as I attempted to draw everything together, I shared the sensation of fragmentation experienced by Lessing's protagonist. To convey this sensation to the audiences of AND ALSO, I used my third notebook as a script for staging the exhibition at Elektroavod Gallery (Moscow) and the performance at Manifesta 11 (Zurich): to communicate the message that at some point the different facets of my relationship with Dr. Adil become impossible to divide, exposing the impossibility of thinking in categories about an experience and process as lively and indeterminate as AND ALSO. As I summarised this in the project's description, the nature of the relationships between the characters and makers in AND ALSO "is not a singular line of narration; it is the surface of a curve with all the variables that appear when Love (for Xs) and Duty (for Ys) meet. In the play, the multiple characters thus constitute the different trajectories of choice-making: they are the enactments of the different ethics that emerge in the eternal human conflict between Love and Duty" (Burkhanova 2016, p.60).

In the case of *When Air Becomes Breath*, the notes were primarily utilised as a means of intercultural communication between the international and Moscow art scenes, as well as between the two art institutions operating in different professional cultures. I initially started taking notes to prepare the exhibition concept for the Biennale: as such, they mainly consisted of annotated academic texts, quotes and samples of curatorial writing. Later, however, I had to repurpose and use them as references for communicating my ideas between institutions with radically different visions of how the project should be described. Once the heavily theoretical exhibition proposal was accepted by the biennale, instead of re-writing the text I revisited my notes to select different facets of the project that would resonate with the interests and agendas of the gallery's audience and collectors. As it appeared in the press release and the exhibition handouts, the resulting iteration of text became more "technical" – focusing more on the artist's professional biography, mediums used, and technologies applied; it was also structured as a "guided tour" through the show, introducing one work after another. Lastly, I had to revisit my notes and search for the aspects of the project that had been captured in our conversations with the artist: I used these to write the poetic version of the text, which later appeared in the sonic installation in our exhibition. All in all, I instrumentalised my notebook as a pool for identifying and selecting convenient

ideas and notes to construct three one-sided representations of the project, manufactured and edited to meet the needs of the institutions and speak to their audiences – none of which was in itself meaningful and complete.

Finally, in *What can we make and become*, collaborative note-taking was utilised as a means of establishing and nurturing the sensation of a singular art collective consisting of a group of artists-participants who had never worked with each other before. During the first workshop I introduced the technique to the group as a specific exercise in self-introduction: I asked each person to briefly talk about themselves and their artistic research practice, but to do so in response to the answer of the person who spoke before them. In this way, I encouraged the artists to try and establish connections between their practices, such as recurring methods, subjects and theoretical frameworks, which could be further used as references for formulating the overall theme and methodology of the project. During each meeting I also encouraged the artists to make their notes in a particular way: to draw diagrams and maps that would reflect the connections they made between ideas, instead of producing a linear sequence of textual entries. I also included several exercises aimed at learning about collaborative note-making in our subsequent workshops: the students were asked to brainstorm and record their progress and findings on a shared sheet of A1 paper while they sat around it; during the process the paper was constantly rotated, so that the participants had to adapt and link the emerging bits of information to that which had been already written in front of them.

The sensation of a shared mind, which I aspired to nurture within the group in the course of the research workshops, was gradually accepted by the artist-participants and absorbed into their repertoires. As a manifestation of this, when we arrived at the second part of *What can we make and become*, in which the major art production and exhibition planning took place, the collective note-taking had already become a habit for the group. It was utilised in our e-correspondence and developing proposals for artworks in response to each other. In addition, writing of the exhibition text proceeded as an iteration of this technique: each person would write a 3-4 sentence paragraph and edit the paragraph written by a person before them. Notably, the gradual “training” in synchronicity and responsiveness, facilitated by introducing the group to my technique of note-taking, ultimately resulted in the shift in the focus of the project. As I initially anticipated, the technique should have enabled the artists to

dig into their collective art practice in order to reveal the shared interests to be investigated together. However, in the end this very sensation of togetherness and creative co-production manifested the overarching project theme. Moreover, the experimental process that was created and tested via curating *What can we make and become* was then systematised and turned into the methodology of Exposed Arts Projects, my art research organisation, which hosted the project.

Completing the sequence: a curator's oath

Once the three aspects of a curatorial practice are determined – the role framework is identified, professional values defined, and the elements of professional repertoire accounted for — a curator can proceed with formulating their ethic. To do so they can write a statement, a manifesto; even formulate a code of conduct or some other kind of customised guidance for themselves. A curator could then share it on their website – i.e., in a designated “my ethic” tab or as a part of their curatorial statement; send it to, and discuss it with, their collaborators and colleagues; make use of it on other occasions (i.e. giving interviews, providing biographies to accompany projects) to speak up and announce the foundation of their practice. To give an example, after formulating my own curatorial ethic I published it on the “How we work” page of Exposed Arts Projects; I incorporated and explained its key principles as I was putting together the organisation's Code of Conduct.¹⁷

In this way, curators can determine their practice for their audiences and colleagues past, present and future. The act of announcing their ethics would be like taking the Hippocratic Oath that has historically been performed by physicians to uphold specific ethical standards. In this way, a curator would say to the (art) world:

As I make my decision and act accordingly, as I perform my judgment over my own action as well as the actions of my colleagues — as I engage in and realise my projects — I do so with respect to the number of roles I co-perform as a curator, upon my understanding of professional

¹⁷ Please see the organisation's code of conduct at <https://www.exposedartsprojects.com/about>

values, and by choosing particular curatorial techniques to make sense of the (art) world and connect things in a particular way.

Besides determining their practice for their professional community and audiences, formulating a curatorial ethic would be of profound importance for practitioners themselves, even if they chose to keep it solely to themselves, unannounced. In what way? To prepare themselves for the future, in the sense suggested by Jean-Paul Martinon in his adaptation of the philosophical notion of *paraskeue* ("preparing for the unknown"), developed by Michel Foucault, to address the realm of contemporary curatorial practice (Martinon 2020, pp.159-166).

Martinon begins by suggesting that the common understanding of the notion of "preparing" in the context of curatorial work as preparing for some ultimate event (i.e., an exhibition opening, a publication release, a programme launch) is not enough to capture the actual state of uncertainty within which an individual curatorial practice evolves. If it is to be sustainable, curating for Martinon comes as "an open-ended work destined to increase the capacity to respond to events whose form, time, and impact cannot be known or calculated in advance" (p.161). It is therefore a curator's ability to prepare "for what cannot be identified in the presence" (ibid.) that secures the minimum sustainability required for a curatorial practice. Importantly, the notion of preparing here does not imply the gaining of certain skills. It rather stands for developing the kind of (self-)awareness that would make a curator stronger than any event itself: stronger than "whatever comes without specifying the degree of strength necessary to achieve such a control over the unknown" (pp.162-163). How would such an awareness manifest itself in practice? After Foucault, Martinon suggests that a curator would need to embed their mind in a set of phrases which would be "persuasive", "true" for themselves and "constitute [their] acceptable principles of behaviour" (p.163) by writing them down and exercising them daily. In such a way, by repeating the principles in their thoughts and deeds, a curator will be able to transform themselves into a practitioner who is stronger than anything that could happen in their (professional) life: by repeatedly exercising their own carefully distilled "rational discourse" (p.163), instead of subjecting themselves to the wider specialist-curatorial discourse, which only covers predictable, finite curatorial

events that are measured in two-dimensional logic: as either desired successes or failures that should be avoided (p.160).

My proposition to curators – to formulate and share their ethics – accords with Martinon's perspective. Moreover, while proposing a practical approach to formulating such a "rational discourse" for a practice, I also suggest the act of sharing it as a way to implement some control over an unknown future. By no means will it determine the exact events to come, but it will work as a filter. Namely, it will attract the kinds of projects, people and institutions which accept and share their ethics; at the same time, it would put off those that don't. A curator will then be choosing their projects out of the pool of possibilities that are already aligned with the foundational principles of their practice. Once this pool is operational, I suggest, they will be able to let go of their rational discourses for a while, so that the irrational drives and intuitions can tune in. At this point, the curator will not ask: "What can I do next?" (this has been already answered, via filtering). Rather, they will inquire: "What do I *want* to do *next*, at *this very next* moment, given the amount of power I possess and taking into account my particular affinities and desires?"

4. THE RESEARCH FINDINGS IN CONTEXT

Owning one's ethic, revisiting the discourse

In this thesis I propose a perspective on a professional-curatorial ethic as determined by the unique configuration of an individual curatorial practice: that is, by the composition of roles, values and repertoire of methods a curator chooses for themselves and refers to as “curatorial”. Following this outlook, I suggested that a curator begins by reflecting on the current state of their practice, instead of starting with the specialist-curatorial discourse and aiming to align their practice with current trends (i.e. with the many definitions of “curatorial ethics” and “ethical curating” available). After performing a self-reflective enquiry (this is where my three-step sequence can contribute) and formulating a kind of oath for themselves (i.e. a curatorial statement), a curator is invited to go back to the specialist discourse and identify their position. Since the curator now “owns” their ethic – and understands what core principles underlie their decisions and actions – they are encouraged to evaluate which other writers, curators and ‘theorists’ have taken part in shaping their ideas. Accordingly, in this last chapter I will examine what precepts, tested against my own experience, contextualise my perspective on curatorial ethic, so that it can be passed on to other curators not as a single statement, but as a part of a grander plateau of curatorial thought.

Revising the helpful questions

After assessing the knowledge and experience gained from the curation of AND ALSO, *When Air Becomes Breath* and *What can we make and become*, it became apparent that my understanding of the ethical dimension of my practice in each scenario would primarily depend on the particular definition of the curatorial engagement that I would favour. In this way, my practice-based inquiry into the formation of curatorial ethics ultimately disclosed the interconnection between the questions “what is a professional-curatorial ethic?” and “what is a curator?” – suggesting that the answer to the latter question would automatically influence the approach to the former. Importantly, in line with my perspective, the questions regarding

the rightness, or righteousness, of certain actions (i.e. “What is the *best* curatorial practice?” “What *should* I do in this situation?”) were never raised. They were replaced by questions concerning the scope of possibilities for my further action: “What *can* I do next — given my role in this project, my core values and my methods of work?”.

Aligned with the perspective on “curatorial ethics” I am advocating here, my choice of roles and behaviours in the course of the three projects should be perceived as the demonstration of an underlying ethic. That is, the “professional ethic” that I had not yet formulated in an orderly way for myself at the time, but have been actively employing in my daily work as a foundation for my decisions and judgements. In the three art-curatorial projects discussed in the previous chapter, each time the curatorial role is defined differently, disclosing the variations of my professional-curatorial engagement in each case. In AND ALSO, it was co-constituted by my dual role as the artist’s research student (the artist was my PhD supervisor at the time) and an admirer of her work (which paralysed my ability to be critical of it). *When Air Becomes Breath* combined the roles of an intercultural translator (as I was exhibiting the artist’s work for audiences and institutions with different agendas: an international art biennale and a commercial art gallery) and that of a “ghost writer” (which partially deprived me of the authorship for the work I did). Finally, in *What can we make and become*, the role incorporated the roles of supervisor of the artist-participants’ projects (as I facilitated and impacted on their projects during the research and development stage) and the art-space director, where the workshops and the final exhibition took place (as director of Exposed Arts Projects). In each case, I faced a number of “ethical dilemmas”: situations in which I had to make a choice that would reveal a conflict (or a contradiction) between my roles, my values and my favoured methods of curatorial engagement; or between my work principles and agenda and that of my collaborators (artists, institutions). In each case there was a different set of dilemmas to deal with, and none of them can be either defined as *exclusive* to the realm of curatorial work or claimed as *universal* and relevant to the practices of curators at large. Rather, they were specific to the configuration of each of my projects – and the particular responses I was capable of in their course as *their curator* (i.e. determined by the relationships I established with the artists and institutions; my aims and motives, which underlined each project; my priorities in each situation).

Thus, as my experience and its further interpretation suggests, there should be no obvious boundary between a “curatorial” (relevant, professional, accountable) and a “non-curatorial” (personal, irrelevant, momentary) action, decision or statement when one talks about a “curatorial ethic”. “Curatorial”, in this sense, only denotes the relation to an individual curator (as in “the ethic of a specialist who is engaged in the project as its curator”); it doesn’t stand for some well-defined field of expertise. After all, it was this practice-based research that made me realise that instead of subjecting myself to the specific criteria for distinguishing between “curatorial” (professional, relevant) and “non-curatorial” (personal, irrelevant) in the course of formulating a professional ethic, I should rather ask: what does the way I make this very distinction in the course of my projects reveal about myself *as a curator*? Thus, instead of enquiring into the potential standards and definitions of a generic curatorial ethic, I arrived at the question: How does *my* judgement of own actions – as well as the actions of my colleagues – manifest and disclose *my* ethic? And from this viewpoint: what do *I mean* when I call myself “a curator” and talk about my “curatorial practice”? With these questions in mind, I have revisited the specialist curatorial discourse, in order to further contextualise my perspective.

Defining “curatorial practice” as knowledge-making

My understanding of the notion of “curatorial practice” – which has further conditioned how I define my “curatorial ethic” – was profoundly affected by the autobiographical writing of the curators Beatrice von Bismarck and Suzana Milevska, which I encountered and that started to impact on my curatorial practice and research after my MFA programme at Goldsmiths. Both Milevska and von Bismarck came to curating after gaining degrees in art history; they have later chosen curating as a field in which (unlike art history, traditionally) the very relationship between the parties engaged in the art process, as well as the process of joint knowledge production, can be studied, analysed and made public. I myself arrived at curating from a different career path (I received a BA in Sociology and worked in marketing for a number of years), yet for the same reason: first, it was an interest in emerging relations and behaviours in the contemporary art field that drove my decision to become a curator; second, I recognised curatorial work as primarily a research-educational endeavour, which may include, yet by no means equates with, exhibition-

making. My own self-identification as a curator was much influenced by those of von Bismarck and Milevska. I therefore considered it important to trace how their approaches to self-identification developed, so that my own understanding of curating gains a context.

According to von Bismarck, her background was always very educationally oriented (von Bismarck 2010). After graduating as an art historian, she started her career as a part of a museum team and after that returned to arts academia, when she started teaching at the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig. In those two situations, representing two very different contexts of curatorial work, von Bismarck — as she recalls — was engaged in a very specific kind of project-making, which from the very start was aligned with, and influenced, the constellational process which she would later define and describe as “the curatorial”. Specifically, this interdisciplinary way of working, as experienced by von Bismarck, enabled the guiding principles and ways in which people dealt with one another which she then contextualised as specific to curatorial work (importantly, these are not limited to the real world of the fine arts). Configuring her curatorial practice as educational work, when she became director of the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig curating course, she organised the programme in such a way that the general public (not just students and staff of the university) were invited to work together on questions related to contemporary art. In von Bismarck’s view, it was also essential for the effectiveness of the course that speakers and project participants were invited from different professional backgrounds and paths of life, and a variety of academic disciplines, such as artists, gallery staff, activists, politicians, and many others. The invitation strategy was formulated by von Bismarck as: “whatever we needed for certain questions [to be covered]” (ibid.) – with the assumption that people from the arts and people from other disciplines would be mutually interested in the knowledge and methods used by one another, and eager to put these in the framework of certain questions that would be of mutual concern. Amongst the questions asked in this way were: “what is the social realm? What is a work of art? What is creativity? What is the space?” (ibid.). All of those were open questions, and there was no requirement to either define the format of enquiry or agree in advance on the kind of answers to be produced. In this way, the working team were able to experiment with both, allowing the collaborative curatorial process to shape the material outcomes, whether this was “a poster, a cinema

screening, series of events, an exhibition”, or anything else among “the many things a project could become” (ibid.).

It follows that, for von Bismarck, an institution (that educates curators or is run by curators) should necessarily take on board “a very specific task of art production” (ibid.), rather than merely that of representing art and making it public. In this way, von Bismarck concisely positioned her curatorial course within the theoretical field and practice of artistic research (as opposed to, for instance, art history), implying that the curatorial approach to project-making offers an effective way of integrating art-related methodologies into not-strictly-artistic education, and vice versa (so that non-art-related methods are useful to artists). In this way, the configuration of curatorial work as research by no means equates it with academic work, but enables an understanding of research on special terms “as a field in which the relations between people, contexts and concepts take place, and can be moved by each other, in relation to one another” (ibid.). Curatorial research, therefore, would take the form of an activity that uses the notion of a field to structure its own actions, not in a theoretical sense (that understands a field as a discipline), but in terms of a third space that is at once material and discursive, and that relies on processes of negotiation and overlaps between these two areas that result into their ongoing re-differentiation and fluidity.

It is notable that, unlike von Bismarck, in her argumentation Suzana Milevska is openly critical of formal curatorial education as the ultimate route to becoming a curator. To recall some of her key concepts, introduced via the junctures above, the “becoming-curator” movement, that emerged from Milevska’s first-hand personal experience of embarking on art curating, which she later assessed critically, should not be understood as a kind of gradual developmental process (such as obtaining a degree and launching one’s career). Reflecting on her own experience of becoming-curator, Milevska stated that she was in a way “forced to invent a job for [herself]”, since “for more than thirteen years after graduating and completing MA studies [in art history], [she] could not get proper employment in Macedonia” (Milevska 2014). Between 1984 and 1997, she recalled applying for multiple positions related to her art history degree, and being rejected every time by nearly all the cultural institutions in Macedonia. She started working as an independent curator in parallel to her unsuccessful job hunting, recognising it as the last available option, although at

that time in Macedonia it was hardly the glamorous position it is now. Moreover, Milevska recalled that for a long time independent curating was not acknowledged as a job at all: she earned money by writing catalogue articles, while her exhibition curating would typically remain unpaid. In this way, as Milevska put it, her practice as an independent curator evolved for her more like “a kind of survival and a kind of activism” (ibid.) than a career.

To give an example of an event that informed her experience of becoming a curator, Milevska shared the story of her creative collaboration with Macedonian artist Violeta Capovska that took place in 1984, just after Milevska finished her Master’s degree and remained unemployed. She shared in one of her talks that at the time she had “no definition of what curating [was], so that [she] developed [her] definition through the kind of projects” she engaged with, such as the one with Capovska (Milevska 2014), grounded in lived experience, shared between the artist and the curator. Capovska contacted Milevska soon after she returned from Australia, and invited her to climb a 2000-metre mountain with her. The climbing was supposed to be related to her established performance practice of making marks and traces on land and documenting the process. The curatorial engagement that she suggested to Milevska was, therefore, far from the traditional understanding of a curator’s role in regard to the artist. That is, instead of participating in intellectual activities, i.e., writing about the artist and her work, conceptualising the process of art production and organising the process, Milevska found herself physically entangled in the process itself, so that her becoming-curator proceeded as a bodily experience. In this way, as she reflected on the particular aspects of the collaborative project with Capovska, she did not discuss the particular concepts developed together with the artist, but instead, focused on the corporeal sensation they had shared with each other. For instance, as she recalled, both she and Capovska were given aspirin by their guide to prevent the inflammation of their muscles as they climbed higher in the mountains; however, since their bodies were not used to the height, the aspirin did not work. As they were getting closer to their destination, even though they were advised to take breaks by the crew of mountaineers who guided them upwards, at the end of the route, as Milevska remembered, all she wanted was to sleep, and not to record the performance (ibid.). Still, she did the recording, observing how her exhaustion and care for the

artist balanced one another. As she shared this story, she went on to explain herself (ibid.):

There, very high in the mountains, it was not the point when I *became* a curator, but it was the point when I defined my position as becoming-curator. The position of working with the artist: without any distance between yourself, the artist, and the artwork; somehow always-already participating in the production of the work.

Milevska's definition of curating as research in many ways embodied this experience. In this sense, rather than a purely intellectual enquiry set up to address certain aims and objectives, for Milevska research would instead be a journey without a set destination that reflects the initial metaphor of movement and becoming-different (as in "becoming-curator"). Thus, she recalls that her "independent research trips were a very relevant part of [her] education" as a curator (Milevska 2014). Ever since she was a young student, in addition to going to her classes at university, she had continually travelled abroad to visit museums and art collections in order to see original artworks, be affected by this experience, and further evaluate them critically. It was by keeping a balance between her studies and time spent within academia and maintaining the habit of travelling and seeing things on her own that Milevska structured her education, making sure it was "diverse, cross-disciplinary and international", since, for her, this seemed to be "the only way one could understand the complexity and fast development of contemporary art" (ibid.).

My own understanding of curating as research, as a knowledge-making activity that is always cross-disciplinary and brings about a diverse range of outcomes, resonates with the experiences and definitions offered by both von Bismarck and Milevska. I therefore see the position of the curator as constantly moving between the critical distance and analytical inquiry of the researcher and curatorial engagement, actualised in connecting with my subjects. As I believe my thesis demonstrates, the configuration of a research methodology that I created is grounded in the individual methodology I developed as a curator. The methods that I routinely use to obtain and deal with various kinds of knowledge throughout my daily work as a curator (i.e. note-taking, autoethnographic writing) were converted into the tools of my research inquiry, set up to meet a

particular academic aim: i.e., to source information, test a theory, find a direct answer to a question posed, or prove a proposition right or wrong. In this regard, I do not see myself as a mediator of a research; and “researching” is not to be merely understood as one of my curatorial activities. Rather, the state of research itself – an ongoing engagement with, redistribution and reassembling of information – can be recognised as my way of being and acting *curatorially*: bringing multiple subjectivities together in my own position, connecting multiple agents (human and non-human ones), contexts, cultures and temporalities.

Defining “curatorial practice” as relating

As an outcome of my evaluation of own experience (represented by my curation of the three projects), the inquiry into the origins of my definition of “curatorial practice” and the systematic analysis of the current state of curatorial discourse and practice, I came to the conclusion that the notion of a “curatorial ethic” would be determined by the balance between the personal and professional relationship between curators and their collaborators. Moreover, it emerges from the ongoing antagonistic exchange between these two elements.

Traditionally, for many professions, these two kinds of relationships are maintained as separate, and bringing them into proximity is considered a conflict of interest to be avoided. Consequently, a professional ethic replaces the personal ethic when an individual acts in the business environment, in their professional capacity. In art curating, however, it is the personal position that becomes professionalised. How does this conversion take place? There is naturally a tension between the two elements, which I visualised with the help of Suzana Milevska’s two concepts: “becoming a curator” and “becoming-curator” (Milevska 2013). Milevska defined the former as “a pragmatic decision to [...] make a living out of one of the ‘sexiest’ professions available in the international art world (one that focuses on singling out emergent art concepts, art objects and artists who produce either those concepts or objects)” (Milevska 2013, p.70); that is, to become a professional curator. She then opposed it with the latter: the understanding of curating as establishing “one’s own position in the world as a thinking subject” that “opens up a new route in understanding contemporary art and the way both curators and artists position themselves in the contemporary art world and the world in general” (ibid.). Milevska recognised “becoming a curator” as a particular intellectual and cross-disciplinary activity

that incorporates theory, puts different artistic practices in juxtaposition with other disciplines, and makes new connections amongst the previously dispersed elements and agents (that in many ways resonates with the way von Bismarck talks about “curatorial position”). She then reflected on “becoming-curator” in more abstract terms: as a complex engineering process that implies “controlling the traffic of different libidinal economies, energies and phantasms” that are at work in the relations between artists, institutions and audiences during the process of exhibition production – which becomes “a platform where all these libidinal energies meet” (Milevska 2014).

While Milevska separated and compared the two identities of the curator, I suggest that they are profoundly intertwined and inseparable in daily curatorial practice. The separation then takes place when an individual curatorial practice is incorporated into the curatorial discourse: a discourse which (like any other) tends to systematise and homogenise its elements . As observed by Paul O’Neill, “if we are to consider the nature of our recent forms of practice as curation, it is always-already attempting to become curatorial discourse”: that is, to become “transparent, visible, and self-critical” (O’Neill 2006). As curators aim for visibility and recognition, only specific aspects of curating make it into the discourse. It is therefore not surprising that the emergent “slight, insubstantial, and personalised responses by curators on the subject of their own rarefied practice” (ibid.) happen to be lost in this transition. In fact, the very possibility of curatorial practice as knowledge that can be systematised, critically assessed and taught relies on such filtration. As a result, contemporary curatorial discourse covers mainly such aspects of curatorial practice as exhibition-making, selecting artworks, working with artists, dealing with institutions, communicating with audiences. It neglects the emerging openings in curation, missing the singular (sporadic, momentary, intuitive) practices that cannot be classified – letting these die out and disappear.

By recognising the task of my inquiry into “curatorial ethics” as embracing the complexity of a singular curatorial practice, I suggest it would be possible to incorporate that what is currently lost in the discourse of contemporary art curating: namely, the personal responses of the curator that would underlie their seemingly pragmatic, rational professional choices. Taking my perspective, the term “curatorial ethic” will not stand for a set of principles that are meant to regulate the social-instrumental aspects of the curator’s

dealings with artists, institutions, audiences and fellow curators. Rather, it will be considered as addressing the entangled relationship between the various paths of life, lived experiences, systems of values, agendas and beliefs carried by each individual curator in the first place: prior to, and outside of which, the very term “curator” does not make sense.

As for the art-curatorial community at large, I propose to address “curatorial ethics” as a typology of potential ways of *being a curator* that are available to the practitioner today. This typology could be further used to evaluate the practice of an individual curator (whether this is a self-evaluation or performed by a third party): by comparing the potentials (how *can* they respond to the conditions of contemporary curatorial practice? How have other curators responded to it?) — and the individual curator’s response. The variety of potentials in this case would disclose the qualitative differences between the ways of being a curator today. For what determines the configuration of an individual curatorial ethic is not in itself what a curator *chooses* to say and do; rather it is the co-relation of their capabilities in the moment, and the amount and quality of information they have about the situation in question, as well as the actions and responses of others, who act on and with a curator in the shared space of an art-curatorial project.

Defining “curatorial practice” as becoming someone else

My perspective on a curatorial ethic – understood as a device, configured to address the complex relationship between the various aspects of an individual curatorial practice – means that it cannot be formulated as a unified code, since it has to account for the inherent indeterminacy of curatorial practice.

As I have experienced throughout my career and via interrogating the specialist curatorial discourse, curating is a practice that cannot be, strictly speaking, bound to a common job description. It does not associate with a singular object of expertise (the scope of practices in contemporary arts and culture is in itself undefined); it is not necessarily bound to a particular subject matter, medium, historical period, or species of collaborator (who may not identify as “artists”). In this regard, it is emblematic for curating that there will always be several roles and subject positions that overlap, merge and co-mutate. Moreover, their number will constantly grow, since each new variation of

an individual practice will at once reproduce the profession at large *and* create a difference in terms of individual methodologies: the scope and kinds of projects a person realises as a curator. In this sense, for instance, while the majority of curators today are in some way engaged in the process of exhibition-making (reproducing the accredited curatorial subject and role), their curatorial practice is at the same time likely to include many other near-curatorial and seemingly non-curatorial activities, thus resulting in new ethical dilemmas to negotiate. Today it is common that, together with the exhibition concept and presentation, curators' tasks will include fundraising, coordination, mass media communication management, conducting research, teaching at universities, reaching audiences and initiating new ones for their work, and shaping a certain public image and reputation. A curator will be involved in education and the politics of culture, participate in the marketing of the city where the project takes place, and promoting the city as a cultural centre. Each of these activities involves a different role and a different constellation of ethical dilemmas that are likely to coincide within a single curatorial project – but are unlikely to be repeated in exactly the same combination in another project, or be experienced by another curator.

Today, when calling oneself a curator, a person is expected to elaborate, for in itself the term “curator” does not say much: it is indeterminate and invites configuration. There is a long history underlying this situation. In the 1970s, Harald Szeemann, a pioneer of independent curatorship, described the curator's professional identity as combining the roles of “administrator, amateur, speechwriter, librarian, manager and bookkeeper, conservator, financier and diplomat” (Obrist 2009, pp.416–417). In a sense, Szeemann not only came up with a list of jobs, coinciding in his role; he also introduced an effective route of self-identification – via self-differentiation – that has been enjoined by curators ever since. The specifics of Szeemann's approach resided in his vision of a curator as a fluid, reactive subject position, rejecting a common definition of the profession (“a curator is x”), but instead seeking to map its ongoing transformation in the course of a curatorial project, via comparison, analogy, and the exposure of the relations between curating and other kinds of engagement (“a curator is a, b, ...y, z”). In this way, in response to the various functions and roles enacted in different circumstances and times, the curator has been described as a consultant and knowledge manager (Meyer 1973), organizer,

editor and compiler (Lippard 2009), catalyst, generator and motivator (Obrist 2006), producer (Manifesta Journal 2009), author, editor and critic (George 2015), iconoclast (Groys 2007). The most popular, and probably the most problematic, has always been the description of a curator as an artist (Buren 1972, 2003; Vidokle 2010). In the expanded title of the recent book by Natasha Hoare and Coline Milliard, *The New Curator* is presented at once as a researcher, commissioner, keeper, interpreter, producer and collaborator (Hoare and Milliard 2016). As has been summarised by the artist Sylvette Babin, even though this condition of contemporary art curating is often mercilessly criticised, the role of the curator today increasingly tends to endure in various forms: “from professional curator to cultural practitioner occasionally taking on the role, independent curator to institutional curator, curator-author to artist-curator “; even more, “the role seems to adapt to every kind of exhibition and artistic event, and of course, to various institutional settings” (Babin 2011). Furthermore, as observed by Michiel Vandeveld, such a halo of uncertainty is often strategically exaggerated, for it allows contemporary curators to “broaden their professional horizons” and be involved in a wider variety of projects *as curators* – defining in an ad-hoc way what that attribution stands for in each particular project’s case (Vandeveld 2014, pp.75-85).

This indeterminacy in the curatorial role has been recognised as a problem by some authors. For instance, Paul O’Neill observed that there is indeed an ongoing tradition of addressing curatorial subjectivisation as “becoming somebody else”; in fact, this is “how we now understand curating” (O’Neill 2006). Critical of this tradition, O’Neill suggested that it is necessary for curatorial discourse and practice today that a curator is recognised *as a curator* – that is, without mimicking the discourses of others in order to produce their own (ibid.). Quite differently, the perspective I am advocating here suggests that this indeterminacy is approached not as a problem that requires solving (i.e. by unifying curating, as suggested by O’Neill); rather, it should be recognised as the essence of acting and thinking *curatorially*: that is, always in connection with, and in response to, the surroundings, trying on different hats, taking after the diversity of disciplines, voices and outlooks a curator encounters. Practically, acknowledging a curator’s indeterminacy and learning to embrace it would be the ultimate survival strategy. It is a particular mechanism that enables the sustainability of an individual curatorial career, allowing it to successfully adapt

to the unpredictability and constant renewal of the professional field of contemporary art. Importantly, the notion of the “*curator as someone else*” implies that we need to pay attention to the particular way in which the initially indeterminate subject (a generic curator) happens to be further “determined” through the certain projects an individual curator chooses to engage in. I suggest that only by first assessing this process of determination can we then evaluate the formation of a (curatorial) ethic.

Consequently, the possibility of a curatorial ethic appears not in the form of some generic code of conduct for all curators to share – but rather as an individual desire to define the position from which they want to speak; to contribute to the description of a curatorial position in general as captured by the curatorial discourse; and to develop certain modes of practice through which they can deliver such contributions. As they establish their positions and formulate their ethics, individual curators would further proceed to “judge” their own practices – and the practices of colleagues. As this happens – as their judgments are “announced” in the appearance of the projects they choose to curate, via their research papers and publication, in the informal conversations with their peers – it would be easy to recognise *their ethics* in the ways *in which they talk about “curatorial ethics” in general*. That is, how they differentiate between an ethical and unethical action; how they tell the “good” motives and drives to curate from the “bad” ones; which projects, institutions and artists they choose to boycott, and which they decide to embrace in their practice.

Lastly, I propose that it is this readiness to face the uncertainty of modern life which defines an ethical curatorial practice. It encourages curators to constantly update their methodologies and agendas in regard to the immediate challenges they face. It requires curators to *always act*, because inactivity today can be a powerful and damaging action in itself. There are new kinds of “curatorial” decisions to make that urge curators to manifest their personal perspective through work, particularly in relation to unprecedented cases for which there is no guidance or regulations in place. Examples of these might include the curatorial responses to the COVID-related actions of governments: the closures of museums, funding cuts, encouragement for professional retraining of arts and culture specialists. In this context, for instance, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s decision to work 18-hour days in order to make her museum accessible online (Pes and Rea 2020) — so that people

could visit it while in quarantine — should be seen as a manifestation of a solid set of personal-professional values. Against Christov-Bakargiev's example, one can compare examples of other institutions and their curators worldwide: either being challenged by the uncertainty, by cancelling the shows affected by national lockdowns (and breaking a few artists' hearts as well); or – as I did at Exposed Arts Projects – to accept and embrace it. To take the uncertainty as the condition of curatorial practice and respond to it: by slowing down, postponing things and moving deadlines, working extra hours in order to get things done, and, together with artists, testing new formats to reach audiences remotely. As before, my intention here is not to state which course of action is “right” or “wrong”, but to highlight – one last time – the multiplicity of courses available to a curator. This is as a reminder that in situations when there is no guidance, regulations or code of ethics available, it will always be someone's personal choice that in the end will be manifested in the professional-authoritative action of an institution on any scale.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Contribution to knowledge

The main contribution to the field of professional art curating is the method for formulating a professional ethic aimed at independent contemporary art curators, who work internationally and on short-term contracts. Namely, my method offers the key steps for a contemporary art curator to undertake in “distilling” a professional ethic from their ongoing practice. Additionally, the claim I make to an original contribution to knowledge in this thesis can be divided into two interrelated areas: first, my methodology; and second, the outcomes of the strategies I have explored through my curatorial practice.

My approach to the field of curatorial practice has been unique in the two specific ways. First, I have demonstrated how reflective exhibition-making can be used as a method of autoethnographic curatorial research. The existing discourse primarily consists of *theories* of curatorial ethics: i.e. ideas about curatorial ethics that are derived theoretically. The way in which I have focused on formulating what an individual curatorial practitioner *already does* throughout their everyday practice and *already knows* implicitly as a kind of an individual professional ethic offers a new lens. Second, I have examined the notion of a curatorial ethic through the unique combination of empirical research and self-driven practice-based curatorial projects, aligned with a theoretical interrogation of the notions of “values”, “ethic”, “contemporary art curating” and “professionalism”. This approach has resulted in a contextualisation and cross-influencing of the practical and theoretical parts of my research.

The outcomes of the practice-based curatorial projects explored in the research have resulted in three interrelated contributions to knowledge.

First, the model of creative “student-supervisor / artist-curator” exchange, tested in the project with Dr. Adil, is in itself a contribution to knowledge in the field of professional art-curatorial education that suggests a new mode of PhD research supervision, to be explored further.

It is anticipated that it would be particularly useful for research projects in which a student and a supervisor are art practitioners themselves, and the research considers the immediate practice of the student. While it may not necessarily be utilised as the focus of a research project (as it was in AND ALSO), being an additional part of an inquiry, it would help to reveal and include in the analysis the often-unconsidered influence of the unique dynamics of student-supervisor relationships, in line with other factors affecting the overall research environment, methods and outcomes.

Second, the two curatorial projects – with Margo Trushina and postgraduate CSM students – offered a new lens through which to view the practice of exhibition-making as a way to collect information about the tacit curatorial knowledge, the expectations imposed on the curator by their publics and collaborators, as well as the regulations imposed by institutions hosting the project. Within this context I developed a new model of reflective curatorial practice that offers a model of curatorship grounded in an expanded understanding of a curatorial role: as a personal position and a profession that determine one another (co-constitute), with no primacy attributed to one side over the other. To document the many aspects of reflective exhibition-making, I experimented with the method of autoethnographic writing (or writing as a method of a curatorial inquiry). Thus, I narrated my three curatorial projects for my own analysis (for the purposes of this PhD), but also to coherently present their dynamics and my experience in the course of undertaking them to a third party with no prior knowledge of them. In this way, not only did I tell my readers *about* them through my writing; rather I approached writing as a way to finalise my curatorial engagement in the projects and to make them public via writing – that was performed in line with, and was no less privileged than, exhibition-making. Grounded in the empowering experience of doing it and meeting my research aims with its help, I propose autoethnographic curatorial writing as an effective method of documenting curatorial projects and contributing to exhibition histories that many curators may find useful.

Third, the important unanticipated outcome of my PhD research is the creation and launch of Exposed Arts Projects: a non-profit art-research organisation that I started in 2018, inspired by the interim

findings of my inquiry into curatorial ethics and modes of curating. Set up as a laboratory for testing and experimenting with the potential range of professional relationships within the contemporary art environment, Exposed incorporates my approach to formulating a curatorial ethic and converts it into a model for an art institution. The strategy of converting an individual curator's ethic into the ethic of an art organisation, which I applied at Exposed, can be further explored by curatorial practitioners aiming to develop experimental forms of critical curatorial practice within, or as, institutional structures.

Finally, the creative contribution to the rapidly expanding discourse of curatorial ethics is "A Manifesto of (un)ethical Curator", which finalises my arrival at a new position on curating. It formulates *my* curatorial ethic — and is addressed to other curators in search of theirs.

A Manifesto of an (un)ethical Curator

1. An (un)ethical curator makes knowledge.

"Researching" is not to be merely understood as a curatorial activity. Curating itself is researching. It is an ongoing engagement with, redistribution and reassembling of information. It is a knowledge-making activity that is always cross-disciplinary and brings about a diverse range of outcomes: i.e. exhibitions, events, texts, objects, relationships or else.

2. An (un)ethical curator is not a person: it is a process.

It is a temporary mode of being, in which you enter as you start a project. It lasts for the duration of the project. It is an implicated, entangled, collective pluralistic and non-hierarchical process — which redefines curatorial authorship and power each time anew.

3. An (un)ethical curator always becomes someone else.

A curatorial position is undetermined — prior to the project. In their own position, a curator brings together the multiple subjectivities and connects multiple agents (human and non-human ones), contexts, cultures and temporalities, involved in the project.

4. An (un)ethical curator emerges from a relationship.

A curator is configured by the unique co-presence and interaction of various parties, engaged in the project together. A curator is shaped by that what they bring to the project: agendas, expectations, powers, skills. Each time, in each new project, a curator is determined by the unique kind of relationships that emerge among the project's participants.

5. An (un)ethical curator is not an identity, but a dynamic constellation of roles.

A curator is always multiple and evolving. Her roles are defined each time anew — in a new project, with respect to a new kind of relationship with the artist they choose to collaborate with. As they choose their artist and their roles, they don't come from a place of some pragmatic lack. "What I need to become for this project to be successful and functional?" Rather, they come from the land of desire and curiosity. "What do I want to become in the presence of this person? What can I become only with them?" Each relationship rearranges a curator anew.

6. An (un)ethical curator forms their repertoire of methods responsibly and owns up to it.

Connecting dispersed pieces of information – in order to generate new knowledge – is the primary unit of curatorial action. A curator develops their own ways and iterations of performing these basic action. So that from the difference in repertoires the difference in curatorial practices emerge. And from that difference comes a unique curatorial sensitivity — their feel for information and materials, their intuition, their voice — which is known as a curator's signature style.

7. An (un)ethical curator comes up with their own theory of curating.

It is a curator's responsibility to challenge and redefine what curating can be, do and achieve: through learning, practice, ongoing self-reflection and contributing to the curatorial discourse. A curator does not reproduce a curatorial profession and mission, but adjusts it to the emerging urges they identify: in themselves and in the contemporary world.

8. An (un)ethical curator is extremely subjective.

As they make their decisions and act accordingly, as they perform their judgment over their own action as well as the actions of their colleagues — as they engage in and realise their projects — a curator does so upon their values, and by choosing particular outlook to make sense of the (art) world and connect things in a particular way.

9. An (un)ethical curator is often unethical.

They don't accept given standards. Challenge norms. Infringe codes of conduct. Make scandals. Take opportunities. Break deals. Let people down. Let down themselves. They are often disliked and criticised. In search of their own meaning of curating — on the route of formulating their theory of what curating can possibly be and do—they distill their ethic from mistakes and experiences. They become ethical — as they get courage to undo a fixed and comfortable professional identity and become one with their process and owning up to it.

Applicability of my approach

In summary, in this thesis I have proposed a perspective on a professional-curatorial ethic as determined by the unique configuration of an individual curatorial practice: that is, by the composition of roles, values and repertoire of methods a curator chooses for themselves and refers to as "curatorial" in the context of their professional practice. Aligned with this outlook, to determine what their ethic is I have suggested

that a curator starts by reflecting on the current state of their practice, rather than starting with the specialist-curatorial discourse and attempting to align their practice with its current trends (i.e. with the many definitions of “curatorial ethics” and “ethical curating” available there).

After performing a self-reflective inquiry (this is where my three-step sequence can contribute) and formulating a kind of an oath for themselves (i.e. a curatorial statement), the curator is invited to address the specialist discourse and identify their position within it. Since the curator then “owns up to” their ethic, and understands what core principles underlie their decisions and actions, what personal biases are there to address, they are encouraged to evaluate what other writers, curators and “theorists” took part in shaping their ideas. Accordingly, I concluded my study by examining what precepts, tested against my own experience, contextualise my perspective on the concept of a curatorial ethic. Specifically, I assessed how the definitions of curatorial practice offered by the curators Beatrice von Bismarck and Suzana Milevska, who have inspired my practice for a long time, affected my eventual definition of a curatorial ethic. While it is anticipated that different curators would have different theoretical inspirations for their practice (and accordingly, different formulations of their curatorial ethics), I suggest that my three-step sequence will potentially be widely relevant and appropriate.

The high degree of applicability of my approach, I suggest, is grounded in a specific definition of contemporary art curating, which comes from both my direct professional experience and its contextualisation in the contemporary art-curatorial discourse. It is understood as a wide range of activities of selecting and organising people, processes, objects, and information in a particular way that adds value, and is grounded in the personal choice of a curator. The applicability is also linked to the acknowledgement of profound uncertainty of curatorial practice today, and to perceiving it as an essential condition of an individual curatorial practice, rather than a problem to be solved. As such, my approach to formulating a professional curatorial ethic can be effectively passed on to other curators who work internationally; find themselves at different stages of their careers, and are

specialists in different areas of curating – including, but by no means limited to, exhibition-making, public programming and event organisation.

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Appendices 1

Project 1: autoethnographic curatorial writing:

AND ALSO (don't tell anyone) Love is a Crime, with Alev Adil, 2016

My experience of curating AND ALSO can be mapped as a process of consequent identification, examination and affirmation of two subject positions, which emerged through my relationship with Dr. Adil (the artist-participant) and co-constituted my curatorial role within the project. Before I started working with Dr. Adil, I was following her art practice for a while — so that I first became an admirer of her art, and only after that (as we started working together) I additionally became her curator-critic. The period of our artist-curator collaboration coincided with the first years of my PhD programme at the University of Greenwich, where she acted as the supervisor of my research: at that time, I was not only her curator but also her student.

These two intertwined treads of relationships merged the values associated with curatorial professionalism (“honesty”, “transparency”, “excellence”) with my personal values and aspirations. This resulted in a complex multilayered experience of curating AND ALSO discussed in the following autoethnographic text.

A curator as an admirer of artistic practice

My first encounter with Dr. Adil happened in 2014, two years prior to our collaborative art project and our PhD student-supervisor engagement. When I was working on my MFA thesis, I have visited Dr. Adil's exhibition as a part of my research into artistic-curatorial methodologies. “Dreaming in Company” was hosted by Steven Lawrence Gallery (Greenwich) and presented works-in-progress from Dr. Adil's “creative collaborative research project on the nature and power of dreams with staff, students and friends at the University of

Greenwich”¹⁸. An outcome of a series of “dream workshops” conducted by Adil, the exhibition presented the works, which emerged through a collective process. It featured installation, digital projection, sound art, fashion and film — all working in concert to reveal “the hidden truths and transformational potential of dreams and the power of embodied, experiential and unconscious knowledge”¹⁹.

While I was not particularly interested in the subject of dreams, it was Dr. Adil’s approach that inspired me. Namely, it was her idea to collaborate with her colleagues at the University in order to examine the existing and emerging relationships of power and distributed artistic authorship, which attracted me. I found this approach unusual, because back in 2014 I only encountered artists either collaborating with other art practitioners, or inviting the audience to take part in their projects. As a curator, I have thus never considered the potential of working with a colleague from the university, with whom I would share something more than the process of art making: the “real” (non-creative) job in a “real” (outside-the-arts) world.

Moved by Dr. Adil’s project, I have contacted the gallery manager and asked him to tell me more about her. In response to my endless questions, he offered an introduction. Later on, Dr. Adil invited me to her office at the University of Greenwich. From the start I found it extremely difficult to approach her work critically – as I would usually do while working with other artists. Apart from that, I figure, the difference in age and professional experience also had its effects: back then, I was an emerging curator; I have just received my MFA and only collaborated with other art student and recent graduates. Dr. Adil was in the middle of her successful career as an artist, poet, performer and academic. While she would never make me feel this gap between us, my respect for her experience and expertise mostly diminished my critical ability. That is to say, I mostly accepted her ideas instead of challenging them.

In an interesting way, the gap between us effected the development of the theoretical framework for our collaboration. Namely, my application of concepts by Gilles Deleuze in curating AND ALSO was encouraged by Dr. Adil. For years

¹⁸ The project description was published at <https://www.iiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A3=ind1401&L=MECCSA&E=quoted-printable&P=1971324&B=--047d7bf0f324ad433804f08cb2e8&T=text%2Fhtml:%20charset=windows-1252>

¹⁹ Ibid.

she had been experimenting with writing her play scripts as “rhizomes” and composing poems as “machines”; she also addressed her art practice as the movement of becoming-woman/writer/poet/and all the characters she brought to life through her writing²⁰. Working with her I willingly embraced her artistic methodology²¹ — although to do so I had to “unlearn” my old methods and make space for the new ones. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to say that my curatorial “excellence” (which I previously defined as an ability to keep distance from the artists and approach their work with criticality) was progressively “degraded” – and replaced by my deep irrational affection and uncritical perception of Dr. Adil’s work. At the point of such professional “degradation”, I could either stop this collaboration, which failed to work on the casual principles of equality of voices, rationality, and a “healthy” critique between an artist and a curator (this is how my previous projects proceeded); or I could try to work with Dr. Adil in a personal, affectionate, uncritical, loving way: in order to see what project we would be able to make accordingly. By proceeding with the second option, I temporally debased myself as a professional curator — in order to undergo the process of reinventing and reestablishing myself as a curator of *Alev Adil’s work*.

According to my further enquiry into the art-curatorial discourse, my situation (as I made the decision to continue the project “unprofessionally”) was not unique. In fact, many curators reflected on their experience of being “deprofessionalised” in the course of their collaborative projects. As has been observed by Beatrice von Bismark (who based her statement on her own experience of being a curatorial educator), becoming a curator “is not so much about professionalisation as it is about de-professionalisation”: that is, learning

²⁰ From AND ALSO introduction text: “Alev Adil is a poet who is inseparable, indistinguishable, becoming-different, and living through her poems. Adil’s practice of poetry- writing corresponds to the process of perpetual distortion of her identity, its deterritorialisation, and falling apart. Ongoing dispersion of the poet’s identity materialises in the emergence of multiple personalities, born and enacted within her poems, connected in an ongoing conversation. She is Johnny, the private detective. She is Gilda (aka Elsa, aka Rita Hayworth, aka Lady From Shanghai). She is the Soldier. And also the disappeared Little Girl.” **Appendices 1.3, p.2, 6.**

²¹ From the AND ALSO introduction text: “Sasha Burkhanova is a curator who is an amalgam of artists she ever worked with/is working with/will be working with in the future. She is the past, present and future experience of connection with the authors she reads. She is an empathetic curator who is theoretically grounded in the concept of love as the principal driving force for interpersonal creative collaboration — with Johnny, Gilda, Soldier, and also the disappeared Little Girl.” **Appendices 1.3, p.2, 6.**

from people from different professional backgrounds and different academic disciplines in order to pose the diverse questions and enact various outlooks when one works curatorially (von Bismarck 2015). As curator Clémentine Deliss furthered this perspective, the critical ability of a curator today is mainly grounded in one's capacity to "avoid [the] reproduction of [curatorial] profession": its standardisation, repetition and homogeneity, and to always be capable of "methodological experimentation" (Deliss 2015) inspired by the methodologies of other professionals one works with. Furthermore, as it follows from Anthony Huberman's essay, for a curator *not knowing* how to do act professionally (i.e. in a standard, commonly accepted way) gradually becomes much more important than knowing (Huberman 2011). This would make a curator more open and responsive to their professional environment: more caring and affirmative of the antagonistic views and agendas of their audiences and collaborators. It is exactly through admitting that one *does not know* how to do things procedurally right — that is, accepting that there is no such thing as a universal notion of curatorial excellence — how a curator gains an ability to truly connect with their collaborators, incorporate the experience of such connection into the project itself, and make it accessible to the audience.

In AND ALSO, my move towards "deprofessionalising" further manifested itself in the emergence of a new subject position in the middle of the project: of a curator-artist, a curator-coauthor. In order to understand her practice more profoundly, I co-create some artworks with Dr. Adil, using her working methods. We developed the characters of AND ALSO and edited the play script together.

Please see Appendices 1.2 for the play script. We conducted such an experiment to bridge the artistic and academic languages, and to create a hybrid narrative that would communicate my experience of becoming-curator with Dr. Adil in our joint art project within the overlapping nexus of academic-creative relationships. In this way, I enacted a curator who did not aspire to become an artist herself, but instead wanted to learn the "artistic toolbox" in order to do the curatorial job differently: in a more caring, personalised way.

As a part of this experiment, I wrote the "The Infinite Conversation" play script that was later utilised as the script for the exhibition choreography. The list of characters included Alev Adil, myself, and authors-theorists with whom I engaged in my research. In my play script, we discuss the subject of hypothetical hybrid language. The characters were:

SASHA, a prisoner of state language; RIFFLE OF BOOK PAGES (all ever written, and to be written); ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN, as themselves; ALEV ADIL, as herself; LUIGI PIRANDELLO, as himself; HEIDEGGER, as himself; R. BARTHES, as himself.

Rather than writing a fictional conversation amongst the characters, I “curated” it as an assemblage of actual quotes by the authors (which I would otherwise cite or use as references in an academic text) and the bits of our discussions with Dr. Adil. The script was then organised so that the contents and structure seamlessly flowed into one another, and the academic and artistic dimensions intertwined.

ACT 1.

RIFFLE OF BOOK PAGES: Track reading. Track writing. Track speaking. Track thinking.

SASHA (is present): As I read a text (no matter what family it belongs), the thread of my thinking smoothly intertwines with the arguments of its author. It happens so seamlessly in reading that the temporal and spatial gap between us almost disappears. I remember, I used to feel upset sometimes, feeling that those who entered writing before me have stolen all of the great ideas, but now I realise that the only unfair thing they actually did was the launch of the infinite conversation. I realised that the continuity of discourse that originates between me and my talkative predecessors reminds a never- ending round in the Questions game, played by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the creatures that won't make any sense without each other, and actually exist as one role: one speech divided into two notebooks - in Thomas Stoppard's notable play.

(voices of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern heard, but the two are not present)

SASHA (continues): I also discovered that there is no way to escape the game - once you've join the conversation. Although this didn't make me feel overwhelmed by playing: the rules of the game are intuitive, simple, even amusing. The round proceeds as a dialogue of asking questions back and forth between the players for as long as possible, without

making declarative statements. It's simple. You translate the text into questions, and with the questions you respond to another text - avoiding irrelevancies, hesitations, repetitions and rhetorics, where possible. Each not-yet-written text is nothing more but another answer to come in the eternal Questions game played by authors. The literature, an infinite conversation.

RIFFLE OF BOOK PAGES: Track reading. Track writing. Track asking. Track responding.

[...]

R. BARTHES (is present, eyes at Heidegger): The author's entire art is to give the object a Dasein, a "being-there", and to strip it of "being-something". (1954)

HEIDEGGER: The content of the text might be dissected even more distinctly, its form outlined even more precisely, but in such operations we would still remain confined by the notion of language that has prevailed for thousands of years. According to this idea language is the expression, produced by men, of their feelings and the world view that guides them... Why should it be broken? (1975[1971]:194)

R. BARTHES: To express an object without order and without disorder is a feat. Is it therefore necessary? (1962)

SASHA: These are the reasonable question. Why, indeed, if we enjoy our writing as it is. Why, if the good old ways of writing do the job. Perhaps, out of curiosity. Just to see: how else could it be between an author and a text.

[...]

- Sasha Burkhanova, *The Infinite Conversation* (fragment), 2015.

For the full play script please see Appendices 1.4.

As I drafted "The Infinite Conversation", it was Dr. Adil who insisted that my writing is included in AND ALSO as an artistic component — rather than as a "secondary" curatorial representation. After using my play script to structure the exhibition, Dr. Adil suggested that it should be also included *in* the exhibition, alongside her artworks and writing. It was thus displayed as a wall installation made of multiple shelves with books, from which the quotes were taken, assembled in the order of appearance of their authors in the acts of my play.

The xerox machine was a part of the installation: inviting the audience to make copies of the expanded quotes, utilised in the play, and engage with those after they had visited the exhibition (i.e. in their writing, reading, art making, or research), thus enabling the “infinite conversation” to continue. All in all, my subject position of an artist-curator — manifested in both my updated working methodology and Dr. Adil’s decision to assign the status of an “artwork” to my script — posed a question concerning the authorship of the various parties engaged in an art process jointly. Thus, amongst other issues, AND ALSO exhibition launched the discussion about the extend and definitions of curatorial authorship: how can it be distinguished (and separated) from that of an artist — if the two work in collaboration, and the products of their work are profoundly intertwined. As we attempted to answer this question, we considered the resulting modes of authorship and art production — as well as their possible implementation in the art-curatorial courses and university programmes.

Importantly, the “curator-becoming-artist” move was encouraged by both Dr. Adil (as she initially suggested it to me) — and the requirements of the academic assessment: “artistic originality” was one of the criteria for assessing my practice as a part of my PhD. Yet, notably, this (almost intuitive curatorial) move used to be perceived as problematic by many authors within the specialist art-curatorial discourse and charged with pronounced negative connotations (Buren 1972, 2003; Vidokle 2010; Huberman 2011). One of the early enactments of the subject position of a curator-becoming-artist could be linked with Lucy Lippard’s curatorship of the *557,087: Seattle* show in 1969. At the time Peter Plagens reviewed Lippard’s curatorial engagement in these terms, “there is a total style to the show, a style so pervasive as to suggest that Lucy Lippard is in fact the artist and that her medium is other artists” (Plagens 1969). After Lippard, Harald Szeemann was criticised as an artist-curator for his directorship of Documenta 5 (1972) in Kassel. The methods of work applied by Szeemann provoked much tension between the invited artists and the curator himself. In his short text *Exposition d'une exposition* (Exhibiting Exhibitions), artist Daniel Buren (who was among the Documenta 5 participants) criticised Szeemann’s curation for uplifting the exhibition to the status of a work of art that would simultaneously put its curator — the author of the exhibition — in the position of the artist, while diminishing the prestige and autonomy of the invited artists themselves, “which are powerless from the force of habit of art, have no choice

but to allow another to be exhibited: the organizer” (Buren 1972). Daniel Buren addressed the performance of a curator-artist as highly problematic, claiming that these days “it is possible to imagine that we are not far-off from having a large-scale international exhibition directed by a great organizer-author who proposes the first exhibition without any artists at all” (Buren 2003). Critic and philosopher Boris Groys also criticised the tendency of curatorial practice to borrow too much from the methodologies of artists, noting that as a result the roles of the artist and of the curator became identical (Groys 2007). Even though the “distinction between the (curated) exhibition and (artistic) installation is still commonly made”, he went on to explain, “it is essentially obsolete” and arbitrary (ibid.). In 2010, two more significant critical statements arrived: from artist and founder of e-flux Anton Vidokle and curator Anthony Huberman. Vidokle critically reminded curators that “curatorial work is a profession, and people working in the field are not free agents [as artists are] but are rather employed to perform a task on behalf of an institution or a client” that essentially cannot “include artistic claim to the artwork on which this activity is predicated” (Vidokle 2010). In a similar way, Huberman’s curatorial statement referred to the curatorial responsibility as necessarily involving “putting the artist first” (Huberman, 2011:192). For Huberman, this would require from curators “the invention of ways to appropriately pay tribute to the lives of artworks and artists — not the invention of curatorial methods for their own sake” (ibid.).

Becoming an artist in AND ALSO was never my aim in itself; yet it consequently became the only “right” way to collaborate with Dr. Adil. Back in 2014, as I wrote the proposal for a collaborative project with Dr. Adil, my understanding of the foundational values that drove my curatorship was not fully shaped. Yet, as I assessed it years later, I could clearly see the personal values’ implementation. First, they manifested in my initial willingness to align my methodology with the methods of Alev Adil in order to profoundly understand her practice. Second, they effected in my urge to proceed with our collaboration *on its own terms* - against the discouragement coming from the specialist curatorial literature, which I reviewed at the time. Finally, third, they were revealed in my need to reflect on the overall process via autoethnographic writing. Even though I noticed the disagreement between my actual curatorial practice and the traditional discursive representation of art curating back in

2014, I felt the urge to discuss in my analysis only via actually curating AND ALSO. In this way, the curation of AND ALSO provided me with a unique opportunity to also re-evaluate the past experiences from a researcher's point of view.

A curator as an artist's student

In line with becoming "the artist's admirer", my curatorial role in AND ALSO coincided with my becoming "the artist's student": that is, embracing powers, limitations, and ethical regulations coming from the institution where I started my PhD, the University of Greenwich.

Back in 2014, my PhD proposal was not about a curatorial ethic: it regarded the possibility of a new mode of artistic-curatorial authorship in a collaborative project based on the experience of becoming a singular creative body and sharing the thinking process between two bodies and minds. **Please see Appendices 1.5 (p.2) for details.** Thus, anticipating the benefits of collaborating with Dr. Adil, I was driven by the following pragmatic logic: "As a student, I *need* you to be my supervisor; I will therefore connect with you to benefit from your skills, ideas, networks, etc. that I don't have but may need for my own empowerment — so that by working together we will make a stronger entity, a winning team". This "formula" emerged from my attempts to conceptualise own practice, since it was the kind of relationship that I would imagine a student and a supervisor at an art school would develop; the kind of relationship that, I thought, would work and result in a "successful" art-research project: that is visually stimulating, theoretically strong and topical. By working with Dr. Adil I witnessed the increasing problematics and ultimate failure of this "winning" logic.

The student-supervisor relationship, which we established with Dr. Adil, literally turned my initial formula upside down. This manifested in a relationship, which was previously unknown to me: the one driven by an instant connection between the two creative specialists, interested in collaborating — so that the details and conditions of their collaboration seem secondary to the very experience of working together. The resulting logic (which further became the logic of AND ALSO) could be formulate like that: "I *need you* to be my artist/curator, since otherwise it would be a completely different experience: of

working with someone else — and a completely different artwork as the outcome of it”.

The relationship that began with an irrational connection provided an alternative to the short-term, self-interested, project-based collaborations which are, in my experience, emblematic for the contemporary art field. An urge to collaborate that is grounded in “love” (to use Pascal Gielen’s definition) would not be driven by a mutual benefit (as in case of my initial logic). It would rather mean a particular kind of connection among people, ideas and things that are naturally drawn together: they would connect, not on the basis of interchangeable, realisable and feasible projects, but instead for a “lifelong investment and commitment”, accepting inflexibility and dependence upon each other (Gielen 2010, p.23). In this way, the importance of the *experience* of making art together would outweigh the result. Consequently, the very process of relating obtains an aesthetic dimension. Notably, in one of my research journals I visualised this process as an invitation to play hopscotch game without the possibility of ever finishing it, since there would be no “logical” ending to AND ALSO. In this way, the only possibility to leave the game would be by interrupting it oneself: by “jumping out” of the relationship (represented by the game) at a certain point. **Please see Appendices 1.3 (p.15) for the visualization of the hopscotch game field in AND ALSO exhibition.**

To understand Alev Adil’s methodology better, I spent hours browsing the notebooks that she generously shared with me: observing her way of organising thoughts, references and ideas for her art projects as notes. In an interesting way, her supervisory comments written prior to, or in the course of, our tutorials would overlap with her artwork ideas, and chunks of fictional text or play script — either written for our project, or for other purposes — yet still (strategically or unconsciously) placed in her “AND ALSO related” notebook. Her notes generously revealed her logic of working, i.e. how she wrote her poetry and plays, how she created and enacted characters for her artworks; how she approached her teaching, as “becoming-undone” (her own words). When I asked her to explain that expression, she brought in an example. She addressed her poems as “machines” that either helped (her) to look into particular emotional states at a distance (to “undo” them through the gaze of a character) or to re-enact them (to “undo” by doing again, repeatedly). In this way, rather than acting as some metaphorical record of the past events, Dr. Adil’s poems

worked as invocations: for summoning sensations and events, that enabled her to experience them each time anew, rather than to merely recall them. It was therefore understandable why Dr. Adil preferred her poems to be read aloud; so that every time they appeared differently, diffracted by the new reader's voice. As mere words on paper they did not "work" and required a reader's voice to obtain agency.

During one of our tutorials Dr. Adil mentioned that the experience of supervising my research — through which she re-discovers herself as an artist — also "undoes" her. This comment affected me deeply. In turn, I reflected on how AND ALSO made me feel the same. I started thinking about those things — stories, voices, objects, artworks, spaces — that obtain agency via engagement in our art-project and simultaneously "undo" myself and Adil as autonomous agents. This thread of thinking further enacted a very careful consideration of those things that are being "privileged" as the objects of art on display; and other things that get silenced, being used as exhibition props — when it came to showing AND ALSO to the public. As we were preparing to exhibit AND ALSO at the Elektroavod Gallery in Moscow, this thought returned and materialised in a specific relationship of equality that we were seeking to establish between the various things in the gallery space — to undo the hierarchical "artwork versus prop" dichotomy and give voice to all. In the end, we literally allocated the voices of Adil's characters and the readings of her poems to the objects in the show. Working to this end, in the exhibition, we had a number of talking pillows that were "reading" the selection of 13 poems-machines: including "a poem that wakes up between at 3 and 6 a.m.; poem that will survive falling from the 10th floor; a poem that loves you back; a poem that may help; a poem that reminds; a poem that remains; a poem that is the easiest to sense". Other characters in the play were enacted by a printer, a selection of books, a video projection, a slide carousel, old furniture, a field for the hopscotch game, glitter on the floor, and many others. They came into being by becoming these objects and exercised their agency, which was previously only enacted through a human voice. **Please see Appendices 1.3 (pp. 6-16) for the exhibition documentation.**

We designed the exhibition in such a way that everything on display could be touched, moved, taken away and put into action by the audience. In this way, the objects (the pillows, books, glitter, etc.) were becoming-undone of

their usual functionality; employed in a different capacity that was disclosed and activated through AND ALSO. Accordingly, throughout AND ALSO, Adil and I were becoming-undone of our usual functionality by each other: the movement manifested us; it empowered us; and consequently, it limited what we could do in our collaboration.

This relationship is not at all a way of utilising each other as means for the creation and transformation of one's self. Rather, the logic of AND ALSO involves a subtle understanding of responsibility with respect to each other. This logic cuts open the common understanding of a supervisor's responsibility to a student — as much as a curator's responsibility to an artist (artwork, institution, audience, etc) — in which one is obligated to another by virtue of an agreement made or a duty had, will be undone. Rather, in our collaboration both myself and Adil were responsible for how we facilitated each other's experience: by encouraging and allowing for self-transformation; by responding to each other in the ways we configured our own practice and teaching-learning process.

Prior to making AND ALSO with Dr. Adil and presenting it to the audience, a lot of work was done to justify to the University research committee why it was necessary for our roles to overlap. Since there was no precedent of an art student-supervisor collaboration before at the University of Greenwich, it was not only a matter of presenting an adequate research outline. It was no less important to deliver it in a credible way: using a specific (non-artistic non-philosophical) language and argumentation that my "judges" from the committee would understand — presuming that the artistic value of my project with Adil would not be enough for them to accept this break with the traditions of research. Accordingly, I explained my urge to employ my supervisor as an artist in my project by presenting the conditions that were essential for my experiment — and which Adil's participation would meet better than any other potential candidate.

The multiplicity of roles and responsibilities hold by Dr. Adil and myself enabled myself to research and document the internal first-hand experience of redistribution of authorship and experimental hierarchy. Consequently, the outcomes of this experiment were expected to be further interrogated as a potential new mode of student-supervisor collaboration within the art academia. Since the variety of Dr. Adil's previous projects operated as poetical disclosure of private matters in a form of artwork, she appeared as an experienced

candidate for undertaking the suggested role in the experiment. Finally, the academic setting itself, as provided by the practice-based PhD programme, appeared as the 'safe ground' for the experiment to proceed. To insure its alignment with the University research regulations, the project was monitored by the two qualified members of the research team, not engaged in the experiment. As required by the University, Alev Adil provided a consent to explain the project's intention from her perspective and express her willingness to participate:

My PhD student Sasha Burkhanova is carrying practice-based PhD research on the changing role of the contemporary curator and the relationship between the curator and artist using a framework of contemporary philosophy exploring identity and sentience. This framework interrogates and questions the borders and parameters of roles and identities. For her first practice-based project exploring the thresholds and boundaries of this relationship she would like to curate an installation of my work. I agreed to the project, both because the project is creatively and intellectually very exciting to me but also more importantly, I can provide a safe space for experimentation with her practice case-study without any consequences for her already very promising career as a curator. I see the experimentation and the resulting exhibition as primarily about the pedagogic and creative process, about my creative work in this pedagogic relation rather than a conventional exhibition of my work per se. [...]

Please see Appendices 1.5 (p.4) for the full text of Alev Adil's consent.

In writing my project's justification for the Research Ethics committee, I consulted with the Research Ethics guidelines, offered by the University of Greenwich. In concert with those, not only I explained the grounds of my methodology and Dr. Adil's relevant professional experience: I also considered how our conflict of interests would be managed; by formally dividing responsibilities within the supervisory team. Likewise, in her consent, Adil demonstrated her awareness of the project's structure and ambition (i.e. what exactly she was expected to do and why), regarded the setting of a practice-

based PhD as meeting the requirements of a safe zone, suitable for my research experiment, as well as claiming the benefits of the project for the overall pedagogic process. My form and Adil's consent were submitted to the university research ethics committee, and were approved: as meeting all the required criteria.

Two months after the official approval was signed by the Committee, a concern was raised regarding how the relationship with my supervisor could have been potentially affected by our collaboration with pedagogical consequence to the supervisory arrangements. At that point, I could choose to terminate my collaboration with Adil (erase its traces from my thesis and invite a different artist to replace Adil). Otherwise, we could terminate our relationship as a student and a supervisor, using the powerful experience we underwent together as a material for completing our artwork outside the University. Faced with this choice, I opted for the second option, which resulted in the removal of Dr. Adil from my supervisory team.

Institutional formal codes of ethics and the informal conventional practices commonly invite the curators who work with institutions to assess and reflect on the ethical dimensions of their practices: to compare their professional principles with an institutional code of ethics. It is therefore common that the performance of a curator who acts on behalf of an institution (i.e. as an affiliated research student) should be aligned with the code. However, as my encounter with the University of Greenwich demonstrated, "an institution" here would always have a dual meaning. On the one hand, it would consist of a fixed or provisional space, populated by people (including a curator herself) for a different duration of time and on different conditions. On the other hand, it would incorporate a system of values, customs and norms that are considered to be of great importance within the community, and therefore are being institutionalised: such as cultural values, authenticity, creativity, idiosyncrasy. A curator's subject position within an institution would be thus also dual. On the one hand, it would be configured by one's ability to respond promptly to the rapid transformation and emergence of cultural and artistic values and adjust one's working methodology to these. Yet, on the other hand, it will be determined by the limitations imposed on the curator by one's position within the preexisting institutional relational structures. As evident from the example of AND ALSO, the expanded notion of institutional ethics implies that the formal norms and

informal regulations do not always agree. Furthermore, the later may have more power than the former (as the case of AND ALSO demonstrated). I will never know for sure and can only speculate why the relationship I developed with Dr. Adil was approved the University Ethics Committee (that is, did not break the code), but got terminated due to the personal disagreement of an *individual* who was in power to act on behalf of the institution. What ethical questions would this raise for the professional art-academic community? The actual power of a code here is revealed as limited. Consequently, there is a feasible risk to underestimate the actual power of “informal” regulations within any art institution.

A closing note on curating AND ALSO: responses from the audience

I believe that the powerful message of AND ALSO — as an exhibition, a performance, a number of conference papers — reached its audience due to our radical transparency about each stage of the project's making. All the experiences we underwent, situations we dealt with, feelings and responses we were capable of at time were integrated in the canvas of the project and passed to the audience. In this way, everything that can be recognised as the “documentation” of AND ALSO can be simultaneously claimed to be the structural part of this lively evolving Universe-like artwork. Our correspondence, records of conversations, lists of books we exchanged, inventories of gifts we made to each other, and film references we shared ended up as the source materials for the artwork we produced and presented to various audiences in different venues and contexts. Likewise, those bureaucratic papers we wrote and had re-written, returned to us and sent again, submitted and re-submitted, acted as one of the sources for writing the play's script: Adil's characters gave voices to our heterogeneous experiences of transformation, destabilisation, and *becoming-with* each other. which ultimately empowered us.

Working in this way, we kept minimum expectations regarding the outcomes of the project, and instead focused on developing various ways to deliver the project's energy to our audiences, without interrupting and formalising it. The following are some reflections of the members of the audience after experiencing AND ALSO:

I don't exactly understand what is happening here but you managed to transport me inside my head. It feels like a very weird, long-forgotten place here that I don't want to leave.

— Visitor, Deleuzian Studies Conference, Rome, 2015.

AND ALSO is a refuge place, I feel it very different when I am here — and when I am not. And it does not end just outside of the gallery, it somehow spreads further than that...

— Visitor, Manifesta 11, Zurich, 2016.

AND ALSO by Sasha Burkhanova and Alev Adil is a story, in which love defeats the limits of a singular, egocentric object of art that we normally encounter in the space of an art gallery. The logic of compassion helps to leave behind the familiar way of thinking about art through heavy concepts, and allows to merge in a shared, corporeal experience of co-presence, co-existence. AND ALSO does not remain on the distance from the spectator — it swallows him immediately.

— ARTUZEL magazine, Moscow, 2016.

Groan of Deleuze! Howling of Guattari! AND ALSO reminds a dream, a Lewis Carroll dream that does not follow the binary logic. Apparently, it does not have to be real in order to be real. [...] And the entree fee for this dream will be your rationality and individuality that you will have to throw away as you enter. Oh, yes, there is also a rubbish bin next to the door for that.

— art critic, Moscow, 2016.

Each time we presented AND ALSO to the audience, the complex issues faced by myself and Adil during the production of the play (re)shaped and (re)produced its characters. Each time the process of simultaneous self-formation and self-reflection — with its particular visual language and narration style — was activated by the members of audience, who read the script aloud and thus embodied the characters (including ourselves). In this way, as Adil and I continued to tell the story of our relationship, exposing the political,

interpersonal and aesthetic dimension of joint art production, we left it to our audience: to acknowledge the interplay of multiple “ethics” (the personal drives, the formal codes, and the imposed expectations) by literally living through those in the curated space of AND ALSO.

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Appendices 2

Project 2: autoethnographic curatorial writing:

***When Air Becomes Breath,* with Margo Trushina, 2016.**

My curation of this project coincided two key subject positions. I acted as an intercultural translator of the artist's work, and also as her close friend. In this autoethnographic writing I reflected on the experience of coinciding the two. I aimed to assess my professional performance without judgment, but with concern for its various consequences; to challenge the negative notion of "opportunistic curating" that can be associated with my course of actions and decisions made throughout the project. As a result, I acknowledged "opportunistic curating" as one of my curatorial strategies and considered how it is linked to my professional values, understanding of curatorial excellence, and overall formulation of my curatorial ethic.

A curator as an artist's intercultural translator

It could be said that my project with Margo Trushina had two "formal" beginnings that coincided with its acceptance by two institutions that were meant to be its simultaneous hosts: the Moscow Biennale of Young Art, and the commercial gallery (OSNOVA, Moscow). In this way, my curatorial engagement required me to develop and master techniques of intercultural translation: that is, communicating Trushina's art practice to the audiences and representatives of the two art institutions with different agendas, expectations, and very different professional cultures.

Let me present the Biennale agenda first. Out of "[m]ore than 2000 applications from more than 80 countries" received via the open call (Samman, 2016), the projects for the Biennale were chosen to respond to its major theme: *Deep Inside*. As the chief curator of the Biennale Nadim Samman elaborated in his statement, "we are climbing, or falling, ever deeper into a kind of black hole.

As we do, it is perhaps to be expected that artists should be fascinated by opacities, by occultations, encryptions and conspiracies — the other side of the event horizon”, while ‘Deep Inside ’corresponds to “a view from the chasm” (ibid.). Preparing the Biennale proposal in dialogue with the artist and in response to this theme, I suggested to contextualise Trushina’s practice in eco-feminism as addressing “Life as the given ability of matter to self-organise and fulfil its ontological right to be, to exist as a diverse multiplicity of chemical elements, forms and species” (Burkhanova, 2016; **see Appendices 2.3, p.2**). In this way, Trushina’s artworks were addressed as “the objects of art that are formally artificial, but nevertheless appear as harmonious symbiotic micro-systems” (ibid.); the artist’s role was further defined as a “respectful negotiator”, who “facilitates the peaceful communication, listens and delivers” (ibid.). Since the Biennale programme targeted “the large number of Russian and foreign art-lovers who are interested in processes happening in contemporary art today” (Samman.org, 2016), I aimed to contextualise Trushina’s work in the contemporary thought and culture and to demonstrate its relevance on the global scale. Thus, I pragmatically aimed for a “topical” philosophical framing for Trushina’s artworks.

Since I was acting in a double capacity of a gallery guest-curator and a curator of a Biennale project, my subject position initially included a conflict of interest, which I could theoretically avoid by cutting off one of the hosts. To be specific, the conflict resided in my suggestive inability to meet the expectations of the two institutions in full at the same time. The Biennale context required me to develop a politically strong and socially engaging statement that would add to the overall message, delivered by the main project that was curated by Samman himself. At the same time, the commercial gallery prioritised – and was willing to fund – mainly the appearance of the show. In this way, my curatorial conundrum resonated with the statement by Chelsea Haines that problematised the global Biennale crisis of meaningfulness (Haynes, 2013:92):

because biennials are typically generated as tourist attractions, curators often focus primarily on showcasing the latest and greatest in contemporary art to attract international visitors and press. [...] Thus major shifts in the ways in which biennials have developed depended

less on the needs of their audiences and focused instead on the art world's increasing interest in international exchange, as well as social and political engagement with urban areas.

Originally, Haynes' argument considered the condition of the chief curators of biennials, not those engaged in the organisation of projects in parallel programmes (like myself). However, as my experience of working in such capacity revealed, the position of a parallel programme project curator can be much more ambiguous and ethically uncertain. In order to get the project funded and brought to life, such curators would have to prioritise the agendas and interests of the institutions-hosts they are dealing with, and to make their project happen without the powers, resources and authority "enjoyed" by the chief curator. This would result in a proliferation of strategies and methods of acknowledging the agendas of the project's hosts, yet without losing their own voice.

The exclusion of the position of a curator in a parallel programme from the debate on the biennial ethics seems to be symptomatic: most authors who have spoken on the subject have shared this limited perspective. In this way, they have failed to acknowledge the possibility that during contemporary biennials "everything that is interesting happens on the margins" (El Dahab 2006, p.208), as curator Mai Abu El Dahab critically noted; i.e. in the parallel programmes, or amongst the excessive number of related projects that take place alongside — hoping to gain attention from the biennial public, yet are often left unnoticed. Interesting things, I would add, happen there not only in terms of conceptual revelations and innovative artworks; but also in terms of new models for artistic-curatorial-institutional collaborations that require critique and evaluation.

In my evaluation of *When Air Becomes Breath*, I address this gap in the debate: by considering what professional aspects such curators share with the chief curator, and what are the main ways in which the two positions differentiate. I do this by considering my specific position in regard to the local context of the Moscow Biennale, to which I can relate as a foreign professional (I am a London-educated, London-based curator) and a cultural local at the same time (I am a Russian citizen and language native, who stays in contact with the local art scene, and curates projects in Russia). This double position enables a

wider perspective on the reality of biennials curatorship than the one pictured by Haynes, in which the biennial curators rarely live and work in the city where the biennial takes place. Unlike mine, their relationship to the city and its locals would almost always be terminal, based on mediated knowledge and acquaintance (Haynes 2013, p.93). Furthermore, I was able to also challenge the resulting understanding of a biennial curator as a “guest”, who works with others on this basis.

As a curator of the 6th Moscow Biennale Bart de Baere stated, in the case of biennials, ethics can be understood by a curator as “the ethics of space”: that is, as questions like “what is your relation to the space?”, and “[how] do you exhaust it” through biennial-making? (de Baere 2015). De Baere’s proposition of the ethics of space reflected my own experience in a specific way. Namely, after participating in the Moscow Biennale for several times in a row, I perceived the exhaustion related to the repetition of this large-scale event. The project with Trushina was my third curatorial project for the Moscow Biennale. Each of my previous projects was hosted by a different art institution (i.e. the National Center for Contemporary Arts; a State-supported exhibition space Manege; a commercial gallery) and addressed some radically different issues in concert with each Biennale edition’s theme. In the course of my three rounds of participation I had a chance to understand the functioning of the Biennale as an institution from within. A State-funded reputational project, the Biennale aspired to enact the “young”, mobile, networked model of relationships, practiced within the contemporary arts community worldwide – yet without changing the “old” and slow local bureaucratic business models that are currently present in Russian museums and established galleries. The resulting hybrid institution, Moscow Biennale each time brings together the brightest artists and curators with ambitious projects in mind, who each time face the same difficulties while putting their ideas into practice. The difficulties are connected to the absence of an adequate infrastructure for supporting the production and marketing of the contemporary art events in Moscow, the unexpected budget cuts in the middle of the project, and poor administration. According to my experience, each time the Biennale appears to be a small, almost communal event for the local art professionals, artists and curators — made by friends for friends — that neither acts as a tourist attraction, nor as a forum for art collectors to discover the names of new local artists.

In this regard, my project with Trushina happened to occupy the hybrid space within the hybrid space: between the Biennale and the commercial gallery, the local and international context, the “offline” exhibition space and its “online” media representation, the audience of art connoisseurs and the general public. I therefore had to develop a certain conceptual flexibility and a repertoire of working methods that would allow me to be simultaneously present, active and “heard” in all these dimensions – in order to have my curatorial agenda delivered, and not to have the quality of my work compromised.

The “why” question I asked myself prior to curating Trushina’s show looked like that: *Why do it again?* Why curate another show for this Biennale? The answer to that: the project with Trushina brought me new kinds of opportunities and enabled access to audiences that I had not directly dealt with before in my work. Namely, art collectors. In this sense, it was the prospect of learning the new language of delivering art to the new “species” of viewers, while teaming up with an artist who knows this language quite well (Trushina’s career has mostly developed through commercial shows), that convinced me. At the same time, I sensed the extent, to which this exhibition will be different from the projects that I had curated before: as delivered in this “new” visual language and driven by different values. Thus, prior to starting it, I agreed with myself that I will follow the rules of this new game to the end: that is, I will adjust my working principles to the standards of this culture, which primary sees a contemporary artwork as a commodity. Furthermore, for the sake of this project’s realisation, I decided in advance to take on board the professional ethic that is specific to this culture, no matter how different it would be to my own. While both the Biennale and the gallery had no official code of ethics, they both had extremely strong unspoken business cultures.

As the president of the Venice Biennale, Paolo Baratta noted in regard to the biennial ethics, as an art institution of its kind, a Biennale may not have an official code of ethics on purpose: so that the ethical code would be “[the] trust in the curator, rather than a sterile written code with ... articles which could hardly cover all and each specific case” (Person and Halperin 2017). He went on to explain the case of Venice Biennale: “if we choose a curator, it is because we have full confidence in his/her ability to choose high-quality artists and participants in full autonomy” (ibid.). Quite differently, the inbuilt ethical

obligations of a parallel programme curator will be always already fourfold: towards the biennial participants, its publics, its space, and, importantly, towards the biennial institution itself. The ability to make informed decisions in the face of these four parties – that is, to understand the conditions under which the decisions are made, to stay aware of their consequences, and to accept responsibility for them – seems crucial in defining the curatorial excellence in this context. As I happened to be working on the overlap of the two art-institutional cultures, my professional obligations literally doubled.

The first conflict was linked to the understanding of what it means to “translate” art for the audience, which appeared to be radically different for the two institutions. According to curatorial theorist Simon Sheikh, in regard to biennial curating, “it would be too limited and limiting to merely understand translation as a pedagogical exercise of explaining works and their contexts to different audiences and groups”. Instead, “translation must be understood within the transposition of forms of language, that is be understood in terms of exhibition display”, that has to do not only with “representation in the form of artworks and the (geopolitical) selection of artists, but also with public programming and exhibition design” (Sheikh 2009). Another aspect of a curator-translator competence, as addressed by cultural critic and translator Boris Buden, concerns one’s power to exclude. For Buden, apart from reconciling differences, translating — in terms of both languages and arts — implies the act of filtering and discrimination (Buden 2012, p.30), which cannot be avoided in practice but must be critically acknowledged. “Every biennial (however internationally curated)”, Buden writes, “generates a border and is simultaneously determined by this border” (p.31). The curatorial mediation, thus, inevitably “draws borderlines and establishes demarcations” (ibid.). — which, as Sheikh suggested earlier, should be made visible and incorporated into the process of public programming and exhibition-making (Sheikh 2009). Both authors agree that the ability of a biennial curator to account for one’s intervention in the local context — since a biennale would always “interrupts the eclipsed continuity of the art world” (Buden 2012, p.36) — is especially important, because the majority of biennials do not have any formal ethical guidelines that would impose limitations on a curator’s actions. While the

biennale ethics are in a mutable state, they need to be continually redefined by the context, since it is this that is always decisive.

At the same time, in the case of “translating” art for gallery audiences, although there is a strongly present culture and common practices of doing this, little has been written on the subject of its underlying principles. The specificities of art translation are expected to be connected to the galleries’ aspirations for presenting art: that is not limited to selling art, but also included the establishment of a long-term reputation and recognition in its niche, solid relationships with collectors (that seem to be more valuable than the relationships with artists and curators), and a history of participation in reputable art fairs that help to develop an international reputation – to name just a few aspects. Consequently, by inviting a guest curator, the gallery expects them to respond to all these aspects: that is, to act simultaneously as a salesperson, an expert, and a networker – while also keeping their hand on the pulse of the international trends. Moreover, a curator is expected to bring additional value to the project, by either being “better” than the gallery team in furthering the various aspects of its agenda, or by bringing in previously unanticipated benefits: i.e. new artists (with which the gallery can continue working after the curator is gone), new audiences (preferably, new collectors), attention of the media, and inclusion into the large-scale art events that focus on curatorial projects: i.e. biennials.

It follows, therefore, that it was the bonus represented by my inclusion in the Moscow Biennale (which outweighed my lack of experience in regard to other aspects of the gallery business) that grounded the gallery’s decision to host the art project curated by a guest curator. In order to make a successful exhibition (recognised as such by both the gallery and the Biennale at the same time), I curated a project that responded the *minimal* requirements of both institutions — in terms of its theme, form, artworks on display, design (that would acknowledge the peculiar architecture of the gallery), and public programme (that would be interesting to both art professionals and collectors). Hence, the next critical question concerned the actual steps in realisation of the project. I started the curation of *When Air Becomes Breath* in the conditions where I knew I was unable to make a project that would conform to the expectations of all the parties engaged in it – including myself. I therefore faced

the need to decide where to compromise, what to edit, what to cut away: in terms of meanings, actual artworks on display, and my own interest and powers.

A curator as an artist's "ghost writer"

In journalistic and literary work, speech-writing, and other kinds of production of authored texts, "ghost writers" are hired to write without getting the credit: so that the outcomes of their work are officially associated with another person as the author. While in the history of independent art-curating there are many precedents of curators using the fruits of others' labour under their own name or undermining the authorship of others²², my experience of curating *When Air Becomes Breath* revealed the situation, which is not usually discussed as an acceptable practice of curatorial engagement. Namely, it is a situation of a deliberate negation of my own authorship for the parts of the art project, which I underwent – while being driven by a personal desire to make the project happen in the best possible way. The urge to "translate" Trushina's work in different art languages was grounded in my drive to meet the expectations of my collaborators (the artist, the gallery, the Biennale) and the audiences. I opened up to their agendas (by making those my very own for the duration of the project) and learnt to adjust my curatorial perspective to theirs. In fact, this was the configuration of a curatorial methodology that I previously applied in curating AND ALSO (the project with Alev Adil). Yet at the same time, with a radically different response of the artist to my actions, the same curatorial methods resulted in a totally different experience.

In curating *When Air Becomes Breath*, I experimented with "attuning" my curatorial position to that of Trushina, the gallery managers and publics, the Biennale and its audiences: by changing my position from that of an outsider towards sharing the very processes of thinking and acting with them as much as I could. In the course of this transition, my curatorial writing acted as a hybrid space which connected Trushina's artist statement, my research interests, the

²² The most known is the case of accusations of Harald Szeemans' authoring of documenta: which undermined the contribution of other artists involved; also, Anton Vidokle's observation of the common curatorial practice of using "artworks to illustrate curatorial concepts" (Vidokle 2010); and the case of Adam Szymchik's curation of Documenta – who was also accused of wiping away the credits to people involved in the exhibition's production, and not crediting artists' works properly.

agenda of the gallery, and the thematic and formal requirements of the Biennale – treating all these elements as equally co-producing the ultimate exhibition. Conceiving the exhibition, I worked to develop a material manifestation of this hybrid space. I considered the variety of materials generated throughout the project's research stage: the photographs, drawings and descriptions of artworks exchanged between the artist and myself; the fragments from email conversations between the gallery team and myself, in which their vision for the show was stated (directly or indirectly); the bits of the Biennale application that discussed the specifications of the required exhibition format; my notebook pages and other relevant materials of various kinds. By keeping these on the same level of “importance”, without the presupposed hierarchy, I was able to create various “versions” of my projects that would redistribute the privileges differently amongst my materials, implying that different voices (of artist, curator, gallery and Biennale) would come to sound “louder” in different versions.

Working to this end, I produced four “versions” of the show that interpreted and communicated Trushina's art practice differently. Their nuanced yet productive differences were most effectively enacted in the four exhibition texts that I wrote consequently:

- (1) the Biennale proposal, fit to deliver the complex theoretical framework that I put together to accompany Trushina's work to the Biennale audience (this text was used on the Biennale website and catalogue, as well as for its press materials); **please see Appendix 2.3, p.2 for the full text**
- (2) the text for the gallery handouts, meant to guide the gallery visitors, justify the exhibition design, interpret the artworks on display (later on, this text was also used by the gallery in their PR: i.e. on their website, in the profile at Artsy.com); **please see Appendix 2.5 for the full text**
- (3) the poetic text for the voiceover to be used in the sound-piece, created in collaboration between Trushina and myself; **please listen to Appendix 2.4**

(4) an interview with the gallery managers, published by SLEEK magazine (published under a pseudonym to hide my curatorial authorship); **please see Appendix 2.6 for the full text.**

The fragments of these texts are presented below — to expose their different styles of narration, choices of language, and perspectives on Trushina's art practice:

For the last two decades natural sciences have radically revised the concept of Life — facing the need to undo the border between the categories of living and non-living, understanding the weakness and insufficiency of this division. After all — when atoms in our bodies are 99.99999% empty space, and 90% of our cells (with their own DNA) are not strictly speaking "human" — what does that mean for us: to be alive? [...] As the cosmic vacuum becomes the earthly atmosphere, emptiness turns into air, the human lungs act as an interface. Consequently, one's speech is never meaningless or neutral: when breathing out becomes the voice, the message is sent directly to the Universe. The message is always the same. It is an affirmation: I am here, right now, alive. [...] in the new body of works by Margo Trushina, art practice is addressed as such tool for communication beyond the humankind, operating on the overlap between the ancient wisdom and contemporary scientific knowledge. Trushina's installations and sculptures came out of her experiments with the hybrid methods of research — coinciding natural science, philosophy and individual faith. [...]

— *When Air Becomes Breath* text, the Biennale version.

As a part of the parallel program of the 5th International Biennale of Young Arts, Osnova Gallery is proud to present When Air Becomes Breath — the solo exhibition of works by Margo Trushina, curated by Sasha Burkhanova. [...] Trushina experiments with becoming the mediator between the world of nature that makes a human-being — and the world of objects that is made by humans. By launching a dialogue with the

multilayered space of the gallery Trushina as if enters an artistic collaboration with the air inside the white cube. Consequently, the distinct ability of air flows to work as a channel for communication between an individual and the world that surrounds her turns into an artistic strategy itself. In the first room Trushina provides us with the certain points for "earthing" [...] The second room undergoes a radical transformation of the exposition rhythm: creatures and objects are levitating, inhabiting the vertical dimension of the space — as if seducing the viewer to join. The immersive sound installation unites the two spaces and offers an alternative experiential route to the objects on display: to pause and concentrate on the rhythm of one's own breath. [...]

— *When Air Becomes Breath* text, the Gallery version.

I am making a long breath... I am counting: one, two, three, four, five... As I am counting, I am making a long breath... I am letting the air in... I am letting in the Cosmos... I am becoming one with the Cosmos... I am recognising myself - in the moment of recognising myself - as I am becoming the act of recognition... As I breath I recognise myself... I am aware... I am aware that right now, being in this gallery, I am also present on the Planet that travels through the space on the speed of 272 km/sec... This speed is unimaginable to me... Understanding it would be breathtaking... But I am still breathing... One, two, three, four, five... I am breathing in... I am conscious... I am breathing... One, two, three, four, five... I am breathing out, slowly.... [...]

— *When Air Becomes Breath* text, the Sound Artwork version.

Moscow International Biennale for Young Art is a 10-years-old enterprise that aims at pushing forward the young generation of international art practitioners under 35, supporting and demonstrating their progress to miscellaneous audiences that coincide in the capital of Russia during the summertime. In 2016 accordingly — with Nadim Samman assigned to be the chief curator of its 5th edition — the Biennale seems to be business as usual. But what does it actually do for the local art? Does it open up any opportunities, attract new publics and produce new class of collectors — or builds up another illusion for both its publics and

participants? [...] Alena Kurmasheva and Dmitriy Vetrov, an energetic young duo that founded OSNOVA gallery in Moscow in 2014, is our choice to launch this conversation. [...] this year for the first time OSNOVA participated in the parallel program of the Biennale. To become a part of the parallel program (along with some 40 projects around Moscow), OSNOVA proposed an exhibition in response to the main theme of the Biennale, yet suggesting a different perspective on it, that was selected by the Biennale committee.

— *When Air Becomes Breath* text, the SLEEK Magazine interview version.

While working on *When Air Becomes Breath*, the curatorial “why”-question (*Why am I curating this show?*) ultimately took a pragmatic, practical form. In the course of curating this project, I justified my engagement by thinking in the following directions: “where would the making of this show take me professionally?”, “how much would I be paid for making this show?”, “how can I make this project in the most beneficial way for myself (i.e. gaining maximum publicity, meeting new audiences, working with new institutions, etc.)?” Yet, in some unexpected way, it is in writing about the project — the curatorial activity, in which I invested most of my time, energy and soul — I lost most of those practical benefits.

Even though the four texts about *When Air Becomes Breath* were radically different in nature and message, each of them enacted my very own perception of Trushina’s art, that was never artificially adjusted or compromised in order to “fit” the required format. First, my perception was articulated in writing the Biennale proposal, which communicates the curatorial framework, highlighting the conceptual grounds of Trushina’s practice: that is, “translating” it into the language of contemporary philosophy and relating it to the global political and cultural issues. Once the proposal had been accepted by the Biennale, the new text was written to incorporate the interests and agenda of the gallery’s audiences and collectors. As it appeared in the press release and the exhibition handouts, the text turned out more “technical”, focusing more on the artist’s professional biography, the media she applied, and almost lost all the initial philosophical, academic, research-related references. This version of the

text was structured as a “guided tour” through the show, introducing one work after another — and placing the focus on the design and choreography of the exhibition (i.e. how it responds to, and works in concert with the two-stories gallery space).

The third version of the text was used as a voiceover for a sound artwork created in collaboration between Trushina and myself. When we were putting together the exhibition proposal for the Biennale, working out the list of artworks in the show, Trushina suggested a sound installation called “Chorus” that she ultimately could not produce for the show due to the limitations, imposed by the gallery’s size and structure. According to Trushina’s initial plan, the installation would consist of a number of standing speakers, organised in a half moon line and representing a choir. The speakers would then be synchronised to project certain statements: the opening parts of which would be the same (i.e. “I love ...” “I believe ...” “I will never forget”); the closing parts would correspond to the individual endings of these phrases. The installation was expected to produce an interesting dissonance, reflecting the different understandings of the values of love, belief and memory, characteristic to different people. To produce the work, Trushina was planning to collect and record the answers from the singers of an actual chorus (hence, the artwork’s title). **Please see Appendix 2.1 p.5 for the original installation idea.**

While we were planning the exhibition design for the gallery, it became clear that “Chorus” was not going to happen due to the technical complexity of its realization. I therefore started to discuss with Trushina the possible options for replacing it. Without an immersive installation, which is what we had submitted as a central piece in our Biennale proposal, the overall exhibition felt weak and undeveloped. Thus, the idea came to create a new piece, that would “bring back” the philosophical narrative, which had been “edited down” in the gallery version of the text: in the form of an acoustic composition. In the gallery handouts, the resulting sound piece was referred to as “the immersive sound installation” that “unites the two spaces and offers an alternative experiential route to the objects on display: to pause and concentrate on the rhythm of one’s own breath”. Played at a slow pace, on loop, the voiceover reproduced the style of a guided meditation, aimed at calming down and harmonising one’s breath. As reported by the audience members, it suggested a particular speed of

approaching the physical artworks on display. Not only it completed the overall experience of visiting the exhibition: it also left a harmonious sensation after leaving it, as if after attending a yoga class. In the exhibition materials, the piece was credited as created by Margo Trushina, in collaboration with a sound engineer (who was commissioned to put the piece together), a singer, whose voice was used for the voiceover, and myself. Since I was driven by the desire to have a strong exhibition as a result of my work, I did not pay attention to the way the artwork was credited, and, even though I felt that my authorship was diminished (I felt it was more a co-authorship rather than a commission), I did not ask to amend it; perhaps out of some inner fear to appear as an artist wannabe.

Finally, the fourth edited version of the project's description was produced to represent *When Air Becomes Breath* to the international art community online. This version resulted in an expansive interview with the gallery managers, published by SLEEK: a Germany-based magazine covering contemporary culture, fashion and art. Notably, this text made a few major amendments to the previous public presentation of my curatorial engagement in the project. First, my creative input (which consisted of producing and releasing the exhibition idea, authored by myself) was merged with that of the gallery: in the text, I appeared as a part of the gallery team, not as a guest curator. According to the interview, "to become a part of the parallel program (along with some 40 projects around Moscow), *OSNOVA proposed an exhibition in response to the main theme of the Biennale*". Second, for the interview to be published I had to work under a pseudonym. Throughout the interview I am named as "SLEEK" (as if a member of the SLEEK editorial team, and not as a guest author); I was then asked to use "Alexandra Khabadze" to sign the interview: a composite of my full name that I never use to sign my work. Finally, third, by the very act of positioning myself as "an interviewer" rather than "the interviewed person", both the magazine (that proposed it) and myself (as the one who agreed to this proposal) contributed to the configuration of reality, in which a curator is understood to be a middleman and facilitator of the process of exhibition-making and public promotion: not a producer and maker as such. The reality, in which a curatorial action that would go beyond the limits of "allowed"

professional behaviour may be recognised as the “unethical”, “poor” practice of a self-interested individual, who acts as a wannabe artist.

* * * *

Even though the practical expectations I had prior to making *When Air Becomes Breath* did not come true, the project payed back a lot in terms of experience. It added to my understanding of my own curatorial values; challenged me to test my physical and emotional limits as a curator; and most importantly, provided me with some rich material for self-reflection — so I could examine the ethical dimension of curatorial practice that I haven't considered or encountered before. Initially I aspired for publicity, new audiences, and engagement with new art institutions: it was something *I supposed* I should be wanting as a curator. By the end of the project, I realised that I had a different inner curatorial urge. Each other party engaged in *When Air Becomes Breath* acted upon their inner drives from the beginning, realising their individual agendas as a gallery and an artist, promoting themselves as a gallery and as an artist to their audiences and press; that is, reinforcing their identities. I was doing something radically different, aligned with my curatorial-personal values: I aspired to understand and take on board the others' agendas and adjust my own practice to theirs — while (after the uplifting experience of AND ALSO) expecting them to do the same in my regard. Similarly to AND ALSO with Alev Adil, I felt that I was “becoming undone” of my curatorial identity; yet this time that happened in a way that was incompatible with my powers. Becoming undone via a process, in which everyone else was investing in concretisation of their identities appeared to be a self-destructive endeavour, since all those things I was “becoming undone of” (i.e. my curatorial agency, my authorship, my name, etc.) were immediately “picked up”, recycled and reused in the others' self-establishing activities.

Having said that, I must underline that my evaluation here does not imply that I am judging either the professional behaviour of my collaborators or my own. On the contrary, what I am trying to do is to show how the experience of making *When Air Becomes Breath* can be evaluated and narrated without claiming some doings as fair, reasonable and “right”, while addressing others as

unfair and “wrong”. Rather, I aimed to disclose the dynamic relationship amongst its participants – by disclosing the dependency and variation of the curatorial subject position in their regard.

A closing note on the experience of curating *When Air Becomes Breath*:
a passage from Gilles Deleuze

As I was completing this part of my autoethnographic text about *When Air Becomes Breath*, a passage from “Spinoza: Practical Philosophy” by Gilles Deleuze came to mind. This book was presented to me by Dr. Adil as an introduction to Deleuzian thinking that would “work best” (according to her). The passage I want to share illustrates the difference between judging a situation (as either “right” or “wrong”, “good” for you or “bad”) and evaluating it (mapping its complexity without judgement) — which comes as a useful metaphor for my experience of curating *When Air Becomes Breath*.

Deleuze wrote about a biblical example: the situation of Adam and the forbidden fruit in God’s garden (Deleuze 1988, p.106). It was Adam’s mistake, suggests Deleuze, to understand God’s statement “Thou shall not eat the fruit...” as an expression of prohibition, which would act as some transcendent rule or a law imposing limitations on Adam’s activities, so that if the law is broken, it is God (the absolute authority) who would punish Adam. Instead, the statement should have been interpreted as addressing the powers of a fruit in comparison to Adam’s own: as informing Adam that eating the fruit would lead to poisoning — a material bodily reaction, and not a transcendent punishment. As the two bodies come in contact, the poison of the fruit will invite the parts of Adam’s system “to enter into new relations that no longer accord his own essence” (ibid.). In this sense, the ignorance, attributed to Adam by Deleuze, corresponds to his inability to understand that what God does is simply an evaluation of the natural consequences of ingesting the fruit: not a judgement of Adam’s action. God is not communicating some universal rule that Adam has to follow for its own sake but invites him to embody the ontological responsibility for his own actions. Hence, eating fruit appears to be “bad” for Adam (yet it is by no means “prohibited”), since it would make him weak and cause physical suffering and irreversible changes in his organism (and possible death as a human). If,

according to some inner logic, however, Adam had recognised those effects of consuming the fruit as “empowering”, making him stronger, helping him to understand and challenge his own limits and abilities, to experiment and learn something new about himself that he can further utilise in his upcoming ventures, then, by all means, eating the fruit could be “good” for him (yet not necessarily supported by the governing system or the authority in the face of God). In both cases of eating and not eating, the responsibility is embodied in making a choice: it is not arbitrary, but physical.

This realisation came to me once the project was completed. The making of *When Air Becomes Breath* put me in Deleuzian version of “Adam versus the fruit” situation. My “fruit” was the project itself. My “God’s statement” was the constellation of patterns of curatorial behaviour and imposed norms that conditioned my engagement in the project. These represented the artist’s, the gallery’s, and the Biennale’ reasons for inviting me to be the project’s a curator. Notably, these conditions never considered the kinds of curating *I was capable of*: such as my ability to deconstruct the project and establish a visible connection between the inner processes of its making; to invite the audience to sense and understand the project I am making on its immanent level. None of my curatorial powers were effectively enacted in the project, or even recognised by my collaborators. Instead, I was invited by the artist (Trushina) on account of my age (so as to meet the “young” Biennale age requirement), my reputation as an “expert” in exhibiting at the Moscow Biennale (as it was my third participation), and because she appreciated my style of art writing. I was invited by the gallery in regard to the reputational bonus of becoming a part of the Biennale (they needed a *curatorial* project for that). Finally, I was invited by the SLEEK Magazine as an “insider”, who would have the full package of knowledge about the Biennale, the gallery and the exhibition itself, required to put together a strong interview.

Having said that, paradoxically, I still recognise the making of this project as empowering. Even though it appeared to be harmful for my sense curatorial “self-worth”, the projects catalysed its productive transformation. It enabled me to test my limits: to experiment with a different configuration of a curatorial subject position; to see what works in concert with my essence, and what works against it, decomposing myself as a curator. Feeling a complete emotional

exhaustion after the project, and after going through the stage of denial (i.e. seeing myself as a weak incapable professional for a while after *When Air Becomes Breath*), I absorbed the experience of making it as teaching me something important about my ethic. That is, as helping me to explore and inhabit a new curatorial subject position: of a curator, who (still) does not know, what kind of curating she is capable of in principle — yet is now aware of her limits, her powers and her inner urge to curate.

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Appendices 3

Project 3: autoethnographic curatorial writing:

***What can we make and become*, with CSM Postgraduate Students, 2018**

In *What can we make and become* I worked with a group of artists who — in line with the conceptual aspirations of this project — underwent the experience of becoming a singular creative body. Namely: an artistic collective, the members of which configured their art practices as continuations of the practices of their peers, and in response to them. To compare the three projects, in AND ALSO the artist (Dr. Adil) deliberately activated her ability to create her art in response to my personal and academic/curatorial interests. In *When Air Becomes Breath* the artist (Trushina) “instrumentalised” my willingness to open up and adjust to her interests and methods — and used it to further her own agenda. With the experience obtained in the other two projects, in case of *What can we make and become*, I started by offering the said curatorial methodology to the artists when I was recruiting my project participants via an open call.

Another principal difference (in comparison to the other two projects) regarded the art institution that hosted the project on its research and development stage and showcased the resulting exhibition. AND ALSO took form of a traveling project that cannot be associated with a singular institution-host. *When Air Becomes Breath* was, so to say, “torn” between two institutions with contradicting agendas. *What can we make and become* took place at Exposed Arts Projects: a non-profit art-research organisation in London, which I founded in 2018 and have been curating since then. The ethos of Exposed in many ways developed from my curatorial ethic — and was much affected by the experiences of the practice-based part of my PhD research.

Thus, my curatorial engagement in *What can we make and become* was co-constituted by the two subject positions: a curator as a supervisor of the artists' research-based projects, and a curator as an art space director. The following autoethnographic writing considers the cohabitation of these two positions in my overall curatorial role and my understanding of the notion and practice of “curatorial care”.

a curator as a supervisor of the artists' research-based projects

This aspect of my curatorial engagement as if reversed the kind of relationship established with Dr. Adil in AND ALSO: this time, as the project's initiator and leader, I informally "supervised" the practices of students who agreed to participate in it. In this way, the experience and outlook obtained through *What can we make and become* enabled me to deepen my understanding of Alev Adil's decisions and actions in its course. This revision further helped me to identify the techniques, patterns of behaviour and overall inspiration for configuring my own performance as a *curator-supervisor*. Furthermore, my previous experience of the student-supervisor relationship (guided by the policies and ethics of the University) enabled me to think and act strategically from the beginning. Thus, instead of approaching the University policies and guidelines as restricting my project (as it happened in AND ALSO), from the start I designed *What can we make and become* in response to them: that is, embracing and integrating them in the project's structure and process. I therefore considered the possible ways of weaving my objectives and the objectives of the University together. As I was assessing its regulations, I attuned myself to see opportunities, not restrictions. While evaluating my state within the University, I inquired: how do the two kinds of "ethics" — my curatorial ethic and the code of practice of the University — overlap in a *productive* way? How can they work in concert?

Prior to the project, I closely studied the University code of ethics. While some regulations were straightforward and clear, others seemed more ambiguous. In concert with the University's conditions, for instance, it was officially required that there be no conflict of interests between the participants of the project and me as a researcher (UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics, 4.10) — although what would stand for that conflict in the context of our artistic-curatorial exchange was not clear. It was required that the artists' contact details were not shared with public (UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics, 4.7), which makes little sense if the artists put together a public exhibition with their artworks signed on display. It was also required that the artists' signed consent should be given for their works to be photographed and published by the members of the audience (UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics, 4.6). In

reality, however, one would be only able to treat such consent as a mere formality: in the era of smartphones and social media it is hardly possible for the event organisers to control unsanctioned photography and publishing by the members of audience during the event.

In accordance with its protocols, the University recognised *What can we make and become* as a project aimed to collect the data for my research, assessing it as “a form of systematic, critical and creative enquiry that aims to contribute to a body of knowledge” (UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics, 3.3), in which all the risks and benefits of participation should be distributed equally amongst the participants and the researcher. In response to these requirements, I experimented with structuring the process of realising *What can we make and become* in a formal systematic way, leaving behind both the creative indeterminacy that grounded AND ALSO and the result-oriented attitude enacted in *When Air Becomes Breath*. There were clear protocols set for the project’s realisation and the exact activities for the group of participants to go through during our meetings.

Once the group of artists-participants was formed, the project started. It proceeded through the six group meetings (or “workshops”, as we defined them in the group) each dedicated to exploring a particular aspect of our collaborative art practice – as determined by ourselves: i.e. what does it mean to “respond” to the practice of the other? How to work as a single artistic body – rather than a group of autonomous individuals? How do we open up to the change in the presence of each other? The profound question that grounded all others – *What can we make and become via working together?* – consequently turned into the title of our exhibition. In order to introduce the audience to our “answers”, we hosted an evening discussion during the exhibition: a cosy sit-down with cookies and tea, where the artists-participants shared their experience of becoming-with each other and reflecting on the transformations they underwent. The evening event enabled us to introduce and unpack the model of artistic-curatorial production developed through *What can we make and become* for to the UAL community and other guests. The event also helped me to contextualise and critically reflect on my experience of this model of curation. After *What can we make and become* I realised that I would like to repeat the experiment with another group of artists, and to ultimately turn it into an educational series that I could run on a regular basis (outside the setting of

my PhD). The result of that is the ongoing annual research residences, which I host at Exposed Arts Projects.

Launching *What can we make and become* within the University enabled me to use its large pool of students to recruit my project participants. As stated above, there were regulations on *how* I should proceed, however I did not face any pre-given restrictions regarding *what* I was (and was not) allowed to do otherwise (as it happened in AND ALSO). For instance, there was a requirement coming from the University research ethics guide that the participants should be fully aware of the objectives and methods of my research project. Thus, to meet this requirement, I wrote the open call to recruit the artists as follows:

You are invited to take part in a collaborative art project, organised by curator Sasha Burkhanova as a part of her PhD research at CSM. The participants will be suggested to take part in making of a public exhibition (Spring 2018) curated by Sasha, that will feature their works (fine art, design, sound, photography, or else). The group will work in collaboration and make key decisions together — so the formation of roles and relations between the artists and a curator can be monitored by Sasha.

Please see Appendix 3.1 for the Open Call poster.

While the open call text gave the prospective participants an overview of the project's aims and format, a detailed explanation was also provided at the first group meeting, during which the "Artist-participant Information Form" and "Consent Form for Artists-Participants" were given to the students: to be read carefully, signed, and returned to me — as requested by the University guidelines. **Please see Appendix 3.5 for the Artist-participant Information Form; and Appendix 3.6 for the Consent Form for Artists-Participants.** For the University, it was also important that all the risks and benefits of participation should be distributed equally amongst the participants and the researcher (UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics, 3.3). In response to that, the questions of mutual benefits, shared risks and "taking care of each other" was placed at the heart of curating *What can we make and become*, addressed together with the artist-participants, and incorporated in the process of making. After all, it was the ethical question of "care" that became key.

Combining the perspectives of an art curator and a university project supervisor, I observed a principal difference between the two understandings of “care”. Specifically, my understanding of *curatorial care* that I was projecting on “my” artists; and the institutional understanding of care for its students, which I was expected to enact as the university associate. It was therefore my aspiration that throughout the project the two definitions were co-activated with no hierarchy between them. The University’s understanding of care for its students corresponded to the practice of protecting their interests, in accordance with the guidelines discussed in its formal documents: (1) UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics, (2) UAL Guidance for Research Ethics Approval Constitution, (3) UAL Health and Safety policy, (4) UAL Equality and Diversity Framework, (5) UAL Disciplinary Code. By acting as a UAL researcher, I was expected to accept certain responsibilities for the parties engaged in my research either directly or indirectly. This included “being accountable to society, to participants, to their profession, to the University and to funders of the research”, “being accountable for the safety of those associated with their research projects”, and “being aware of all legal, regulatory and ethical requirements laid down by the University or any other relevant bodies”, among others (UAL Code of Good Conduct in Research). In an interesting way, when projected on the situation of a researcher-*curator*, the institutional formulation of the research ethic suggested an effective way of merging of the two approaches to a curatorial ethic: the practice of self-accounting and following the provided standards of practice.

This hybrid perspective would imply that a form of a critical self-account and self-reflection (constituted by one “being accountable to / for ...” and “being aware of ...”, as worded in the University code) would be in itself a *requirement* – and monitored by a designated institution. In the UAL code of ethics, honesty (“researchers must be honest in respect of their own actions and in their responses to the actions of other researchers”), integrity (“researchers must be honest about conflict of interest issues, whether real, potential or perceived, at the earliest opportunity and at all stages of research”), accountability (“where available, the University expects researchers to observe the standards of practice set out in guidelines published by funding bodies, and other relevant professional bodies”), and openness (“researchers should be as

open as possible with other researchers and the public in discussing their work and making it widely available”) are regarded as the Professional Standards of research practice.

Hypothetically speaking, if I adopted these principles as the basis for my curatorial ethic, the resulting outlook would be the following. First, a curator’s honesty in their professional relations with other art practitioners will be required. This would include acknowledging their direct or indirect contributions in the curatorial projects, disclosing any conflict of interest or infringements in the intellectual property rights of their colleagues as soon as they became apparent. Second, the curator’s transparency and openness in regard to their ongoing projects and professional agenda will be required. A curator will be obliged to make their work public and participate in an open dialogue with their audiences to explain their choices. Third, the accountability of a curatorial practice will be monitored at all times. A curator will be required to be consistent with the terms and conditions covered by the agreement between themselves, the institution (the host of a curatorial project), and the “ethics” of other collaborators. Finally, fourth, a curator’s integrity would be recognised as their willingness to follow the standards of good practice, and reporting cases of malpractice or suspected misconduct as appropriate (i.e. in accordance with the established procedures for dealing with misconduct).

At first sight, these four principles appear reasonable and sensible parameters for defining what a curatorial practice should be. In fact, although they are not yet manifested as a single professional code, they have already been accepted by the curators at large. At the same time, however, there are plenty of problems with these principles, also addressed by the curators themselves. For instance, the problem with the articulation of integrity and honesty for curators, in Dieter Roelstraete’s view, is connected to the transformation that would result within the professional art community if curators were required to “rat” on each other, even for the sake of a fully transparent, credible and fair curatorial performance. He therefore recognised the requirement of reporting the misconduct of his colleagues as “unethical” in itself. According to his observation (Roelstraete 2011, pp.20-21),

we all know — many curators are either unethical or curate unethically.
And the only real question that any investigation of so-called curatorial

ethics can logically ask itself is simply this: who are they? For that would be the least one could do from an ethical point of view: warn both artists and curatorial colleagues alike for those curators who either are unethical or curate unethically. [...] Curatorial ethics, in short, requires me to rat on my colleagues — many of whom I know to have done, like me, unethical things. [...] So I am not going to tell you who the unethical curators are, or who has curated unethically [...] — because it would be unethical to do so!

Curatorial practice is profoundly different to a researcher's engagement in terms of "caring". Professional curating requires one's ability to relate to others in many different ways, redefined by each new curatorial project. Importantly, not all of these relationships can be rationalised, reproduced and added to a protocol. In the course of curating my three projects, I experienced the variety of modes of relating between a curator and other parties involved. While some kinds of relations were empowering and productive and others seemed unwanted and "wrong", each time (even though differently) my decisions and action manifested my definition of the curatorial care in the unique context of each project.

For instance, in *What can we make and become*, as I navigated my relationships with the project participants, my personal perception of care in many ways resonated with the ones articulated by curator Anthony Huberman. According to Huberman, the act of "caring" in curating first of all constitutes "a more vulnerable relationship to knowledge" (Huberman 2011, p.191); a "radical act of wearing [one's] heart on [one's] sleeve" (p.192) that is constituted by merging the rational approach to information and knowledge with a sensitive, affective one. In so doing, writes Huberman, curating does not simply reject the expertise of knowing in favour of the anti-intellectualism of not-knowing, but instead steps entirely outside of the "rationality versus emotion" dualism (ibid.). The ideas and things, given through curating, are first of all meant to make the receiver curious, Huberman summarised; even though they will be never fully understood, they will be cared about, so that the "I Love It" value of perceiving the project would always be already more compelling than "I Get It" (ibid.). The situation of "not getting it" but still supporting and nurturing it on its own terms is precisely what I experienced as a curator of *What can we make and become*

from the very start. Deliberately denying my capacity to choose artists for the project via assessing the merits of their work in accordance with my taste, knowledge and expertise, I aspired to create the conditions in which the personal desire to work in a particular setting would matter more than the medium, thematic interests and visual language of each artist. As a result of this approach, I ended up with a group of artists whose practices were conceptually different to my own. At the same time, it was the aspiration to open up, learn from each other and change together that united all of us in the collective.

All in all, throughout the project, my enactment of supervisory-curatorial care consisted of fostering the kind of responsiveness to the others within our group that would not require a complete understanding and agreement with their philosophy and art practice. It was therefore essential for me to set up working conditions in which that balance is established, so that the group neither fell into making one art-piece together (such an aspiration was vocalised in the group several times), nor created their artworks in isolation (i.e. in response to some collectively decided theme; this option was also discussed in the group).

My decisions and actions were primarily driven by curiosity and “not knowing”, while my capability to act was expanded as I deliberately neglected some powers, commonly assigned to the position of a curator in the contemporary art field. Namely, I denied my control over the project’s realisation and its outcomes: rejecting the distance and hierarchy commonly established between a project coordinator and its participants, between a curator and the artists. My involvement in *What can we make and become* on the stage of the workshops took the form of a subtle moderator of a group discussion (not an opinionated curator). I was asking questions so that the conversation proceeded, encouraging the quiet artists to speak more, and gently interrupting the monologues of others, not taking any side in the discussion myself. In a notable way, by the end of the project, the artists themselves “embodied” this position, as they started to shape their statements not as “answers” to my questions, but as further questions, paying more attention to the power of inquiring and the expanding territory that can be claimed through it. The decision to have the exhibition title in the form of a question — *What Can We Make and Become?* — can be also perceived as a part of this strategy, learned by the group.

Another productive conflict between the understandings of care distinct for the University, and my curating of *What Can We Make and Become*, resulted in revising the meanings of statements “I Can do” and “I Can’t do” — as defining the artists’ perception of their own capabilities. The last stage of the project (specifically, the last workshop, installing and exhibition opening) was just before the University graduation show, meaning that the artists had to divide their time between the two exhibitions. This condition became the key subject of our discussion during the last workshop. While we were in the middle of setting the schedule for the installation days, one of the artists expressed a concern that she may not be able to attend these, even though she wanted to, due to the little time she had to get ready for her graduation show. She then suggested that she might not even be able to make her work for *What can we make and become* in time, or at least not to the scale she was aspiring to. The majority of the participants shared the same position. They explained that they also experienced insecurity regarding the timing of the two shows and asked me to consider the possibility of moving the exhibition dates. To give examples, the artists expressed the following concerns:

Artist-participant 1: I have ideas of what I would want to make, but I won’t be able to make it by the 27th [the show opening date]. I still need to finish my project for the graduation show. So I am wondering if there is a possibility of moving it later in May. [...] If that’s just me, I can probably just adapt and bring something else. [25:42 — 26:04; 4th Workshop tape]

Artist-participant 2: It won’t be impossible [to make it in time], but it will be a bigger challenge. I have a feeling that if our course leaders will find out about it, they will be really angry. This is basically what they said: you are not allowed to do any work other than the degree show. I mean, it is obviously up to us, we are grown-ups, but it would really have an effect. [26:38 — 27:15; 4th Workshop tape]

Artist-participant 3: I am concerned about the time as well, because that week [before planned opening of WCWMB] is quite crucial, because after that all our workshops [at the University] will be closed. I also could

just make “something”, which will be sad: since the space has so much potential, and I want to respond to it, rather than just bring some work in. [29:48 — 20:10; 4th Workshop tape]

Artist-participant 4: I feel that we are not making good service to the space and the project itself by rushing it, as if ignoring all the ideas that evolved in our discussions. [...] Because I think that for what we aspired to do it is just not enough time, technically. [30:44 — 31:10; 4th Workshop tape]

Please see Appendix 3.4.2 (tape 4) for the full recording.

The way of expressing their concerns, the specific terminology and references used to support their statements, disclosed the profound disagreement between the two understandings of “curatorial care”: as embraced by curators of the degree show at the University, and myself. This happened due to the two different approaches to measuring the project’s “success” that we had. The unease expressed by the artists-participants thus resulted from their attempt to merge the two approaches, disregarding the different contexts and specific purposes they were responding to. The focus on the result meant that it was the students’ ability to finish their project in time (make it coherent, visually stimulating and accomplished, so as to promote the student as a capable, reliable, creative professional to her multiple audiences) that was mainly valued by the University. A degree show acted as a meeting place for many audiences: the course leaders who would mark the work (and therefore require the students’ complete devotion to it, as one of the artists-participants noted); the gallerists and curators, who would come to “headhunt” the new artists to work with (and for whom the material and conceptual quality of a finished piece is key); the potential collectors; people from the press; finally, the miscellaneous crowd of art-lovers, whose “likes” and Instagram posts would help to promote the artist’s work online. To attract attention and receive a positive feedback from each of these audiences (i.e. a distinction mark, a proposal of a project, a purchase, a post) the artists’ work was expected to be visually and conceptually stimulating; but most important, it should be convincing, well-thought-through and complete. Thus, the University’s

understanding of “care” for its students’ interests manifested in making these criteria of success clear to the students from the very beginning (prior to the actual artistic production) and discouraging any side projects (like *What can we make and become*) that would potentially distract them. As a result, once the art students incorporated the success criteria suggested by the University in their practices, they further applied them as the universal principles for assessing their work and their capacity as artists. For them, “being able to do something” thus started to mean their capability to finish a project in time, in accordance with the plan, while doing “the best one can possibly do”, as one of the artist-participants put.

At the same time, my curating of *What can we make and become* challenged this suggestive universality of the “successful artwork” criteria, and the resulting understanding of “curatorial care” (promoted by the University, amongst other institutions in the contemporary arts field that propagate it: i.e. commercial galleries, biennials, art fairs). For the “success” of *What can we make and become* it was then important that, by coinciding the individual experiences and outlooks into a collective discussion, the artistic group arrives at the understanding that their capability to do things, paradoxically, is *empowered* by those limitations that are imposed on them, as well as the always already-limited abilities of those with whom they choose to work. This perspective suggested a specific approach to artistic production that felt counterintuitive to some artists (as the aforementioned statements by my artists-participants disclosed). Instead of starting with a preliminary plan of an artwork, and further asking: “How much time/resources do I need to have this project done? Whose assistance do I need to make it happen?”, it suggested a departure from the very condition in which she finds herself, thus asking instead: “What can I possibly make in this time, with this number of resources, and in this company?” In this way, an artist’s power to act was not understood as an intended direct action towards the established aim (i.e. what she should do to achieve something), but as her ability to make sense of her own (limited) agency in order to define it according to her own terms (i.e. what *she* can possibly do: right *here*, right *now*). In the case of *What can we make and become*, as the artists worked in a group, I aspired to create the conditions in which their personal incapability could be evaluated and embraced, in a process that would gradually result in their empowerment. The specificity of the approach that we

exercised in making *What can we make and become* was well-captured by one of the artists-participants, as she responded to her peers' suggestions to postpone the exhibition opening:

Artist-participant 5: I think today it is important to understand the extent of what we possibly can make, get into an imaginative and practical mode. [...] If we say that this is less about us producing something — which we might do, but it is about creating something, which people would feel as they walk into the space. So we can be easy about it. So my thought was that we are in the process now when people just put something in the middle of the room and see if it works: how it works if it does, and why it possibly may not. [...] So by the end of this session why don't we just sort out what we already got here — between us? And instead of arguing, shall we think: what can we make of this meeting, by the end of it. What can we make in the next two hours? [28:05 — 29:13;

Appendix 3.4.2, tape 4]

At this point it is important to clarify: I am not in any sense making a comparison between the two curatorial approaches, claiming one to be more effective than the other; and thus suggesting that one articulation of “curatorial care” should be prioritised over the other. Instead, I am aiming to communicate the multiplicity of articulations and approaches that reflect the wide range of situations and relationships in which an art practitioner can be simultaneously engaged through their work: all grounded in different criteria of success and requiring them to amend their methods accordingly. It would be a curator who constantly experiments with what curating can be; who does not pre-exist the very situation of curating and always reconfigures themselves in accordance to the different situations and relationships with their collaborators. To bring in the words of Michel Vandeveld, this would require them to approach their work as inherently “flexible and indefinable”, while consciously “[keeping its] interpretation vague in order to allow for a wide range of professional possibilities” and relations (Vandeveld 2014, p.76). Furthermore, this subject position would allow an individual to adapt successfully to the uncertainty of the environment in which they work and respond to the emerging opportunities and professional relations in a caring fashion.

a curator as an art space director

The official start of the *What can we make and become* project — namely, our first meeting with the recruited artists-participants in January 2018 — coincided with the launch of my art-research organisation Exposed Arts Projects in London. As some of the artists-participants were aware of my curatorial practice prior to our collaborative project, when we came to discussing the potential venue to host the project they requested if it could take place at Exposed. After considering other possible options (i.e. using the space provided by the University, collaborating with another art space, or designing a series of nomadic events), it was decided by the group that collaborating with Exposed would be the most beneficial option. It was the specific methodology and values manifested by Exposed that inspired the artists-participants.

The curatorial values and methodology employed at Exposed emerged from my experience as a PhD student. As a researcher working on a practice-based thesis, I mostly enjoyed two aspects of art-research process: the full immersion in art academia (with research seminars, specialist discussions and peer-to-peer exchange throughout the whole process) and the platform to showcase my art-curatorial practice and research to the non-academic audience (there was a gallery space to use; the University funded research students, interested in organising public events: i.e. symposia, reading groups, performances). The conditions created for PhD research in arts demonstrated the equal appreciation for both the (typically hidden) research element of the project and the final outcome (i.e. an artwork, text, exhibition. Consequently, I felt the need for a similar platform outside art academia: a place where the value of research-based art practice can be explored and demonstrated without editing it down to the strictly visual component. In this way, I came up with the idea of starting such art-research organisation myself. My intention was to bring together an interdisciplinary community of researchers interested in revising the relationships between contemporary arts, science and humanities via creative exchange and collaboration. After months of applying for funding and searching for an appropriate venue, Exposed Arts Projects opened its doors in early 2018.

Format-wise, Exposed Arts Projects was conceived as a “think-and-do tank” that celebrated “the power of arts-based research to produce an informed

multidimensional perspective on the contemporary human condition” and acted as a hub for a mindful and just society that is driven to explore the creative alternatives to the status quo” (exposedartsprojects.com). From the start, the organisation was committed to nurturing a constructive discourse about human values at play in the interconnected, technologically-augmented world. It was set to explore how the ethical dilemmas of modern life can be revisited and understood differently, when the different configurations of values, specific to different people engaged in the same project together, are co-activated. The “think” part of the organisation’s mission corresponded to the way how its annual programmes were conceived and realised. Each year the programme would depart from an ethically complex question and bring together a diverse group of researchers to maintain an inclusive, interdisciplinary mode of knowledge production. The “do” part of the mission reflected the specific way chosen to make the research process and findings public. At Exposed this was done through organising various kinds of art-educational activities relevant to people of different age and background.

Specifically, three kinds of engagement were facilitated at Exposed: (1) setting up and running a research group to deal with the question, so that the outcomes of their activities are then translated into public events; (2) volunteering that enabled the members of the public to work together with our team of researchers to acquire practical skills and knowledge; (3) and public events’ participation, which enabled the members of wider audience to join reading groups, workshops, seminars, Q&As and games organised by the research group and volunteers. While the activities carried out by the *What can we make and become* project collective mainly followed the first engagement route, the group members also willingly participated in the capacity of project volunteers. Usually, the members of a research group would be responsible for the conceptual and organisational element of the project, while the volunteers would help with its curation, marketing, venue management and practicalities. For the successful realisation of *What can we make and become* project, however, the artists felt the importance of sharing *all* the tasks and roles throughout the project, including the “boring” executive ones. Consequently, the formats of work that would be typically recognised as merely organisational in *What can we make and become* project became the parts of a creative process:

by either inspiring the artists' final artworks or being "repurposed" as the art-making activities.

For instance, the installation by Tere Chad emerged from a conversation which the online shop, in which she was ordering the materials for the exhibition. One of the objects she ordered arrived with a minor defect, and when she requested a repair, the shop instead insisted on sending her a piece and advised her to dispose the deflected item. Chad problematised this situation — which is exemplary of online retail today — by building up a complex structure that incorporated the deflected item, which she repaired herself, and its replacement; the large amount of unsustainable packaging that was used to deliver them (the boxes and plastic bags that seemed too big for a small-size object); the record of the conversation she had with the customers service at the shop; and the random objects she found at Exposed, which belonged to the previous owners of the venue. The found objects Chad used were abandoned for the same reason: minor defects and breakages, which were possible to fix — taking some time, effort and basic skill. **Please see Appendix 3.2 p.13 for Tere Chad's installation.**

Another artist who turned her administrative contribution to the space into an artwork was Niloofar Taatizadeh. For her installation she has chosen one of the rooms which was used as a storage: it was occupied with many unwanted objects and building materials, which Niloofar was asked to remove if she wanted to use that space. *What can we make and become* received a small funding from the university to cover the production and installation costs, however there was no extra money available to use for the professional rubbish collection. Approaching the situation creatively, Niloofar — known for her floating installations of objects and shapes relying on each for balance — utilised the metal objects she found in the room and incorporated them into her installation: a mobile-like assemblage that occupied the hole room and appeared as an endless web of intertwining thin metal lines and their shadows. The artwork represented a complex network of relationships, developed through *What can we make and become* that was emotionally and physically sustained by the space and ethos of Exposed Arts Projects. **Please see Appendix 3.2 p.14 for Niloofar Taatizadeh's installation.**

Ultimately, among the key outcomes of our administrative-creative exchange was the final text we used to promote and present the project to the

audience, and the collective text-based artwork that also served as a map for the exhibition, which was handed out to the visitors on arrival. **Please see Appendix 3.3 for the map.**

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As a curator of the Exposed Arts Projects, I was responsible for organising and structuring all the activities in the course of the project: including the work-in-progress meeting, which we referred to as “the workshops”. **Please see Appendices 3.4 for the workshops’ documentation and audio recordings.** Each of the six workshops of *What can we make and become* was designed to develop responsiveness within the group, in a playful, conversation-based form. At the beginning of our first meeting, I invited the artists to introduce themselves: to share their names and tell something about their practice. There was one “rule” to follow: each speaker should connect their narration to the preceding one - saying in what way their interests or methods intertwine with that of the other artist. To conduct this “exercise” with minimum pressure, it was suggested not to follow the circle order (in which they were sitting), but instead — to speak when they feel that they wanted to. In this way, after a couple of interruptions, apologies, and rounds of laughter, the conversation gained its force and flow. As a result, instead of a half-an-hour-long ice-breaking game, it stretched through the whole workshop. After the workshop, I sent a group email as a summary of the work we had done during the session, and to help those who missed it to catch up. Since I received a lot of positive feedback from the artists, encouraging me to keep on sending such emails, e-correspondence became not only an integral part of our practical communication, but also the way of thinking jointly, changing with each-other.

I used e-correspondence to make the artists feel like there was no gap between our meetings. Thus, between the first and the second workshop I asked each of them to think about one word that would be of profound importance for their art practice (i.e. theme, subject, method, medium, etc.), and which they would be interested in exploring via *What can we make and become*. When the artists finished responding, we arranged them spontaneously into three “flows”: *creative ambiguity and disconnection; becoming-conflict, squeezing and change; becoming-multiple, bound and modified*. We then

engaged with these flows to discuss the transformative power of joint art production, and what effects it can have on the individual artists. In this way, for instance, we discussed the creative potentials of ambiguity and disconnection as working in concert; how the act of squeezing (both a mechanical movement of squeezing something with one's hand and a perception of being squeezed: by stress, one's situation, or physically) can bring about a change (in substance structure, in shape, or in perception). Finally, we speculated on how becoming-multiple (the state, which we were aspiring to achieve) facilitates our bounding, and causes, or is caused by, our specific actions and statements. The causal relations between the three were not clear, and different artists communicated different versions on how this can be. At the end of the discussion, however, it was agreed that the artists revisit their practices and come up with some material responses to the three flows: the one(s), with which they resonated most. While the initial "purpose" of this exercise, as I pictured it, was to help the group bond together and start thinking as one multidimensional creative entity, the game went on far beyond this intention. The artists decided they wanted to use the three resulting "flows" as their strategies for making works for the exhibition, so for our next meeting they suggested to bring some artwork ideas so that these could be talked through, as well as "becoming-conflict", "squeezed" and "bound" via group discussion. Notably, the e-discussion and exchange of ideas and opinions then thrived during our next workshop, eliminating any sense of discontinuity.

At some point in the middle of *What can we make and become*, as we started putting together the conceptual framework for our project and thinking about the structure and choreography of the resulting art exhibition, it felt appropriate to use the multilogue format for our e-correspondence. Our specific kind of artistic-curatorial relationship was reflected on as *Intra-action*, to use Karen Barad's terminology (Barad 2007). We specifically favored the Baradian principles of "intra-action" – as a critical response to the notion of "*interaction*", which is commonly utilised to describe an artistic-curatorial collaboration. An interaction-based model of a professional relationship results in a temporary collaboration of consistent, fundamentally autonomous distinct agents that pre-exist the event of joint art production. In a very different way, the *intra-action*-based model recognises the process of a joint art production as a dynamism of forces in which all designated art practitioners (artists and curators alike) are

constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing each other and working inseparably, and developing their specific artistic outlooks, subjectivities and techniques in the presence of the others. The idea to use this model for conceptualising the project came from looking into the particular approach to note-making developed between myself and the artists-participants.

In the course of preparing the exhibition and participating in the four workshops together, the artists-participants shared their impulses for making art, which consequently transformed their very way of thinking about the joint art practice: from being autonomous creative individuals they were moving towards becoming one creative entity. These transformations were mostly observable in the dynamics of e-correspondence, which brought to life the particular kind of relationship I aimed to foster. As I explained earlier, I only demonstrated my way of (strategical, creative, not merely instrumental) email writing once, and did not require the group to embrace it. It was their desire to appropriate it for themselves and approach it as contributing to their art making process.

The bellow fragments from my email to *What can we make and become* participants after the first meeting (27 March 2018) demonstrate the overall style and language used in our e-correspondence:

On Tue, 27 Mar 2018, 14:54 Sasha Burkhanova-Khabadze, <sashaburkhanova@khabadze.com> wrote:
Dear Artists,

It was another great meeting, where some important issues were addressed.
Here is the link to our recording, for those who missed it (and was missed by the group) or wants to revisit:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QTuLiMeijhZNih8uY5XwXxRRiWV4khLV/view?usp=sharing>

One of those issues mentioned was the pressure of time, and proximity of your graduation show to this one. These two art projects have very different nature, nurture, structure and weight.

Graduation show seems to be an opportunity to present your individual excellence, hours of hard work (in the traditional sense of artistic production:) in your studio, aiming at producing an outstanding, unique, unforgettable, the one and only work of art, that would serve as your representation to the audiences (as many will come to see the show: collectors, potential galleries to work with, curators, friends, peers, critics, tutors, and many others). I hope you do your very best to attract the right ones and get the mark you are aiming for.

Our show at Exposed is of a very different kind. The value of things like "individual excellence" and "hard work in the studio (library, workshop,)" becomes uncertain. What does the first mean in the context of human relationships that require at least two people – becoming one – becoming different?.. What does the second mean in the context of your "outside the studio/library/workshop/..." life? Do you have it? How do you know that?

After all, how would you measure the success of our project? What defines "success"? What does it mean? And why is it important?

What other things come into importance?..

Lara's alphabets-soundscapes

Alexander's installation-critique-feedback conversation loops

Lois' things and narratives that matter for certain places to be

Lexi's rhythms of people (queues) and sounds (tracks)

Carla's human-to-technology relations, strange eyes and clouds

Teresa's leftovers of the everyday that may (or may not) look like art

Isobel's hidden artworks in secret places (what is a better place to hide an artwork than inside another artwork?)

Tere's society of circus, laughing pretentiously about themselves

Susanna labyrinths of imagination and matryoshka rooms

Harley's intra-inter-in-dust-rialisation of death and execution in progress

Niloo's becoming-multiple becoming-machine becoming-different

What else is important?

Some practical things.

- having the exhibition text ready by the end of this week. so please do update the google doc by Friday, and then I will edit it into the final piece.
- graphic design: who can make our exhibition poster-invite in the next few days? Any volunteers? :-)
- equipment: do you know what you need to show your work? Let me know so we make sure you have it. As I said there are some monitors and projectors at Exposed that you can use.

And some practical questions.

- our interdependence within the group that is the underlying structure of this exhibition: how can we disclose it through instals and our choice of works to show? do we want / need to show it?
- our authorship: how do we title the show? How do we sign the artworks and names? In a very physical way – do we make a map, a list, little table next to each work with the artist's and the work's name? Will we explain the works and/or our choices?
- our collaboration: how was it? what is it? what is it capable of becoming?

My use of e-correspondence in this particular administrative-creative way — facilitating the continuity of the project experience and inviting artists to respond creatively to the mundane tasks — was driven by the aspiration to dissolve the comforting dualities that are typically present in an artist-curator collaboration, and to see what can emerge in their place. For example, I aimed to undo the division between the personal and professional facets of our relationships, inviting the artists' responses to my questions and actions. In supervising the project, I was trying to avoid separating the discussions of its conceptual framework and practicalities, and encouraged the artists to keep them intertwined at all times. Moreover, the artists were encouraged to let the pragmatic exchange of information regarding the project intertwine with their stream-of-consciousness writing: those things they would *feel like* saying at times, which may not seem relevant to the project. Written with these objectives in mind, our emails challenged the border between different genres of e-correspondence, which on the one hand, may have confused the artist-respondents, yet on the other, invited them to join this liberating game of writing that would take us one step closer to connecting our thinking processes and attuning to each other. Thus, strategically putting the artists in a situation of such uncertainty by my emails, presented above (no instructions were offered to them on how to respond to my email), I encouraged them to approach the act of responding as a creative statement in itself. Specifically, I asked them to talk about the things that were “important to them”, and to start by thinking about the very definition of importance. I suggested that they do so in response to the

ephemeral poetic definitions suggested by their peers: to look for similarities between each other's creeds, interests and methods, and investigate how those "similarities" can help them to disclose their profound differences; that could then be engaged with further. At the same time, in the second part of my email, I contrasted the philosophical notion of importance with the more practical one: i.e. dealing with the preparing and installing the exhibition of their artworks.

When the responses were collected, I registered that many artists in the group incorporated the principles underlying my email-writing in their own way. Thus, they incorporated the same productive balance in their emails: between the sensible and senseless, functional and poetic; informative and confusing. Each of our emails was turned into a complex device: a (pragmatic, rational) means of communication, and an (intuitive, spontaneous) act of sharing *that which is important* for oneself, at a certain moment of time. To point at it, as if saying: *this is important, although I can't yet explain why, so for now I'll just mention it to you here.*

Throughout our e-correspondence within the group, we practiced thinking in response to each other: "intra-actively" rather than interactively. For the exhibition text, we tried intra-active writing and contextualisation of our practices. *Writing intra-actively* for us corresponded to including the multiple voices and perspectives which we had managed to accommodate in our (e-)conversations up until that point. Consequently, we worked to apply the same principles in writing our exhibition text collectively, following some principal "rules": anything can be added to the text, things can be moved around, yet nothing written by another artist can be "deleted" (only graphically struck through, if one wishes). We also decided to use distinct fonts to visualise the dynamics of writing (different artist wrote in different fonts). The names, however, were dropped, so that the resulting text manifested our becoming one creative entity. A major challenge that we faced in the course of writing was that, in order to make our text coherent to the various audiences (the "outsiders" and "strangers" to our creative exchange), a certain amount of interpretation and contextualisation was needed. It was thus the only time during the *WCWMB: What can we make and become* project, when the artists requested that I "use my curatorial authority" and "edit" the resulting piece of collective writing. When that was done — in a profoundly meaningful way — our exhibition text was sent to our audiences by email.

Please see Appendix 3.4.1 pp. 10-14 for the collectively written exhibition text.

* * * *

With this immersive experience of becoming a part of the art collective, what happened to my position of a director of the art organisation hosting the project? On the one hand, it may seem like the curator-host of *Exposed* became fully subservient to the artists-guests. Yet, on the other hand, it is through this subservience, constant encouragement of their experimentation and reminders not to worry about “failing” anything or anyone – how I managed to establish and nurture the relationship of trust within the group. This trust further enabled our ability to transform and evolve together. Throughout *What can we make and become*, my “curatorial engagement” primarily consisted of helping the flow of artists’ statements to go on and bounce between their similarities and differences. In this way, my own statements and replies were not meant to contribute to the “contents” of the discussion, but to ensure its continuity. My emails thus acted as responses-bridges and responses-knots (rather than answers or expressions of my views in regard to the discussed subjects). As this position materialised in my emails, it resulted in a system of “pointing” that connected the stray thoughts of the artists. After each workshop - after revisiting my notes and paying attention to the repetitions and some “logic” that made me make those – I would use them to compose a “follow-up email”. In each email, I would go back to a particular issue that was repeated over and over during the workshop. Ultimately, the logic of thinking “in response” and acting “to ensure continuity” became *the* logic of *What can we make and become*. Each time the participants spoke or did something, it was in response to the other. They would refer to a text that “came to mind”, include anecdotes from their practice that would respond to some of the references and issues, etc. In the end, there was almost no sense of individual minds: only a collection of “re-cycled” experiences we shared during each workshop. Ultimately, these experiences were manifested in the resulting artworks for the exhibition. **Please see Appendix 3.2 for the exhibition documentation.**

As I evaluate the project now, I understand that one of my inner drives for making *What can we make and become* was to experiment with creating a

space — which is safe, yet by no means conflict-free, which is not an exile from the “cruelties” of the art world that requires rationality and reason but offers an alternative livable subject position for artists and curators within it. A space that would bring a group of strangers together, inviting them in a relatively short period of time (i.e. one introductory meeting and four two-hours-long workshops) to move towards becoming one creative body, whose thinking-doing processes are indivisible and entangled. A space, by inhabiting which we not only created a powerful exhibition, but also profoundly transformed our practices for our future projects. As a material form, this multilogue-space constituted itself as Exposed Arts Projects: furthering the values and hybrid ethics we developed through *What can we make and become* long after the project was over. These are still embodied by each new project, and formally presented in the Code of Conduct of Exposed. **Please see Appendix 3.7 for the Exposed Arts Projects Code of Conduct.**

List of references:

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- University of the Arts London (2017) *University of the Arts London Code of Practice on Research Ethics*. Available at: https://www.arts.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/43328/UAL-Code-of-Practice-on-Research-Ethics-February-2017.pdf (accessed: 28/1/2021).
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