

Endlessly from the Middle, Or, Toward curatorial/politics

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Doreen Mende

Making exhibitions seemed to be a way out of the narrow pathways of an artist's work and its narrow subject-object relation, a discomfort that haunted me ever since I studied painting in the 1980s.

Marion von Osten^[1]

Knowing at the limits of justice must start before, but facing the beyond of, representation.

Denise Ferreira da Silva^[2]

Being Outside With/In

If I am writing or speaking of "I," this "I" may be myself, and it may not want to be myself as an "I." The latter is not meant to address the modernist trap of individualism. Instead, this "I" beyond myself shall rehearse a consciousness for the limited capacity of language in providing space and time for complexity. This text between essay, a diary, many conversations, and a peer review cannot solve the limitations: any premise of problem-solving would be a continuation of competition or blindness toward an unlimited crystallization of a true coalition of thoughts. In this context, language marks a definitional imperative, usually claiming the right to declare the moment of crisis, danger, emergency, or rupture. It invokes the limits of language as an insufficiency of semantic transmission, which already addresses, thereby putting the insufficiency of curating as a practice of putting (language-)objects on display. This is not easy to put into words otherwise, and my own situatedness departs from within structures of institutional academia and para-academic or para-institutional locations of contemporary art/research, but also from structures of history in a post-1989 world, when memory was scattered, obscured, repressed, neglected, inferiorized, and dominated, while such memory also keeps desiring presence, visibility, resistance, and resilience, and perhaps also power. If I could, I would like to lose and get rid of "I" toward a voice "hacking the subject" or "with/out a subject," as Denise Ferreira da Silva proposed to enable moving beyond the limits of critique.^[3] Exactly because we are trapped in confronting the definitional imperative of language by analyzing it as if it could be transformed by the same reason that defined it, as if it was a personal matter to be solved and as if "I" is the key for socializing memory it is not. What if language, though, is a means

for speaking out the irreconcilability with the past? What if language is the lesser evil to move beyond “I” toward an irreconcilable “we” as an alien body altogether? Despite all, we must not give up on the practice of *ex-hibere*, of holding out, as a possibility of making public beyond representation yet as a conversation if not a confrontation and a conflict. Con-flict: the word proposes etymologically to be together in strike. The “I” alone is incapable of doing it. Yet, “we” have hardly learned how to be in conflict together as a practice of emancipation. Could such learning of being in conflict become a method toward the abolition of the exhibition as we know it? Maybe we are already in an endless attempt of trying from the middle of it without, yet, having words and vocabularies for such an alien body. The following text reflects on situations of conflicts, unease, and failures as conditions fostering what I propose as curatorial/politics.

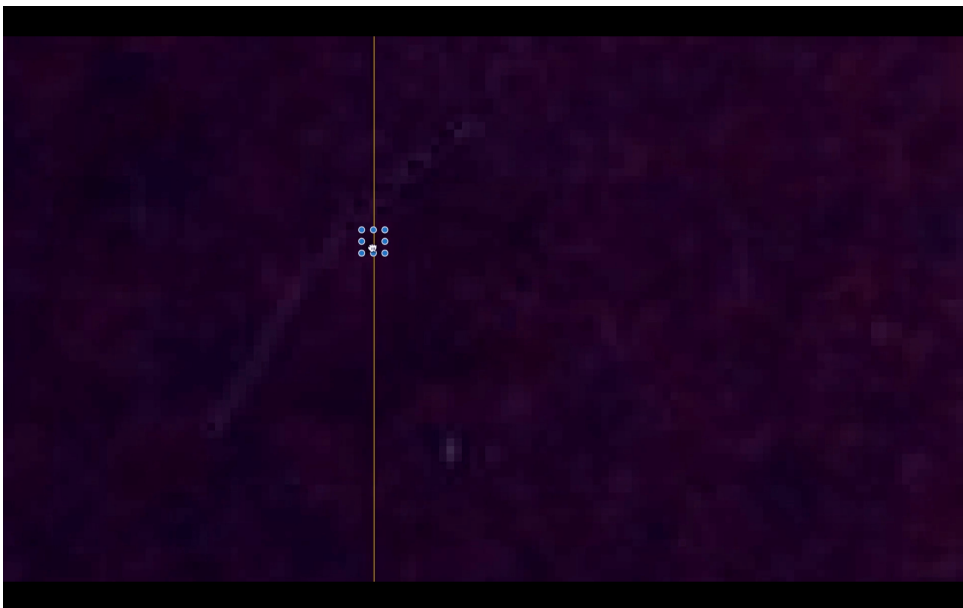
My initial plans for a PhD addressed *cybernetics of a second order*, as a methodology to problematize the exhibition as a recursive process between human and non-human entities. I was particularly interested in developing a vocabulary that would allow me to articulate the exhibition as a spatial-temporal formation, emerging through a set of relations: between the institution as a machinic structure of control *and* the contingency of the artist/curator *outside in* the exhibition machine; between the fluidity of processes *and* the static imperative of (built-) architecture; the relation between the fragility of research and the demonstration of a statement on display; the relation between contingency *and* control. Yet, never try to do a PhD involving cybernetics/system theory in a PhD program dedicated to post-structuralist thought and that permanently and most generously but insistently pushes you to undo existing structures and systems, to think counter-intuitively, to mobilize lived experience into a repository for knowledge toward writing as a biography and body of research; and finally, to learn to understand that the feeling of struggle in writing, thinking, and making is not something to fight against but to embrace and act from. I will come back to the notion of struggle a few times.

During my early participation in curatorial/knowledge, I sometimes could not speak the word “system” out loud anymore I could not utter the word system without the feeling of violence or doing something wrong, of being horribly limited in thinking or betraying our own work of undoing.^[4] In the process of getting over the system-theory block, I came across the notion of the *blind spot* from reading on second-order cybernetics, and which I mobilized as a method or operational tool to think the curatorial from that what remains in the blind spot, meaning invisible to the exhibitionary complex, according to the principles of spotlighting as making visible and enlightening. I was interested in *inhibition* as a potential methodology to challenge the supremacy of *exhibition*, and to move our understanding of the exhibition closer to a dysfunctionality disqualifying the normative signification toward a display in transit.^[5]

During the first year of my research on the blind spot, I was invited to participate in the conference “The Blind Spot and the Orientalized Space” at the Petach Tikva Museum in Israel in October 2008.^[6] It was my first visit to Israel. I was nervous, in fact not so much because the participation was the first presentation of my PhD research in public, but also because it was my first time in Israel. As a teenager, I had read *Anne Frank’s Diary*, Sophie Scholl’s *Die Weiße Rose*, about resistance movements of German youth in Nazi-Germany, and at school in the DDR the German Democratic Republic, the communist part of Germany we were told about the antifascism of Clara Zetkin, the communist resistance of Ernst Thälmann during the Nazi regime, the Black revolutionary feminist struggle of Angela Davis, and solidarity for Yasser Arafat’s Palestine; all that together had composed a memory without history after 1990 in reunified Germany. Upon my arrival, I walked around in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv-Jaffa with the burden from the seemingly intergenerational incapacity to think outside of the concept of guilt that had repressed a possible vocabulary for imagining the everyday struggle and complexity of contemporary living conditions for Palestinians, Arab Jews, or Israelis in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Haifa, or Ramallah and Bethlehem. Perhaps because of a childhood memory on solidarity campaigns with Chile,

Nicaragua, and Palestine in the DDR, there was no doubt that I should travel to the Occupied Territories, about 45 minutes away from where I was staying.

Crossing checkpoint 300 marks a transformative moment that had an impact on my research far beyond an academic project: on October 10, 2008, in the afternoon the sun hadn't set yet, but could be sensed already I took bus 24 from the Arabic bus station between the Garden Tomb and Damascus Gate in Old Jerusalem. The tour ended in front of the GILLO checkpoint, or checkpoint 300, that separates Jerusalem from the West Bank town of Bethlehem. It's a large, physically present checkpoint that operates like a border control post, as an infrastructure of violence, inequality, and segregation. I went through passport control. With the Reunification Treaty negotiated in principle until October 3, 1990, a German passport would have allowed people from the DDR to cross checkpoints and borders impossible to cross a year before. The exit of the checkpoint on the Palestinian side is spatially organized in the form of a corridor articulated by a fence structure. The fenced corridor functions as both architecture of control and a spatially, highly organized stage. A stage because on the other side of the separating wall there are Palestinian traders, taxi-drivers, mothers, and street vendors waiting for those who arrive. It's like at an airport, when you arrive from a flight entering the arrivals hall: the automatic door opens and presents you with this panoramic view into a waiting crowd, and each person, each pair of eyes, looks at each person passing through the automatic door with anticipation of an immediate future. Arrival is like a stage, a super display, a spot-lit moment, a high-point of exposure a manifestation of bodies encountering bodies.



Reiterating An Itinerary to Translucency (1982/2013), 2021, 18 min., research video by Doreen Mende.

Transiting the checkpoint between Jerusalem and Bethlehem invoked a transformation: the woman who had arrived on the Jerusalem-side as a PhD candidate transformed in her movement through the control corridor into a woman born in East Germany really existing socialism in solidarity with Palestine but was welcomed on the Palestinian side as a woman from the West. The eyes of a taxi-driver offering a ride and elderly women selling sweets from the Aida camp or Ramallah were welcoming travelers from the other side; their eyes identified the woman, in tourist shorts and shirt, as a traveler from the West. Dressed in white, carrying a blue textile bag with sunglasses and the not-yet fully finished book *Prisoner of Love* by Jean Genet, I felt displaced by my own blindness. Yes, this woman who had just crossed the checkpoint from Jerusalem, looked like a tourist traveler from the West. Yet, in this moment, the woman realized too that she did not perceive herself to be part of a

geography of the former West because she had grown up in the East, or that which until 1989 was geopolitically considered as the East. The woman meeting the anticipating eyes upon arrival remembered herself *waiting*, at home in the East-German village where she grew up. She saw herself as a schoolgirl waiting for family relatives from West Germany to finally arrive with their car, waiting for the so-called *Westverwandschaft*, whose arrival in the DDR was officially monitored and pressured under the one-party socialist state, yet to whom the family in the East would offer everything despite the danger of political consequences. Crossing the checkpoint on that day, and more importantly, arriving on the side of those waiting for visitors, friends, family, or tourists triggered the memory of my own waiting stretched within an East-West divide of the global Cold War some decades earlier, and thus made me realize the co-existence or the double consciousness inhabiting a divide in my own body, reaching far beyond myself.

The walk through the checkpoint was a passage of subjectivation: the constitution of a political but confused subject beyond the “I” not invoked by the state, but by those who were excluded from the state. The woman ceased to be a proud PhD candidate and became an East German on the inside and a traveler from the West on the outside. This confused feeling of inside/outside enmeshment suddenly explained so many situations of feeling not quite fitting in one or the other system; the feeling of being a misfit, troubling and unsettling, constituted the only possible position to proceed. It was the moment in which I forgot about cybernetics as “the science of effective organization.”^[7]

Exhibition as Problem-Space

Turning more concretely to the framing of this issue, I would like to remind us that the term ex-hibiting or, “ex”-“habere” in Latin means to hold out, or, to take out, or to give out. The term “exhibit” denotes evidence in court too: one presents *an exhibit* as evidence or an argument to verify the charge or the defense. In the conventional practice of making exhibitions, the act of holding out is bound to various elements: the artist’s labor, the curator’s labor, the assistants’ labor, the technicians, or, the division of labor and forms of collaboration, the budget, the institution’s agenda, the exhibition design often realized with an architect and/or designer leading to many decisions about light, colors, the parcours through an exhibition space, the entrance and exit of the exhibition, etc. The research process for which maybe also includes travel, the limits of making, transport and insurance, many, many conversations and forms of communication, negotiations, a specific context, the production process of the exhibition, the press release, the audience or public, as well as political/social urgencies. I am listing all these elements to indicate the immense network of practices that exhibiting comprises, and which must be mobilized in order to turn the exhibition into a medium that constructs a value-making system that would divide the exhibited and inhibited into a binary logic:

art/culture,

light/dark,

masterpiece/waste,

authentic/inauthentic,

approved/disapproved,

qualified/disqualified,

civilized/non-civilized,

colonizer/colonized,

woman/man,

North/South,

East/West.

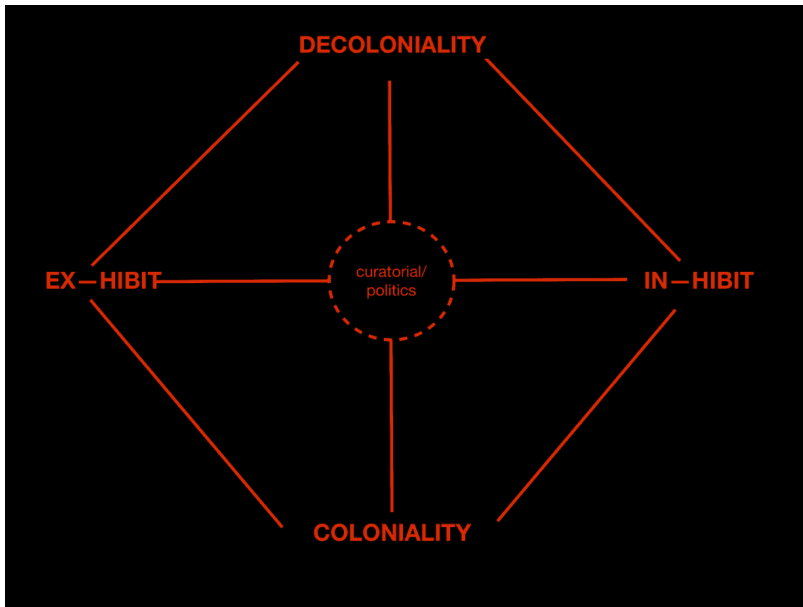
exhibition/inhibition

(the “/” as potentiality

to dismantle the binarism)

In this regard, the exhibition is the perfect tool, or the “ontographic device” as Anselm Franke describes the exhibition as a medium,^[8] for the project of modernity that David Scott defines as a “complex structure of social, economic, juridical, and political relations of knowledge and power,”^[9] with the objective to install a normative logic that divides modernity from non-modernity as a principle to legitimize modernity. In order to modernize, modernity declares domination over cultures/ languages/ subjects, and regions as not modern. Allow me to return to the hyphen between “ex” and “hibition”, “ex-hibition”, to mark its constructed nature, as well as of its counterpart, “in-hibition.” In-habere, to hold back, but also to take in or to *not* give out. While modernity’s violence installed the exhibition as a tool for colonial domination, it also installed a division, or the great divide, between exhibition and inhibition. It is the coupling of ex-hibition/in-hibition, entangled or separated or related through a dash as a profoundly conflictual space-time that shall provide us with a point of entry to *problematize* the exhibition through its own dilemma.

From an anthropological perspective, we can think of the “medium of the exhibition as a possible *ontographic device* a medium that is particularly well-equipped to deal with the ontological separations of the modern age,” as Franke states about the “magic circle” facilitating the great divide, or the “ontological partition,” or the “differential principle,” as making of a world as universal principle (modernity) by the means of exhibiting.^[10] Certainly, as curators we need to analyze precisely the violence of ex- of the entangled yet separated or related space-time for making worlds while stepping back to provide care, time, resources, and room for the *in-* to unfold according to its own terms and conditions of making public. Yet, could there also be a third approach that is closer to the feeling of being a misfit, meaning of an existence on both sides of the “differential principle” so that it becomes possible to unsettle the extreme binarism of ex-hibiting versus in-hibiting? This is a first proposition to engage with curatorial/politics: endlessly from the middle, emerging between ex- and in- or in and out. Or to pose the question differently: how to get out of this deadly and horrible divide that modernity imposed on us? How could we mobilize *inhibiting* as a methodology for exhibiting? If we understand the figure of “inhibition” as a form of dysfunctionality, embarrassment, and confinement, how would the mode of inhibiting change the conditions of exhibiting?



curatorial/politics, diagram by Doreen Mende, CCC/HEAD 2020.

My approach to *inhibition* had been informed by reading Sigmund Freud's *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), however, my interest in inhibition is not a psychological condition to be pathologized, cured, or therapized. Rather, the condition of *inhibition* opens an endlessly generative space for counter-intuitive knowledge, opposing and challenging the norm(alizing) principle under which exhibiting operates. In this regard, inhibition intentionally exhibits a dysfunctionality, once its potential is recognized outside and within the modernist exhibitionary complex confronting or occupying the line between in/exhibition facilitating the violent divide. That means that the proposal for a curatorial/politics entails not giving up on the exhibition as a practice of making public. Instead, this approach aims to re-own, re-create, de/recompose the means of making public by rehearsing the practices of disengaging with cultures of domination.^[1] Such disengagement does not simply mean leaving the scene, rather such disengagement attempts to interrupt the violence of domination and to stop the continuation of the division between either domination or resistance, as if these two categories are eternal, static facts. Or, in Scott's elaboration, such disengagement would insist on and depart from the care for a confidence of knowledge of those who have been subject to imperial modernity's "differential principle," as elaborated above, and who know from lived experiences turned into poems, songs, paintings, and methods constituting a practice of disengagement that has enabled, namely the *transformation* of the conditions of modernity that Scott describes as a *problem-space*:

A "problem-space," in my usage, is meant first of all to demarcate a discursive context, a context of language. But it is more than a cognitively intelligible arrangement of concepts, ideas, images, meanings, and so on though it is certainly this. It is a context of argument and, therefore, one of *intervention*. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.

That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such (the problem of "race," say, [as a problem of thought]), but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having. Notice, then, that a problem-space is very much a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context, if you like, of knowledge and power (which is: modernity). But from within the terms of any given problem-space what is in dispute, what the argument is effectively about, is not itself being argued over. Notice also that a

problem-space necessarily has a temporal dimension or, rather, is a fundamentally temporal concept.^[12]

Rehearsing again and again the disruption of linear, chrono-normative, or imperial temporality of exhibiting is where the trans- or intergenerational de/linkage comes in to learn to listen to those inhibited/categorized forms of knowledge, while remaining aware of the forces of imperialism that classified the faculties of knowledge in the first place. Rehearsing the disengagement with cultures of domination means to foster, to support, to aspire, to narrate, to practice, and to call for a different history of “the postcolonial present,” that is not new in the progressive or developmental sense (modernity), rather this newness is a potentiality that has always already existed.^[13] As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay writes, “[p]otential history is not the account of radical thinking, of explicit ideological struggle against imperialism, but a rejection of imperialism’s apparatus all together.”^[14] Thus, such rehearsals of disengagement are crucial in avoiding the imperial temporality, or chrono-normative order of linearity, that always demands to seek new solutions for a better future. This linearity is a trap. Instead of sojourning in the analysis of the exhibition as a medium, or, instead of spending precious time with another wave of “institutional critique” to analyze the structures of power, and thus investing emotional and intellectual labor *again*, I would like to propose to occupy the exhibition itself as a *problem-space*. For such a desire, knowledge will not be enough to offer the only confrontational device. Instead, we need something else or more or different in alliance with knowledge for creating, or fostering, or offering, or sharing a space-time in which knowledge “at the limits of justice must start before, but facing the beyond of, representation” as Denise Ferreira da Silva proposed.^[15]

curatorial/politics

While running the Critical Cybernetic Curatorial Research-based Program (CCP RP) Master at HEAD Genève, especially during the first years after arriving in my first institutionally contracted position as a curator/theorist in 2015, I continuously asked myself in which ways *the curatorial* has an impact on conceptualizing a research-based study program in a visual arts department. Not in terms of *curating* a study program, but in terms of considering *the curatorial* as a field at the crossroads of non/knowledge, research, art, and publicness. What kind of curatorial situatedness would be needed to enable a space of learning, collectivizing, socializing, learning to unlearn, as Azoulay and Françoise Vergès would phrase it,^[16] or of moving underneath what the institution possesses, of hijacking the institution for needs of social-political relevance larger than us as human-individuals.

My approach to the curatorial has never been descriptive. My own educational formation took place through exhibitions such as Documenta11, where I participated in the education program at the University of Kassel with the involvement of Okwui Enwezor as artistic director, yet, importantly also Ute Meta Bauer and Sarat Maharaj from the curatorial team, as well as Vergès, Isaac Julien, Andreas Siekmann, Trinh. T. Minh-ha, and many more artists, intellectuals, and storytellers. The exhibition itself in Kassel, considered platform 5 of a discursive process also involving conferences and gatherings in New Delhi, St. Lucia, Lagos, Berlin, and Vienna, never tried to illustrate its commitment to decolonizing processes of the twentieth century and the postcolonial condition in contemporary art. Instead, the exhibition operated as a passage of a process, closer to a forum for debate, listening, and learning. Through this experience of encountering the exhibition as a space of “knowing at the limits of justice [...] beyond [...] representation” to invoke Ferreira da Silva again, my initial encounter with the curatorial can best be described as imaginative. Sarat Maharaj’s text “Xeno-Epistemics” in one of the Documenta publications, for example, was formative in thinking about the retinal regime as a philosophy of struggle. Later, the research think tank group Curatorial/Knowledge at Goldsmiths provided a space for developing a non-descriptive but constitutive understanding of the curatorial that is closer to a fabric, an intersection, a set of

relations, a contradiction, an assembly, and a provisional term for articulating what the crossing of the lived experience with theory in and through practice produces. It is continuously changing. At this moment, the curatorial offers a chrono-political framework in which economics, politics, practices of resistance, culture, memory, and futurity compose a condition that is closer to life than to any discipline.^[17]

In regard to a study program within institutional hierarchies marking the structures of the colonial matrix of power, the proposal of “affirmative sabotage” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak became relevant for reflecting on a possible curatorial/politics as a practice: undoing or unlearning the industrial-academic complex from inside, or, from “outside in the teaching machine” which is another formulation by Spivak, whose essay collection *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012) has been a constant interlocutor for me to think through programming the CCC.^[18] An “affirmative sabotage” is a possibility to operate from within, which means through an intimate proximity with the master as a powerful position from which a slow revolution could possibly turn the master’s tools against the machine.^[19]

My approach to the curatorial as a methodology crossing different fields departs from a profound frustration with normative-epistemic orders of memory, history, and education. My own formation as a curator-theorist is deeply informed by situating myself on the side of those who question the normative machines of knowledge-making. We know from the short twentieth century that revolutions often demand a tabula rasa, as another call for modernity to replace one system by another. The peaceful people’s revolution on the street in East Germany in 1989 had led to the fall of the socialist state system, yet only when macro-political narratives (of the former West) took over from euphoric exhaustion, which has led us in the East into a political depression and demographic social disorder. We are coping with these consequences today more than ever, as we face the worldwide rise of fascism, not only in the East of Germany where the Alternative for Germany party (mainly initiated by male West-German politicians) claims to finish the East German people’s revolution by using protest slogans of 1989, such as “we are the people.” For that reason, *revolution*, as it has been unfolded in front of us, is an exhausted promise. Perhaps, I veer too far from the topic, yet, for me these histories, experiences, and approach to the curatorial are intertwined and mutually informing.

After six years of running the CCC RP, I reflect on my practice of shaping a space for learning/unlearning, education, gathering, socializing, conflicting and debating, for making and thinking together as a continuation of the curatorial. Again, I don’t think of curatorial practice but of curatorial inquiry as a field of knowledge production with tensions between the intimacy of reading and public exposure, between academia and civil publicness otherwise. It has been a profound learning process to realize that running a study program in an institution like HEAD, which sits on the foundations of the economics of transatlantic trade in which Switzerland participated as we analyzed in the seminar “The Many Voices of ‘les indiennes’” (2018/19) leading into an exhibition at the school’s art exhibition space LiveInYourHand in 2020 everyone signing a contract to work or study here is implicated in a structural condition that results from a coloniality of power. I am an “implicated subject” as Michael Rotherberg argued in his latest book.^[20] Despite the fact that I am not a full member of the normative order of Swiss society, I have an *Ausländerausweis* Permit G frontalier without any political rights, I am structurally implicated in an institution built on a coloniality of power that Patricia Purtschert analyzed as “colonialism without colonies.”^[21] I will come back to the seminar later.

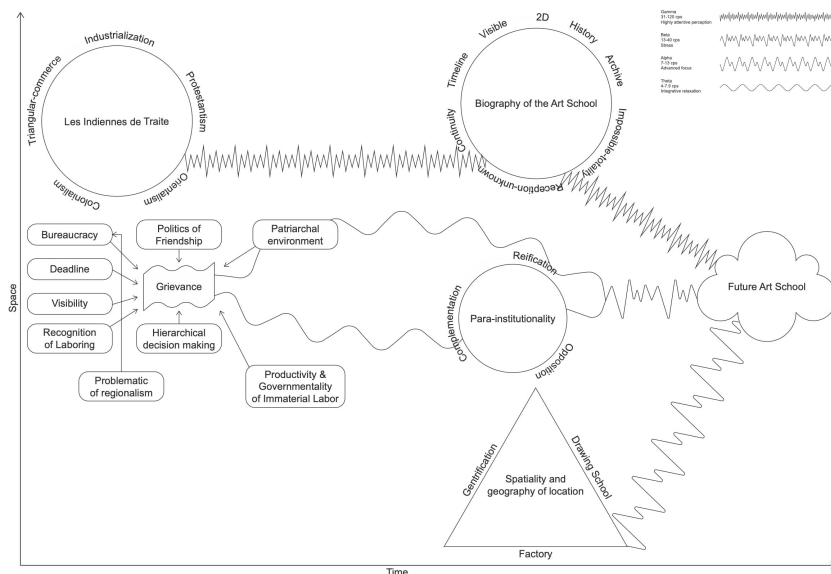
What could a practice of accountability look like within a structural condition of white patriarchal ignorance? Is it possible to inhabit the creation of a “safe space” that moves beyond the reach of the institution while being implicated in this very same institution? This is a painful dilemma, a daily struggle, and a permanent balancing act. It requests forms of radical diplomacy, practices of resistance, humor, love, care, and friendships, extra-

institutional coalitions, good health, an obsession with learning, losing control, thinking ahead, a Lacanian psychoanalyst, the capacity to take distance, a slow process of understanding that individual problems are structural problems, and *joie de vivre*. It takes energy, time, friendship, and collective will to maintain such space within, or, to put it differently, a space of learning “outside in the teaching machine.”^[22] A double bind. It puts pressure on our practices as well as our solidarities, socially and structurally, across the teacher-student divide.

I started my seminar at CCC by naming it “The Curatorial” to underline that this seminar is not about curatorial practice, training students in skills to make an exhibition in technical terms. It was important to me to point out that the seminar challenges curating as a politics of making public, and to cross thinking with making as an intertwined process, from research to making thought and matter public. By renaming the seminar curatorial/politics,^[23] I wanted first to express the need to situate the curatorial in relation to the knowledge-industry complex, and second underline the increasing pressures on intercommunal or transcontinental processes in a climate of a “global swing to the right” as Arjun Appadurai framed a lecture in 2017.^[24] In regard to the first, I belong to a generation for which institutional critique in contemporary art of the 1990s was an important emancipatory proposition: the analysis of the structural situatedness of your practice of performance became fundamental material for the performance itself. Yet, we could also see that criticality as a method quite smoothly re-constituted the value-system of contemporary art: critique, and thus knowledge, had become an immaterial value, lubricating cognitive capitalism in contemporary art. We can agree that critical thinking as institutional critique is highly contested in places like HEAD, which is one of many of its kind across Europe. Yet, critique is not enough. Or, as Ferreira da Silva reminds us, “we cannot stay in the work of critique, we must go *through* critique to get to the work.”^[25] In relation to the second, my proposition of curatorial/politics wishes to acknowledge the power of display as a political tool for making public. In other words, I wish to reconnect with the spatiality of a public, or mobilize the curatorial toward the spatiality of people, the polis, the civil, the city... Therefore, naming the seminar curatorial/politics seemed to me the only option to situate the curatorial, as a fabric of relations and as an urgency for knowledge with power of transformation, in relation to public knowledge. The forward slash between “Curatorial” and “Politics” aims to point at a relationality, where the curatorial is a xeno-epistemic field that intersects with the lives and debates from the polis as a people’s inquiry.

The Seminar/Exhibition

I vividly remember the seminar “Re-locating the art academy / What are possible spatial politics and architectures for learning and doing research practices in the arts of the 21st century?,” specifically the refusal and anger from some of the students to engage with the exercise of turning the actual spatial framework about 250 square meters on the fifth floor of the future building in the North of Geneva into a plane of experimentation, imagination, and speculation. With a concrete and real situation, the move of the department to a new campus, as its case study, the exercise was to take the floor plan of the new location as matter, with and against itself, to imagine an art school. For me, the seminar was absolutely necessary after having struggled for two years to create a space in the institution that would allow us students and teachers shaping the educational process on the ground to discuss a spatial-architectural vision of an architecture of a future academy we want to inhabit polyvocally for learning, studying, and collectivizing.



Joo Young Hwang, *Labour of Research*, 2018, diagram, CCC

During the same time, we undertook a study trip to visit the “Learning Laboratories” at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht, a research–exhibition conceptualized by Tom Holert. This exhibition presented several case studies, ranging from a “de-schooled school” of the Bielefeld laboratory of the early 1970s, to the militant education and so-called Pilot School during the PAICG-movement in Guinea Bissau, as Sónia Vaz Borges elaborates extensively in her recently published book,^[26] as well as Marxist-cybernetic experimentations by “audio–visual codes (AUVICO)” as proposed in various films by Harun Farocki and Hartmut Bitomsky in the late 1960s.^[27] There is a long history of architectures of learning, specifically in the case of HEAD, whose building on Boulevard Hélvétique where the CCC was located for about ten years and where our seminars took place was built as l’école des beaux arts by a French architect in 1904, as an art school for the twentieth century! From my perspective, it has been critically important to reflect together with the students on what an architecture of research-based art-learning for the twenty-first century could be. A once in a lifetime opportunity to imagine an art school in a moment when an art school is literally under construction... It was important to hear the students in imagining the art academy in the twenty-first century; I thought that it was necessary for students’ voices to become traces or inscriptions or send-offs into the future-history of the institution in which they studied. Therefore, the seminar was an attempt to refuse the ignorance of an institution not listening to students’ ideas; perhaps, this was a practice of “affirmative sabotage.”^[28] The “Living Document” operated as a working paper, an open document, and a “material witness” as Susan Schuppli proposed,^[29] of the students’ ideas, which would remain available for future students/teachers long after us. The making of the “Living Document” was meant to be like the planting of a virus that now continues to sit infectiously in the school’s library, like a poetic-critical virus that Suely Rolnik proposes for approaching archival matter that waits for the right conditions to break out.^[30] This virus might be inactive for some time, but could break out under conditions of joy, of danger, or of change, demonstrating a practice of futurity. I am not sure, though, whether the seminar framework unfolded this imaginarily sufficiently.

The term decoloniality has been resonating more and more as an urgent call in recent years. I had situated earlier decoloniality, or more precisely decolonization, in liberation movements, in Ghana of the 1950s for example, like it has been discussed during the first summit of the Non-Aligned movement in Belgrade.^[31] Another curatorial framework, if you will, was “Unmaster Class: Committees of Decolonization” with farid rakun of ruangrupa and Nabil Ahmed.^[32] I am not able to say that these projects were moments when decoloniality became part of my

curatorial process, yet these are important constellations of transhistoric inquiries into practices of decolonization attached to existing political movements of the past that can function as points of departure for developing research methodologies of contemporary inquiries. Despite the danger of tokenism and commodification, and despite the extreme proliferation of the decolonial as just another research methodology re-confirming the institution, as Olivier Marboeuf rightly analyzed it in his notion of “decolonial variations,” decoloniality is a wedge into institutional white ignorance.^[33] It is a step.

The call for decolonizing this place as it has been resonating within the fields of contemporary art, such as that formulated by the MTL collective in New York only a few years ago,^[34] has informed my seminar “The Many Voices of ‘les indiennes’” in 2018/19, constituting an exhibition with the students that I consider an attempt to contribute to the work of decolonizing this place, i.e. a decolonizing practice through the means of a seminar at an art school in Geneva if possible at all... This emerged as an urgent concern from the previous year’s seminar on the biography of the institution in the context of Switzerland, which revealed the structural-economic implicatedness of the art school. During that seminar, the participating students were artists, researchers, poets, and curators who researched reports on “la vie économique” of Geneva during the foundation of the art academy in 1748,^[35] while another group studied parts of the curriculum of the art academy. It is no surprise that the Geneva art academy, one of the oldest in Switzerland, is founded on the economic support of private funds from sources such as the Fazy family, which made its money through the manufacturing of ‘les indiennes’ textiles. Les indiennes is the French-colonial name for *chintz* or Kalamkari block-printed by hand cotton textile, which originates from the Coromandel coast in East India as a social practice for transmitting knowledge between generations. Expropriated both of its name as well as its sociability by French-imperial traders, its continued fabrication in manufactories first in Marseille and then in Geneva and Neuchâtel has been proven to be formative in the proto-global transatlantic trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and thus makes Switzerland’s economic wealth built with bodies of men and women from Guinea, in West-Africa, sold on the markets at the forts at the coasts of Porto Novo to the Portuguese, French and English using textiles fabricated in Switzerland and France as currency transacting people into property.^[36] It was a very difficult seminar, comprising many conflicts, impasses, and disagreements as well as militant research, careful reflections, and precise interventions. We studied artistic methodologies by Maïté Chénier, Harun Farocki and Tabita Rézaire, among others, for reflecting how practices of art/research could reveal, counter and oppose visual cultures as infrastructures of coloniality, or, how regimes of vision continue through today’s algorithmic cultures.^[37] The students collectively wrote a statement for the exhibition to position their decision of not exhibiting the Swiss textiles “les indiennes” in the exhibition space. Furthermore, in addition there were student conversations with political theorists, anticolonial writers, curators and sociologists including Ramon Amaro, Noémi Michel and Françoise Vergès about decolonizing Europe, Blackness, coloniality and the violence of exhibiting,^[38] among others, to open a discursive and transdisciplinary field as an integrated part of the exhibition, where students contributed by *voicings* to the exhibition.^[39] The method of voicing^[40] had become a pedagogical methodology for engaging with the transhistoric complexity while rehearsing as we would call it following Azoulay’s proposal the refusal of extreme violence still resonating from the expropriated textile culture.^[41] In the exhibition space itself, no artwork, *voicing*, or conversation was mounted to the concrete architectural surfaces directly; instead, the work was exposed on display configurations creating a critical distance to the existing architecture.^[42] Perhaps, “The Many Voices” had been a first rehearsal for confronting the colonial matrix of an art school by means of art/research, yet, much remains to be heard, failed, practiced and refused.

Crossing these various moments of “[k]nowing at the limits of justice [that] must start before, but facing the beyond of, representation,” this text began while thinking with Ferreira da Silva to re/decompose a condition for curatorial/politics to crystallize into a practice of making public.^[43] This practice demands creating the conditions of crystallization to take place, which shall be considered a necessary part in exhibiting practices as a research process toward the possibility of a decoloniality to speak, whisper, sing, socialize, and agitate. The components from which such a condition might emerge could include confusion, double-boundedness, and implicatedness as well as inhibition, failure, conflict, problems, re-starts, and rehearsals. Yet, this seems the only possible way, at this moment, to generatively conceptualize the exhibition as a “problem-space,” as Scott proposed, meaning to hold onto the acts of making public as a process of *in the making*, as Von Osten suggested, to break through the modernist split of the object-subject relation. Such an unsettling can neither lead to a conclusion, nor does it have a defined beginning or end; instead it endlessly departs from the middle as an open wound toward the end of the exhibition at the limits of justice.

Footnotes

1. Von Osten, Marion. “In the Making. Traversing the project exhibition: In the Desert of Modernity. Colonial Planning and After”. PhD Thesis. Malmö Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts, Lund University. 2015; and Von Osten, Marion. *Thinking Under Turbulence*. Geneva and Berlin: CCC, HEAD and Motto Books. 2017. p. 57.
2. Ferreira da Silva, Denise. “To Be Announced. Radical Praxis or Knowing (at) the Limits of Justice.” *Social Text*. Vol. 31. No. 1. Spring 2013. p. 44.
3. Ferreira da Silva, Denise. “Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique.” *philoSOPHIA*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Winter 2018. pp. 19–41.
4. Curatorial/Knowledge was founded as a research think tank by Irit Rogoff in conversation with Jean-Paul Martinon around 2006; it was joined by artists, curators, theorists, activists, and storytellers. See the publication *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*. Edited by Jean-Paul Martinon. London; Bloomsbury. 2013.
5. Mende, Doreen. “In Transit.” In *In a Manner of Reading Design: The Blind Spot*. Edited by Katja Gretzinger. Berlin: Sternberg. 2012.
6. Thanks to Irit Rogoff proposing my research for the conference, I presented parts of my doctoral research then for the first time outside of the shared space of Curatorial/Knowledge.
7. Stafford Beer quoted by Heinz von Förster. Von Förster, Heinz. “Ethics and Second-Order Cybernetics.” *Cybernetics & Human Knowing*. Vol. 1. No. 1. 1992.
8. Franke, Anselm. “The Third House.” *Glass—Bead: Site 0. Castalia: The Game of Ends and Means*. 2016. Available at <https://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-third-house/?lang=enview> (accessed 2021-10-19).
9. Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2004. p. 4. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
10. Franke, “The Third House.”
11. In this sentence, I am particularly thinking with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s proposition of rehearsal for “unlearning imperialism” as an ongoing process of learning how to unlearn that she elaborated in depth in her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London and New York, NY: Verso. 2019; and with Denise Ferreira da Silva’s proposal of a re/de/compositional practice as proposed, for example, in the

- essay "In the Raw." *e-flux journal*. # 93. September 2018. Available at <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/> (accessed 2021-10-19).
12. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, p. 4.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
 14. Azoulay, *Potential History*, p. 43.
 15. Ferreira Da Silva, "To Be Announced."
 16. See Azoulay, *Potential History*; and Vergès, Françoise. *Un féminisme decolonial*. Paris: La Fabrique. 2019; and a talk in the framework of "Frantz Fanon's Critical Legacy: From the Alienation of the Individual to the Emancipation of Practice, at ECAL Lausanne, 2021.
 17. See Rogoff, Irit. "Becoming Research." *Sonic Acts*, 2019. Available at <https://soundcloud.com/sonicacts/irit-rogoff-becoming-research> (accessed 2021-10-19).
 18. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2012.
 19. I would like to draw attention to the important deepening of Spivak's proposition by Dhawan, Nikita. "Affirmative Sabotage of the Master's Tools: The Paradox of Postcolonial Enlightenment." In *Decolonizing Enlightenment: Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World*. Edited by Nikita Dhawan. Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich Verlag. 2014.
 20. Rothenberg, Michael. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press. 2019.
 21. See Purtschert, Patricia and Fischer-Tiné, Harald (eds.). *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. 2015; Bertschi, Denise et al. "Unearthing Trace: Dismantling the Imperialist Entanglement of Archives and the Built Environment." Conference organized by PhD students., May 27-29, 2021.
 22. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York, NY, and London; Routledge. 1993.
 23. I certainly also re-named the seminar after a few years into curatorial/politics as an intergenerational response to the Curatorial/Knowledge PhD program.
 24. Appadurai, Arjun. "The Global Swing to the Right." Lecture, Graduate Institute, April 25, 2017, Alfred Hirschman Centre of Democracy. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if_v-wUc3eY (accessed 2021-10-19).
 25. Denise Ferreira da Silva quoted in la paperson. *A Third University Within the First*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2017. p. 43.
 26. Vaz Borges, Sónia. *Militant Education, liberation struggle and consciousness. The PAIGC education in Guinea Bissau 1963-1978*. Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag. 2019.
 27. Holert, Tom. "Learning Laboratories: Architecture, Instructional Technology, and the Social Production of Pedagogical Space Around 1970, research exhibition and a symposium." BAK—basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, December 2, 2016–February 5, 2017.
 28. Dhawan, "Affirmative Sabotage of the Master's Tools."
 29. Schuppli, Susan. *Material Witness, Media, Forensics, Evidence*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2020.
 30. Rolnik, Suely. "Archive Mania." In "100 Notes, 100 Thoughts." Documenta Series 022. Kassel: Documenta. 2012.
 31. See Roaming Academy. "Travelling Communiqué: From Belgrade, September 5, 1961" (2013/14) at the Dutch Art Institute; and Linke, Armin, Travelling Communiqué Project Group, Eshun, Kodwo, Mende, Doreen and Tomić, Milica (eds.). *Travelling Communiqué*. Leipzig: Spector Books. 2017.
 32. See Ahmed, Nabil, rakun, farid of ruangrupa, Paolino, Camilla and Kohl, Carolin. "Unmaster Class: Committees of Decolonisation In response to the Curatorial seminar and Pool CH." In *Thinking*

- Under Turbulence*. Edited by Doreen Mende. Geneva: CCC HEAD. 2017.
33. Marboeuf, Olivier. "A conversation between Olivier Marboeuf and Joachim Ben Yakoub." May 2019. Available at <https://olivier-marboeuf.com/2019/05/09/variations-decoloniales/> (accessed 2021-10-19).
 34. MTL Collective. "From institutional Critique to institutional Liberation? A Decolonial Perspective on the Crises of Contemporary Art." *October*. No. 165. Summer 2018.
 35. This group consisted of, among others, vinit agarwal, Maïté Chénrière, Ghalas Chara, Léa Genoud, and Joo Young Hwang.
 36. Alongside Patricia Purtschert, important research has been done by Benjamin, Jody A. "The Texture of Change: Cloth, Commerce and History in Western Africa 1700-1850." PhD Thesis Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, 2016; Etemad, Bouda. *Possessing the World. Taking the Measurements of Colonization from the 18th to the 20th Century*. Oxford: Berghahn. 2007; Fässler, Hans. *Une Suisse esclavagiste. Voyage dans un pays au-dessus de tout soupçon*. Paris: Editions Dubois. 2007; tongues_kp8vil. "Architecture of Continuous Enslavement." *Listening with Tongues*. August 5, 2020. Available at <http://www.tongues.xyz/2020/08/05/architecture-of-continuous-enslavement/> (accessed 2021-10-20); historic sources include D'Allemagne, Henry Rene. *La Toile imprimée et les indiennes de traite*. Paris: Gründ. 1942.
 37. The works on display in the exhibition were Maïté Chénrière, *Under the Water, Under the Radar, There are Mutants Moving with their Sonar* (2019); Harun Farocki's *The Silver and the Cross* (2010); Kiluanji Kia Henda's *Havemos de Voltar* (We Shall Return) (2017); Tabita Rezaire's *Deep Down Tidal* (2017) and Lauren Huret, *Breaking The Internet* (2016).
 38. For example, see Amaro, Ramon. "Conversation with Alex Gence in the framework of the research exhibition The many voices of 'les indiennes,'" 2020. Available at <https://vimeo.com/383181800> (accessed 2021-10-19). Further interlocutors included Grant Watson and Zasha Coleh.
 39. Students' voicings included Alex Gence, Laila Torres Mendieta, Math Gaugué, Clara Nissim, Julie Robiolle, Léa Genoud and Fatima Wegmann,.
 40. Informed by texts that included Dhawan, Nikita. "Hegemonic Listening and Subversive Silences: Ethical-political Imperatives." Pre-publication version. 2015; Moten, Fred. "History does not repeat itself but it does rhyme." In *Travelling Communiqué*. Pre-publication version. 2017; Dolar, Mladen. "What is in a voice?" *Literatura e Sociedade*. Nos. 18-19. 2015. pp. 79-90; Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in two Acts." *Small Axe*. Vol. 12. No. 2. 2008.
 41. The *Rapport pour les droits et la mobilité des personnes noires africaines en Suisse et en Europe* by Collectif Jean Dutoit, August 2018, was displayed in the exhibition. In addition, on February 17, 2020, the film *No Apologies* (50 min., 2019) by Ebuka Anokwa, Mamadou Bamba, Aladin Dampha, Lucas Grandjean, Lucas Moréel, and Lionel Rupp was screened and discussed in relation to ongoing racism in contemporary Switzerland by Garance Bonard, Léa Genoud, and the audience.
 42. An online drive contains a research library that was also accessible from the exhibition via a QR-code. See https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1TwWsRDRff4gox4wpKQtr8_gUZ0-CuUHq?usp=sharing (accessed 2021-20-19).
 43. Ferreira da Silva, "To Be Announced."