

# Curatorial (Mis)care in an Age of Ongoing Crises

by Noor Alé

*O my body, always make me a man who questions!*

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

Amidst this convergence of multiple calamities—health pandemic, right-wing extremism, and a global recession—this period of seismic events ushers in an urgency to interrogate, challenge, and redefine the role of the curator as more than just an apolitical caretaker of objects. In light of these recent events, Western museums have faced public demands to dismantle the colonial conventions and hierarchies they uphold. These institutions were founded upon colonial legacies of stolen Indigenous lands and objects amassed over centuries of colonial plunder, resulting in asymmetric power relations to the detriment of those whose cultures are othered. Curatorial work forms an integral part in this matrix of exclusionary practices. Since its inception—to its recent professionalization—the enterprise of curatorial labour is associated with the directive to preserve and care for objects, oversee acquisition and collections management, and produce knowledge that contextualizes objects and brings them into conversation with our time. Taking into consideration the etymology of the word “curator” from the Latin *curare* “one who has the care or charge over a person or thing,”<sup>1</sup> the care of objects forms the bedrock of the profession’s original mandate. This tradition of a curator as a guardian of objects must be expanded to include care practices towards the communities their exhibitions and public programs intend to support. And in this age of ongoing crises, the curator’s role necessitates a reimagining to forge pathways towards a future of collaborations, interdependencies, and care practices that invoke decolonial strategies.

Reflecting on the reparative power of care, feminist writer María Puig de la Bellacasa offers an entry point into rethinking curatorial work as a subversive and transformative practice: “‘good care’ ... is never neutral ... Because the work of care can be done within and for worlds that we might

find objectionable.”<sup>2</sup> Historically practiced by women and marginalized communities, care practices are political gestures deeply rooted in feminist approaches that can be appropriated by curators to dismantle Eurocentric narratives and behaviours entrenched in art institutions.<sup>3</sup> In remedying the inequities found in the ailing institutional body, curators are able to “reclaim care” from a “toxic terrain,” museological practice in this case, making it “capable of nurturing.”<sup>4</sup>

Although care practices serve the betterment of the collective, their implementation in museums has been met with opposition. This was the case with the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a Paris-based organization that positions itself as the leading scholarly forum in the field of museums, and comprises a global community of over forty thousand institutional and individual members from 138 countries.<sup>5</sup> ICOM describes its role as being “committed to the research, conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world’s natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible.”<sup>6</sup> The definition of what a museum is—or what it should be—falls under the auspices of ICOM. The definition of the museum’s role has been largely unchanged for a half a century, an issue symptomatic of the reticent nature of our field to evolve in the face of social, political, and economic upheavals in the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>

In 2019, the Executive Board of ICOM selected the new definition of museums proposed by the Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials to be the following:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research,

interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.<sup>8</sup>

The new definition departed from conservative models which historically positioned museums as static depositories of precious objects and curators as neutral caretakers; instead, it defined the duty of museums and curators as adaptive and responsive to emergent relationalities across a spectrum of circumstances. This proposed definition of museums was met with considerable resistance, leading to a series of resignations and a postponement on the definition's voting. The leading issue of contention was the adoption of socio-political care as a practice bound to curatorial ethics.<sup>9</sup>

By refusing to adapt to change, institutions generate an inertia that recalls political philosopher Frantz Fanon's commentary on "intellectual alienation," a feature common in "bourgeois societies." In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes a "bourgeois society" as "any society that becomes ossified in a predetermined mold, stifling any development, progress, or discovery."<sup>10</sup> According to Fanon, a bourgeois society is oppressive, as it is "a closed society where it's not good to be alive, where the air is rotten and ideas and people are putrefying."<sup>11</sup> Echoing Fanon's critique, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist reflects upon the static culture of art institutions and their obsession with cannibalizing the past to the detriment of the future: "This process of becoming stuck implies we are not able to access the future" and in embracing stasis "the institution becomes a graveyard, the curator nothing but a macabre gravedigger slowly disintegrating into the past."<sup>12</sup>

Obsolete curatorial practices risk converting the museum into a mausoleum, a grand sepulchre for objects deprived of social transformations and untouched by emergent discourses in the domain of culture. Museums—whether encyclopaedic or contemporary, or collecting and non-collecting—abide by prevailing nineteenth century conventions that fetishize objects according to an asymmetric system of classifications, creating power imbalances between the curator and visitor, the museum

and public, and the West and Other. Imploring us to refuse these outdated conventions of bourgeois societies, Fanon argues: “And I believe that a man who takes a stand against this living death is in a way a revolutionary.”<sup>13</sup>

In order for a revolution to be born, Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s commentary on the interregnum—a period of successive changes in social order—merits interpretation in the context of working in the curatorial field amidst a layering of global pandemics: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”<sup>14</sup> These “morbid symptoms”—racial inequities, financial precarity, and conventions that uphold colonialism—are identified by collectivizing museum workers to be ongoing issues that predate the pandemic, but have ruptured in response to the overlapping of multiple crises.

Unlike Gramsci, I believe that the birth of new strategies—in this case, curatorial approaches—can germinate from interventionist practices that disrupt the institution of museums, an ill social body that requires reparative work from within. As a social body, museums have historically perpetuated ailments through their colonial plunder, refusal to repatriate sacred and ancestral objects, and exclusionary practices. Curatorial care is an act of divestment that dismantles and remedies the organizational ills perpetuated by museums.

Curing the ailments in institutions—and engendering reparative curatorial practices—can be enacted through the lens of epidemiology, a strategy borrowed from postcolonial scholar and poet Anjali Raza Kolb. Addressing the interrelationships between the ailed social body and its constituents, Kolb notes: “If the epidemic imaginary metaphorizes the social body as a singular body, as it often does, it faces challenges in scalar translation and interpretation. So, an epidemiological reading method is one that attends to both the digestive system of the patient and to the digestive system of the town, region, nation, or globe.”<sup>15</sup>

An “epidemiological reading” is a method that locates and solves the threat(s) to the greater good of the commons. Reflecting on the threats facing the commons, Kolb notes that the “...*problem* is not the virus itself, but rather the hideous racism and xenophobia we’ve seen in the West...” which has compounded the suffering felt by marginalized communities who have endured “the long-term and renewed withdrawal of care and social services that is the hallmark of settler colonialism.”<sup>16</sup>

This approach disavows the interpretation of the social body as an independent entity, and prioritizes the well-being of the collective by recognizing the interrelations between all of those involved. As a social body, museums have a socio-ethical responsibility for the care of their workers, artists, and publics. Curators are uniquely positioned to catalyze change; they can subvert the rhetorics that have normalized exclusionary practices that situate the museum as a sovereign entity, one that holds no ethical responsibility to its attendant publics or the cultural objects it holds.

Transformative curatorial practices extend beyond the tangential gestures of curating exhibitions, publishing articles, or speaking engagements that revise art historical erasures by centring the Other. Although these inclusionary practices are necessary, if implemented alone, they dislocate the communities curatorial work purports to serve. A catalytic curator envisions their work as a collaboration *with* and *for* marginalized communities, fosters social activism, and engenders separatist models that challenge the museum’s authority. Curators who employ interventionist approaches that disrupt Western museological conventions include Sandra Benites—the first Indigenous curator of Guarani Nhandewa descent—at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) and the late Peruvian philosopher, drag queen, and artist Giuseppe Campuzano.

As a curator, Benites engages in collaborative methodologies that site the museum as a democratic forum. This approach is evinced in *Dja Guata Porã: Rio de Janeiro Indígena*, a co-curated exhibition with Pablo Lafuente for the Museu de Arte do Rio that was inspired by a Guarani phrase: “walk collectively, and build that path while walking.” This show brought together

Indigenous peoples and museum workers to collaboratively plan the exhibition and imagine alternative ways of presenting Indigenous cultures and issues within the museum, diverging from Western conventions. *Dja Guata Porã: Rio de Janeiro Indígena* presented the multiplicity of Indigenous realities across Rio from a perspective that centred Indigenous cultural production in the curation, exhibition design, and public programming of the show. In conceiving this exhibition, Benites and Lafuente “opted for a format that seemed obvious to us: to meet up to talk about what could and should happen; to think in a group, from different positions, about what to do together” allowing for the “building [of] bridges across conflicts to seek common sensibilities.”<sup>19</sup>

Campuzano’s Museo Travesti del Perú—the Transvestite Museum of Peru—offers a method to antagonize the curator’s role in enforcing hierarchies of historical records. The Museo was an experimental, nomadic, activist project that presented a revisionist archive comprised of queer images, objects, and texts amassed by Campuzano that disrupted the official monoliths of Peruvian history and heterosexual subjectivities by siting trans, intersexual, and androgynous figures as protagonists in historical accounts.<sup>20</sup> For Campuzano, the museum could be transformed as an instrument of decoloniality to unearth trans and androgynous histories that predate Europe’s colonization of the Americas and reclaim political agency as means to allow for decentered, Indigenous histories to emerge from broadly propagated colonial narratives.<sup>21</sup> In his own words, Campuzano states: “By reclaiming the transvestite patrimony, the museum becomes a tool of empowerment, not as a request but as a demand for social transformation and inclusion. From the symbolic-collective space to individual liberties.”<sup>22</sup>

It is through these avenues that Benites and Campuzano approach the labor of exhibition-making as a platform to uproot the staid and top-down modes that have been long entrenched in the curatorial field. Curators must endeavor to centre artists, publics, and communities represented in their shows while engaging in the process of curation. And while curators can catalyze these conversations, they alone cannot bring about the sweeping

institutional changes that are necessitated to decolonize the museum space. It is the work of everyone within the institution: museum boards, directors, and administrators must also take part in the labour of care practices as a way to remedy racial, cultural, and social injustices. The work of unseating the hierarchies of colonial conventions is obliged to come from within. Offering a way out of the interregnum that our curatorial practices and institutions find themselves in, philosopher Achille Mbembe states: “No struggle occurs that does not perforce entail the breaking apart of old cultural sedimentations. This sort of struggle is an organized collective work. It distinctly aims to overturn history.”<sup>23</sup>

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Alongside *Claudia Mattos* she co-founded AXIS, an independent curatorial laboratory dedicated to exhibiting socially-engaged contemporary art. Their most recent exhibitions include *EXTRACOLONIAL: Reflections for Action*, Sur Gallery, Toronto; and *LAW & (DIS)ORDER*, Vtape, Toronto. She was awarded curatorial residencies at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, and the Shanghai Curators Lab.

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