



ISSUE 5 Curatorial Episteme

Ethics of Curating

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It goes without saying that curation has always been related to ethics to a certain extent, the relationship between them, however, has just received attention in recent years especially after the publication of Maura Reilly's *Curatorial Activism, Towards an Ethics of Curating* in 2018¹ and Jean-Paul Martinon's *Curating as Ethics* in 2020. Whereas the former is, strictly speaking, dealing with politics rather than ethics, the later directly declares that curation itself is ethics, making the topic of curatorial ethics more remarkable.² Taking the word "curate" in its root meaning of "caring for" allows us to expand the curatorial sphere to ethics. Regarding curation not only as selection, design, interpretation, and presentation, but also "caring" or "care-taking" revealed in the intersubjective and intimate relations is an ethical interpellation and response.

Ethics is the inquiry about "how to live," or about "how to live a good life" from the perspective of ancient Greek philosophy. It is also about the acceptable and unacceptable, compliance and contempt, what we should and should not do; and, more importantly, it is about the relationship between the individual and the other. Ethics shapes our emotional response to people and things, and determines what glory, shame, anger, and gratitude are, as well as what the inexcusable and unforgivable are. Ethics gives us "standards," or "norms"—guidelines for behavior that emphasize "what ought to be" (of feelings and behavior) rather than "what is". Ethics involves the combination

¹ Maura Reilly. *Curatorial Activism, Towards an Ethics of Curating*. London: Thames & Hudson. 2018.

² Jean-Paul Martinon. *Curating as Ethics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. While the author relies heavily on Heideggerian ethics, which makes some critics, especially those who are also curators with practical concerns, skeptical with the approach, the publication of the book can be regarded as an important step toward the serious discussion of the relationship between curation and ethics. For the example of the review of the book, see: Edith Doove,

of emotional insight and logical insight to help us make the right choices in our everyday lives. It's an attempt to make reasonable decisions while taking the positions of others into account, which is exactly the situation a curator always confronts.

Following this line, the ethics of curating is supposedly neither discovered nor created as a disciplinary knowledge but was always already there. In the same way, humans have been confronted with ethical issues in everyday life likely all along the evolutionary history of homo sapiens, so to seriously think of it as a discipline and separate phenomenon arrived relatively late. Human conduct is pervaded by the ethical dimension everywhere and it is not only the questions for academic philosophers to ask, “How should I live?” “What is a good life?” or “What sort of person should one be?” Ethical issues are related to everyman, and there is of course no exception for curators. To investigate the ethics of curating is thus no less crucial to inquire about the essence of curation itself.



Posters of exhibition *All Too Human*, Tate Britain 2018. (Photo : Meng-Shi Chen)

While this article is not intended to conduct a genealogy of curatorial ethics, the “ought to” aspect of ethics is nonetheless regularly seen in the conceptional configuration of earlier discussions about the ethics of curating. In her article *Curators: Ethics and Obligations*, the anthropologist and museum curator Mary Elizabeth King has clarified some clear and specific “guidelines” as the ethical and obligational standards, or more specifically, “norms” for curation, presenting the regarded essentials of museum exhibition of anthropology, archeology, and ethnography. With the slight awareness of the respect of other cultures as ethical concern, King’s article nevertheless centers on “museums’ code of ethics” rather than the problematics of “speaking for others” which is arguably the core problem of the ethics of curating.³

³ Mary Elizabeth King. “Curators: Ethics and Obligations,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 23①:10-18.

⁴ Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. 65-67.

Despite the museum exhibition, it is anthropology as a discipline itself along with ethnographic methods to be questioned as there is much on-going discussion and skepticism about how speaking for others is possible. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, anthropology is mainly a conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them,’ of the white man with the white man about the primitive- nature man ... in which ‘them’ is silenced. ‘Them’ always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless. . . ‘them’ is only admitted among ‘us,’ the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by an ‘us’ . . .⁴

Speaking for others is always the pivotal and challenging issue that modern-day anthropology and ethnography confront. The critical question posed by the curator Manray Hsu in the workshop of “Curators Intensive Taipei 19” discussing his curatorial project — *When Kacalisian Culture Meets the Vertical City: Contemporary Art from Greater Sandimen* — very well represents this self-awareness of the tension between the indigenous and non-indigenous people and cultures:

What is the most daunting challenge for a curator to organize an exhibition on Taiwanese indigenous contemporary art, especially when the curator is an outsider whose ethnic and educational background can be ‘legitimately’ identified as part of the cultural ‘mainstream,’ which implies that he is a living descendant of the ‘colonizers’ over the past four centuries?⁵

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<https://curatorsintensive.tw/manrayhsu/?lang=en>



Yu-Ling Wu's work at exhibition *When Kacalisian Culture Meets the Vertical City: Contemporary Art from Greater Sandimen*, 2019.
(Photo : Manray Hsu)

The self-reflective question asked by Hsu is undoubtedly the question of the ethics of curating, urging us to realize its complexity as an epistemological web covering at least from art, anthropology, history, to philosophy. How do we define and interpret the other's culture? More specifically, who has the authority to speak for any group's identity and authenticity? What are the essential elements and boundaries of a culture? How does self contend with the other in inter-ethnic relations? Despite Hsu's pensive question, these are familiar questions posed by some cultural anthropologists with critical insight such as James Clifford who developed the innovative ethnographic methods toward the anthropological and ethnological studies of the other (especially indigenous people), which meanwhile lead to the requirement of correspondent code of ethics for museum exhibition. Before the awareness of the dilemma of presenting and interpreting other cultures, the "principle" ethical concern for the museum curators is likely how to abide by museums' code of ethics determined by the scholarly and professional organization (such as the association

of museums), including the list of responsibility and duties on governance, collections, programs, and promulgation, etc. But now, with the awareness of asymmetrical power relations and cultural incommensurability brought about by some cultural anthropologists' self-critique, to avoid this "ethnocentric trap" when attempting to present and interpret the cultural heritages of non-western peoples has become the crucial ethical concern for museums.



Sakuliu Pavavaljung's work at exhibition *When Kacalisian Culture Meets the Vertical City: Contemporary Art from Greater Sandimen*, 2019. (Photo : Manray Hsu)

Under the same concern of "caring for" as what curator originally means, the ethical concerns may vary from different roles of curator with different tasks, as Mary Elizabeth King points out: "the ethical concerns of the curator of archaeology are far more clear cut than those of the curator of ethnography and are very different from those of the curator of art."⁶

However, the institutional code of ethics are full of dogmatic and normative tones, serving almost as moralistic statement, not only for the museums of anthropology and ethnography but also in contemporary art museums.⁷ It is unlikely that the self-respecting curatorial ventures, proudly publishing a code of ethics to prove their well-meaning intentions to make the exhibitions look and sound ethically and morally good, have never noticed the "turn" (into self-awareness of the dilemma of

⁶ Mary Elizabeth King, "Curators: Ethics and Obligations," in Curator: *The Museum Journal*, 23①:14.

⁷ Here are two examples showing museums' code of ethics: "Members of the Association of Art Museum Curators believe that the core mission of art museums is to collect, preserve, study, interpret,

speaking for others) in anthropology and ethnography in the past years, but the nature of ethics itself might prevent them from any change.

Back to the “ought-to” issue of ethics, it is now a commonplace that “what is does not imply what *ought to be*.” Some social norms might create racial, gender, or class inequalities, but it is beyond doubt that it does not follow that we should accept such norms. “Conversely, we have moral reasons to follow norms against polluting the environment even if no such norms exist.”⁸ The uniqueness of ethics is that it can’t be represented as either propositional knowledge or a norm but is instead given to us in some ways beyond rational grasp. Namely, ethical demands can’t be translated into forms of knowledge nor followed by a knowledge of rules. Whereas to probe the essential aspects and the problematics of normative ethics that investigate the questions regarding how one ought to act in moral sense is definitely beyond the limit of this essay (not to say to bring in the discussion of the complexity and difficulties of ethics itself as a philosophical field), it is necessary to examine whether it would be proper to regard the curatorial ethics as merely following museums’ code of ethics as norms especially when the variety, quantity and quality of curation is greatly changed today.

To ask, “What is the ethics of curating?” is equivalent to ask “What is a curator?” or more bluntly and specifically, to ask “What is a curator beyond the professionalism of curating including the demands of art environment, communication with artists, negotiation with exhibition institutions, selection and classification of art works, art knowledge (art history, art theory, etc.), and of course, knowledge of funding?” As in the case with other occupations, a professional ethic usually replaces personal ethics when an individual practices her profession; yet in curating, especially for independent curators, it is the personal ethic that becomes professionalized.⁹ A doctor’s personal ethics likely depends on whether he or she abides by the code of medical ethics, while it is the independent curator’s personal ethic that make ethics of curating conceivable. This is not tantamount to say that the profession of

and display works of art for the benefit of the public.” Fisher, J. et al. *Professional Practices for Art Museum Curators; The Association of Art Museum Curators*: New York, NY, USA, 2007. 6.; and: “All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they fulfil all the museum’s guardianship responsibilities in respect not only of the collections but also of all other resources (for example, premises, land and information), which, in explicit or moral terms, it holds in trust for the benefit of the public.” Trevelyan, V. *Code of Ethics for Museums: Ethical Principles for All who Work for or Govern Museums in the UK*; Museums Association: London, UK, 2008. 8.

⁸ Klenk, Michael. “Moral Philosophy and the ‘Ethical Turn’ in Anthropology” *ZEMO* 2, 331-353 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42048-019-00040-9>

⁹ For the idea of curator’s ethics in the context of the

a curator can be ignored. Unlike institutional curators whose role and duties may be defined in their contract with the institutions or employers, including all norms and obligations to be followed in their curatorial works, almost nothing is formally prescribed to independent curators. Considering the ambition to challenge the power and arbitrariness of official and institutional curation as one of independent curators' deep concerns, there is the other side of the coin which echoes the indeterminacy of the ethics of (independent) curating.

To ask "What is ethics of curating" is to ask "What is a curator?", and to ask "What is a curator?" is to ask "What kind of person do I want to be?" as Mark Hutchinson brilliantly puts it:

The curator, that is to say, 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? There are plenty of people who will answer the first question for her. Faced with the second question, there may be terrors but there are no experts.¹⁰

In this sense, the ethics of curating is to a large extent existential, related to the idea that "existence precedes essence."

Furthermore, while it is widely assumed that curation-based skills presuming formulas for curating are needed in all museums and are a vital part of professional training for a museum-oriented career, seeking formulas for curating effectively and satisfactorily is no more feasible than following the code of ethics especially for independent curators of art. Quite often, when curators think that they have found some methods, statements, or procedures as the formulas for achieving their curatorial tasks, especially reconciling different aims or positions, the formulas will just slip away and become inapplicable to another curatorial work and mission, as Zoe Butt describes how this could happen in the interview about her

relationship between personal and professional ethics, see Sasha Burkhanova-Khabadze. "Curatorial Ethics and Indeterminacy of Practice". *Philosophies* 2020, 5(3), 23.

¹⁰ Mark Hutchinson. "On Expertise, Curation & the Possibility of the Public". *Seconds* 2006. <http://www.slashseconds.org/issues/001/003/articles/mhutchinsondbeech/index.php>

¹¹ When asked about the curatorial mission and experiences at the place not where she is from, Zoe Butt replied as follows: "...I left the museum thinking: 'I have the formulas', then I realized after moving to Asia that they don't work. I was, and still am, in the process of unlearning all of those institutional expectations, terminologies, and approaches,

curatorial mission for the Sharjah Biennial.¹¹ It is unlikely that the environmental, cultural, and political changes at the different locations where curation takes place may impair the belief that the curator has the formulas for curatorial task. But seeking for formulas is fundamentally inimical to curation and will likely be doomed to failure insofar as the complexity and sophistication of curation is concerned.

Curating is about the practice not tied with a regular and fixed description of the contents of what the curators do, including the complexity of the topic, medium, socio-historical context of the curated exhibitions, as well as the variability of participating “authors.” If the norms for curators of art is indeterminate, then the crucial question is “How do we argue for an ethics of curating?” It is very much like to ask “how to dance on the edge of abyss,” or to think of any ethical life after the death of God in Nietzsche’s terms—a scenario of the good, old, and stubborn ground turning into an infinite groundless abyss; and when we look down to the emptiness of this abyss, it just looks back without any feedback. To overcome nihilism is a certainly a hard task (although to label the indeterminacy of the ethics of curating as nihilism is questionable), but to dance on the edge of abyss is not unthinkable as Jacques Derrida offers us some clues. In contrast to deontological ethics, the normative theories emphasizing our duties and the moral choices of what we ought to do, the curatorial ethics is likely associated with the “ethics of hospitality”¹² that Derrida outlines as follows:

because living in Vietnam has shown me more proactive and provocative means of getting things done. This empowered me to speak back to the artworld.” *Are biennials ‘curatorial mission impossible’? Ahead of the Sharjah Biennial, co-curator Zoe Butt pauses to reflect.*
<https://www.artbase.l.com/news/zoe-butt-interview-sharjah-biennial-chris-sharp-lulu>

¹² How the ethics of curating can be linked with Derrida’s notion of hospitality is inspired by the curator Francis Maravillas’s presentation on “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner: Food and Hospitality in Contemporary Art and Exhibitions in Asia and Beyond” at the workshop of “Curators’ Intensive Taipei 19”.
<https://curatorsintensive.tw/francis-maravillas/?lang=en>

Let us note parenthetically that as a quasi-synonym for “unconditional,” the Kantian expression of “categorical imperative” is not unproblematic; we will keep it with some reservations, under erasure, if you like, or under epoche. For to be what it “must” be, hospitality must not pay a debt, or be governed by a duty: it is gracious, and “must” not open itself to the guest [invited or visitor], either “conforming to duty” or even, to use the Kantian distinction again, “out of duty.” This unconditional law of hospitality, if such a thing is thinkable, would then be a law without imperative, without order and without duty. A law without law, in short. For if I practice hospitality “out of duty” [and not only “in conforming with duty”]’ this hospitality of paying up is no longer an absolute hospitality, it is no longer graciously offered beyond debt and economy, offered to the other, a hospitality invented for the singularity of the new arrival, of the unexpected visitor.¹³



Exhibition *All Too Human*, Tate Britain 2018. (Photo : Meng-Shi Chen)

There is nonetheless an inevitable tension arising in hospitality as ethics in the Derridean sense. In order to be hospitable, the host must rid himself of security and invite the new arrival. The self must give up authority, security, and property and promises benevolence; and the guest becomes the host. That said, absolute, and hence unconditional, hospitality is never possible in conjunction with indivisible sovereignty. The authority of the host has diminished, and the host inevitably becomes the guest and vice versa:

So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage—and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host's host. The guest (*hôte*) becomes the host (*hôte*) of the host (*hôte*).¹⁴

The deconstructive relationship of *hôte* (host/guest) reflects well the relationship of curators, artists, or the participating third parties. While the curator unconditionally welcomes the curated artists and their works as a kind of completely open hospitality, he or she needs to use various resources conditionally, including professional knowledge, communication, choices that often contains conflicts, etc., to achieve this unconditionality. When applying conditional ideas and resources, he also loses the unconditional hospitality. An inevitable paradox may arise in this deconstructive approach toward hospitality, leading to the impossibility to argue for a convincing ethics, so far as “what ought to do” as the essence of ethics is concerned. However, as Derrida argues, hospitality is ethics especially in terms of self/other relationship:

Insofar as it has to do with the ethos, that is, the residence, one's at-home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, ethics is hospitality; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality, whichever way one expands or limits that.¹⁵

To grasp the ethics of curating through hospitality is therefore not inconceivable after formal regulations and obligation is put into question and lead to the indeterminacy for the complicated and sophisticated ethical concerns of curators, not to say that the displacement of host/guest in hospitality as the relationship between one/other is always the curators' principal ethical concern.

Hospitality is an ethics about *empathy* that is pivotal to curation. While empathy is often associated and even confused with the notion of sympathy, the nature of the two emotions is indeed different, we should note that both terms refer to identification; they are similar emotions that arise in the course of spectating. While empathy is often associated and even confused with the notion of sympathy, the nature of the two emotions is indeed different. Douglas Chismar outlines the distinction between them as follows:

The parameters which determine the likelihood of empathizing differ from those which determine sympathy. In the case of empathy, familiarity with the recipient and his situation is the chief parameter, whereas for sympathy, agreement with the recipient, liking him and what he stands for—appear to be the important variables.¹⁶

Following this general distinction, if there is no agreement between the others and us, there is hardly any sympathy. Yet, even if there is agreement, we are likely to be preoccupied with the assumed duality between our emotions and the emotions of the others, for our attention is focused on the analogy between the others and us. In other words, sympathetic emotions can never be qualified as the source of ethics of hospitality in which we lose consciousness as self.

The empathizer, on the other hand, tends to abandon his self-consciousness. We can *feel for* (sympathize) the other person’s situation yet remain conscious of the difference between him/her and us, yet we *feel with* (empathize) the other person with a sense of familiarity so strong that our own identity can fuse with his or hers, and temporarily lose ourselves. We tend to project our emotions onto the other person in sympathy, while we are absorbed or thrown into the other person’s emotions in empathy. Sympathy is thus a more detached emotion than empathy. It is not familiarity that makes empathy possible, but the cancellation of oneself that transcends familiarity and similarity. And it is in empathy as well as hospitality that the ethics of curating striving against authoritarian forms and norms, and striving to speak for others, emerges.

In his essay “The Crisis of the Image: Levinas’s Ethical Response” Richard Kearney argues that under the prevalent influence of postmodern cultures we are living in a “civilization of images”¹⁷ that renders a human subject less responsible for his or her “poetic imagination” that “incarcerates the self in a blind alley of self-reflecting mirrors.”¹⁸ Enlightened by Levinas’s ethical philosophy—the experience of the face particularly—he then devises an alliance between poetic imagination and ethical responsibility to form an “ethical poetics” which “responds to the face with the question ‘Who?’ (opening us to the alterity of the other person) rather than the question ‘What?’ (reducing such alterity to an impersonal system of substances, structures or signs).”¹⁹ Focusing on “who” rather than “what” without a negative attitude towards poetic imagination is likely what curation in our contemporary art world needs. Under the circumstance of curating in the overflow of artistic exhibitions similar to what Levinas depicts, a summary sketch of the ethics of curating may be like this: To empathetically uncover the hidden knowledge swept under the carpet, making the invisible visible, without sacrificing the poetic potential of art.

¹⁷ Richard Kearney, “The Crisis of the Image: Levinas’s Ethical Response,” in *The Ethics of Postmodernity*, Edited by Gary B. Madison and Marty Fairbairn. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2000. 13.

¹⁸ Ibid, 15.

¹⁹ Ibid.

¹ Maura Reilly. *Curatorial Activism, Towards an Ethics of Curating*. London: Thames & Hudson. 2018.

² Jean-Paul Martinon. *Curating as Ethics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. While the author relies heavily on Heideggerian ethics, which makes some critics, especially those who are also curators with practical concerns, skeptical with the approach, the publication of the book can be regarded as an important step toward the serious discussion of the relationship between curation and ethics. For the example of the review of the book, see: Edith Doove, *Curating as Ethics*. <https://leonardo.info/review/2020/10/curating-as-ethics>

³ Mary Elizabeth King. “Curators: Ethics and Obligations,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 23(1):10-18.

⁴ Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. 65-67.

⁵ <https://curatorsintensive.tw/manrayhsu/?lang=en>

⁶ Mary Elizabeth King. “Curators: Ethics and Obligations,” in *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 23(1):14.

⁷ Here are two examples showing museums’ code of ethics: “Members of the Association of Art Museum Curators believe that the core mission of art museums is to collect, preserve, study, interpret, and display works of art for the benefit of the public.” Fisher, J. et al. *Professional Practices for Art Museum Curators; The Association of Art Museum Curators*:

New York, NY, USA, 2007. 6.; and: "All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they fulfil all the museum's guardianship responsibilities in respect not only of the collections but also of all other resources (for example, premises, land and information), which, in explicit or moral terms, it holds in trust for the benefit of the public." Trevelyan, V. *Code of Ethics for Museums: Ethical Principles for All who Work for or Govern Museums in the UK*; Museums Association: London, UK, 2008. 8.

⁸ Klenk, Michael. "Moral Philosophy and the 'Ethical Turn' in Anthropology" *ZEMO* 2, 331–353 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42048-019-00040-9>

⁹ For the idea of curator's ethics in the context of the relationship between personal and professional ethics, see Sasha Burkhanova-Khabadze. "Curatorial Ethics and Indeterminacy of Practice". *Philosophies* 2020, 5(3), 23.

¹⁰ Mark Hutchinson. "On Expertise, Curation & the Possibility of the Public". *Seconds* 2006. <http://www.slashseconds.org/issues/001/003/articles/mhutchinsondbeech/index.php>

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¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*. California.: Stanford University Press. 2000. 81-83

¹⁴ Ibid. 125.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. London: Routledge Press. 2001, 16-17

¹⁶ Douglas Chismar, "Empathy and Sympathy: The Important Difference" in *Journal of Value Inquiry* 22(1988): 261-2.

¹⁷ Richard Kearney, "The Crisis of the Image: Levinas's Ethical Response," in *The Ethics of Postmodernity*, Edited by Gary B. Madison and Marty Fairbairn. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2000. 13.

¹⁸ Ibid, 15.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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