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## **Curating Under Pressure Biennials Conference**

**Christchurch, New Zealand, November 5 – 8, 2015**

*Te aroha, Te whakapono, Te rangimarie, Tatou, tatou e.  
(Love, Faith, Peace, for us all.)*

When the first biennials conference was held fifteen years ago in Kassel, the terrain was still visible. There were around twenty large international exhibitions held around the world. Now there are more than 160, with no end in sight. To this day, biennials are the most successful model for exhibiting international contemporary art. ifa (Institute for International Cultural Relations) has followed this development actively over the years, working with various partners and further conferences. The most recent, entitled “Curating Under Pressure,” took place in early November 2015 in Christchurch, New Zealand, initiated by the Munich Goethe-Institut.

Unlike museums, which act as fixed institutions with their own collections and thus enjoy a certain stability, the status of biennials is in most cases insecure. Most of them are temporary structures with no firm financial, personnel, spatial, or organizational basis. This openness is also their potential. Biennials are flexible, can react to new situations, and sometimes come about as a response to crises, like the Gwangju Biennale or Prospect New Orleans, for example. But the lack of a basic structure makes them vulnerable. Particularly in recent years conflicts have arisen and biennials have come under political pressure, like the 13th Istanbul Biennial in 2013, Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg, and the Sydney Biennial, which had a main sponsor who was involved in state camps for rejected asylum seekers.

### **The Situation in Christchurch**

The Christchurch biennial, SCAPE Public Art, also encountered a crisis situation. After a serious earthquake in September 2010, the planned sixth edition had to be postponed. In February 2011 there was a second, devastating earthquake which killed 185 people. 91 percent of all the buildings in the city were damaged, and 17,000 dwellings became uninhabitable. The inner city was hit the hardest. In the meantime, 1,240 buildings have disappeared here—either destroyed by the earthquake or fallen victim to property speculators. Today, four and a half years after this catastrophe, the center of Christchurch is a mix of wasteland and construction site. Faceless new buildings are produced, posters promise investors marvelous returns, and botanic urban decoration makes for a provisional sense of green. After the large earthquake, 70,000 people left the city. Around four fifths of its population, just under 350,000, stayed or came back.

Can or should a biennial be held in conditions like these? The answer in Christchurch was “yes.” After the sixth edition was cancelled, the seventh took place in 2013, and this year the eighth. Under the title “New Intimacies” curator Rob Garrett presented eight projects, including by Judy Millar, Pauline Rhodes, and Nathan Pohio. He

hopes that these works help citizens to find a new personal and also memorable way of looking at their completely revamped city center.

### **Curating Under Pressure**

It was in this context that Blair French (curator of SCAPE 7) and Mischa Kuball came up with the idea of holding a biennials conference on the ethics of curating in Christchurch. Leonhard Emmerling (Goethe-Institut) took the suggestion up and initiated the project “Curating Under Pressure.” He approached the Institute for International Cultural Relations (ifa), which has gained considerable expertise in this field over the years. Elke aus dem Moore, head of ifa’s art department, had already co-planned and co-organized three conferences on biennials. In cooperation with Creative New Zealand and the University of Canterbury, Emmerling and aus dem Moore organized this symposium, which Leonhard Emmerling was unfortunately unable to attend due to sickness.

The first biennials conferences were all about bringing the right protagonists and experts—still a relatively small number—around one table so as to discuss basic issues of professionalization, networking, and cooperation. Thereafter, the conferences organized by the Institute for International Cultural Relations (ifa) explored substantive issues in more depth. The podium here did not only include biennials organizers and directors, but also curators, artists, and academics. For the sixth conference in Christchurch, this circle was further expanded. Alongside representatives and activists from the local art scene the general public was also invited to participate.

The conference kicked off at the marae in Rapati. Marae are holy places for the Māori, where ceremonies, cultural activities, and important rituals of greeting take place. The conference delegates were all welcomed in official Māori manner, with the Pōwhiri. This was followed by a barbecue in the North Projects project space that had been opened in 2014 and a long guided tour through the inner city of Christchurch. This unusual start gave participants plenty of insight into the critical situation of the city, and also enabled them to make good contact with each other—an important basis for later group work during the conference.

### **World Café**

What can art achieve in times of crisis? Can art help to work through trauma? What can it do to heal wounds, to stabilize, to rebuild? Does it have an ethical responsibility? These were the questions raised in the lectures and discussions over the following days. A key format of this biennials conference, used for the first time, was the World Café. In small groups, ideas and proposals on the most important questions of the symposium were collected and developed. This was an exciting experiment. For the first time, the conference did not just consist of lectures, but involved real active work, in open rounds with alternating participants. The results are systematically presented in the following. (On the symposium lectures, see the detailed report by Andrew Paul Wood on this website.)

## **World Café - Natural Disasters**

### ***What can we learn from catastrophes and traumatic experience?***

The conference participants discussed this question in eight small groups, and all reached similar results. Traumatic experiences can have an effect on different levels—personal and individual, between people, and for society as a whole. It is important to differentiate. There is a difference between natural catastrophes and disasters caused by people. There are crises that speak to us as communities, like war or the climate catastrophe, and there are personal crises in our lives. Alongside spectacular catastrophes, there are also slow disasters that creep up on us, like homelessness, the costs of education, or underpaid work.

Crises nearly always force us to abandon our comfort zones. They mobilize our instincts, and the will to survive makes us decide whether to flee or to fight. Some people become fixed in a state of shock and are unable to act. Crises can help us to discover our strengths and sources of power, and they can help us (re-)gain access to our own spirituality. They can be an opportunity to set new priorities in life and they can teach us to mourn.

Catastrophes can also have positive effects on our relations with other people. They can teach us to feel empathy again and to be concerned about others. And when we talk with each other and share our experiences then we can rediscover the emotional potential of our own language.

A catastrophe can reveal and activate the hidden strengths of our communities. Just as on the personal level, a loss can here become an opportunity for a new beginning. The public and the private can be rebalanced, and once valid norms can be questioned, as new forms of community develop. When destroyed infrastructures need to be rebuilt, then fundamental improvements and changes can be tackled. Often catastrophes are appropriated and made use of by the dominant system, and a crisis situation can be misused for power political purposes by governments and authorities.

Basically—in all areas—catastrophes and traumatic experiences offer the chance for a new start, for reflection and regeneration. They can be the catalyst for rethinking fixed and inflexible systems, defining new priorities, and recasting concepts like progress, development, growth, or sustainability. The validity of knowledge can be renegotiated in a crisis. Sometimes, fractures make it possible to see the structure of problems that already existed and create the potential for alternative models.

All of this is also valid for biennials in times of crisis. A crisis may force the organizers to fundamentally rethink their exhibition plan and to develop new forms of organization. Biennials have to learn to manage change and to develop the right projects at moments when everything is in flow. This is a great challenge. Biennials are meeting places, places where people come together and stories are collected. In times of crisis it is important that places like these are maintained. To achieve this, it might be necessary to make an event smaller and to focus. Or no longer to use an international yardstick, but instead to strengthen relations with local micro-politics. In this situation, biennials can also activate the imaginations of people going through crisis.

## ***How can biennials contribute to making the world better?***

The three working groups addressing this question found it difficult to answer, probably due to the ambiguity of the terms. How is “biennial” defined here, and what is a “better world?” There are many kinds of biennial and a plurality of worlds and values. Perhaps this was why the results here were presented in the form of lists of pros and contras. What are the pros of biennials, and where are the weaknesses of this exhibition format?

The following positive characteristics were named. Biennials create meeting places and are therefore a platform for many different voices (perhaps even unintentionally). They inform the general public, promote learning processes, and activate the imagination. Biennials can take up critical issues and operate as a safe—because authorized—channel for new ideas and new forms of art. In this, ideally international and local dialog are combined. In the local context, they also support the recognition of institutions and create new jobs. An important potential of biennials lies in their creation of emotional and unforgettable moments. This makes them interesting for the tourism industry too. Their two-yearly rhythm with its repeat effect encourages loyalty from the audience.

The working groups also defined the disadvantages of biennials. Participants saw a fundamental danger of instrumentalization, whether through political or financial pressure. Invited artists can also be instrumentalized. The curatorial independence of biennials is threatened by a trend toward reproducing the hierarchies of the art world. The size of biennials is also a critical factor. Many biennials have more than three hundred participating artists and are simply exhausting and over-saturated. The result is tiredness and emptiness, instead of inspiration and information. The two-year rhythm has its pitfalls too. How do biennials manage to keep the idea alive in the two intermediate years? How can they maintain the institutional and personnel structures they have established? And what about the pressure to repeat, even if there is no artistic necessity (any longer) or the local scene has developed new priorities?

## **World Café – Political Pressure**

### ***Is there an ethics of curating or a curatorial responsibility?***

This question was discussed by two groups. The first voted for a clear “yes.” They saw an ethics of curating in the integrity of responsible, accountable, honest, and respectful work. Knowing that all the expert knowledge you have never means you know everything. Knowing your own limits and working with others on this basis. Acting reflectively and communicatively. Recognizing the power of language.

Ethical curating always means gaining knowledge, and sharing, disseminating, and communicating it. A prerequisite is that curators are aware of their privileged status. Then this privilege should be unlearned (as far as possible), before the third step—practice—begins.

Ethical curating not only implies questioning your own action, but also that of the institution. It is necessary to bear its limits in mind, to test its authenticity, and to maintain and strengthen its structure.

That was the opinion of the first group. The second group came up with a more complex set of results. They saw a movement today that questions curatorial practice, and perhaps even wishes to limit it. An example that was given was the conference “Curatorial Ethics” that took place in spring 2015 in Kunsthalle Wien. Given this, the participants asked how curating can take on any responsibility at all. Here, it was not the curator who was seen to be obliged to act, but the artists and of course the institutions.

On this basis the question was reformulated. How can ethical concerns be taken into account in curatorial practice and the production of art, and what are our aims in this? Key words here were: working together, communication, working with colleagues in networks. But how can that work in practice? Who is allowed to take part (and who is not)? Perhaps it is better to begin with oneself and question one’s own actions. What is my role in the world of art? Why do I select the artists I select? Because of their fame? To get them on my resume? Just to belong? Do I openly admit to the gaps in my knowledge?

A further interesting aspect was discussed here—ways of working with history and historical exhibits. Participants agreed that it is important to describe contexts, to test obsolete terminology, and to question our use of language. The Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, for example, is presently reviewing its collection for racism and changing titles and descriptions of artworks. In this context the question is asked, whether (art) historians and curators should adhere to different rules?

And what about ethical responsibility in the institutional context? Perhaps there should be general ethical guidelines, drawn up an external body like the International Council of Museums. Fee structures, budgets, copyright, relations with external patrons, a code of practice, the vision of a museum, and financing options are all themes that might be considered in guidelines of this kind.

Ethical curating always takes place within a tense relationship between individual and collective responsibility. This can lead to conflicts. How can we even begin to question the work of curator colleagues? How should we deal with someone we know to be acting unethically? What are the values that guide us?

The issue of finance is particularly delicate. Many sources of money are compromised, conflicting with environmental protection or human rights. In this context, ethical curating means critically reviewing all finance and making it transparent on all levels.

It is always the case that ethical values are not written in stone, but need to be continually redefined. The context is always decisive. Where am I curating? As a curator I have the ethical responsibility to take an interest in the place where the event takes place. I must know how to manage sensitive issues and controversial exhibits. It is important to make contact with local people.

Conclusion: It is not easy to set universally valid ethical guidelines for curating. Is curatorial work perhaps just too diverse?

***Are there any strategies or model procedures for working together with the audience as co-producer?***

This question was discussed in four groups. While one group based its dialog on a practical example, the three others focused on theory. The ideas are summarized in the following.

Cooperative projects with audiences should be planned for the long term, and should be flexible and processual. Right from the start, there should be clear preconditions and rules. The following questions must be answered in advance. Who is the project aimed at? Who should benefit from it? Which groups should be involved? Furthermore, the relevance and necessity should be defined—perhaps in the course of other current projects and within the institutional framework.

It is important to communicate clearly at all times and to clarify active roles. What does collaboration look like? Who works with whom? All the participants must promise to contribute to achieving a goal they have set together. Organizers should know that real coproduction is only possible if it is based on open dialog and equality. This is the basis for the democratic exchange of knowledge.

Of course, a common process like this has its limits. Even if concessions are made in the course of a project, not every idea can be pursued. Out-of-order proposals that threaten to make the institution vulnerable cannot be accepted. It is essential not to forget that you are not working with experts. Cooperative projects with audiences should therefore not be fixated on any end product and should always also be seen as potential spaces of failure.

**Manifesto Creation**

After two full days on the University of Canterbury campus in Christchurch the group spent the last day of the symposium in New Brighton, an unspectacular coastal town with a somewhat dilapidated beach promenade. To kick off the final working sessions, the participants took a long beach walk across the broad open bay. After the experience of earthquake-devastated Christchurch this was quite a contrast.

This was certainly an unusual touch for a biennials conference, but chosen very deliberately. A joint experience of nature was intended to help participants to find a new level in their discussion, drawing on non-rational access to knowledge. In a contemplative round, everyone was able to come to themselves, listen to the voice within, and also to sense their connections with the others and to open up. The idea was to find ways toward collective knowledge not derived from the intellect. In all, five themes were developed from this evolutionary dialog and worked on in small groups.

***Curatorial Instinct***

Is there such a thing as “curatorial instinct”? The working group was in agreement: YES!! It is so direct as to be like a physical reaction. It guides our commitment and

the way we enter into relationships. Feelings toward art should not be divorced from life.

Ideas are a process, feelings are a reaction—instinct is the ground. Instinct is spontaneous, direct, and highly expressive. It is immediate and acute. It comes from the unconscious and guides our attention toward things not yet seen.

We should cultivate our instinct by working with it, practicing it, and giving it time and space. We should concentrate on the essentials and question what we take for granted. Not to live BESIDE life, but WITHIN it. To unlearn conditioning. To follow current events with great concentration—not divorced from life but living in our own time, actively taking part.

### ***How can curators work close to the audience and expand the role of the public institution?***

On this question, the group compiled a number of basic ideas. Top of the list was listening, an elementary component of curatorial practice. If a curator wants to work closely with the audience and expand the role of his institution, then he or she needs to take the time. Time to think, to filter thoughts, and to let them sink in. A nice keyword here was: “Listening with your eyes.” A curator should also take time for research, which is a key element of curatorial work that should not be sacrificed to time pressures or any other expectations.

Another strategic measure is establishing and taking care of relationships with people outside the world of art, people who are not art insiders. Within the institution, this would include security staff and technicians, while outside it could be any number of different people with relations to the institution, including hairdressers, bakers, or cleaners. These contacts can be the voice on the ground, the sounding board that provides insight into realities beyond the world of the academies. Studio visits are also helpful in this context. In all of these situations, what matters is being open and permitting your own vulnerability.

The media are of course eminently important for relations with the audience. A start can be made with press releases, Instead of disseminating the usual insider knowledge, it would be possible to write these texts together with interns, technicians, or visitors, and to integrate interviews with artists, etc. This would change the “voice” of the institution, signaling openness, and then leading to a shift in the audience’s expectations.

### ***Privilege***

As a curator/artist, you are privileged. Perhaps because you represent a well-known institution, or are recognized for your knowledge, or able to work across several borders. It is important to be aware that practicing and unlearning privileges are two sides of the one coin. Meaning: It is important to continually question and evaluate your own position and the structures of your own action. To self-reflectively attempt to go back to being an amateur and to then cope with the accompanying ill ease.

The key to everything is language. Via language we write cultural history, and we disseminate our knowledge. And yet there are many things that cannot be easily

translated: concepts, words, situations, contexts, cultural understanding. We should always be aware of this.

As a curator/artist we should purposefully enter into unpleasant and difficult situations, and thereby risk being rejected. We should try to bear close proximity, and also great distance. Our privilege means that we discuss our own position and act authentically. And that we celebrate the inadequacy of our knowledge, take note of gaps, permit hesitancy and ambiguity. Knowledge is always only partial and subjective.

At the close of this round, discussion turned to parallels between privilege and repression. Both can be increased when critical factors combine. As in the cases of race + class, sexuality + age, ability to perform/disability + gender, etc. An interesting observation.

### ***Support***

When dealing with support there are two basic principles. First, curatorial independence has top priority. And support must be transparent for ALL stakeholders, especially for the artists. Artists have the right to state their opinions freely, as is embodied in Article 5 of the German Basic Law. This right of the individual holds true toward both state finance and private sponsors.

Even if it may not seem so from the outside, public institutions are dependent on central support. Commercial sponsors are making more and more demands and setting tougher conditions, with the result that the deal is not between equals. More and more and increasingly substantive concessions are made. But must a museum really accept an advertising cart in its foyer or hand out free tickets?

“He who sups with the devil should have a long spoon,” so they say. Would more distance to the money-givers mean more security? And what about the idea that “money doesn’t stink”? Can cultural institutions accept money without checking out and questioning its source? Would they become debased money launderers?

It is always necessary to ask what the motivation of money givers is and what they expect in return. And never bow down to pressure—in matters of naming rights, logos, or greenwashing—PR methods aimed at giving a company or organization an environmentally friendly and responsible image without the necessary basis.

“There’s dirty money sticking to you.” That can also be true of cultural institutions. Where does the supply chain of dirty money end? As an individual, it is possible to defend a strong position with integrity and without support. A state institution or a biennial cannot really do this. How can they strategically manage this dilemma? By reducing all offers of concessions and staying very clear about any conditions attached.

Governments have to do good things and bad things. But curators are not politicians. If it is necessary, they should refuse to accept money on offer and thereby make a clear statement.

## **Conclusion**

Christchurch is certainly not a hot spot in the international art scene. This city is “out of focus,” at the other end of the world. But it was a good place for this biennials conference, which was not about self-presentation by biennials makers (as unfortunately is often the case). This was not about positioning (and advertising) your own biennial, and not about finding a place in the international art business. No, this event was not made for vanities. The themes chosen were much too serious for that. “Curating Under Pressure” was a think tank in which people were able to learn from each other and develop ideas together. With a World Café for the first time an experimental and open method was chosen that was not primarily about presenting solutions. Of course, solutions were in demand too, but it was just as important to give participants the chance to really address all their questions—emotionally and intellectually—and to be receptive for new ideas coming from completely different directions. That the audience was also involved, was a further positive side to this experiment.