

Article

The Return to *Kalokagathia*: Curating as Leverage in the Ongoing Dialogues between Aesthetics and Ethics

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Abstract: This essay argues that curating brought back a kind of leverage that redressed the otherwise imbalanced relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Curating lends out to art its innocent and aspirational belief in such a balance because the ethical concerns in art theory and art criticism have long been toned down while form was prioritized over content. Ever since the curatorial profession created its own niche in the art world—started, for example, in the West, in the late 1960s with curators such as Siegelau, Szeemann, or Lippard—curating began to mediate this relationship, thus helping to activate the catalyst potential of art without having to compromise its formal aspects. More specifically, this essay explores the ways in which theories and practices of curating brought back to mind the ancient Greek notion of *kalokagathia*, the intertwinement of aesthetics and ethics and, with it, other ethical responsibilities, principles, and values that art forgot to address while giving privilege to its formal aspects.

Keywords: *kalokagathia*; curating; aesthetics; ethics; sublime; autonomy of art

1. Introduction

Ethical concerns in art, art theory, and art criticism have often been toned down while form in those disciplines and practices has been prioritized over content. Even now, the “*l’art-pour-l’art*” dictum still has its supporters, long after it enjoyed widespread acceptance after the Second World War.¹ This strict division between aesthetics and ethics was also prompted and enhanced by various modernist art discourses and debates that were central to Western European aesthetics and art theory. This division also dominated Eastern Europe during the same period, and particularly, in what concerns me personally (I hail from North Macedonia), the ex-Yugoslavia with its academic and museum programs, even after their cultural policies broke off from the socialist realism that dominated the region at the time [1]. Unofficially, this strict division was also the desired alternative of Eastern European artists who did not subscribe to the ideologically driven socialist realist aesthetics of the time. However, everything slowly changed in the late 1960s, when the curatorial profession entered the art world and started to mediate this relation between aesthetics and ethics.

In this essay, I want to argue that curating gave art the possibility of renewing the balanced and reciprocal relations that can potentially exist between artistic action and ethics. In other words, curating helped activate the catalyst ethical potential of art, without having to compromise its formal aspects. I want to argue this by keeping in mind a too-often-forgotten notion, namely that of *kalokagathia*, this aspirational ideal of harmony between the beautiful or the aesthetical and the noble and good or the ethical.² Armed with this notion, I want to argue that curating helped leveraged this imbalanced

¹ I refer here to the well-known debates stemming from the rigid and class-driven priority that Clement Greenberg gave to aesthetics and to his disdain for content and social engagement.

² *Kalokagathia*, from the Ancient Greek (καλὸς καγαθός), meaning the beautiful and good. The word is derived from two adjectives: *kalós*, beautiful + *agathós*, honest, good, noble, courageous, worthy of admiration. This Ancient Greek ideal of

relation between aesthetics and ethics in the context of art. More specifically, I want to explore the ways in which the rise of curating brought back the idea of an ethical responsibility in art alongside other principles and values. Starting with the etymology of the term curating, which by default puts an emphasis on embedded ethical positions and principles, my aim is to show that in the last decades of the twentieth century—and more specifically at the end of 1960s—curating had a radical effect on art that helped redefine art's role in society.

Although the relation between aesthetics and ethics was never perfectly balanced, the role of this relation in the interpretation and evaluation of art never got defined during the modernist period, with its unchallenged hierarchy of aesthetics over ethics. This lack of challenge and this predominance of formalist aesthetics had an overwhelming and long-term impact on the general understanding of the potential for art to have a societal and ethical role. This is obviously the result of a systemic flaw and of the infra-structural conditions in museums, galleries, and other art institutions throughout the period. However, it is also the result of the institutionally and politically preferred formalist discourses that have created obstacles for any in-depth discussions of the reciprocal relation between ethics and aesthetics. Not only did this affect and undo the existing relations between the two fields in the past, such divisions still exist and prevail today—both in the professional debates and in the wider sphere of culture that appropriated the curatorial phenomenon in the broader sense of this term [3].

In this essay, I will only address a couple of theoretical “heavyweights” (namely, Adorno and Kant) who still influence this bias towards the aesthetic and against the ethical concerns of art. In doing so, I will not be discussing the endless conundrums arising from the personal ethical positions of individual curators. I will also not be delving or exploring the specificities of certain curatorial movements that privilege and overestimate the importance of the role of curators over and beyond that of artists. Finally, I will opt for a slightly conjectural and speculative tone in order to address this long debate and a possible way out of it.

2. The Sublime and the Evil in Art

In different periods of the history and theory of art, the broken link between the aesthetic category of the beautiful and the ethical category of the good has always been supplemented or justified by other categories. Ever since Theodor Adorno wrote the enigmatic statement “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” [4] (p. 34), his words have been used as a slogan for justifying the imbalance between aesthetics and ethics, especially when the harmony between the two is seen as something impossible to achieve. However, Adorno's words have often been misquoted and their meaning has been misconstrued, thus reverberating with discomfort and unease especially for artists who continued making work. This is partly due to the fact that the statement juxtaposes poetry with the site of one of the most incomprehensible Nazi crimes, thus stressing their un-thinkability together [4] (p. 35). This is also due to the fact that Adorno's words stand as an overt admission of the paradox that humans are incapable of understanding and representing various human phenomena, or more concretely, of translating their own deeds, and particularly negative ones, into art.

This, however, is not the same as to say that art cannot engage in ethical debates and oppose violence, injustice, or other social ills. On the one hand, Adorno's statement has served as an excuse for apolitical silence, refraining from taking a political position due to its metaphysical impossibility. On the other hand, modernist abstention from representation and Adorno's negative dialectics can be interpreted as a direct consequence of the admission of ethical impairment and the inability to understand and represent human nature, even if various artists early in mid-twentieth century had

harmony between any artistic action and the noble and good human personality is documented in Plato's teaching on the harmony between bodily, moral, and spiritual values (also present in other ancient texts). For example, in Plato's dialogue *Lysis* the relationship between beauty and goodness is established with an emphasis on both categories as positive human values. Socrates says, “Now I maintain that the good is [the] beautiful. What do you think? (λέγω γὰρ τὰγαθὸν καλὸν εἶναι· σὺ δ' οὐκ οἶε).” [2] (p. 65).

different explanations for the urgency of abstract, anti-representational, and formalist art. It comes as no surprise then that, in his landmark essay, “The Sublime is Now” (1948), the American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman stated that the category of the sublime—“this impulse of modern art”—resides in a “desire to destroy beauty” [5] (pp. 170–171), since beauty prevents the artist from realizing man’s desire for the exalted, for the sublime.³ For Newman the preoccupation with the beautiful has impeded the perception of “the Absolute”, particularly in religious art, with its emphasis on the figurative [5] (p. 170).

All throughout the modernist period, when all arguments against representation were respected, the sublime has been pushed forward as the best justification for abstraction, as a kind of a mystical device enabling one to think the un-representable. Barnett Newman’s view accords here with that of philosophers Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. For example, in his text, “Analytic of the Sublime” (1790) in *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant locates examples of the sublime not only in nature, but also in the human condition. He famously argues that the sublime, unlike the beautiful, “cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason” [6] (p. 99).

Interestingly enough, this radical critique of the aestheticization of art could also be interpreted as one of the steps that later enabled the inevitable return towards the rapprochement of the aesthetical and the ethical in art. According to Kant’s and Burke’s definitions, what sublime and evil have in common is incommensurability and incomprehensibility. As Phillip Shaw writes: “The sublime . . . is on the side of the mind rather than nature; and since the extent of the mind is unbounded it cannot be adequately represented by an object with determinate bounds” [7].⁴ I want to argue here that this negativity in the Western metaphysical tradition (which goes as far back as both Eastern and Western mystical tradition of discussing negative theology and its arguments about the possibility for humans to comprehend and overcome their limits and essence) still influences our belief in humanity’s potential to change the trajectory of its development and re-define its own nature. The limits of human capacity to understand this are responsible for the conceptualization of both the sublime and evil, often leading to bewildering statements that eventually end up conflating the two, as was, for example, Damien Hirst’s statement that “9/11 [was] wicked but a work of art” (despite the fact that they operate in completely different registers) [8].⁵ Any attempt in art to refrain from understanding and/or interpreting the reasons for this confusion is as politically motivated and as dangerous as misinterpretations of Adorno’s often simplified statement [10] (p. 234).⁶

In contrast to this statement, terror, politics, and aesthetics are not always interpreted as contradictory as in Adorno’s analysis. Adorno’s continual revisions and re-interpretations of his own aphorism⁷ led to many contradictory positions regarding whether one could comprehend and represent evil and what kind of representations of evil are ethically acceptable. Adorno’s critique of the dominant climate of post-war Germany was also directed against the discussions surrounding Heidegger and his denial(s) of his affiliation to National Socialism.

Regardless of Adorno’s disagreements with Heidegger, the arguments that, later on, Jacques Derrida put forward in defense of Heidegger’s refusal to officially distance himself from his affiliation with National Socialism are equally problematic. These indeed seem now similar to Adorno’s denial of the potentiality of poetry and language to express the horror of Auschwitz. In the very beginning

³ The impossibility of representation was best exemplified by Barnett Newman’s sculpture *Broken Obelisk* (1963).

⁴ According to Phillip Shaw the “subject matter” of Newman’s work is “creation itself”, “an act associated no longer with God but with man.” This discussion is in a way related to several recent philosophical projects that attempt to re-evaluate and rehabilitate the potential of “Prometheanism” and “Enlightenment” beyond a simple call to re-think modernist values.

⁵ Arnold Berleant also argues in his article “Art, Terrorism, and the Negative Sublime” that one cannot dismiss such statements [9].

⁶ The best example is the well-known part from Walter Benjamin’s essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in which he reflects on the extreme self-alienation within fascism, which according to him, allows for the destruction of humanity to become an aesthetic experience.

⁷ Adorno revisited and revised his statement in his *Negative Dialectics*, into “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream.” [11] (361).

of the first chapter of his book *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Derrida mentions a possible title “How to avoid Speaking: Denials” that actually exists as a separate text published in several other anthologies. It not only refers to Heidegger but also deals with Derrida’s “denial” of the uncritical influence of negative theology and subsequently of its power to speak the incomprehensible.⁸ With such post-Adornoian inheritance in mind, it becomes now clear of the impact of Adorno’s own sentence. Not only did Adorno’s original statement question German culture and its future after Auschwitz, it also forced intellectuals around the world to take a stance on whether politically and socially committed art is possible in conditions of incomprehensible cruelty and evil. This coercion raised to the level of universal truth led many socially engaged artists at the time (conceptual, process, and land artists, for example), to be co-opted by form and market forces. Perhaps this is another reason why interpretations of the sublime and evil position themselves in the same register.

Although it is obviously unreasonable to equate the ethical category of evil with the aesthetic category of the sublime (even though ethical aspects of the sublime were already discussed by Kant), one should acknowledge that these two categories share a certain negative dialectic and even negative theology, and this correspondence needs a more profound analysis. The central question here, for me, would be why certain periods privilege silence over loud protests (the demand for politically engaged art in the 1970s versus the insistence on formalism in the 1980s, for example), passivity over active response to what is shunned as wrong and evil? An additional question is how evil can be represented differently than through the sublime, the meaning of which is usually understood as falling under the rubric of the aesthetic? Yet, precisely because the modernist hiatus between ethical and aesthetic arguments has become unsustainable in most recent discussions about art, the difference between the representation of the sublime and evil has become more intricate than ever before. As recent texts have shown, revisiting the theory of the sublime has therefore become urgent and the disenchantment with the sublime remains a rather frequent topic of discussion [14] (pp. 20–42).

3. The Death Grip of Formalist Aesthetics’ “Invigilators”

The rigorous formalist division between the ethical and aesthetic aspects of art, or more precisely, the polarized distinction between content and form, and between good and beautiful, has yielded some of the most debilitating outcomes of modernist and formalist theory. The either/or polarity that often results from hierarchical positioning of one of these poles still has a key bearing on our understanding of art’s position, and its role in different cultural contexts and in contemporary society in general. Kant’s rigorous division between ethics and aesthetics was not the only philosophical legacy that contributed towards the solidification of the modernist “myths” of originality, authenticity, uniqueness, universality, art genius, autonomy, etc. [15]. It was also influenced by the Russian early formalist school of Viktor Shklovsky [16] and the semiotic analysis of art, wherein the issue of art’s autonomy stemmed from political interventions in both art’s content and form. Given the divisive and politicized culture of the post-war period, the strict division between form and content that was often interpreted as a form of escapism also implied that the socialist and communist policies were the only “culprits” for this tendencies of social and ethical issues to contaminate and defile ideals of an otherwise autonomous “pure” art.

When Joseph Kosuth published his early attack on the modernist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg in his essay “Art After Philosophy” of 1969 [17]—in which he addressed Modernism’s fallibility for having equated aesthetics and art (stressing the relevance of conceptually over and beyond form-driven art)—he was nonetheless not yet ready to fully abandon the idea of art as an entity separate from society. We have to wait for Hal Foster’s critical reader, *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture* [18], to see the problems associated with calling for art’s autonomy away from its contextual background.

⁸ See [12] (p. 79) and [13] (p. 2).

However, such “anti-aesthetic” tendencies in art have always co-existed with modernist art in the past, and specifically, in avant-garde movements in both the East and West [19].

The conflation of the realm of philosophy—to which the aesthetic category of the beautiful belongs—and the realm of art has gradually resulted in a contradictory long-term pursuit of an ever more precise, and false, dichotomy between art and society, as if they could always be isolated from each other. Taking the current neoliberal political context as its point of departure,⁹ this essay attempts to reveal and disentangle the difficulties that still prevent many art theorists from abandoning completely (or at least partially) modernist ideals and formalist criteria regarding art and the valorization of its production despite the vigorous calls for social change in art. The usual criticism, for example, that curatorial interventions merely caters to societal needs is one of the many commonplaces stemming from modernist principles. I therefore find it urgent to discuss why and how the sociopolitical factors that enabled the long-term dominance of modernist aesthetics still affect, or more precisely prevent, the embracing of ethically and socially focused art practices as a relevant contribution to the art field, dubbing them “politically correct art.” Furthermore, how the socially engaged art that is concerned both by ethical and aesthetical demands nonetheless continues to develop its strategies, despite such skepticism toward its results.

I have already argued elsewhere that the urgency for the emergence of socially and politically engaged art such as, for example, community-based art or collaborative and participatory art stemmed from the uneven development of theory, which was lagging behind art practices in terms of ethical concerns [21]. The shift from art focused on the production of art objects toward art that implicated and engaged various subjects (e.g., art producers, mediators, audience members, citizens) in order to create new and relevant relations amongst them was imagined as an inevitable strategy of intervention in the existing distinctions and hierarchies in order to change or dismantle them entirely. However, it must be acknowledged that there are still many trends in the art world to keep both the art discourse and art theory away from issues of social justice and political realities—mostly justified by the supposed absence of relevant artworks (read: objects)—as well as to interpret art’s involvement in such changes as irrelevant and ultimately counter-aesthetic. These trends, so visible in biennales and other fairs, only reveal the fundamental fraught infrastructures of art, which are in Europe and elsewhere mainly driven by privileged, white, and patriarchal orders, including those hiding under the bandwagon of neoliberal feminism.

Furthermore, such trends often reveal the interconnectedness of art-world structures to the wider sociopolitical and economic systemic structures to which the art production system belongs by default. Ultimately, the remnants of modernist definitions of art are directly linked to this compromised position that sees socially and politically engaged art remain dependent on the production, distribution, and marketisation of art and on the many other structures that underpin the prevailing late capitalist and neoliberal economy, such as, for example, the world-wide use of social media and its many coopting tactics. Therefore, I want to stress that some of the issues regarding the aesthetic criteria of evaluation of socially engaged art are still unresolved. Yet they are pertinent for a more profound understanding of art’s changing role in society, and its effort to break with the inherited sociopolitical and economic relationships that facilitated the preservation of the strict division between art and society in the first place.

In this respect, attempts to detach art from the ethical, cultural, and social codes and norms prevailing in the period and the geopolitical contexts of its production became questionable and unattainable—for various geopolitical, sociological, and cultural reasons. The reframing of the triangular relation between ethics, aesthetics, and art is still partial, although the position of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline (and not only a modernist one) relevant in determining art’s definition has

⁹ This neoliberal political context refers to all the market-oriented policies set in place in democratic countries, both in the West and East, that are largely responsible for the widest range of social, political, ecological, and economic problems. On this use, see, for example, [20].

weakened. Modernist and formalist aesthetic ideals endured for only a couple of decades (the 1960s and 1970s), but the unwinding of this short modernist time span via poststructuralist and postmodernist debates became a lengthy endeavor, starting more or less at the same time and continuing all the way to the 1990s, especially those made by art historians and art theoreticians reading the incursions made by authors in the fields of deconstruction, semiotic theory, and political theory.

The self-appointed modernist “watch” over the quarantine of socially and politically engaged art practices is still lurking, on the one hand, amidst the established, elitist art world, and the complex networks of private galleries, art dealers, and collections (both private and corporate-owned), and on the other, amongst art critics, curators, museum, and biennial directors. Those concerned conservative voices still struggle, “warning” us that excessive concern with societal justice, ethical, and political concerns, as well as social and racial equality impedes the production of “adequate” art. Even today, there are still many sporadic attacks in the art world against all efforts to bring art back together with its societal context. Against these, it is therefore crucial to look into the way curating intervenes as this is often overlooked and undervalued. Curating in my view indeed adds the necessary weights to the fight against the formalist aesthetic canons and criteria that were instrumental in sustaining the prevailing concept of art’s autonomy.

4. The Ethical Conundrums of Autonomy of Art and Curating

Needless to say, artistic concepts, genres, and theoretical terms such as institutional critique, social intervention, relational aesthetics, participatory art, socially engaged art, activism, as well as those we already highlighted earlier, namely, community-based art and collaborative art, were all conceived to provide adequate analytical means for better understanding the problems associated with the modernist dichotomous interpretations of the relations between art and society. They all contributed towards enhancing the importance of the ethical positions in the context of art. This means that curating did not act in an ethical vacuum, but it did so in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, curating helped both art and artists to survive and to continue their fight against conservative attempts in the art world that still use the autonomy argument as a tool for maintaining the status quo, but on the other hand, it made even the most radical art susceptible to institutional recuperation and self-cooptation in the neoliberal contexts described earlier. Curating’s intervention was therefore always ambiguous and the cooption of curators and artists alike never far from the kinds of discourses held by formalists and conservative proponents.

This paradox is not, however, unique. Ever since the basic conditions for autonomy emerged, the paradoxical nature of the autonomy of art has become apparent, owing to competing definitions of autonomy that are interwoven and contradictory because of the different positions of those who claim such autonomy. The dialectical relationship between social and aesthetic autonomy, just as between autonomy and commodification should not be forgotten. Artists are free to choose their paths and diversify their various positions when calling for “art for art’s sake”: calling for a formalist separation of aesthetic and moral values; giving precedence to aesthetic values above all other values; staking out a type of distanced and disinterested Kantian aesthetics; or even asserting that art is completely independent of life and subject to wholly independent rules of development [21,22].

One of the biggest contradictions of the burgeoning “autonomy period” is often forgotten: art could only become autonomous because it was commodified through its involvement in the capitalist market system and the exchange of symbolic values. Adorno’s reflections on the relationship between art and society gave way to different interpretations of autonomy, so there are different levels of autonomy in art, which makes shifts and moves across different levels and registers even more complex and paradoxical [23] (pp. 251–66). Thus, a more specific analysis of conceptions of autonomy could clarify the inner contradictions of art’s claimed right to autonomy. Obviously, there is an overall distinction between social and aesthetic autonomy, but artists and their artworks also belong to differing and often contrasting registers of autonomy depending on their institutional affiliations and/or allies.

Let me survey a few of these artistic registers of autonomy. The first is the claim to autonomy originating with the artist. He/she uses this claim when speaking and writing in public about the artwork and how it relates to society, both in the Eastern and the Western political and art systems. The second claim to autonomy derives from various institutions that are responsible for the production and presentation of the artwork. They mostly assert their responsibility to define and protect the autonomy of the artwork from intrusion by different sources. The third claim is the position of published art criticism, which produces texts advocating for the right to autonomy and stressing the importance of aesthetic value (often helping the artwork to receive an award or be sold). The fourth, but not last, claim is that of the curation on the institutional or independent art scene and of diverse activist organizations, which are, one must note, not unified. Claims to autonomy do arise from certain artists and artworks on this side as well. The call for the autonomy of subjectivity as a position in the liberal legal societal and political context is, of course, the most complex issue to discuss, because it is never clearly stated or protected by the state. It has often served various purposes when its derailment started threatening the state itself and its interests. Finally, artists' class, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and the specificity of their art production have made the issue of autonomy even more complex.

If one accepts the general assumption that autonomy is still needed and reflects an unresolved contradiction of an artwork's structure, the conundrums that still remain to be addressed are: What kind of autonomy and for whom? Why do artists and institutions claim the right to autonomy, even in contexts where they have already accepted various "worldly" alliances of political and economic power? The inevitable internalization of a critical position towards institutions ("biting the hand that feeds") is a two way street: on the one hand, institutions very quickly internalize the critique aimed at them, appropriating the vocabulary of their critics and sometimes superficially incorporating new structures in order to rehabilitate themselves—a danger already anticipated by Guy Debord's discussions with regards to media, appropriation, and recuperation [24] (pp. 18–30).

5. Curating as Institutional Critique and Self-Instituting

Institutions criticized in this way may become strengthened in the process, even if they continue to work under the same rules as before. On the one hand, an institution constructs itself only after being interpolated by the right kind of critical opposition. On the other hand, critical subjects internalize institutional power, practicing the same forms of self-criticism time and time again, to the point where it starts to govern their own activity. By continuing to use the same methods, under the pretext of receiving protection from more powerful institutions, these supposedly critical institutionalized subjects run the danger of becoming at best gatekeepers, at worst, agents fighting other art practitioners' right to position themselves critically. This itself amounts to an exercise of power, albeit of a different kind [22].

Under the umbrella model of "reverse recuperation", I want to address long-term concepts undertaken by various curators and artists during the last couple of decades. It is one of the possible artistic strategies for avoiding the clichés of one-directional participatory relations. I arrived at this "reverse recuperation" while writing a book about the work of Slovenian artist Tadej Pogačar [25]. Tadej Pogačar has dedicated more than fifteen years of artistic effort—in parallel to other art projects and works—to collaboration with sex-workers' self-organized communities. During his long-term research, participatory, and activist project CODE: RED (1999–2016), Pogačar's interests were invested in the interventions of sex workers within the existing economy and their development of various new models of parallel economy. He curated multilayered collaborations that were combined with his artistic strategy and intertwined them with the activist strategies of different local organizations and cooperation partners around the globe (Slovenia, Croatia, Brazil, Italy, Albania, Greece, Germany, etc.). These projects acted in solidarity with and supporting the empowerment of sex workers who faced difficult working conditions and impediments in exercising their right to work.

This “reverse recuperation” is a means of circumventing established, simplistic reading models related to the hermeneutics of uncritical self-instituting and self-institutionalized practices that have career advancement as their only aim in order to ultimately establish themselves in existing institutions. It is an alternative umbrella model encompassing artistic strategies that attempt to create more relaxed institutional and organizational structures (sometimes real, but more often fake in legal terms). Within such meta-institutions (e.g., in 1993, Pogačar established the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum of Contemporary Art, which was legally registered as an institution but had no real museum building), artists-turned-curators develop their own cultural and artistic policies and ethical principles, focusing more on the democratic and de-hierarchized participation of various marginalized, vulnerable (and often criminalized) communities than on the existing hegemonic and hierarchical principles already at work in most of the existing institutions.

These efforts offer different organizational models and networks and are thus self-instituting in the sense developed by Cornelius Castoriadis [26] (p. 373). Both the self-organized sex workers and the artist aimed to empower communities through artistic means, thus acting as antidotes to the co-optation, monopolization, and “recuperation” of resources in the arts, fears expressed by Guy Debord in his use of the latter term [27].¹⁰ Living with and within the current reigning contradictions in the art world is difficult, especially for artists and curators collaborating with high-profile art institutions.

According to George Lipsitz [28] (p. 80), the inability to speak openly about contradictory consciousness, this Gramscian term to explain how American workers in the nineteenth century exercised a “half-conscious complicity” in their own victimization can lead to a self-destructive desire for “pure” political positions that ultimately have more to do with “individual subjectivities and self-images” than with “disciplined collective struggle for resources and power.” Lipsitz states that “the ultimate goal behind the pertinent critique of the exclusive and hegemonic institutional models is to overcome the deterministic approach” [28] (p. 80); that is, this feeling that there is nothing to be done, and that as victims, we are de facto complicit. A curators’ role in such a context becomes even more complex, even though it is always called to negotiate and balance the critical struggle between the power and truth.

6. Conclusions

Although the arguments put forward until now are rather bleak, I want nonetheless to conclude with a positive and optimistic understanding of curatorial agency. In my opinion, curating’s full potential is still to be unleashed and developed, but this could happen only as long as the ethical quality of relationship among the participating subjects in the global art scene (art institutions, artists, curators, theorists, audiences, and other implicated and interested individuals) is interpreted and fully accepted as a possible end-goal for art. This cannot only be the production of beautiful objects, regardless of whether this is interpreted as anti-aesthetic, counter-aesthetic, or simply art. The concept of critical curating that emerged in the 1990s, came out of such a necessity to differentiate curatorial engagements in research, knowledge production, and critical theory from the ones dominated by the managerial, organizational, and promotional approach to curating as uncritical assembling and representing art works and objects due to the pressure and expectation of neoliberal art markets.

For several decades now, I have been looking at various contradictions that were provoked by the development of collaborations between curators and artists. I have also been looking at the ethical issues in different models and frameworks, some of which resulted in artistic and curatorial productions aiming towards socio-political and ethical changes in the art scene. These collaborative projects and frameworks were able to work around strictly controlled networks and hierarchized

¹⁰ Guy Debord uses the term “recuperation” (from: Lat. *recuperāre*: revive, recover, revive) in order to encompass the sociological process by which any radical ideas and images can be twisted, co-opted, and absorbed by mainstream and official culture and media in bourgeois society [27] (pp. 29–33, 4).

relationships in art, thus challenging traditional institutional structures. There is therefore some hope in the way these models and projects challenge the complacency and conservatism of formalist and aesthetic institutionalized structures.

However, I want to finish by emphasize the importance for curating of the term *kalokagathia* as a way to bridge the aesthetical and ethical principles in art. To do so, I simply want to go back to the original meaning of the term *kalokagathia*. Even in Plato's dialogues, it is not completely clear whether the beautiful and good are thought together as one and the same, because there are several philosophical and linguistic nuances that should never be overlooked when applying *kalokagathia* to contemporary contexts. For example, the meaning of Plato's term *kalos* is not completely symmetrical to the contemporary meaning of the word "beautiful", which is sometimes translated as "fine".¹¹ However, the asymptotic proximity and striving towards harmonization of the two is an ideal that, even if it is to be revived, faces a lot of obstacles. This challenge could be looked at through the prism of what was dubbed "felicitous acts" by J. A. Austin in the context of his speech act theory. According to Austin, the difference between what one says and what one does depends on the context and circumstances, and hence, the context can substantially affect fulfilment of a promise [30] (p. 100). With regards to *kalokagathia*, a felicitous act is therefore one in which the act is considered not just pertinent or relevant to a given context but manages in and for that context to bridge the gap between the aesthetic and the ethic or between the beautiful and the good.

The key here is to keep in mind that curating is often more reliant on the socio-political context than the art itself. This means that when it comes to a felicitous *kalokagathian* curatorial practice, the evaluation of the "success" of the said practice is often more resistant to a simple assessment of its impact because of the contradictions between the personal, ethical, and social positions of the artists. When the "stage" is not a theatre stage, as in Austin's examples, but is instead the general socio-political arena that determines the "success" of art, curating is in a way protected, shielded in the way it adds a new contextual layer, since it creates a new set of socio-political and community rules. In doing so, any curatorial agency that deliberately seeks to implement Plato's forgotten term as part of its endeavors can substantially fulfill its ethical and aesthetic promises. Even if it does not change the world's ethical and socio-political issues, it can at least create a potential micro ethical climate of its own.

I want to give here an example of what could be perceived as a felicitous *kalokagathian* curatorial project. The project focused on the porous borders between three countries in East India: Coochbehar in West Bengal (on the border of India/Bangladesh), Dzongu in Sikkim (on the border of India/Bhutan), and Karimguni in Assam (on the border of India/Bangladesh). These borders were roughly drawn up during the 1947 partition, dividing communities with relatives on one side, for example Bangladesh, and other relatives in the other, for example India. However, the partition was not done systematically everywhere. This resulted in the creation of specific no-man's lands, with inhabitants, for example, not knowing for decades, whether they belonged to India, Bangladesh, or Bhutan. Inhabitants would often have no citizenship, formal education structure, health care system, or employment rights. The project, called *Project Borderland*, was curated by Anshuman Dasgupta in 2013. It emphasized interactivity and collaboration with the local communities with a view of sharing knowledge about the local area. Using Poor Theatre techniques,¹² the aim was to create communal maps to help these communities in their struggle to acquire a sense of place in one or the other country. The felicitous curatorial outcome was that some of the participants reconfigured their understanding of these no-man's lands and started the

¹¹ For Plato, the relationship between beauty and art is not one of simple equivalence, but it is definitely related to form. Furthermore, Plato also uses another term, *kalon*, that is even closer to the ethically charged "goodness." Finally, the often-quoted line from Plato's *Lysis* has two different possible translations: "the beautiful is the good" and "the beautiful is good" because the Greek grammar does not allow "to discern whether *kalon* is a predicate adjective or a predicate substantive, nor does the context allow us to disambiguate" [29] (p. 147).

¹² The Poor Theatre technique was created by Jerzy Grotowski, the innovative Polish theatre director who wanted to rid cultural productions of all theatrical excesses, such as stages, costumes, and sets (hence "poor"). The map-making workshops in East India were conducted following this technique with minimal curatorial props.

process of acquiring if not a citizenship, at least a place to call home. This is *kalokagathian* in as much as it bridges the gap between the beautiful cartographies drawn by the communities and the ethical imperative of enhancing knowledge and improving lives.

In a response to various urgent issues related to contemporary art, culture, and politics, this type of curating literally calls for bridging both the gaps and the incommensurable dissimilarities between differently conceptualized art practices (e.g., poor theatre, fine art, cartographies), while strongly opposing these hackneyed hegemonic forms of curating that impose themselves to the art of disenfranchised communities and “subaltern cultures.” While aiming to expand the curatorial field and reflect on its social relevance, curators advocating such a type of curating no longer see the exhibition as the ultimate format of their curatorial practice. As culminating manifestations, these curators rather assume the mere research process and, in parallel to their exhibitions, include theoretical critical formats as conferences, seminars, interviews, close reading workshops, projections, public debates, and various online events and platforms that are responsive to actual urgencies.

Overall, one could say that the kind of felicitous *kalokagathian* curatorial practice curators should perhaps aim for and correspond to a type of ethical curatorial agency instead of a bland form of managerial practice. Curatorial agency is a concept that is even more directly indebted to the rethinking of the ethical role of curating in the context of contemporary art, culture, and society [31] (p. 152 and pp. 164–165). Drawing on Alfred Gell’s concept of “art as agency”, curating indeed can unleash and enhance art’s power to act, instead of just passively representing the world. Curatorial agency assumes that the curator is no longer considered to be a mere presenter of already existing artistic concepts and projects or to be dubbed the “author” of the exhibition. It acts as a social and ethical agency that entrusts its intellectual and theoretical capacities in curatorial knowledge production as well as art for social change and collaborations among curators, artists, and activists. It is embedded as one of the major cultural policy concepts in relation to the urgent need for cultural translation of lesser-known art and cultural traditions inevitably linked to the postcolonial critique and theory.

If conceived in this way, a *kalokagathian* curator is rather assumed as an active societal agent that contributes towards a cross-referential understanding of art and towards the rapprochement between different artistic, cultural, ethnic, class, gender, and sexual camps and moreover, towards improvement of society in general by building the bridge between aesthetics and ethics. Such a practice does not require a particular figure who would master the intricate balance implied in *kalokagathia*, and it does not require a particular platform from which to speak and impose this harmony between the aesthetic and the ethics. It simply requires from anyone who ventures onto this noble path, a kind of social practice of shared learning and doing, one which suffers no top-down managerialism. The danger will always be, of course, the kind of liberal humanitarianism that these kinds of projects often generate, but this can hopefully be circumvented if the intentions of the curator come after that of the participants involved, whether they be artists or local communities. In doing so, a felicitous *kalokagathian* curatorial practice is therefore an invitation to finally confront the modernist split that modernity instituted between ethics and aesthetics as well as rejecting art’s aloof autonomy for the sake of the wellbeing of communities. There is thus still hope that curating’s arrival on the art scene can renew our relationship to both the beautiful and the ethical.

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