Curating With Counterpowers: Activist Curating, Museum Protest and Institutional Liberation

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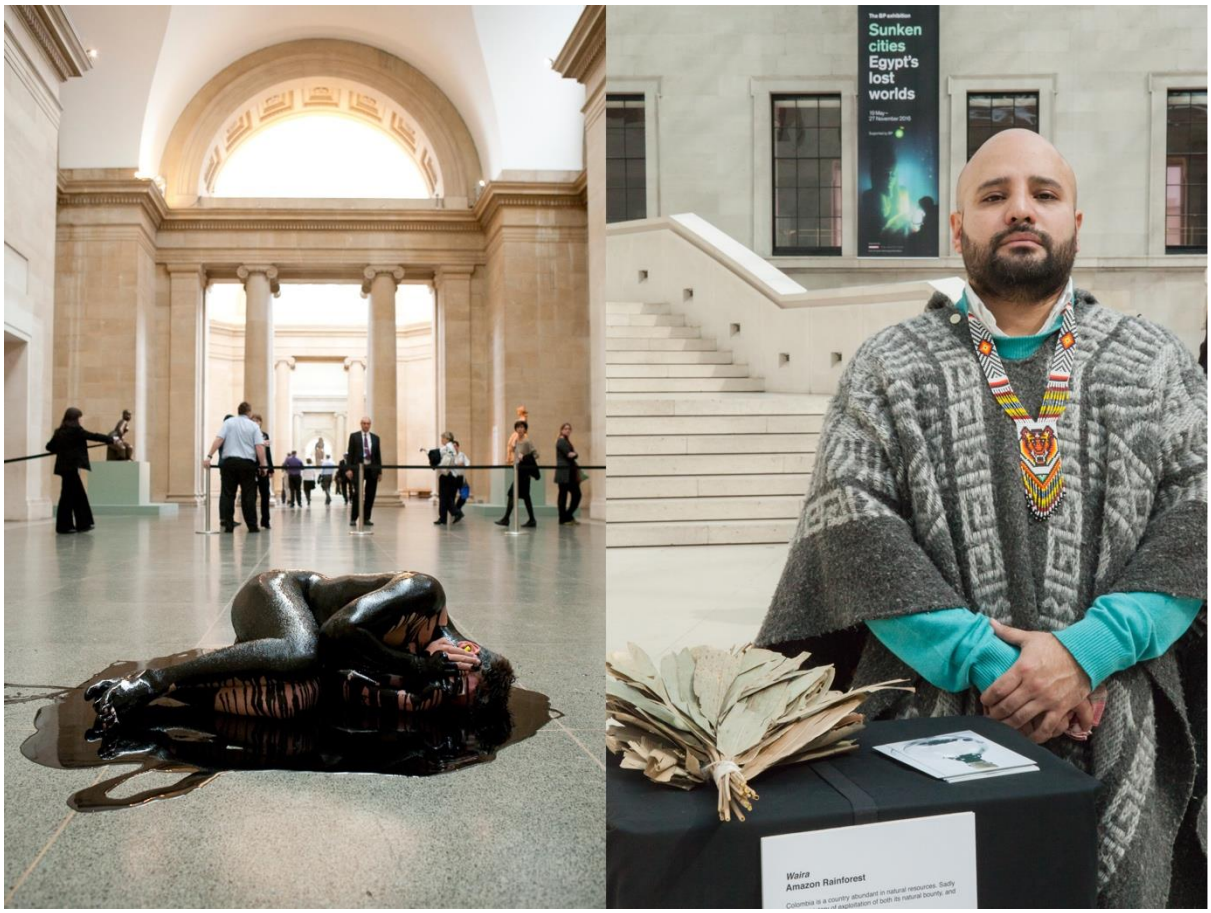

Figure 1: "Human Cost," Liberate Tate, inside the BP British Art display 'Single Form', Tate Britain, April 2011. Rafa Semilla and a Waira, part of A History of BP in 10 Objects, inside the British Museum Great Court, April 2016. Photographs courtesy of Amy Scaife.

There have been a flurry of recent texts and projects engaging with ideas of 'activist curating' or 'curatorial activism'.[1] Discussions of these terms are often framed around the ethics of institutionally-employed curators as an issue of progressive 'best practice' or 'critical practice' (often for inclusive representation or raising topical issues). This recent vogue is an institutional refraction of three wider, more significant phenomena. The first of these is a dramatic rise in protests focused on museums and heritage sites. Recent widespread protests at public monuments were presaged by a dramatic rise of protests in museum lobbies and

galleries. These actions are the most-visible tip of an iceberg in which curatorial language and thinking have emerged as a common repertoire across a range of social movements: a curatorial turn for movement cultures. The second phenomenon is a legitimation crisis for cultural institutions' production of neutrality. This crisis should be understood as largely a structural product of the third phenomenon: a recomposition of curatorial labour, in which 'curatorial' forms of work have proliferated within a more expansive field of social mediation.

By examining these interrelated factors, I want to think about 'activist curating' starting with the undisciplined curating already being conducted collectively within social movements. My objective isn't to argue for the primacy or purity of curating by social movements, but to find terms to engage with this often-invisible cultural work of social movements which is shaping museums and galleries; and to orient a discussion of curatorial theory and history towards a grounded examination of the dynamics, potentials and limits of the social movement curating which haunts cultural institutions as "an internal outside."[2]

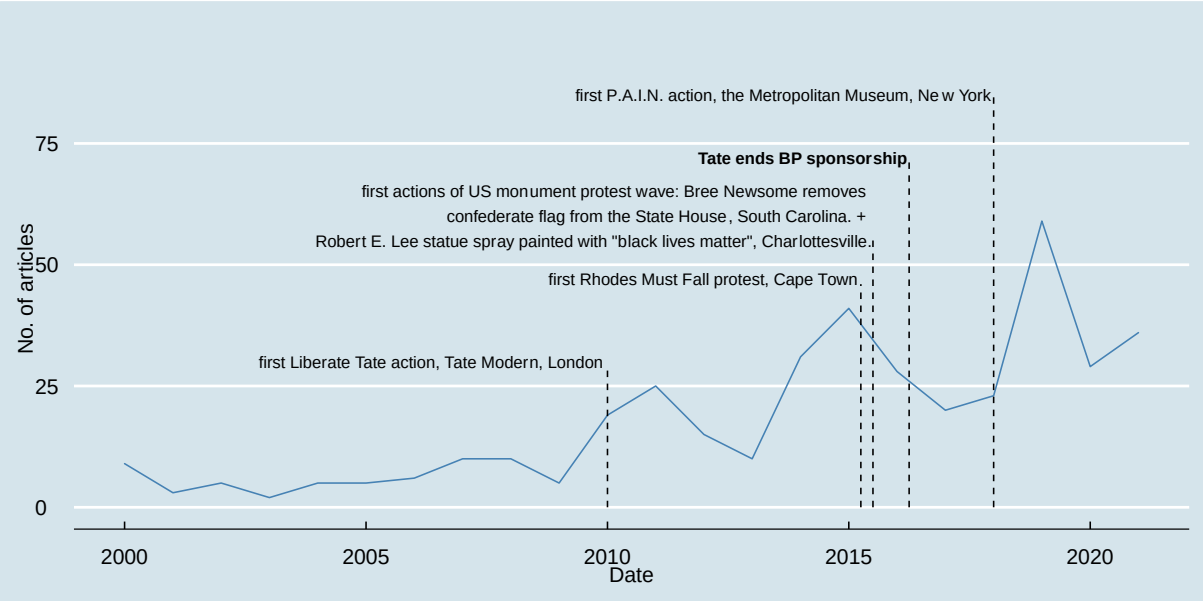

Figure 2: Number of articles about protest inside or directly outside museums and galleries 2000-2022 in the EBBSCO Art Full Text archive; Guardian; and New York Times.

Though social movement groups have irregularly directed themselves at museums in the past,[3] this recent trend marks a distinct turn not only in the site of actions, but in their form – uninvited actions and installations in museum spaces, the most powerful of which do not just resituate the traditional form of a demonstration, but adopt self-consciously curatorial and artistic forms and language. For example, Liberate Tate's actions re-signified Tate's spaces and works using titled performances: *Floe Piece*, bringing a block of artic ice into Tate Modern to melt in the galleries; *All Rise*, in which veiled figures drifted through the galleries over a week, whispering each day's stenographed Deepwater Horizon trial testimonies, livestreamed to a remote audience of affected communities in the Gulf of Mexico; *The Gift*, depositing a 1.5 ton 16m wind turbine blade inside Tate's turbine hall and using the 1992 Museums and Galleries Act to force trustees to consider it for the collection; or *Birthmark*, building and operating a tattoo studio inside Tate Britain's 1840 room to mark visitors with the PPM of carbon in the atmosphere in the year of their birth (in the year that earth passed the landmark of 400PPM). This considered approach can also be found in Yankanku's 'active diplomacy' performances, claiming custodianship and directly removing colonially looted items from European museums; in P.A.I.N.'s oxycontin spills in Sackler-linked museums; in BP or Not BP's performances, uninvited exhibitions and artworks in the British Museum; in the musical performances and 'stolen goods tours' of the British Museum led by Gweagal Elders, Ancestors and People with First Contact 1770, calling for restitution of the Gweagal shield; and in the money drops of GULF Labour at Guggenheim New York, exposing the institutions' exploitation of migrant workers to construct Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Not only the frequency, but the reception and understanding of these actions, has changed. Liberate Tate's early actions were often highly marginalised (I personally recall one Tate curator in 2010 who did not know I was a member explaining to me that the group's demands made them 'ecological extremists' - the language of the UK police's National Domestic Extremism

Unit). But by 2015, even as the disruptive scale of Liberate Tate's actions escalated, they nonetheless began to find support among mainstream art-world figures. Since 2016, these many groups' engagements with cultural institutions have built multiple victories: from funding shifts and trustee resignations; to the removal of monuments linked to slavery and colonialism; to the restitution of colonially-looted heritage. While such actions were the likely driving force in policy shifts in cultural organisations in recent years, it is worth nothing that the end-strategy of most of these groups is not solely or even primarily to reform a museum.

Jan 2016 US David Koch forced off board of AMNH
March 2016 UK Tate drops BP
April 2016 UK Edinburgh International Festival drops BP
Dec 2016 US AMNH drops fossil fuel investments
2017 NL Rijksmuseum drops Aramco
2018 CA Canadian Museum of History drops CAPP
Jul 2018 UK Design Museum returns artists' work following links to arms company Leonardo
Aug 2018 NL Van Gogh Museum drops Shell
Aug 2018 NL Mauritshuis drops Shell
Oct 2018 UK National Gallery drops Shell
Mar 2019 US Guggenheim drops Sackler funding
Mar 2019 UK Sackler Trust freezes donations to arts institutions
Mar 2019 UK Tate drops Sackler Trust
Mar 2019 UK National Portrait Gallery drops Sackler Trust
April 2019 UK Edinburgh Science Festival drops fossil fuel sponsorship
April 2019 GER Jewish Museum drops Sackler funding
May 2019 US Met Museum drops Sackler funding
July 2019 US Warren Kanders forced off board of Whitney
July 2019 FR Louvre removes Sackler name from galleries
Oct 2019 UK National Theatre drops Shell
Oct 2019 UK RSC drops BP
Nov 2019 UK National Galleries Scotland drops BP
Jan 2020 US Rebecca Mercer forced off board of AMNH
March 2020 UK BFI & Southbank Centre drops Shell
Sept 2020 NL Het Concertgebouw drops Shell
June 2021 NL NEMO Science Museum drops Shell

Figure 3: Funding-related victories within the timeline above.

This activist turn towards traditional culture and heritage institutions has a movement context. From 2007, we can identify a turn in which traditional museum-like forms – galleries, archives, libraries, fixed displays – appear more and more consistently as part of the front-line infrastructure of direct-action mobilisations. The 2006-12 global wave of protest camps provided a particular ecosystem for these institutions.[4] For example, the 2006-10 UK Camps for Climate Action instituted 'check-in' spaces. These included an exhibition display which oriented new arrivals to the history, values and strategy of the camps.[5] Similar spaces emerged in the 2011 M15 camp in Madrid. The self-produced maps of these camps reveal a general intellect marking space for prefigurative political institutions, but also for cultural institutions including spaces for independent media, making and displaying art, libraries and archives. Often these developed promiscuous hybrid forms and functions across such institutions. The US Occupy camps would echo and modify these practices. In each of these cases, institutional forms many associate with the past became devices for world-making, imagining other future heritages. As the camp movements waned, the movements that followed (notably the Hong Kong umbrella movement)[6] have sustained these strategic orientations towards instituting arts, culture and heritage organisations as part of their repertoires. There are of course pre-existing practices which we might think of as 'activist curating'. A rich disparate history waits to be pieced together of exhibition-making in social movements. While there is a consistent history of movements producing their own archives, exhibition-making has been a less consistent practice, outside of the more structurally-instituted museums of the labour movement, such as the UK's People's History Museum or Tolpuddle Martyrs Museum. From the 1970s, there are small-scale examples of grassroots collectives who focus on producing serial temporary exhibitions in community spaces, tied to media with small, mobile outputs like photography; screenprinting and pouch-laminating. The strategic orientation of these projects was often towards community outreach and

pedagogy. What is new since 2007 is both the number of projects and a level of formal experiment which moves beyond producing either small mobile exhibitions in community spaces or traditional demonstrations at museums and galleries. As I will argue below, surrounding the intensified appearance of traditional curatorial institutions at protests, we can also find that recognisably 'curatorial' work has become a greater part of the general intellect and repertoires of several social movements.

Figure 4: Welcome tent, Climate Camp, Blackheath, 2009. Photo courtesy Mike Russell; Documentos and Biblioteca, Acampada Sol, Madrid. Photo courtesy LRamón Briña/Archivo15M, 21/05/2011; Occupy Wall Street Library, 2011. Photo courtesy of David Shankbone; Umbrella Movement Visual Archive meeting, Hong Kong, 2014. Photo courtesy UMVA.

In the years directly following this wave of frontline movement curating, a broad legitimation crisis emerged for Anglophone museums, galleries and heritage institutions in their production of neutrality. In the UK we find signs of this crisis in the heated 2018 debate on

neutrality and the role of museums as "vehicles for social justice" between V&A Director Tristram Hunt and Liverpool Museums director David Fleming;[7] the heated 2019-2022 debate within the International Council of Museums around a new definition of 'museum';[8] and in the reprimanding 2020 letters and meeting the UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sports directed at heritage and museum organisations following the toppling of the Bristol monument to slaver Edward Colston.[9] In the US, museum workers' *Museums Are Not Neutral* campaign, and a number of indigenous and social history museums have been the most forthright in publicly rejecting the myth of neutrality and the authority of the curator. I will return below to the connection, at a structural level, between this new wave of extra-institutional curatorial practices; and the legitimation crisis for museums and heritage institutions. They occupy either side of a crisis in the composition of curatorial labour.

Curatorial Labour from Frame to Platform

Discussing 'activist curating' begs the question of what constitutes curating. When writing on curatorial theory has addressed the labour of curating, it has been variously summarised in three principal ways: as care work, as knowledge-production and as mediation.[10] This article will focus principally but not exclusively on the last of these, examining the production of mediation in museums and galleries vis-à-vis the varied practices of producing mediation within social movements.

The growth of academic curating programs since the 1990s has been accompanied by some attempts at histories of curating. However these are often, de facto, histories of exhibitions, or focused on the 'great men' of curating, rather than a social history of the making of curatorial work. Across multiple studies, we can find glimpses of how the structural and institutional

conditions and practices of professional curatorial work have been composed. We might look to critical accounts of the formation of the museum and post-Enlightenment ideas of art. These accounts often focus on how museums served a primary role as sites for mediating and shaping publics, through the visual and narrative mediation of objects and artworks.[11] However, the composition of curatorial work towards this institutional function occurred through intersection and bifurcation with similar practices and functions of knowledge production, care and mediation in other institutions, equally directed towards shaping publics. So outside of critical accounts of museum and art histories, we may also find traces of the making of curatorial work in media studies that recognise the museums' work of shaping publics in relation to the development of competing institutional practices. For example, in preaching; journalism; public relations and comms; visual merchandising and marketing; or state propaganda and psy-ops. While situating mediatory curatorial work, and its changes in form, in this interdisciplinary field, it can also be situated in the expanded field of a diverse economy of unwaged social mediation. There already exist developed arguments from feminist and autonomist scholars on how the commons of extra- and infra-institutional care, aesthetic or affective labour underwrites, shapes and contests institutional forms of care production.[12] In decolonial, feminist and Marxist visual cultural studies, such arguments have for just as long been applied to the labour of curatorial care in order to make visible the extra-institutional labour of care, stewardship, maintenance, support or dark matter which lie beneath, around and before the visible, formal centre of 'curation'.[13] With both of these wider contexts of social production in mind, we can find curatorial work taking place in social movements, and understand the museum-based curatorial practices of groups such as Liberate Tate, P.A.I.N., or The Natural History Museum as specifically emerging from their own institutions, traditions, theories and strategies of mediation (and care and knowledge production) developed by movements.

Social movements' discrete, long-developing practices of mediation, care and knowledge production less often involve a specific curatorial role than a collective dialogic and distributed process of symbolic and affective connection and shaping, in which a movement's political composition is emmeshed with building its structures of aesthetic composition or finding its "language in common."[14] Often this is the collaborative, emergent work of messy networks of actors who may never know each other. When we think about such processes in movements, we might be tempted by a familiar and suggestive metaphor: the 'framing function.' In social movement studies one tendency has picked 'framing' as a longstanding metaphor for how movements build counterpublics and counterhegemonies. It describes the work of social movements to mediate social representation and understanding, and tends to emphasise this as their primary dynamic.[15] The conceptual metaphor of 'framing' draws upon a material object of late medieval Europe that was a key material infrastructure for mediating vision, developed in the 12-14th century – a carved wooden border which surrounded painted art. The material infrastructure of the frame was, of course, the central material support that made possible the earliest forms of the profession of mediatory curatorial work. It is joined in this regard by other historic small-scale curatorial infrastructures such as the mannequin or the cabinet. 'The frame' parallels the extended metaphorical role of physical infrastructures of mediation in other disciplines (when one takes to the pulpit; the stage; the presses; the shop window; the screen).[16]

But to avoid reducing the work of movements to ideological messaging, and to consider movement curating in relation to the prefigurative organising and remaking of social relations that has become a central feature of autonomous movements since at least the global justice movement, we might look to another infrastructural metaphor, which offers us an additional

way to view things. Curatorial and movement infrastructures coincide in the metaphors of the plinth or platform. Platform's historic fifteenth-century meaning, as a visual plan or frame to orient activity, is partly rearticulated in the nineteenth century in two directions which each take the form of an enabling frame: a raised speaker's platform and the connected articulation of oriented political organisation; and the raised museum plinth or pedestal and its connected articulation of oriented vision and value. In the current moment, something in these two senses might re-converge for social movements. Both of these infrastructural metaphors describe mediating supports for composing publics, not just for framing new values and ways of seeing, but for the composing, assembling and instituting of new social relationships and structures.

This focus on the infrastructural and constituent capacities and challenges of curatorial work is shared by Shannon Jackson's account of curatorial 'support work' (in which she also extrapolates from the frame as a form of support among others); Stacy Douglas' 'curating community'; and by several of these groups' own conception of 'institutional liberation' (discussed below).[17] In 'Virtuosity and Revolution,' Paolo Virno draws on Marx's mention of the 'virtuoso' to critically renew this esteemed Renaissance role, whose usage has been less generally revived by the post-1990s creative industries than 'curator.' Virno argues that the labour relations of general intellect shifted with the growth of what is variously termed the service, affective or creative economy, such that a greater part of social production relied on the virtuosity of the worker, and that this presents a political opportunity for exodus and disobedience:

> Production demands virtuosity and thus introjects many traits that are peculiar to political action, precisely and solely because Intellect has become the principal productive force.[18]

We might rephrase Virno that there was a coincidence in new forms of work between curating and political action. The social capacities described by curating became a greater part of work but also of the disobedient labour of movements. The curatorial labour of movements, and the frames, supports and platforms that embody them, help compose movements' plateaus of counter- and dual- power. Recently, these have surprisingly often resembled historical forms of 'curating'.

The adoption of curatorial languages and practices within Anglophone autonomous social movements can be understood in terms of the historical composition of earlier cycles of struggle. Firstly, art and avant-garde experiment held a central role in the direct actions of queer and global justice movements of the 1980s and 90s, a composition later often described in terms of 'carnival.'[19] Key groups in these movements such as Reclaim the Streets and Act Up transformed repertories of protest and action with new forms of activist-art which developed considered approaches to the mediation, design and performance of direct action. Secondly, the global cycle of struggles of the early 2010s capitalised on increased access to networked media, giving a more central role to collective mediation: such as in the distributed citizen mediation of the 2011 Syrian Revolution on mobile phones and the mass advent of DIY handwritten placards, often referencing online memes, of the 2011 Egyptian uprising and UK student protests.[20] Such increased mediation was also central to new muncipalist and other movements which followed, engaging networked autonomous counterpowers with existing institutions of power. The aesthetic, cultural and political composition of preceding cycles of struggle conditioned a rise in what we might now see as self-consciously curatorial movement practices. Kirsty Robinson even convincingly suggests that Fig 2's representation of museum protest might begin with a longer arc from in the 1990s

anti-globalisation movement, in which the 'curatorial' labours and languages of summit protests in urban centres inclined them towards actions in or near museums.[21]

In thinking about these novel forms of curatorial labour which have grown within social movements, we might conceive of this labour taking up multiple forms and practices along a curator-organiser continuum, outside or across the forms, practices and visibility of the roles of either an institutional curator or political organiser. We might open up this continuum by looking to histories of curating with dual power. Museology has produced an abundance of work considering museums vis-a-vis the state, both in the operation of existing states' soft power and as platforms for state-formation. It isn't surprising then to find that where museum-making practices are historically more prevalent for movements is among movements of national liberation and decolonisation.[22] But beyond attempts to create new national museums, the relationships to cultural institutions of recent decolonial struggles (whether in Standing Rock or Rojava) offers another route to imagine curating with dual power. Their formulations of dual power are not oriented towards the state so much as towards composing (various degrees and types of) autonomous institutions.[23] For example, a deep concern with mediation, care and knowledge can be found tied to the political defence of sacred culture and lands. Indigenous cultures in North America possess concepts and labours of care and custodianship which predate Western notions of curating or museology (and likewise of Western social movement activism or protest), which have been mobilised to contest arguments that Western museums holding stolen colonial items 'know best' about care and mediation. Tribally-operated museums and cultural centres have "steadily grown from the early days of the 1960s."[24] In Canada today, Watchman and Guardian roles combine docent tours with governmental stewardship of the land. Such dual-power roles took the form of intersecting indigenous curator-organiser practices in 2017 at the Standing Rock resistance

to the Dakota Access Pipeline. Participants described their role not as protestors, but as protectors, conceiving of their work as maintaining a responsibility for the care, mediation and knowledge of the land.

These 'curatorial' concerns can also be found among new muncipalist movements, focused on fostering dual-power rights to the city and emergent infrastructure, often founded in the counterpower of historic autonomous social movements (and returning, like early summit protests, to urban spaces where their claims more frequently encounter museums). For example, in London the Museum of Homelessness is an independent museum run by people with direct experience of homelessness and housing inequality. The museum has a rich archival collection and curates varied cultural events inside other cultural spaces and in the streets. Articulating itself as a "hybrid organisation"[25] for curating and organising, the museum has co-produced guides to legal inquests for bereaved families of homeless people, produced parliamentary evidence, and co-organised shelters and street kitchens. The museum plays key roles in homelessness support, advocacy and campaigning that has forced concrete policy changes, such as the creation of safe spaces in the UK for 30,000 homeless people to isolate during the Covid pandemic. At the more prospective end, within the fine-art world artist-curator Jonas Staal organises summits, international courts and parliaments inside art institutions which bring together representatives of different counterpowers, appropriating museum infrastructure to imagine and activate the latent potential of these spaces as soft-power networks of non- (or not-yet) state actors. In all of these cases, practices of curating are supported, empowered and validated not by existing curatorial institutions linked to the state or capital, but to sites of counterpower which also bring their own traditions of mediation, care and knowledge-production.

The Technical Decomposition of Professional Curatorial Labour

That there is a crisis in the composition of professional curatorial labour is well-evidenced, not least in the dispersion of the term 'curator' beyond museums and galleries since the 1980s, to now describe digital, marketing, service and many other kinds of work. 'Curated' has a strong claim to be a dominant keyword of the last 20 years, a word that has become socially binding and yet a multi-accentual site of competing social purviews. Google's NGRAM reveals that the use of 'curator' dropped after the 1990s, especially when capitalised as a professional role. Meanwhile 'curated' as a verb has boomed.

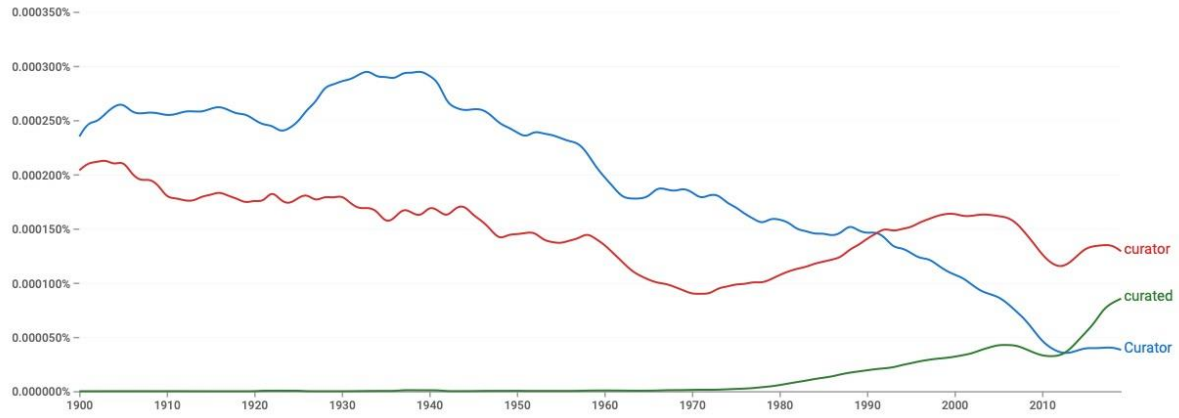

Figure 5: Google NGRAM. Curator, curator, curated.

The dramatic shift in word usage marked by this diagram was accompanied by neologisms and qualifiers for professional curators as the ground slipped beneath them: for contemporary art workers (artist-curator, relational, curatorial, or pedagogic turns, arte útil); for museum workers (community, learning, public and programmes curating; rapid response curating; contemporary collecting); while several awkward terms have tried to diagnose a broader cultural shift (postproduction, the paracuratorial, curationism, curatopia).[26] Chiming with Google's NGRAM, the OED's earliest citation of transitive uses of 'curated' is in 1982 with curated events of performance art, video art and music at The Kitchen in New York. We might also look, as indicators in artistic practice, to the 1980s work of Group Material or

Stephen Willats which sought to engage with and platform the non-professional curatorial capacities of local communities.[27]

As intimated above, this decentring and decomposition of the profession of curator is one effect of a steady recomposition of working roles since the 1980s, in which other forms of work became more 'curatorial': new relations and technologies increased levels of aesthetic and cultural work within individual jobs and as a total proportion of jobs. This is reflected in neologisms from 'creatives' or 'prosumers' to the more critical frameworks of affective, immaterial or emotional labour. Multiple explorations of art and postfordist labour have followed in the wake of Virno's virtuoso.[28] Alongside's Virno's argument that work has become virtuosic came critical arguments preceding my 'curatorial' suggestion, that work was characterised by 'performance' or 'art'. Within the capitalist economy, the term 'curator' appears to have become a preferred term (like 'creative') for the uncritical cultural capital it can carry. The content of the specialist role of 'curation', as an intermediary managing access to culture, has eroded inversely to the growing demographic distribution of educational and technological capacities for such mediation from the 1970s. In museums and galleries the anxious conceptual reworking of the notion of curating has accompanied the decomposition of secure employment for professional curators in favour of precarious and freelance positions.[29] As paid work declined while competence spread, the UK Mapping Museums project notes a parallel boom in small independent museums since 2010.[30] But aside from the disarticulation of paid curatorial work, these changes have laid the foundation for a structural shift in the relations of power between cultural institutions and social movements.

Zombie Neutrality

These structural shifts are at the root of the recent crisis for museum neutrality. Museum studies has much examined the historical function of the (once) new media of Victorian museums and galleries – to produce a normative cultural centre of truth and ideological hegemony. We should distinguish this residual notion of neutrality from 'neutrality' as a relatively recent form of that normativity, associated with liberal capitalism from the Cold War onwards. Museum neutrality as 'objective truth' tended to be joined or replaced by museum neutrality as 'balance.' Fred Turner describes how a new ideology of Cold War American Liberal 'balance' was pioneered by museum exhibits which drew on new media and modulated levels of visitor participation, but also that social movements of the 1960s appropriated this new liberal democratic language to formulate demands.[31] Many others have noted how neoliberalism responded to the growing strength of movements with both fundamental attacks and limited forms of participation - what Jon McKenzie described as an invitation to "perform or else."[32] This later neoliberal-era 'neutrality' is marked in Western museums, galleries and cultural policy from the 1990s in an explosion of curatorial language around performance, participation and 'the public', as well as in fine art institutions by the artspeak adoption of the language of movements as mediated by critical theory. For many cultural institutions, the confident 'balance, objectivity and neutrality' of mid-twentieth century liberalism gave way to a more anxious, shifting maintenance of liberal centrism.[33]

The instability of the notion of neutrality, specifically in contemporary art, was described in 2004 by Brian Holmes as a game of *Liars' Poker*, such that "when people talk about politics in an artistic frame, they're lying."[34] He describes a game in which curators and artists are complicit in a structurally-coerced enclosure of ideas and forms from social movements:

The ace is political reality, and its image in the museum is highly attractive. This gives the artist a great advantage: because to prove an ace is a bluff, you have to go out looking, whereas the public prefers to stay

inside the museum. The artist, however, also has a great disadvantage, which is that the house - I mean the people who run the game, the founders, the funders, the boards and directors - actually can't stand aces, and if they think the artist really has one, they will never let him or her set foot inside the museum. So in both cases the artist has to bluff his way through, either claiming political engagement to live like a king inside the white cube, or hiding it to siphon off money, resources and publicity for use by a social movement. Occasionally, when the lie is too grotesque, the public will call the bluff; and then the artist has to give up some cultural capital. Even more rarely, it turns out that the artist is really involved in a social movement, in which case he or she is soon fated to disappear from the museum.[35]

But recently, this game has been hacked. The 2016 victory of Liberate Tate, and the 2018-19 victories of P.A.I.N., mark a breakthrough moment in the crisis of neutrality. In the timeline of protests above, the gradient magnitude of its upward trend increases noticeably at this point. Beyond the hard work of these groups, the structural changes above shifted the ground underneath Holmes' game of liars' poker, so that the game can be played differently. These victories leveraged open the contradictions of these changes to museums as 'public' democratic spaces of 'balance'. These contradictions were evident from Liberate Tate's founding moment, when Tate's education department invited activist-artists for a workshop titled "disobedience makes history", yet accompanied it with written instructions not to criticise their sponsors. In the list below Figure 1, we can see of these and other protests that it is specifically contemporary art museums and galleries which have been the first and greatest sites of impact for this wave of protest. The changes are most marked in museums and galleries of contemporary art, because they are the most exposed to the shifts in soft power outlined above, due to their proximity to, and reliance on, social movement cultures. Sites such as the British Museum (currently still sponsored by BP), are less exposed to the dilemmas of credibility and reputational damage fostered by these pressures.

The underlying structural change which facilitated these victories is twofold. Firstly, Holmes' argument, like many approaches to 'the museum', critiques museums as if they were homogenously monolithic. But the changes to curatorial labour above have made the solid edifice of cultural institutions more permeable and porous. Cultural institutions began to be saturated by a reliance on sources outside themselves for cultural legitimacy and were also increasingly composed of a more precarious, mobile workforce to enable their everyday functioning. Museums' power as mediators, to selectively ignore or reject aspects of the political discourse upon which they rely for cultural capital, has been reduced vis-à-vis the capacity of movements (and, so, of certain forms of art and curating connected to them) to speak out, speak back, appear and legitimate themselves directly without engaging with cultural institutions. Claiming and controlling representations which appear in the museum as 'mine' (to paraphrase the wordplay of Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*) has become more possible for more people.

Further and more broadly, since the 2007 financial crisis, liberal centrism's material basis in a period of capitalist accumulation (and the limited truce between Western capital and labour this enabled) has increasingly stalled, which has exposed its claims for neutrality and political participation in a 'public sphere' and promises of progress as increasingly hollow for increasing numbers of people, especially the generation entering adulthood around 2007.[36] For Tate, with an ex-CEO of BP heading their trustee board, this was compounded by the increasingly evident urgency of the climate crisis. In sum, the art world game of liars' poker around neutrality or balance has become increasingly exhausted and disconnected from the material reality of the counterpublics it attempts to harness.[37] A de-facto cultural policy of zombie neutrality has lumbered on, yet the frequency of 'museum protests' has grown exponentially and speaking out has become more common and more visible. Black Obsidian

Soundsystems' multi-issue critique of the Tate's hypocrisy in nominating them for the 2021 Turner Prize, while - among other things - censoring black artists who spoke out against Tate's benefactors, is only one recent example of this dynamic.[38]

One of the key results of these developments is that institutions like museums, galleries and heritage sites became identified among some social movements and later, NGOs and unions (with varying levels of strategic nuance) as operative leverage-points. In 2016 a museum became for the first time a target for environmental NGOs, as Greenpeace climbers scaled the British Museum to drop banners criticising BP sponsorship of its *Sunken Cities* exhibition. In 2018, 360.org successfully campaigned for the Canadian Museum of History to drop sponsorship from the Association of Petroleum Producers. Meanwhile, museum and theatre lobbies have become regular backdrops for Extinction Rebellion actions in the UK. In 2017, Culture Unstained was founded, an NGO campaigning directly on museum sponsorship. In this same period the right has produced a surge of 'anti-woke' and 'culture war' discourse. The right's sense of 'freedom' often relies on refusing to acknowledge its increasing reliance on the communal infrastructures and broad reproductive work which these shifts emerge from and which they make increasingly visible. One way to understand the 'culture war' reaction is as an attempt to hold off the threat of a structural understanding of these cultural shifts. It is beyond the scope of this article, but we might also see zombie neutrality as actively complicit in producing space for this discourse.

From Mining and Critique to Occupying and Liberation: Institutional Liberation

Several of the first groups to self-consciously employ creative tactics within and directed at museums developed a broad shared perspective they termed 'institutional liberation.' A 2014 event at the Queens Museum in New York, *The Museum Divide*, brought them together with

key figures of institutional critique such as Hans Haacke and Mark Dion. In 2015, representatives of several of these groups (BP or Not BP, PCS Union Culture Sector Group, Gulf Labor, Liberate Tate, the Natural History Museum, Occupy Museums, Stopp Oljesponsing av Norsk Kulturliv (SONK) and others) met for two days of strategy planning during mobilisations against the Paris COP21 summit, culminating in several members being arrested by riot police inside the Louvre.[39] During this meeting, a longer unpublished collective piece of theoretical writing on Institutional Liberation took shape, distinguishing it from the frameworks of socially-engaged curatorial and artistic movements such as institutional critique, new institutionalism or social practice.[40] The term finds fuller articulation in writing by The Natural History Museum (TNHM) in 2016. But sympathetic arguments had also been articulated by Liberate Tate.[41] The common strategies these groups arrived at might be summarised in three points:

Firstly, these groups understood museums and galleries not as a reflection or after-effect of changes elsewhere, nor as the terrain of a culture war. Instead, they identified cultural institutions as emmeshed with other institutions, notably those of large fossil fuels, arms and pharmaceuticals companies. For example, Liberate Tate drew on Platform's analysis of a 'carbon web,' which maps the role London cultural institutions play for oil companies, alongside institutions of banking, law and governance.[42] For BP, museum sponsorships and trusteeships were not a cultural after effect, but a key part of its infrastructure in extracting from the city not only contracts and permissions but the underlying cultural legitimacy of a 'social licence to operate' (and here oil companies stepped into the sponsorship gap left when tobacco lost its social licence).[43] They have played a similar role for Purdue pharma and arms dealers such as Safariland and Leonardo. This made specific cultural institutions points of power and leverage upon other social sectors.

Secondly, their work was fundamentally rooted in the counterpower, labour and networks of social movements, rather than relying on those of the art or museum world. Liberate Tate and TNHM argue that this structural difference breaks with Institutional Critique's dynamic of critical art/recuperation. With their own infrastructure rooted in the curatorial labour of movements, they do not rely on the career support structures, funding sources or apparatus of representation required by professional artists. This made possible a curatorial circumvention and appropriation of the institution which stood both inside and outside it. Likewise, Liberate Tate's productions were highly legible as site-specific performance art at the same time as they were carefully functional as direct action. They were made possible by the intermeshing of practiced artistic and curatorial aptitudes with social movement skills and knowledges of action planning; protest infrastructure and design; consensus and direct democracy; comms and media training; police negotiation and strategic escalation; legal aid; and specific knowledges such as FOIA requests (that eventually had Tate representatives convicted in court of non-compliance for refusing to reveal sponsorship amounts).

Lastly, these groups understood the new porousness of museums and galleries. They instituted themselves wholly within the language and symbolism of fine art and museum practices, rather than presenting as 'activists', protestors or outsiders. They avoiding the most common aesthetics of recent social protest, assuming belonging already within the institution rather than engagement from without. This meant Liberate Tate conducting performances not protests; and TNHM achieving full formal membership of the American Alliance of Museums. They each occupied the institution in increasingly structural ways, dividing museums' claims around keywords, like public and democracy, in order to amplify the institutional dilemmas produced by their actions. They identified points of consolidation to

divide the institution. For example, Liberate Tate appeared on magazine covers in Tate's own bookshops; were raised in Tate conference debates on contemporary art; and built traditional solidarity with Tate's striking PCS Union workers. In 2005, Andrea Fraser argued of Institutional Critique, in a melancholic tone of at least partial recuperation, that these days "we are the institution."[44] Groups like SONK or BP Or Not BP emphasised this also as an assertion of power - a power intensified by the structural shifts in curatorial labour discussed above.

We should be cautious about cheering 'novel' strategies of knowledge-making, care and mediation work that indigenous, black, feminist and queer radical traditions have already long practiced to defend their communities. As acknowledged above, indigenous peoples have histories of knowledge-production, care and mediation work which anticipate the above valorisations of an expanded understanding of curatorial labour. They also have histories of making-visible and employing such labours against more limited and exclusive colonial curatorial conceptions of knowledge, care and mediation. Such work has often been central to the defence of indigenous cultures against colonisation, not least that conducted by museums. There is a risk here of negating this prior work, or even falling into ungrounded calls to 'decolonise' which replace this material work with a romantic myth of indigeneity as a pure ungovernable other.

We might find a practical, real-world engagement of institutional liberation's strategies with the protocols of indigenous nations and communities; and the complexities of their interactions with museums, capitalism and the state; in the work of the US-based The Natural History Museum (TNHM). TNHM is rooted in pressure movements led by native American organisers, linked to organisations like the Native Organizers Alliance. Two of TNHM's five

core members are of the Lummi Nation, and the museum is shaped by a primarily indigenous board and network of indigenous fellows. Since 2016, struggles over land and water rights in sacred sites have continued between native nations and fossil fuel and uranium mining companies, in places like Bears Ears in Utah, Black Hills in South Dakota and Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota. At the same time, native dual power manifests during elections in which the native voting bloc is a significant factor in several states. Secondly, native people have long occupied a symbolically colonised position with a history of misrepresentation, which is often expressed through the often-problematic terms of their heavy cultural representation. But the representation and appearance of their cultures in museums is, recently, a site where they possess increased power as producers and mediators. This includes the collection and display of totem poles, for which Lummi carvers are particularly recognised. Totem poles function both in a colonial museum framework as 'art and design' and within native cultures, as a sacred and political art of healing and connecting communities. TNHM's and the Lummi Nation's curator-organiser work carried a fresh totem pole through these institutional spaces, so that Lummi knowledge, care and mediation of their culture and environment 'mined' the curatorial structures of museums in order to leverage them for building indigenous movements against the corporate mining of their land, among other struggles.

The 54-foot wind turbine blade of Liberate Tate's *The Gift* leveraged a UK law in which art donated as a gift to the nation must be kept and considered by the museum board for its collection.[45] The Lummi and TNHM's work expands such dynamics on a national scale while resonating with far older native traditions of gift-giving and potlach (The Lummi House of Tears Carvers have been conducting healing totem pole journeys since 2001). The 2021 project *The Red Road to DC* brought a 25-foot totem pole as a gift and challenge to

President Biden. The totem pole took a 2-week 20,000-mile journey moving porously between 10 embattled sacred sites and protector camps like those above, where Biden faced major challenges from communities. The red road ended at the capitol building, where the totem pole was received by the US government's first native Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, with a press conference. It was then gifted in an opening ceremony at the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian in Washington, becoming the site of two days of discussion between Haaland and tribal leaders who had welcomed the totem pole on its journey, offering her native support and the necessary pressure for her to act as an effective advocate.

As the totem pole moved between sites of indigenous, social movement and museum-institutional curatorial labour towards the government, the totem pole's journey mutually reinforced the power of organised indigenous care of the land, and the power of indigenous cultural capital inside museums, to compose movement counterpower and open political opportunity. One of the key ways it did this was through placing hands and prayers on the totem pole at each site it stopped at, shaping meaning through its journey, and helping communities articulate and connect their common issues. This knowledge-making was mediated and shared online and in communities' print media by Lummi and other native and indigenous participants during the tour. The totem pole, carrying their prayers, built solidarity as it travelled. By the time of its arrival in DC, it embodied and manifested native nations' presence and hopes, becoming a challenging assertion of counterpower and organised community. Appearing finally at the Museum of the American Indian to accompany a TNHM/House of Tears Carvers exhibition placing this in the context of their earlier climate justice totem pole journeys, *Kwel' Hoy!: We Draw the Line*, the project leveraged the infrastructure of a national museum to consolidate movement organisation, and to amplify the

momentum and visibility of the demands placed before the government. As a challenging gift via a museum to the state, it adopted a cultural strategy of antagonistic reformism.[46]

At this point, we can briefly turn back to consider the comparatively weak position of a professional curator who hopes to be an ally or co-conspirator. Such a position institutionalises and individualises these dynamics, returning them to a matter of ethical (if structurally antagonistic) 'best practice.' It mostly returns us to a game of liars' poker, where the only move is to play the ace. As Harney and Moten describe:

> One may be given one last chance to be pragmatic – why steal when one can have it all, they will ask. But if one hides from this interpellation, neither agrees nor disagrees but goes with hands full... into the Undercommons – this will be regarded as theft, as a criminal act. And it is at the same time, the only possible act.[47]

In practice these brief clandestine co-options, putting the institution's networks and processes in the service of movements, are limited in capacity before even considering the barriers to non-white, non-male and working-class museum workers. Meanwhile, opening these spaces for movements risks even well-intentioned 'critical' curators taking cultural and financial credit from the less-visible work of community and labour organisers.

In the V&A exhibition *Disobedient Objects* my co-curator Catherine Flood and I displayed examples of grassroots social movement design such as tripod barricades; lock-ons; pamphlet bombs; and 'book-bloc' shields. We also shared takeaway and downloadable 'how-to guides' for making them. One of the exhibits was a makeshift tear-gas mask, based on a design originating in Syria around 2011, but appearing most visibly in Turkey's 2012 Gezi Park occupation. It uses a soda bottle cut in half, a surgical mask and other simple materials to construct a full-face mask with a particulate filter. During the exhibition, downloads of the

PDF from the V&A website spiked sharply and unexpectedly in August 2014 as the guide was shared online and used to produce makeshift tear-gas masks at nascent Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri.[48] Interviewed by the BBC, one participant describes his shock when a militarised police response fired a chemical weapon at civilians, and describes how he facilitated a workshop using this makeshift tear gas mask guide found online to make protective masks for the local community, outside a QuikTrip. Like the Lummi totem pole, the mask design became a token for circulating struggle. The guide was redeployed in the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement demonstrations, produced in hundreds by design students and handed out as gifts of care at the front of the demonstrations. The masks surfaced again (after the exhibition had closed) during the 2018 Palestinian Great March of Return.[49] Rather than coming to die in the museum, the object moved through the museum into the streets. A national museum, as an institution of amplified visibility, was appropriated as a site of soft counterpower or diplomacy from below, through which solidarity and struggle circulated from one movement to another in this and other shared objects. While this example offers an exceptional glimpse of something else that a museum might be for its publics, the possibility of moments such as this are - for most institutions - structurally profoundly rare.[50]

Conclusion

The example of the Lummi House of Tears Carvers and TNHM, with its collective leveraging and opening of multiple institutional contexts, represents a far more sustainable, connected example of liberatory instituent power than the more isolated, individuated practice of a professional curator. Their case also tends to upend the terms of 'counterpower' or 'institution.' Not just because for the Lummi and other native and indigenous groups in colonial contexts, almost everything is 'the institution.' But because their authority, the

institutional form that constitutes and organises their community, comes from care for the knowledge of their own ancestral history and traditions. Institutional liberation for TNHM is not an avant-garde critique of institutions; or a call for some pure 'decolonial' political autonomy; but a practical grassroots engagement with the unacknowledged or unseen dual powers of other already-existing institutions, which it would not be correct to characterise as a secondary 'counter' power to the institutional power of museums or the state. Instead, they compose *with* other dual-power curatorial and art worlds, organising with and for their intersecting forms of curatorial labour.

These practices of occupying museum and heritage infrastructure are already facing reaction, as far-right governments in Europe and the UK clamp down on even the zombie functioning of liberal public spaces, and build their own rhetorical discourse of infrastructural support around terms like 'cancel culture' and 'no-platforming'. In the UK, Liberate Tate find a dark mirror in the reactionary campaign, 'Restore Trust', which aims to take control of the board of the National Trust (in reaction to a National Trust project acknowledging the significant legacies of slavery embodied in British country houses). Boris Johnson appointed one of its leaders to the board of the V&A in September 2022. But the capacities which made these practices possible, and their forms of curating from below are now out of the bottle. They will stalk the undercommons of cultural institutions and be appropriated and reshaped in the virtuoso performances of future movements' repertoires.

Notes

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1. Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*; Message, *The Disobedient Museum*; Janes and Sandell, *Museum Activism*; Gonzales, *Exhibitions for Social Justice*; Martinon, *Curating As Ethics*; Chynoweth et al, *Museums and Social Change*; Murawski, *Museums as Agents of Change*.

2. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*. p.31.

3. We might identify previous waves of protest targeting museums in the 1910s by British Suffragettes; in the 1960s by New York black, anarchist and anti-Vietnam war groups, and from the 1960s multiple global campaigns by indigenous groups around custodianship and representation.; Fowler, "Why Did Suffragettes Attack Works of Art?"; Cahan, *Mounting Frustration*; Grindon, "Poetry Written in Gasoline,"; Cooper, *Spirited Encounters*.

4. Feigenbaum et al, *Protest Camps*.

5. See the exhibition, by Cargo Collective, at https://cargocollective.com/ecolabs/Time-to-Act-The-Camp-for-Climate-Action-Poster-Exhibition

6. Ho and Ting, "Museological Activism and Cultural Citizenship."

7. David Fleming "Why Tristram Hunt is Wrong About Museums and Social Justice."

8. Zachary Small, "A New Definition of 'Museum' Sparks International Debate."

9. Dan Hicks, "The UK Government is Trying to Draw Museums into a Fake Culture War."

10. Graham et al, "The Educational Turn in Art; Rogoff, "The Expanding Field."

11. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*; Shiner, *The Invention of Art*.

12. See *Social Text 38:1 (142), Radical Care*; Graziano et al, *Pirate Care*; Gibson-Graham, *Take Back the Economy*.

13. Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles*; Sholette, *Dark Matter*; Krasny et al, *Radicalizing Care*.

14. Flood and Grindon, *Disobedient Objects*; Not An Alternative, "The Language in Common."

15. Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements."

16. Likewise, Kazanjian observes of conceptual frameworks that frame work was also understood in the 1730s as stretching fabric on a frame for weaving. Kazanjian, "Marxism," 160.

17. Jackson, *Social Works*; Douglas, *Curating Community*.

18. Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution," 193.

19. Hardt and Negri, "Carnival and Movement"; Notes From Nowhere "Carnival".

20. Deterritorial Support Group, "All the Memes of Production"; Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets*.

21. Robertson, *Tear Gas Epiphanies,* xi.

22. For example, see Cesari, *Heritage and the Cultural Struggle for Palestine*.

23. Thompson, "What's So New About New Municipalism"; Nunes, *Neither Vertical Nor Horizontal*.

24. Child "Creation of the Tribal Museum," 252.

25. "Charities Join Forces to Tackle London's Homelessness Problem."

26. Graham and Cook. *Rethinking Curating*; Bismarck et al, *Cultures of the Curatorial*; Balzer, *Curationism*; Schorch and McCarthy, *Curatopia*.

27. Irish, *Concerning Stephen Willats*; Ault *Show And Tell.*

28. For example, Child, *Working Aesthetics*; Beech, *Art and Labour*.

29. Szreder, *The ABC of the Projectariat*; Museum Freelance, *Survey 2020*.

30. Candlin, et al. *Mapping Museums*.

31. Turner, *The Democratic Surround*.

32. McKenzie, *Perform or Else*.

33. Laura Raicovich details the explosion of post-2016 New York case studies in museums' crisis of neutrality: Raicovich, *Culture Strike*. Others describe an international crisis: Marstine and Mintcheva, *Curating Under Pressure*.

34. Brian Holmes, "Liars Poker."

35. Brian Holmes, "Liars Poker."

36. It is relevant here that the 2010 UK student protests against the post-financial-crisis tripling of university fees involved a notable wave of art school occupations, including the disruption of the Turner Prize ceremony, which moved away from London in subsequent years. Milburn, *Generation Left*; The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, *A User's Guide to ~~Demanding~~ the Impossible*.

37. In this, the crisis of 'neutrality' in museums is tied to the similarly heteroglossic ruptures which have developed in cultural institutions' discussions of 'participation', 'education' and 'the public' over the same period.

38. "Collective Nominated for Turner Prize Criticises Awards Main Sponsor."

39. For an account, see Aronoff, "The Risks of Being Heard at COP21."

40. One of the participants non-consensually took key aspects of this unpublished essay, including its title (adding a question mark), to separately produce their own article. MTL Collective, "From Institutional Critique to Institutional Liberation?"

41. Not An Alternative, "Institutional Liberation"; Liberate Tate, "Confronting the Institution in Performance."

42. See https://platformlondon.org/about-us/platform-the-carbon-web/

43. Evans, *Artwash*.

44. Fraser, "From The Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," 104.

45. We might add to this discussion of gift strategies BP Or Not BP's 2020 gift of a 13ft Trojan Horse smuggled into the British Museum during its *Troy: Myth and Reality* exhibition, as both a metaphor for BP's insertion of itself into the institution, and a vehicle from which ten activists did indeed later emerge.

46. Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*, 276.

47. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 28.

48. For a far more detailed account of this case study, see Lyons, "Disobedient Objects."

49. One bizarre mark of its cultural reach was that the how-to guide appears as a plot device in the 2016 J.J. Abrams film *10 Cloverfield Lane*.

50. We might consider here the parallel salutary tale of MACBA's workshop Of Direct Action Considered as one of the Fine Arts. Ribalta, "Mediation and Construction of Publics."

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