

Article

Curators Serving the Public Good

Jean-Paul Martinon

Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths College, University of London, London SE14 6NW, UK;
j.martinon@gold.ac.uk

Abstract: This article investigates a principle inscribed at the top of most codes of ethics for curators: they should always “serve the public good.” No self-respecting curator would ever admit to serve “the private good,” that is, the good of the few, whether that of an elite in power or of a circle of friends or allies. The principle of “serving the public good” is inalienable and unquestionable even in situations where it is most open to doubt. However, what exactly is the meaning of this seemingly “true” and on all accounts “universal” principle: “to serve the public good”? To address this question, I look at this principle for the way it is perceived as being both majestic in its impressive widespread acceptance and cloaked in ridicule for being so often disregarded. I will argue—with an example taken from the history of curating—that it is not the meaning attached to the principle that counts, but the respect that it enjoins. I conclude by drawing a few remarks on how the value of the “good” remains, after the principle has been cast aside and the priority of respect is acknowledged, a ghost on the horizon of all curators’ work.

Keywords: curating; ethics; code of ethics; public good; Degenerate Art Exhibition



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1. Introduction

Most self-respecting curatorial ventures, whether that of a museum, gallery, art space, or creative hub, proudly publish on their website a mission statement, a code of ethics, or a code of good practice or governance that aspires to prove their well-meaning intentions towards the public they serve. These are not straightforward statements that demonstrate the aims of these curatorial endeavours, such as, for example, “for the purposes of education, study and/or enjoyment.” These are clearly moralistic statement in as much as they imply the sense of improving or enhancing the lives of their audiences. Here, are a few examples of the kinds of overarching moral statement at the top of these codes of ethics:

“Curatorial work is guided by the following value: *To serve the public good* by contributing to and promoting learning, inquiry, and dialogue, and by making the depth and breadth of human knowledge available to the public.” [1] (p. 4).

“Members of the Association of Art Museum Curators believe that the core mission of art museums is to collect, preserve, study, interpret, and display works of art *for the benefit of the public.*” [2] (p. 6).

“All those who work for or govern museums should ensure that they fulfil all the museum’s guardianship responsibilities in respect not only of the collections but also of all other resources (for example, premises, land and information), which, in explicit or moral terms, it holds in trust *for the benefit of the public.*” [3] (p. 8).

This last iteration expands this benevolence by making the code itself a key component of this provision:

“[Furthermore,] the Museum Association believes this code’s provisions to be in *the best interests of the public* and therefore urges all museum governing bodies (and where appropriate, subsidiary, subcontracted or delegated bodies such as executive committees, contractors or managing bodies), formally to adopt it.” [3] (p. 5).

As these examples show, the public that engages with these institutions find themselves to be the recipient of curators' overall moral largesse. Curators serve the public good and they work to benefit the public. If one takes these examples at face value, the public would indeed be foolish not to accept these advantages brought onto them. The perks are clear, the benefit or good is clearly stated.

Yet, there is a strange ambivalence about this benefit or good. What does it actually mean? What does "benefiting the public" mean? What does "serving the public good" mean? In this essay, I would like to explore the way curators not only acknowledge, but also obey (or not) this principle and, to some degree, how they go about bestowing this supposed moral enhancement on their public. To address this, I have limited the scope in two ways.

Firstly, I will only focus on the way curators respond to the principle of "serving the public good" and not on either the audience's reaction to curators' moral largesse or their moral preferences. The reason for limiting the scope of this essay to curators' abidance by the principle is because the audience's reception is simply unquantifiable. If one were to quantify it, one would require very precise experiential surveys and statistics that would inevitably be limiting, impractical, and unapplicable elsewhere because what counts as an audience or a public means different things in different contexts. The focus is therefore on the way curators respond or not to the principle in question. The essay is therefore an attempt to evaluate the issues encountered by curators when they strive to serve the public good and not an exercise in assessing the way a lone individual, a small group, an audience, a public, a community, or a nation perceive and judge exhibitions and the way these impart a "good."

Secondly, out of the two main expressions shown above ("benefiting the public"/"to serve the public good"), I will limit this research to the expression "to serve the public good" because it is the most moral of the two statements. "To benefit the public" can indeed be perceived as an economic advantage, the word "benefit" clearly denoting a profit gained, paying an entrance fee benefits my understanding of this cultural artefact, for example. By contrast, "to serve the public good," clearly brings out a general moral dimension, the two words "serving" and "public good" intimating a type of improvement that is widely accepted as being "morally right," without necessarily incurring an economic benefit. In other words, no bartering is implied in this service to the good of a public. So, again, what does this ethical statement actually mean?

Essays and discussions about the soundness of this principle are scarce in as much as the principle is invariably taken as self-evident. Besides the actual codes of ethics themselves (usually put forward by panels of experts such as art curators, art historians, museum directors, legal advisors, etc. and focusing on the fine art practice of curating in museums and galleries), the research field is sharply divided in two: on the one hand, with articles on museums ethics and on the other, with a looser batch of essays on curatorial ethics. The former mainly contains exegeses on the limits and potentials of these codes for museums either in general or within a specific discipline or practice.¹ The latter, a research area in rapid expansion, but nonetheless still quite limited, focuses either on repeating the well-meaning intentions of codes or asserting, by way of a contrast, curators' own private ethical codes.² These range from simple advice on how to curate ethically to exhortations on how to lead a better life. My aim in what follows is not to propose a new principle or ethical code, discuss the merits of previous principles or codes (whether museum-based or curatorial), or approve or redress these curatorial ethical suggestions. Equally, my purpose here is not to offer a comprehensive philosophical analysis of this term.³ My aim is only to focus on this specific principle, its meaning, and the problems

¹ See, for example, in chronological order, [4–7].

² See, for example, in chronological order, [8–11]

³ For such an analysis, I would obviously need to examine in close detail a number of arguments with regards to both common and public goods, such as those put forward, for example, by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, Hegel in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, or Dewey in *The Public and its Problems*. Unfortunately, lack of space prevents me from exploring these arguments in detail here.

that it entails for curators—the scope of this essay is thus clearly limited to curating and its specific ethical predicaments.

To fulfil this specific aim, I will explore the following topics: after this brief introduction, I will consider the fact that, when one reflects on its meaning, the principle in question is at once majestic and ridiculed. I will then look at the difference between the words “public” and “private,” then the difference between “public good” and “common good,” and finally look at the importance of respecting this principle over and beyond the principle itself. To illustrate how this principle operates in the curatorial profession, I will very briefly look into the staging and subsequent reincarnations of the famous Nazi exhibition of 1937, *Ausstellung “Entartete Kunst”* (henceforth referred to as “Degenerate Art” Exhibition). The reason for choosing such a well-known exhibition and a few key aftermaths, is simply because it highlights a rather remarkable feature of this principle, namely that the “good” in the principle “to serve the public good” can, however strange this is, easily become “evil,” and then “good” again. The changing nature of the principle is what is at stake in this essay. I will neither give a detailed account of the original show nor of all the other reinterpretations. Instead, I will only try to articulate how the principle of “serving the public good” can hypothetically be understood to operate in each exhibition. I will conclude by looking at the issue of the lawlessness of respect and draw a few remarks on how the idea of the “good” remains nonetheless as a ghost on the horizon of all curators’ work.

Since I am a theorist of curatorial practices and not an art critic who would invariably report back on what is exhibited and whether or not it served its intended audience, I necessarily support the view that curatorial gestures can be analysed on the basis of their left-overs (curators’ statements, intentions, catalogues, archives, reviews received, and if statistical evidence is sufficiently trustworthy, the audience’s reaction). This does not mean that first hand exhibition experiences have no bearing on how curatorial practices occur or are evaluated. This only means that when it comes to controversial exhibitions, and specifically contentious historical exhibitions, a theoretical approach is often more fruitful than one relying exclusively on empirical, experiential, and phenomenological accounts, which would invariably be subjective and unapplicable in other contexts. By tracing a specific, but necessarily arbitrary lineage of curatorial adherence to (or rejection of) the principle of “serving the public good,” my aim is thus to side with the possibility of writing about exhibitions from a purely speculative and theoretical perspective without undermining, of course, individual or collective accounts. The following arguments are intended in this framework.

2. Majestic and Ridiculed

I will start with my first theme with regard to the principle “to serve the public good,” namely that it is both majestic and ridiculed. First of all, I use the term principle not in the sense of a fundamental truth, but in the sense of a widely accepted suggestion that, more often than not, remains unchallenged. In doing so, I discard the expression “value” as was stated in the first iteration of this principle. The reason for doing so is that in ethics, “value” is a dispositional belief, it expresses a desire to bring about what is judged “good.” In the first iteration of the principle, it is clear that the curators who are members of the American Alliance of Museums are disposed to take whatever actions they believe are likely to bring about the good. If I were to limit myself to understand the sentence “to serve the public good” as a value only, then indeed there is nothing to be said about it. Everyone can wish for the good to happen. However, as I will show, the codes of ethics that include such a principle are more often than not proscriptive and prescriptive. They are not only hierarchical institutional impositions formulated by experts and handed down by board of trustees and directors, they also incur, by their sheer existence, an obligation. Even if they are unwritten or simply assumed, the principle still retains a force of generality that prescribes without question. It is in this sense that I will understand this expression: a principle with a degree of prescriptive power.

As a widely accepted general principle then, there is no doubt that the words themselves have come to acquire a certain ambivalence whereby one is not too sure whether one should take them seriously or not. “To serve the public good” sounds as if curators need to abide unreservedly by some general truth, the formidable majesty of a principle surpassing all other principles. This majesty is partly due to the two words that make up this principle: “Public,” that is, what concerns a specific people, irrespective of any difference; and “Good,” that is, what this specific public supposedly finds desirable, pleasing, or welcome. These two vague words consolidate the principle in its majesty, their vagueness secures its magnificence. Who would dare not abiding by the principle of “serving the public good”?

Yet, at the same time, this expression has also come to be cloaked in a degree of ridicule whereby one is no longer sure what it means, as if heralding from a forgotten past unrelated to the concerns of today’s wired communities. Interestingly, as if to show a more contemporary take on the issue than that put forward by institutional curators, this moral improvement or benefit is rarely included today in online content curators’ own codes of ethics. These tend to cover freedom of expression, truth, credit where credit is due, admission of failings, moderation in commentaries, and a general aim to create quality content, while retaining the right to delete spam and hate speech.⁴ Content curators have thus clearly removed this intention “to serve the public good” from their codes, thus confirming that the principle has indeed become a little ridicule, as if straight out of Victorian charity statutes. Today, such a statement indeed exposes that this emperor of all curatorial principles has indeed no clothes, that its grandeur can only be the subject of mockery and laughter.

The result of this ambivalence is that either curators follow this principle in protracted seriousness (and many inside and outside of institutions do), or they smile at it, mocking it for its old-fashioned overtones (and many others—a generally younger crowd—do too).⁵ In either case, the expression stands for a principle that seems inaccessible (“am I ever serving the public good with this or that project?”), nearly impossible to execute (“am I really only serving my self-interests and career?”), and effectively unknowable (“do I really know what the expression means?”). Majestic or ridiculed, inaccessible or unworkable, and above all, unfathomable, the principle “to serve the public good” nonetheless remains in our vocabulary as a powerful and inescapable term, very close to other equally vague terms such as “in the interest of the majority,” or “for the greater good of all.” Therefore, my question still remains: when it comes to curating, in lofty museums or alternative venues, what does this principle mean? To continue addressing this question, I will now look at a first differentiation: public versus private.

3. Public/Private

As a philosophical concept, the idea of “serving the public good” can perhaps be understood as a rational and practical effort among members of a certain community to create or maintain something or other for the sake of common interests. For example, most large towns around the world have a history museum. The “public good” of this history museum consists in the fact that it benefits everyone in the surrounding community. A history museum will then be open on the basis of this effort of “serving the public good.” The curator of a history museum will then be working, as Boris Groys, rightly emphasises, in the name of the public, safeguarding the public character of the works which would otherwise be confined to dusty storerooms or private collections [16]. The crucial thing here is that this “public good” effectively stands opposed to a “private good” for which each member of the community would pursue distinct personal projects that are not in the interests of everyone. A private history museum would be a cabinet of curiosity that benefits only one person: the owner. It would then be closed-off to everyone on the basis

⁴ See, for example, [12–14].

⁵ It is old fashioned perhaps because the use of the term “public good” was especially prevalent among political philosophers, roughly from the 16th century to the 19th century. John Locke, for example, in the *Second Treatise of Government* defines political power as the right to make binding laws so that it is directed “to no other end, but the peace, safety, and the public good of the people.” [15] (p. 353).

of a “private good,” thus going against the interests of all. “Public” and “private” thus contrast each other not as being the equivalent of “good” or “bad,” but in relation to the community they serve: the larger, the more the common interest is met, the smaller, the more this interest is reduced.

However, there is a fundamental slipperiness between “public” and “private.” This slipperiness prevents the establishment of a clear demarcation between the two. For example, private citizens often pursue private goals that end up benefiting a wider public.⁶ This is much evidenced in what concerns us here in collectors bequeathing their artworks to museums, for example. By contrast, projects that serve the public good often also benefit private citizens. This is much evidenced, for example, in museums hosting private parties for funding bodies or wealthy benefactors amidst public collections. This slipperiness renders all the more confusing what is understood by “serving the public good,” thus emphasizing once again, its lofty majesty, in as much as it has the potential of being all inclusive and its ridicule, in as much as it often stands for the exact opposite, namely radical exclusivity. Where can the line be drawn in any effort to serve this principle?

4. Public Good/Common Good

To answer this question, it is perhaps worth looking into a third crucial aspect, namely that the expression “public good” often stands in contrast to “common good.” In a nutshell, “the common good,” implies a vague collective view amongst a community: what is or should be common to all. It is vague because it refers to a good that is supposedly shared, divided, or distributed amongst the members of a community, irrespective of any economic and socio-cultural belonging, perceived or real. The “good” in this case mostly refers to a community’s common “wealth,” such as, for example, clean air or water—albeit before politics and economy take over and turn these into commodities and services, in which case, the “good” ceases to stand for a “common wealth.”⁷ By contrast, “the public good,” implies an already constituted view of this community, namely that it is “a public,” i.e., an already determined section of the community who has a particular interest in the good provided: an audience interested in visiting a history museum, for example.

As this shows, the remit of “public good” is already much more limited than that behind “common good.” There is a limitation, if not already an exclusion, at stake in the words “public good.”⁸ The extracts taken from the code of ethics quoted at the start of this article clearly emphasise that curators’ endeavours are destined to improve (or benefit) the lives and minds of an already circumscribed audience. Anyone who does not fit the category of “public” is thus excluded: curators do not work for the good of animals or, more generally, of the environment, for example. The public is preferably an able-bodied viewing and/or hearing public. I emphasise “able-bodied” in as much, as the requirement of a disability rights of access in curatorial projects is often ignored or omitted. In this way, curators often serve the good of an already predetermined public, with all the dangers that this entails.

Notwithstanding the crucial difference between “public-” and “common-good,” the two expressions are often confused because in either case, they imply the setting aside of private interests in order to privilege either a vague “common” or a slightly more circumscribed “public.” However, slippery and confused, this is the function of these overused expressions.

Now that I have defined—very quickly, I admit—what the words “public good” mean, how they oppose themselves to “private good” and how they contrast with this other expression “the common good,” I will try to make sense of the way these words constitute an imperative for curators.

⁶ The most famous proponent of this view is, without doubt, John Rawls’s argument that society overall should be structured in a way whereby the greatest amount of liberty should be given to its citizens (limited only by the notion that the liberty of any one member shall not infringe upon that of any other member), which will thereby benefit all. See [17].

⁷ On this topic, see, for example, [18,19].

⁸ In the field of economic theory, see on this issue, for example, [20].

5. Before the Principle: Respect

My question is now this: Why do curators follow the principle “to serve the public good” without ever questioning it? The first thing that must be highlighted when it comes to these curatorial codes of ethics is that they must be respected. As soon as a curator joins a museum, for example, he, she, or they will be given a copy of this code with the assumption that it must be adhered to. In this way, even without a swearing-in declaration of oath or obedience, the principle “to serve the public good” necessarily enjoins respect otherwise there would be no point for museums and curators in writing them down. In a book dedicated to Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, Jean-Luc Nancy clearly explains this when he states that categorical moral principles must enjoin respect, otherwise there would be no point in putting them forward. This respect, as he says, “forms the very relation to the law . . . Without this relation, we could speak neither of ‘good’ nor of ‘evil.’” [21] (p. 145). This respect forms the actual moral relation a curator will have with the museum they work in. I would go as far as to say that notwithstanding the meaning of the expression “public good,” the curator will respect the principle without needing to question it or even understand it: it is a self-evident principle that bears not even a second glance.

The second thing that must be highlighted when it comes to these curatorial codes of ethics is that the respect for the principle supersedes any other type of respect. Curators, for example, have more respect for the principle than they have for the public they supposedly serve. This is especially true when one looks into the way curators consider the potential or actual audiences of their exhibitions. Audiences are treated as either the result of questionable statistics or the outcome of vague assumptions about gender, ethnic background, social and economic status, perceptions about local communities, etc. Faced by the always unstable nature of what is understood by “public” or “audience,” curators thus reassure themselves that notwithstanding who they have reached or how well they have reached them, they ultimately abide by the principle of serving “a” public. The respect for the principle (and therefore for the code of ethics) is thus prior to all other objects. There would be no respect for audiences without this inaugural respect.

Respect for the principle therefore strangely comes first. Respect is what curiously matters above and beyond the meaning of what is understood as “the public” or “the good.” The reason respect comes first is because contrary to its object (i.e., the principle “to serve the public good” itself), respect remains constant. This is probably the most crucial thing I will argue in this article. While—as I will show—the meaning of “public” and “good” can vary greatly, “respect,” by contrast remains always the same. A curator, for example, can lose respect for this principle. They can find that the principle does not oblige them, that they prefer to serve private interests. The key thing here is that whatever they decide (an elite in power or a vague understanding of the visiting public), they will still have respect binding them in one way or another. Respect is indeed what curiously remains constant even if the principle changes, is ignored, or replaced with less lofty and majestic ones, like serving the rich and powerful.

Respect therefore not only comes first; it is what inaugurates the principle, it is what gives the expression “to serve the public good,” its power and force of generality. Two things further reinforce this priority.

Firstly, the strategic position of the principle “to serve the public good” at the top of most codes of ethics for curators testifies to the priority of this respect: it is what founds the other principles in the remainder of the code. Such strategic primacy practically serves the same function as the disposition of Moses’s first (“I am the Lord, thy God”) and six (“Thou Shall Not Kill”) commandments which, as is well known, inaugurates the moral hierarchy at the top of the table and therefore of all subsequent commandments.⁹ In a way, this position at the top of the code implements respect and inaugurates the “good” in the rest of the code. Secondly, the priority of respect is clearly evidenced in the fact that the principle is most often than not handed down by an authority invariably situated hierarchically

⁹ On this topic, see [22] (p. 122).

above curators. This can be either museum boards of trustees or directors who sign off these professionally written codes of ethics or, more broadly, a political power who directly or indirectly determines the way their supporting publics need to be curatorially addressed. In either case, respecting the principle comes with respecting the authority that either implements it or enforces it. Unless there are causes for distancing themselves from the authority in question (political disagreements over the trustees' or directors' unethical funding sources, for example), moral authority invariably gets confused with hierarchical authority, thus securing the primacy of respect over the meaning of the principle.

The priority of respect thus highlights a crucial issue in what concerns me here: If "respect" comes first, if respect is what remains always constant, then the meaning of the principle "to serve the public good" is variable. It can easily, without anyone really noticing, turn into "to serve the public's own ruin." Faced with the constancy of respect, there is nothing to stop the meaning of the principle (whether stated or not) to mean the exact opposite of what it is supposedly intended. This does not simply refer to the infinite polysemy of language, but to the very real moral slippage in the meaning of the term "good," when faced with the imperative of respect. To show how the principle "to serve the public good" can suddenly become "to serve the public's own ruin" and how the blind respect for the principle supersedes the principle itself, I will take, as I said in the Introduction, a well-known curatorial example followed by a few reincarnations. The key thing with this example is not its exemplarity or its controversy, but the crucial variation in the meaning of the words "public good."

6. "Degenerate Art" Exhibition, Munich, 1937

The example I have chosen is Adolf Ziegler's infamous exhibition of 1937 called "Degenerate Art" Exhibition, organised by the Cultural Section of the Reich Propaganda Office. In what follows, I will neither present nor analyse this well-known exhibition. The bibliography on this show is probably unique in the history of curating for being so rich, insightful, and extensive.¹⁰ I will simply contextualise it within a long history of exhibitions. However, this contextualisation does not pretend to be exhaustive either. To do so, one would have to analyse many other exhibitions, both before and after 1937, especially lesser known projects in and outside of Germany. As I said, my aim is simply to pin point the slippage in the meaning of the principle, "to serve the public good." To refresh our memories, I will just highlight its most salient aspects.

I will start not with one, but two exhibitions that took place concurrently in 1937. The first of which is this "Degenerate Art" Exhibition, shown at the former Institut für Archäologie (Institute of Archaeology) at The Hofgarten, in Munich, Germany, between the 19 July and the 30 November 1937. As is well known, this exhibition presented six hundred and fifty artworks confiscated from German museums with the aim of declaring a "merciless war" on works of art that insulted "the good" of the German people. This notoriously defamatory show included works that did not conform to the Nazis' views about art: Expressionism, Fauvism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Bauhaus, Cubism, and New Objectivity, basically all modern art was to be pilloried and ridiculed and later burned or sold abroad. Artists such as George Grosz, Marc Chagall, Paul Klee, and Wassily Kandinsky were labelled un-German or Jewish Bolshevik. Ideologically, it was primarily based on a popular pseudo-scientific treatise of 1893 by Max Nordau, titled *Degeneration*, in which he railed against modern art as a symptom of mental and moral decline [25]. This book, which appeared in an English translation two months before Oscar Wilde was sentenced to prison for homosexual acts thus giving credit to the spurious medical reasons for considering Wilde's character and work as "degenerate," was of decisive influence to the National Socialist rhetoric and was adopted by Hitler not in his own 1925 book *Mein Kampf*, but in

¹⁰ I only give here the most insightful of academic texts: For an account of the history leading up to the Degenerate Exhibition, see [23] (pp. 83–103). For an analysis of the exhibition, see [24].

later speeches, in which he singled out Dadaism as “the degenerate excess of insane and depraved humans.”¹¹

The art was divided into different rooms by category: art that was blasphemous, art by Jewish or communist artists, art that criticised German soldiers, art that offended the honour of German women. One room featured entirely abstract paintings, and was labelled “the insanity room.” The idea of the exhibition was not just to mock modern art, but to encourage viewers to see it as a symptom of an evil plot against the German people by a band of corrupted individuals suffering from excessive outbursts of madness, insolence, and degeneracy. The curator went to some lengths to get the message across, hiring actors to mingle with the crowds and criticise the exhibits, allowing only over-18 s into the show, and labelling each work with the sum that was paid for it to demonstrate the way German museums squandered the hard-earned money of taxpayers during the Weimar Republic. To make sure visitors understood the intentions of the exhibition correctly, the walls were smeared with slogans and derisive graffiti proclaiming, “Madness will be the Method” or “Crazy at any Price.” The exhibition was, of course, accompanied by a catalogue that reinforced the message by showing examples of degeneracy and drawing problematic comparisons between racial profiling and modern art. It included thematic chapters such as “Formal deformation,” “Insult to religious feeling,” “Depiction of moral decay,” “Portraits of people without the Aryan ideal of race,” “Relationship of art to the mentally ill.” One million people attended the Munich exhibition in its first six weeks. The show then travelled to other parts of Germany and to Austria, thus drawing further crowds gawping at the repulsive aspects of modern art.

As is well known, this infamous exhibition ended up doing the exact opposite of what the Nazis wanted, namely, it drew attention to modern art and the ways in which artists depicted the horrors of the modern world. The key thing here is that Adolf Ziegler and the Cultural Section of the Reich Propaganda Office clearly worked with one aim in mind: to serve the “good” of the German public by exhibiting, in reverse, everything that insulted the “good” of Germany. This is plainly evidenced in the accompanying catalogue with forward-looking sentences pointing to where the “good” lies, such as “[The exhibition] must prevent the jabbering cliques from that murky past [The Jew-ridden Weimar Republic] from foisting any such men on the new state and on its forward looking people as ‘the natural standard-bearers of an art of the Third Reich.’” [27] (p. 42). The aim was therefore not only denunciatory of a past ruled by the enemies of Germany, but projective of a rosier future which will see a flourishing art world in full support of the ideologies of the much hyped “Third Realm or Empire” to come. Such an aim would thus have been entirely welcomed by the Nazi-supporting public who would have interpreted this exhibition as serving their own good. As with previous German exhibitions that attempted to show “chambers of horrors,” it would also have appealed to a popular sentiment, namely, the opportunity for the less enthusiast supporters of the Nazi regime to form their own opinion. Needless to say, such a sentiment would not have been shared by all those who had been stripped of their voting rights by the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Before I draw any further conclusions, let me now move to the other exhibition that took place at the same time, across the road from The Hofgarten.

7. The Great German Art Exhibition, Munich, 1937

As is well known, the “Degenerate Art” Exhibition was staged alongside another exhibition, this time, celebrating the opening of the newly built Haus der Deutschen Kunst (now Haus der Kunst) which, according to the Nazis, paid tribute to Germany’s supposedly superior culture. The new museum opening ceremony was preceded by pageants and festivities celebrating “Two Thousand Years of German Art,” and paying tribute to Germanic and Greek heritages. “This new museum,” Hitler proclaimed at the opening

¹¹ Quoted in [26] (p. 27), my translation.

ceremony, “will be part of the immortal achievement of the German artistic heritage.”¹² The exhibition, titled Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung (henceforth referred to as The Great German Art Exhibition), was filled with realistic, symbolic, mythological, and naturalist paintings depicting heroic soldiers, wholesome still lives and landscapes, alongside oversized muscular bronze men and paintings of modest nude women. Inevitably, the exhibition also came with its own catalogue glorifying the best of Nazi art.

Contrary to the “merciless war” waged against artworks that insulted the “good” of the German people, this parallel exhibition was clearly intended to showcase art that did precisely the opposite, namely, emulate the “good” of the German people. Although Hitler’s own inaugural speech was filled with hatred and antagonising statements against the Jews, their artists, and their patrons, the exhibition clearly served a clear nationalistic “good.” Amidst the diatribe of abhorrence and contempt, Hitler managed to point towards an auspicious future to-come, with sentences highlighting the strength of a nation’s will against the murky tactics of a coterie of degenerate artists: “. . . it is not art that creates a new age. It is the general life of the People which takes on new forms and thus frequently seeks a new form of expression . . . It is not the men who wield a pen who shape a new epoch, but those who are willing to enter the fray, who take control of the course of events, who lead their People and thus make history” [28] (p. 62). Amidst the ruins of the past, arises the promised “good” of the Aryan race.

For this parallel exhibition, the Nazi public would have thus encountered its own perception of the “good” in as much as the artworks on display embodied the image of the Third Reich. Although it is difficult to assess whether German artist’s heroic individualism was compatible with collective totalitarianism, the authoritarian Nazi pedagogy displayed in the twenty-seven rooms of the museum clearly laid out the fascist aestheticization of politics. This aestheticization is never, however, clear cut, with the “good” displayed in the House of German Art and the “bad” displayed in The Hofgarten. As the biographies of several exhibited artists testify (Emil Nolde, for example), the division between fascist and non-fascist art forms never managing to neatly pair with a good and evil order. The German “good” would have thus been seen as always in danger of being soiled and made again impure.

Ever since these twin exhibitions of 1937, there have been numerous attempt to either show the same works or stage similar works with a different “public good” in mind. I will go through these selected reincarnations one by one, only highlighting again, how the curators saw themselves as serving the public good.

8. Twentieth Century German Art, London, 1938

Exactly one year after the twin propaganda exhibitions in Munich, the exhibition Twentieth Century German Art opened its doors between 8 and 30 July 1938 in London. This exhibition was curated by Noel Norton, Irmgard Burchard, and Richard Paul Lohse for the New Burlington Galleries, already famous for having held in 1936 the first International Surrealist Exhibition in the UK (the 6th worldwide). This 1938 London show contained over three hundred examples of German modernist art, paintings, sculptures, and works on paper by over sixty artists, among them Max Beckmann, Max Liebermann, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, George Grosz, Otto Dix and Kurt Schwitters. This exhibition was not only the first major retrospective of German modern art in Britain, it was also the largest international response to the Nazi campaign against so-called “degenerate art.” The exhibition had a major impact on the London cultural scene. The opening night, for example, saw many cultural celebrities in attendance, including Virginia Woolf, Pablo Picasso, and Le Corbusier. The exhibition attracted thousands of people. The Munich propaganda exhibitions a year earlier had been widely reported in Britain, and the political significance of the London show was all too clear. Although the exhibition’s title and the

¹² Quoted in [27] (p. 8).

catalogue attempted to downplay this political significance, the show sent a powerful message that “degenerate art” was now the toast of the British art world.

The “good” served in this particular exhibition was above all that of the German avant-garde, this coterie of modern artists pilloried by the Nazis. The exhibition indeed mostly served the interests of the artists exhibited not only in this defiant gesture against the propaganda machine of the Third Reich, but also and above all, in the way it consolidated their presence in the international art scene. As the exhibition catalogue clearly stated: “Art has its disciplines, but these originate in the mind of the artist, and cannot be imposed by the indoctrinated will of statesman, however, wise. That is the only principle we maintain, but in virtue of this principle, we can offer the persecuted artists of Germany the prospect of appealing to the unprejudiced eyes of the world” [29] (p. 14). Of course, the “good” targeted here also served the British visiting public in as much as it presented them with a different approach to modern art than that of other European avant-gardes. However, most British reviews in art magazines (*Studio, Apollo, and Connoisseurs*) and the general press (*Daily Telegraph, The Listener, Morning Post*) focused on how German abstraction and expressionism compared with their French or Italian counterparts [30] (pp. 114–137). Although the comparisons were generally unfavourable, these artists did get mapped onto the art scene, not only as artists condemned by the Nazis, but more widely, as the latest alternative to better-established European avant-gardes.

9. Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany, Los Angeles, 1991

Let me now jump a few decades and move to an exhibition first staged between the 17 February and the 12 May 1991 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, then restaged between 22 June and 8 September 1991 at the Art Institute of Chicago and later on, at the Smithsonian in Washington, and the Altes Museum in Berlin, Germany. This travelling exhibition was called again, *Degenerate Art*, but subtitled: *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* [31]. This exhibition was a scholarly re-creation of Adolf Ziegler’s *Degenerate Art Exhibition* of 1937. It brought together nearly one hundred and seventy-five works from the original show and included rare posters and dozens of original documents and forgotten film footage. The curator, Stephanie Barron and architect Frank Gehry, who designed the installation, created exhibition spaces devoted to the plight of all avant-garde art under National Socialism, including film, music, and art and how these media coped under the Nazi regime. The exhibition included full-scale and small-scale re-staging of the original 1937 installation.

The aim of the show was to demonstrate that repetition is crucial if we want to make sure that art can withstand the onslaught of criminal ideologies. To some extent, the show was like a cautionary tale about the dangers for a society going off the rails. As Lisa Vihos, clearly emphasised in the Related Events Guide of the exhibition: “The exhibition and its accompanying educational programs serve a dual purpose: to contextualize the “Degenerate Art” Exhibition mounted by the Nazis in 1937 and to pay homage to a great portion of the history of modern art and culture. Issues raised by the exhibition and these programs shed a chilling light on recent events in this country, where the director of an art center in Cincinnati and a rap group and record store owner in Florida have been brought to trial for exercising their freedom of speech and government funding for the creation and exhibition of art of all types in precarious balance” [32] (p. 1). Over and beyond the educational aims of the exhibition, the “good” targeted here was clearly the wellbeing of America’s freedom of speech. The exhibition thus took on a clear moralistic tone for the way it cautioned the viewers about the fragility of such a freedom in the face of censorship and funding cuts.¹³ Once more, the curators indirectly served a national “good,” albeit pitched as a dialectical contrast to the 1937 one.

¹³ On this topic, see, [33] (pp. 216–259).

10. Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937, New York, 2014

My next re-staging of the 1937 exhibition took place at the Neue Galerie in New York. The exhibition retained the same name as in 1937 (“Degenerate Art”), but with an inevitable new subtitle: *The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937* [34]. The exhibition was curated by Olaf Peters and opened to the public between 13 March and 30 June 2014. The same kind of narrative took place there, albeit with a crucial difference. Unlike the 1991 Los Angeles show, this exhibition brought together works from both the “Degenerate Art” Exhibition and The Great German Art Exhibition. For example, Adolf Ziegler’s own triptych painting *Four Elements* which originally hung in the opening exhibition of the House of German Art was shown alongside Max Beckmann’s *Departure* triptych, which was originally shown in the “Degenerate Art” Exhibition. The aim of such a juxtaposition was not to pitch Nazi and Modern art against each other, but to highlight a major turning point in history, namely that unlike any previous art movement, the history of modern art has its origin in tragedy. To emphasise this point, the exhibition heavy-handedly displayed empty frames alongside artworks in the aim of highlighting the fate of thousands of modern artworks stolen by the Nazis in the 1930s that were destroyed or remain lost to this day. The history of modern art is thus presented as this battle between the best that modernity can foster (what has been saved) and the worst that modernity can generate (what has been destroyed or lost by a nefarious ideology). As such, the Neue Galerie exhibition was much more historicizing in its scope than the Los Angeles exhibition nearly two decades earlier. This new restaging of Ziegler’s 1937 show was, this time, trying to tell a nuanced story of the contradictions and political dilemmas of modern art.

The “good” served by the curators was here at least twofold. On the one hand, it reiterated the 1991 Los Angeles show by conveying a warning that freedom of expression is always in danger. As the curator of the exhibition Olaf Peters says in the catalogue: “The historical slogan ‘degenerate art’ should still offer occasion to reflect on the freedom of art at present and on the extent to which art, particularly contemporary art, can be considered a cultural asset, a critical authority, or even a provocative alternative proposal to the existing world” [34] (p. 12). However, the curators also aimed at serving an additional “good,” namely, the well-meaning intentions of Germanic culture in general. As is well known, the museum ethos is indeed to bring a sense of perspective back to Germanic culture in general, and specifically, early twentieth-century German and Austrian art and design. This is evidenced in the way Renée Price, the Museum’s Director, insisted in the catalogue that the eye-opening confrontation between persecuted and Nazi-approved artists only reveals “the true tragedy that both experienced” [34] (p. 10). By emphasising the tragic nature of artist’s expressions in times of conflict, German cultural production of the era was thus elevated irrespective of political sides. This was therefore yet another nationalistic “good” even if it tried to teach the treacherous lesson that art never occurs in a lofty realm, but always in the midst of conflict.

11. Modern Masters: “Degenerate” Art at the Museum, Bern, 2016

My next exhibition takes us to Switzerland. Between 7 April and 21 August 2016, the Kunstmuseum Bern (henceforth referred to as the Bern Museum of Fine Arts) presented an exhibition titled *Modern Masters: “Degenerate” Art at the Museum*. The idea for this exhibition was to present, for the first time, the acquisition history of the museum’s collection, including works drawn from a treasure trove of some 1500 works found hidden five years earlier in the homes of the German collector Cornelius Gurlitt, the son of Hitler’s own art dealer. The show’s goal was to illustrate the problem of acquisition of modern art looted by the Nazis. The reason Bern decided to show this acquisition process is because although it boasts one of the leading collections of modern art in Europe, its purchase history is minimal. Most of its collections is made up of either donations, bequests, or belong to external foundations. The exhibition was curated by Daniel Spanke and focused largely on works of art that were considered “degenerate” in Nazi Germany and came into the possession of the Bern Museum of Fine Arts after 1938. Extraordinarily, the exhibition

was divided thematically around questions such as: “What was ‘degenerate’ art supposed to be?” “How did Switzerland respond at a cultural level to the threat of Nazi Germany?” and, not least, “How and why was art from German museums ended up in Switzerland?”

The “good” targeted here was not so much that of Swiss museum-goers or the artists of the avant-garde, but that embodied by the institution itself in as much as it tried to cover its back from any wrong-doing in acquiring, storing, and exhibiting works that had been looted by the Nazis from private individuals and institutions. This is much evidenced in the exhibition’s detailed account of the museum’s own history, its chronicle of the way it serves as a patron of art, the history of the composition of its board of trustees, and even a close account of its statutes, which clearly emphasise its clear aim: “to promote and sponsor the Kunstmuseum Bern and foster interest in strengthening its growth and success” [35] (p. 9). This institutional “good” was, of course, complemented again by yet another nationalistic “good,” this time, the famous neutrality of Switzerland as a heaven for freedom of expression. As Matthias Frehner and Daniel Spanke, the editors of the catalogue for this exhibition, state: “We only have the privilege of mounting these works by the modern masters because Switzerland was and remained a free, democratic nation—as it still is” [35] (p. 5). Serving the “good” of the institution and that of a nation thus took precedence over any other “public good,” such as that of the descendants of “degenerate” artists and collectors, for example, whose work had been looted by the Nazis and ended up in the neutral Alpine country. Although efforts to identify provenance and legitimacy abounded, the integrity of the museum and the neutrality of Switzerland appear to have outweighed any other “good”.

12. Spot on 1937: The “Degenerate Art” in Dusseldorf, 2018

My next exhibition takes us back to Germany. I have chosen a small exhibition that took place in Dusseldorf, but I could have chosen many other German shows, small or large, that attempt to deal with the way German museums reassess the country’s past. Examples of these show include, for example, the 2010 Berlin Neue Museum’s travelling exhibition of the surprise find at the Red City Hall underground station of 11 “degenerate” sculptures confiscated in 1937 by the National Socialist regime¹⁴—an exhibition that overall led to a reassessment of the void left by Nazi cultural policy in German’s art landscape. Another potential exhibition could also be the 2012 Haus der Kunst commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of its 1937 opening, with a large exhibition titled, *Histories in Conflict: Haus der Kunst and the Ideological Uses of Art, 1937–1955* or the many other smaller shows such as the ones presented at the Center for Persecuted Arts in Solingen, the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, the Bucerius Kunst Forum in Hamburg, or the Kunstmuseum in Basel. The importance of all these exhibitions cannot be underestimated in as much as they all highlight the way German museums examine, re-evaluate, and mediate anew their history, a work that is now examined in close detail by The “Degenerate Art” Research Center at the Freie Universität in Berlin.

The Dusseldorf exhibition specifically focused on the one-thousand works of art that the National Socialists had stolen from the City of Dusseldorf’s art collection (now the Museum Kunstpalast). The exhibition, a research project carried out on behalf of the “Degenerate Art” Research Centre in Berlin and funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, was titled *Spot on 1937: The “Degenerate Art” in Dusseldorf* and was curated by Kathrin DuBois of the Museum Kunstpalast. It was staged between 14 July and 1 June 2018 [37]. The aim of the exhibition was to show what had been lost to the Nazis’ purges from the city’s own public collection. It was effectively an exhibition about a collection that technically no longer existed. In order to do so, the curator borrowed works that were originally located in Dusseldorf, but found their way into foreign museums, such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s painting *The Three Bathers*, which was borrowed for this occasion from The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. The crucial thing with this exhibition was the fact

¹⁴ On this topic, see [36].

that the 1937 Nazi Parliamentary Act that confiscated “Degenerate Art” had never been repealed by the Allied Forces or the Federal Republic. The changes of ownership were then effectively legal, thus questioning the right of possession of whatever “degenerate art” is to be found in or out of Germany today.

The aim of this Dusseldorf show as well as of these other German exhibitions is clearly to present both the works of so-called “Degenerate Art” and the classical artworks and artifacts collected by the Nazis as conflicted elements of modern German cultural identity. As such, not unlike the New York Neue Galerie show, the “public good” targeted by curators in this Dusseldorf or in any of the other German shows was again, a nationalistic “good” even if it was staged as an act of lament, a veiled or overt call for restitution and reparation, and an attempt at re-writing a painful history. This is clearly evidenced in the way this particular exhibition displayed all the information available at the Dusseldorf Museum, in particular, the inventory books, the confiscation lists, the photo files and historical correspondence all in order to expose the damages caused by the Nazi looting. The exhibition also celebrated the return of some of the artefacts either through new donations or re-purchases of artworks that had been in the collection prior to the Nazi purge. Furthermore, like for the Bern Museum of Fine Art, the “good” was also institutional in the way it celebrated Museum Kunstpalast as the cypher of a renewed pride in the role Dusseldorf played in promoting modern avant-garde art prior to the Third Reich. Once again, serving the “good” of the institution and that of a nation was thus prioritised over any other “public good,” such as, for example, the surviving Dusseldorf Jewish community whose forefathers had been the victims of the “Law on Confiscation of Products of Degenerate Art” of May 1938.

13. London 1938: Defending Degenerate German Art, Berlin & London, 2018

The next exhibition takes us back to London. Between the 3 June and 14 September 2018, the Liebermann Villa, the former Berlin residence of the German painter Max Liebermann in conjunction with the Wiener Library for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide in London, mounted an exhibition that retold the remarkable story of the 1938 New Burlington Galleries exhibition [38]. This new exhibition was staged exactly eighty years after the original London show. It was titled, London 1938: Defending Degenerate German Art and was co-curated by Christine Schmidt and Barbara Warnock. The exhibition featured a small number of the original artworks from the New Burlington Galleries 1938 exhibition alongside stories of the lenders and some unique archival collections. What is crucial in this revisited exhibition is that it clearly emphasised the fact that no art movement, art history, or art institution is ever neutral. It is always enmeshed in a web of social and political contradictions. Not unlike the 2014 Neue Galerie exhibition, this was clearly a historicist exhibition not in the way it re-created the original 1938 exhibition (as was the case with the Los Angeles show), but in the way it re-evaluated how art emerges in conflict.

However, there was an untold aim to this show. The idea of revisiting such a reactive historical exhibition was not exclusively scholarly. It was also, indirectly, political. This untold aim was to point at the dangers of the disturbing resurgence of far-right ideologies throughout Europe and the US at the time. In the same way that the 1938 exhibition defended German Art, the 2018 show attempted to recall, eighty years later, the importance of such a collaborative defense between British, German and Swiss galleries and artists in the light of the resurgence of populism. As Martin Faass, the Berlin exhibition’s co-curator stressed, “In these Brexit-tainted times, it is important to show how significant, then and now, on a European and international level [the 1938] cultural co-operations are. We value this opportunity at such a challenging time, even if we did not specifically seek it out” [39]. In this way, besides its historicizing aims, the exhibition curators aimed at a “public good” that was entirely projective: it emphasised the importance for communities and nations to come together instead of creating more barriers and divisions. Conversely, this undeclared “good” pointed to potential future dangers not just for Britain, which was already ensnared in the endless difficulties of a populist Brexit, but also for any other country lured by, or

already trapped in, far right ideologies. This exhibition about an exhibition thus served a much wider “good” than simply highlighting the hackneyed trope that lessons of the past must not be forgotten.

14. Degenerate Art, New York, 2017–2020

I will end this sweeping journey of the many avatars of Adolf Ziegler’s 1937 Degenerate Art Exhibition, by moving not to another location but, this time, online: This digital Degenerate Art exhibition ran for nearly three years (between 19 July 2017 and 29 February 2020) and was curated by the Museum of Modern Art, New York [40]. This small online exhibition presented a selection of works in MoMA’s collection that were deemed “degenerate” by the Nazi government. Once again, the exhibition’s aim was not to proudly bask in the ironical historical reversal of the fate of “degenerate art,” but, not unlike the Bern exhibition of 2016, to focus on what had been saved by MoMA from the Nazis’ purge. This digital show was indeed part of MoMA’s Provenance Research Project [41], which explores the origins of over eight-hundred works acquired by MoMA after 1932 that might have been unlawfully appropriated at the time. This framework clearly confirmed the museum’s commitment to assist in the discovery of artworks looted during the Holocaust and to make information on collection provenance more widely available.

The good targeted here was not so much that of the American public (as was the case in the Los Angeles exhibition), but that of the institution itself. Not unlike the Bern Museum of Fine Arts, the curators focused on the good of their own museum, in as much as it tried to deal with any wrong-doing in acquiring, storing, and exhibiting works looted by Nazis. MoMA indeed possesses in its vaults, nearly a thousand artworks created before 1946 and acquired after 1932 that were or could have been in Continental Europe during the Nazi era. The key issue here is of course whether these works were indeed acquired legitimately from artists, collectors, or dealers and whether their true provenance records are sufficiently complete and trustworthy. Considering this is a “research in progress,” the “good” here is not projective as was the case with the Wiener Library’s exhibition, but on the contrary preemptive of any future legal claim from holocaust survivors and their descendants. To some degree, it stealthily and with scholarly flair safeguards MoMA from either compensation or restitution and legitimises its good will in case of potential ownership claims. This is much evidenced in the abundance of internet resources, reports, databanks, research portals, lost registers, claim portals, documentation centres, and bibliographic sources available both in the US and Europe that MoMA puts forward on its Provenance Research Project website as well as its call for comments, errors, and feedbacks.

15. The Lawlessness of Respect

Overall, these reincarnations of Adolf Ziegler’s 1937 exhibition show first of all that the meaning of the principle “to serve the public good” is incredibly variable: the good of the Third Reich and of its supporters, the good of the German avant-garde in comparison to its other European counterparts, the good of America’s freedom of speech, the good of German culture surviving its conflicted history, the good of a Swiss institution and of the country’s neutrality, the good of a city and a country coming to terms with its past, the good of a European collaborative undertaking, and the good of a museum safe from judicial persecution for any wrong doing. These are obviously non-exhaustive. Other “goods,” especially educational and dialogical, were also targeted alongside these easily noticeable ones. My aim was not to provide a comprehensive and authoritative list, which would be either unwieldy or impossible, but simply to expose the potentially changing nature of the principle, even if it was unacknowledged or simply implied.

Secondly, these reincarnations of Adolf Ziegler’s 1937 exhibition also show that if the meaning of the principle is variable, then what counts above all is, as I said, the respect for the principle and not the principle itself. All the curators of these exhibitions (Adolf Ziegler, Noel Norton, Irmgard Burchard, Richard Paul Lohse, Stephanie Barron, Olaf Peters, Daniel Spanke, Kathrin DuBois, Christine Schmidt, Barbara Warnock, and the

team of archivists at MoMA) might have had radically different understandings of what it means to “serve the public good,” they are nonetheless all comparable in the way they obey the injunction of respect for the principle, acknowledged or not. Of course, this obedience varies considerably between them, some respond to the injunction of respect in a scholarly or institutional manner, others are politically motivated and others are clearly unaware that they abide by it. However, notwithstanding these differences, the respect for the principle is clearly what enjoins authority, not the principle itself. In other words, curators, whether they are politically or ethically motivated, neutral, or even thoughtless are enjoined to respect the principle not because it is beautiful and universal, but because the injunction of respect has, as I said earlier, an unshakeable priority and an unflinching stability.

The reason this is the case is because respect is unrelated to any power of constraint. Contrary to the empty principle “to serve the public good” which, as I said, is invariably handed down by an authority in power (institutional and/or political) who checks or not whether the principle is obeyed, respect, on its own, obeys no sovereignty. Nothing—no written statute or code—and no one—no board of trustees, director, or politician—enforce this respect. It happens without any overseeing jurisdiction, whether real or fantasised. Unlike formally written-down principles, respect is therefore outside the law, unwritten in any code, or external to any institution or political legislation. Its lawlessness is precisely what makes respect so much more powerful than the principle. Take, for example, the fact that the lawlessness of respect occurs even in cases where justice is at stake, like those involving the tracing, restitution, and/or return of works looted by the Nazis. The Bern Museum of Fine Arts or MoMA abide by respecting the principle even if it is to simply safeguard the trustees from being sued for wrongfully possessing and displaying looted works. Not even the justice of rightful restitution can alter curators’ respect for the principle (they might choose not to respect the principle and keep dubiously acquired works in storage until restitution is completed, for example). In this way, respect happens irrespective of justice. In fact, I will go as far as to say that respect happens irrespective of what is shown or who is identified as an audience or a public.

The reason respect happens irrespective of justice, of what is exhibited, or who is addressed is simply because it comes with the curator in his, her, or their effort to exhibit, display, and expose. Respect is indeed an individual decision. It remains entirely and exclusively tied to the curator who abides by it. Curators (and everyone else in their entourage who work with them) obey the injunction of respecting the principle of serving the public good every time it is called for, that is, every time the need to exhibit, display, and expose manifests itself. The reason this is the case is simply because respect only entreat singular and subjective wills and not local, institutional, national, or international wills. In other words, respect enjoins curators over and beyond the institutionalised ethical efforts of museums, such as that developed in mission statements or code of ethics. In this way, contrary to the vague and changing principle, respect starts from the subject, i.e., the curator, who alone or in a group decides to respect or not the principle.

This often unconscious decision to respect the principle irrespective of its contents or of its positive or negative consequences is precisely what gives the principle its force of generality. By abiding the injunction of respect, the curator indeed renders universal the principle that they follow. They alone give the principle its invariable applicability. In the same essay on Kant’s categorical imperative, Jean-Luc Nancy emphasises this with utmost clarity. He writes, “respect does not prescribe submission to the universal but prescribes that I make universal law” [21] (p. 146). In other words, curators alone universalise the “public good,” not by complying with it, but by respecting it, even if no one else follows it or history proves it to be the opposite, “evil,” as was the case of Nazi Germany. To personalise this, I could say: “I serve the public good” really means “I privately serve to universalise the sovereignty of respecting the principle of serving the public good.” This means that the principle “to serve the public good” needs to be understood less in terms of the “good” that it purportedly affirms or of the “public” that it supposedly serves, than in terms of the sovereignty of respect, that is, the sovereignty of the one who abides by

the principle. The individual decision to respect the principle takes precedence over any meaning attached to the principle.

16. Conclusions: The “Good” Ghost

Inevitably, the question now is this: if the meaning of the principle is changeable, what happens then to the “good”? What of this cherished “good” in a situation where there is only a blind respect for the principle? The consequence of the priority and stability of respect over and beyond the changeable nature of the principle is formidable. It radically alters the way the “good” is perceived. Since curators mostly serve the sovereignty of respect, the “good” thus becomes not so much a vague and changeable value, it becomes above all something unreachable, an extremity that effectively knows no measure. The “good” is indeed no longer a value that can be attributed to propositions or states of affairs, this is a “good” exhibition, for example. The “good” is also no longer a vaguely formulated belief or aspiration, I will achieve something “good” if I exhibit this artist, for example. It becomes instead an unqualifiable and unquantifiable value, an elevation, for example, that can no longer be measured in terms of “height” of any sort. No one, not even curators and their public, can measure this extremity. In other words, instead of being an attributive or dispositional value that can be recognised and whose experience can be shared, the “good” outside of any principle, that is, outside of any prescriptive or prospective morality, evaporates higher up in the skies every time an attempt is made to make sense of it.

This does not mean that once the sovereignty of respect is acknowledged, the “good” becomes therefore a metaphysical ideal (a supreme or divine good, for example), something that reason constructs in order to justify what it desires. Once the prescriptive moral principle is evacuated, the “good” effectively becomes, on the contrary, what always defies reason. It defies reason in the way it stands outside of all forms of rationality. In other words, the “good” makes sense, and yet it defeats all sense. I have no idea what the “good” is and yet I sense it as something that needs to be sought after. As such, the “good” is something intrinsically felt and not judged. It cannot result from a rational choice or form the basis of an ethical theory that articulates and systematises pre-theoretical ethical judgments. This does not mean that the goodness of an object is exclusively a matter of how we feel about it. This means instead that the good is the cause not the result of ethical judgements.¹⁵ As it defies all forms of rationality, reason obsesses over it, tries to define its properties and pre-empts its possible or imaginary consequences. This is particularly the case in exhibitions, that is, in what attempts to expose an argument. Faced by an expository speech act, the curator or the viewer looks out for what will give him, her, or them a pleasing feeling of approbation or an uneasy feeling of disapprobation. Something must be good in this exhibition, we all search for it without knowing what we are searching, without truly understanding what we are looking for.

Additionally, this is why it haunts us. Once removed from the moral institutionalisation of the good imposed by codes of ethics, the “good” is in fact a ghost that makes a demand on us, lures us, tempts us, and then withdraws as soon as an attempt is made to gauge or measure it. As a ghost that defies reason, this “good” haunts curators’ lives. However much they try to obey the principle of the “public good,” they can never quite domesticate the “good” they are after. It slips in and out of view, in and out of reason without a moment’s notice. The “good,” like a true ghost, is all about the search, the attempt to see it, spot it, decipher it. In this way, it haunts the corridors of museums and galleries without ever being seen or felt, understood or articulated. The same can be said of viewers who visit curatorial projects. The ghost called the “good” haunts anyone seeking it. When I visit an exhibition, for example, I invariably secretly look out for the “good” of

¹⁵ I realise this is a rather large and difficult argument that I cannot hope to explore in sufficient detail in this context. It would require a patient analysis of how the good relates to rationality, carefully pitching, for example, Humean and Rawlsian arguments [17] (pp. 387–396) for whether goodness should be defined in terms of rational desire or whether reason should be slave to the passions [42] (p. 415). It would also necessitate that I then challenge this juxtaposition with my own Levinasian-Nancyan interpretation of goodness as what defies reason. I can only leave this for another context.

what I am presented. Such a secret and often unconscious search makes me realise that I believe in the “good” in the same way that I believe in ghosts. The “good” is indeed an extremity that knows no rational measure even if I spend my time trying to gauge it. As this extremity, the “good” can thus never be domesticated or rendered familiar.

In all this, the final question is perhaps this: Considering its indeterminable character, can curators work without their cherished empty principle? Can they ignore the institutional prescriptive principle “to serve the public good”? Can they disregard the most important principle in their code of ethics? These final questions have nothing to do with the obvious: can they only serve private interests? This is no longer about public versus private. This has to do with living and working with this ghostly “good.” Can I ignore the spectre of the “good” while I curate? Most likely, the answer is no. Curators need what defies reason, they need what lures them into measuring it. Even if the meaning of the “good” always disappears as soon as an attempt is made to gauge it, the “good,” with all its ambiguity, calls on curators to save themselves from the blind respect for any moral institutional principle, this respect that can easily turn any moral good into evil itself. In other words, the immeasurable ghost that rests on no law is there as a safeguard against respect, this blind obedience to what is handed down as the moral law. Understood outside of all institutional definitions of the good, this peculiar ghostly “good” is precisely what drags us away from the banality of evil. The ghostly demarcations of the principle “to serve the public good” can indeed save curators from the worst violence: the violence of blind respect, the one that was so blatantly on show in 1937.

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