

**A Study of Queer Affect and Relation in Curatorial Practice and Writing**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to those who might be called, variously, loved ones, family, friends, those who are close (*mes proches*), who have shown me what love, care and gratitude can look like.

The ends and limits of what your love has afforded me goes beyond any piece of writing and doing it justice could never be expressed only in words on a page.

Thank you.

Tha gaol agam oirbh.

## Abstract

This thesis develops a recent impulse in feminist and queer curatorial theory to propose affect, relation and emotion as important dynamics within the development of curatorial studies and, more specifically, curatorial writing within times of crisis.

Initially situated within a time where the so-called ‘crisis of care’<sup>1</sup> has dominated curatorial thinking, witnessed across both art, political and social institutions, this research became quickly entwined with the realities of its unfolding during the now-ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

This research proposes that affect and relation might trouble the assumed neutral or institutional nature of the figure of the ‘curator’ specifically through reflexive curatorial writing. Key concepts from queer theory including distance and proximity<sup>2</sup> are important anchors within the thesis’ engagement with writing as a reflexive method, particularly as it pertained to the isolation of Covid.

The first chapter defines key terms as well as expands on the idea of the curatorial within an institutional sense as being insufficient for an expansive sense of relation. The second chapter instead situates bodies and proximity as central figures of importance within the research.

The final chapters look specifically to curatorial writing as a site where affect’s circulation might bring us closer towards transformative ways of understanding pleasure, love and trust within the curatorial. Drawing from previous curatorial practice and projects, writing in this thesis becomes a central site of curatorial affect, with a capacity to develop both analytical and synthetical engagements with curatorial knowledge and queer theory, as well as to transform *being-affected* into affective *action*. This contribution both offers alternatives to and challenges more conventional curatorial writing, and more widely, heteronormative forms of knowledge production.

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<sup>1</sup> Noor Alé, “Curatorial (Mis)care in an Age of Ongoing Crises,” *Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity*, 2021. Available Online: <https://www.banffcentre.ca/bici/curatorial-miscare-age-ongoing-crises> (last accessed 27.06.22).

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, First Edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2006).

## **Contents**

### **Introduction**

- Introduction to an Introduction 6
- An Introduction 15
- Beginnings of Research 24
- Conceptual Shifts & Clarification 27
- A Development of the Object(s) of Study 38

### **Chapter 1: Contexts**

- Introduction 45
- Social & Political Realities 46
- Institutions & Performance 48

### **Chapter 2: Curatorial Relation**

- Introduction 54
- Problematizing Definitions of the Curatorial 66
- Defining Relation 71
- Defining Curatorial Writing 73
- Curatorial Writing in the Field 78
- The Relational Beyond Aesthetics 84
- Misunderstanding the Relational 89
- Situating Curatorial Knowledge 92
- On Austerity 97
- Moving From Institutions 101
- De-Neutralising the Curatorial 108

### **Chapter 3: Somewhere 114**

### **Chapter 4: An Exterior Relation**

- An Exterior Relation 121
- Familiarities 129
- Stages, Polyphonies, Lines 137

### **Chapter 5: Bute Hall 142**

### **Chapter 6: Curatorial / Proximity**

- That which is shared 149

- Closeness and Proximities	154
- Queer Values	163
<b>Chapter 7: Curtains</b>	168
<b>Chapter 8: Curatorial Affects</b>	
- Introduction	173
- That Which Surrounds	178
- On Conflation	183
- The Proponents of Individualism	186
- Dependence	192
- Figuring Affect	194
- Vibrations	200
<b>Chapter 9: Drumochter Pass</b>	207
<b>Chapter 10: Writing Affect, Writing Emotion</b>	
- Introduction	215
- Affect and its Movements	216
- Emotion and Art	221
- Desires and Futures	226
- Towards Alternatives	237
- Interiority and Exteriority	248
- Subjectivities and Writing	252
- Love, Pleasure, Instability	261
- Dissonance, Solidarities, Excess	270
<b>Conclusion</b>	276
<b>Appendices</b>	
<b>Note on the Appendices</b>	
- Appendix A: Études	
- Appendix B: Sean Elder Wilson, <i>(I get) So Emotional</i> , Baltic 39, Newcastle, 2018	
- Appendix C: Sean Elder Wilson, <i>Common Positions</i> , Jerwood Arts, London, 2019	
- Appendix D: Benny Nemer, <i>Tunings</i> , Grand Union, Birmingham, 2021	
- Appendix E: Sean Elder Wilson, ‘_BEATING_’, <i>Dowser: Notes on Artists’ Moving Image in Scotland</i> , 2021	

## **Introduction**

### **An Introduction to an Introduction**

In this thesis I use both study of, and research, writing and practice within modes of affect and relation to propose new ways of conceptualising curatorial writing and practice as it is being undertaken within the current wide-reaching and diverse conditions of ‘difficulty’. These conditions of difficulty, though seemingly vaguely referred to here will be expanded upon within the body of this thesis, defined by both their specificity, as in the case of the post-Blair art world of the United Kingdom, as well as their sharedness, as in the case of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020 – Present), still unfolding within the context of what some are referring to as ‘late capitalism’.<sup>3</sup>

In introducing this thesis, I had hoped to begin with a meditative piece of writing that brought into being a recollection of a moment, a gesture, perhaps a specific conversation, exhibition, performance. In another time this might have been the results of the conversations I have been having with artists over a number of years, a newly commissioned piece of work, presented within a public gallery in Birmingham, with audience members, participants, friends and

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<sup>3</sup> Annie Lowrey, “Why the Phrase “Late Capitalism” is Suddenly Everywhere,” *The Atlantic*, 2017. Available Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/late-capitalism/524943/> (last accessed 16.12.22)

acquaintances, unknown faces, huddled together perhaps in the familiar post-industrial settings that dominate the art world in this region, England's West Midlands, in the United Kingdom. Would it have happened, I am imagining making my way through documentation, pages of notes from the preparatory discussions, the printed and online material. These moments being an opportunity to return and to reflect. To write reflexively and newly on things that have passed.

I am imagining myself within moments such as these as well as moments that have passed by previously, a circularity of moments and familiarities that I have been witness to; participant of; organiser of; lover of; critic of. I am remembering past moments like this, where I have made my body smaller, moved and twisted in ways to let past other people in the room, overly-aware of my six feet of height and whose vision I might be blocking. I am imagining the sensations and sounds of jackets on indoors, the sharp sounds of synthetic material rubbing up against one another, the lowering tone of voices as something is about to begin, the light of phone screens dotted around a room, people gathered around a central space. I am imagining the queue for the (one) toilet afterwards. The smell of cigarettes hanging around in the air outside on exiting the building, the caught glances of those familiar and unfamiliar, the intimacy in touches and hugs and hands held. The introductions of one to another. There are various times-of-writing which have at various points put the

images described above at varying degrees of closeness and distance from me. There are gaps, a small summer between two waves, where things became possible, as well as the over-arching sense of time passing spent indoors, over nine months of lockdown in one form or another. And now at another time of writing, a time of editing, where it feels like such moments and gestures are returning to us, squeezing past, busy buses, glances across, faces masked and unmasked. Along with this comes the anxiety of wondering, the re-surfacing of agoraphobic traumas from a year spent away from those around us. The possibility that everything might be returning is accompanied by slow and small recognitions of things that are different, things that have changed, things that will change, things that we wish had changed.

In this introduction I will get to a more practical set of contexts to set the scene for this research, to describe the conditions within which this research took place, to plot out the lineage of curatorial thinking that this research sits before and after, side to side with, or in opposition to. I will discuss the theoretical thinking that has been so central to understanding this research both before, during and after the current conditions of distance that dominate not just research and work, but life and health, friendship and sociality. But within this first moment of reading (and indeed in me writing right now) I wanted there to be space for an understanding of the ways that the current crisis has found its



way into nearly every way of conceptualising the rationale, aims, and even existence of my research.

Whilst I did not initially set out three years ago to begin researching quite directly the notion of intimacy within the curatorial, and indeed how it might unfold within writing [as practice] I found myself increasingly homing in on it as a key part of my research. The political and social conditions which have dominated much of my working life, much of my life as a researcher, and my youth, have been ones of precarity and instability, increasingly so in the past few years. That in itself had, to me, made a case for thinking *intimately* about the curatorial. And then in my second year of research, a condition that both blanketed itself on the world, and bolstered the inequalities and structural gaps already present within existing conditions, and it is from still within that cloud that I am writing now. This new condition completely changed both the forms in which and the extent to which my research could take place. The undertaking of PhD research, often a solitary pursuit, especially in comparison to the socialities so often tied up with curatorial work, became even more-so within the confines and restrictions that we have all found ourselves living through in the (at the time of writing) previous two years.

The research presented here takes the form of writing, both in the form of engagements and syntheses of existing curatorial and theoretical literature,

namely across the central relations of this research of relation itself, and affect and emotion as dynamics that guide, shift and develop these central thematics. Accompanying this thesis there is also a selection of curatorial work in the form of writing and documentation of events and performances that I have undertaken both before and during the years of research and that, subsequently became works on which I reflexively wrote, engaged with critically and developed thinking within and around. These projects came to mind during the process of reflexively thinking on the curatorial and represent an engagement with them that primarily circulates around the notion of developing writing in a critical and affective way. Some of the experiences and happenings that I found myself thinking about whilst writing this thesis, for the most part during the isolating years of a pandemic, included: an event including a screening and new commission by artist Kirsty Russell in London; a day-long event in Newcastle that included collective cooking, eating and watching, and a series of speeches by artist Gordon Douglas, a performance developing from long-term ongoing conversations with artist Benny Nemer, amongst other moments reflected on, not as curator of such events, but as someone who visited, took part in, bore witness to, a number of exhibitions, screenings and events. Some of these events, which though not research-practice events in themselves, contributed to my thinking within this thesis, particularly as it became a piece of research defined by thinking on, engaging with, and developing writing from memories

and understandings of what had happened previously and what might happen again, during various degrees of confinement in the Covid-19 pandemic.

The conversations and thinking that developed both for and around these events has been integrated with the engagement with critical and curatorial theory that marks the early chapters of this thesis, with later writing acting as a reflexive practice of the work, labour and research undertaken within such projects as a means of reflecting on curatorial work through the medium of *curatorial writing*, which I will define within this thesis in contrast to what we might think of as more conventional curatorial or exhibition texts and literature.

A large part of my research is to consider not only the ways that intimacy might configure within curatorial theories, but also how I might make the case for these claims within the very form of my writing. To write a thesis on intimacy in a way that feels disembodied from the methods of knowledge that are situated within daily life and practice became increasingly understood as the incorrect approach to undertake writing this thesis. Instead as the interiority of the pandemic-reality became increasingly concretised it became more and more evident that my writing instead, needed to turn outwards, lean into affectivity.

The work of auto-ethnography and autofiction<sup>4</sup> became an accompaniment to

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<sup>4</sup> I here use autofiction as a means of thinking through the ways that auto-ethnographic writing might be accompanied at the time of writing with more poetic and affective markers than traditional academic writing, later I will describe why exactly this could be a useful form for curatorial writing. See:

the early months of lockdown for myself, and embedding intimacy within the very form of this thesis felt important to undertake from this introduction. This, I believe is a small gesture towards what I will later describe in current curatorial thinking as an effort to move towards love and intimacy.

Vulnerability, and honesty about such vulnerability<sup>5</sup>, is both a thematic and a method that will appear within this thesis, one of the primary contributions of this research to curatorial literature, as part of an effort to instil alternative and less institutional values of care and love within its boundaries.

Before going on to detail my own defining of what constitutes the institution or the institutional within this thesis I will here sign post important theoretical contexts from which this research, and its grounding in ideas of precarity and vulnerability, emerge.

This context of precarity is specifically in agreement with the definition of the term that Judith Butler builds on in a significant portion of her work, but namely in *Precarious Life* where she defines precarity as conditions that make difficult the very possibility of a life that is 'liveable'. Here, liveability refers not only to the necessities that make life some that can be continued, but additionally, the

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Christian Lorentzen, "Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Tao Lin: How 'Auto' Is 'Autofiction'?" *Vulture*, 2018. Available Online: <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/how-auto-is-autofiction.html> (last accessed 27.06.22)

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, *Vulnerability in resistance*, First Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)

dynamics that make life something that is sustaining and fulfilling. Precarity, in Butler's writing, not only describes the conditions of contemporary life that make living difficult in varying degrees and manners for beings differentiated by race, sexuality, gender, ability or other characteristics, but also indicates how it is that political will can fuel reaction to such conditions. Understanding precarity as a defining condition of our time also means understanding that it can act to direct energy, create new political demands and thinking. In recognising our surrounds as 'precarious' we can begin to undertake processes of speculation that speak to alternatives ways of thinking and imagining.

One such ways which will be built on in this thesis, is connected to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conception of 'reparative reading' and further, the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's development on this work which occupies itself with 'weak theory'. The methods of speculation, and the tentativeness within which they appear in writing in this thesis speak to this notion of weak theory, which defines itself in difference to a 'strong' theory, the type of theoretical enquiry that is imagined in a linear fashion, remaining untouched and resolute in its course to fulfil its own demands of thinking. What a weak theory does, that grounds the research that will follow in this thesis, is allows its

own trajectory to be diverted by moments of encounter, to follow lines that ‘hold promise’<sup>6</sup> that can’t always be understood without closer inspection.

Movement is key in this type of weak theory, not looking to evaluate or understand any of object of study as fixed nor singular, but instead to *attend to* them as things that might lead to other things, other ways of thinking. That this journey, imbued in speculation and tentativeness might in fact illuminate potentials previously unseen, or modes of knowing that are more resonant and bodily, than concrete and quantifiable.

This introduction, these chapters, the thesis itself will oscillate between many resonant and speculated enquiries, linking different objects of study. It includes scholarly research that brings together literature reviews, original research writing, reflexive thought on curatorial writing both witnessed from the position of researcher and active curator, and will at times shift into modes of writing that embody the emotive ways in which I have found myself thinking during a period of global unrest that has marked greatly the object of my research, as well as my own ways and varied levels of ability or energy of approaching it.

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Stewart, "Weak theory in an unfinished world," *Journal of Folklore Research* 45, no. 1 (Jan 2008): 71+, *Gale Academic OneFile*, Available Online: [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A178359682/AONE?u=uce&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=5b1a4d57](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A178359682/AONE?u=uce&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=5b1a4d57) (last accessed 07.11.22).

This embodied and at times, vulnerable, emotive writing and labour is an important part of this research's contribution to knowledge. Specifically, it is a contribution to a field which has been dominated by literature and practices originating in the post-war myth making of the male genius, and a field which in recent turns has been spearheaded, developed further, by decolonial, feminist and queer practices. The sphere to which this thesis contributes knowledge is that of curatorial practice, with practice in this instance being visible in the modes of engaging with curatorial thinking retrospectively, through writing of various means, which in turn is informed by a literary basis in queer theory. The way of working that will both be reflected on, and embedded within the texture of this thesis, offers alternatives to a more formalist approach to curatorial thinking that I will describe in earlier chapters, and will add to a growing and important turn in these discourses that illuminate love, solidarity and emotion as not simply thematics or concepts to be explored and reflected on within curatorial writing, but instead reflexive dynamics that have the opportunity to change the very expectations of curatorial thinking.

## **An Introduction**

The form of relationships between artists and curators has interested me since I began working and studying within fields largely concerning the curatorial or,

curating. The socialities that defines much curatorial work became evident to me in two distinct ways, one with which I felt more comfort and another with which I felt more discomfort. The first was the ways in which often spaces of labour, co-operation, collaboration emerge from friendship<sup>7</sup>. Experiencing as many students at art schools do, the energy that circulates within spaces of collective endeavour was a definitive beginning to thinking about organising – what I would later think of in more complex ways as curating – being inherently linked to those with whom I found myself close to. Problematics exist within this paradigm of course, but also potential. The second distinct way was how it is that social spaces within an art ‘scene’ become a site also of affective labour. By this I mean that I was bearing witness, through moving and working within these spaces, to the smaller and quieter labours of curatorial work. The work of social reproduction and actions of hospitality and hosting that is often overlooked in favour of the more headline activities of exhibition-making and moments of publicness through speaking, conversing, presenting and performing. This type of labour is something I have become reacquainted with many times within my curatorial work and reminds me of a talk in which Katrina Brown, Director of The Common Guild, Glasgow told us that much of her time spent organising and extended programming for arts programmes was dedicated to ‘making sandwiches’. While the comment was obviously meant

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<sup>7</sup> Céline Condorelli, “Notes on Friendship”, *Mousse*, (2012): 222–227.



tongue-in-cheek it does illuminate some of the other labours that form part of the curatorial, outwith the expected practicalities of developing exhibition and event programmes, and as well as making sandwiches I might add; conflict resolution; encouragement and support; warmth and positivity.

Whilst the devising of a schema for addressing a simplified dichotomy utilised above to divide the social dynamics of curating into either ‘problems’ or ‘potential’ is not the goal of this thesis’ research, instead it is to think about the relationships between queer understandings of closeness and intimacy, and how these entanglements might bolster a more loving and intimate form of curatorial writing. I will describe in earlier points in this thesis how this relationship between sociality and the curatorial is so deep-seated that extracting one from the other in any rigorous engagement with these histories is difficult, and also intend to make sure it is evident that this is a setting up for later research here, of how the field of the curatorial has *previously* and *historically* been defined or conceptualised. The dichotomy presented above is a simplified iteration of an engagement with curatorial literature that will be complexified in the earlier chapters of this thesis.

Indeed, the duality between what felt like a positive and generative space through sociality – friendship, warmth, intimacy – and a more problematic embodiment of very similarly located feelings – social reproduction leading to

acts of care for others that in turn deplete the energy required to care for the self – felt distinct enough for me to understand both as part of a connected context within which my research was happening within, as well as connected to research of intimacy and affect in writing / practice which I was undertaking. It felt to me as the very beginning of my research, a hunch that I had to follow which inevitably led to more complex ways of configuring the social, the curatorial and the intimate. These dualities though linked, closely implicated in one another, felt distinct enough for me to contribute new forms of knowledge production – specifically through the medium of ‘curatorial writing’ a term that will be defined later in this thesis – and without falling into the assumed, institutional ways of gathering, engaging with, and synthesising these knowledges.

## **Precursors to the Research**

Having detailed a very introductory approach to the conceptual concerns that this research began to emerge from, I will now detail the ways that my previous working in curating, writing and research might form a more chronological understanding of how these research concerns emerged. I will firstly discuss previous projects and research that led to the thinking around the research within this thesis, before detailing the two main sites of research to which this

research is contributing (in short: the field of curatorial practice, from an approach informed by both curatorial and queer theory) I will then describe how the object of study within and between these sites (curatorial practice, and the literature of queer and curatorial theory) developed over the course of this research, with changes taking place both within the conceptual direction of the research as well as responding to the quickly changing environment as the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated thinking around alternative ways of thinking, working and surviving.

My own distance and unfamiliarity whilst growing up with the formalities, gestures, structures of the art world meant that I entered into the art world in a way that was not foregrounded on an attempt at professionalism or performing the identity of being a curator<sup>8</sup>. My work with artists repeatedly brought me back to thinking about the ways that our relationships with one another were bound to institutional timelines.

As I will describe later in the thesis itself, Mason Leaver Yap acknowledges the practical need for an institution's relationship with an artist to end at one point or another, but for the curator, and particularly the independent curator<sup>9</sup>, such

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Lind, *Performing the curatorial: Within and beyond Art*, First Edition (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Mason Leaver Yap, "The Producers Part II: New Positions on Curating. With Martin Clark and Mason Leaver-Yap, chaired by George Vasey", *Art Monthly*, 2019, video, 1:33:40, Available Online: <https://vimeo.com/306725539> (last accessed 27.06.2022).

needs for relationships to be bound within such ways do not exist. The tension between the inherent sociality of the curator and the association of them as figures within institutions whose own lifetimes do not extend the same ongoing and developing, growing warmth as a human relationship was of interest to me, as someone who had formed friendships and closeness with those whom I had been working with, during preceding years. The specificity of the form of artist-curator friendships has been explored widely and more expansively by others<sup>10</sup>, yet another particularity that sits outside of the reach of this research, though remains deeply connected to the initial reading and research undertaken. In early chapters the engagement with these problematics and indeed institutional processes and values are developed in writing before this thesis turns in later chapters towards writing developed that embraces the intimate and affective moments of curatorial writing and work as a material form. Considerations of the curatorial as relation in and of itself – that is, an action of making and maintaining proximity – that have the ability to exist interpersonally, between people, outwith the institutional.

Here, I must detail explicitly the differences in terms of the ‘institutions’ which this thesis does and does not engage with as particular sites of research. Firstly, to say that institutions, as they pertain to our lives realities and experiences

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<sup>10</sup> Céline Condorelli and Gavin Wade, *Support Structures*, First Edition (Berlin: Sternberg, 2009).

cannot be denied as important contexts through which this research has emerged. At various points in this thesis I will refer to political and artistic institutions as the sites of others' research and indicate that this is not where my research is situated. The 'institutions' referred to in these instances are those that could also be described as organisations, entities, or galleries, spaces, et al. They are those composed of a finite number of people, workers, they may exist as ideologically or as non-geographically as the next definition of institutions I will give, but they are a recognisable form of working and labour within artistic and political spheres.

Other 'institutions' that form contexts for this research are those that this research cannot help but be implicated within. These institutions are what might also be considered as, or related to, societal norms, dominant ideologies, or identities. Specifically, this thesis will engage with curatorial practice and writing from an embodied point, that makes necessary, an engagement with Queer and Critical theory. Additionally, in later components the looking to work being done by others in relation to their own positions as either indigenous, racialised, differently abled, gendered, et al, provides a context for institutions that though not specifically described as such within this thesis, are important contexts for this research. The institutions of gender, sexuality, and race for example, appear as dynamics within this research, and of course no institution of these kinds can be escaped within our current realities, but for

clarity's sake when the 'institutions' that are described in this thesis as being evaded as sites of research, I am referring to the former and not the latter.

It is with this in mind that I began thinking about the curatorial, defined by many as the theoretical and philosophical wing of its more practical counterpart<sup>11</sup>, curating. The need for the curatorial to exist bound to institutional timelines necessitated an alternative thinking of the curatorial that was inherently interpersonal. This thesis is both a direct response to, and an addition to the increasingly centred institution within curatorial discourses, it is not intended as a position of knowledge making that is meant to supersede or overrule the numerous values of institutional thinking, but instead contribute from another, more embodied position. It is something that has emerged from my own understanding of the need for curators to exist not only as institutional workers necessitated a thinking of curators as not independent, but interdependent.

## **Masters Research**

During my Masters in Curatorial Practice at the Glasgow School of Art I had worked with artists Gordon Douglas and Tako Taal to develop work that

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Lind, "The Curatorial", *Artforum*, 2009, Available Online: <https://www.artforum.com/print/200908/the-curatorial-23737> (last accessed 27.07.22).

emerged from research into Glasgow's botanic gardens, and specifically the notion of publicness, access to such spaces, and their colonial and queer histories. This project did not necessitate a finished 'work' from the artists, though we found ourselves increasingly falling into the desire to produce and in addition to a number of research visits and conversations held between us we also held an additional garden tour that included a number of gestures and various happenings orchestrated by myself and the artists. This included: audio works playing under a bridge with the group, passing around a home-made mixture of vaping flavours in e-cigarettes, and a collective whatsapp group where participants were invited to document the things encountered throughout the park and gardens. The undertaking of this labour began from our three different positions, looking onto the research with different interest, different lenses, and with a different understanding of the problems and opportunities of public gardens and their histories.

Whilst questions of shared authorship and the ethical implications of this have not remained so firmly within my frame of research, I still think back to this time spent together as an important part of understanding my own curatorial practice. To practice curating is both a practical and practicable thing, but it additionally is linked to many forms of being and working together. Closeness and intimacy, with the artists, was a huge part of this project that felt, at the time, unruly and unsuited to other more formal outcomes it was presented

alongside during the graduate degree show, and I was attracted to this difficulty in placing it, but more-so was simply determined to develop the project in a way that fostered the relationships with artists, more-so than any idea of a kind of ‘production’ that had taken place.

Criticality has emerged within spaces of friendship and I have continued to work with a number of artists repeatedly. Including again with Tako Taal for a two-person show with Rami George, *Inherited Premises*, held at Grand Union in 2018, and Gordon Douglas for a performance at BALTIC 39, Newcastle, as part of the *Ways of Learning* programme. It is over the course of these years that I felt an understanding of the differing between institutional and personal relationships that Mason Leaver Yap discusses in their contribution to *The Producers* talk series and indeed, what sparked an interest in thinking about relationships between the queer and the curatorial, the nature of what it means to work together, and eventually on the reflexive power of writing to embody some of the vibrations and movements of such relationships, in retrospect and even in distance.

### **Beginnings of research**

At the beginning of my research, as many Doctoral researchers find I am sure, I found myself amongst a broad set of concerns, desires and contexts within which I swam for some time, aware that its breadth needed to be reduced. My initial understanding of what the research was signified something like, a



borrowing from queer theoretical concepts into the curatorial. It felt like something simple and transactional at that early stage. A simplicity that I knew was necessary to complicate in a number of ways. Why it was that I was both borrowing and learning from queer theory and curatorial theory and enfolded it within a curatorial practice of writing felt a more pertinent starting point, to understand what it was that existed that was not sufficient. To re-think the ways that discussions of ‘care’ and other emotive language has been deployed within the art world, engineering a progressive façade within an industry which equally finds itself at odds with the values of funders, foundations and private agents who, after many years of austerity, have come to dominate the systems and structures of support in the art world. The central question at that time seemed to be: *How can queer methods of sharing inform curatorial theory and practice?*

Over the earliest parts of this research I became increasingly interested in the role that the curatorial might play within such relationships if, instead of directing itself towards the development and outcomes of new art objects, performances or happenings, the curatorial was a force that could be considered within the same ways that emotion, feeling and affect might be thought of in queer studies. This first year of research marked a period of shifting the research from the notion that I was going to consider queer methods within curatorial practice to one that is more complex, more poetic. One that configures affect

theory and different models for understanding those within networks of relation to then think about the curatorial, not as an external appendage of research and philosophy that attaches itself to projects and timelines, but instead as a force within the curatorial desire to become author, to become co-conspirator.

As the research progressed, particularly coming to the end of my first year, I found myself thinking repeatedly about conversations with artists and curators that were ongoing for me at the time, connected to other work and labour undertaken that though not part of my research practice became something I meditated on greatly in my writing of this thesis, some of which is detailed in the appendices, as well as thinking about what a curatorial practice might function to do in the wake of shifting local and national infrastructures, with the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union at that point feeling particularly prescient a context. What shifted from a local or national condition became expanded when the still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic unfolded and thinking around intimacy and resilience became somehow both globalised, in relation to a crisis that was being faced by all equally as cases began to spread, as well as a crisis that felt bodily and internal with anxiety, illness, health and worry curdling inside.

In conversing with a number of critical friends in the worlds of art and research and in shifting myself further and further through definitions and explications of

what exactly a queer mode of sharing constituted I found a new position from which my research was emerging. The ongoing conversations, political upheaval and increasing precarity had not yet entered the beginning of the Covid pandemic, yet I found myself thinking about closeness and intimacy as primary concepts within this research, and specifically with a desire to think about how writing might operate within a curatorial manner – that is to speak to, be close to, artworks and practices.

### **Conceptual Shifts & Clarification**

At this point my research was widely divided into two contextual components – one being the wide terrain of queer theory and the other, the growing and shifting foundations of curatorial theory, widely acknowledged to be undergoing an explosion of publishing in recent years<sup>12</sup>.

In parts of this thesis I will use physical expressions denoting my positionality in relation to particular concepts, these positions might be ones of distance or closeness, of deep embodied understanding, or of choices informed by years' experience and learning of and from academic and curatorial work, and all those who I worked with or besides during. Coming to mind particularly is the idea of

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<sup>12</sup> Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, *Curating and the Educational Turn*. First Edition (London: Open Editions, 2010).

‘turning away from the institution’, a phrasing that is used by myself later in this thesis. By this I do not mean to disavow the importance of the institution as a site of thinking, practice, even conflict within curatorial studies, nor do I mean that the institution is somehow not-present within the ends and limits of my research. Instead what I mean is that the thing that I began to occupy myself in researching was smaller than the grand claims of instituting. By smaller I do not mean less meaningful, or less important, I mean just that, smaller. As I mentioned above, the purpose of this research is not to supersede, to disavow or to erase the validity of institutional research, but instead offer another, alternative *in addition to*. It was during this time period that the object of my research shifted, and subsequently that changed the methodological approach that structured both writing and the position of curatorial practice itself.

Primarily, I found myself thinking about the terms *relation* and *affect* within queer and curatorial discourses on a level of interpersonal relations, rather than grander narratives of relations and closeness between art institutions and their supporters. A significant part of why this was is related directly to the lack of intimate and warm voices speaking through the existing scores of curatorial literature that I had been making my way through. Even when sociality and friendship was mentioned it was positioned within narratives of production and development and I began thinking about how it might be that such a position could be challenged or contributed to in a different way. This both acts as a method in this thesis and a way of understanding its contribution to knowledge

– it is something that has emerged in response to bodies of research in the curatorial that makes claims for sociality, intimacy and care, but whose written contributions lack such affective warmth. It is for this reason that I undertook research in this direction, and indeed, placing a particular importance on writing as a method and an outcome from which to position this contribution.

Well aware that this research would not become a chronology of curatorial work, looking to situate histories within parallel developments in queer theoretical understandings of relation and affect, the form of writing and research that this PhD took became one more concerned with smaller scale intimacies, particularly those associated with conversation and with writing. To explain further, I spent the earliest parts of my research diving into queer theory that specifically held affinities to curatorial and/or artistic practice. Primarily, this included broad readings of theorists including Judith Butler’s body of work preoccupied with the relation between self and other<sup>13</sup>, that seemed in these early stages of research to act as some kind of parallel to my thinking of the difficulties that lie with in a so-called curatorial relation – between a curator contextualising and acting as a critical voice, and the artist, developing, making,

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<sup>13</sup> This largely is referring to Butler’s work on non-violence and accountability. For the most part from her book *Giving an Account of Oneself* and *The Force of Non-Violence*. Though like many young queers I first came to the work of Judith Butler via her theory of gender performativity expressed in *Gender Trouble*, this other connected strand in her work spoke of a number of the complexities that emerge through ‘relation’ not constricted to an identarian gender or sexual construct. See:  
Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, First Edition, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).  
Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, First Edition, (New York: Verso, 2020).  
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, First Edition, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990).

creating. But of course, a relation of simple parallels was not a sufficient reading of the ways the curatorial functions in a context of queerness. Other reading undertaken, including on the ongoing influence of Arendt's theorisations of politics continuing to constitute a discursive point of 'between'<sup>14</sup> where the political exists between persons, and this semblance this notion held to an increasingly de-materialised idea of the curatorial which functions as an interlocutory abstract onto which forms and ideas as diverse as research, praxis, philosophy and politics are ascribed. Butler's work continually returning to sharing not as an erasure of difference, but an opportunity to acknowledge them drew a line directly from Arendt's conception that 'politics originates in-between and establishes itself in terms of relations'.<sup>15</sup>

I will discuss these links further in the thesis but to say for now only that the foregrounding of relations as opportunity to act as *alternatives* to the distribution of precarity rested with me for some time at this stage in my research.

The presence of this particular notion – of 'alternatives' to precarity and difficulty – became very prominent in my early research. Complementing my developing engagement with theoretical, curatorial and queer literature I also

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The promise of politics*, trans. Jerome Kohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

began thinking about past and ongoing practical applications and processes of exhibition making and programming, how these might form as part of a useful material to engage with within the body of the thesis.

This first year of research made connections broadly between this reading under the heading of *Socialities*, then connected to *Relation*. *Relation*, as a key concept is still present within the research, but at this point was more formally invested in the ideas of relationships as process of political alignment within and in relation to, existing institutions. *Relation*, being so dominated as a term within contemporary art by Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*<sup>16</sup>, in which the renowned curator and theorist, co-founder of the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, defines social practices in the contemporary art world, it became essential for me to define this term in relation to this study and related ones, namely Claire Bishop's formidable and famous rebuttal, which tackled Bourriaud's proposals from Bishop's background as an Art Historian, of course presenting its own myriad of problems. Whilst Bishop's *Relational Antagonism*<sup>17</sup> provided ample critique of some of Bourriaud's more audacious claims for an inherently positive or good aspect of even the term relational, it fails to provide a clear link between labour and contemporary art, in a way that obscures practices that may

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<sup>16</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, First Edition (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> See:

Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", *October Magazine* 110, (Fall 2004): 32 – 35.  
and

Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, First Edition (London: Verso, 2012).

be considered ‘good’ art whilst also replicating problematic inequalities in their delivery. Bishop’s gripes with relational art in this sense is one that includes huge blind spots, namely within the difficulties and precarities that emerge not from within the realm of an artwork’s production or development, but within the many structures and interlinked conditions that enable a before after and during to the work itself.

Instead then, of approaching my research as an institutional critique, or utilising particular artworks as objects of study, from which to develop expansive theories on my research interests, or perhaps from collections or existing museums and galleries, work that already exists, I decided that my approach would be one that utilises the knowledge and understanding I have of curatorial work – including commissioning, programming, and the wider more ‘macro’ elements of such labour, but additionally and perhaps more importantly, the experience of being with artists, the small moments of understanding relationships within this particular configuration and the small moments of care that this research forms part of bringing to the fore. It is an approach to develop writing that engaged both with my own understanding and experiences of this reflexively, not to illustrate thinking with projects that are perhaps accompanying or besides, but instead that form part of the developing thinking, the texture of thought and emotion that makes itself known throughout the action of writing.



This approach was developed both early in the research but took on a new relevance as the conditions of various Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns took hold within the United Kingdom, where I was living, and continue to live, during the development of this research. Even before lockdown reached us this approach felt like the right one, and then very quickly it became something that was necessitated by the distance from one another we were all living within. Using ongoing research into curatorial literature to reflexively think on previous and ongoing, distant, delayed working became the only method through which I could undertake research, and there were moments where despite the psychic trauma of restrictions, the distances enabled an outpouring of both critical and emotional thinking.

This approach allowed a more complex and nuanced way of developing writing that both emerges from research about and in its own form and texture communicates, my research interests in intimacy and affect. Whilst it was necessary to link these to the critiques of systemic conditions of difficulty and precarity, and whilst these political and social conditions do form an important part of the context for this thesis, I did not want them to become the primary objects of study within this thesis. The problems of institutions not simply referring to museums and galleries but also the systems of governance, politics and funding, were dynamics that were necessary to address early on in this

thesis, but without making the institution the site of where this research emerges from takes place. That role is reserved for the body.

And so, it meant that at early stages of this research there was a necessity of my definition of relation to make its way through its close associations with Bourriaud and Bishop, as well as the halls of imagined and real institutions, but only to explicate why this was not the right place for this specific use of the term in a wider context of my ongoing research.

What became evident was not only that the scale of such related research was beyond the remits of any singular doctoral body of work, but also, that there was a lack of positionality within the undertaking of the research. This first year felt de-centred, broad, an archipelago of concepts, histories and processes through which I was moving within, drifting from one to the other. It being necessary to establish both my own position with the research as I continued it, as well as sinking further into these broad topics, I took a moment to think about my own investment in the curatorial. My mind was brought back to a group discussion in which I had once discussed ‘responsibility’ and to whom we felt responsible, with a group of curators<sup>18</sup>. The answers were diverse and expanded beyond the expected answers of simply artists and publics, to include

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<sup>18</sup> This was part of a private session lead by curators Anna Santomauro and Valerio Del Baglivo at Grand Union as part of their then-ongoing residency, which took place in 2017.

people and communities linked to our home lives – our families, our friends, people who shared our minority statuses, sexuality, gender, ability, our backgrounds that were founded on otherness. At this time the institution was more present as a concept within my research, I found myself thinking of the ways in which an institution might be considered a kind of body, as in the words of Judith Butler in *Frames of War*,

the body serves as a point of departure for such a rethinking of responsibility, it is precisely because, in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition.<sup>19</sup>

Butler's status as a defining thinker on gender, sexuality and institutional harm presented a variety of opportunities to engage within this thesis, both in terms of thinking through harm and value, as well as definitions of gender and sexuality. Institutions are inherently heterogeneous things, the activities, exhibitions, programmes that take place within and through them depends on a network of individuals. I began to be interested in the idea that institutions might hold emotional or affective ways of understanding curatorial responsibility specifically<sup>20</sup>. Thinking from this brief insightful quote from Butler, we can understand how in fact the institution and its expositions to others, in partners,

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, First Edition (New York: Verso, 2016) 40.

<sup>20</sup> See:

Paul O'Neill, Lucy Steeds and Mick Wilson, *How institutions think: between contemporary art and curatorial discourse*, First Edition, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, Bard College. Center for Curatorial Studies & Fondation LUMA, 2017).

Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, *Curating research*, First Edition (London Open Editions / de Appel, 2012)

in the funding, in artists, in programme, in events and in staff and in its communications, might make it an object of study for thinking through curatorial relation and affect. And yet, the longer I spent thinking on the bodies of institutions, the relations they hold, the ways that they exert affective and emotional labour through workers the more I realised two things:

Firstly, that the scholarship and research being done on instituting elsewhere, by others, tackles this subject matter from a broader perspective than I was understanding it from.<sup>21</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the more intimate perspective does not have a place within current discussions around art institutions. But what it has meant is that my understanding of my own research led to a decision to not think of the institution as a primary object of study within my work, instead that it is another actor, another agent within a network of complex relations, but instead that my gaze is more firmly focused on curatorial relation and affect as it unfolds *between* people. This is related to my second realisation.

This second realisation was the reminder, in reading the formidable work of Andrea Fraser, whose work as a performance artist has been instrumental in

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<sup>21</sup> I would point here to the excellent work in feminist, anti-racist, and queer institutional research undertaken by practitioners and theorists including Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, Lucy Lopez, Languid Hands, Teresa Cisneros and others, the former two who are engaged with in the section *De-neutralising the Curatorial* in Chapter 2 of this thesis

developing the field of Institutional Critique, that we are the institution<sup>22</sup>. The institution itself being made up of a number of people, every decision comes down, on some level, to human interaction. My investment in curatorial relation and affect was one inherently in support, in dreaming of, in imagining, a curatorial intimacy that occurs not at the grand level of institutional decision making or policy – though these strides forward in discourses of accountability are equally as important as any and all other curatorial research – but instead takes place within the small moments. It slowly emerged to me that a number of the reasons I found myself connected to working in this way with others was simply for the sake of connection itself. I have worked with artists on projects of various scales and outcomes, and with many, have worked repeatedly. I decided then to think about my research as both a more abstract, but ultimately more specific set of questions than I had begun with. These are primarily:

*How has relation been conceptualised within the curatorial and how might queer framings diverge from or develop these understandings?*

*To what degree has the emergence of affective and intimate discourses within curatorial work emerged in response to conditions of difficulty?*

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Fraser, “From the critique of institutions to an institution of critique” *Artforum.com*, 2005. Available Online: <https://www.artforum.com/print/200507/from-the-critique-of-institutions-to-an-institution-of-critique-9407> (last accessed 27.06.22).

*How might a subjective approach to thinking curatorial affect and relation contribute to curatorial research and particularly in the form of curatorial writing?*

### **A development of the object(s) of study**

That these questions are more intimate and perhaps more bodily than what I had initially set out to answer in my research does not mean they require less criticality of course. To speak and think from bodily and intimate experience does not just necessitate a criticality within oneself, but also being aware of the reproductions of the inequalities constantly being reproduced. Though I have, as described, moved slowly and surely away from the institution being the dominant object of study within this thesis, there is also the question of the institutionalisation of the self. Andrea Fraser's afore-mentioned proclamation that we are all the institution<sup>23</sup> is at once both a critique of the opacity of institutional workings, as well as a sharply delivered blow to those who think of themselves as somehow outside of such institutional parameters. Though I will argue in this thesis that the 'institutions' of this second component-meaning does not necessarily refer to simply institutions of art and contemporary culture,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

but moreover, the institutions and hegemonies of -isms and -phobias that prevail within society.

I found as I headed into a second year of research with a clearer idea of what it was I was setting out to understand was to zoom in closer and closer, to the intimate potential for the curatorial. The position I was speaking from was one of my own body, my own understanding. The subjective within the curatorial has been an object of criticism, with academics and theorists citing how highly specified nature of subjective, auto-ethnography being used in a field that necessitates several actors<sup>24</sup>, yet to me, the notion of methodology informed by subjective and embodied experiences not only became an effective way to whittle down the scope of the research, but it allowed me to think of the component energies of affect, emotion and feeling within the curatorial. Rather than thinking more widely about all that the curatorial as such a force has the ability to include, I instead have found myself thinking deeply on the affective processes that take place within curatorial processes. Additionally, this shift afforded me the opportunity to rethink the methodological approach of my research. Always having the idea that the practice-based portion of my research would take an auto-ethnographic approach, the change towards thinking in smaller ways about the curatorial has allowed me to take an approach that is

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<sup>24</sup> Paul O'Neill, "Curating: Practice Becoming Common Discourse" (2006), *Seconds*, 2006. Available Online: <http://www.slashseconds.org/issues/001/003/articles/poneil/index.php> (last accessed 16.12.22).

situated<sup>25</sup> within my own experiences. This then allows me to enfold specific theoretical concerns in queer studies in a reflexive process that occurs within writing. The action of writing then, is itself not just a recounting of practice, an interplaying of this practice with theory and arguments I am developing separately. Instead they become very implicated, one with the other, in a process of writing that I can only describe as emerging from the emotional states that are brought up within times of difficulty.

Engagement with writing that has taken place over the years of this research, and emerged from these mentioned times of difficulty, are engaged with repeatedly throughout the thesis. The use of repetition in the pages that follow are deliberate in their manner of engaging and re-engaging with particular moments, gestures and critical proposals for developing curatorial practice research through writing.

This use of repetition emerges not only from the necessity to engage with material written in the past during lockdown, at a time where the ability to work and be with others was impossible, but also is part of this thesis's contribution to knowledge that operates as a document of curatorial practice-as-writing, as it unfolded within a particular time in history. Repetition acts in this thesis both as

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<sup>25</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1987): 575–579.



a formal writing method, recognised in many of the texts that form important touchstones for literature sign-posted to throughout this research, as a means of developing affective and textural elements of the thesis itself, but also acts to refer back to the central proposals at the heart of this research. This positive redundancy allows this thesis to both gradually build imagery and gestures within its body, as well as to structurally build and bring together its various arguments as it moves across various thematic and conceptual landscapes and contexts<sup>26</sup>.

The role and purpose of writing within this period has been questioned and developed through various conversations with my supervisors as well as further reading I have undertaken in attempting to understand the appropriate ways of such bodily-led writing to find itself at home within a thesis such as this one. The role of subjectivity in this writing became a question of the thesis itself. Is the writing that forms this thesis a retrospective recording and expansion of research that has taken place? Is it in itself a research-action: a method through which I draw the connections between the various thematics of study that is brought together within this piece of work – namely, affect theory, queer theory and curatorial writing?

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<sup>26</sup> Stewart, "Weak theory in an unfinished world." 71+.

During the course of this research there have been varying points of sharing this writing, or things that have derived from it, within different contexts, forums, and outlets. Namely, through seminars and through conversations with critical friends. This reliance on intimate networks for criticality is one that I both speak on in the body of this research as well as being something that is woven through the action of writing itself. Writing as verb. The instability of writing (both verb and noun) and the possibilities held within this instability has become a point of interest particularly for Black Feminist and Black Queer research, namely in the works of Saidiya Hartman and Tavia Nyong'o, whose work on 'fabulation' informed much of my thinking, and to whom this research owes a great deal. Hartman's research uses such fabulation to construct narratives describing her own experiences in undertaking the writing of histories, filling gaps and imagining small intimate moments to add impact to the realities of these histories, while Nyong'o's own work has occupied itself with developing the field of Black diaspora performance as it might interact with critical and cultural studies. Namely grounded on a transformation from bodies that are being speculated-upon to bodies that themselves are speculative<sup>27</sup>, within the context of the interruption of covid, the idea of writing and the opportunities that arise from fabulation – processes that engender speculation and story-making though

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<sup>27</sup> Tavia Nyong'o, *Afrofabulations*, First Edition (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

not necessarily fiction, became an important component in my considering of curatorial writing and how it forms itself.

Distinctly related to, as well as contributing greatly to an expansion of, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of reparative reading which offers that acts of reading, investigation and research, instead of being interrogative without affect, instead abounds in affect, tackling such actions from a position that is 'on the side', as Heather Love explains, 'of multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity, and love'.<sup>28</sup>

Sedgwick's engagement with specifically queer affects, and background of literary criticism provided a cross-disciplinary perspective on this type of engagement. What unfolds in the following chapters of this thesis, is a bringing together of actions and dynamics that act as something reparative, or perhaps emotive or affective, with the means to provide alternatives in the face of difficult contexts. Definitions of such contexts and alternatives will be provided in the coming chapters. I will begin with an overview of curatorial thinking, particularly how key terms such as relation are attended to in the field of visual arts theory, as well as a detailing of political contexts more close to home in the

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<sup>28</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, First Edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2003), 145.  
Heather Love, "Truth and Consequences, On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," *Criticism* 52, no. 1 (2010): 237.

form of Conservative austerity which has dominated conversations in my home for over a decade. Then I will go on to look at a diversity of theorists' thinking about what it is that is close and far to us, and where the value of such proximities might relate to specifically curatorial thinking. Then I will move towards this thesis' central contribution to knowledge, by way of both demonstrating and examining writing that embodies and exerts itself in affective ways, to bring together theoretical and writerly ways of articulating new ways for the curatorial to be inscribed in writing, moving away from the formal and towards dynamics distinctly understood in various guises: beauty, affect, relation, love.

## **CHAPTER 1: CONTEXTS**

### **Introduction**

In establishing a context from which the above questions can be asked I will, in this component of the chapter, review firstly the political and social conditions that have defined cultural work in the preceding decades. The contexts for which this chapter is named includes both subjective understandings of my own on the preceding years of work and labour within the art world from the perspective of the precariat, as well as drawing from a number of sources to develop and image of the ways that socio-political contexts and art-world neo-liberalisation have both been heightened and inherently linked within the preceding years. Then I shall reference existing research that problematises institutions' complicity in such conditions and explain further why there is such a need for more subjectivised thinking on the curatorial. Lastly, I will lead to definitions of relation that exist within curatorial theory, art theory, and queer theory in the following chapter, definitions.

## Social & Political Realities

In 2009 David Cameron, delivered his now canonised austerity speech<sup>29</sup> at a Conservative Party conference held in Birmingham. Analyses of the speech were presented across the political spectrum – and the newspapers that held their faction’s loyalty. Primarily it criticised the existing Labour administration, particularly for its many loans and ‘reckless’ spending that had occurred in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis.

Looking retrospectively, what is notable in the speech is Cameron’s continual re-iteration of some kind of necessary and communal hardship that must be undertaken by the British public. Cameron’s repeated use of ‘we’ at different times in the speech refers to many different *we*’s; the delegates of the Conservative party present at the conference; the speculative Conservative government he aspires to take power, and lastly, assumes a collective first-person voice, speaking for the whole of the British Public(s).

Throughout the speech, Cameron speaks on behalf of all sections of British society and their apparent desire for a minimised state, with less ‘power’ to

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<sup>29</sup> David Cameron, “Full text of David Cameron's speech to the Conservative party conference in Manchester” *The Guardian*, 2009. Available Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/oct/08/david-cameron-speech-in-full> (last accessed 27.06.22).

influence their lives. This, Cameron argued was a transferral of power from the Government, to the people. Cameron stated that:

We have explained that we want to achieve these progressive aims through Conservative means:  
Personal responsibility. Social responsibility.  
[...]  
Taking power from the state and giving it to individual people and communities. We don't believe in taking power, we believe in giving it away.<sup>30</sup>

At first glance this excerpt is representative of a long tradition of 'small-government' policies enacted by Conservative, and indeed New Labour, Governments far preceding Cameron, Thatcher and other austerity figure-heads. In considering what Cameron is referencing when he talks of 'power' we can understand that what Cameron is hoping to enact is not an empowerment of local communities, but instead eschewing governmental responsibility and accountability onto already stretched individuals. This speech marks the beginning of Cameron's Big Society, a convenient step for the 21<sup>st</sup> century from Thatcher's famous notion that there is no such thing as society<sup>31</sup>.

In this structural refusal to take ownership of responsibility and accountability, we can trace back through British cultural legislation, a reality of stretched

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Thatcher, "Margaret Thatcher: A Life in Quotes", *The Guardian*, 2013. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes> (last accessed 16.12.22).

budgets, barely coping cultural workers, and a reliance on the arts sector as a source of cheaper, and occasionally free, social and pastoral care for local communities. As previously mentioned, this lineage of austerity takes into account of course many Conservative governments, but also New Labour's reforms of cultural and social provision which often collapsed and conflated the two.

### **Institutions & Performance**

Within this trying social reality, conversations of disenfranchisement, misrepresentation, and inaccessibility reached another peak – or perhaps plateau depending on who you are asking - in their ongoing lifeline. With increasingly unsustainable independent practices, curators moved from the promiscuity of freelance work towards institutions, positions became less and less common, and the art world's continuing exclusion of particular groups; namely; working class people, differently abled people, women, queer people, and people of colour became increasingly evident in a cultural sector that looks less and less like the world it unfolds within.

And with this turn of formerly independent curators becoming part of institutions there is a problem with how these individuals can adequately critique and destabilise the power structures that have housed and supported



them. Institutions, as Natasa Petresin-Bachelez, a curator and academic whose practice has led to her working with institutions on ambitious exhibitions across Europe, articulates, can be envisaged as ‘publics’ co-produced by associated staff, workers and visitors<sup>32</sup>. When an institution is produced with the desires and needs of the state’s own shortcomings in mind – what kind of institution are we entering?

The spaces of difference between personal politics of curators, the public-facing presentations of an institution as socially progressive, is the central object of concern within Morgan Quaintance’s 2017 essay, ‘The New Conservatism: Complicity and the UK Art World’s Performance of Progression’.

Writing on the neo-liberal realities of working methods in large institutions, and how these differ from the programming and ways of presenting themselves these organisations do, Quaintance, a curator, critic and artist based in London, writes:

At the institutional level, consider how the anti-racist sentiment in curators Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whiteley’s much trumpeted celebration of art in the age of Black Power ‘Soul of a Nation’ is profoundly

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<sup>32</sup> Nataša Petrešin Bachelez, “For Slow Institutions,” *E-Flux Journal*, 2017. Available Online: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/> (last accessed 16.12.22).

undermined by the funds Tate received from Leonard Blavatnik towards the eponymous gallery extension opened in 2016.<sup>33</sup>

The essay goes on to detail that Blavatnik's philanthropy to Tate was accompanied by his generosity also extending to a million-dollar investment in Donald Trump's inaugural committee as POTUS. Tate, the most visited contemporary art gallery in the world, has a gulf existing between its operational practices and its programming.

Quaintance's journalistic style of research in the essay remarks on a number of contradictory practices within large contemporary art institutions across the UK, raising the question of *when does an institution's associations negate its programming?* It also raises concerns for artists of colour, queer artists and marginalised artists being utilised in an attempt for galleries to present themselves to the world as radical or progressive spaces. With the distance between institution's practices and the artists they represent increasing exponentially there is opportunity within smaller, more agile institutions to embody and enact a politic more representative of shared values of cultural workers. When it comes to art institutions, with greater size there is lesser transparency. The operations and accompanying wings of governance are

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<sup>33</sup> Morgan Quaintance, "The New Conservatism: Complicity and the UK Art World's Performance of Progression," *e-flux conversations*, 2017. Available Online: <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/the-new-conservatism-complicity-and-the-uk-art-worlds-performance-of-progression/7200> (last accessed: 16.12.22)

described by Quaintance as ‘octopoid’<sup>34</sup>. This difficulty in identifying working processes both at the micro and macro levels makes discerning the practices of staff difficult – particularly when it comes to the emotive and conversational aspects of curatorial practice.

The considerations of how a Museum should function, particularly in relation to Queer communities is mused upon in Kevin Brazil’s 2018 essay ‘The Uses of Queer Art’ for *White Review*. In the essay, he describes the very careful and deliberate handling of such a discussion at Tate Britain, ‘Surrounded by the airless eroticism of Pre-Raphaelite portraiture, all drowning Ophelias and hieratic Lady Macbeths’.<sup>35</sup>

Brazil describes the conversation that has taken place as ‘delicate’<sup>36</sup> and even compares the handlings of disagreements in conversation as being treated like children. The figures who managed or mediated such agreements are not mentioned – whether staff members or other participants in the discussion, and so the spectre of the institution looms over these conversations as some kind of negotiating force between opinions. Instead of acting as a facilitator or encouragement of such opinions, the rhetoric communicated in Brazil’s essay

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<sup>34</sup> Quaintance, “The New Conservatism: Complicity and the UK Art World’s Performance of Progression”

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Brazil, “The Uses of Queer Art”, *The White Review*, 2018. Available Online: <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/uses-queer-art/> (last accessed 16.12.22).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

instead points to a silencing, or at least, quietening down of dissenting voices.

Brazil surmises the inevitability that such a diverse debate could have as a result of the subjectivity of such political and social identity-making:

The very real anger that accompanies debates about what belongs in a museum, queer or otherwise, shows that the conflict about who and what goes in a museum is a conflict about who and what we are. The fact that these debates seem so intractable is that co-opting the past to create any identity inevitably winds up in an endgame of definitions: my definition, your definition; my museum, your museum.<sup>37</sup>

Brazil goes on to include Black Queer debates around the validity of the museum as western and colonial institution, as brought up by participants of colour in the discussion. In the chapters that follow each will include forms of literature reviews embedded throughout, but I wanted to point to both Quaintance's and Brazil's writing at this stage to sign post early on my aversion to the art institution as being the home of this particular research. I will develop this further in the following chapters and in particular detail the ways that work of institutional critique is being undertaken in a myriad of effective and engaging ways, but also justifying where this research sits in position to that, i.e. not part of, but related to it.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

The detailing of the particular context within the UK will also be developed further particularly in relation to thinking about relationality and the curatorial and how it has been perhaps misunderstood within such institutional lenses and how it is that we might think more poetically about subjectivity within the curatorial.

## CHAPTER 2: CURATORIAL RELATION

### Introduction

The intimate space I hope to bring into the dialogue between myself as writer and you as reader is one concerned with a particular type of working I have undertaken and continue to undertake with others. Since working within the field known under various names including curating; the curatorial; production; programming; commissioning; arts management, I have repeatedly found myself having conversations that question the semantics of the curator, the figure of the curator, and the presence of the curator as an agent within contemporary art discourse. These questions emerge between various actors and component parts of the art world; myself and artists; artists and other artists; curators and other curators; audiences and stakeholders; staff and invited guests. It emerges within a number of relations crossing a number of hierarchies, for example across the structures of a team or a framework of governance. This presence, of social and relational considerations in curatorial writing has been with us for several decades, and later in this thesis I will detail more fully its alignment with the development of the curatorial, since the emergence of the contemporary curator as a figure in the 1970s<sup>38</sup>, with a significant link existing between the idea of movement within social circles and curating as a ‘practice’.

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<sup>38</sup> For accounts of early figures associated with the field of ‘Curatorial’ emerging in the 1970s see: Jens Hoffman, (Ed.) *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating* (Milan: Mousse Publishing. 2013). Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Geneva: JRP Ringier. 2008).

This will help to situate this research firmly within the field of curatorial whilst also allowing itself to bring in thinking from other disciplines in order to, as referenced in my first research question, think of possible divergences from these established understandings. This foundation is related primarily to my first research question:

*How has relation been conceptualised within the curatorial and how might queer framings diverge from or develop these understandings?*

While also, more expansively thinking about discourses engaged with in the body of this research speaks of the contexts of difficulty addressed in my second research question:

*To what degree has the emergence of affective and intimate discourses within curatorial work emerged in response to conditions of difficulty?*

The curatorial is defined by a significant number of theorists, including Maria Lind, former Director of Tensta Konsthall, known as much for her leading curatorial work as her pedagogy and academic achievements, as being the philosophical or theoretical arm of curating<sup>39</sup>. Whilst I will go on to define more

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<sup>39</sup> Lind, "The Curatorial." Jens Hoffman (Ed.), *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating* (Milan: Mousse Publishing. 2013).

specifically some of these particular takes on what the curatorial and curating is, there is a commonality that reaches across many of these definitions – particularly Lind and Irit Rogoff’s – that speak to the curatorial acting as some kind of methodology, a practice that is inhabited and extends outwards from practical acts of curating. Curating, as a practical act is accompanied by the curatorial – which acts as a way of understanding the expanded field and actions associated with exhibition-making, that includes: publishing, organising, developing, programming, planning, visiting, researching, writing, performing et al.

Curating, and its practical and theoretical components constitute a broad and diverse series of actions that are contingent on happening between people, as well as institutions and objects. Across a number of definitions of curatorial work<sup>40</sup>, a commonality that appears and reappears is an idea of relationships and relationality being at the heart of such work. This development of the curatorial initially being one part of a number of artistic, organisational and *social* actions undertaken by curators including Seth Sieglaub and Harald Szeeman, largely considered defining figures of the early imagining of contemporary art curators, is closely linked but not entirely identical to the field’s increased

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Irit Rogoff, “Smuggling: An Embodied Criticality,” *Xenopraxis*, 2013. Available Online: [https://xenopraxis.net/readings/rogoff\\_smuggling.pdf](https://xenopraxis.net/readings/rogoff_smuggling.pdf) (last accessed: 16.12.22)

<sup>40</sup> Condorelli, “Notes on Friendship.”

Ulrich Obrist, “A Brief History of Curating.”

Sophia Yadong Hao (Ed.), *A Cut A Scratch A Score*, First Edition (Manchester: Art Editions North, 2015).



professionalisation. In parallel we can see both the identity of the figure of the curator become more distinct and ubiquitous, alongside an institutionalisation of the actions by which curating takes place. *Curatorial* practice, if not curating, came to be defined both through social activities as well as the approach it took to exhibition making and other activities as research-based. Whilst curating largely refers to activities, processes, things undertaken both by institutions and by individuals, the curatorial conversely is largely considered as making part of a way of understanding and producing knowledge, located within and between many other fields. Its porosity and ability to sit between for example, art history and anthropology, or between critical theory and artistic practice is what makes it both a difficult sphere of which to ascertain ends and limits, but also ripe with opportunity in connecting diverse fields of human knowledge. Irit Rogoff, Professor of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College, University of London, defines the curatorial (in contrast to curating) as a structure which produces ‘events of knowledge’<sup>41</sup> which themselves act to expand and challenge on the conventions of the form of curating. This relates the form of curatorial knowledge as something reflexive, looking back into and onto itself. This self-critical form was an important development by which curating became the curatorial and additionally within the work of Lind and Beatrice Von Bismarck, as well as Rogoff, becomes a philosophical method within which the practical

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<sup>41</sup> Beatrice Von Bismarck, and Irit Rogoff, “Curating/Curatorial: A Conversation between Beatrice Von Bismarck and Irit Rogoff”, in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, ed. by Beatrice Von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski, First Edition (Berlin: Sternberg. 2012), 23.

actions of curating are employed. The reason for which I use the word 'important' here is because this departure from an understanding of curation that existed in almost purely museological terms was an important step towards the post-war understanding of curatorial work that then developed into the more poetic and philosophical understanding we have of the curatorial today. While this end result in itself I would not deem as particularly important nor necessary, and instead would regard as the result of an assemblage of conditions and practices that happened to develop and be understood in a particular way, what is important is that with this increased reflexivity, this ability to move these studies from simply a museological and towards a socially ontological perspective is what includes the potential for emotion and affect that later I will propose within this thesis. The important part of this development is that it began to understand the curatorial as a social form as well as an intellectual or artistic one, and therefore indicates the very beginning of potentially transformative ways of understanding the way we work with others through what we call the curatorial.

The definitions by which the curatorial became considered 'a practice' are inherently ones bound up in interdependency and sociality – these developments both make examples of and are told through multiple voices, with the event of people coming together being inherent to what marks the contemporary curatorial in difference to previous, more museum-based ideas of curating. This

increasing focus on the social is not of course free from problems, and later in this chapter I will describe the political and social contexts, particularly within the United Kingdom, that this change has taken place within specifically the preceding decades, but what we do witness in a more far-reaching history of curatorial work is a parallel between this understanding of curating/the curatorial and the developing shift away from formalist understandings of art practices.

Whilst a history of curating, or even a history of *austellungsmachar* (exhibition-maker) may not exist in the varied and diverse forms that histories of art objects and movements have been attended to historically, even brief forays into early accounts of the curatorial's emergence as an identifiable field account for a shift between activity organised by artists, to the current position of the curator. Over the last twenty years a self-awareness within the self-made histories of the curatorial in writing has included *When Attitudes Become The Norm*<sup>42</sup>, by Beti Zerovc, or Ulrich Obrist's *A Brief History of Curating* interview collection, describes decades of shifts from artistic activity being predominantly organised by artists or artist' societies, leading through a process wherein curatorial roles became both professionalised – associated with particular roles and processes within fields of management, whilst simultaneously being increasingly

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<sup>42</sup> Von Bismarek, Schaff, Weski, *Cultures of the Curatorial*.  
Beti Zerovc, *When Attitudes Become the Norm*, First Edition (Ljubljana: Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory, 2015).

associated with sociality, conviviality, and particular positions that led to this being considered, now, as ‘practice’.

And even when this professionalisation is presented in parallel, what is foregrounded repeatedly is both the forms through which planning and development happened – through dinners, socialising, anecdotes – and is again mirrored in how it is accounted, through informal interviews, remembering collectively with friends, the anecdotal mode rearing its head repeatedly. I mean ‘rearing its head’ in no negative terms but just that in the initial months researching and immersing myself in the literature of curatorial work I found myself repeatedly coming into contact with anecdotal forms that were dependent on understanding between those recounting, those reading, those involved at the time of these unfoldings, and I was struck by the intimacy and closeness that existed in even some of the more typically academic or ‘neutral’ remembrances of curatorial happenings.

In conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Pontus Hultén, reflecting on significant exhibitions and shows during his time leading institutions such as Stockholm’s Moderna Museet, or Paris’ Centre Pompidou, remarks that they ‘developed in close dialogue with the artists and marked great moments in the

history of my friendship with them'.<sup>43</sup> This notion of friendship and intimacy as being materials that find themselves drawn upon within curatorial work is not a new one. Indeed, in Ulrich Obrist's accounts of his work as a curator, vast amount of words are given over to describe travels to visit, stay with, dine with, befriend, and socialise with a number of internationally renowned artists. What was absent for me in reading so many of Obrist's accounts, though I enjoyed them for their personality, their relative warmth, and the clear respect and admiration he had for the artists with whom he worked, there were a number of stark differences between the way that this vague, still-being-defined mode of 'the curatorial' was being reflected upon through his experiences, and the experiences I recognised in the experiences of myself and those close to me. Our ways of working were tied far more intimately to material means, no night trains across Europe to meet established artists in expensive restaurants, instead for many operating within public galleries there is scrimping, saving, more casual and more economic ways of being together, projects are tied to the limits of what resources are available.

There are vastly more critical, intimate and less privileged considerations of such labour, for example the work of Helena Reckitt, Reader in Curating at Goldsmiths College, and a hugely experienced independent curator and writer,

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<sup>43</sup> Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, 63

who has simultaneously looked to sociality as both a tool for enacting feminist practices within otherwise institutionalised spaces as well as having critiqued the aspects of social reproduction so often relied upon within such institutions<sup>44</sup>, particularly as it so often falls to women and queer people. These criticisms I will examine in other parts of my research when I begin to talk about situating curatorial knowledge within and between bodies, understanding where an understanding of authorship or ownership might be located in relation to the figures of the curator. Later this will be used along with other recent impulses in curatorial theory to describe the limitations of institutions and instead the potential for individual reflexive understandings to be formed around love and intimacy. This will lead to the latter parts of this thesis and form an essential building block of the potential for curatorial writing to embody such changes.

But for now, to return to Hultén's statement. The texture evoked in his statement, a shared relation between the topography of friendship and of practice, is one I find almost as evocative as his early conceptions of the 'elasticity' of art institution's spaces; spaces where a number of acts may take place. That one of his closest friends, the French artist Niki de Saint Phalle once

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<sup>44</sup> For an introduction to Reckitt's particular research, see: Helena Reckitt, "Productive Refusals", in: *Old Land, New Waters*, ed. by Edward Ball, First Edition (London: Freeland Foundation, 2021) 134–139.

Helena Reckitt, 'Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics', in *Politics in a Glass: Case Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, ed. by Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 131–156.

said that Hultén had ‘the soul of an artist, not of a museum director’,<sup>45</sup> communicates at least two things. Firstly, that their working relationship was invariably bound up intimately with ‘soul’, emotive language communicating that rather than competence or knowledge taking precedence here it was something less concretely quantifiable that remained in de Saint Phalle’s thoughts on her friend, and secondly, that museum directors, embodiments of institutionalisation are generally subjects of suspicion from artists. This serves as just one example of how it is that affective and intimate discourses have emerged within curatorial relationships. But additionally, the aforementioned textures and topography that is present within the intimacies of this exchange speaks at this point in the thesis as a way marker, towards writing that will find itself later in this thesis that enfolds itself and benefits from such intimacies. This is the first indication of curatorial writing that I will define in a later chapter that might expansively encompass the warmth and love that is potentially sited within the curatorial.

As well as these early anecdotal accounts of socialising and friendship, the development of curatorial theory has also sought to chart the relational nature of curatorial practice. Since the 1990s this trajectory has been present in a number of writings, including Paul O’Neill’s *The Emergence of Curatorial Discourse*, a

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<sup>45</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, “THE HANG OF IT,” *Artforum.com*, 1997. Available Online: <https://www.artforum.com/print/199704/the-hang-of-it-32879> (last accessed 16.12.22).

title regarded as exemplary of his role in defining the field of contemporary curating, as well as his broad body of published work in the field. In O’Neill’s case, the relational nature of the curatorial is defined as a ‘shared discourse’<sup>46</sup>, a sensibility that emerges between artist and curator, rather than simply practical actions of exhibition-making carried out by institutions. Relationships are centred almost within curatorial discourse, even in contexts where individual authorship seems a priority to certain curatorial approaches, for example, Gavin Wade’s conception of Eastside Projects, a gallery in Birmingham of which he is a founding-director, as an ‘artwork’<sup>47</sup> and his own position as ‘Artist-Curator’ presumably making him the author of the work of the exhibition<sup>48</sup>, and perhaps even a co-author in the works that constitute this wider constellation of works brought together. And even with such an individuated approach to curatorial relationships - in which the artists and indeed the objects they have made become material for the artist-curator Wade - is still dependent on collaborators, supporters, others. Even when such authorial claims are made, there is always at

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<sup>46</sup> O’Neill, “Curating: Practice Becoming Common Discourse.”

<sup>47</sup> In *Artist-Curator Gavin Wade on Authorship and Curating at Eastside Projects and the Post-Industrial City* Wade articulates his hopes that his ‘ambition is that the gallery is an artwork, not a curatorial platform. Artwork is the primary goal.’

Michael Birchall and Nkule Mabaso, “Artist-curator Gavin Wade on authorship, curating at Eastside Projects and the post-industrial city”, *On Curating*, 2013. Available Online: <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/artist-curator-gavin-wade-on-authorship-curating-at-eastside-projects-and-the-post-industrial-city.html#.YVR8FJ5KiRt> (last accessed 16.12.22).

<sup>48</sup> This evidenced further in *Off-Space No 3: Eastside Projects*, in which Oliver Basciano identifies that ‘Wade does not separate his directorship of the gallery from his practice.’ and ‘actively seeks to physically express its exhibition history and the personal subjectivity of the director.’

Oliver Basciano, “Off-Space no. 3: Eastside Projects, Birmingham”, *Art Review*, 2014. Available Online: <https://artreview.com/off-space-no-3-eastside-projects-birmingham/> (last accessed 16.12.22).



the very least an implication of, or a pointing towards an *other*, whether the *other*, if not an artist, is perhaps a participant, audience member or viewer.

In relation to the wider narrative of this research inquiry, what the above shows is that whilst intimate relations form the heart of many collaborations, curatorial and artistic, and indeed that relation has been situated as a very particular dynamic within the curatorial, there exists potential problematics within this.

These previous examples have been given to illustrate both the foundation from which my research is emerging from in a curatorial context, but additionally to demonstrate just why it is that there is a necessity for new contributions of curatorial knowledge to emerge from positions less concerned with authorship, and instead invested in actions of love and intimacy. What I have demonstrated within these examples is a lack of understanding of differing and diverse subjectivities which in themselves negotiate and direct the flow of curatorial emotion and labour.

In the next part of this chapter, as well as further on in this thesis in *Towards Alternatives*, in *Chapter 10: Writing Affect, Writing Emotion* of this thesis I will detail more explicitly the appearance and re-appearance of relational modes within curatorial discourse, how it relates more specifically to institutional thinking, and why exactly we must both maintain this line of enquiry whilst also shifting new research towards intimacy and affective modes of enquiry. In the

following section of this chapter I will also detail how care and social reproduction has begun to figure within conceptions of the curator and the curatorial.

### **Problematising definitions of the curatorial**

I have detailed above the ways in which curating has been defined in largely relational terms and how it is that the figure of the curator has emerged within the post-war period to introduce a few key building blocks of arguments I will later make the suitability of the curatorial as a space of intimacy. I now plan to look at the ways that care has become a central component of recent curatorial work. This will work within the wider structure of this thesis both to build arguments around the presence of sociality that already exists within curatorial theory, and additionally will signpost ways that the development of these discourses might be pushed further, towards deeper intimacies, more beautiful and poetic understandings of relation within this field. This will also contribute to the role that engaging with a curatorial practice of writing plays within my thesis, to think of it as a prospective affective labour that can be undertaken in a curatorial way.

As evidenced above, the understanding of how curating and the curatorial function as spaces of production and of research is also founded on an

understanding of socialities and interpersonal interactions. Understanding ways of being and working together is central to curatorial thinking and is nowhere more present than in the proliferation of this term, *care*, in its ubiquity across recent curatorial thinking.

From the established understanding across curatorial studies of *Curare*, the root of the word *Curator*, meaning the action of taking care, we can see that the figure of the curator exists in relation to another. Whether that *other* is an artist, object, or institution has changed with developing and shifting understandings from the curator as collection-holder in a historical, museological sense to the contemporary figure of curator-as-author or collaborator. Yet, however the relationships between curator, objects and artist changes, the action of caring, appears and re-appears consistently. So, whilst we might find ourselves working with a definition that is unruly or perhaps too elastic in certain professional terms, we can all understand the central premise of the curatorial figure as someone networked, between institutions, artists, and more increasingly recently, other curators, as well as other activities including writing, publishing, editing, performing, screening, introducing.

This expansion in the idea of the curator has also been paralleled with an explosion of discourse surrounding care and support. These conversations have re-appeared in the midst of political strain, institutional stretching and the age of

austerity in the UK. Later on in this thesis, specifically in *On Austerity* a later point of this chapter, I will detail my idea of ‘difficult contexts’ from which these concerns have emerged from. Engaging with austerity as a particular context for this research became necessary the longer I was thinking about my own situated experience of the curatorial, and indeed how that might be shared with many others within the specificities of a UK context, as the effects and unfoldings of austerity still take place within the country I have lived and worked in my whole life. Another difficult condition, that of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is addressed in various points in this thesis, but emerges most importantly through emotive and affective writing in later chapters (*Chapter 8: Curatorial Affects*, and *Chapter 10: Writing Affect, Writing Emotion*). But before bringing us to more expansive definitions of what ‘difficult contexts’ might encompass as a starting point, I wish to quote again curator and researcher Helena Reckitt as she describes the figure of the curator’s shift from caring for objects to caring for people, to illustrate the ways that social reproduction has become enfolded and entrenched within the contemporary notion of the curator:

In the post-1960s period characterized by the rise of the independent curator, the associations of curatorial work with artworks’ acquisition, conservation and scholarship expanded to include the affective labours involved with communication, liaison and social networking.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Helena Reckitt, “Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction”, *Journal of Curatorial Studies* (2016): 7–8

This pre-eminence of both care and these ‘affective labours’ are both examples of the urgency of research within curatorial studies that prioritises more specific thinking on what it is relation might mean within this sphere. The urgency of centralising care and support in curatorial working has re-appeared and is, of course tied into curating’s inherent relationality. The expansion of the curatorial makes opportunity for a number of new areas of thinking intersecting with other understandings of relation. What Reckitt’s research operates to demonstrate here, and a question that I will expand on to answer more fully, is the role of framing particular labours on the subjectivities through which they often appear. In Reckitt’s case, the realm of social reproduction is tied to women and Queer people’s labour, relating to the object of my first question:

*How has relation been conceptualised within the curatorial and how might queer framings diverge from or develop these understandings?*

Secondly, whilst Reckitt describes the post-60s period as being particularly of interest when researching the figure of the curator, and a great deal of curatorial literature deals with the post-war period as a particular space of development around the idea of what the curatorial is or could be, I am tackling these objects of study and the wider research surrounding it from a specific temporal context, as one within my lifetime that has been largely resultant from the

neoliberalisation both of cultural spaces but also the wider lives which we lead within an increasingly right-wing political world. In the following parts of this chapter there will be a reckoning of the socio-political contexts through which these concerns have emerged, and in later ones (namely Chapter 5, 7 and 9) I will begin to use my specific embodied context as a method through which to engage with the research through writing. This notion of ‘difficult contexts’ will be explored more fully within this thesis and will become particularly important as more than half of the time spent developing this research has taken place under the era of Covid-19, a time that has repeatedly been pointed out to illuminate and make evident existing precarities and inequalities. This interlinked context will relate to my second research question:

*To what degree has the emergence of affective and intimate discourses within curatorial work emerged in response to conditions of difficulty?*

Considering relation as it pertains to the curatorial, and in a time within which a number of institutions are rethinking their treatments of subjects and publics years gone by and where renewed urges in curatorial practice have been directed towards creating discursive and subjective projects within institutional spaces, I will look to writing itself as a curatorial action and ask:

*How might a subjective approach to thinking curatorial affect and relation contribute to a curatorial research and particularly in the form of curatorial writing?*

In the following parts of this chapter, literature will be reviewed to give a specific definition of relation as it pertains to both curatorial and artistic contexts, As in following chapters the literature review of this thesis will be spread out across each chapter. Before going on to define more specifically the particular idea of relation that this thesis is holding, I hope to further discuss the conditions upon which such relations have emerged from and will justify the reasons for which this research is not anchored around 'the institution'.

### **Defining Relation**

My research is preoccupied with socialities and moments of relating within curatorial practices. The social and the relational have been present in curatorial writing since the emergence of the contemporary curator as a figure in the 1960s, with a significant number of early accounts of Seth Sieglaub and Harold Szeeman focussed on the social circles, collaborations and friendships that led to a consideration of curating as a 'practice'. In earlier writing, but particularly in increasing numbers since the 1990s including Paul O'Neill's *The Culture of*

*Curating and the Curating of Culture*<sup>50</sup>, the curatorial began increasingly being defined as a relational practice, in O’Neill’s aforementioned categorisation of it being a ‘shared discourse’.<sup>51</sup>

The relational nature of curating is almost universally acknowledged within curatorial discourse, even with the most authorial claims of artist-curating-as-author grounded in a dependence on an *other*, whether the *other*, if not an artist, is perhaps a participant, audience member or viewer.

What is less clear, or rather, less harmoniously articulated in curatorial theory is the conditions that surrounds curatorial relationality; What conditions does/should it emerge from? What conditions should it produce? What exterior conditions should it challenge? These are just a few of the questions that have formed parts of my own, wider research enquiries, and specifically what will be addressed in *Chapter 6: Curatorial / Proximity*.

Whilst much curatorial literature, much of which is detailed previously in the above passages, from the emergence in the decades of the 90s and even early 2000s talk of the relational between artists and curators as being purely an inherent reality of such practices, there has also been a ubiquity of writing and

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<sup>50</sup> Paul O’Neill, *The culture of curating and the curating of culture(s)*. First Edition. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> O’Neill, “Curating: Practice Becoming Common Discourse.”



conversation in the field concerned with care as a central concern of curatorial practice. My own desire to define a specific idea of curatorial relation does so not as part of a desire to contribute to institutional discourses (I have already introduced and will detail fully later in this thesis), nor does it fit particularly neatly into the rapidly expanding field of curatorial care. Whilst care and its ubiquity is directly related to thematics of affect and emotion that will appear later in this thesis, and whilst I am also myself as a practitioner directly invested in the notion of care for those with whom I work, I do not intend for this to be a manifesto for care. Specifically, in defining the relational here, in difference to other specific definitions and in common with others, I hope to evoke the subjectivity of the curatorial as it holds potential. This is a potential to rethink how the curatorial might interact with or come close to other studies and spheres of knowledge, additionally it is a potential that the curatorial might itself become a receptacle, a process through which to imbue love and emotion. It is a potential which will be explored and exploited within this thesis through both actions and verbs of writing and works and nouns of writing.

### **Defining Curatorial Writing**

The phrase ‘Curatorial Writing’ will be used repeatedly as this thesis develops, to refer specifically to a type of writing proposed both as method and contribution to knowledge, within the boundaries of this research. I will here

detail a brief explanation as to the usage of ‘Curatorial Writing’ as opposed to the ultimately broader, wider and more diverse uses of writing within curatorial work. This functions to make distinct my own proposals for how the former might function both within this thesis and as a contribution to understanding relationships between curatorial thinking and writing within the field of contemporary curatorial knowledge, to which this research contributes. I will also detail the ways that writing will appear at various points in this thesis, both as a synthesis of existing fields’ thinking to provide new contexts for one another, as well as particular forms of writing that developed from the very particular situated-ness of this research as it took place within the preceding years of public health crises.

Whilst writing forms an important part of any curatorial labour, whether undertaken through institutions, as an individual, or even as a dialogue between artist and curator, what will specifically be proposed within this research will be writing that might utilise and exploit the affective capacities of curatorial work to be written, to develop and to unfold, to contribute a newly affective and responsive way of thinking through what the limits of curatorial writing might be.

The work of a curator is often occupied by writing a great many things; emails; press releases; marketing; educational resources; the list goes on. And whilst

much of this writing is marked and defined by the receiver, the need for clear and often concise communication about the properties, dynamics, or physical realities of works and artists' practices, what will be proposed within this thesis is that writing itself might operate as a site by which the curatorial might prove a generative and reflexive way by which to generate new thinking. By this I mean, the ways in which a curatorial sensibility might provide ways by which we elicit more emotional and affective connections, not simply to artworks themselves, but as a means of living and being in the world, undertaking research and collective labour with others.

Whilst some forms of curatorial writing, undertaken for the purposes of dissemination and communication, of course have the capability to demonstrate, or at least to purport to demonstrate, the curator's ability to articulate 'from a position of self-reflection, social awareness, and engagement'<sup>52</sup> the type of writing I will go on to propose and practice within this thesis is more akin to an approach where relationships between practices, writing, reflection and time are more complex and elastic than considered simply as ways to vehicle ideas from transmitter (curator, institution) to receiver (audience, visitors) in a linear fashion.

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<sup>52</sup> Panos Kompatsiaris, "Curators, words and values: the branding economies of curatorial statements in art biennials", *Journal of Cultural Economy* 13, no. 6 (2020): 758-771.

Up until this point in the thesis, writing has functioned to introduce the beginnings of where this research emerged from both within my own thinking as well as within a more social context. The writing that follows this will begin to move towards writing in ways that provide both forms and content for thinking about curatorial writing in more emotive ways. The first-person, already used previously in this thesis will continue to be used as a means of exploring what became a very embodied experience of research during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in part of chapters that include *Moving From Institutions*, and, *De-neutralising the Curatorial*, there will be spaces for more experimental forms of writing make their way into this thesis. Several remembered encounters with artworks, with artists with ideas make themselves visible in a selection of scenes of writing which were developed widely from the remoteness of my home, in actions of remembering and engaging with these works, ideas and moments, as a material and process for writing with, adjacent to, besides, the curatorial<sup>53</sup>, rather than utilising the curatorial as a specific position from which to describe or critique specific works.

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<sup>53</sup> Also of use in thinking about this type of writing was Tina Campt's *Black Gaze*, in which sensations in viewing or discussing artworks or ideas are as well-attended to as the content or political scope of the works themselves.  
Tina Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, First Edition (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021).

In Chapter 4, remembering an encounter with artist Alex Martinis Roe's work becomes an important point in my own understanding of a few key concepts introduced here, in other scenes, engagements with other works, ideas and thinkers make visible subjectivities within myself that have been drawn out through writing. Even in the appendices of this thesis, which includes details of work that was undertaken at the same time as this research that on later thinking became relevant to the functions of this research, I have included a short piece of writing, originally written with Benny Nemer's ongoing research work, *Tunings*, in mind, which engaged with the work's juxtaposition of intimacy, choreography and floral arrangements, as well as a particularly embodied understanding of the need for such intimacies processed in a time of distance.

Whilst the writing within this thesis and its appendices function in different ways, the variety of textures, voices, styles, and emotions that are weaved through and emergent within the writing are central to a proposal within this thesis for writing that does not minimise its affected or affective capacities. And indeed, in *Chapter 8: Curatorial Affects* I will detail fully the ways that affect and emotion have previously and will continue to provide spaces for more fully celebrated vulnerability within the curatorial, for now this interlude is here just to describe above some of the different forms of writing that will be encountered in the reading of this thesis. The moments where the practice visible within this thesis (that is, the practice of writing) are interlinked and

woven into critical and academic engagement with existing literature, with the wider field, and yet there are moments where this writing will break down, dissolve, make way for the emotional and the affective. This is precisely because this thesis will demonstrate ways in which curatorial writing might have the opportunity to embody not just intellectual criticality, but emotional and beautiful criticality<sup>54</sup>.

### **Curatorial Writing in the Field**

Whilst I have detailed above the need for this thesis, and my research present within it, to fulfil a particular and intimate role within the field of curatorial writing practices, and indeed have contextualised it within both the thesis (within which it operates to build on my arguments), and within wider curatorial discourses (around which it offers an alternative valuing of the role of intimacy and affect within curatorial practices, and specifically the field of writing as it relates to such practices), I will here detail several curatorial texts that not only help to further define my particular usage of ‘Curatorial Writing’ within this thesis, as well as provide examples of writing that I imagine spatially as adjacent, or in alignment with my own.

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<sup>54</sup> This will be explicated on further in *Chapter 10: Writing Affect / Writing Emotion*.

This ‘Curatorial Writing’ as defined earlier in my thesis might be termed in a more expansive way ‘Affective Curatorial Writing’ or ‘Relational Curatorial Writing’, that is, writing that is developed from, within, during, *as*, curatorial practice that is reflective, reflexive, thinking and critical. But also, that it gives opportunity to slippages both bodily and emotional, that it allows itself to follow through-lines that shift between and through body and experience in line with the ways that I have detailed concepts of ‘weak theory.’<sup>55</sup>

Whilst the style of the essay ‘Lots of Shiny Junk at the Art Dump: The Sick and Unwilling Curator’ operates on the surface within academic standards – with the specific ‘we’ referring briefly to the co-authors being only used to allude to a collaborative curatorial project undertaken together, before the collective ‘we’ of the art world is favoured for the rest of the essay – it also functions to detail in sometimes bodily and emotive languages the exhaustions of the expectations of curatorial practices in the contemporary art world. In describing their increasing misalignment with values of specifically *production* and *producing* (more art, more objects, more happenings, more things), Irene Revell and Dr Lina Džuverović say:

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<sup>55</sup> Stewart, "Weak theory in an unfinished world." 71+.

On a personal level, for each of us the breaking point was not only a matter of not willing, but also a matter of capacity, of other responsibilities: becoming a parent, becoming disabled, chronic illness.<sup>56</sup>

Revell and Džuverović draw from their own experiences within the essay, both as co-curators of the organisation Electra, to their independent curatorial and research practices which have involved projects with other entities such as Cinenova, Nottingham Contemporary and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, to detail the interactions with these overbearing demands of arts production of their bodies. The central question within the writing is one of survival, as a curator, and whether there might be a curatorial practice that is not enveloped in the stresses and pressures of production.

Whilst this question – of whether a curatorial practice might need to entwine itself within production and creation – is one tackled with clarity and vigour in the text, what is of more specific adjacency to this thesis is the vulnerability that is demonstrated in this writing. Even though the first person is not utilised as a narrative device, the expression of bodily vulnerability, as well as affective difficulty in engaging with an increasingly results-driven contemporary art world, the honesty of voice within this work signals to me, its belonging to a wider impulse within curatorial practices of writing to engage with the bodily,

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<sup>56</sup> Lina Džuverović and Irene Revell, “Lots of Shiny Junk at the Art Dump: The Sick and Unwilling Curator”, *Parse Journal* 9, (Spring 2019) Available Online: <https://parsejournal.com/article/lots-of-shiny-junk-at-the-art-dump-the-sick-and-unwilling-curator/> (last accessed 16.12.22).



the affected. The authors refer to ‘loss’ associated with such opposing ways of working, of ‘exhaustion’ of being ‘wrung out’ as the result of many years of working within such conditions.

Whilst this particular piece of writing occupies itself with spaces we might consider existing around, between, underneath, linking the production of art, indeed the writers themselves detail their own desires to imagine curatorial practice somewhat uncoupled from the pressure to produce, another work that embeds itself sometimes wholly within the results, the productions of curatorial relations, but in an equally intimate and affective way, is a collection of essays and writing by Eloise Sweetman entitled, *Curatorial Feelings*.

Whilst Džuverović and Revell occupy themselves with a broad analysis of working conditions and their harm in contemporary understandings of curatorial practices, the texts in Sweetman’s collection reflect on her many years working as a curator, developing intimate relationships with artists whose work she has presented in institutions including; De Appel, Amsterdam; Jan Van Eyck Academie, and Treignac Projet, France. In one essay situated in proximity to the work of Miyeon Lee, Sweetman muses on imagined conversations between two grandmothers, ideas of home, and of course, Lee’s paintings in themselves, which at the point of writing had already been packed away, following the

closure of the exhibition *Roll on, Roll on, Phenomena (until you are no more)* at Jan Van Eyck Academie, 2016.

As the years go by, the urge to return builds, to go back ‘home’, a place that seems surreal and distant. And so we fumble at the door, uncertain how it should unlock. To keep grounded those of family members who have long passed.<sup>57</sup>

Sweetman’s writing differs from the previous essay in its styles and forms. It functions in a different way, it offers more poetic and sculptural forms to a Curatorial Writing, that provides avenues in reading that develop and grow from more intimate, than institutional, questions. Indeed, later in this essay collection she refers to her brother’s pacemaker and the closeness of objects and touching as ‘we encounter and pass through each other’s lives, we have a responsibility to respond with care’<sup>58</sup>, and in others will intersperse personal memories of her mother’s table amongst reflections on the work of German minimalist Charlotte Posenenske and Polish sculptor Katarzyna Kobro.

Whilst the placing-together of these texts here might more immediately illuminate to some the gaps and differences in their approaches – in style, form, and the subjects which they tackle, ranging from intimate memories inspired by engagements with art objects, to more spatially-evasive and difficult-to-

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<sup>57</sup> Eloise Sweetman, *Curatorial Feelings*, (Rotterdam: Shimmer Press, 2021) 90.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

conceptualise concepts of curatorial practice and art institutions at-large – instead I present them here both as examples of Curatorial Writing that prioritise the self, intimacy, and affect. Later in this thesis, in the part entitled ‘Love, Pleasure, Instability’, of *Chapter 10: Writing Affect, Writing Emotion*, I will expand on the ways that curatorial writing deals in material ways with affect and emotion, but here these two different pieces of writing not only detail part of a body of literature that demonstrates what I mean by [Affective / Relational ] Curatorial Writing within its specific usage within parts of this thesis, as well as providing a spatial device in the literature, to demonstrate alongside what this contribution to knowledge is situated.

The adjacency of this writing to my own will become more evident as the writing present in this thesis expands both its conceptual and spatial territories. But for now, in this moment, these pieces of writing are brought together here as examples of ways in which I am specifically thinking of Curatorial Writing.

What makes these exemplary of this proposed grouping of particular types of writing, is that whilst artworks and the wider field of curatorial work form central discursive points within themselves, they are used as a means of communicating the realities of lived and emotive experiences. That they expand on the ways in which writing interacts with institutions of art as well as institutions of ability, gender, and the very daily experience of being. Whilst

Sweetman's collection of writing is mainly drawn from individual pieces written for, or in response to, specific exhibitions, projects, or bodies of artists' work, there is possibility to imagine how the ways in which she uses literary and poetic manners of writing to expand beyond relations of one body of work (artistic) to another (written). And with regards to Džuverović and Revell's sharply observant piece, whilst it serves as an example of a definition of Curatorial Writing that moves to embody the self in more honest and frank ways, it of course differs from the style and form of writing that will unfold within the duration of this thesis.

And so, these two pieces of writing provide models adjacent to the one that is employed in much of this thesis. One providing an example of the uses of curatorial practices and thinking in laying out a field, a foundation, a space upon which can be inscribed the realities of living and working within a body. And another that whilst more pre-occupied with the results of curatorial and artistic relationships, provides language that does not retreat from indulging in its own humanity.

### **The Relational Beyond Aesthetics**

With this in mind, I am interested in the relational within curatorial practice.

And particularly how complex subjectivities emerge between artist and curator,

in the way that politics was imagined by Hannah Arendt to be shared between people, rather than interiorised solely within bodies<sup>59</sup>. Rather than examining managerial systems that are entwined with contemporary ideas of the curator, which run the risk of embodying only formal, institutional concerns, I am interested in a practice of relationality. Whilst the institution is of course present within my research, I am more interested in the very thing that some of the research I have mentioned fails to do – to look to the intimate and the informal that exists within curatorial practices, and particularly how queer models of practice might provide opportunity for de-formalising curatorial practices, contributing research that considers the development of curatorial projects as an opportunity for shared subjectification, a recognition of sharedness and difference. What this functions to do is to develop the field of the curatorial in another direction, that is slowly emerging through the work of theorists and curators including afore-mentioned Reckitt, Lucy Lopez, Nella Aarne<sup>60</sup> and others. But additionally, this contributes to this direction from a specifically queer and embodied position. This in itself will colour the field of the curatorial with yet more intimacy and address the way that relation might be thought of not just as a reality of curatorial practices, as detailed in the preceding parts of this chapter, but instead as a dynamic through which to enact emotional and affective ways of working and being together. The necessity of this happening

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<sup>59</sup> Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*.

<sup>60</sup> Who will be introduced and whose work will be engaged with appropriately later within this thesis

is evident in the contexts I have already and will continue to describe, which have already detailed the way that relation as a concept has been used, even misused as a shorthand for simplifying narratives between artists and curators of a particular position or privilege that does not do enough to account for the surrounding difficulties which often emerge.

What specifically, I am interested in, lies outside of the more exacting institutional concerns (which of course, must be tackled in tandem, in parallel, in solidarity and in action with other researchers and other practitioners), and specifically is focussed on how curatorial practice can be used as a mode of relationality, not just relating an art object to a gallery space, or an artist to a particular geo-political setting, but more around how the inter-subjective functions between artist and curator. I am researching how curatorial practice might allow a relationality to emerge that does not flatten distinctions between one subjugated body and another, but instead creates a relationship that practices and develops, and makes and remakes itself, specifically from a queer methodology. I will discuss the particulars of this later in a section on methodology.

Up till now my research on relationality has included the previous review of curatorial literature, but also a review of the relational existing in art theory, foremostly in the work of Nicolas Bourriaud, and his writing's subsequent

critique in the work of Claire Bishop<sup>61</sup>. Bourriaud's writing so often celebrated the relational nature of social practices that emerged in the 1990s on the advent of the internet and Bishop's subsequent critique of his writing identified many problems within the field of 'social practice' which I will detail here.

The fact that these two figures dominate the notion of 'the relational' within contemporary art discourse has led me to writing here and now, a differentiation between their own considerations of the relational, and how I am undertaking mine. Whilst Bishop aptly identifies Bourriaud's enthusiasm for relational practices leading to a separation from its history to that of Beuys's social sculpture, or the minimalism of Judd, Flavin and other white males whose works marked a presence (or absence) of the bodies between them, the major problem in her assessment is that it does not bring a conversation on relational ethics outside of the artwork. Instead, Bishop concerns herself with the following:

'The tasks facing us today are to analyse how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the quality of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work'.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Their conflicting ideas on social practice are already introduced and engaged with in the introduction of this thesis, re-introducing them here allows me to build a deeper critical engagement with their thinking

<sup>62</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 78.

The interiority of Bishop's argument is plainly visible from the above quote, and indeed, there are trajectories within her arguments that produce themselves almost solely from formal conceptions of quality. Where Bourriaud positions sociality and the relational as a co-production, thus making a locating of the producer - and thus, critique - more difficult, Bishop re-centres artistic materiality and quality within this locating-process<sup>63</sup>. In doing so, both Bourriaud and Bishop fail to consider the relationalities at play exterior to such artworks, the relationships and power dynamics that exist between curator, artist, audience member, participant, public etc. Whilst Bourriaud's notion of the relational was one that had emerged from a new decade of information technology, and a desire to situate such artistic practices within this trajectory of 20<sup>th</sup> century life, Bishop considers the relational as an artistic material which we must give as due material critique as we would a painting or sculpture. Where I differ from both of these approaches most obviously, is that my research is curatorial. The relational I am interested in is one that is shared between an artist and a curator and the conditions through which these relations relate. The opportunity within such interrogation of relationality is one that considers the values and conditions of being not only for artists and participants,

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<sup>63</sup> In their PhD thesis, Linda Stupart offers a consideration of labour, emotional and social, within Relational Aesthetics and its subsequent criticisms which might provide interesting further reading: Linda Stupart, "Becoming Object: Positioning a Feminist Art Practice" (PhD thesis. London: Goldsmiths, University of London, 2017).



but for the ‘network of agents’<sup>64</sup> that create a curatorial project. This is a term not limited to an artist who produces new work and a curator who mediates it, but instead offers a way to think through the number of relations between artists, curators, institutions, fabricators, viewers, audiences, that produce ‘the curatorial’.

### **Misunderstanding the Relational**

Additionally, whilst significant contributions have been made to these lines of enquiry from practices of feminist curating and thought, I would argue that recent work in this field, including Maura Reilly’s *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*<sup>65</sup>, place an over-reliance on numbers, figures and concerns of representation within collections or exhibitions rather than considering subjectivity within a wider field of thought. What I mean by this is that there a myriad of different approaches that could be taken in thinking through the moments and ways that subjectivities and the curatorial come into close contact with one another. And instead the approach taken by Reilly is one that places a reliance on the institutional modes of understanding such subjective positions as numerical, or something to be surveyed and established

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<sup>64</sup> Lind, “The Curatorial”

<sup>65</sup> Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, First Edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018).

from an exterior position. Reilly, a notable curator and a founding-curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art, her writing has repeatedly positioned herself within roles of undertaking feminist or anti-racist<sup>66</sup> modes of working, alongside others, describing herself as a ‘curatorial activist’ and claiming a coining of that term.

Having successfully ‘infiltrated’ the masculinist art world system via a series of highly acclaimed feminist art exhibitions (e.g. *Global feminisms*, *The dinner party*, and *Burning down the house*: all at the Brooklyn Museum), by 2008 I began concentrating almost exclusively on the problem of racism in the arts, with the first of many exhibitions being one dedicated to Egyptian artist Ghada Amer, followed thereafter by a mid-career retrospective for African American artist Nayland Blake.<sup>67</sup>

Reilly’s experience, work and tireless labour in developing a field of curatorial work that openly advocates for equality is of course, a good and necessary thing. And despite the importance of her work and indeed her own reflections on it, we can always be more critical in engaging with Reilly’s understanding and articulation of her own practice. Within the above quote, first of all, there is a linear logic to Reilly’s achievements, aligning notions of success with institutional logic, the idea of moving onto racial inequality, having ‘infiltrated’ the ‘masculinist art world system’ with no recognition of her whiteness having

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<sup>66</sup> The use of the phrase ‘anti-racist’ here is directly lifted from a number of Reilly’s self-reflective writings not as my own estimation of her role in dismantling institutionalised racism. I should also point out here that Reilly is a white woman who has been in roles of significant power to enact inclusive and representationally diverse programming, but whether such programming can be considered ‘anti-racist’ is not up to me, a white academic, to assess.

<sup>67</sup> Maura Reilly, “What Is Curatorial Activism?” *Maurareilly.com*, 2017. Available Online <http://www.maurareilly.com/pdf/essays/CIAFessay.pdf> (last accessed 16.12.22).

ceded any need for her to ‘infiltrate’ on those grounds. Aside from a failure to look in on her own positionality as a white curator working predominantly with Black and People of Colour artists, Reilly’s writing uses a representational logic to define her own activism that functions within the boundaries of curating (and never leaves such borders). Her idea of a politically-engaged curating practice, along with many others, is one that extends only to representational justice, and fails to consider the many failures of ‘representation’ or ‘diversity’ as aims within institutions<sup>68</sup>.

Additionally, Reilly’s writing, along with a majority of writing on curatorial theory, rarely provides accounts of moments of working and relationality within such practices. We hear why artists were involved, what they devised, and perhaps how, together, artist and curator dealt with institutional difficulties, but rarely is the intersubjective nature of such conversation detailed and interrogated. Never are the moments of informal relating between these two figures made so public in the name of curatorial research. And indeed, such details are often inappropriate for divulging beyond the parties who formed components of such partnerships, but even in reflections on preceding projects, this writing provides one example of how so many become reduced to a numerical exercise within which beauty and desire, central to any ongoing

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<sup>68</sup> Zarina Muhammad, “The Problem With Representation” *The White Pube*. 2019. Available Online <https://www.thewhitepube.co.uk/representation> (last accessed 16.12.22).

practice, artistic or curatorial, dissipates within the pages. Instead, representational logic makes objects of the artists involved, to be considered within percentages and figures, rather than through intimacies of working relationships and co-produced practices.

The above demonstrates that whilst this very necessary type of work is being undertaken there is also a lack of more poetic and even beautiful ways of understanding the role of our own shared and differing subjectivities within the operation of the curatorial. It is not that this approach does not have a place, it is just that there is opportunity within a growing field for such space to be populated with writing that takes upon itself the development of textured and subjective ways of understanding itself and creating new ways of thinking curatorially through and with writing.

### **Situating Curatorial Knowledge**

Whilst the care that is so widely written on in art theory has previously been concerned with the material conditions of objects, care for histories, relics and traditions<sup>69</sup>, there increasingly has been a turn to consider the contemporary

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<sup>69</sup> Reckitt, "Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction."

curator's *care* as being a mode of social reproduction, a way to produce and maintain socialities, friendships and convivialities. This placement of curatorial labour that it is not a product of one or two, but labour that sits amongst many others, rather than as one half of a dyadic line drawn between artist and curator problematises not only the notion of care as linear exchange, but also helps to consider that 'curating is not so much the product of curators as it is the fruit of the labour of a network of agents'<sup>70</sup> in the words of Maria Lind. To consider the curatorial to be extant only in the spaces of conversation shared between artist and curator is to erase working individuals involved in the production of artwork, its dissemination and interpretation within galleries and institutions, and its subsequent reframings in events, discussions, and tours. Additionally, if we are expanding our horizons of where the beginnings and ends of curatorial processes lie (were it even possible to do so), then there is opportunity to situate curatorial knowledge not only within the temporal confines of an artistic project, but also as an active engagement and revisitation with knowledge produced by what Helena Reckitt describes as a 'collective influence and inheritance'<sup>71</sup> that spans generations. Curatorial knowledge is scattered both between multiple bodies, but also multiple knowledges and eras within this line of thinking.

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<sup>70</sup> Lind, "The Curatorial."

<sup>71</sup> Helena Reckitt, "Opening a Closing Door: Feminist and Queer Artists as Historians" *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture* (2009): 102.

Reckitt's research contributions to the curatorial are a rarity in the field in their acknowledgement of the socialities mentioned previously not just as being present but being embedded within histories of the reliance of networks, families, societal structures, on social reproduction undertaken by [predominantly and disproportionately] women and queer people. In short, Reckitt, among others within a recent turn in curatorial theory, are recognising the subjectivity of the figure of the curator, in opposition to the neutral 'Middleman' that so often is envisaged as a way of thinking through curatorial roles. Reckitt, and other feminist curatorial theorists such as Dorothee Richter, have added another component to a relational definition of curating – one that takes into account the subjectivities occupied by particularly women-curators, and the labour of social production and maintenance that comes with such relations. It is closer to this gesture within current curatorial thinking that my research can find itself, rather than in older curatorial thinking that was discussed in previous parts of this chapter. The relevance for my research to sit within an expansion of our thinking about the curatorial is very important. The curatorial is not separated from the realities of daily life, and the work of Reckitt and Richter demonstrates this, and forms part of an expansion of understanding how social reproduction crosses both personal, political and labour practices. It is within this new impulse that I am situating my research. Or perhaps not within, but adjacent to, besides.

Looking to subjectivity in a different way, Søren Andreason and Lars Bang Larsen have often attempted to offer readings of mediation and ‘middlemen’<sup>72</sup> that constitute an active practice that recognises the production of subjects as it occurs between many people, not solely an action of the [singular] curator. Working both as artists, writers, curators and critics, their various positions and the insight afforded by them is evident in their focus on this spatial conceptualisation of curatorial practices. They argue that the curator may not ‘be the origin of an effort [or] to ponder external values’ but instead looks to the curator (and by extension, curatorial practices) as an ability or opportunity to ‘put ideas into orbit and get caught up in perpetual motion’.<sup>73</sup> The validity of such a mode of working appears and re-appears in their work, with mediation being considered ‘a desire to stage mediated material’<sup>74</sup> rather than simply being an actor for signifying current tastes and trends. This ‘desire’, as well as the trust present in mediation mentioned in their writing are markers of subjectivity being produced within practices of the curatorial/curating/mediation. The figure of the curator is, in this instance, made a little more human through desires and emotions. And whilst Søren and Andreassen begin to shift away from a visible curator-figure that moves further

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<sup>72</sup> I use here Middlemen, directly quoted from much of Andreassen and Larsen’s writings, which I believe to be gender neutral, though in some instances of writing ‘Middlewomen’ has followed Middlemen in brackets in some of their writing.

Søren Andreasan and Lars Bang Larsen, “The Middleman: Beginning to talk about Mediation”, in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O’Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007): 21 – 27.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>74</sup>Søren Andreassen and Lars Bang Larsen, “Remarks on Mediation”, *A\*Desk*, 2006. Available Online < <https://a-desk.org/en/magazine/remarks-on-mediation/> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

away from the authorship of Seth Sieglaub's demystification of institutions and focus on the curator-as-author, where they fall short in my mind is providing an account of the subjectivity that is not only produced *through* curatorial practice, but the subjectivities involved *in* processes of curating, the subjectivities, identities and subjugations that pre-exist a project developed between curators and artists. Accounts of subjective relationships that form between curators and artists are few and far between, notable exceptions might include the aforementioned work of Helena Reckitt on social maintenance within the curatorial, and I would argue that a generation of curators and producers have been influenced by artist and writer, working in close proximity to architectural practices, Céline Condorelli's writings on friendship as a critical support structure<sup>75</sup>, however there have been few contributions that brings queer methodologies in line with curatorial practice to identify subjective relationships and their opportunities and challenges within curatorial theory, that have not focussed on the institution as the central site for this.

This move towards subjective curatorial work forms part of my approach in later chapters – namely, *Chapter 8: Curatorial Affects* and *Chapter 10: Writing Affect, Writing Emotion*. Whilst here we can see how Soren and Larsen acknowledge the potentials of a figure situated between others and a type of

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<sup>75</sup> Condorelli, "Notes on Friendship."



labour that is defined by its de-centred authorship, what I will do in these later chapters is to think about how the experiences and feelings, the emotions and affects that are produced within and through curatorial work might form the rhythm and poetry of a body of ‘curatorial writing’, a term which I have defined in *Chapter 2: Curatorial Relation* and which will be expanded on particularly in *Chapter 8: Curatorial Affects* and *Chapter 10: Writing Affect / Writing Emotion*.

For this portion of the thesis however, I intend to define more of the terms present in my research by understanding a more specific definition of the ‘difficult’ conditions I have previously and will continue to refer to. This initially was a necessary definition to make in the research as I was working within the context of austerity-Britain, and this idea of a context of difficulty from which to develop both research and curatorial work became all the more relevant as the global health crisis of Covid-19 began to unfold only a quarter through my second year of research.

### **On Austerity**

Austerity, the conscious political action of reducing government spending across a variety of areas; health, education, care, culture, etc, has become a

defining feature of the UK political landscape for the last decade. Whilst up till now the writing and research in this thesis has for the most part been relegated to either the still-expanding field of curatorial studies, drawing internationally from a number of resources, and the research present in later chapters, conversely took place through interior and intimate recollections of my own having taken place within a small and specific field of my own work and life, this point in my writing will, momentarily, situate this research in relation to particular institutions.

While the next part of this chapter, *Moving From Institutions*, will refer to institutions of art, and more specifically institutions of contemporary art, this chapter will detail one of the many contexts that this research and nearly all artistic and curatorial activity within the UK is taking place under. I will discuss the political institution of austerity that has become so much part of any discussion around care in the arts since 2008.

Austerity's impact in the UK has been too broad, too far reaching, for me to adequately surmise its horrors within the confines of this thesis. The effects of governance that took place firstly under the joint Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition, then subsequent Conservative-majority governments, include (but are not limited to); the increase of university fees to over £9000 p.a.; a 'mortality gap' of excess deaths, estimated in some studies to be up to

120,000 people from 2010 to 2017<sup>76</sup>; increased child poverty; over 200 schools in England being unable to afford remaining open for 5 days a week<sup>77</sup>; an increase both in mental illness and ultimately, in suicides.<sup>78</sup>

Moving from late adolescence to adulthood in the years that followed the 2008 financial crash, the catalyst that in the eyes of political c/Conservatives<sup>79</sup> necessitated austerity measures, meant that the phantom of austerity hung over our heads like a cloud. Protected, somewhat, though weakly, as I was then, by devolution in the Scottish Government, and yet still exposed to the violences of such political decision-making, meant that the notion of public cuts accompanied my own development into a field of work – the arts, the curatorial – that was one of those most vulnerable to such actions. Having been brought up by women carers and nurses, the longer austerity bore on, the more freely the people in my family expressed political feeling (namely, hatred) without embarrassment, in a manner that was usually only reserved for Margaret Thatcher and the thousands of livelihoods she destroyed in our region. Also

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<sup>76</sup> Johnathan Watkins, Wahyu Wulaningsih,, Charlie Da Zhou, Dominic C Marshall, Guia D C Sylianteng, Phyllis G Dela Rosa, Viveka A Miguel, Rosalind Raine, Lawrence P King, Mahiben Maruthappu, “Effects of health and social care spending constraints on mortality in England: a time trend analysis”, *BMJ open*, 7, 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Sally Weale, “English Schools Can’t Afford to Teach Five Days a Week”, *The Guardian*, 2019. [://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/04/figures-reveal-english-schools-cant-afford-to-teach-five-days-a-week](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/04/figures-reveal-english-schools-cant-afford-to-teach-five-days-a-week) (last accessed: 16.12.22).

<sup>78</sup> China Mills, “‘Dead people don’t claim’: A psychopolitical autopsy of UK austerity suicides,” *Critical social policy*, 38, (2018.): 302–322.

<sup>79</sup> I here use both lower and uppercase C to denote the spectrum of political proponents of austerity including the Liberal Democrat party, who, in coalition with the Conservatives, voted in austerity policies, as well as centrist Labour of the time, leaving opposition of austerity to the then relatively small Scottish National Party and other minority parties such as The Green Party and Plaid Cymru

being the first in my (both immediate and extended) family to go to university, the weight of expectation was inherently linked to the precarity of the field I felt myself heading towards, the decisions that led me to this line of work and life were not simply ones of capability in an intellectual sense, but also political ones.

Austerity was once positioned by Conservative politicians as something not undertaken lightly, a difficult decision to make, but something that was an economic necessity, something that required sacrifice by all. The bulk of these measures took place under the Liberal-Conservative coalition before successive Conservative majorities and minor-governments working with British Unionist Terrorist-linked Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland. In the years following these huge numbers of cuts many indicators of quality of life have drastically fallen, with the justification in taking such action increasingly being regarded as nothing more than a political choice<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> Jack Peat, "Austerity Has Been The Most Self-defeating Choice in a Generation," *The London Economic*, 2021. Available Online: <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/opinion/austerity-has-been-the-most-self-defeating-political-choice-in-a-generation/04/03/> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

## Moving From Institutions

Instead of contributing and attending to the already fiercely occupied site of discourse of instituting<sup>81</sup> and infrastructuring, I want to consider the *self* and the *other*, both within the space of the social imaginary, and subsequently within the imagined space of the curatorial. I am hoping that by spending time thinking through spaces of shared political relation, an understanding of subjective encounters and the role of self and other within a relational, curatorial practice can take place. It is notable that the research questions anchoring this thesis are all ones that do not make the institution the object of study in either of them. However, there is a necessity here for me to demonstrate why exactly this is, to give an overview of some of the ways the institution is being engaged with in contemporary curatorial thinking, and lastly, to show that the knowledge generated in this thesis is not necessarily in direct opposition to this, or to any engagement with the institution, but instead a complementary and additional way of thinking through subjectivities emergence within curatorial literature.

In the field of curatorial enquiry, itself becoming more and more populated, Simon Sheikh makes a convincing case in writing on the relationships between imaginations, instituting (the practices that uphold or introduce values,

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<sup>81</sup> Simon Sheikh, "The Magmas: On Institutions and Instituting" in: *How Institutions think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse* edited by Paul O'Neill; Lucy Steeds and Mick Wilson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017) 126-131.

structures, or processes within institutions), and doing things *differently*<sup>82</sup>. Sheikh's previous roles include both as institutional director of Overgarden, Institute of Contemporary Art in Copenhagen, as well as independent curating projects, and as a Programme Director at Goldsmiths College's renowned Curating masters programme. Indeed, in his essay *The Magmas*, Sheikh articulates that within processes of instituting, accruing and practicing through the institution, and its specific processes that structures, identities and subjectivities have the opportunity to emerge from these structures as well as make themselves part of such mechanisms. In making the case that institutions should perform *differently*<sup>83</sup> Sheikh articulates not simply that institutional processes should be changed or altered to suit the current political or social conditions they are situated within, but instead that the spaces of instituting are opportunities to employ imagination as one part of a process that has very real effects and affects on the discourses that create such political and social conditions. Within instituting processes, we as cultural workers and organisers have the opportunity to embed and practice values through what we do. Doing so within the midst of a socio-political lurch to the right is exactly what I think of in reading Sheikh's plea to 'institute as if it were possible'.<sup>84</sup> Possibility, futurity, potentiality, these imaginary practices that bring together the abstract figure of the future, or perhaps a time that is not-here, is something I will

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Emphasis original author's

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 126.

discuss at greater length and with greater depth later in my research. This specifically will be addressed in *Chapter 8: Curatorial / Proximity*, so as to generate these ideas with neighbouring concepts from which they emerged in my research. For now I want to hold onto this idea of operating in different ways, in manners which might disturb the afore-mentioned neutrality of the curator, or which embody the care and socialities described by Reckitt, as well as the decentred or dislocated authorship that Larsen and Andreason align their thinking with.

When I think about what these moments of doing things *differently* might mean, I find myself aligning my thinking with vulnerability, and remembering moments where vulnerabilities have brought themselves to the fore within collective discussions. I am thinking of an intimate session led by a curator during which we, the participants, introduced ourselves and how we were feeling. So used to spaces in which admission of fatigue or exhaustion was not common I remember the first few answers being the expected *excited about today* or *I'm looking forward to talking together*, until slowly individuals became more and more honest and began describing anxiety, tiredness, or frustration. I am also reminded of discussions taking place on a rug made by artist Kirsty Russell, unfolding between a small group of people as the sounds of a screening programme next door echoed slightly through the space.

Whilst these moments took place within institutions of varying sizes, it is not with the institutional in mind that I am writing of these. Instead what I remember are the small intimacies, the encouragement that took place within such spaces to be a little more vulnerable. My interest in doing such things differently, even in seemingly small ways is one that is invested in the interpersonal. This does not mean I am uninterested in the transformative potentials of such actions and practices for institutions, but merely admitting that this is not my object of study. Problems arise for me in reading the work that Sheikh is proposing when he employs a linear way of thinking about such world-making when he contrasts tradition with ‘progress and evolution’<sup>85</sup>, which I find to be a very conventional way to think about the ways that action, gesture and practice can embed themselves within ways of working and living. Despite this, I return repeatedly to Sheikh’s idea of an institutional imaginary, its tightly bound relationships to the possible and the conventional, and indeed the urgency with which it offers itself within a time where ‘care’ has emerged repeatedly as a key concept within recent curatorial research. This emergence comes within a long line of critique directed at the increasing ambition for arts

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 127.



organisations and organisers to play the roles of social carers as the welfare state shrinks exponentially<sup>86</sup>.

In recent years, this shift for discussions at all organisational levels to encompass notions of care and nourishment take place against the backdrop of nearly 10 years of Conservative austerity. What I am critiquing is not the desire to care, or the desire to hold and support moments of emotion within certain artistic or curatorial spaces. Instead, I am suggesting that when we begin to think about the relations of care and affect within curatorial practices, we recognise that these relations are not defined in ends and limits by the institutions with whom we work. But instead, that these relations are present because we are human, and to complicate that further, we may hold certain affective modes dependent on our gender, sex, sexual orientation, race, religion, abilities. Particular in that these identities or ways of living either contribute to the invisibilisation of our bodies within institutions, or in representation, with its many problems. Just as the personal cannot be separated from the political, the ways that other'd bodies become signifiers within institutional settings has a

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<sup>86</sup> For critical academic writing on Blairite policy on arts and culture that has largely remained intact of been strengthened through austerity see: Oli Mould, "The creative industries are hurting, not helping artists—we need a new model", *Prospect Magazine*, 2019. Available Online: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/creative-industries-new-labour-labour-precarity-art-funding-union-oli-mould> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

long history of academic critique.<sup>87</sup> Helena Reckitt surmises this more succinctly than most when she writes that

‘While continuing to pressurize institutions into giving fairer representation to artists from diverse backgrounds, feminists also question the logic of participating in a system that undermines their ability to care for themselves and others’.<sup>88</sup>

Here Reckitt questions institutional logics of representation when they are married with other working processes and infrastructures that politicises solely what is presented to the public, whilst systemically reducing and reducing the time and resources staff have to adequately *care*, yes, but also to make time for the informalities of affect and conversation that I have noted proliferating across much curatorial writing and accounts of curating histories.

These ends and limits to how the institution can begin to function is part of my reasoning towards a shift in the curatorial towards an introspective, inter-personal thinking. Institutions are not the providers of care, affect or emotion,

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<sup>87</sup> For contemporaneous discourse analyses of criticism levelled at early Black British Art exhibitions, bemoaning both right-wing and liberal political groups pre-occupying themselves with the representation more so than the work itself, see: Kobena Mercer, ‘Black Art and the burden of representation’ in *Welcome to the Jungle: New positions in Black Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>88</sup> Helena Reckitt., “Introduction: Being Seen, The Politics of Visibility in Feminist Art”. In: *The Art of Feminism*. Ed. by Helena Reckitt; Hilary Robinson; Amy Tobin and Luci Gosling (San Francisco/London: Chronicle Books/Tate Publishing, 2018): 5

these are things that circulate and form between bodies and between those caring and those being cared for – positionalities which are by no means fixed, even within a curatorial relationship. Care is not an action that exists solely within the confines of the institution, and nor is institutional care one that solely happens within the workplace. Care work, affect, labour, these all bleed out of borders and red lines and email inboxes into the work of our personal and daily lives.

The writing that theorists such as Sheikh and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez have undertaken recently have begun to acknowledge the production of social and imaginative space within art institutions, and how these are specifically bound up with subjectivities and affect. While they house themselves in the bricks and mortar of institutional walls, there is a shared impulse in much recent writing to engage with the institution through more affective than institutional means. This move, though slow, points towards the direction of my own research. Within these consideration of institutions, bodily and subjective accounts of curatorial work appears and reappears, and it is this type of consideration I am interested in. In an intersubjective mode for considering the ‘curatorial’.

## De-neutralising the Curatorial

Lucy Lopez references both Sheikh and Petrešin-Bachelez in her writing *On Care and Parrhesia*<sup>89</sup>, which both draws from a range of curatorial thinking on care as well as detailing the development of policies and structures for care within Eastside Projects, where her research was taking place through practice. Lopez's position as an independent curator and researcher within the institution is in addition to her previous experience as Curator at BAK, Utrecht, and independent projects across the United Kingdom. What Lopez, Petrešin-Bachelez, and Sheikh do successfully is to begin to offer considerations of institutions' inter-human relationships that successfully transition from the institution being considered as a series of structures and values, some that have been there longer than others, and others that will remain there longer than others. And instead they have moved this discourse towards the institution as a living, breathing and changing thing, with different bodies and affects circulating within, between, through it. This forms a necessary shift away from the formal, clinical handling of the terms 'curator' and 'curatorial' in more historic writing on the subject, detailed previously, and nods towards a bodily consideration of these relational workings:

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<sup>89</sup> Lucy Lopez, "On Care and Parrhesia", *Temporary Art Review*, 2017. Available Online: <https://temporaryartreview.com/on-care-and-parrhesia/> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

This struggle over management is also simultaneously a struggle over the *bios* of the institution, viewed most directly through the experience of the art worker, and the anxiety and exhaustion which this often entails.<sup>90</sup>

Lopez here invokes, *bios*, pointing to the political life of institutions but moving beyond the political life of institutions as an abstract concept distant from ourselves, then details bodily reactions that emerge from the political frameworks that are both upheld and distributed by them. In reading this portion of Lopez's short text, I am reminded of a conversation I had whilst living in Scotland. During a mentoring session, I described difficulties I was having managing the demands of a project I was then running, which included the negotiation of use of a public space in Glasgow, as well as juggling recent personal issues that had left me exhausted. My mentor told me that it was my job, as curator, specifically, to not allow any of this anxiety or stress pass between myself and the artist. I was to present to the artists I was working with a coping face and a steady hand. Whilst to this day I would agree that a necessary part of any curatorial role is attending to conversations with artists with care and conscientiousness, and I agree with them on preventing negative affects to stagnate, circulate, or hold themselves between people within processes such as this, it made me wonder how the surrounding conditions of a racist, sexist, anti-queer social realm might make this 'coping' more difficult. The advice given was correct, but the conditions surrounding my

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

implementation of that advice was more complexly problematic. Even with no true ‘institution’ involved, I found myself performing institutionally, the logics of protection and care which are, of course, completely human were shared between myself and those I was working with freely, however even within this relatively modest project, I had found myself restraining other emotive and bodily urges like difficulty and frustration that I had internalised, were logics that paralleled that of institutions. It became the first of many moments where I realised the capacity for institutionalisation to occur bodily, a concept I will expand on later in writing surrounding thoughts in common with Andrea Fraser’s statement that ‘We are the institution’<sup>91</sup>, a reference that has been repeatedly sign-posted to within this thesis. What has emerged since that conversation across institutional and academic discussions of the curatorial has been more affective discourses that account for conditions of difficulty. Following this emergence brings a particular relevance to my research and even acknowledging that yes, affective and even intimate discourses have emerged within curatorial work not in spite of, but within and as a result of specific conditions of difficulty. What remains to be expanded on in this part of the chapter is to think about different particularities of care both for others and for the self.

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<sup>91</sup> Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” 278–283.

So, as with the institutional logic, the care for other's bodies becomes more prioritised than care for the self<sup>92</sup> theorists including Lopez, discussed above, and another number of women-identifying curators have referred increasingly to the figure of the 'coping curator'.<sup>93</sup> The body of the institution has now been accompanied by the bodies that inhabit it. And they are tired, they are worn, they are looking for change. These images and imaginings, of workers and labourers stretched and tired is, of course, related intimately to the effects and implementation of austerity detailed in the previous part of this chapter. There is a visibility of the violence of the state and of the institution through these exhausted forms.

From this point on, having introduced the contentious site of the institution/the institutional, I will look to affect and its modes of appearing between bodies. In this instance not between the [institutional] body and the [institutionalised] bodies, but instead between bodies of subjugation, that find themselves living and working together within what I have above described as 'the curatorial'.

What I hope to do in this thesis is to move the concerns of the relational within curatorial discourse from the more institutional and infrastructural, to the

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<sup>92</sup> For writing on care of the self see: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, First Edition (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

<sup>93</sup> For a more detailed conversation surrounding the figure of the 'coping curator' from a feminist perspective, see: Victoria Horne, Kirsten Lloyd, Jenny Richards and Catherine Spencer, "Taking Care: Feminist Curatorial Pasts, Presents and Futures" in *Curating in Feminist Thought, On Curating* 29, no. 1, 2016. Available Online: <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-29-reader/taking-care-feminist-curatorial-pasts-presents-and-futures.html#.Yrn96JPMK34> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

intimate and the affective. I will move the discursive field from occupying the institution and its people as those removed from disembodiment and towards a configuration of a number of individual bodies, intimate affects circulating between them and the relationship between this and curatorial thinking. This pushes towards one of the objectives of this research – to make use of the affective and emotional forces that circulate around thinking of such labour and practice in developing a method of writing poetically and with relationships to a number of works and thinkings of the curatorial present and living within it. Moving from infrastructural and institutional ways of thinking about the value of such care is necessary not only to decouple one from the other and to reclaim it for ourselves, but also to contribute another method of engaging with such concerns in addition to work around instituting which finds itself becoming rapidly developed and embedded within discourses.

This piece of writing will move from a brief venture into the role of relationality and constitutive encounter, to articulating the role of affect, desire and value, and finally will imagine how these bodily enquiries might figure into the spaces of curatorial practice. As I have briefly demonstrated above and will do so more extensively in later parts of my research, there is an increasing dependence on notions of affective modes within the art world to be bound up with institutions. What is necessary now, is to consider relationality in the curatorial, not as a



result or dependency from the institution, but an inherently affective condition that emerges from both shared and not-shared political subjectivities.

The way by which this shift will take place will be largely through practice-informed writing, with reflexive writing that enfolds conceptual and material concerns of such intimacies and affects within itself. Later in this thesis I will discuss specifically writing as a curatorial action and link it to the urgencies of writing critically as well as beautifully as described in the work of certain scholars. The importance of writing specifically as a curatorial process within this thesis, and particularly as it relates to other ongoing curatorial practices, became increasingly evident over the course of this research as it found itself taking place within a time of remoteness and separation within various degrees of restriction and solitude during the ongoing health crisis.

## Chapter 3: Somewhere

I am leafing through the volume of a substantial collection of essays on curatorial theory. It is one of those types of curatorial volumes that has become almost prolific recently. Screens of names, mostly men, a few women, and fewer non-European authors included. One of the names catches my eye and I wonder for a second before remembering where it is I have seen her name mentioned. And then I remember reading an article in *Le Quotidien de l'Art*, a French art newspaper, entitled

*Harcèlement moral à Bétonsalon ?*<sup>94</sup>

*Moral Harassment*<sup>95</sup> *at Bétonsalon?*

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<sup>94</sup> Magali Lesauvage, "Harcèlement Moral à Bétonsalon?", *Le Quotidien de l'Art*, 2019. Available Online: <https://www.lequotidiendelart.com/articles/16309-harc%C3%A8lement-moral-%C3%A0-b%C3%A9tonsalon.html> (last accessed: 16.12.22)

<sup>95</sup> "Moral Harassment" is a specific French legal term defined as below in the French Public Service website: <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F2354>

"Moral harassment is manifested by repeated acts likely to lead, for the person who is subjected to it, to a deterioration of his working conditions which can lead to:

- an attack on their rights and dignity,
- deterioration in physical or mental health,
- or a threat to his professional development.

If you are the victim of moral harassment, you can benefit from the protection of the law, whether you are an employee, trainee or apprentice.

These actions are prohibited, even if there is no hierarchical link between you and the perpetrator."

The article detailed difficulties that had arisen at Bétonsalon, a gallery known for its research-based programme, and its collaboration with Université de Paris, with over thirty former and current employees signing a letter to the board citing harassment and mismanagement. The Director's name, Mélanie Bouteloup accompanied a quote from her responding to such serious claims with, simply:

*Il y a toujours des erreurs dans une structure.*

*(There are always some problems in an institution.)*

I think some more about the gesture I feel within this phrase. A dust away from oneself. A simple explanation, that, *toujours*.

Always.

In a gallery, perhaps real and perhaps a fiction, somewhere else, a curator meets a friend of mine in a gallery in the second floor of a former industrial building, overlooking rooftops and city streets.

My friend tells the curator they know of their work through [Redacted], a project that took place in [A Gallery] located in [A City, A Country] whilst they

were working as curator at [An Institution]. The curator says, half-jokingly and half-concernedly

*How did you survive there?*

It is laughed off. Shrugged off. Pushed with great effort off.

The first moment, seeing the name of a Director, whose name has also appeared close to the words *Harcèlement Moral* very recently, presenting their research, being accompanied in presenting said research, being invited to discuss institutions, being welcomed to present again.

There is a proximity between this name and this accusation and the invitations continue.

These malpractices, errors, are played out in full sight. It reaches people not only through the publicness of the art press – and in fact, rarely would the art press publish such criticism of a highly regarded curator – but also through conversation and gossip. And the people who hear about it, and who are removed enough from the eyes of these real or imaginary storms speak about it openly.

The art world is a social microcosm where professionalism and personal histories are entwined in daily life. The names that you read in journals, books, or online are ones you might meet during a seminar, an evening performance, an exhibition preview. Or they might be ones that you encounter in a bar in Peckham, a messy fundraiser in Newcastle, or in a flat party in Glasgow, where the highest earner at the party is the one rooting through cheap bottles of champagne cooling in a fridge for a precariously employed artists' birthday at the stroke of midnight.

I am writing this whilst being remote from loved ones, both family and friends. The bleeds and leaks of gossip and speak have slowed down greatly since lockdown and yet when I see a name, and its closeness to these words, I am reminded instantly of many current and former employees mistreated by so many directors and so many curators who have exploited colleagues and staff, I return myself to thinking through such relationships not via the form or upholding structure of institutions, but instead think of them through series of relations, affects, circulations of both love and violence that distribute amongst selves.

I am aware in writing this, the seeming lack of logic that there is in expending so much energy defining such institutional harms, whilst at the same time coming to the conclusion that 'the institution' is not my object of study. And yet

this is what I feel I must do. I cannot ignore these negative affects and relations that circulate both between individuals as well as between institutions, and I am consecrating my felt understanding of them here so as to not erase this important part of any research that defines itself by relation. It is important for the structure of this thesis to say now what is spurring my energy within this research whilst also defining what lies beyond its ends and limits. It is the violence of the institution that makes my own contribution to this field, that is more concerned with intimate ways of writing the curatorial, important and necessary. It makes the alternative space of beauty in writing and thinking necessary.

As Judith Butler writes ‘relationality is not by itself a good thing’<sup>96</sup>, and indeed Butler’s own definition of relation, which I will go on to expand on soon, details the presence of a ‘destructive potential’ within all relation. In a conversation between German art historian Beatrice Von Bismarck and independent curator Bill Brown, Bismarck positions relationality as something defined through materiality, Brown agrees and notes that what interests him in the curatorial ‘is that it is necessarily about space. It’s not *just* about relations’<sup>97</sup> (emphasis my own). Here I hope to make the imaginary space of the

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<sup>96</sup> Judith Butler, “Judith Butler on the Case for Non-Violence”, *Literary Hub*, 2020. Available Online: <https://lithub.com/judith-butler-on-the-case-for-nonviolence/> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

<sup>97</sup> Beatrice Von Bismarck, Bill Brown and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, *Toward the Curatorial Thing*, in *Curatorial Things*, ed. by Beatrice Von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (Berlin: Sternberg) 96.

curatorial, its affects and relations the realm of study within which I am working. The potentials of the imaginary and of the subjective will be examined in *Chapter 6: Curatorial /Proximities* and subsequently will become method for writing throughout points in this research. Situating writing as a site of transformative potential in *Chapter 10: Writing Affect, Writing Emotion* will be a key contribution of this thesis that links the definitions of relation that are expanded on within this chapter along with the broadening horizons of curatorial thought through loving, indigenous and queer thinking, as well as through critical thought in Black feminist thinking.

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I have already provided a brief literary walkthrough of the concerns of authorship and institutionalization that has accompanied curatorial discourses since the 1970s, and a rationale behind why it is that tackling the institution as a central point of study is not the centre of this thesis. I intend now to further develop the definition of relation that has been introduced within this chapter through a number of ways of writing. Firstly, I will introduce a subjectivised encounter I had with an artwork by Alex Martinis Roe several years ago. I will use my remembering of this encounter, and the number of affective moments both in the work itself and within the surrounding conditions and contexts to show in practice, a writing of relation that might be considered curatorial. The reasoning behind this is not only to consider relation in an expansive sense, but also the curatorial in an expansive sense – i.e. in ways that are not bound by

confines of curating as exhibition-making, but instead using the notion of curatorial knowledge to bring together a different manner of writing within the work of creating definitions within this thesis.

In the following writing I will argue that whilst the curatorial, as a frame of reflection through which values and subjectivities enter and circulate, is indeed dependent on space, such space is not a setting concretised by institutions nor does it act as a stable ground from which to relate to one another, nor will I be thinking through Brown's sentiment by considering concrete spaces such as the studio or the gallery, instead considering the more abstract 'spaces' of reflection, affect, and shared language and indeed, other forms that imaginary curatorial space could take. In treating considerations of 'space' in relation to the curatorial this way, I hope to develop writing that departs from the frustration and emotion evidenced above and substantiates a desire for vulnerability and alliances to be embodied and emerge through the curatorial.

when we speak of a poetics of Relation, we no longer need to add: relation between what and what? This is why the French word Relation, which functions some- what like an intransitive verb, could not correspond, for example, to the English term relationship.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics Of Relation*. 2nd ed (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2010). 27–28.



## Chapter 4: An Exterior Relation

In this writing I will define my understanding of relationality within the context of this research, through a few key references. These references are primarily concerned with actions of sharing and relating to one-another, which I hope to situate within curatorial practice and theory. I will pay particular attention to methodologies or processes and thinking that might be understood as ‘queer’ within current curatorial writing, as well as using a remembering of my own experience of viewing an artwork by Alex Martinis Roe, an artist-filmmaker whose projects focus on the lives and afterlives of feminist genealogy<sup>99</sup>, as a means of introducing more experimental curatorial writing that lingers on the feelings and bodily sensations of viewing particularly affective artworks that might usually be eschewed in favour of more traditional academic and critical forms of writing.

What I am doing within this chapter, by reflexively engaging with this multi-bodied work of Martinis Roe’s is to provide a primary, working-example of what I will go on to define as a particular type of ‘curatorial writing’.

Curatorial writing as a phrase might normally conjure images of the many types of texts and copy associated with curatorial work, programme notes, exhibition

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<sup>99</sup> More details available through Alex Martinis Roe’s own website: <https://alexmartinisroe.com/Info>

texts, etc. What I am referring to here specifically is a type of writing that developed organically with my own subjective engagements with a rich work that provided particular histories and moments from which to draw thinking. But instead of configuring this approach as extractive, where Martinis Roe's work becomes an illustration or example of the methods I wish to convey, it instead becomes yet another point of research, something with which this writing can be read alongside. In situating my own interaction with this artwork as a site of emotional and affective shifts that results in a reflexive thinking on key concepts that build later arguments in my thesis. Namely, by engaging with my own memorialisation of my engagement with this artwork I will show how the affective potentials within it lead to developing more specifically my own thinking around relation and difference, key to the later chapters of this thesis. By situating engagement with artworks as both an intellectual and affective, emotional site of exchange, I will have demonstrated the potential for relationships within contemporary to undertake these transformative potentials. Following from this, this method of reflexive writing-with will be rendered within thinking of my own curatorial relationships in *Chapter 6: Curatorial / Proximities* and *Chapter 10: Writing Affect / Writing Emotion*.

Alex Martinis Roe's *It was about opening up the very notion that there was a particular perspective*<sup>100</sup> is a three-channel film installation which details a number of events that took place within leftist-artistic circles in Sydney during the 1970s and 80s. I will go on to consider this experience as both illustrative and constitutive of a type of relationality that does not flatten distinctions or divergences, but instead offers a sharedness that recognises difference in the vein of the 'shared precarity' present in Judith Butler's more recent writing on grievability. Whilst this concept of grievability appears in Butler's and will appear in my own writing, it is not a key concept to this thesis, but is, however, an important mode of understanding Butler's own models of relation, particularly those that do not rely on a linear transitive gesture from one to another. The reason to explore this further than I have previously in this chapter is to link such thinking around relation with ideas that have emerged as dominant in curatorial discourses increasingly since the 1990s, with writings on ecology, publics, and co-production becoming increasingly visible in a line of theoretical enquiry<sup>101</sup>. This step is important to building towards one of the key enquiries of my research – to ascertain the value and indeed necessity for emotional and affective means to be present within curatorial practices and writing, to imbue recollections and critical thinking within this field as things

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<sup>100</sup> Alex Martinis Roe, *It was about opening up the very notion that there was a particular perspective*, High definition video and 16mm transferred to digital, 2015–17. More information here: <https://www.alexmartinisroe.com/To-Become-Two> (last accessed 16.12.22).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

and methods that have the potential to be relational and loving, radical qualities to possess in an increasingly hostile world.

These concerns bring to mind Foucault's notion of heterotopia, which has been particularly formative in both the writing of Judith Butler and my own (as well as many others, I am sure) understandings of her work. The conception of a spaces that are 'other' that mirror, trouble, or deviate from assumed, usual functions has become particularly formative to my own understandings of Butler's conception of sharedness in difference, and also affords a useful critique of the aforementioned work of Nicolas Bourriaud, whose writing, as I mentioned in *Chapter 2: Curatorial Relation* previously in this thesis, on social practices within the art world are so dependent on relationships between artists and audiences, that they fail to consider the surrounding contexts of labour and life outwith the artwork. While inheriting Foucault's pre-occupation with the discursive as both a form and method for legitimising the 'social' within 'socially engaged' practices, Bourriaud extends little critique beyond the interiors of works of social practice artworks.

Within curatorial writing, which I am here proposing as writing which is intimate in its relation to art works, I will further define the 'relation' that has been the subject of this chapter and define methods within such intimacies in relation to artworks as queer. This chapter provides a model, an example for the

affective power of artworks and writing as engagement with works in developing critical thinking. And building on this in the next chapter will be building a specifically queer position from which to enact such writing, opening up potential for more useful subjectivities within curatorial thinking.

I have sat down to watch Alex Martinis Roe's film *It was about opening the very notion that there was a particular perspective*, in gallery spaces, twice over the past year and a half. The first time was in Melbourne in January 2018. Her work was featured as part of *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on Art and Feminism*, a group exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. The second instance was on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 2019, in the closing weekend of Nottingham Contemporary's *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance*, at which point I had begun my research for this thesis.

The project is a multi-site, multi-work body of theory, practice and research that connected feminist genealogies across decades, continents and multiple positionalities. With a series of films and workshops, it developed in exploring differing practices of feminism in spaces as divergent as a women's bookshop in Milan, archives of the university that was attended by Europe's first women student in Utrecht, and a number of cultural and political happenings in Sydney that followed from an initial university philosophy department's strike. The relations that form across this body of work is mirrored in my own desire for

connectedness within my writing. This is present in my hoping to imagine and therefore forge connections to particular histories, artworks, solidarities or lines of inheritance. I am proposing here that this writing has utilised a cruising methodology, in that it reads particular gestures within the work to articulate a relationship that is, as Elizabeth Freedman writes ‘intimately involved with corporeal sensations’, and also relies upon prioritising ‘connectedness’<sup>102</sup>. The material reality of my own body interacting with the work, and indeed others interacting with the work, and also to connect myself to queer practices of world-making, past and present, wilfully brings myself to the veins of utopian practices extant in the work. However imagined or tenuous these connections may be, I would argue that the opportunity for queer people to insert themselves into histories of invisibility and ungrounded material archives is a central method of dealing with fragments of history, and often, a lack of linear inheritance to such histories<sup>103</sup>. Imagining an inheritance to the struggles and political ruptures I came to witness in that gallery space was what I was afforded by spending time with Alex Martinis Roe’s *It was about opening the very notion that there was a particular perspective*. This writing is thus situated as an example of the potentials of such methods which have been deployed as and through writing within this thesis, and later in *Chapter 10: Writing Affect*,

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<sup>102</sup> Cited in Fiona Anderson, “Cruising as Method and Its Limits,” *LUX Moving Image*, 2017. Available Online: <https://lux.org.uk/cruising-method-limits-fiona-anderson#:~:text=Cruising%20as%20method%20is%20a,be%20consumed%20in%20this%20way>. (last accessed: 16.12.22).

<sup>103</sup> David M. Halperin, *How To Be Gay*, First Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

*Writing Emotion* I will return to unpack this intimate methodology described by Freedman and others in regard to my own practice of writing as it intersects with a reflexive curatorial thinking.

With these relations of what-is-shared and what-is-not in mind, I hope that through defining my own understanding of relationality through this experience of an artwork, I can employ processes that critically consider the relationships between material and historical contexts interior to Martinis Roe's work, as well as my own subjective encounter with it, that in itself is informed by other relationships of personal and social histories. I did not write this experience with the intention of neatly tying together a number of concerns I am addressing within my research. Instead this writing came about on a hunch that undergoing a process of writing, following a thread with no specific end in mind, might help me to articulate my own thinking around the political shared stages that Butler and Arendt write of, the physicality of the work in gallery spaces, the social and physical exchanges that its installation enabled, and to accompany further writing on curatorial relations. This writing is the beginning of my own attempt to make use of my own particular experience with this art object as a beginning to developing a writing and practice methodology in which the self and its material interactions with theory and art become opportunity for enacting queer relations within a curatorial practice. As already signposted in

this part of the chapter I will look to write more deeply on this in *Chapter 10: Writing Affect / Writing Emotion*.

I will use this writing not as an opportunity to employ *It was about opening up the very notion that there was a particular perspective*, as a tool to illustrate an idea of relationality, but instead think of my own approximation with this art work, and the subsequent act of remembering and critiquing, as well as the historical content of the work including protest and dissent, as part of a ‘curatorial time-travel’<sup>104</sup>.

This phrase, ‘curatorial time travel’, was first uttered by Marlene Smith, in a guest lecture at Birmingham School of Art, in referring to a recent period of ‘looking back’ at materials from the BLK Art Group (of which she was a cofounder) as well as wading through more personal belongings and family materials as her mother’s memory deteriorated due to Alzheimer’s. Smith’s reflecting on this time travel was namely that it was imperfect, that memories, unstable and imperfect as they are, were still a useful reflexive tool. This is where I am situating reflexive thinking and memory within a wider methodology in engaging with Martinis Roe’s work. The value in this particular

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<sup>104</sup> I here refer to a phrase used by Marlene Smith, in a guest lecture at Birmingham School of Art, who referred to a recent period of ‘looking back’ at materials from the Black Art Group (of which she was cofounder) as well as wading through family materials, and personal belongings of her Mother as her memory deteriorates through Alzheimers. The talk that took place was one that oscillated between looking at archival materials, catalogued, dated and held in museum collections and conversely discussing memories and more fleeting moments of object-knowledge from family photo albums, heirlooms, and furniture.



work by Martinis Roe is not one bounded by its connection to a current critical enquiry by myself, or an application of gender or political theory that substantiates the methodologies employed by the artist within a particular field of writing. Instead, I hope that this particular piece of writing – and engagement with a specific artwork – will provide a foundational prelude to a continuing engagement with the notion of relationality in contemporary art, but particularly, subjective curatorial practices. This writing begins with memory, with subjective rememberings and thinking that is hard to corroborate, instead relies on a trust linking myself as writer, and you, as reader.

## **Familiarities**

The day I visited the ACCA, it was fiercely hot. And unlike in Sydney, where I had been staying until days before, there was no coastal breeze that would occasionally hug you and give you some light relief from the searing heat. It felt more inescapable in a city nestled on a river leading to a bay, with the ocean just a little farther away. It was the middle of summer and I'd walked through the city's business district, trying to find shade in the city's botanic gardens, just south of the Yarra river. Even under the dense roof of palm trees above my head, the only relief from the heat I could imagine working was that of an air-conditioned gallery.

And so, I headed to the southern tip of Melbourne's city centre, past apartments of glass and metal that wouldn't look out of place in a holiday resort, and unlike other parts of the city I'd visited previously, the streets were lined, not with coffee shops and street vendors, but hoardings advertising universities, building developers, new precincts, and a concert hall. Behind a number of these walls that followed me from the main tram stop to the gallery were large swathes of ground, dug up soil more orange than at home, waiting to be built upon.

I made my way through the entrance of the centre and was immediately met with a wall of cold air, and a darkened room. I awkwardly made my way through asking if I needed a ticket for the exhibition, I was told the galleries were free and so I walked into the first gallery space. I encountered a wall on entering. I cannot quite remember what was on the wall, posters I think, but I could be wrong. Regardless of what was there I don't think I was impressed by them or particularly taken with the work. Moving round the wall, which was situated in the middle of the room, blocking a view of the huge space behind it, I then noticed *It was about opening up the very notion that there was a particular perspective*, set amongst a number of other works on walls, on the floor and accompanied by various furniture with books and zines scattered across.

The installation itself consists of three films on separate TV monitors. They are on stands, all monitors standing at the same height, and in this iteration at least, were curved slightly around the black stools sat in front of them. Before looking to images of the show online, I couldn't adequately describe fully, the exact form of the stands the televisions were on, but I had mentioned to friends, colleagues and artists that they had reminded me of the ones used to wheel around televisions at school, ones familiar to anyone at school in the late 90s and early 2000s, to anyone who remembers images of the burning twin towers of New York City being wheeled around on them.

Each screen had a looping video playing on it, with some moments of darkness at the beginning – or end – of each work. On each screen there was a variety of materials that made up the works on show. Shaky shots of a woman walking around a Sydney suburb, footage of feminist films made in the city including Pat Fiske's *Rocking the Foundations* (1985), and Helen Grace and Erika Addis's *Serious Undertakings* (1983), and buildings and archival photographs of various houses of the inner city.

I had just arrived from Sydney only a few days before visiting the exhibition, and when I sat to watch it, a number of the images presented in archival and appropriated footage were recognisable to me. The Inner West neighbourhoods I had so recently frequented were presented there, littered in graffiti, with spray

paint covering pastel coloured terrace houses, intricate iron-lace balconies in varying states of disrepair, with groups of queer women gathering together. Shots of buildings as they stood now were accompanied by archival photographs, or voices of women, activists, and Aboriginal people talking about what had happened in the years before, their alternative living arrangements and family units.

Some of these images were familiar to me in my recent visits to the city, a familiarity with the architecture or the hilly streets, but in writing this now, in remembering my experience of this work within that space, I am thinking of other, older memories I hold of Australia from a few years I lived there as a child. Whilst I do not think these memories are in any way necessary in a reading or consideration of this work by Martinis Roe, I am interested in how my faint bodily memories of this part of the world, to which I do not belong, have been changed or at least added to by my encounter with this installation.

My memories of this kind are vague, I remember the style of housing that was so different to home – thinner walls, long hallways with all the rooms to one side in the hope that breezes could pass through, and large sliding doors that opened to dry grass and paving stones that would blister my feet if I ran out barefooted. Other recollections I have of the place are as small but also as specific as my Mother shouting at me to put shoes on before going outside, cold

showers taken as often as we could when the water was available, and the weight of summer heat on my back.

Whilst my knowledge of Australia became reduced to knowledges of catchphrases, TV and film, and my Mother's constant disappointment with coffee quality in the UK, this encounter, with Martinis Roe's work, was a primary moment of re-evaluation for me. Considering a living history of politics, schisms, agitative working practices and protest. The bodily rememberings I had of Australia had little to compute with the conversations present in the work. And so, through this work I learned of a minor history of protest that came about when two graduates of The University of Sydney proposed a course of feminist philosophy.

The proposed course was initially accepted at a department level, with a few individual lecturers endorsing it, but was subsequently rejected by the established Philosophy department in the school, composed almost completely of white men, who believed feminism's politicism would taint and deprive the department of Philosophy's inherent purity. This process of acceptance to rejection came about partially through previous student attempts to democratise

the University, allowing all teaching staff (not just Professors) as well as students to participate in voting during departmental meetings.<sup>105</sup>

This rejection from the upper echelons of the university lead firstly to a strike by students within the department, which quickly, through the distribution of printed materials, general student meetings, and word of mouth, became a wider student and staff strike. In addition to this, and with particular attention given to it in this film, was the relationship between the students and the New South Wales' Builder's Labourer's Federation.<sup>106</sup> The relationship between the student body and the union was in no small part helped by a number of self-described communists involved in the federation, and so all maintenance or construction work on the University was halted in solidarity with the striking students and staff.<sup>107</sup>

After weeks of protest, which rather than acting as a sit-in, instead was a productive time for students and staff in instituting an alternative curriculum of gay studies courses, 'How to Depose a Professor' tutorials, and a regularly produced bulletin for distribution around both the University and the wide Inner West of the city.<sup>108</sup> Eventually the course was instated as a separate department,

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<sup>105</sup> Lewis d'Avigdor, "Let the Lunatics Run their Own Asylum: Participatory Democracy at the University of Sydney 1960–1979", (PhD. Thesis, Sydney: University of Sydney, 2011).

<sup>106</sup> James Frankling, "The Sydney Philosophy Disturbances", *Quadrant*, 43. (1999) 16–21.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

that of *General Philosophy*, with staff working on precarious contracts, and a responsively structured course that looked more to the collective endeavouring that began its existence in the first place than established forms of grading and development. Martinis Roe begins with telling a version of this story, using its concerns and approaches as a point of departure, rather than specifically its position in an Australian timeline of feminist thought. Other gestures and histories mentioned include those from groups including The Sydney Filmmaker's Co-op, Feminist Filmmakers, and the proliferation of *Working Papers*, a series of translations of continental philosophy that passed through the university and beyond through reading groups, friendships and other informal initiatives. The central action, the formation of this new philosophy school, is centred in the film as an influential break in convention, a gesture that influenced the relationships between the other actions and groups.

Moments that hold narratives from a number of different groups – graduates, students, staff, labourers, union leaders etc – are retroactively considered to form a portrait of an event worthy of consideration in the history of feminism, but also to create a discursive 'stage' which Hannah Arendt uses to describe the political<sup>109</sup>. Arendt's conception of the self becoming-public through speech and action, is a consideration that speaking and doing in public both stem from an

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<sup>109</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of The Mind*, First Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978): 21.

impetus to perform who we are, but additionally, to insert that individuality within a wider interdependency<sup>110</sup>. In these moments of performing ourselves, we are acting on a stage that is the relation to others – allowing us to recognise, interact and work with each other.

The publicness of the moments of political performance held by *It was about opening up the very notion that there was a particular perspective*, are examples of voices concretising their demands, wishes, and hopes, within a wider stage of subjectification. Student demands became entwined with workers' constraints in working conditions, a lack of representation of women within the philosophy department then lead to calls for a de-formalising of education. Within the work, these calls that ring out from the era they began in are accompanied by contemporary reflections of the effects of such vocalising, by meditations on other political moments including experiments in housing, the split of an artists' film co-operative, and a consideration of the shared and the distinct within all of this.



## Stages, Polyphonies, Lines

Splits by a group of women from the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative in protest of the original group's 'growing apolitical and amorphous quality'<sup>111</sup> are connected to Aboriginal rights protests through documentation and story-telling, artists' films from the era are bricolaged with tales of political dissidence and the departure from one life laying the ground to enter another. The web of associations that Martinis Roe weaves in this work is not a simple relationality based on shared personhood or humanity. Instead it speaks to me of a more complex intersubjectivity, where precarity became a condition in which groups began to align themselves together. Earlier in this thesis I described the social and political contexts within which 'difficult conditions' have emerged, and thus elicited a curatorial interest in care in response, and rather than employing a definition of relationality that is bound by the aforementioned notions of personhood, that are broad and attempt to make objectivity the foundation for shared conversation, Alex Martinis Roe's work performs political gestures and points to narratives across different eras within the work. The relation that is being defined here both through and with this work is one within which a manner of political actions, discursive spaces, and articulations of protest are curdled together. Rather than simple relations and lines linking one to another

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<sup>111</sup> Jeni Thornley, "Sixteen Year of Women and Film Groups: A Personal Recollection", In *Don't Shoot Darling*. ed. by Blonski, Annette; Creed, Barbara; Freiberg, Freda. (Richmond: Greenhouse Publications, 1987) 89–90.

through family, friendship or conventional means, I am here interested in the emergent logic aligned to Judith Butler's notion that precariousness is a 'shared condition of human life'.<sup>112</sup>

In line with Butler's call for an 'alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit and distribute precarity'<sup>113</sup> the moments of grouping, disbanding and regrouping that are discussed through Martinis Roe's work in a way that continually finds itself 'animating differences'<sup>114</sup> in the words of Butler: that is, the groups and groupings present in the work I watched on that over-hot summer day was not a cohesive call to action, instead it was a substantiated body of calls, developed through histories of colonialism, sexism, classism and the division of knowledge-access. Just as Arendt's political stage does not play home to one kind of gesture, Butler's conception of precarity is a condition that ensures a flexibility useful enough to examine a whole number of material affects of society on the body. Difference is inherent to her proposal that precarity is increasingly becoming a shared human condition, it is a key to her definition of this rather than a disapproval.

Precarity, not as a specific material condition that effects all bodies in the same way, but instead as multiple processes of other'ing that occurs in varied ways

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<sup>112</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, (Verso: New York, 2010) 11.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 32.

bound up in how both we identify ourselves, and how others identify us.

Recognising ourselves as ‘other’ or different from the bodies around us is an act that firstly is part-constitutive of the self, but secondly means we are ‘always already positioned outside’<sup>115</sup> of ourselves. That is, that even our recognition of difference is relational and therefore, an opportunity to enact togetherness. A type of political relationality is a concept previously written on by Arendt, who makes the claim that:

‘the human being is apolitical. Politics originates in-between human beings, that is precisely outside the individual. Therefore, there is no strictly political substance. Politics originates in-between and establishes itself in terms of relations’<sup>116</sup>

This emphasis on difference could be interpreted as an action of separation, but in contrast to recent anti-relational turns in Queer theory spearheaded by writers such as Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani, I am interested in the pluralism that Butler’s thoughts on shared precarity could bring to mind. Difference, in Butler’s recent writing is more an opportunity for understanding difficulty and how it manifests differently and repeatedly, rather than an example of the impossibility of solidarity. This complexity is evidenced not only in this

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<sup>115</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004) 151

<sup>116</sup> Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 95.

definition of precarity, but also in the processes of identity-through-relation itself, specifically Butler says that:

‘who we “are” fundamentally is a subject in a temporal chain of desire that only occasionally and provisionally assumes the forms of the dyad’.<sup>117</sup>

Many lines and histories are drawn through a multitude to actions of belonging, relating and sharing. Rarely might we be able to map such relations cleanly and neatly, but we can understand the ways that exchanges and sharedness proliferate within any understanding of the self. Just as Martinis Roe’s work employed ways of engaging that became bound in the exchanges and sharedness of the installation, all happening in front of recollections and re-lookings at spaces shared and agitated by narratives of Aboriginal rights, women’s and workers’ welfare, and informal approaches to learning in the face of the institutional, there is a way of thinking through relationality as both a subject and method in research. It is this that brings this thinking to the wider direction of my thesis’ aims – to recognise relation as both a method and an object of study, and particularly the contexts from which such movements towards relation might emerge from.

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<sup>117</sup> Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 151.

The relationality that Martinis Roe has both deployed and documented so tenderly, through voices and archives compiled together across time frames and communities, is here not an opportunity to present a political plea for one thing or another, but instead a number of voices speaking to, and in difference to one another. Stories being told in ever-so-slightly different forms within the interior of the work, and invitations looking out to the assumed viewers. Not to unify an understanding of the world around them, but to recognise the divergent worlds they inhabit and experience, and to begin with that as a starting point for sharing space.

Eventually the screens' films finished too, and I got up to watch all three screens in – relative – silence again. Through the audio I could hear other visitors moving around other artworks in the space, picked up pieces of paper shuffling, seats being moved across the floor, hushed conversations and the occasional cough or laugh. A pair of hands passed me another pair of headphones, someone shifted and sat on the seat I was in, I decided to sit next to them and watch this other component, which seemed to be halfway through. Whilst also dependent on the mechanics of exhibiting artists film, there were a number of silent exchanges and compromises that occurred within that gallery space. Headphones being gifted, seats taken up and then vacated, friends sharing a seat and headphones.

## Chapter 5: Bute Hall, University of Glasgow, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018

Once, whilst sat in the salubrious surroundings of the Bute Hall, University of Glasgow, I sat with a friend, to hear Judith Butler speak to a packed lecture theatre with many faces familiar to both of us sat eagerly awaiting one of three lectures Butler was to deliver in the historic surrounds. Butler's address concerned itself with preservation of life; infrastructures of violence and infrastructures of care; how the passage from one community to another can shift the valuations on one's life or livelihood. The central object of Butler's lecture was that of vulnerable bodies, grievability, and who we do and do not grieve for, and how and why this happens. The contents of this lecture, itself not directly relevant to what I am going to write of here, builds on a body of writing that Butler has built regarding relation and difference<sup>118</sup>. These relations *in* difference - rather than *of* - have come back to me multiple times in writing other passages of this paper, and so I felt an impetus or a desire to note down some of the moments that have left brewing and ruminating on the surfaces of my thinking.

I am returning to writing this, again, after poring over the many badly-written notes scribbled across my notebook pages, and a re-watching of the lectures

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<sup>118</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex*, First Edition (New York: Routledge, 1996).

online. These online lecturers, of course provided clarification on what I thought it was Butler had said to me and many others that evening, but the notes themselves, though illegible perhaps to people who aren't me, and sparse in comparison to the rich and densely-weaved textures of Butler's address, are accompanied by energetic arrows, underlining, capital letters, and informalities that will not make it to this more developed and appropriate presentation of my thoughts on this lecture.

In re-reading these notes and presented with deep indents on paper from a hard-pressed pen, I am thinking back to the immediacy of the reception to which I gave Butler's address. A material reminder of my own relation to a number of objects – the pen with which I wrote, the paper, materials of writing, the 'objects' of Butler's studies and research, as well as the desire of the act of writing<sup>119</sup>. The closeness to a voice that I had previously only read or heard through online lectures enabled a reorienting of a writing approach that felt responsive and lived.

I sat through this lecture with a friend by my side. We queued together in the cold of the University of Glasgow quad in jackets and scarves in the dark, nodding and smiling and talking to our many friends and acquaintances also in

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<sup>119</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, First Edition (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

the queue. Faces familiar and somewhat familiar and many more we might have passed many times before on streets or in galleries or in bars or from behind supermarket checkouts. We made our way up a stone staircase that must have been over 200 years old, that seemed so distant from our own shared education in a northerly art school built in the 1960s and entered a balcony. During the lecture we took notes next to one another and said at one point we should share them with each other. We never got around to doing this. And yet I do remember the moments where an understanding, an agreement or a disagreement with what Butler said took place silently for a second, and then was declared by an unsheathing of pens, a flurry of note-taking, a quick sketch. As the lecture continued these moments punctuated an otherwise silent state of beside-ness, with our note-taking responding from inward reactions that took place at different times, to different things that was being spoken of.

And so, in this grand hall, where we both felt in awe and perhaps out of place, not only because of our own experience of University having occurred somewhere so different, but also because of the differences we represented from many of the people who occupied this place, sat beside one another, within one of the oldest universities on this island. And perhaps we didn't both feel out of place, or in awe, but I certainly did in moments that ebbed and flowed, and I think there was a number of those emotions circulating in the room at that moment, therefore my reading of such a felt experience is something that



requires trust in the part of the reader, as well as a generosity in the act of reading.

Our bodies, sat next to one another, differed in more ways than posture, poise or stance and a myriad of different violences have over the course of our lives come into proximity with our bodies in many different ways. Whilst beside-ness in itself, may not always be seen as a relation, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘any child knows who’s shared a bed with siblings. *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivalling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations’.<sup>120</sup>

At the top of my notes from this lecture, I have written down:

- A Question:

‘What leads any of us to seek to preserve the life of the other?’

As I think back now to this moment, sitting close to a loved one who has been a formative part of both my personal and professional lives, I see this notation and think about what it is that encourages one *another* to come together. I mean

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<sup>120</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, First Edition (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8

this not necessarily in a didactic sense, not another binary model of working-together. Instead I mean: what is it that fuels the desire for those of us who are politically subjectivised, to not just surround ourselves with others, but to be *in proximity*<sup>121</sup> to them through actions that might include listening to Judith Butler speak, or more general shared actions of conversation, supporting, resting?

The relational, in terms of considerations of care and friendship are significantly attended to within contemporary curatorial discourse. And whilst the forms of knowledge production that are reflected upon are expansive the manners through which they are addressed often, are not. Whilst writing about this particular experience might not be thought of within the wider spheres of artistic theoretical thinking as curatorial, I situate this writing here within curatorial research precisely because I make the proposition that if the curatorial is, as I have detailed in previous chapters, can be considered as a relational mode of being and working, then it falls to us to think of the ways that relation unfolds both within the infrastructures of curatorial-artistic work as well as in daily life. It is only with thinking outwith specifically curatorial actions that we can begin

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<sup>121</sup> In using the word proximity here I would refer to several key references in thinking through how this specific phrasing is deployed. Firstly, I wrote very vaguely on proximity during a writing residency with Cooper Gallery, Dundee. Sean Elder Wilson, “Bringing Into Proximity”, *Cooper Gallery*, 2016. Available Online: <https://www.dundee.ac.uk/media/dundeewebsite/cooper-gallery/exhibitions/2017/seanelder/Sean-Elder-Bringing-into-proximity.pdf> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

The interest from how this phrase functions came about because I had read in copy of a Cooper Gallery exhibition that the works had been ‘brought into proximity’ by the curator. I thought about this in relation to value judgements but also intimacies between different bodies and state apparatus.

to reimagine how it is that the relational that is present within the curatorial might itself offer alternative, transformative ways of thinking and rethinking ways of working and being together.

What are the ways in which relational work takes place – or could be undertaken – within social and political infrastructures that tire, subjugate, and other? What are the opportunities for something that exists between self and other, me and you, lover and lover, to make affect within an interpersonal figuration of curatorial practice, rather than a processual, lineal production within curating that looks to its ends and limits as a material object to be represented and absorbed within the institutional? I ask this not to suggest that such processual, lineal productions are somehow devoid of closeness and interpersonal intimacy, but instead to firstly delineate my own interest in lying within the more abstract points of affective relation in curatorial work, and secondly acknowledge that even such institutional processes will hold their own potentials for such relations.

What this writing brings together as well as develops as material for future curatorial thinking is recognising that within conditions of difficulty, within lived experiences of capitalism, through our shared-yet-different understandings and feelings around the past few years of still-ongoing pandemic years, there is value for curatorial thinking to extend beyond its presumed remits, as it always

has. As detailed previously, the emergence of the curator as a figure, and consequentially the emergence of the curatorial as a particular mode that differs from the practical actions of 'curating', unfolded within new thinking around such definitions. What this writing functions to do here is to extend the experiences and frameworks from which curatorial thinking may develop, to encompass a broader and more affective array of discourses and more feeling.

## Chapter 6: Curatorial / Proximities

### That Which is Shared

I have already detailed a recent impetus within curatorial theory to re-imagine what constitutes curatorial practices, curating and exhibition making as ‘activism’, and I have also detailed how it is that these conversations have largely concerned themselves with institution, infrastructure and policy. This chapter marks the beginning of directing my energy and my writing towards a consideration of curatorial practice as relational as defined in the previous chapter, but furthermore, to begin thinking about *proximity* as a key curatorial concept.

The connectedness of the curatorial is something that has been long established by theorists including Maria Lind and Paul O’Neill, whose understandings I have detailed earlier in this thesis<sup>122</sup>. But in difference to them, I hope to think about relation and closeness within the curatorial, not as defined by institutional structures, but instead through the shared precarity we have been living through. At the beginning of my research, this context of shared precarity was largely defined by over a decade of conservative rule and the way that care has emerged

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<sup>122</sup> See: *Situating Curatorial Knowledge* in Chapter 2: *Curatorial Relation*

responsively as a defining curatorial concept. However, as the research progressed and over half of it having taken place within various covid restrictions, the notion of difficulty and precarious conditions became more and more central not only to the subject matter of this thesis, but also through the methods of writing which expanded and are expanding currently beyond the realms of traditionally academic or curatorial writing.

Though I am not concerned predominantly with the figure of the curator, I hope that by addressing the often-unspoken presence of affect, desire and subjectivity within curatorial theory we can shift away from an image of the curator as neutral mediator, and towards them as being one agent within a shared imagining of not-yet-here futures, affective relations, and shared-ness in difference<sup>123</sup>. Reckoning with the difficulties of the post-covid world is yet another rich and challenging context for this to be developed through.

In her lecture<sup>124</sup>, Butler identified how theories of the *other* being constitutive of the *self* have shifted. Indeed, she criticised a masculine-feminine binary in which masculinity was defined by a lack of dependency and femininity is conversely, dependent on material and social relations. Instead, she brought us to arguments of vulnerability; who is it ‘we’ or ‘they’ are vulnerable to? And

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<sup>123</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>124</sup> Judith Butler, “My Life, Your Life: Equality and the Philosophy of Non-Violence” (Gifford Lecture Series, University of Glasgow, 2018).

how is it that the figurations of these vulnerabilities shift and change within different infrastructures, communities and identities? Introducing this movement, this temporality of shifting vulnerabilities and privileges alleviated some of my ongoing frustration with the presumption that we are all living in the same world. The presumption of a masculine-feminine binary is so often brought into discursive spaces to the detriment of racialised, queer or differently-abled voices. Butler's address, however, acknowledged the complexity of movement between such space – both discursive and physical. So, her focus on the presence of vulnerability, began a line of enquiry that allowed for shifting values, prejudice, and safety that moved along with imagined bodies traversing from one social world to the next, making themselves vulnerable in some, and invulnerable in others through relations to other similar or dissimilar to themselves.

Butler's argument, that was grounded primarily in reminders of the dangers of shifting between these community-worlds, spoke of Black vulnerability within white worlds, of Queer vulnerability in heterosexual ones, and of course how these vulnerabilities and these worlds are housed in different ways in different bodies, exhibited to different degrees, and align and re-align in new configurations.

Following this talk, and throughout my research I have been re-acquainting myself with Butler and many others' work, reminded particularly of the relational nature of love and intimacy in her work, that also moves between worlds. Butler's continual returns to a structuring of shared-ness, not as an erasure of differences, but instead an acknowledgement of them. In previous writings, Butler has afforded me ways of thinking through relationality, for example in the way that precarity acts as a 'shared condition of human life'<sup>125</sup>, one that is affective of myriads of different bodies in myriads of different ways. This inheritance from Hannah Arendt's conceptions that 'Politics originates in-between and establishes itself in terms of relations'<sup>126</sup> is accompanied by Butler's call for alliances that bring us to relationships focussed on producing shared 'opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit and distribute precarity'.<sup>127</sup>

Thinking about alliances as reactive and productive in this way will become an opportunity to conceptualise curatorial ways of thinking and working together as other interpersonal moments, not only of solidarity, but of critically producing worlds.<sup>128</sup> I am not writing this here out of a misguided optimism but instead through the very necessity by which these oppositions, these

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<sup>125</sup> Butler, *Frames of War*, 11.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>128</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 1st ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2009).



productions, might emerge. I say necessity both because of and from within the conditions I have been describing in this thesis. The opportunity for the curatorial to produce new worlds, however momentary, through transformations of space and relation is evident in Jean Paul Martinon's conceptualisation of the curatorial, emerging from his own development of French philosophy in relation to futurity, as well as co-creating with Irit Rogoff, Goldsmiths College's Curatorial/Knowledge PhD programme, that situates it 'in the middle, between promise (a coming reflection, contemplation, or action) and redemption (intellectual achievement, aesthetic emotion or political resolution)'<sup>129</sup>. This position of the curatorial, in-between and therefore changing engagements with that which surrounds it, is one that rings true to my own experience of curatorial work, as well as being something that appears and reappears in various conversations that I have had, will have and that others have had and will have with those involved in this field. But envisaging the position of the curatorial in this way does not in itself offer the fullest account of production and different worlds and experiences. The presence of difference does not only necessitate acknowledgement, as I mention previously, but is also completely necessary here to return to gain a full view of Butler's conceptions of political thought and action. The substantial relationships that Butler both spoke of, and writes of, between vulnerability, differing social worlds, and

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<sup>129</sup> Jean Paul Martinon, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, First Edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 25–33.

shared difference are ones that have opportunity to be both embodied by and emerge through the curatorial. Much of Butler's writing is characterised by an ability to continue to give validity to the figure of the subject, of identity, whilst also imbuing it with, and considering its relation to ethics<sup>130</sup>. The presence of responsibility and accountability in Butler's work is not individuated, it is something dependent on exchanges and sharing. In later writing I will expand on the abstract quality of this 'responsibility' and how whilst it often is something imbued within institutions, it can also emerge from radical interpersonal ethics founded on understandings of intimacy– in thinking how we can think about a responsibility that circulates between bodies, and whose burden is undertaken within processes of affective labour in working together.

### **Closeness and Proximities**

I have above introduced Ahmed's thinking of proximity, which is a term that I became pre-occupied with both within the research of this thesis, as well as most prominently in my mind whilst I was working on writing for a residency at Cooper Gallery, Dundee. *Proximity* was used by the curatorial team to describe a series of thinkings and objects brought together within the space of an

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<sup>130</sup> More useful reading on this includes John Paul Ricco, *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Age of Scenes*, First Edition (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

exhibition<sup>131</sup>. Since then it has stuck with me as a conception of structuring curatorial tendencies. Thinking around proximity within curatorial work largely leads to understandings of space<sup>132</sup>, which contains a vitally poetic element as it is discussed in curatorial discourses, namely in the work of Jean Francois Lyotard, a Philosopher who in the 1980s curated *Les Immatériaux*, widely regarded as an exhibition that foreshadowed relations between curatorial practice, globalisation and criticality<sup>133</sup>. I describe such language as ‘vitally poetic’ in relation to the aim of this thesis for curatorial writing to become a particularly affective and effective method by which beauty, emotion and affect might transpire more often within this field.

The shift in configuring space within curatorial practices has undergone something of a reckoning within the digital age, and even more so within the recent lockdown conditions experienced globally as Covid-19 restrictions spread across the world. Whilst a great number of engaging and convincing curatorial texts have staked their claims with the curatorial as being inherently related to space (both physical and digital) and particularly the space of the exhibition as it has developed in parallel with the curatorial’s own development,

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<sup>131</sup> Liam Gillick & Anton Vidokle, Miranda Pennell, Dominic Watson, “All Systems ... Go” *Cooper Gallery*, 2016. Available Online: <https://app.dundee.ac.uk/cooper-gallery-archive/exhibitions/all-systems-go/> > (last accessed 16.12.22)

<sup>132</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*. First Edition (London: Penguin, 1964). Daniel Birnbaum, D. and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *Spacing philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of the Exhibition*, First Edition (Berlin: Sternberg, 2019).

<sup>133</sup> John Rajchman, “Les Immatériaux, or, how to construct the history of exhibitons”, *Tate Papers* 12, 2009. Available Online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/12/les-immateriaux-or-how-to-construct-the-history-of-exhibitions> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

I am here interested in proximity and closeness that is less physical and more emotional and relational.

I was reminded of it last year when listening to Judith Butler's aforementioned lecture, in which she criticised the prevalence in societal imaginaries in which a masculine-feminine binary presides within which masculinity is defined by a lack of dependency and femininity is conversely, dependent on material and social relations. I was interested in the appearance of the word relation and its being understood as being part of a relation of proximity. Specifically, that the feminine is shorthanded for an understanding of proximity to many things, to many others, to be amongst a network. There seemed to me, at this early point, to be potential within this understanding of proximity to think about how it might provide understandings for queer and curatorial practices. I am interested in how this word might describe affiliations to different institutions, but also, as I'm sure you've gathered that I am more interested in – the proximity between bodies. What this has developed into during the course of this research, and the specific conditions of remoteness and isolation during the ongoing pandemic, was an engagement with the ways in which affective and emotional language might become not simply part of the ways that the curatorial is embedded within institutional thought to humanise or to 'give a face' to the institution, but instead might emerge in an honest and frank account of the ways that proximity and vulnerability figure within our lives of today.

Butler's talk brought us to arguments of vulnerability; who is it 'we' or 'they' are vulnerable to? And how is it that the figurations of these vulnerabilities shift and change within different infrastructures, communities and identities?

Introducing this movement, this temporality of shifting vulnerabilities and privileges alleviated some of my ongoing frustration with the presumption that we are all living in the same world. This writing, this research is not intended as an all-encompassing redefinition of curatorial work, nor are those the grounds on which I hope to begin any of the arguments I am making in my research, this is a contribution that has emerged from a particular person, with a particular voice, at a very particularly difficult time. Whilst this has both created challenges and limits to this research it also is evidence for the situatedness of what it is this research is functioning to do here. What I hope this research's contribution to curatorial thinking does is not to make grand definitions for the future of curatorial work, but instead is to situate this as one contribution amongst many others, and for each contribution to be considered, to be conceptualised and to be developed upon with an understanding of the specific positions and conditions that were assumed and lived, respectively, during the development of such work.

Returning to Butler's address, it acknowledged the complexity of movement between such space for bodies racialised, queer, gendered, sexed, or differently-

abled. In encountering this line of enquiry that allowed for a complex considering of shifting values, prejudice, and safety that through relations similar or dissimilar to ourselves and others.

We could consider this *proximity* to others in the sense that Sara Ahmed describes moving from and towards certain objects, with differing emotions both causing and resulting from these movements<sup>134</sup> (2006). Ahmed's academic engagement with questions of emotion, affect and proximity is accompanied by her widely publicised critiques of academic institutions and particularly of complaint procedures, that have seen her writings become almost ubiquitous in cultural spaces grappling with the same questions.

Within the framing of mediation and curatorial work, this notion of proximity and movement towards/away positions the curatorial as a practice, and curators and producers as people, through which value-based exercises take place. I am interested in the notion of how we work between, in proximity to, or remote from particular scenes or values. And subsequently, how this might emerge from queer affinities to working with different artists and people. As I have repeated already, it is not the institutional frame of the curatorial through which I want to discuss this, it is through the intimacies of the curatorial. Proximity

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<sup>134</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

and vulnerability speak within curatorial fields of those things that are so often left unsaid, the fact that some projects leave more of an indelible mark on us than others, that some curatorial experiences, in working or in attending, are more painful, or conversely, more fruitful than others. I am thinking of

a phonecall made to a colleague, having situated oneself between a fellow attendee, angry and loud, and a speaker, responsively angry and quiet

thanks exchanged following a modest discussion, well attended, seats full, warmth emanating between two practitioners whose admiration for each other shone through

lunch breaks spent in sunshine, escaping the workspace only to return to find that it was going to come together, wasn't it?

Ahmed's situating of affect as something that is not interiorised, but instead circulates between bodies, often using the word 'sticky' to describe its tendency to attachment, parallels writing on camp, in which desire becomes bound up in objects of otherwise questionable value<sup>135</sup>. Sexuality, then, and we can presume, other subjectivities, becomes a frame through which affect's circulations and

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<sup>135</sup> Jon Davies and Mark Clintberg, "Haunted by Queer Affect: Geoffrey Farmer's *The Intellection of Lady Spider's House* and Allyson Mitchell's *Killjoy's Kastle*", *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 5 (2016): 57–74.

proximity's valuations might take on alternative forms and configurations, just as in the late and esteemed cultural critic Lauren Berlant's *Desire/Love*, in which she writes that affect's desire (which could be read as *desire's* desire) to be bound up in objects, embodied physically, and attached to people and things<sup>136</sup> is what makes it susceptible to ordering and disciplining (read: heteronormativity). Berlant's work is considered formative in the nascent field of affect studies, also built in line with Ahmed's own fields of enquiry, examining the ways that affect and belonging build upon one another. In the realm of heterosexual desire, desire's presumed normativity results in its use as a tool of framing, policing, and structuring. What I am proposing here, is that affect, its desire, our desire to align and shift our proximities between and to objects or individuals – can afford a state of attending to relations that go beyond the normative and the expected, and in the alternatives to discipline and ordering in fact exist not *within* ourselves but *between* our *selves*. Relationality, in itself, is of course not an inherently good thing as I have repeatedly said.

Butler warns that relationality is

‘a vexed and ambivalent field in which the question of ethical obligation has to be worked out in light of a persistent and constitutive destructive potential’.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love*. First Edition (New York: punctum Books, 2012).

<sup>137</sup> Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*, 10.



Whilst Butler's writing on violence and its proliferation may seem overstated in writing on curatorial work, the tension in the above quotation speaks to me of the tension of working *outwith*<sup>138</sup> the institution, or in another configuration, a tension between attending to the obligations curators have to artists, institutions and publics, and the ever-present problematics of consolidating and sharing these relations. The closeness of relations I share with artists with whom I am working necessitates particular flows of desire and imagination in what shall take place, but these can often come into tension with institutional structures of *how things are done*. As conversations around care become so focussed on institutional relationships where exchanges are often thought of as linear (the artist A, creates X, a new work, for the institution, B) there is a tendency for the focus on care and that which it purports to situate itself against i.e. violence, to become simplified in our considerations for it<sup>139</sup>.

Whilst ethical obligations instead are multi-layered and complex things, when they can be shared and explored, they can make space for imagination. I am thinking particularly of a proposal I made to artist Kirsty Russell, to have a new piece of work by her accompanying a day long screening at Jerwood Space in central London<sup>140</sup>. The work accompanying the screening consisted of a

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<sup>138</sup> *Outwith* is a word of primarily Scots use, which means outside of, but generally it suggests an awareness or relation to that which it is outside of.

<sup>139</sup> Lopez, "On Care and Parrhesia."

<sup>140</sup> Like much of the work featured in the appendix, this exchange with Kirsty Russell was something that was reflected on in a later date in writing and subsequently became part of this thesis, despite the activity itself of working with her not being practice-research for this project. See: Appendix C

handmade rug upon which particular programming could take place. Between us we then made a decision to read to one another out loud, joined by those visiting the space on the day. Russell's work which has often alluded to domestic spaces, made a space for sitting and gathering and discussing in what could otherwise so often be a static form of *exhibition*. We read Céline Condorelli's *Notes on Friendship* together, a new group of people brought together closely by the physical limitations as well as physical abilities of a rug Russell had specifically made for the event. At other points on the day headphones were laid out in the space for visitors to listen to audio selected by us that discussed housing rights and tenant's movements in New York City, creating another configuration of bodies moving throughout the space.

I am not proposing here that the act of reading within a gallery space was a radical break with what we might call appropriate use<sup>141</sup>, nor did it in itself upend the circulation of violences that are so ubiquitous in this world, especially as it is becoming a more and more commonplace function of the gallery to become host to happenings such as this<sup>142</sup>. Instead what I will suggest, is that through introducing a 'use' of Russell's work in the space (pictured) that was not defined by one or another – myself or herself. Instead, the act of hosting

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<sup>141</sup> For writing on use, see: Sara Ahmed, *What's The Use?*, First Edition (Durham: Duke University Press: 2019).

<sup>142</sup> See contrasting views:

Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*.

made space for different selves to come together, discussing lack, imagining support structures<sup>143</sup> and talked about housing new futures. And whilst I began this part of the chapter by critiquing the definition of proximity that is so reliant on physical or digital space, and I have somewhat gone back on this in defining the use of the space that we worked together on, what this functions to do is detail the way that particular conditions have had and will have the potential to foster such intimacies. Whilst unpicking complex layers of ethical and social obligations is not the object of study here, what is relevant to the objectives of this research is the evidence that there exists opportunity to diverge from particular understandings and methods within the curatorial, and more so, how these are linked as well as could emerge from the understandings of violence and relation in this instance detailed by Butler. I will now move on to my own understanding of queer proximity that develops Ahmed and Butler's logics in dialogue with the work of artists and art theorists, to bring together several strands of thinking that have contributed to this body of research.

## **Queer Values**

In their writing on affect and curating, Jon Davies and Mark Clintberg, both researchers, as well as curator and artist, respectively, jointly acknowledge the

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<sup>143</sup> In this group we read Céline Condorelli and Gavin Wade, *Support Structures*, First Edition (Berlin: Sternberg, 2009).

proliferation of queer – specifically gay men’s – childhood’s and isolationism combined with a particular desire to be around valued objects. The duo’s individual and joint work spans queer pedagogy, and curatorial and artistic practices concerned with affect, which in the example attended to here demonstrates the prospect of an interiorising affect that aligns closely with queer life. The two describe queerly ‘inward-looking pursuits such as reading, drawing, and collecting’<sup>144</sup>, giving example of Andy Warhol’s tendency to invent himself and ‘his own america’ from ‘radio, comics, Saturday morning cinema’ and so on.

For us, a camp gesture is when a degraded cultural object is taken up by a queer subject, who invests it with love and value beyond its apparent worth. This process of revaluation is infused with the marginalized subject’s own desire to transcend their similarly low status. In sexuality scholar David M. Halperin’s indispensable *How to Be Gay*, he notes that ‘[t]he ability to identify a particular object as camp, and to induce others to share that perception, thereby creates a basis for community’<sup>145</sup>.

Whilst I could at this point expand on this association of objects in physical spaces and engagements with such objects being a basis from which to prospectively form a community, particularly in the age of Covid-19 when physical relationships to objects, spaces and others became estranged from us

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<sup>144</sup> Clintberg and Davies, “Haunted by Queer Affect: Geoffrey Farmer’s *The Intellection of Lady Spider’s House* and Allyson Mitchell’s *Killjoy’s Kastle*,” 62.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

all, there is a necessity to flag here this alternative way of thinking about community and closeness that has emerged in these previous few years.

Additionally, though my writing here is not invested in an investigation into the status of camp, I hope that by presenting this quote here, we begin thinking from this point, through the ways that queers both intimately and socially ascribe value and affect to particular objects and things. The duo's argument here makes a connection between subjectivity and an affect that travels and attaches itself to objects within proximity. The 'painful individuation' identified by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that is ubiquitously present in tales of queer childhoods, eventually becomes an opportunity for 'uncontrollable relationality'.<sup>146</sup> This transformation from interiority to exteriority is one reliant on alternative values, and indeed alternative notions of what constitutes value. To me, this notion of 'uncontrollable relationality' can be seen in the desires to connect with and relate to in alternative ways. It is, however, not an active desire of which we may always be aware, it exists within other ways of working, types of labour and means of living, and emerges from conditions where closeness and intimacy are necessitated. With a longing for intimacy not only in romantic or sexual life, but for intimacy to be weaved within ways of working, throughout processes of political and social becoming. Within the

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<sup>146</sup> Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 37.

frame of Davies and Clintberg's writing, the interiority of a queer relation between self and objects subsequently becomes a shared affective mode, more similar to the circulatory nature of affect that Sara Ahmed describes as 'sticky'.<sup>147</sup> Both the desire that attaches itself to objects, and the desire for community creation are preceded by a desire (read: affect) for relational ties between ours and other bodies. The queer desires described between and through these writings is a different sort of animal to dominant, normative desire (read: heterosexual desire). And whilst the stickiness of the desire that Ahmed describes might only reveal its stickiness when it comes into proximity with something to which it can or could stick, the queer relations between self, objects and developing spaces of communality emerge only within distinct and understated recognitions of affectedness towards each other.

This, in a way, acts against discipline. If we return again to Berlant, affect's desire (which could be read as *desire's* desire) to be bound up in objects, embodied physically, and attached to people and things<sup>148</sup>, is what makes it susceptible to ordering and disciplining. In the realm of heterosexual desire, its presumed normativity results in its use as a tool of framing, policing, and structuring. What I am proposing here, is that affect, its desire, our desire to align and shift our proximities between and to objects or individuals – when

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<sup>147</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. First Edition (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>148</sup> Berlant, *Desire/Love*.

applied queerly, this might in fact be a useful tool within the affective spaces of the curatorial. I am imagining and enacting here lines of desire being followed through writing and proposing that these make a particular sense when inhabiting the field of the curatorial. In previously highlighting the limitations of imagination with the institutional mode, what I am discussing in regards to these definitions of desire and relation, and indeed through writing in desiring and relational ways that stray somewhat from academic normativities, raises timely and important questions for the role of curatorial labour in the midst of a crisis defined by so many as linked to [lack of] intimacy and closeness.

## Chapter 7: Curtains

The summer of 2017, it felt like a heatwave had hit Birmingham. It was maybe just a slightly-nicer than average English summer but compared to where I grew up the May temperatures felt like a summer holiday. I had with colleagues and visitors and artists in the week leading up to the heatwave that the institution always seemed to have programmed films, that necessitated darkness and blocked-out light, during the long, bright summer days.

*The Dutch Window*, by Seecum Cheung, an artist filmmaker whose collaborations with journalists, academics communities are central to her practice, had been on show. The bright and wide windows that dominated the gallery space necessitated curtains and in entering the institution as a new employee during this show, freshly moved from Glasgow the flowing orange curtains floated so gracefully through this otherwise hard industrial space could remind me of nothing other than Orange marches through the historically Catholic neighbourhoods I had lived in. My first day at work there we had sat on bean bags, surrounded by the soft touches of the curtains lifted by drafts from the open windows. Being with that work collapsed boundaries between the home I had just left and the new one I was making. Between histories connected somewhere through the colour orange, the Dutch national colour interrogated by Cheung, it's adoption by Protestant aligned to William of Orange and its



subsequent, continued use by groups in Ireland and Scotland representing some version of these histories.

I remember watching the film a few times through. It was beautiful. One of those films that was not an effort to wade through. It was, instead, something you could sit with and the thing got deeper and deeper under you. Close to a documentary but made with a hand and a sensibility that said something else, moved in a different way. There were interviews with a number of new members of the Dutch parliament, some brief explanations of the ease with which one can form new political parties across the Netherlands, and shots of the eponymous Dutch windows – displays made for passing strangers in the street, often a symbol of openness, an opportunity to display values and hopes. The whole film slowly seemed to negotiate this boundary space as a means of dismantling the very idea of Dutch progressiveness.

I remember a friend of mine from Indonesia, whilst studying my Masters, discussing the difficulty she was having in attaining a visitor's visa for an upcoming group trip to Berlin we were taking. She told us that the only place she could visit without much difficulty in Europe was the Netherlands, and that being linked to their own colonial guilt<sup>149</sup>. Bandung, the city in which my friend

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<sup>149</sup> Nisa Ashila Ghaisani, Curator and Writer, currently based in Jakarta, Indonesia.

had studied and lived before coming to the UK was famous now for its critical approach to artistic institutions. Several hundred years ago it had been known as the 'Paris of Java', much in the way that Beirut was once the 'Paris of the Middle-East'. I wonder about these comparisons, ones that occur between familiarity and strangeness, and the bringing of one to the other to make the other less remote. The often-unrecognised power imbalances that are held together when one does that.

In watching Cheung's portrait of a country divided between interior values and exterior communications, I couldn't help but think of the ways my friend had described a number of high-profile art events and galleries in Indonesia being peppered with Dutch names. I remember sitting on the bean bags, thinking of my friend, and again being reminded of the space, dominated with orange curtains, as they fluttered in a brief gust that whistled across the rooftops surrounding the building. I wondered if the curtains, orange, and flapping in summer, would remind a Northern Irish colleague of the same things they reminded me of, having so recently lived in Glasgow and having grown up understanding to some degree the nature of sectarianism in both Scotland and Ireland.

The thought of these orange flags bringing us back to maybe Scotland and maybe Ireland a film about upcoming Dutch elections seemed bizarre if only

considered for a fleeting moment. But William of Orange was a Dutchman who had defeated the Catholic Stewarts, had given branches of Protestantism and the Dutch nation the colour orange as a symbol these many years after. So even a slightly longer look those relations means they made sense to one another.

Maybe to Scotland and maybe to Ireland. To a bedroom from which I heard badly played pipes and drums every weekend of summer. To my mother telling me her family had heard them many times.

The collapsing.

It's collapsing again. In a different way, here, in this writing.

And then, the summer of 2018, again installing curtains in the gallery. Trying to figure out how much light we would need so the space didn't become impossible to navigate, whilst also making sure that the projected films that dominated one half of the space were visible. We had eaten outside nearly every day of install week, with a continuous run of summery salads breaking time spent in front of computers, assisting our technician in building and shifting key components of the show. There is little reason for me to be thinking specifically of these few weeks right now, only that it is again getting to that time of year and with the smell of the heat on the ground I am reminded of this time. The artists, Rami George and Tako Taal and I had been texting each other with

memories brought to our attention by phone notifications, social media, ‘two years ago today’ reminding you gently on the screen that every swipe made, like tapped, and image captured was sitting there, still.

It collapses in so many new ways every time I see those notifications. When I first wrote the above I was shown a picture of us eating outdoors, at a time when doing such a thing was not allowed.

Then other images of collapsing histories, Rami George’s reproduced photographs from family photo albums. Notations and details written on the back in a delicate hand, again, at different points in Arabic, English, and French.<sup>150</sup>

It all collapses.

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<sup>150</sup> Rami George and Tako Taal, *Inherited Premises*, two-person exhibition at Grand Union, 2018, Birmingham UK.

## Chapter 8: Curatorial Affects

### Introduction

In this thesis I have already established the potential for the curatorial to be thought of as a site that is both affective and relational. In detailing the ways that relationality has been present in so many definitions of the curatorial I have problematised the site of the institution as the site where curatorial research might most be associated and have instead turned to the bodily and the experienced, thinking of the relational within curatorial work as part of a practice of everyday life and being. In detailing and expanding on what is meant by the ‘difficult conditions’ that elicits the needs for such intimacies and relational work I have demonstrated the timeliness and necessity for this research within the current realities of an ongoing pandemic. I have begun to present writing that troubles convention and instead leads itself through hunches, connection and even intimacy with that which is being discussed, with the previous chapter having introduced definitions of proximity, relation and even intimacy to become parts of the research which I am writing here.

Acknowledging the affective relationships that curators have with objects, people, artists, places, and the socialities and soft forms of labour and interaction that develop such relations, we can also draw a line somewhere

between this understanding of the curatorial, and the widely described queer affection for objects, and desires for closeness that have been described in the work of Ahmed, Berlant and Butler.

What I will do in this chapter is to begin considering the ways that thinking of these intimacies might lead us to curatorial practices being understood in intimate ways, as well as being undertaken in different ways. The ongoing health crisis has meant that our homes are closer to being workplaces and our workplaces are closer to being homes. The spaces which were used for one are now used for the other. And despite as I type, the efforts of vaccination campaigns and new and improved treatments, it seems that the troubling of these two spaces is very far from reverting back to whatever idea of ‘normal’ we had before.

While the curatorial is so often associated with actions of making art or even discourses public, I want to move away from this, not in a way that avoids the entire idea of publicness, but instead in a way that complexifies what we mean when we think of curatorial affects and how they might play out in various degrees of publicness for example. Critiques of Hannah Arendt’s notion of public-ness, or the staging of the political being ‘in public’ as being dependent on an individual’s ability to stand, speak, proclaim, to ‘make public’ thoughts and gestures in front of a presumed audience. In contrast to this longstanding

criticism Michael Warner, a theorist and cultural critic whose work includes co-written work with the afore-mentioned Lauren Berlant as well as defining much of how we understand shared discourses, proposes that the ‘public’ that Arendt speaks of and in fact ‘values so much’<sup>151</sup> is moments of ‘world making and self-disclosure; it is therefore to be distinguished from both the prevailing system of politics and from any universalist notion of rational debate’.<sup>152</sup> Indeed, in contrast to the notion of ‘speaking truth to power’ espoused firstly by Michel Foucault, and in countless exhibition and curatorial texts since, the ways that we can consider ‘making something public’ does not in fact need to be a performative, theatrical moment, in fact it can be a moment as intimate, personal and closely held as a divulgence of personal knowledge, gossip<sup>153</sup> or affection from one body to another.

This related to the noted prevalence of care and the interpersonal as it figures within current curatorial literature. As part of a slow movement away from the formality of the figure of the curator that for so long has dominated art theoretical discourses, the intimacies that I am thinking of here are not ones that exist between myself and objects, myself and vast and imposing collections of hoarded colonial wares or paintings preserved for hundreds of years. Nor is it an

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<sup>151</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, First Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 59.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948 – 1963*, First Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

intimacy with which we try to ‘bear witness, to give space and shape to absent people, objects and cultures, to present violent conflict without perpetuating its logic’<sup>154</sup> as Erica Lehrer, the anthropologist and curator writes so beautifully on her curating with object collections associated with Jewish history and, subsequently, the Holocaust. Instead I will sign-post and direct to her words in a way that I hope will illustrate the transformative nature of relational modes when working within the curatorial and how her thinking gleans wisdom for us to consider other lines of curatorial work, whilst not detracting from the very situated, particular, emotive study that she herself discusses.

Her thinking about the curatorial ‘not only as a selection, design and interpretation but as care-taking – as a kind of intimate, intersubjective, inter-relational objective’ speaks honestly and frankly about her own Jewish identity and its entanglements with the living and difficult histories of subjugation embodied in objects, and I hope that within this writing I can speak as honestly and as frankly on conducting curatorial work as a relational mode between beings and between histories. The complexity in working within a field that demands such emotional labour and sense of self collapsed into the processes of research, making and developing relationships is what necessitates not just

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<sup>154</sup> Erica Lehrer, “Introduction”, in *Curating Difficult Knowledges*, ed. by Erica Lehrer, Cynthia Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson, First Edition (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 4.



allowances for emotion and affect to be present in written and recounted recollections of such undertakings, but encouragements of such methods.

In my previous chapter I detailed the ways in which proximity and notions of closeness might figure both within my own embodied experience of developing research at this time, and within curatorial practices. In particular, I wrote on the relationship that we have to objects and others, how these are purported by our own identities, subjectivities, and even desires. It is from this final point that I want to begin writing in this chapter, in thinking about the circulation of desire and affect, and how the ways in which curatorial practice can learn from studies of such fields may be further benefitted from a consideration of circulation between peoples.

To tackle this, I want to approach this chapter from positions that might be considered a 'before' and an 'after' to the previous chapter. I have previously written on proximity and closeness, I here want to provide a foundation from which the need for such intimacy and closeness has emerged within curatorial work, as well as then theorising on a relation extant between this context and alternative practices that might respond to it. I will look to think about ways that thinking that surrounds alternative affective values and non-violence can be thought of with this context, within a context of interdependent curating work and further, within curatorial writing. As I have previously stated in this thesis,

this functions as a contribution to knowledge that does not erase or supersede anything that has come before, instead I think of this as another necessary direction from which to consider curatorial practices and writing that functions to challenge notions of relation that are seen as inherently distanced from ideas of subjectivity.

### **That Which Surrounds**

In my previous chapter the central gesture of ‘getting close to one another’ became a key component in developing links between alternative values relating to cultural production and also, the closeness between this research, curatorial work, and the reality of research within a pandemic. As Irit Rogoff succinctly puts it we are partaking in an ‘analytical mode and a demand to produce new subjectivities that acknowledge that we are what Hannah Arendt has termed “fellow sufferers” of the very conditions we are critically examining’.<sup>155</sup>

Closeness then, is here not simply a theoretical or literary gesture. It is also a reality of the undertaking that is inclusive of curatorial work. Rogoff here describes what I have been trying to articulate over preceding chapters, that closeness, as well as my earlier gesture of ‘turning away’ from the institution

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<sup>155</sup> Irit Rogoff “From Criticism to Criticality,” *Transversal Texts*, 2003. Available Online: <https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en> (last accessed 18.12.22).

are useful rhetorical directions within this research but also indications of particular necessities for the curatorial to embody. In this instance a recognition of the conditions we are working within that often become the very objects of study for ourselves. This is most evident in the ways that I have begun establishing socio-political contexts in relation to austerity and the specific position in the UK of art institutions, whilst increasingly relevant and present and close is the presence of Covid, a condition that surrounded everybody, that affected us in different and unequal ways, and which became some kind of companion to this research.

Whilst only touched on briefly, I want to now provide a broader look at what surrounds the realities of contemporary curatorial practices *now*. This ‘now’ will refer both to the small and specific moment of this previous two-years (plus) of research within a pandemic, as well as a more expansive consideration of the years surrounding this particular moment, the years during which we have felt (and I’m sure at the point of reading will be continuing to feel) the results of over a decade of austerity. I will draw from particular curatorial thinking and writing to support proposals for both curatorial and writing practices as having the potential for transformative ways of thinking about relation and difference.

This writing then, will involve a diversity of scales in what it is ‘taking on’. To provide a context that is at once, social, political and societal, will then necessitate a re-alignment through which I can return to the intimacies of which I have previously spoke. And yet, this journey through the social and historical conditions within which we are living has never felt more prescient than now. In research that is embroiled within needs for intimacy and closeness a recurring question that must be addressed (and that I will answer here) is *from where, and what conditions of living and being, did these needs emerge?*

Context, here, will not be a neatly encompassed body of conditions from which we can draw a direct line to a concept as complex as a ‘need for intimacy’.

Instead, what I hope to do here is to ensure that in communicating the contextualising aspects of curatorial practice, the need to look to these contexts that exist within particular conditions, particular geographies, exacerbated by particular environs, is evident.

I have already detailed the development of curatorial work as a multi-authored mode of address in this research, as in O’Neill’s case, where the relational nature of the curatorial is defined as a shared discourse<sup>156</sup>, a sensibility that emerges between artist and curator, rather than simply practical actions of

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<sup>156</sup> Paul O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse”, in *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art*, ed. by Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick, First Edition (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), 241 – 253.

exhibition-making carried out by institutions. This unstable placement of the curatorial as a phenomenon that sits between authors, institution and externality, publics and geographies means that what ‘becomes necessarily part of the discussion are the social, historical, cultural and epistemological meanings of curatorial practices: how these practices are intertwined with practices of making art, but also politics, financial structures, and the larger cultural sphere’.<sup>157</sup>

Here, independent curator and director of the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York, Elena Suovrjö’s reminder of the curatorial’s embeddedness within other modes of work and life is also a reminder for us to think about the surrounding conditions through which curatorial work has emerged and continues to emerge in differing forms, with different politics and different aims held within its deployment. The shift from the singular authorship that marked many early conceptions of the figure of the curator, towards a more collectively-led approach has also been accompanied by the emergence of the exhibition becoming a less and less stable form. The parallels emerging between the instability present in a multiplicity of curatorial authorship (even as the celebrity-isation of individual curators continues) and the exhibition as a form becoming increasingly a point of research for differing and diverse

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<sup>157</sup> Elina Suovrjö, *See me, feel me, touch me, heal me: working with affect, emotion and creation of transformative energies as a feminist curatorial practice*, Thesis, (London: Middlesex University, 2019).

constellations is evident to all those who work in the curatorial. And yet, within the frames of this research I wish to return us not to the grand scales of curatorial histories writing themselves into being even now as Covid-19 still is closing galleries and museums globally, though further and more distant from where I am writing within the United Kingdom, but to this notion of intimacies and closeness. I only mark this parallel to bring us again to the question of what contexts it is that these responses emerge from? And to also say that in the remainder of this chapter I will look to other realms of theory (as curatorial work often does) to make our way through the compounding difficult contexts of; austerity; the crisis of care emergent in the arts; Covid 19. These difficulties will form one part of the setting for this writing, whilst providing arguments for relation and interdependence that are both politically necessary as contributions to the field of curatorial knowledge, as well as in themselves act to bring together differing knowledges from differing systems and bodies of understanding. What writing in this thesis does is inhabit and reflect on the number of contexts (both curatorial and social and political), engage with and from experiences of curatorial work (including both encounters with artworks engaged with as viewer, or in reflecting on previous labour and relations). A key component of the practice of writing that is visible within this research was to make visible the particular point at which this writing was emerging from, this is not to say to defer to embodied standpoints as the only or central way

from which to write<sup>158</sup>, but instead to make visible in some way a practice of writing as it unfolded within a time of remoteness. It is a reprioritisation of connection and transformation from a point of disconnection.

This builds on the preceding work in this thesis to move towards writing in new and affective ways, towards speculative ways of defining affect as a relational force that might take place outwith similarity. This theorisation will be framed in relation to the contexts described.

## **On Conflation**

The difficult contexts within which artistic and cultural spheres exist within the United Kingdom is not only limited to post-2008 austerity of course. And whilst the many contexts that I will later theorise have contributed to the emergence of intimacy and closeness within curatorial discourses are too numerous and densely layered to discuss in detail here, I do want to briefly make mention of other specific contexts. These include the one which currently envelopes my time in writing this right now, and I imagine will still be present in some way at the point at which you are reading this, of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

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<sup>158</sup> Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò, “Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference” (2021), *The Philosopher*, 2021. Available Online: <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/being-in-the-room-privilege-elite-capture-and-epistemic-deference> (last accessed: 18.12.22).

Since the beginning of Tony Blair's premiership, there was an active desire under New Labour to collude the activities of social care and arts practices to make up for gaps and chasms left in the social fabric of the United Kingdom from Margaret Thatcher and subsequent C/conservative governance. Rather than redress the difficulties that such gaps caused within society, Blair looked at grouping a number of disparate activities under an economic umbrella, the now ubiquitous notion of 'the creative industries' was developed from a desire to consider arts and cultures through their use in bridging gaps between lacks extant in social support.<sup>159</sup>

This financialisation, professionalisation and consolidation of fields of work and life as varied as craft, photography, art, and even software development marks just one moment in a long history of co-option of art workers within neo-liberal models of industrialism and production. Stretching back to the 1920s in Andrea Fraser's writing, this increasing professionalisation stems from the re-imagining of the *raison d'être* of the institution of the museum towards

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<sup>159</sup> For critical academic writing on Blairite policy on arts and culture that has largely remained intact or been strengthened through austerity see references and writing in *On Austerity* in Chapter 2: *Curatorial Relation* of this thesis

Oli Mould, "The creative industries are hurting, not helping artists—we need a new model," *Prospect Magazine*, 2019. Available Online: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/creative-industries-new-labour-labour-precarity-art-funding-union-oli-mould> (last accessed 18.12.22).

and

Terry Flew, *The Creative Industries: Culture and Policy*, First Edition (New York: Sage Publications, 2012).



education and pedagogy<sup>160</sup>, and I am proposing here that to link the context of afore-mentioned difficult conditions with the theorisations towards new forms of practicing and practiced affection.

I want to again reiterate that the presence of institutions here – and by this I mean institutions of art, culture and politics, the structures through which discourse is shaped in ways as diverse as; parliament, museums, galleries, etc. are not the objects of study within this research, instead they form a context and a structure within which my research is situated, and their proximity to this affective research shifts between being very close and very distant. Within this chapter it feels perhaps closer than at other points as I attempt to set the groundwork for the political and social context which frames the intimacies with which I am involving myself in. My research within the bounds and limits of this thesis has not the breadth or length to encompass a full study of institutional praxis and process which might involve the same contexts I have detailed briefly above. With these in mind I would again refer to the literature considered in earlier writing of mine, particularly work by Simon Sheikh, Nataša Petrešin Bachelez, and Lucy Lopez, who have developed thinking from similar yet diverse contexts of political lurches to the right amidst decreasing cultural provision, and move to consider the ways in which institutions may

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<sup>160</sup> Gabrielle Moser, “Do Curators Need University Curatorial Programs?” *C Magazine* 100, no. 1 (2008): 27–32.

respond adequately through alternatives such as slowness and criticality through the frameworks and processes of policy, programming, and constitution.

Instead of doing the same here, I want to look at these institutional problems as a context from which we can think about why it is that affect and emotion might be so prominent within the cultural fields at this moment, and eventually, how it is that such affect and emotion might be developed and circulated in ways beneficial to not individuals or institutions, but to the notion of interdependency.

### **The Proponents of Individualism**

To begin, a contradiction. One that was lived, enacted, practiced throughout the preceding years of isolation.

A movement towards connectedness, despite isolation.

A movement towards connectedness, because of isolation.

A movement towards connectedness, from isolation.

I have spent previous chapters describing the social and political conditions that relate fairly specifically to my lived experience of curatorial work as it has

emerged in the United Kingdom, as well as directing the ways in which such conditions have been experienced by many.

Perhaps the most effective and most affective and most illustrative way of imagining something experienced at once both so internally, so bodily, as well as so collectively, is in asking you, reader, to remember the contradictory emotions and gestures of lockdown.

Contradictions exist everywhere. They exist in research. They exist often closely entwined with human emotion. And as this is a body of research that is interested and implicated and invested within affective and emotional faculties it makes sense that a contradiction of togetherness and remoteness might appear eventually.

It is what I reminded of in reading Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's noting that queer shame often includes

'a contradictory turn 'double movement...toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality'.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 37.

Sedgwick's 'contradictory turn' is one that she aligns conceptually and phenomenologically with the closet, with an experience of queerness which at once both brings about an isolationism in childhoods as well as being dependent on an understanding of relation to others. This split turn between isolation and togetherness, between a figuring of one's identity whilst disconnected from those with whom we can learn and understand ourselves better, is yet another one of these gestures, these gestures that make visible and embody the ways that difficult conditions have instilled and developed within us, needs for being-together. Pushing ourselves into proximity with others, embracing the relational and opening ourselves up to the transformative movements of those that surround us is not only a proposal, it is a necessity. And within this thesis my writing is emerging at this moment from relationships between these theoretical lineages, between the now and the past and remembering, reflecting and reflexively thinking on those from whom I have learned, as well as situating affect and emotion amongst these academic and theoretical pursuits.

When I first engaged with this particular thinking in Sedgwick's oeuvre I wrote from the deepest lockdown. Now I (we) are all in the long process of readjustment to the new reality that some are calling post-covid despite very much still being during-with-covid.

Right now I feel myself sat somewhere between these two states of both emotional over-relation, that comes to disturb me in moments of distress or gratitude – in speaking with friends I am far from through my laptop screen; in maintaining two metres between myself and close friends who I wish dearly to touch and hold; in feeling distant from those with whom I live, and who I can touch and hold, as the anxieties that pervade this time of crisis management bleed from my interior thoughts into my exterior actions and interactions. And now I am writing again, editing again, returning to writing that was first made in the depths of the strictest conditions and reminding myself of the changes that have taken place over the past two years (and longer).

Contradictions appear again and everywhere. More contradictions found, also, in the ways that cultural work has enveloped itself within private funding and organising principles of ethics that might differ from that of their constituent parts. As artists and the art world continue to undertake work that can either actively further social justice, mimics the forms of social justice movements, or represents an idea of social justice, they also find themselves in precarious positions from which they are fraternising with funders whose other work perpetuates the conservative values further entrenching the very inequalities that make necessary such alignments between social justice and cultural work. Conservative links to Donald Trump's campaign, the arming of Israeli forces, amongst others. This contradictory logic, which has emerged from private

foundations and money attempting to fill the gaps in provision left by cuts and Blairite cultural policy, discussed previously, is monikered by Morgan Quaintance as ‘The New Conservatism’, also the title of his inflammatory article made available through E-Flux in 2018<sup>162</sup>. The close associations Quaintance looks to as examples of such private-public partnerships is a New Labour continuation of Thatcherite values, individual liberty and citizenship being tied up in an inalienable right for private money to play a role in public cultural projects. Moving forward from New Labour, through austerity, and to the current Covid-19 crisis, we can see the finger prints of such partnerships not only in individual organisation but also in much of the Covid emergency funding being distributed by national and state funders including Arts Council England, Creative Scotland, Arts Council Wales, being supported by Elizabeth Murdoch’s Freelands Foundation<sup>163</sup>. I am not bringing up these associations to begin an assessment of how it is that these ethics have been engineered closer and closer together through generations of inching neoliberalisation. Nor am I seeking to begin a piece of writing that explores the contradictions or the arguments for or against such alignments of oneself with such heterogenous politics. Work on such questions is being done by others elsewhere<sup>164</sup> and here I

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<sup>162</sup> Quaintance, “The New Conservatism.”

<sup>163</sup> Elizabeth Murdoch is the daughter of Australian-American media magnate Rupert Murdoch. A number of campaigns have recently been mounted against her involvement in the UK arts world. I myself made the decision to work on writing for a Freelands Foundation-funded publication on the invitation of Irish artist Neasa Terry and believe that the work they aided in supporting artists during the pandemic has on a personal level, helped a great deal of my friends and colleagues

<sup>164</sup> See *Moving from Institutions* in *Chapter 2: Curatorial Relation*.

want to focus on how it is that these are also a part of the conditions that make more essential, closeness within this field. I will do this by showing how the individual becomes positioned within such decision-making and ethical thinking.

What does interest me in these contradictory movements is the way in which the individual becomes positioned time and time again as decision-maker within such ethical quandaries. These forms of ‘care-washing’<sup>165</sup> both seek to make citizens of companies and organisations in the same way that Thatcher and Reagan, two of the most prominent proponents of individualism in recent history have ‘urged us all to believe that care in all of its various manifestations is a matter for the individual’.<sup>166</sup> Just as work and labour is proposed as the solution to change one’s conditions, our decision making in terms of who we associate ourselves with, who we allow ourselves to be supported by, what we can bring ourselves to work with, within, around, through, even against, is a complex history of increasingly networked conditions of individualism, austerity and social collapse. At the time of writing, a global pandemic is also bearing witness to the collapsing myth of Western European exceptionalism, illuminating the fact that the economic and infrastructural wagers against covid

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<sup>165</sup> The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, First Edition (London: Verso, 2020).

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

‘have not been enough to counteract the decades of organised neglect suffered by our caring infrastructures’.<sup>167</sup>

## **Dependence**

I am here not asking a question about the validity of those working with or seeking support from these funds. That is a matter for another body of research, for another more institutionally focussed piece of writing. But what I am interested in is how the enfolding of such partnerships and associations, as a pre-existent condition for support, in the monetary sense through the state, presupposes as a belonging to the state, a belonging to the world in which such practices are validated. Though the contexts that I have discussed above have been generally affective in wide and far-reaching ways their interaction with people, I now want to spend some time thinking through how we might specify more succinctly how these contexts will then link to a theorisation of affect in the curatorial. I have already detailed the ways that far-reaching and general affectedness has emerged from particularly difficult conditions, and indeed situated this in relation to my own position working in the post-Austerity United Kingdom, and further have written emotively and affectedly within various degrees of confinement and lockdown as a result of the still-ongoing Covid-19

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 37.



pandemic. What this has done is illustrated one of my initial research questions, how it is that difficult conditions have resulted in needs for intimacy and closeness. But for now I wish to be more specific in examining the peoples and bodies and subjects and citizens more vulnerable to the political contexts detailed, and how is it that their not-being-admitted to such worlds might then further strengthen needs for closeness, protection, interdependency, outwith such structures?

Though subjecthood and citizenship are distinct categories we can look at them through the lens of dependency and state to think through their closely related definitions. Particularly, Lauren Berlant's work provides useful readings on who is and is not admitted into the realm of citizenship, or whose admittance might be tenuous, precarious, or difficult. Subjecthood and citizenship are are closely related, although the 'policing of citizenship is easier to see, outside the body, where matrices of nationality, belonging, and threat play out across skins and other borders',<sup>168</sup> as Linda Stupart writes.

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<sup>168</sup> Stupart, "Becoming Object: Positioning a Feminist Art Practice," 57.

## Figuring Affect

The crux of the argument detailed above – this layering of difficult political, social, and now health conditions – is something that I am aware has appeared within and punctuated several points of this thesis. The rationale for doing so, to include such literature and such contexts for research stretched out across a number of chapters and writings within this research is mirrored by the definitions and speculations introduced within this research. As I have developed a definition of the curatorial, relation, and proximity, I am now detailing the ways in which these forces interplay within curatorial and queer thinking, and a reminder of the reactive conditions by which these have emerged is important to hold close at this point in the writing. The flexible temporality of this thesis, present in the many definitions, contexts and thinkings that are returned to repeatedly, as well as expanded upon each time are directly linked to my own circularity of thinking throughout this research process. Within a timeline that was punctuated by lockdowns and enforced isolations, within a time of great distance the notion of returning again and again to my own thinking and the thinking of others is what has created a complex and layered approach to definition-making and world-making within this thesis. Now, having re-established this complexity I want to further push my own understandings of the work of Berlant and Ahmed in thinking through the notion of intimacies and their temporalities, and what this means when thinking about the development

and formation of closeness within such times. What is at stake in doing this has changed at several points in the writing of this thesis. In its earliest stages I found myself looking to curatorial writing, and specifically emotional and affected curatorial writing as a means of grappling with the socio-political conditions, as well as performed socialities that dominate the curatorial. But during the course of the pandemic what is at stake has transformed completely and instead I propose this thesis as a glimpse from a particular moment in time, a necessary approach taken in difficult times, within which I learned from the intimate knowledges produced not only by Berlant, Butler, Sedgwick and others, but also in and through moments of reflection and reflexion on the intimate knowledges which have appeared and been garnered through a number of relations within my practice, with artists and projects from recently and from further back in time, with former colleagues, with friends whose conversations came to me in the deepest of lockdown as I found myself attempting to think about what a thesis might even look like when written in the long months of lockdown. This is a contribution to thinking around curatorial writing, yes, but moreso for me it is an offering, an illustration, an example of a particular way that I and we have all been affected within a time of great difficulty, and how togetherness and reflecting on times-spent-together, has aided a process of painful adjustment.

Intimacy, in the writing of Lauren Berlant, is often offered or proposed as a *promise* of belonging<sup>169</sup>. This idea of a promise is interesting in that not only does it figure itself as an abstract agreement based on trust<sup>170</sup>, but also that it is itself based within an unassured temporality, the future. The futurity within such a conception of belonging is interesting as it also allows this idea to become dependent on differing modes of interconnection, reliance, dependency, and again admittance. Belonging, here, is not then presupposed, it is also itself precarious whether existing in or out of state apparatuses. Berlant cites the developing post-war fantasy of what it means to live a ‘good life’ as a key proponent in the developing figures of ideal citizens. The white, heteronormative family, whilst always centralised have become a model within which to enfold other political and social subjects. We can see this within gay marriage’s legalization, through the enveloping within the British establishment of anti-immigrant rhetoric, now often communicated through the mouths of Black or Brown c/Conservatives<sup>171</sup>. The idea of ‘belonging’ in a state-wide sense that has been perpetuated and expanding from the post-war period is not one of true inclusivity, it is one which expands the remits of citizenship so as to

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<sup>169</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The female complaint*, First Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>170</sup> Trust also figures within future references for this thesis, in the work of Mason Leaver Yap and Helena Reckitt whose curatorial practices and writings have been instrumental for my own development

<sup>171</sup> Yassmin Abdel-Magied, “Boris Johnson’s ‘brownwashing’ is a return to Britain’s Imperial Playbook”, *Gal-Dem*, 2020. Available Online: <https://gal-dem.com/boris-johnson-brownwashing-imperial-playbook-priti-patel/> (last accessed: 16.12.22).

configure those then enfolded within party to nationalisms, heteronormativity and social conservatism<sup>172</sup>.

The notion that ‘*feeling* together is the basis for all effective political action’ (emphasis the authors’),<sup>173</sup> then comes with yet another double movement, an opportunity for feeling together to go one way or the other. Our sense of belonging can either emerge from this closeness promised, either through alternative political world-making, with the creation of spaces where normative values might be ‘suspended’<sup>174</sup>, this affect circulating between creating imaginings for belongings not so hinged on normativity, or instead, a feeling of belonging can equally come from the enfoldment of a precarious citizenship (state-belonging), into which you, as other, are temporarily or conditionally invited. Relation is not an inherently good thing, as Butler has pointed out, and it is at once simple to see both how the opportunities presented in *feeling together* through alternative ways of living can equally be usurped by the political mechanisms of citizenship which assimilate and conditionally allow in particular political subjects, making one feel as if they are *feeling together*.

This tension is present in the following quote from Lauren Berlant:

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<sup>172</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. First Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>173</sup> The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, 37.

<sup>174</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

When is holding on to normative life modes a world-regenerative refusal to adapt to neoliberal demands for affective flexibility, mobility, reactivity, and abjection or austerity, and when is it a world-destructive refusal to admit non-normative human beings to the resources of collective social life?<sup>175</sup>

The demands and calls for the ability to live safe and healthy lives comes now at a particular period in time, when we see now the convergence of ecological collapse, late-capitalist disaster, and the post-pandemic in which the pandemic still persists. And indeed, these calls, the desire to live such lives are not in themselves ethically dubious demands. It is of course, accepted that people have the right to demand security in housing, health and finance. There is no problem with this per sé. Instead the problem emerges when who has the right to ask or make such demands, how far these demands extend themselves and when it is that these worlds-being-generated might be ones bound up only in the immediacy of family and similarity. Care exists within them, yes, but when similarities become an overriding force of identification between ourselves and others, when the desire to care stretches not so far as to reach those who are, perhaps, dissimilar to us. When this notion of world-generation – a world, presumably, which we want to protect, to nourish – becomes a site of gate-keeping and assembled alongside other negative affects – the fear of the other,

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<sup>175</sup> Lauren Berlant and Jay Prosser, “Life writing and intimate publics: A conversation with Lauren Berlant”, *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011): 182

the identification with the nation-state – this is when we can see the shift of movement from *relating* in an expansive sense, to *relating* in a closed and dangerous sense. This identification with those close to us is compounded by the opposing tension of how much attention we pay to our accountabilities to those more-vulnerable than ourselves, those with whom we are linked not by family or immediate relation.

Within the world of arts and culture our relationships to what we call a ‘world’ (as in, ‘the art world’) are tied in complicated ways to belonging and not-belonging. The artistic sphere operates both as a site of labour as well as emotion and socialities, as I have already established in this thesis. The notion of ‘belonging’ here signalling a space or world within which we are not truly accommodated, supported, or cared for, within the myriad of differences that mark us one from the other. If belonging is a promise, then it is a promise that is fulfilled for the most part only for those whose abilities to adjust to these destructive social and political contexts are and have been predicated for some time on their independent wealth, sexuality, skin colour, ability. For the most part the world within which we work is, conversely, one within which we do not feel we belong – which perhaps is the very same thing as not belonging. Our abilities to navigate these fields are bound up in resources that seem at times distant from us. Any moment in which ethical quandaries present themselves, individuals are faced also with their own specific realities, this is yet another

weight of the context through which we are living. And it is with this that I will move on to the next part of this chapter, which will look to the presence of affective worlds, constructed within and between other worlds, and theorise a link between these increasingly austere conditions, and a need to continue practice intimacy, closeness. I propose that if the world we are in the process of making whilst and as we live and work within it is one which has opportunities to stretch and alter the potentials for belonging and indeed different belongings, then it is not only within our ability to enable such intimacy and care, it is our obligation.

## **Vibrations**

Here I would like to draw further thinking from Berlant's and others' oeuvres that concerns its self primarily with the notion of worlds in the political sense. Again, this is not to develop a thinking around institutional practices. Instead I want to, once again, mention this relationship between difficult political contexts, and a speculative theorisation of how the role of affect within the 'worlds' and contexts of difficulty I have described, might be a way of thinking through the needs for imagining and relation within curatorial processes that have been made to emerge from such hostile ground. The way that this speculation will unfold is related to modes of writing already employed within this thesis, specifically writing that has emerged from my own reflections and



reflexive thinking on projects previously undertaken with artists, developing thinking during a period of isolation in thinking on what had been undertaken previously, elsewhere in other places. Within this process I will draw from my previous definition and engagement with the term ‘affect’ in *Chapter 8:*

*Curatorial Affect*, and subsequently must first define what it is that I mean when I use the word ‘affect’ and how it relates to a method of reflection / reflexion / bodily engagement with retrospective thinking on the curatorial that emerged at very specific time of extreme isolation.

Firstly, to identify in what context I am using the term ‘affect’ referring to earlier writing within this research that has defined the means by which I have expanded on the term ‘relation’. As I have written in earlier points in my research the relational affect which I am looking to expand on within this research is not one that exists between the figure that is variously configured by different theorists as audience, participant, viewer, receiver<sup>176</sup>, and the artist.

The affect that I am interested in is one that circulates between curators and artists within the process of curatorial and artistic practicing, and this process of writing being a composite reflection-practice from which this research will emerge and is emerging. Affect and its circulation here becomes a method from

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<sup>176</sup> These figures all stand in for what might be considered with in Arts Council language ‘audience’ but has been subject to different treatments and understandings through Nicolas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop’s differing conceptions of relational aesthetics in which the audience member, paralleling the dematerialization of the art object has similarly becomes a sometimes-unwitting active participants in the production of artworks.

which I have developed intimate engagements with not even necessarily artworks or artists themselves within particular moments of staged encounters with the intention of academic engagement with them. Instead the method that is unfurling here in writing is a reflexive and intimate thinking on the relationships and encounters that have defined so much of my memory of curatorial practice, and specifically became a way with which I could engage a more abstract and bodily curatorial-thinking during months of isolation and distance.

I would also iterate here that whilst I have at points and will continue to use the terms 'emotion' 'affect' and 'relationality' with differing and slightly distinct meanings, their connectedness is exemplified by their presence across notions of world-building and imaginary potential in both political and sociological texts.

To begin defining the abstract and sometimes difficult-to-describe force of affect I wish to bring your attention here not to a purely theoretical or academic text (though I would argue within the context of politically engaged queer theory such distinctions serve only to dilute the potential present within such

texts) but instead to a verb used in a memoir by Didier Eribon, the French philosopher in his book *Returning to Reims*.<sup>177</sup>

Employing this writing here within my thesis is yet another example of this method of reflection from isolation, reflexive thinking engaged from a context of difficulty and isolation. Whilst far from many of those to whom I am closest I read Eribon as a means of escaping the weight of the everyday, alongside fiction and other literature that provided a different view of living and being to that confinement which we all experienced both individually as well as collectively. Where this method began to hold a poetic logic in the times of isolation was in the way that I found myself drawing connections to a particular movement or gesture that Eribon described, and through drawing thematic and conceptual relations to a practice of curatorial work which was at that time, impossible and distant, I found myself feeling close to it in reading. And now, in writing I hope to bring myself close to it yet again.

Eribon describes the moment where his emotions externalise themselves, in viewing footage of workers' strikes in France across several decades, as himself 'vibrating'<sup>178</sup>, a verb that he also deploys to describe his resonance with the writing of Michel Foucault. This feeling of vibration – of resonance, of

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<sup>177</sup> Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims*, First Edition (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

<sup>178</sup> Original French: "tout en restant fidèle à des valeurs politiques et émotionnelles qui font que je vibre quand je vois un documentaire sur les grands grèves de 1936 ou de 1968"

excitement, and sometimes gratitude is one that emerges within curatorial relationships, precisely because such relations are naturally geared towards a temporality of futurity. Eribon's vibration here talks to me of the affective modes I have established as being very much a part of the curatorial, as well as being a gesture that evokes bodily and innate feeling, dynamics with which I wish to develop writing that develops thinking on the curatorial as an impulse, as an assemblage of feelings, as a set of relations, rather than reducing writing simply to a linear relationship between criticality and labour.

Research on the curatorial, and indeed the field's growth and development since the 1970s has largely been defined by its outputs – exhibitions, learning programmes, the expansion of what a 'programme' or 'institution' mean. And while each of these expansions in meaning-making have bit by bit developed an equity of critical thinking around the many different frames of curatorial work – the ways in which some are prioritised over others, how some aspects of this work have been denigrated by its association with femininity. Here I want to remain in the moment of vibration, of excitement and possibility which emerges through interdependent working. This moment when *je vibre* (I vibrate) is here proposed as one opportunity from which 'feeling together' as previously discussed might arise. This is a relatively small and vague gesture of feeling from which to base an argument for why such affective curatorial practice has developed within and in opposition to the difficult contexts detailed above, so I

will now bring together other writing on how it is that emotion and circulatory affect might offer opportunity to develop values alternative to dominant discourses, as well as writing that hinges on moments of vibration between myself and the work of artists. The writing that follows first emerged within the deepest feelings of isolation towards the contradictory relation which Sedgwick describes and which I have previously employed in my thesis. I have included it here both to illustrate the necessity of the method undertaken for much of this thesis, a necessity put in place by never-before-experienced conditions and remoteness, by an unknown which haunted each day, by phone updates on cases, hospitalisations, deaths, news of vaccines and wonderings of whether they might ever work, or be produced, or be distributed, or be distributed to whom. It is a piece of writing that situates itself within relatively small moments, of recognitions of feeling and emotion within myself at a time where any slight shift might have the ability to change my composure or ability to exist.

It is with this intuition towards bodily vibration and affective work and reflection that the following writing first emerged to me during lockdown. It began as notes scribbled in notebooks before making its way to my computer screen and subsequently became something else. Now presenting it here, following mention of my own understandings of Eribon's vibrations, I wish to make space for writing that is curatorial in the ways with which it abounds in

the potential for artworks and art practices to be woven into every day practices of living and understanding, and additionally, writing as an affective method of engaging with such dynamics.

## Chapter 9: Drumochter Pass

It was several weeks into lockdown. I had been avoiding anything that required me to look at a backlit screen for art's sake since things had begun closing. I found myself repeatedly being courted by emails – either mass or personal, from artists and institutions I knew, artists and institutions I didn't know, and from places and cities I have never set foot in. I wondered often why I had signed up to these mailing lists. It might have been that I held genuine interest in the programming they were doing, the artists they were platforming, the practices that were held within them. Or it might have just been an optimism that sometime in the future I might set foot there. Whether by invitation or by holiday, both were privileges.

I was drinking daily the first few weeks of lockdown. Not enough to worry myself or those around me. Nor enough that a long-buried anxiety around drinking that I had inherited from an upbringing by a recovering alcoholic and the daughter of a never-recovered alcoholic had resurfaced. It was just enough for those of us in the house to firstly, notice this behaviour that we were all sharing, and secondly, joke delicately of.

The thought of my mother being on wards with this virus, and my grandmother sick was enough to put me off the idea of art completely for those first few

weeks. Proximities, closeness, distance, they keep returning as central characters within this research. Here I draw from Ahmed's notion of what is close and what is far as I tried my best to make myself close to loved ones, and at the same time force my thoughts to linger far away from their own proximities to the virus, as nurses, as carers, as those most vulnerable. I found anxiety curdling within me, swilling around with last night's glasses of wine, at the thought that in parts of the art world people were still ongoing. Able to be sat at their computer screens by 9am and answering emails by quarter-past. A withdrawal from this labour during these weeks of lockdown meant that I had also withdrawn myself from art itself. Not to the extent that I avoided the gaze of paintings and prints hanging in walls of my house, but in ways that when I walked my fingers across the spines of books on my shelf they rushed past the theory and the artists and the curatorial this and that, and languished more slowly on fiction, poetry, prose. It had been a long time since I had read fiction. The thought of taking this time to slowly lower myself into the pools of other worlds that had laid waiting for me on my bookshelf proved too much and I read.

I consumed fiction in a way I haven't in years. My computer lay untouched during the days, I ignored the indications of progress other researchers and writers made, numbers of words and chapter submission deadlines displayed proudly, celebrated despite the strangeness of what was happening. I read



fiction for the first time in a long time. I found myself in poor rural France with Annie Ernaux, in the swelling hot cities of Andrea Lawlor, in the seediest filth that repulsed me, with a bottle of poppers handed to me by Dennis Cooper. Closeness, distance, proximity, those friends and enemies of mine. Again, pushing myself further from a reality that didn't feel real and towards fictions and pasts where viruses meant computers and colds and not lockdowns and death and the news blaring 24/7 from every computer and screen in my house.

I re-read the entirety of *A Scots Quair*, books that many secondary school students from Scotland I'm sure turned their back on and never returned to. And began to miss the sights and sounds of home. Pushing myself in these directions was a method to keep myself going, just to keep being able to be. A method that was drawn from life and nothing more, but which became bound up in what it is I am writing here, and in all the intimacies of the research that has been with me in these previous several years.

One night my housemates and I got pissed. We drank all the alcohol that was in the house and turned the big lights in the living room off. The only light still illuminating the room were some orange street lamps on the street in front, and our tv screen, emitting music videos from every gay icon you could name. Kylie's gold hot pants, Madonna's legs spread atop a glitching old-fashioned tv,

Donna Summer in various shining and glittering outfits. We made fabulous a living room to which we had all been confined to.

Eventually the alcohol in us shifted to its motive as a depressant. We became slow and feeble. Lying on soft cushions and rugs, watching quieter and weirder things on the TV screen as the night disappeared and morning came closer.

Everyone else had gone to bed and I asked my housemate if he wanted to watch one more thing. My head was numb with alcohol and my words big and broad in my mouth, cumbersome. There was little poetry in my explanation of what I wanted to watch and why, but my body felt with every need it had, feeling far from home, so clearly the need to again be with a film I had introduced months earlier, at an arts centre in the Outer Hebrides.

I sat for a few minutes deliberating. Charlotte Prodger's film *SaF05*<sup>179</sup> was made available to me online solely for the purposes of writing an introduction to one of its stops on a Scottish tour, following its exhibition in Venice. The numbness of the alcohol and the physical, restrictive pressure I felt had built up for weeks had fogged this. With the tv screen still beating through the dark, deep speakers, I played the film.

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<sup>179</sup> Charlotte Prodger, *SaF05*, Film, 2019, originally commissioned for Scotland in Venice. More information here: <https://lux.org.uk/work/saf05/> (last accessed 18.12.22).

As we sat watching *SaF05* lines drew themselves in my mind between the many times I had watched it. Several times on my laptop with headphones in bed, often cited as my favourite place to watch films by artists, then on Leòdhas, with a cinema-size screen making the long long horizons of the film seem that bit longer.

There are no iPhones present, as far as I can tell within its filming. I remember being in a taxi in Birmingham, on my way back from the airport after introducing Prodger's work at An Lanntair, Lewis. I'm making small talk with the friendly driver. He asks what I do. I work in a gallery, I tell him. Which is an easier, shorter and slightly incorrect way of describing what I do. He tells me that he saw on the news an artist had made videos on their iPhone and won the Turner Prize. What did I think of that? I say I think it was a very good film, and it isn't it amazing what you can do with phones these days. I never told Charlotte this had happened, I wondered if she hears things like this a lot. But the closeness of the reasons and the moments seemed a little poetic to me, or maybe I'm being romantic.

*SaF05* felt expansive. In so many senses. Pissed, tired and swaying a little in my living room, the darkness around the television seemed to dissipate, and the crunching sounds of maybe fots or paws on burnt grass and that sort of dry soil you only get in those hot places, took me to smells and textures. Maned

lionesses, that are the name and reclusive subject of the film are glimpsed briefly at the start, in black and white footage from a wildlife reserve in Botswana and remain something that is looked for, but not documented in the rest of the work. I find myself thinking about the power in the refusal to not cooperate with representation. To dissolve.

Various scenes are presented to us within *SaF05*. Close to the beginning we see what look like frozen rocks, feet atop them, climbing and making their way around cracks. Noises emit from the spaces where boots meet these rocks. A low drone of what I think are bagpipes or I want to be bagpipes play over – or maybe it's under? – this. Charlotte Prodger's voice starts talking about the Kirk. Presbyterian austerity I am well familiar with. Prodger's voice appears and reappears throughout the rest of the film, describing memories of local Laird's and those that worked for them, the jewellers on Belmont Street, Aberdeen, and standing, high, looking into its windows, a clear glass dildo, a new work, pressed, pressed between two.

A screeching saxophone accompanies a light dimming and brightening. Dimming. Then brightening. Then so much brighter than that previous moment of brightness. I think a hand is turning the lamp towards us. Then I think it is just momentum. The low wheezing of the saxophone becomes yelps and

screams. Bursts of violent noise amongst an otherwise comfortable bed of low notes and breathy constants.

At another point, before or after I'm not sure, I was pissed, the colours of soil, and green plants that are so plentiful in this dry soil, and skies much bluer than the ones here make way for an image of white and blue. It is a mountainside with deep scars of black amongst white. I recognise it instantly, this was, selfishly part of the reason I felt the need to be with this work at this late night. I tell my housemate, This is what I pass on the way home.

The mountain sides of the Drumochter Pass fill car windows when you pass through it. Without pressing your nose to the glass you might not see the sky at all. It's not so much that the peaks surrounding you are particularly high – not compared to many in Scotland – but they form a cocoon of sorts you pass through. Producers film took us there, looking on to white on white and panning slowly across as the gentle curve on one side of the mountain lowered down, giving us a glimpse of yet more hills, further behind.

I wept a little in seeing it. Of not being there. Of knowing there so intimately and being far from it. Of this artwork taking us there so delicately and then in a moment, to the savannah and bush of Southern Africa.

It was placed amongst a gentle slow rhythm of images of other landscapes, rocky alpine mountains, termite mounds that you could almost feel emitting heat in the dry sun, and a slick black loch, with Prodger's voice describing the military movements that weaved in and out of, exploiting, cruising, abusing these remarkable landscapes.

## **Chapter 10: Writing Affect, Writing Emotion**

### **Introduction**

The work of this thesis so far has established a bedwork of sociality, intimacy and relations at the heart of curatorial work, markedly since the emergence of the field in a contemporary setting and more specifically, emerging recently within art-world discourses of particular geographies, in this case situated within the wake of Blairite cultural policy, over a decade of Conservative austerity, and most recently and arguably still ongoing, within the confines of various lockdowns and restrictions on ways of living in place since the Covid-19 pandemic. The writing (both noun and verb so far) has unfolded across a multiplicity of different registers. It has included reviews of the literature in its defining of key terms such as relation, affect and even the curatorial itself. It has demonstrated ways in which friendship and social reproduction have been intimately entwined with the labour of curatorial work. And in the preceding section to this chapter it has explored the notion of proximity, closeness, intimacy as a dynamic both within the curatorial as well as writing. I have given a definition of curatorial writing that attends to the wide range of ways that writing is utilised both by curators and institutions, but also to situate a specific method and way of writing within this thesis that I refer to in the shorthand as ‘curatorial writing’. Moving from a meditation on belonging and difficulty in the previous chapter, I will here provide ways that affect and emotion have

already been configured in practices of criticism, writing and may be within the curatorial before extending into writing that exposes an affected or emotive state as method. Before writing on Charlotte Prodger's work from the very specific positionality of a lockdown spent in my own home, I detailed a gesture, a movement towards vibration, and it is with this impulse that this writing moves us towards, in demonstrating and reflecting in exhaustion, the ways that curatorial writing, specifically, as a practice might be suited to bringing together thoughts and actions of affect and emotion. This suitability is also accompanied by a necessity, a necessity to engage with, reflexively think on, reflect on and engage with this constellation that has been termed 'the curatorial' which was unavailable to so many as a way of working during the long years of lockdown.

### **Affect and its movements**

As my writing moves further into moments of being affected, being affective, and I aspire for it to also *affect*, I feel the need again to iterate that the definitions of emotion and affect within this thesis are not always interchangeable, but both share similarities in the difficult relationship they have to a perceived notion of academic rigour. This difficulty is something I have felt and I continue to search out to feel again within the writing (both verb and noun) of this thesis. Just as the curatorial is not an origination of ideas in the world of art and relies instead on already-circulating or in-motion knowledges, nor is affect within this writing (again, both verb and noun) something that



emerges from myself and is transferred directly to you. Just as my previous references to Butler's problems with understanding through anything via a dyadic relation have come to form complexities within this research, I again am reiterating that affect, similarly to the curatorial, does not lie in the beginning with an originator. But instead circulates and interplays with emotion, its internalised equivalent, to develop and move itself further, wider, more broadly.

Ahmed details repeatedly the ways in which emotion, a force developed internally, is cast as re-active to thing, dependent on something else's catalyst<sup>180</sup>. This, in the eyes of many, is what makes it a dangerous and difficult material to both use and consider within theoretical thinking. Even within the process of writing this thesis there has been difficulty for me both in developing a curatorial writing practice that feels appropriate to me within a process of ongoing practice, and particularly one stunted and hindered by the Covid-19 pandemic. And yet, in moments of difficulty the affects that have come to be close to me within the midst of the health crisis have elicited particular ways and forms of curatorial writing, namely ones that abound with affect rather than attempt to professionalise or remove themselves from emotion. Thinking on what is 'appropriate' for the form and content of a thesis proposing curatorial writing as a particularly emancipatory site for engagement with and exceeding

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<sup>180</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

from contemporary art practices, was bound by the necessity of writing taking place within the greatest difficulty of many of our lives. The confines of academic writing and anxieties around whether what my proposition for this particular type of ‘curatorial writing’ might relate itself to, and a difficult relationship imagining what is academically accepted, found a potentiality to exceed that within engaging in queer work. As Kevin Brazil, academic and writer on Queer Happiness, writes

The freedom of queerness is the realisation that the self and its desires are cultural, not natural: they change, and they have never been fixed. This means the queer can only know history in order to do without it, at least in any deep and extended sense.<sup>181</sup>

And whilst I disagree with a wholly dismissive relationship to history (as evidenced in this very thesis’ engagement with a number of curatorial histories) this notion of something not aligning to what has existed because it has not exactly existed in language or in definition or in position before is exactly the contribution to knowledge that this thesis demonstrates, and later in this chapter I will look to other practitioners and writers expanding and exceeding the limits of what has come before.

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<sup>181</sup> Brazil, “The Uses of Queer Art.”

Returning to Ahmed's conception of emotion and affect, I want to highlight that she details its mobility as 'circulatory', moving both thematically and gesturally in a similar way as in the work of Berlant. Whilst rejecting a model of contagion for such modes, in which the presence of shame creates shame, the presence of joy creates joy etc simply in an of their own existences, Ahmed's understanding of emotion is reliant on the tendency for how it is that 'emotions can move through the movement or circulation of objects'.<sup>182</sup> In the same way that Berlant's conception of desire, a flighty affect based on futurity and promise, is particularly susceptible to being bound up in objects and structures, therefore finding itself policed and structured, Ahmed's takes an expansive approach to the thinking of such 'objects'. The exteriorisation of such emotions into affect does also not deny the interior feelings of someone. Ahmed iterates that queerness, even when felt, however, is an assemblage of feelings that are 'mediated' and 'attached to the category 'queer' in ways that are complex and contingent, precisely because the category is produced in relation to histories that render it a sign of failed being or 'non-being'.<sup>183</sup> So, labelling my own produced knowledges and writing within a category that we might consider 'queer' is itself produced in relation to other types of failure. Namely, the failure to uphold or perform the institutional, the failure to centre and develop towards an institution around which the curatorial becomes anchored. The

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<sup>182</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

failure in itself is a success of spending time within the affects themselves. Just Halberstam's definition of failure resides on a socially-accepted-and-expected definition of success that is aligned variously with individualistic, capitalist, financial success, I am here using failure in a celebratory way, in a manner that rejects the expectations of normative institutional ideals and instead abounds in the knowledges that are emotive and bodily, shared and circulated, that particularly in the last few years celebrate even our survival.

That the historical, political and social contexts that the category of 'queer' is produced in – as well as many other *other* identities and subject positions - come then to define our relation or non-relation to citizenship, is a foundation that undoubtedly produces particular affects. The affects produced and circulated within such field of citizenship, that is within the comfortable confines of nationhood and community into which access is granted, become themselves within, sanitised spaces. Affects produced and circulated outwith such delineated fields, less bound by the admission and regulation of such structures holds potential which I will now look to in Jennifer Doyle's own valuing of emotion within critical contemporary art practices. This moves further my third research question, by not only demonstrating that subjectivity has already been used to develop thinking around affect and relation in a critical (read: curatorial) sense, but additionally to demonstrate through writing that a practice of curatorial writing holds the ability to push this further.

*How might a subjective approach to thinking curatorial affect and relation contribute to curatorial research and particularly in the form of curatorial writing?*

## **Emotion and Art**

Ahmed's use of the word 'sticky' referring to how it is that objects become 'saturated with affect'<sup>184</sup> to objects and structures that hold on to the potential of personal, social, or political feeling, for me draws a line similar to the definitions of camp developed in the previous chapter. Camp as a sensibility which can and often does result from one's pre-occupying oneself with objects and things otherwise culturally degraded. This spirit is similarly evoked in the ways that writer, curator and filmmaker Gavin Butt plays with the opportunities that queer culture's different relationship to seriousness might turn it more interestingly towards alternative forms of reflection, reflexion and critique.<sup>185</sup> I would like to remark here that These means of reflecting on the ways in which feminine and queer emotions have historically been slighted, cited as dubious by dominant cultures both widely and in the rarefied field of academic discourses. The non-normative values espoused by Butt here is used in art critic

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<sup>184</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.

<sup>185</sup> Gavin Butt and Irit Rogoff, *Visual Cultures as Seriousness*, First Edition (Berlin: Sternberg, 2013).

Jennifer Doyle's compelling argument in *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* which, instead of binarising emotion and critical thought as two opposing poles, two mutually exclusive elements, posits them as complementary sensibilities where we might encounter the 'interface of the personal and the political'.<sup>186</sup>

The above quote positions the processes through which queer culture emerges as being often antithetical to normative notions of seriousness, instead it abounds in non-normative values. Whilst Butt's very prescient contribution to Doyle's research seems to be aligning the queer with triviality and the insubstantial (the *camp*, still present), Doyle herself is using these definitions – within the sphere of contemporary art – to reconfigure relationships between values and bodies. Specifically, Doyle presents a relationship between these supposed notions of 'insubstantiality' and the queer. And in line with affective circulations between bodies and communities espoused by other theorists, Doyle tells us readers that 'emotion is widely assumed to make things easier to get out and pollute critical thought'.<sup>187</sup> Whilst other writers I have referenced previously here have mused more widely on the phenomenology of affect, Doyle here is situating these conversations in relation to contemporary art discourse. And whilst Doyle's writing is predominantly occupied with art

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<sup>186</sup> Jennifer Doyle, 2013. *Hold it against me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. 1st ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

criticism, the figure of the critic, and indeed the very situated research that deploys her own experiences as critic within these fields, I believe there is ample opportunity to consider here that Doyle's assertion that 'sentimentality is generally unwelcome in institutional spaces associated with contemporary art'<sup>188</sup> alongside my previous consideration of queer sensibilities she writes of, that Doyle's writing is a refreshing alternative to the antagonism of Claire Bishop's towards the very thought of ethics playing a role within critique and valuation of contemporary art. Additionally, Doyle's assertion of sentimentality's awkward position as unwelcome within spaces of contemporary demonstrates the difficult relationship institutions have to being spaces for what have traditionally been seen as more feminine or queer affects, even in curatorial roles which are increasingly taken by women and queer people. Whilst not within the particularised boundaries of the curatorial, Jennifer Doyle's *Hold it Against Me: Emotion and Difficulty in Contemporary Art* provides some useful way markers in thinking through how it is that emotion has been viewed within art writing, art criticism and more broadly, critical art practices.

Earlier in this writing I briefly referred to Michael Warner's writing on counterpublics, in which he offers that attention and modes of communication,

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 77.

even a ‘glance can constitute our social world<sup>189</sup>. One quality particular to these social worlds is how they can suspend the dominant social discourses that surround them, allowing values or assumptions to be paused, or simply not-present. He writes that ‘within a gay or queer counterpublic for example, no one is in the closet: the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended’.<sup>190</sup> For Warner publics constituted through attention – and I would argue desire – exist through and are also constituted by social relations that might exist in opposition to dominant ideologies. Before delving deeper into Warner’s work on the constitutive intimacies of public and counterpublic lives, I want to draw back a little. Before looking to these constructions of relation between self and other through affect, I want to detail specifically why I am speaking in this writing about queer affect, and how queer methods of emotional relation are of particular interest in my research.

The ‘painful individuation’ identified by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that is ubiquitously present in tales of queer childhoods, eventually becomes an opportunity for ‘uncontrollable relationality’.<sup>191</sup> This transformation from interiority to exteriority is one reliant on alternative values, and indeed alternative notions of what constitutes value. Here, sociologist and researcher

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>190</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 120.

<sup>191</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 37.



on citizenship and identity, Mabel Berezin's own conception of 'communities of feeling'<sup>192</sup> becomes particularly useful, in attending to the problematics and opportunities that arise when institutions attempt to align themselves within the movements of flighty and mobile emotion. Whilst emotion itself, and how it arises, she claims is indeterminate, political, social and national institutions are particularly good at posturing themselves in relation to particular moments of circulation of emotion. And whilst Berezin never (or at least rarely) specifically uses the word affect, the way she describes institutions intervening within moments of collective emotion in contexts such as terror attacks in Berlin or even the death of Princess Diana, to me is a cousin of the other conceptions of affect I have laid out in this writing.

And so, the relations framed within Halperin, Davies and Clintberg's writing, which I have engaged with in *Chapter 6: Curatorial / Proximity* offer us a brief glimpse into the opportunities for queer affect to configure new ways of being and working together. The structures and frameworks that Berlant's conception of hetero-desire both create and continue to uphold are ones in which sentimentality or affect find an uneasy lack of home within, and so they are forced to make their own alternatives. We can see clearly parallels, similarities, relationships between the uneasiness with which sentimentality and affect find a

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<sup>192</sup> Mabel Berezin, "Emotion and Political Identity: Mobilizing Affection for the Polity.", in *Passionate Politics: Emotion and Social Movements*, ed. by Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, Francesca Polletta, First Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 83–98.

home within the academic institution as well as within more traditional conceptions of the curatorial which rely not the ability to remain steady and unwavering. The increasing precarity and difficulty that has been mentioned in this thesis so many times is unfortunately the lived reality for many beings, it is the default of the precariat, particularly right now, and it is through forming these alternatives by necessity that I propose a more poetic and beautiful type of writing to become prioritised both within this thesis and through the field of contemporary art thinking.

### **Desires and Futures**

No relationship is dyadic. The perceived-as-dyadic relationship between artist and curator is in fact, not dyadic. The relationship between male and female is in fact, not dyadic. The relationship between love and hate is in fact, not dyadic.

A discourse taking place between two actors is also, in fact, not dyadic. This is a dynamic that is both enabled and supported by the previously-cited definitions of 'circulation' that occurs with affect and discourses. Discourses shift and move, are specific but also variable and on a spectrum from place to place. They are bound up in their very emergence from particular moments in political, social or artistic time. No relationship of critique or curatorial or criticality or engagement or anything else is ever simply something produced *between two*.

Just as forms of academic parlance have expanded, are expanding, and will continue to be expanded so too will every definition given in this thesis.

As I have said previously to this section, the notion that affect and sentimentality sits difficultly with the academy is one established and worthy of consideration. But additionally, the opportunity that this holds as becoming a dynamic component part of methods that align ourselves to futures and things not-yet-here<sup>193</sup> is central to understanding why it is that affect and emotion have the potential to extend and invite outwards, rather than simply act as an interiorisation, a problem for research that involves thinking only with the self. Instead I want to illustrate here how the relationship between affect, desire and the future illuminates opportunity and potential for a relationality of the ‘uncontrollable’ variety we have already witnessed described by Sedgwick. Additionally, I wish to show how this illuminates a method by which curatorial writing that abounds in reflexive thinking on relationships, that uses the rhythms and impulses of affective being-amongst-others or even rememberings of being-amongst-others during lockdown, may be the alternative ways of curatorial thinking that are so necessitated by the difficult conditions we live and work in currently.

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<sup>193</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, First Edition (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

Affect theorists Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth locate queer affect as a mode of politically engaged inquiry ‘that attends to the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of “experience”<sup>194</sup>

Desire describes a state of attachment to something or someone and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between and objects specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it.<sup>195</sup>

Lauren Berlant’s writing here is predicated on the future, or at least, a different temporality from the now, where we presume that possibility exists. I say here ‘a different temporality from the now’ to propose that the potential for other times that do not exist on a linear processual understanding may exist already, or at many times at once. Desire here is intrinsically linked to imagination and futurity, and the concreteness of objects or bodies is not only subject to, but is revealed as falsified by the generative and emotive powers of imagination. Desire, in Berlant’s eyes is visible ‘only when it reaches toward something to which it can attach itself’. For desire and affect to be considered within the curatorial, the spectre of the object is somewhere but I would argue that it is haunting conversation, rather than acting as a concrete present.

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<sup>194</sup> Clintberg and Davies, “Haunted by Queer Affect: Geoffrey Farmer’s *The Intellection of Lady Spider’s House* and Allyson Mitchell’s *Killjoy’s Kastle*,” 62.

See also:

Melissa Gregg and Seigworth, Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 1–25.

<sup>195</sup> Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 7.

Affect or emotion, as Sedgwick notes, is always rooted in, and coded as, desire<sup>196</sup>. It is not necessarily a desiring because of lack<sup>197</sup> in this instance. It is a desiring for always, more than. A desiring that consistently and continually strives to improve upon its inner working and effects and affects. The temporality of desire is one that looks forward, imagines and conceives of in a variety of ways. Desire being a forward-facing mode is evident in a cruising methodology. Desire is not fuelled by something, it is not the product of something not-yet-here. It is itself present, not in a concrete or representational way, but present through our urges, our needs, and our hunches that lead us down leafy dark corridors of trees, to spots where bodies linger and make themselves known physically or visually. A glimpse of what is yet to come, fleeting moments of intimacy in which a gesture or a sketch is drawn by hand and communicated within a timeline of prospective events. Art historian Fiona Anderson describes a cruising methodology as one which involves ‘looking closely for ideas or motivation in the words and images of others’<sup>198</sup> and the intimacy of closeness here, as well as the searching for energy through that which is created by others here speaks to me of not only the desire and its futurity that Sedgwick details, but also the very nature of a curatorial

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<sup>196</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

<sup>197</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VIII. Le transfert, 1960-61*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, First Edition (Paris: Seuil, 1991) 139.

<sup>198</sup> Anderson, “Cruising as Method.”

engagement. It is dependent on others, it finds points of departure through closeness with others. Additionally this method, as Anderson describes it, holds the ability to prioritise alternative forms of knowledge-making, ones which reclaim ‘that which is difficult to see.’<sup>199</sup> The place of desire, of a methodology that prioritises bodily encounters, is one which leads to transformation not only of the form of the research itself, but of the field of belonging to which the research is and can be found.

An affective network here becomes ‘an event of place, in part in the simple sense of the coming together of the previously unrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing’.<sup>200</sup> And so the new formulations of being together that emerge within curatorial work, as groups of persons brought together to speculate on something in the future, become important sites of affect’s infectiousness. Embodied and bolstered by subjectivities the way that the curatorial is situated between many bodies and emerges abstractly and bodily is a parallel to the way that Australian affect theorist Anna Gibbs describes how, ‘Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch a fire; affect leaps from one body to another evoking tenderness.’<sup>201</sup> It is perhaps too simple to say that together

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid

<sup>200</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, First Edition (London: Sage, 2005), 141.

<sup>201</sup> Anna Gibbs, “Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect,” *Australian Humanities Review*, 2001. Available Online: <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2001/12/01/contagious-feelings-pauline-hanson-and-the-epidemiology-of-affect/> (last accessed 18.12.22).

things are more than the equal sum of their parts, but the circulation of feelings within a site of labour that is as personally implicated as in artistic and curatorial production can be attested to by anyone who has worked in the cultural fields. Further, what I am doing within the more affective and affected components of writing here is an attempt to make opportunities for closeness and vulnerability within writing, within a form that is normally associated with normative proponents of the academy.

Desire here shifts between bodies, never truly individualised, one is predicated within a desiring economy, and circulatory rhythms of desire are substantiated between selves. The figuration of desire in this argument then, is not one wholly individual. It is again a 'contradictory movement'. Heightened sensitivity within these moments offers a space of imagination in which queer emotion is not related just to and of myself, but is in fact a collective work, where circulatory affect is constituted between bodies, between those that recognise both similarity and difference in the other, one who walks opposite them with a limp wrist, an exhaustive attention and a formation of themselves that looks outwards only slightly to find solace in the arms, legs, body of an other.

To work within a mode of relation and being-amongst, as such it is to work within the curatorial, is to inherently assume and adopt methods of engagement that relate or align themselves unconsciously with my identity, as well as its

relation to how I am perceived as queer. To work with an other, with whom I recognise a similarity is to know ‘our subjectivity is understood as having a resonance with others’.<sup>202</sup> To work with queers or to work queerly is to surround myself within a particular type of safety. Within a temporality where the assumptions of heterosexuality, normative desires and values are paused. And within this pause, imagination can occur.

Scholarly interest in conceptions of truth or the accountable reside in a long-established desire for knowledge to occur within the formal and concrete<sup>203</sup>. With imagination through the relational we can encounter ourselves and each other within configurations of power and production that are neither true, nor false, ‘but fabulous’.<sup>204</sup> The line of alternative knowledge production that was introduced earlier in this thesis with Clintberg and Davies’ own conception of camp continues here, the troubled relationship between institution and knowledge, or knowledge and form of knowledge is troubled. Instead, what is prioritised is the ways in which such knowledges might emerge through fabulation, through more excessive and exciting means of engaging with what already exists.

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<sup>202</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 77.

<sup>203</sup> Mason Leaver Yap, “Trust Not Truth”, in *The Foundation*, First Edition (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2015)

<sup>204</sup> Tavia Nyong’o, “Mother Would Like A Cash Reward: Trajal Harrell at MoMA,” *Museum of Modern Art*, 2015. Available Online: [https://www.moma.org/d/pdfs/W1siZiIsIjIwMTUvMTAvMzAvMXg0b3RlNXpnY19lYXJyZWxsX055b25nby5wZGYiXV0/Harrell\\_Nyongo.pdf?sha=8eaa98cfbf434ea1](https://www.moma.org/d/pdfs/W1siZiIsIjIwMTUvMTAvMzAvMXg0b3RlNXpnY19lYXJyZWxsX055b25nby5wZGYiXV0/Harrell_Nyongo.pdf?sha=8eaa98cfbf434ea1) (last accessed: 18.12.22).



Warner defines attention as being constitutive of publics, and subsequently, counterpublics, groupings of individuals that exist in opposition to normative and dominant knowledges or desires. For a queer curatorial writing practice to be envisaged we cannot think about the curatorial as a solid set of knowledges which can be pulled apart and then added to with Queer histories, theories or individuals. Instead of simply attaching the hopes of queers to projects that emerge through the curatorial, we must think about practices as relations to a great many things, and through relations with others, enact a queer criticality. To react to and reflexively engage with the curatorial as a particular site from which writing practices might emerge is to reveal existing relations and speak into existence new ones. Just as Jennifer Doyle's engagement with the critical capacities of an emotional engagement with art reveals political potential in gesture and movement, I am here situating writing that is both gestural, moving, encouraging of people to move and be moved, firmly within curatorial knowledges as it is defined by its movements between figures and relationships in the world of contemporary art.<sup>205</sup>

What I mean here by a queer criticality is to utilise the various affective and resistant modes of working and being which have been evidenced as part of queer methods in the literature brought together within this thesis, in ways that

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<sup>205</sup> Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*.

resist and shift dominant practices. The key action or practice of this type of queer criticality within the ends and limits of this thesis is an engagement with writing as a curatorial site, engaging with writing (again, noun and verb) as a means of re-engaging from positions of marginality, from positions of peripherality, from positions of difficulty, from positions that have been defined politically, socially, societally, and most recently defined through the unruliness of a virus and its effects on our lives. Actions may be repeated, improved upon, developed and imbued with the desire to glide along or gather themselves up against existing infrastructures. Desires, both libidinal and critical, theoretical and poetic, come into contact with practice as it moves towards the future, something not-arrived.

Warner notes that in spaces of counterpublics, it is possible for heterosexuality, the figuration of the closet, to be suspended and even temporarily erased. At the centre of such an ability to imagine, to make fabulous, to withdraw from one reality and enter into another, is relationships. The abilities to imagine and enter into new possibilities dominates conversations between artist and curator, there is possibility for the not-yet-present art object or event to form itself in words before it is formed in form. Within the institutional structure of a studio visit we need not [always] predicate ourselves with the physical and material, imagination can occur in the form of world making. Bizarrely and seemingly contradicting this nature of togetherness it was through distinct remoteness that

enabled writing and developing this thinking while remembering curatorial pasts with fondness, imagining curatorial futures, and maintaining a belief that togetherness might once again be a state we could inhabit someday soon.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that there is discursive formation to what cannot be known. For Sedgwick, there is an institutional privilege of not knowing and producing false knowledge. I think that here we can imagine that within these existences of false knowledges we must develop new frameworks through which we can use queerness as a discursive form. Queer worlds will always have a relationship to non-queer ones, usually that relationship being necessity, aggravation and demarcation.

Pedro Neves Marques notes in his essay *Parallel Futures*, that ‘it is only white people who have the privilege of living in one world; everyone else must live in many worlds, theirs and ours (I mean mine) in order to survive.’<sup>206</sup>

Survival as a mechanism that comes about through diverse modes of presentation, passing and performance results in a number of worlds. Arendt’s notion that the social realm is a thoroughly modern phenomenon that has coincided with ‘the political form’ of the nation state, means that these worlds,

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<sup>206</sup> Pedro Neves Marques, “Parallel Futures: One or Many Dystopias?” *E-Flux Journal*, 2019. Available Online: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/99/263702/parallel-futures-one-or-many-dystopias/> (last accessed 18.12.22).

and realms built through the social can be constituted through discourses, both illicit and sanctioned.

Discourses that build and imagine new and existing worlds happen through circulatory economies, of exchanges of words between bodies. This is how counterpublics form, how we can find the opportunity to find our way within existing spaces and structures for our own desires<sup>207</sup>, and how particularised they might be in emerging in the face of power imbalances.

The writing that follows was made from a variety of different types of writing. Some that felt necessary to spill out on to pages, others that provide yet more context and more analysis of the sources that I have already been drawing from in this thesis. And throughout this writing, as it shifts from something lyrical and vibrating to something that engages more structurally with its surroundings in this thesis, is the imagination of worlds, construction, and writing itself and its place within this.

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<sup>207</sup> Rogoff, "Smuggling."

## **Towards Alternatives**

We are told,

We have been told,

Recently,

For the past several years,

*For most of my voting years,*

We are living in unprecedented times.

‘a turn to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity’<sup>208</sup>

I see the jokes online, people begging, please to go back to ‘precedented times’.

My voting life has been defined by failure (for me). Not a queer failure, a very

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<sup>208</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 30.

heterosexual and violent failure. A failure of care and of compassion and of reckoning with legacies and futures.

They have been defined by it never quite going the way that I and others who are like me, would wish.

Alike-ness is a tricky thing. What is alike-ness in the context of the past more-than-a-decade of Conservative governance? What is alike-ness when it is claimed within times of austerity?

We are living in times of institutions sharing infographics and making statements.

In solidarity with the ongoing occupation of Palestine.

In solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

In solidarity with a museum director criticised by a group called Lawyers for Israel.

A withdrawal of labour.

A withdrawal of Labour.

No withdrawal, but Solidarity.

In solidarity.

There is pressure on institutions to do. To perform, but also, to do.

We have lived through over a year now of this virus having changed everything about our lives. Never before have I been scared to touch or be touched.

And now we have adjusted. Those of us lucky enough to live in certain parts of the world have protection now. And still it goes on.

I am tired and I am finding this difficult. Writing this, to you. Writing this, to myself. Writing this, with anyone in mind.

I am frustrated. I am wondering, what does it mean for these people to post these statements of solidarity, to make statements questioning their past working decisions? To admit to the world that they have worked with organisations whose money comes from arms-dealers and occupying forces?

Surely a statement of doing wrong is not enough? *What comes after?* I find myself wondering.

What comes after?

What comes after the infographics and the statements.

We are living in the time of the Making Statements Industrial Complex.

The Infographics Industrial Complex.

The Text Edit Screenshot Post To Instagram To Openly Criticise Someone You Are Working or Have Once Worked With And Yet Are Continuing To Work With Industrial Complex.

The Make A Group Of Workers Redundant And Then Re-Advertise Their Position With Less Pay And Get Invited To Judge Prizes and Prizes And One Hundred Other Things Industrial Complex.

I am so tired of hearing these people talk about ethics. It tires me and I am tired and I tried and it tries me I tried it TRY ME.



There is no end destination for this.

The pressure applied might cease but then another one will be applied. And probably rightly so. There is always a better. Just as we watch television from the nineties without the rose-tinted lenses we see people who have been at the helm of institutions for decades and wonder how much longer they will be there.

Conversely, the life-span of an institution changing every two years, with underpaid and undervalued team members. Team members who have entered the structure understanding the visibility it will give them.

I can't blame them. And yet for some the work seems more belonging to them than others. If an institution sheds its skin every two years then you are to expect some dead weight, right?

What does it mean for these positions to be assumed? For a body to try to position itself between and close to these political alignments. It is this that interests me more than the thought of an institution assuming these common positions.

If the curatorial is marked – as has been detailed previously in this research – by relation, proximity, closeness and distance then how might it be marked by ‘these various encounters with mixed forces’ and how might these ‘come to shift its affections (its being-affected) into action (capacity to affect)?’<sup>209</sup>

In the context of the curatorial, what is being asked of affect is how it is that it might become a force, a dynamic within the curatorial relation that enables acts of solidarity. More widely, this question is about the type of relation of the curatorial, is there a relation more expansive than the institutional relation? And if the curatorial relation is, or at least has the potential to be one, imbued with distinct and intimate affects, then how might this provide a basis for future action that does not predicate itself along institutional lines?

What if we invested ourselves in the actions of writing and imagining a form of curatorial work, of life work, that does not seek to establish and develop knowledges in theoretical ways that are endorsed and furthered by the academy? And whilst a speculative moment within this thesis might not be the most appropriate way to imagine these actions themselves then what I am asking here is what is it that these actions finding themselves bringing us closer to? What is it that such relations might bring us *towards*?

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<sup>209</sup> Gregg and Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” 2.

This thesis has already broken down in points, descended to ways of writing that became necessitated from emotional spaces of vulnerability and remoteness. And in inhabiting these modes, and in writing from them, I propose that the curatorial, having been both expanded and specified in meaning enough might also hold space to include practices of living and being with difficulty that enact emotion not to distract nor engender indifference, but instead to prompt a desire for more freely circulated emotion, more freely flowing writing that grapples and writhes with the reality of the type of work we are undertaking, one which ‘invites us to cultivate practices of care, tenderness and love’<sup>210</sup> in the words of Jennifer C Nash, Professor of Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies, Duke University, whose work on Black Feminist Theory will be referenced later in this thesis. Just as desire stems from a desire for desire<sup>211</sup>, and beauty elicits a recognition that beauty is possible and within reach, the *towards* that I propose the knowledge demonstrated within this thesis gestures us closer to, is, in fact, more gestures towards, more movement. This writing-as-research does not define itself by an outcome that operates to demonstrate a key idea or concept that has been unlocked through an engagement with curatorial literature and past curatorial practice, instead it is an invitation to impulse, a call to gesture, a desire to elicit desire.

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<sup>210</sup> Jennifer C. Nash, “Writing Black Beauty”, *Signs* 45, no. 1 (2019): 101 – 122.

<sup>211</sup> Berlant, *Desire/Love*.

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We have all been feeling affected in recent years, we are all always in a state of being-affected in one way or another. But what has unfolded within the last year has been the most intensely and widely felt affectedness from the virus that has upended our lives. ‘We’ and ‘our’ here are pronouns that I use with an understanding and an acknowledgement of their limitations. That a ‘we’, ‘us’ or ‘our’ cannot do justice to the singularities and specificities of every lived experience during this pandemic. But it also acts as a ‘we’ that includes myself both within the groups of people who have lived through the horror of these preceding years and additionally, through the relative comfort of a middle-class job, an income, and a precarity of a particular kind which was not immediately endangered in the first lockdowns of the pandemic.

It is no coincidence that thousands have marched city streets both near and far from me within the context of these times. Whilst opportunity for physical closeness has been far from us the circulation of political feeling has remained, or even been bolstered by our internalised emotions of distance and being-far from one another.

At various points in this research I have detailed the place of relation and interlinked subjectivities both within the daily, lived reality of curatorial work

as well as within conceptualisations of ‘the curatorial’. To think now, within this moment where statements from institutions feel more and more populating on the stage of the internet, about other forms of thinking together might emerge from, and subsequently, how different forms of relations might be imagined in smaller ways that imbue ethics and senses of the work of the curatorial that does not necessarily entail a production of an exhibition or work of art.

This chapter will look to a number of alternative thinkings that either engage directly with the curatorial, or which I am bringing into conversation with the curatorial, that support as well as inspire my own proposals for a curatorial writing practice that is expansive and transformative through the ways by which it is affected and affective. How we might transform or radicalise the art world has so often been confined to thinking around grand gestures of institutional change. We see this in the manners that the art world’s new is disseminated not only through news media, but also through social media and by word of mouth, chatter and Chinese whispers. What this chapter will do is build on my previous writing in this thesis that proposes writing as a particular site of curatorial labour and writing as a process by which we might reconfigure relations of time, reflection and curatorial dynamics.

I am putting forward here that writing may be considered one of the sites through which affects might circulate and transform within, besides or in

dialogue with, the curatorial.<sup>212</sup> Proposing that instead of thinking about how it is we might transform or radicalise institutions, instead concern themselves with smaller and more personal positions that bring us closer to pleasure, love and trust. Firstly, I will depart from previous writing on emotion and affect and move to consider how existing conceptions of the curatorial that remain firmly rooted within work and labour, even within recent thinking around the *paracuratorial*, is insufficient to respond to the current political contexts and demands within which we are working. Then I will write on literature and positions that will benefit both future conceptions of the curatorial as practice, as action, as these afore-mentioned labours, but additionally on writing the curatorial, specifically within the confines of this essay. Encompassing writing by Jennifer C Nash and others I will demonstrate the ways in which Black Feminist thought has led on similar thinking around how it is that writing might best function as it embodies and describes bodily and embodied emotions, feelings, and experiences. This forms an important part of supporting the varied types of writing present within this research, and particularly to form proposals for embodied writing, both academic and curatorial. The inclusion of signposts to Black Feminist, Indigenous or other thought is not to consolidate them neatly here, or even to bring them together under one umbrella. Instead I intend to retain the particularities of these bodies of research where writing becomes

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<sup>212</sup> Ben Cranfield, "Mind the Gap," *Performance Research* 22, no. 3 (2017): 118-126.

pushed and changed and make use of the diversity of appearances for such writing to demonstrate that the curatorial might act as yet another field which would benefit from such approaches to thinking affect in writing.

It is not only through an employment of such forms of writing that I make advocacy for, but also an alignment with other forms of writing and vulnerability that centralise attention onto moments of caring and imagining. I will look to recent curatorial writing that develops what I will call an interpersonal curatorial, conceptualizations of the future within curatorial circles, and how instead of envisaging a future institution we might instead benefit from thinking about the sensory and emotional bonds that might be entered into via the curatorial in ways that are loving, consensual and enthusiastically slow. In articulating, writing, speaking in these particular modes the benefit will be an expansion of both voices and ways of speaking that are held within the sphere of curatorial work, a way of articulating a particular moment in time, when living through a pandemic and its isolation meant research here being engaged with in a curatorial, relational way, through writing that both moves, is moving, makes moves, and has moved.

## Interiority and Exteriority

Previously in this research I had described how exterior relationality spoke of affect as a circulatory thing as defined by Ahmed, Berlant and others<sup>213</sup>.

Conversely emotion is generally conceived of as an interiorised thing<sup>214</sup>. What I will do here is to expand on the position of emotion within this research before bringing it towards a valuation of emotion, beauty, and even love as forces for developing writing. I have previously detailed the ways that writing holds possibility to operate as a particular vehicle for curatorial emotion, and this will form a key argument in my proposition for such dynamics.

Whilst I have referred heavily to Ahmed's conception of affect within arguments that surround objects and proximity, Ahmed, and indeed Berlant's understandings of affect also make an interesting connection to more abstract thought that expands an understanding not just of what is close or far, but also what is *not-yet*, what exists not as an exchange or a transfer from one body to another, but a circulation of complex emotions that find space for movement within the collective 'social body'.

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<sup>213</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

Berlant, *Desire/Love*.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.



‘Rather than locating emotion in the individual or the social, we can see that emotionality – as a responsiveness to and openness towards the worlds of others – involves an interweaving of the personal with the social, and the affective with the mediated.’<sup>215</sup>

Whilst emotion rests – unstably – within the individual, the idea of emotionality struck me as particularly pertinent within the last year-plus we have been living. Both in life and in work we have found borders between ways of living become leaky and non-distinct. The realities of childcare accompanying work carried out through zoom, the noises of a household penetrating group and team meetings, the ways in which home spaces have become work spaces and work spaces have become empty and just now we are returning slowly to some kind of different way of working-living. The boundaries of what is ‘inside’ and what is ‘outside’ are not fixed in the same places, in the same spots, across all parts of life and work. The fixity of these things is so often relative and subject to change within particularities. Ahmed evokes Judith Butler’s conceptions of affect and emotion being inherently linked to ‘fixing’ identities via borders, nations or identities<sup>216</sup>. We have seen these things that seem so permanent shift and change, and that is what complicates this notion of outside/inside. The fact

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<sup>215</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Collective Feelings, or, The Impressions Left by Others”, *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 2 (2004): 25 – 42.

<sup>216</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*. First Edition (New York: Routledge, 1993).

that the boundaries between the two is changing, not that it does not exist or has not existed in the past, simply that these borders shift from collective sentiment.

Thinking through how it is that alternatives might be developed in response to the curatorial's firstly rapid institutionalization and subsequent becoming a subject of critique, it might be tempting to think about the proposals and conversations happening around post-curating, or the *para*-curatorial. Devised largely within academic spheres of an alternative way of *doing* the curatorial, understandings of the paracuratorial largely rest on that which it is rejecting. Namely, large scale, biennale culture, the focus on the exhibition as the primary mode of curatorial delivery, and a propensity for slower, longer term working processes. Paul O'Neill specifically details the subjects of his rejections of the curatorial:

The disappearance of curatorial self-reflexivity; curatorial labor restricted to object-oriented exhibitions curating reduced to working within institutions; establishing a canon or selecting from within a canon; curating associated with, or working within, a private collection or museum context as the only way forward.<sup>217</sup>

The problem I have with this vision for the alternative future of curatorial work is not so much that which it is rejecting but more so where it locates itself within a timeline of production and labour. In lieu of the above ways of working

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<sup>217</sup> Paul O'Neill, "The Curatorial Constellation and the Paracuratorial Paradox," *The Exhibitionist* 5 (2012): 57

O'Neill proposes events, talks and discussions as important sites of paracuratorial labour that make room to shake off some of the overly production-focused aspects of assumed-curatorial work.

These two quotations above – O'Neill's and Ahmed's – complement each other in that the snapshot of Ahmed's thinking here exposes the problematics within O'Neill's. The idea of a paracuratorial that might be following on from, or outside of existing established ideas of the curatorial is one that only takes root if we agree to it. And I do not agree to it. Whilst there is some work done within thinking around the paracuratorial that rejects more overtly commercial or capitalist aspects of curating, exhibition-making, programming, organising, etc, there is a problem for me in that the rejection does not offer anything new in place, instead it is just the same but slower. The problem with much of the writing around the paracuratorial is that much more time is dedicated to describing what is being rejected than what is being imagined in its place. As detailed throughout this thesis, the site of writing is a central point of my own contribution to this field. And it is with this in mind that intimate writing, loving writing, as part of larger and diverse imaginary practices of relating, instating and building (actions that touch closely but are not the object of research within this thesis) are necessitated by such rejections. This is also evidenced in Simon Sheikh's writing who proposes that instituting and instituting in alternative ways might be the best context for the paracuratorial to unfold within. I am here

saying that instead of looking to instituting as an action, as institution as place to do so, we instead look earlier in the whole idea of curatorial timelines, long before the ‘becoming public’ takes place. The proposals that will follow in this chapter are ones that specifically foreground intimacy and the very uncool idea of love within such work, not as a labour process, not as a coping mechanism within work production lines, but instead as an alternative to relations based on producing more and more and more. Writing within the context of this thesis is many things. It is the thesis, it is practice, it is a reflection on and reflexive engagement with practice, but it is also a space whereby the potentials of loving imaginaries might be more fruitful through poetic and beautiful words, whereby an inspiration for beauty might emerge from an encounter with beauty.

### **Subjectivities and Writing**

From understanding that affect and Ahmed’s notion of emotionality, a readiness or a pre-existing state that makes its priority, a connection from ourselves to others, not only offers opportunity to shift what we think of as fixed, means that we can think about subjectivity within work and labour such as the curatorial within different ways, therefore changing the boundaries that surround the curatorial *beyond* simply a form of work and labour. Here, writing by Jennifer C Nash, Saidiya Hartman and José Esteban Muñoz will be presented to think about writing in itself, and additionally practices more widely associated with

art-making or creative production to not just think about transforming the idea of work and labour, but more broadly to change how it is that we think such forms of subjective making.

Just as Ahmed's proposals that emotionality holds the potential to shift and change particular boundaries, I wish to think about the inside and the outside as additionally being accompanied by that-which-is-yet-to-come. Within Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* a distinctly queer approach is made by his writing that 'queer is not yet here'<sup>218</sup>, the future from the beginning is not set within a linearity of past, present then future. Instead the future is an object of imagining something that exists outwith the now, as much as, or even more so than looking-towards that-which-follows the now. A more poetic way of imagining the physicality of this proposal might be that these futures are ones that need not exist in the months and years to come, but instead act as an imaginary space. Drawing from my previous engagement with Clintberg and Davies' writing and indeed their definition of camp as a method by which Queer imagination, particularly in youth may abound, we can link this in a gestural way, to the kinds of 'critical fabulation' that is present in Saidiya Hartman's use of writing as transformative, reparative but also imaginative, as well as in the work of Jennifer C Nash, whose work will be engaged with in this chapter.

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<sup>218</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

One thing I wish to make clear here is just as I have said in earlier writing, quoting Judith Butler, not all relation is positive, and not all subjectivities are formed solely through positive affirmation. Just as the boundaries and borders of labour and life shift and change, the transfers between these two also do so. The spaces about which I am writing are not immune to contagion from subjectivities. The spaces which I am writing are deliberately so.

I am thinking now of an event delivered with an artist.

There are reasons for which we are feeling drained, reasons that I shall not write here.

Reading now there must be trust between you reading and I writing.

Trust that these affects that circulated were then visible and are now being recounted perhaps not perfectly, but poetically and with intentions for beauty and affect and thought to mix.

The exhaustion that accompanies thoughts wandering elsewhere to others.

Emotions building up during a long day that was focussed on this then eventually spilling out from the institution's building, followed into spaces of eating, relaxation, socialising where the circulated affects continued to flow freely between us and others.

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I came across Jennifer C Nash's writing via footnotes, citations and dedications noted in the work of Saidiya Hartman and historian Tina Campt, and then again in a request from a close friend to find one of her essays through my institutional library access. Such is the way with academia as with the curatorial – the sociality of these worlds bleeds into labour and thinking and vice versa. I had remarked her name previously, but it was only when a request came from a friend without institutional access to academic journals to read a particular essay by Nash that I spent a significant amount of time engaging with and benefitting from the complexity and indeed, the affect, of her thinking.

That this essay came to me via a friend, an artist who wanted to make use of my own privileges as part of an institution to read something that was difficult for those outside of such institutions to find, felt like a citation that needed not to be relegated to the footnotes of this thesis, but instead be written here in the body of my research as yet another gesture of beauty occurring through unexpected

exchange. The fact that the reading of this essay, *Writing Black Beauty*, and other works of Nash's engaged in a way with thinking around methodology and writing and writing as practice, as method, as beauty, is something I am very grateful for. By foregrounding emotion as a generative force within theoretical writing, I immediately noticed an alignment between what I am trying to value and practice and to hold up within this research and her own preoccupation with 'intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements'.<sup>219</sup>

Nash's pre-occupation with these forces stem from, and are presented often alongside and within, her experiences as a Black Woman within the USA today. Nash herself describes the roots of writing that prioritises emotion and affect as political forces as rooted in queer politics<sup>220</sup>, and similarly and in parallel I want here to remark on the huge role of Black Feminist literature in developing ways of discussing complex theoretical thought that is not removed but in fact is lived *in and through* subjectivised and other'd bodies. Nash's own writing pays homage to the complexity of its own genealogy, with roots in Black Feminism, Queer thinking, and decolonial studies all acknowledged and given space to be talked about from often, her own very specific and *felt* position.

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<sup>219</sup> Jennifer C. Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," *Meridians* 11, no. 2 (2011), 3.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*



Emotion, for Nash, is not only an object of study, as with Ahmed and Berlant, but it also acts as a kind of method. Though she does not explicitly state this, her essay *Writing Black Beauty*, critiques firstly the conventional western archive as a point of historical research, particularly as it fails to represent the embodied histories so often lived by, in Nash's research, Black Women, and more widely, oppressed groups. Specifically, Nash's essay reveals the ways in which writing as an action can be a form of both world or history-making<sup>221</sup> but additionally a means of opening oneself up to others, to allowing the possibility of other lives and other lived experiences finding space within writing that opens up possibilities through the specificity of experiences described. The anxiety that an experience might be too specific or rarefied here unravels, as Nash makes the case that beautiful writing, that writing which occupies itself with emotion and beauty instead of closing itself to an insularity, opens itself up to a great number of many possible beauties to follow.

Of course beautiful writing is also a matter of technical skill, but I am particularly interested in emphasizing the "act of sacrifice," the deliberate connection between writer and reader and the vulnerability of the writer that this writing makes possible as part of its critical and political investment in engaging its reader affectively<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Nash, "Writing Black Beauty."

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 109.

What echoes most with my research here is the idea of a critical and political ‘investment’ in affect, affecting, affection. There has long been conversation around curating’s etymological root being ‘to care’ and how it is that care must be embedded within the practices of the curatorial. And whilst there is a great number of interesting and crucial research on this topic, I find myself drawn to Nash’s characterisation of ‘investment’. That writing emotively, or writing with emotion, or writing through emotion might offer opportunities for relation to emerge is one significant ‘alternative’ that I would like to propose within this chapter, in the wider context of my research. If our field, our worlds of work are looking to find alternative ways of doing and making, then so too should the ways we talk about our experiences, the way we write and communicate about our lived experiences of this very specific type of work and labour.

Just as Nash describes the ways in which the presence of beauty inspires the desire for more beauty<sup>223</sup>, this idea of ‘alternatives’ being proposed in institutionalised and mechanical modes is exactly what I wish not to do in this thesis. Just as beauty can be found in writing, and this in turn can form relations and bonds, this too makes beautiful writing not only a prospective site for curatorial relation to emerge and blossom from, but a necessity within the current climates of difficulty and exhaustion.

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

I here propose curatorial *writing* as a particular method and outcome of curatorial/curating work that offers the opportunity to make such investments. I have already detailed the way that writing enfolds itself within curatorial and curating practices in *Chapter 2: Curatorial Relation*. Vulnerability, mentioned by Nash echoes earlier mentions of vulnerability within the work of Butler, and also contrasts with the figure of the ‘coping curator’ which I discussed in an earlier chapter. The potential that curatorial writing holds within it is to offer up a relation between curator, artist, reader, viewer, audience, a whole host of prospective networks, that engages affectively in a process that also surrounds itself with the affect circulating within material, social, political and interpersonal contexts.

Writing vulnerably, writing vulnerability, linking the practices of a curatorial writing to a writing of life is something that emerged as increasingly important to me during many months of lockdown experienced. Just as practices of care should be undertaken within life as well as in work, I have here attempted to weave through different forms of writing, including those that both affect and are affecting, that have been affected and I hope will continue to affect.

Curatorial writing here, as I have defined earlier in fact remains, largely undefined. I would point to Tina Camp’s own figuring of her writing’s relationship to artworks as being ‘writing to artworks’ rather than ‘writing on

artworks'<sup>224</sup> and whilst a number of gestural metaphors have been brought into this thesis already I wish to use this as a means of ringing back to the earlier definitions of relation given within this thesis' engagement with curatorial thinking, and subsequently the work of Sara Ahmed and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Just as 'besideness' has been utilised to rethink alternative positions within writing and the academy, so too can these gestures reconfigure the relations between writing, the curatorial and artworks. This thesis itself, comprised of writing developed in synthesising a number of definitions and thinkings around the curatorial, some remembered and engaged with from a bedroom office during lockdowns, proposes and enacts the very beginnings of writing we should urge ourselves to see more of within the curatorial.

*Affect/ed.*

Again, defining curatorial writing by affect only does a disservice to the complexity of what I am proposing here. Affect surrounds and moves with and through us in so many parts of our lives – what I have detailed thus far in this thesis is the ways in which curatorial labour might in fact be suited to undertaking such affective and affecting work. That the relations that form under conditions both of curatorial-artistic labour, as well as within challenging

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<sup>224</sup> Tina Campt, "Writing to Images: The Practice of Corresponding with Art" (Zoom Lecture, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 17.06.22).

and exhausting political and social contexts, might in fact benefit from a type of expression that is not tied explicitly to the institutional and instead makes its vulnerability known and present.

### **Love, Pleasure, Instability**

It is with this in mind that I lead to curatorial literature that changes some of the expectations of curatorial writing from a number of subject positions. Moving from wider theoretical shifts, I want to specifically detail the subjective and often embodied moments present within these following writings by Léuli Eshrāghi, who defines their practice as existing on edges of academic, curatorial and artistic work, and Nella Aarne, writer and curator, to both acknowledge the work being done within the curatorial that aligns and supports the aims of my own research, as well as subsequently providing a starting off point for my own conclusion within this piece of writing that thinks more widely about what these alternatives are – not so much as concrete actions within institutions, but more as commitments to more honest and embodied modes of writing and communication within the curatorial. Nash's notion of an investment being instilled or awakened within a process of reading beautiful writing is not just an abstract concept for me. It is something real that I have experienced many times and which I experienced in reading the following texts, as well as many others that are close to this body of research, as well as remote or distant from it.

Curators and theorists have often grappled with the notion of visibility within curatorial work – a whole other subject area of discussion that is beyond the remit of this research – but I find increasingly the notion of ‘citation’ gaining traction within this debate of visibility. I am not going to advocate for the visibility of the figure of the curator, an already over-visible agent within contemporary art discourses, for the purposes of authorship nor of agency. But I will attach it instead to a conception of responsibility I first came across through an in-conversation with Sophia Yadong Hao, Director of Cooper Gallery, University of Dundee, and Lisa LeFeuvre, Executive Director of the Holt/Smithson foundation who both attach the visibility of the curator as being fundamentally related to the idea of responsibility<sup>225</sup> – i.e. detailing who is responsible for the care of the artist, their work, the way things unfold within an institution.

In relation to this, I find myself thinking about citation as an action which is both a necessity within academia, and also a small gesture which is increasingly enfolded within curatorial work. When I think about this in relation to curatorial writing I am imagining the potentials that citation holds in bringing together particular understandings that might differ in their distinct positions or

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<sup>225</sup> Yadong Hao, *A Cut A Scratch A Score*.

approaches, but which may act to build a kind of intimate rapport between them and in their stead create another way of understanding, another way of writing. I will not be so crude as to equate this to curatorial work in the sense that curators are often seen as those who bring together existing objects to create something new. I have many problems with this equation of curatorial work, primarily because it positions curator as author in ways that I have already critiqued within this research, but also that it significantly reduces the idea of a relation of proximity to becoming something else, together. Instead what I am thinking about in bringing together these citations and these texts, these thoughts that have been drawn from so many thinkers within this thesis, is how these relations might emerge in harmony and in difference, making visible shifts and changes specifically in curatorial writing and how it is that the way the curatorial emerges through writing might slowly be changing. I am situating the following thinking here, alongside and dialogue with what has preceded in this thesis both to advocate for these forming types of curatorial writing that might offer intimate and emotive engagements with form and content that figure alternative ways to engage with the curatorial as driving force, as process or as methodology.

Léuli Eshrāghi's *Privilégier le Plaisir Autochtone (Priority to Indigenous Pleasures)*<sup>226</sup>, presents texts in both English and French, it is unclear which was the original and what role translation plays here, whether they were written in parallel or one after the other, in which they describe their own understanding of pleasure and how it pertains to their identities in relation to colonial and western impositions of defining such pleasures. Sexual and romantic adjectives, verbs and causalities are utilised to further an offer of indigenous pleasures that usurps the needs of the majority white and colonial definitions of knowledge.

Part of an increasingly bolstered and engaging wave of indigenous curatorial theory, Eshrāghi makes evident the ways in which some knowledges might be prioritised over others, and how we may bear witness to such knowledges particularly within cultural institutions. Through understanding meaning and value as these pertain to privileged and non-privileged economies of knowledge, we can understand what must instead be put in place for curatorial and cultural processes to shift. Eshrāghi advocates for states of fluidity and sensuality, as ways of embodying ancestral knowledges. Several elements in the text stand out to develop poetic arguments against dominant structures of knowledge and power; The physicality of the text's translation - a blue, larger text in French accompanied by its English translation to the left in red; the use

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<sup>226</sup> Léuli Eshrāghi, "Privilégier le Plaisir Autochtone," *Nirin Ngaay*, ed. by Jessyca Hutchens, Brook Andrew, Stuart Geddes and Trent Walter (Sydney: Sydney Biennale 2020) pages vary by edition.



of Eshrāghi's *hi/story* as translation of the dual meaning of the French equivalent *histoire*; the content itself including an introduction to the differing geographical boundaries between Indigenous and colonisers' place names in both Darwin, Northern Territories, and Montréal, Québec.

Advocating for 'non-colonial actions' Eshrāghi proposes sets of relations that 'can convey tenderness, hardness, futurity. Beyond European notions of taboo, deviancy, normality'.<sup>227</sup> Here, we arrive at not drawing a line simply from Eshrāghi's alternative sets of relations and the ways in which Mason Leaver Yap describes the possibilities of anecdote and queer knowledges, but instead I hope that we can consider the ways that (heterosexual, western) institutionalism sits in opposition to the relations of care between politically subjectivised communities in both sets of propositions. Eshrāghi's text, oscillating between poetry, recounted circumstances, and multi-linguistic boundary marking is also marked by a defined sensuality. The Indigenous pleasures of the title are not metaphors in this instance, and they additionally challenge the sensibilities of western art-writing with proposals of 'diving deep, feeding, rimming, furrowing'<sup>228</sup> furthering a very concrete embodiment in which pleasure and knowledge become interlinked. Through and within this writing, there is indigenous beauty, resistance, and advocations for different ways of doing. To

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Butler, *Giving An Account of Oneself*.

connect this to the writing of Nash, the investment which I developed in reading this emerged directly from the language of pleasure, love, and even sex which Eshrāghi presents. To develop a collective effort sometimes it is necessary to open yourself up in vulnerable and intimate ways. And it is through this that we can create spaces that make claims for relation, care or love. It is not within the capacities of management or administration that spaces of relation, care or love are made. Instead, the opening up of oneself to the other<sup>229</sup> must come from us, interconnected through proximities of trust, inheritance, love or thinking - this work begins with the self<sup>230</sup>. An engagement with the self here does not further interiorise or internalise prevailing and dominant rhetorics and harm, but instead opens us up to potential for relation to other. To write honestly of ourselves is to undertake an action that makes-exterior particular dynamics, that helps to further circulate and make visible the emotive and the affective.

In addition to relation and affect, I have at times used the word *love* in this piece of writing. As much as it is wildly uncool to talk about love, particularly in the discussions of art and strategy dominated by self-awareness, I have found that a return to love and emotion is increasingly necessary and increasingly evident as we carry on deeper into the ongoing health crisis<sup>231</sup>. A notable indicator of this

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> I here use home in an expansive sense, related to the 'proximity' detailed elsewhere in this writing.

<sup>231</sup> I have seen bell hooks' *All About Love* appear on the Instagram and twitter accounts of many loved ones since lockdown began, and this is one of many essential texts I feel necessary for us all to return to right now bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*, First Edition (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1999).

for me felt like the number of times I have, in the last few years, both before and following her death, seen bell hooks' *All About Love* appearing on various Instagram, twitter and social media accounts of loved ones, of colleagues, of cultural workers and organiser, of artists and writers. Whilst care has been a central discussion point for curatorial thinking this preceding decade it is not difficult to see why the grips of a health crisis might have inspired peoples turning to love and intimacy in earnest and honest ways. Despite the coolness of the art world, the performed and re-performed coolness of the actors within it, I am finding myself both comforted and supported by the surrounds I have created in this writing with Ahmed, Berlant, Nash, Eshrāghi and others talking so openly about things so intimate.

Reading the words of Nella Aarne's *The Other Love Which We Seek*, instilled confidence in continuing to disentangle the very fragile elements of love and relation within this time. Just as the writings I have detailed above challenge many of the conventions of curatorial writing that frustrate and wear me down, there is always opportunity within such challenges to enact forms of sharing and learning. In bringing together the texts above, I hope not to homogenise or draw together the arguments of each, but instead gesture towards a fluidity of 'an alternative approach to subjectivity and identity construction' that 'instead of

maintaining territories and borders, it incites movement across categorical boundaries'<sup>232</sup> in the words of Aarne.

As detailed previously, borders and ends and limits are constructed by our own collective emotionality<sup>233</sup>. The surfaces through which emotions ascribe themselves are not individual, but cross many of our lives and bodies. In a pessimistic sense this is true of the violences and difficulties faced, something laid bare during this preceding year of the pandemic with inequalities of different kinds highlighted by the weakness of our national infrastructures. In alignment, however in a more positive sense, is Aarne's advocacy for a prioritisation of love within such cross-categorical ways. Whilst earlier in this thesis, in *Chapter 4: Curatorial Relation* I cited the ways in which loves that emerges through similarity can be problematic in their drawing of boundaries and extents, the languages utilised and practiced within these texts connects with a type of love that is both specific but also outwards looking, that offers itself unto others. Whilst collective identification with others is not an inherently good thing, as it so often can lead to identifications based on similarities and what is already shared, often perpetuating divisions, it also sits with potentiality and opportunity for alternative formations of solidarity.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Nella Aarne, "The Other Love Which We Seek," *Curating the Contemporary* Goldsmiths Summer School, British School at Rome, 2016. Available Online: <https://nellaaarne.art/the-other-love.php> (last accessed 18.12.22).

<sup>233</sup> See: *Chapter 4: Curatorial Affects*.

<sup>234</sup> Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence*.

Stuart Hall, the eminent academic and indeed founder of the field of cultural studies, identified culture as a site in which relation has the power to unsettle and rupture hegemonies<sup>235</sup>, and it is within these sites of unfinished and ongoing sharing, affect and relation that we can and must begin to practice productive forms of subjectivity. Beginning such practices, of solidarity and love sound grandiose but it is again to the gestures and practices of everyday we must return to, to begin proposing such ways of being in the world. The curatorial, though distinct from, includes many of the practices of relation and closeness that are ripe with opportunity for such gentle rupturing to take place, with these instances of affective companionship or closeness emerging with a phone call, a conversation, a reassurance, or here, in the process of writing that we have already asserted as a space of potential incitement for love and much more.

During the development of this thesis, as it became evident that we were ourselves to become more confined, writing became both a method of relating and generating knowledges to one another, but additionally, to understand just how expansive the curatorial might be. Whilst I wish not to expand a definition of the curatorial so far that it fails to retain its shape or hold a particular meaning, what has become evident in the preceding years spent writing this thesis, particularly in times of great isolation, was that to practice in a curatorial way is sometimes to practice in a manner of living and being with the other. It is

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<sup>235</sup> James Procter, *Stuart Hall*, First Edition (London: Routledge Critical Thinkers, 2004).

for that reason that the writing here shifts and moves itself between many ways of being, because it is a practice that has emerged from relation and therefore from connections both difficult and nourishing, generative and withholding, loving and toxic.

### **Dissonance, Solidarities, Excess**

What this idea of ruptured hegemonies or alternative ways of doing means in relation to the curatorial is predicated on this idea of shared difference. Whilst either historically, or in certain spheres of curatorial work there has been an assumption of similarity that brings together works within particular spaces under the hands of the curator, whether thought of as similar by their concerns, place of origin or development, time period, or historical significance, there is equally a basis for curatorial thought as being predicated on difference.

Though more focussed on museological curation, Ben Cranfield is one curatorial theorist who has repeatedly made convincing cases for difference as being a central curatorial force. In *Mind The Gap* his work begins to point towards an idea of intimacy within artworks, discussing proximity in the museum, with touch being an ultimate transgression of ‘appropriate’ museum behaviours, but what is more interesting to me is his proposals that curating, as

a series of practices, form alternatives to traditional forms of museum knowledge and that this is the case through its ability to perform

‘openness and continuous nature of the associative and the networked in the perpetual unfolding in display that is never foreclosed, but is, nonetheless, productive of something that is more than a sum of its parts’.<sup>236</sup>

I have already detailed in definitions the ways in which relation is defined both more widely in curatorial discourses as well as within this thesis. What Cranfield’s writing here supports in relation to Aarne and Eshrāghi’s thoughts is the idea that this perpetual unfolding that might take place within and across boundaries and categories is something without an end, or at least an end goal. It is something developed within and through those who seek to engage with it, which evolves and distances itself from previous understanding of museum curating that depend on a model where visitor and audience is receiver.

The curatorial in Cranfield’s words ‘exceeds’ the demands of questioning and answering, or of formulating a thesis which must be tested. Instead of becoming a mode of enquiry that is used as a tool, its most radical potential is in fact in the ways that it might become *too much* for a number of things. I am arguing here

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<sup>236</sup> Cranfield, “Mind the Gap.”

that this might include; the categories to which it belongs; the professionalism of the institution; relationships and affects.

The idea that excess, an exceeding of something to then become transformative makes significant echoes with the conventions of academia and I would argue, in a curatorial field dominated by the same few voices of straight, white, able-bodied men, that both restrict and constrict what might be deemed appropriate forms of research. This writing, this thesis, is peppered with moments of excess, moment of *too much*-ness of which I am very aware. Queer figures have repeatedly been configured within the public imagination as in states of emotional or affective excess<sup>237</sup>, as well as the associated femininity with such traits, and the perpetual Angry Black Woman stereotype that persists across collective [white] imagination<sup>238</sup>. All these associations are methods of silencing and homogenising distinct subject positions from which we are speaking. It is with this in mind that I am writing in the way that I have – with I and me centred not only as a rhetorical device but as a means of locating to differing affects and relations that I am researching. My writing here is sometimes *too much*. It is curatorial in that it exceeds the sum of its relationships to others, following on from the above description of citations and their uses, to direct affect from myself to you, as reader. The circulation of affect that has stirred

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<sup>237</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, First Edition (London: Routledge, 2002).



emotion within myself does not belong to me. It is too much for me, too much for you to see sitting only with me, I am being too much. Just as in the previous chapter, I detailed how Jennifer C Nash has made the case for writing being beautiful, we too can here make the case for writing being excessive, exceeding the sum of what it brings together, so long as we recognise the pursuit of creating and building relations that also exceed, that also are more-than.

That methods around writing or self-declaration that are so centred within subjectivised experiences are so beautifully conveyed by Aarne as ‘the feminine’ in her text, linking such expansive moments of curatorial practice to *écriture féminine*, or that Eshrāghi’s advocacy being in pursuit of ‘Indigenous pleasures’ is so rooted in a lived Indigenous experience, or that Nash’s advocating for writing specifically *Black* beauty, are so clearly not examples of personal histories being utilised within a dwindling and rarefied sphere of relation. In fact, quite the opposite occurs, with each of these texts and many others instilling a generosity of account that holds transformative potential. Citing, and presenting these thoughts here alongside my own writing is not by any means an attempt for me to co-opt the work done here by others of different experiences to myself, instead it is a recognition of how it is that these many types of beauty and love are emerging within writing, and how important it is for developing alternative ways of writing the curatorial to make sense of their value. These moments are presented here not because I wish to utilise them to

develop a new overarching theory of curatorial subjectivity that encompasses all these positions and more. Instead what I am doing both here and throughout the body of this thesis, is to bring together such polyvocal understandings of emotion and its cultural value within recollection and reflexive thinking within the curatorial. In relation to the differences with which all these differing sources and my own contributions form themselves from, I would say that bringing them together here is linked to ‘the work of feeling done both in spite of and because of these differences, and choosing to feel across that difference, rather than feeling with or for someone living in very different circumstances.’<sup>239</sup>

This text, by virtue of its promiscuities, its bringing together from different sources, mouths and hands, is in itself an attempt of sorts at polytextuality. Or rather it is the first step towards dedicating more time within curatorial thinking and writing towards a polytextual approach, one that brings together these differences that are shared, not to flatten, but to illuminate. It is the potential within these actions that outline this research’s impact, and indeed the opportunity present here to rethink how the curatorial as method might interact in, with, and through, writing.

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<sup>239</sup> Tina Campt, *Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, First Edition (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023): 169–170.

Just as this writing began with problematising, the distinction between an inside and an outside is complex and changing. And it is through an honesty of writing and an affective mode of working that holds chances to garner collective energy sufficient to shift these boundaries. And by this I do not mean shifting boundaries to encompass more within one space or another, to bring more difficulty and emotion into art or work or life, but to collectively understand the rapidly changing nature of these borders and boundaries as an opportunity to create new ‘communities of feeling’<sup>240</sup> without homogenising, mixing, or de-specifying that which they have been invested within.

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<sup>240</sup> Berezin, “Emotion and Political Identity: Mobilizing Affection for the Polity .”

## CONCLUSION

In the body of this thesis, as well as in my lived every day, I have tried to depart from thinking about the problematic, difficult and wearing contexts within which we all live and work, and to instead imagine alternatives. What has happened during the course of my research, necessitated by the pandemic and the years of isolations whose toll was taken on us, is that these alternatives have not become grand gestures of proposing or imagining new institutions, new working methods of instituting. Instead, just as the world within which I lived became smaller, at one point restricted to however far I could walk to and back within the space of one hour per day, so too did my research's forms and shapes. By this I do not mean that its ambitions nor its potential impact were somehow less worthy, what instead I mean that again I found their form and my forming them being enacted in response to what surrounded me and us at that time. Regrouping with and through writing, reflecting on curatorial work that was undertaken at various times of my practice and considering how it might, through reflexive writing, become something to consider within the textures and topographies of the written word.

It was through this that I have found myself repeatedly thinking about the thoughts and feelings that might be associated with such freedoms. The sensory aspects of a life that is led by myself alone, and within which relationships are

entered into consensually, lovingly, enthusiastically. I think about how it would be for a more radical type of honesty to find itself on the pages of curatorial theory, spoken in conferences on exhibition-making, detailed in the spaces of galleries and exhibitions. My research is investment in the idea that a form of curatorial practice in the form of writing might yet take a beautiful or an emotional form, for which there exists both possibility, but also necessity.

I attended a reading of an ongoing, developing piece of text by the artist Harun Morrison, presented at Eastside Projects in Birmingham, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2021. It was the first time I have attended an art event of this kind since lockdown restrictions began easing. Some things were similar to before – smiles and glances caught between one another, exchanged with maybe more emotion than previous to this time. It was the first time I had seen many of these people in over a year, people whose presence defined many of many spaces of socialising and leisure pre-Covid. There was a chatter that hung around the room, again something from before that remains now. But people were further from one another, chairs were spaced apart carefully, and most of us were wearing face masks when we weren't taking sips of water from disposable cardboard cups offered by gallery staff. Some were happy to hug and be close and others were not, there was a new way of negotiating greetings and welcomes within the new space and new time. The reading, entitled *Nothing Special* (2020–ongoing) took place, undertaken by Cindy Cissokho, a curator based in Nottingham.

Morrison's text detailed a number of everyday, minor happenings – a door pushed when it should have been pulled; water spilling from an over-full cup; the forgetting of someone's name. All these small moments are communicated in the second person – *you, you, you, you*. There was something about the way it addressed all of us collectively, individually and also spoke of none of us. It felt like a deeply personal thing that was spilling out into a collective moment of audience-ship and distillation. After listening to the reading of the text, which I believe took around forty minutes the bodies gradually dispersed from the centralised point and I took the opportunity to explore the exhibition in the space that was only separated from us listening by a large curtain designed by Céline Condorelli for the space. On a large text work on a wall I saw detailed

He had just stenciled something that Sofia, from BAAAD press, had uttered days earlier: TOO OFTEN, WHEN PEOPLE IMAGINE THE FUTURE THEY FOCUS ON HOW IT WILL LOOK, RATHER THAN FEEL<sup>241</sup>

I wish I had a better or more rational explanation for why it is that I am recounting this anecdote here but I can only say that when I came to this part of the text I found myself stop. I had a lump in my throat, I felt deeply emotional following a moment where I had heard read out what seem to be innocuous and

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<sup>241</sup> Harun Morrison., *Experiments with Everyday Objects*, Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 12 March – 13 July 2021. More information here: <https://eastsideprojects.org/projects/harun-morrison-experiments/#:~:text='Experiments%20with%20Everyday%20Objects'%20takes,father%2C%20a%20former%20science%20teacher.> (last accessed 18.12.22).

everyday statements that in fact held a deeper resonance with all of us sat there. When I came to see the writing, referencing colleagues and neighbours of Harun's in the text, fresh from my first time being amongst bodies in such a long time, I felt emotion in a space I had not been used to for so long. For the past year and more my emotions had been interiorized by necessary lockdowns and public health interventions. My bedroom had become a workplace and my workplace had become the place where emotion surfaced to levels that felt too much to keep them down. And this is the reason for which I am recounting this anecdote here. Just as anecdotes become a tool for communities with histories of unstable knowledges<sup>242</sup>, and just as writers such as Nash in the field of Black Feminism, or Eshraghi and Aarne in curatorial thinking have demonstrated, their value of these specific affects, beauties, emotions, are valued. I'm here recounting in the spirit of hoping to write something beautiful that speaks of both the beauty of interconnectedness of this research, as well as proving this research as an interconnected thing. When I am describing to you I am not doing so try and elicit emotion for emotions sake. Instead I am recounting through writing, emotion. I am prioritising a bringing together of this moment through and in writing that seeks not to disentangle emotion from the written word, but instead to use emotion both as method and subject within this writing. Whilst my first research questions established and gestured towards the ways

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<sup>242</sup> Leaver Yap, "Trust Not Truth."

that relation has been conceptualised within curatorial work, as well as looking to queer framings of these dynamics, particularly of affective and intimate discourses as they operate both within and as a result of conditions of difficulty, the final research questions I asked at the beginning of this thesis

*How might a subjective approach to thinking curatorial affect and relation contribute to curatorial research and particularly in the form of curatorial writing?*

Is one that has formed the vital capacities, textures, poetics and beauties within this writing (noun) and within its writing (verb). It is this approach, utilising writing specifically as a method that can become intimate and beautiful by the ways in which it connects even in times of sever disconnection, that forms this research's most prominent contribution to knowledge, that operates as a method derived from many starting points.

It is neither controversial nor new to say that the arts have capacity to affect us. This is why many who work in this sphere or visit galleries or artistic events and performances regularly return to them again and again. But what is emerging within conversations around curatorial practice and writing is that the current ways we talk about art in relation to care are not sufficient. I have detailed this in previous chapters, as well as specifically detailing why



institutions are not the only sufficient site for providing new ways of thinking and imagining. Specifically I looked to the ways that from a specific UK perspective, our political institutions and our social spaces have undergone years of neglect at the hands of neoliberalism, and in later chapters juxtaposed these difficult conditions with the desire for intimacy and emotion that has emerged not only as a ways of living but also as a method of working, practicing and researching, both within the academy and within the visual arts. In various points in this thesis, different and varied forms of writing have been used to develop affective readings of these conditions, as well as to constitute the ways that writing itself might become a curatorial site for such affects.

What is written here, in remembering the emotions and affects of this particular time is not as simple as a concrete and historical recounting of the event that passed within the walls at Eastside Projects, nor is any recounting of any project detailed in such a way perfect. There are many ways in which and reasons for which that many communities have in the past developed different senses of selves and identity within their writing. Within this writing I am advocating that such recounting would be useful within curatorial writing. When I am defining this component of my research as unfolding within curatorial writing what I am contributing to is what others might think of as rarefied or specific narratives.

I am here stating that there is value within such specific narratives when they emerge from people who come from particular subjectivities. That is, when the positions that thinking emerges from can be inherently linked to experience and what is felt, both bodily, socially, and within the trajectory of histories. Within this own thesis a number of sources have spoke of queer thinking, feminist thought, decolonial actions, Black Feminist historicising. None of these have been brought together in a crude attempt to draw something as simple as a commonality between them, but instead to make more visible the ways that interconnectedness bleeds through every component of thinking around affect and emotion at this point in time. This relationship between those who fashion understandings of their own identities is not limited simply to artistic practices, indeed in Foucault’s own history of sexuality we encounter phrases such as ‘practices of the self,’ or ‘techniques of the self’.<sup>243</sup> These terms refer to forms of governance and specifically, a self-governance that allows subjectivised people to fashion their own realities and understandings in such a way that will generate them the most happiness, contentment, or in cases of difficult conditions, survival. The resonances that this type of thinking has with, in particular the work of Saidiya Hartman and Jennifer C Nash is no coincidence – the great debt owed by Foucault to the time he spent working with and learning

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<sup>243</sup> Olivier Asselin and Johanne Lamoureux. “Autofictions, or elective identities.”, *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine* 105, no. 1, 2002. Available Online: [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A30069702/AONE?u=uce&sid=summon&xid=b1719c3d](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A30069702/AONE?u=uce&sid=summon&xid=b1719c3d). (last accessed 13 July 2021).

from the Black Panthers in the 1970s<sup>244</sup>, the debts owed, the relations formed for so long between Queer theory and Black Power movements, Black Feminism and Critical Thought more widely, have another long relation within which ideas of self-actualisation and fabulation appear and re-appear, one after the other in exchange, in generosity, in dialogue.

As has been detailed at various points in this thesis, it is the ability for these relations and gratitudes, the links between various manners of writing and practicing, to glide across boundaries of thought, that both embodies and provides examples of how it is that curatorial practice, through writing might reprioritise more critical manners of intimacy and relation.

This is not a call for more histories of institutions run by men who want to talk about how the radicalism of their curatorial programmes and exhibitions changed the ways that the institutions they worked within functioned. It is neither a call for representational justice that mimics the forms of what has come before it. Instead it is a proposal that the curatorial more widely, and specifically, curatorial *writing* is a space within which we can self-actualise through imbuing our recollections and rememberings with a critical kind of beauty. It is not a proposal that centres the curatorial as some kind of fixed form

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<sup>244</sup> Brady Thomas Heiner, "Foucault and the Black Panthers," *Analysis of Urban Change, Theory Action*, 11 (2007): 313 – 356.

over which we might be protective, or for which we might purport to speak for. The curatorial within this proposal is not fixed, it is a method, it is a sensibility, it is a desiring. I am writing this following an adolescence and adulthood defined by political rupture that has repeatedly sought to diminish the wishes of people my generation. I am writing this following nearly eighteen months of different and changing restrictions in the face of a virus we are still in the process of learning about. If there was ever a time where I both needed and wanted to imbue my writing with beauty, both in the hope that those reading it might see beauty and that the writing itself might contribute more to further developing beautiful things, thoughts, and feeling, circulating freely beauty in a time where beauty in life seems difficult or hard to find or remind ourselves of.

The importance of actualising a beauty that is affected and affective within this writing, and indeed I believe within curatorial thought more widely is important in that it is not only an alternative way of doing things, but it is also that within its capacity to affect and be affected there is a potential for it to develop political action in a more concrete sense. What I mean by this is that if I were to write something about the importance of affect and beauty within the curatorial making use of standardised writing styles, reforming to academic standards in erasing myself, the *I*, from this thesis, then the rhetoric of care and affect that is becoming so prolific in curatorial circles would be something referred to *within* the writing, rather than being actioned *through* or *as* writing. It is an attempt to

challenge and to bypass ‘the protocols and limits that shape the narratives’,<sup>245</sup> a necessity for counter-narratives, a means of contributing not only something new to the field in terms of a body of research but also a body of writing that sits uncomfortably in relation to what has come before it, and in this discomfort illuminating existing limits. This writing holds firmly, a significantly greater capacity to affect others if it is itself *affected*, that is the nature of affect that has been referred to so often within this research. I am committing myself within this writing to actualising affects in a way that is not deliberate nor a ‘beginning’.

It is within this affective capacity that this thesis’s contribution to knowledge operates within the field of curatorial practice through writing. Giving precedence to humanity that extends beyond the limits and capacities of the individual, and instead looks to the manners by which emotion and affect can circulate not only feeling, but also criticality, provides an example by which we might expand curatorial thinking.

Just as the curator is not the originator of ideas or concepts within a project developed with artists nor am I the originator of the affects that are present within this page. Emotion can be stirred up within someone, but affect as I have

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<sup>245</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, *Small Axe*, 12 (2008): 4.

detailed within this thesis, is something circulatory, something that moves between and through so many things. I am here committing the affect that I found myself close to in writing. This writing is a committing to some sort of permanence of the affects that have become so prevalent in the previous year and a half. It is a snapshot of what it meant to write at a particular time, about relation and closeness, in a time of great distance. It is a result of an understanding of self that necessitated being undertaken from an ever-shrinking amount of spaces, and eventually, a re-opening of worlds and lives. This writing is something that my proximity to and within these affects has lead me to. I am writing here within fear, within anxiety, within exhaustion. There is exhaustion in this writing because there is exhaustion both within my life, within my work, and within my realities. But it is not only because of these realities, my realities. The exhaustion which exists there is part of a shared circulation of this exhaustion, one that I feel shifting endlessly, but most prominently within this last year. The exhaustion which I am committing to words on paper here is a testimony to the difficulty of the conditions we have all faced within the times of this virus. Expectations to still somehow to produce, to work, to research, and now to write which I am fulfilling as I type are being met through contortions and working that are exhausting us all. Committing to writing the detailing of these affects is not an attempt to elicit pity for myself, nor to demonstrate a specifically individual sense of emotion and affect. Instead it is to make a document of what it was to undertake this work at this time, from a point of

working where reflection and reflexive thinking from the limits of my bedroom were the resources most available to me for much of the time.

Another justification of this proposal of this writing I wish to make is the feeling that this writing in itself might be *curatorial*, not necessarily by the way we might tie it to a particular project or a particular institution. But instead in that it emerges from a curatorial sensibility that is also a practice of human connection, that emerges from the desires for connection and building-together that have been evidenced in the preceding chapters – through the desire of closeness in camp, through the self-fulfilling desire for beauty and more beauty in austere conditions, through practices of writing and speaking that proliferate across these pages. It is being written within a context of a vast expansion in preceding years in what the curatorial might refer to, encompassing not only work within exhibitions but additionally with talks, events, extended programming and simply the production of commissioning of art works in themselves, regardless of their being-made-public. Whilst this thesis has been written in parallel alongside work with artists and institutions, the last year has repeatedly stunted and changed the course of working that defines not only institutional timelines, but the daily lives and ways of working of the many precarious workers involved within their wider networks of workers and thinkers. The writing that is present here is the result of years spent working within this, thinking within this. My actions of citation are curatorial, they

aspire to be feminist, to be queer<sup>246</sup>, but I will neither claim them to be operating as such, nor limit the lingering affects of these words to such boundaries, however porous. As are my decisions to divulge my own circumstances of difficulty and exhaustion.

## **Relation & Proximity**

In the first chapters of this thesis, I provided my own definitions and understandings of relation and proximity, both as I intended to make use of them within this thesis as well as how they have been variously used, misused and abused within curatorial thinking. My own definition of them has emerged from a concerted engagement with queer theory that does not seek to create new definitions of relation, but instead works to bring together existing definitions of such subjectivities from a diversity of thought, through which we might be able to expand our horizons of what ‘relation’ might look like as it is defined in curatorial thinking. I have defined relational as it pertains to both critical and theoretical thinking, namely through Butler, Arendt, as well as how it has historically been deployed within curatorial theory, as well as more widely, its

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<sup>246</sup> Gabrielle Moser and Helena Reckitt, “Feminist Tactics of Citation, Annotation and Translation: Curatorial Reflections on the Now You Can Go programme”, *On Curating* 29, Vol. 1. 2016. Available Online: <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-29-reader/feminist-tactics-of-citation-annotation-and-translation-curatorial-reflections-on-the-now-you-can-go-programme.html#.YrGfJZPMK34> (last accessed 18.12.22).



omnipresence in discussions of relational aesthetics and labour in the work of Bourriaud and subsequent critiques by Bishop.

I have argued that the curatorial, as a specific field within contemporary art practices holds potential for such new definitions of relation and proximity to hold potential for new formations of being and working together. This is primarily because, as I have also detailed, the curatorial is a field and practice largely understood through its necessity for connectivity and connectedness, a field that is closely entwined with socialities that run closely between two points – one of exclusion and the other of radical opportunity for openness, an ‘uncontrollable relationality’<sup>247</sup>, as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick repeatedly within these chapters. While I have in my definitions of the relational and proximity associated the former of these two poles with the [art] institutional I have similarly moved towards the intimacy of the latter. As my writing continued to take place within increasingly hostile and difficult conditions I found my ability to write became deeply connected to an ability to write in beauty and in admiration for and amongst those with whom I have been conversing and learning from throughout these past several years. The notion of a curatorial writing, a writing that prioritises connectedness and intimacy with the work of an artist, and indeed forging intimacies between that and one’s own

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<sup>247</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 37.

life, became an important way of understanding how the curatorial might fit into an understanding of this thesis and its associated materials as practice. It, also, in the midst of redundancies, gallery closures, cancellations, delays until who-knows-when, postponed permanently, postponed forever perhaps, who-knows-when-this-thing-will-end, became a tool for understanding the curatorial in a way that operated differently to conventions of academic writing, as well as being accessible to me throughout the long months of lockdown. Even writing from my embodied position of relative privileges and stability, the conditions within which I worked necessitated my own relating-to-others in a time of great distance. The desire to feel connected became engine, method, material and companion in writing.

Writing curatorial intimacy became, becomes, will become, I am proposing here it will become (going to become, ought to become), a way of understanding subjectivity within contemporary art that offers platforms of sharing that is not a specialisation or overly-specific moment of understanding something from one's life that has difficulty in translating into the lives, thoughts, and thinking of others. Instead the careful and intimate treatment and understanding of ourselves in relation to the proximities within which we live and work become opportunities to speak and think with radical openness that encourage movement across the very boundaries that we have been situated within by

others, across and through institutions of gender, class, race, sexuality and ability.

This thesis has embraced the emotional, the excessive, has channelled the often difficult-to-pin-down sensation of affects that make their way across and between bodies, in a field noted for its restraint when it comes to honesty around such matters. It has detailed how to embrace such fleeting emotions both through reflecting on the place of emotion within the work of other theorists, as well as imbuing emotionality within the work of the thesis itself.

The reality of a thesis produced in this time is inherently bound to the difficulties I have repeatedly circled back to in its writing. The contribution to knowledge, that a curatorial practice of writing might offer expansive and beautiful ways of moving beyond the limits imposed on intimacy or affect, also functions here to speak to an imagined reader. Whilst the space occupied in the increasingly populated world of curatorial practice and thinking may be modest for the writing presented here, it is a writing that can be valued by readers in its openness, its ability to divulge and to speak from a particular moment in history, but additionally to instil a recognition in the ways that the curatorial field limits itself in its inhibition of emotions and affects, that in other worlds and lives rarely themselves subject to such regulation.

Emotion here is not only a material, a process, an object of study, but in its ability to self-replicate across borders, I believe becomes a central dynamic to those reading this research. And in doing so, in reading, thinking and acting emotion, this research provides a field that is in need of an increased critical engagement with these bodily affects, with one route by which we might envisage writing a curatorial practice as operating to expand such boundaries.

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I am sat in a warehouse that overlooks an industrial quarter of the city. It is golden hour. Sunlight streams in through the window and warms what it touches. It is warming, both physically, keeping us warm, as well as something that changes the surfaces of our skin to a more beautiful and glowing colour. The frames of the industrial windows cast shadows and lines across the floors and walls, onto buckets of vibrant flowers in pink, red and purple. Waxy leaves reflect sunlight and look wet, roses clipped from a nearby office block fade from pink into a blinding white<sup>248</sup>. The artist's arm extends out into one of the frames of light and ties with a delicately thin slice of tape, a flower to a plastic rod, that is almost see-through, save for the soft shadow that it creates. The assemblage of flowers and thin plastic rods hangs loosely against the wall,

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<sup>248</sup> Benny Nemer, *Tunings*, 2020 – Ongoing, Multiple Performances, Various Venues.

buoyed up by pressure from the feet of the rods that rest against the uneven concrete floor. There is quiet, we are in rehearsals. But then during the performance it feels similarly quiet, with breath exhaled through masks softened by the shared space of quietness that we are sitting within. Eventually the quiet sounds of breath are accompanied by soft footsteps in socks against the floor. A dancer's body approaches it, having understood slightly more of its movements and its gestures. Their limbs begin to find ways to interact with it, not even touching it at first, but instead moving around and with its bent-over shape. Eventually, after much trying a position is assumed. And the arrangement which pre-existed this relation shudders and moves slowly with its new neighbour, the warm breathing mass. Positions are held for as long as they can be and then they are transformed, moving slowly to a new one, to a new relation. Then there are sounds. Warm breath transmitted through the body of an oboe, a cor anglais, it is uneven, and it comes out continuously but in waves that fall and rise and fall and rise. The breaths become quiet notes but not notes that I can pin on any sort of key or scale. They are not accompaniments to the movements of the dancer, but they do accompany, they do act in relation. They are close. The slowness takes place again and I feel myself and the audience when they appear during the performance, watching intently each small position and shift that takes place. Eventually another dancer joins, and the proximities become even more implicated in one another. There is not only the beginning structure to respond to and configure one's body in relation too, but there is also a history of

touches<sup>249</sup>, a history of near-touches, a history of closeness and remoteness even within this room to which a body must respond to. These things continue to unfold and change slowly, and I feel myself unfolding and changing with them. You are there too. Watching. Eventually a number of positions have been assumed, and failed to stay perfectly still within them. Flowers and sculptural material have fallen to the floor, across which the light has moved slowly and then disappeared from. I have been watching this both from the before, where it was just us, artists, performers, myself. And now it is happening in the during, or perhaps the after, within which there are familiar and unfamiliar faces peppered throughout an audience of masked faces, across whom the sun also rests, whose eyes look onwards at the moving bodies and gestures that feel like they are filling this space.

Another time, in another space, I am watching different women projected on wooden screens, reading from what looks like scripts, pieces of paper<sup>250</sup>. The screens on which they are projected cut across a room with crown moulding, ceiling roses, large windows now blocked with light, but with the understanding that this is a domestic space, and a salubrious one at that, still present in the room with us.

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<sup>249</sup> Björk, "A History of Touches," *Vulnicura*, 2015.

<sup>250</sup> Sharon Hayes, *In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You*, Film and Installation, 2016, The Common Guild, Glasgow.

I am there with a friend and as they move around the space, the only part of them that is visible to me is their legs and feet. We here the same sounds, these slowly recounted stories of queer love read from letters and features in lesbian magazines, echoing throughout this beautiful room. There are different voices, accents, and faces. As we move around the screens the settings for each of these recollections change, but they are nearly all domestic. There is a shot of a young women sat in a chair, parts of the view of her blocked out by partitions, walls, the architecture of her home. She speaks out loud, with the script rustling and moving in her hand and I notice the printed hand-outs held in my own hands, in the hands of my friend, and in the hands of another visitor to the gallery.

The women talk about where they live, how distant they feel from others like them, how wonderful it is to be able to write to other women like them. To read other women like them. They talk about the places where they live with a degree of anonymity but where indications are made they are places completely anonymous to me. They are towns that exist in deserts and on prairies and in regions so vast and remote they make my own understanding of rural remoteness seem feeble.

The voices that echo through these grand rooms in a grand part in the grand West End of Glasgow talk to us about liberation, desire, self. They are Queer Women, Lesbians, Transgender, Black. They speak the words of others, with

whom there seems to be an understanding. I listen and I feel my heart in my chest, I feel my feet on the ground, my hands around the paper hand-out.

Everything is so felt as I listen to these many voices tell many stories – of acceptance, remoteness, closeness, defeat, triumph, of collectives with which people identify or with which people see their own double-subjugation.

The words, spoken through the mouths of people who did not originally write them, become not historical artefacts. They are live and are living. I look to the space underneath the wooden screens and see my friend moving across as the blank screen signals the end of the film. I follow to meet them in the hallway illuminated by summer light.

Another space, with two screens, of water pulling me along a boat. We are all on this boat watching the water rush past us. There are images of a goat climbing on a knotted tree, trying unsuccessfully to get down onto the ground. There are calls of the artists name shouted from somewhere distant. There are photos following one after another and soundtracks to the work that sound like big heaving sighs.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Tako Taal, *At the shore, everything touches*, 2022, Film and Installation, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee, UK.



Another time, walking from an ornate civic corridor into a display of photographs with a film playing on another side, showing women's work in sewing, cleaning, hands in motion and medical masks being worn, a portrait of a particular moment in time that will be difficult for many to forget<sup>252</sup>.

Then, in a cinema, a pair of legs pointing upwards, a respiration, an exhale, stitched with images of state violence that unfolds both in words and in blows.<sup>253</sup>

An exhibition opening, in which I realise it was much too soon for me to be around so many people. Overwhelmed I make polite goodbyes and tell people I need to be alone, not knowing that in a few weeks' time being alone will be imposed on so many of us.

A screening space constructed where I now live, far from my childhood. And then, there is a moment where another home from a previous life is revealed to me in a shot, and my heart desires it.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Frankie Raffles and Margaret Salmon, *Home Economics*, 2021, curated by Kirsteen MacDonald, Glasgow International, Glasgow, UK.

<sup>253</sup> Camara Taylor, *suspiration!*, 2021, Berwick Film and Media Art Festival, Berwick-Upon-Tweed, UK.

<sup>254</sup> Charlotte Prodger, *Bridgit*, 2018, part of *Women, Power Protest*, 2018–19, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham UK.

Wall to wall windows showing the rooftops of a city that is new to me, furniture from a home in Algeria, brought across the Mediterranean Sea to this place. Books on shelves, magnets and postcards on fridges, an invitation to sit amongst these belongings that feel so much like they belong<sup>255</sup>.

An outroduction.

Words of gratitude and emotion spilling from mouths when we see each other next. When it is time to wrap things up. When it is the moments after the thing itself and we are safely cocooned from view in an intimate corner where we can express differently what has been expressed already professionally.

It is not the end or the beginning - but I am emotional because it is done. I am emotional because it is not yet finished.

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<sup>255</sup> Lydia Ouhramane, *BARZAKH*, 2021, Triangles Asterides, Marseille, FR.

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### **Note on the Appendices:**

The images and projects detailed here are not intended as supporting material or as ‘results’ for the thematics and concerns of this thesis. Instead, they are here to indicate some of the work that I was undertaking as a curator and a writer during the course of this PhD and to give a glimpse into the sort of activity that was both ongoing, as well as prevented by the various restrictions that affected the course of this thesis.

The research in my thesis is that of a *writing practice* that is both academic, critical, and emotive. The projects shown here are detailed to provide more context as to the type of curatorial activity I was undertaking and the development of my own curatorial profile during these years, rather than a means to illustrate key concepts in this thesis, as well as making space for writing and work that would not be suitable for the central body of this thesis.

The inclusion of these appendices here gives an indication of some of the many activities which were reflected upon and engaged with in a critical reflexive manner both during varying stages of lockdown and isolation, and in the development of this body of research and thinking. Whilst the thesis is developed from a practice of *writing*, these appendices give indication of the many relations which to varying degrees will have contributed to my thinking during this time.

## Appendix A:

Sean Elder Wilson, 'Études' (Online Writing) Grand Union, 2020

### Études

Something about *grasping*.

See: The desire to *grasp*, to understand or to comprehend, with permanence.

The fruitlessness of this motion. The performance of such a gesture, the naivety of trying to hold in place for any period of time, knowledge or knowledges<sup>256</sup>.

Also: *Grasping*, my Grandmother's hand, safely, finally, after a period of time where it seemed it might not be possible. The slow wait we all have experienced, broken by an impermanent moment of another's hand in mine. Of my hand in hers. The shift from something experienced by many to this moment, and then intimately between two. I am here bringing mention of family, something usually separated from, into the same space as my work; *writing*; *working with you*, becomes public.

I can't say exactly why these two things have come together in this writing, however momentary, but I feel it might have something to do with the space of my home becoming the host of conversations of all different kinds these past

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<sup>256</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics Of Relation*. 2nd ed (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2010)

few months – amongst family, amongst friends, amongst those with whom one works. We were accustomed to these transitory moments from one world to another; a train journey from one part of ourselves to another; a commute from home to office. It remains that our homes have become host to conversations and moments of intimacy that are usually separated if not by walls and boundaries, then by time and space.

\*

I am re-reading notes from when we thought this might take place physically. There are notes on the future-evening-prior, the repertoire of materials that would have been gathered, there are arrows directing me to reading material, further planning, groups to whom this activity might be of interest. It seemed, with half a year between me writing these notes and the night itself that they were cut short, in infancy.

Underlined there is *creating performative conditions* and I remember us thinking about the other agents within what became these *études*. Not only you, who is setting into motion the relations between these materials, people and spaces. But also the dancer, the movements of muscle, straining and holding, and the material, their inability to act exactly as expected, their propensity to

unfurl and unfold, sometimes in slow moments and sometimes in quick ones – in a clatter, a bang.

Over these past months there has been a need for us to reconsider.

Conversations like the ones we have been having are expected to migrate and grow nebulously and take unruly turns. The relationships between so many people and things have shifted and now we are viewing something ongoing, in progress, which you described to me through the paradigm of two processes. In the first process, S assumes a position. You then would build *around, through,* or *with* that position. Eventually this unfolding would come to an end and removal would begin, leaving S alone. The second process began with you building the beginning of an arrangement. S would then insert himself within this arrangement, and the silent, physical building-dialogue would continue. Weaving amongst both of these processes of testing, the making of these studies, sketches, *études*, is something *more alive than that*.

I have this phrase, *more alive than that*, written in my diary on the day we spoke on the phone, the word *static* crossed out underneath it, scored through with a dramatically flourishing line. I was in my garden and you in your studio, it was the first day of hot sun after weeks of humid rain. What the *that* refers to I am still not certain, memory has fogged the specificity of the phrase. But I don't think verification is important here. Again, it is something ungraspable.

Looking back, leafing through notes in various black notebooks in front of me, my laptop facing me, the *études* performing themselves within its frame, limbs stretching and pausing on the screen, breath lightly raising and lowering torsos, with branches and foliage weighing down upon shoulder blades, hips and waist, I find myself getting an idea of what the *more alive than that* is, or at least, what a new conception of it is. Material intimacies that linger between bodies, limbs, assemblage, the proximities between them shifting and altering under the hand of the artist or the eye of the camera, but also their relations to one another. The botanical matter heaves breaths, lines of metal and plastic resist solidification, they don't set. They shift.

This spirit, embodied in the formal quality of these *études*, also marks their own reason for being here. These are not intended as a finality, as the result of conversations that have ended. Relationships between institutions and artists inherently have an end, contracted and dated, signed, officiated. But the relationships between those whose ideas have been furthered by conversation, shared interest, support and intimate belief in attempts at unfolding such complexities together, continues to unfold. And unfold. And unfold. These moments are not a response to an invitation I extended to you over a year ago, they are yet another invitation in and of themselves.

## Appendix B:

*(I get) So Emotional*, event curated by Sean Elder Wilson, including Hermano Silva's reconstruction of David McDiarmid's *A Short History of Facial Hair* (1993), Gordon Douglas, *Welcome Speeches*, performance (2018, pictured), a session of the Queer Conditions Reading Group (2018), communal lunch made with artist Kirsty Clarke (Pictured), BALTIC 39, Newcastle





## Appendix C:

*Common Positions*, curated by Sean Elder Wilson, including 'Desires Will Leave The House And Take To The Streets' (1998) Park Fiction, Hamburg, and films from the London Community Video Archive, and 'Buff' (2019) a new commission by Kirsty Russell





**Appendix D:**

Benny Nemer, *Tunings*, (Documentation of Performance), two dancers, oboeist, floral arrangements, presented at Grand Union, Birmingham, September 2021 (Curated by Sean Elder Wilson)



## **Appendix E:**

Sean Elder Wilson (Here: Seán Elder), *\_BEATING\_*, chapbook published as part of *Dowser: Notes on Artists' Moving Image in Scotland*, First Edition, published Summer 2021

# ***DOWSER, notes on artists' moving image in Scotland.***

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## **5. \_BEATING\_ Seán Elder**

**Edited by Marcus Jack**

