

A Thought Never Unfolds in One Straight Line

On the Exhibition as Thinking Space and its Sociopolitical Agency

Christel Vesters

Whether we conceive of exhibitions as narratological spaces with grammar and syntax,¹ or as intellectual working spaces,² the fact is that our understanding of exhibitions has shifted from static, temporary constellations of art objects gathered in a dedicated space, to performative sites where the art objects become agents, interacting among themselves, with their audiences, and with the various discursive contexts that are implicitly or explicitly present or presented. Furthermore, exhibitions are increasingly understood as sites for knowledge production, for research, and as having their own discursive agency. They are not merely the outcome of a curatorial research done by a dedicated expert, but in and of themselves sites where various modes of research and various modes of thinking are enacted. Much like we can think about, with, and through art, we can think about, with, and through exhibitions. In tandem with this new understanding of exhibitions, or rather of its ontological potential, the idea of *the curatorial* as a new epistemological paradigm is rapidly taking hold.

This essay will look at ways in which exhibitions are understood as thinking spaces. I am not referring here to the archival exhibition—filled with books, documents, texts, etc.—but to exhibitions as sites where research and knowledge production is evoked *in situ* and *in actu*. I borrow the term “thinking space” from Aby Warburg, who, a little short of a century ago, described his *Kunstwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* as a *Denkraum*. The library, which by the time of his death in 1929 contained over 60,000 books on subjects as diverse as astronomy, philosophy, art history, folklore, etc., was not organized like a conventional library; the books were not categorized according to discipline, geography, or historical period, but in temporary “alliances of attraction.” Books would be arranged and rearranged depending on Warburg’s current train of thought and in

relation to the questions he was entertaining. Warburg's organic conception of his library allowed for flexible "knowledge montage" where different "elective affinities" based on "intuitive associations" took shape materially and spatially, and changed over time.³

During the 1920s, Warburg organized various small exhibitions in his library, in which he together with a small audience explored his tool to develop a new science of visual culture, adamant, as he was to break away from conventional art historical methodologies. The images in the exhibition were organized according to the same principles as those in his much better known *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*: grouped thematically in alliances of attraction across disciplines, times, and geographies, emphasizing what Warburg called the *Ikonomie des Zwischenraums*, the iconology of interspaces.⁴ These qualities are also shared by the genre of exhibitions I will focus on in this essay. Like in the *Bilderatlas*, where the intervals between the images instigate new spaces for thinking and interpretation, the intervals between the different artworks and objects that are put on display in these exhibitions also seem to evoke a specific kind of reading/seeing space.^{5, 6} In turn, as I hope to demonstrate, this thinking space seems to unlock a political agency aimed at changing the way we think. An agency that is closely related to the epistemological shift proposed by Irit Rogoff, among others, towards "a meaning that takes place as events unfold."



Fig. 1 Aby Warburg, Ovid Exhibition in the Reading Room of the Kunsthistorisches Institut Warburg, Hamburg, 1927.

The exhibition as intellectual laboratory

When Swiss curator and art writer Hans-Ulrich Obrist recalls his encounter with the exhibition *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, organized by that other legendary Swiss curator, Harald Szeemann, in 1983, he describes the exhibition as "an attempt to produce knowledge": "I visited it thirty-eight times. I was still in school, but I went there every afternoon I had free. It was an encyclopaedic exhibition of a type that is less and less present today—it was an attempt to produce knowledge."⁷ Obrist continues by elaborating on the exhibition's main theme and some of the included works before moving on to describe its spatial layout and the ways in which the display generated an "associative network of relations emerging between the works." "The exhibition architecture... contained a real polyphony of positions that created fascinating associations across the different historic positions. *The Gläserne Kette* could be connected to Runge, Beuys could be connected to Steiner, and so forth.... It was an amazing experience for me as a teenager to walk through the exhibition in ever-different ways. I experienced it differently every time, like one can read Deleuze and Guattari's book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, in many different ways."⁸ Declaring the importance of Szeemann's exhibition as a catalyst for his own practice, Obrist concludes, "*Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* was a very participatory exhibition and an active polyphonic and intellectual working space."⁹

Obrist is not the only one who believes in the ontological potential of exhibitions and curating. In the last ten years, the idea of the exhibition as a platform or medium for the production of knowledge and discourse has become commonplace. Among others, resulting in a “new” specialism, coined “curatorial knowledge.”¹⁰ I will return to the concept of “the curatorial” and curatorial knowledge in more detail later, but for now what interests me in Obrist’s account of Szeemann’s exhibition is the emphasis he places on its spatial layout. He describes the exhibition as an open space with an architecture that gives rise to different lines of sight and different lines of thoughts, producing an associative network of relations between the works. Secondly, his experience of the exhibition, the reading and the thinking it evoked, was different with each visit. Obrist also points at the ability to move—and think—through various historic and disciplinary positions, proposing a more holistic, or interrelated reading of the theme, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, rather than a linear, chronological one. But the most important observation is this: “Its power comes from the subtle sources of juxtaposition and arrangement.... The very idea of an exhibition is that we live in a world with each other, in which it is possible to make arrangements, associations, connections and wordless gestures, and, through this *mise-en-scène*, to speak.”¹¹

This approach to exhibition-making marks a significant shift from the earlier, more established understanding of exhibitions, which evolved from the historical nineteenth-century Salon. This model, which is still prominent today, is firmly tied into the history of modernism and the idea of the white, modernist gallery space as a space for aesthetic appreciation and contemplation.¹² As Irish artist and art critic Brian O’Doherty argues in his famous essay, “Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space,” the white cube is not just an architectural archetype—with windows sealed off to prevent the outside world from entering, walls painted white, wooden floors, and light coming from the ceiling. It is a unique chamber of aesthetics.¹³ According to O’Doherty, the modernist white cube frames art within “the eternity of display,” separating it from the world outside and privileging sight and thought over any other type of engagement with the work. It is the ultimate fulfillment of the ideal display of the nineteenth-century Salon. “Each picture was seen as a self-contained entity, totally isolated from its slum-close neighbor by a heavy frame around and a complete perspective system within. Space was discontinuous and categorizable.... The nineteenth-century mind was taxonomic, and the nineteenth-century eye recognized hierarchies of genre and the authority of the frame.”¹⁴ If we fast-forward, the robust wooden frames made way for increasingly larger spacing between the paintings, until the white cube itself became the frame. These white spaces create a visual vacuum for each painting, eliminating any interference from the proximity of other works and encouraging the viewer to focus on each work individually.

Considering the fact that this white cube model was the standard practice of exhibiting art in 1983, it is clear why *Der*



Fig. 2 Tatlin, *The model reconstructed for Der Hang Zum Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerke had such an impact on Obrist. Not only did Szeemann's encyclopedic exhibition open up an infinite field of dialogical encounters between the works and the visitor, it also broke away from a number of (art historical and ideological) paradigms that were implicit to the white cube: for one, the categorization of space into unique, singular viewing moments which in turn reinforced the idea of the unique artwork, best experienced in total isolation. But, more importantly, the white cube promotes a belief in a stable, linear, and positivist art historical narrative in which every work of art, every style, every discipline, and every artistic idea had its own fixed position.¹⁵

Decolonializing thought

Someone else who is invested in the discursive—and subversive—potential of curating is the Nigerian curator and art historian, Okwui Enwezor. Describing the curatorial layout of the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale, he states, “Rather than one overarching theme that gathers and encapsulates diverse forms and practices into one unified field of vision, *All the World's Futures* is informed by a layer of three intersecting *Filters*, namely *Garden of Disorder*, *Liveness: On Epic Duration*, and *Reading Capital*. The three *Filters*, in their iterative choreography across the exhibition, represent a constellation of parameters which will be touched upon in order to imagine and realize a diversity of practices.”¹⁶ Enwezor, too, describes the exhibition as a fragmented yet connected field of potential relations; as a “dialectical field of references... which refuses confinement within the boundaries of conventional display models.”¹⁷ With this, Enwezor discards the white cube model in favor of a multisensory, shape-shifting space that can be read from multiple directions. In one interview, he puts it like this: “... from a formal and curatorial standpoint, that's what the *Filters* stand for: not to impose a standardized narrative within the biennale, but to look at the tectonic plates of the shape of the exhibition, through voices, through instruments, through visuals, through pre-visuals categories and weave them together to look at something that hopefully could be comprehensible and enjoyable.”¹⁸

Without going into detail here, a meaningful connection can be drawn between Enwezor's open, multilayered, and multifocal mode of curating and his longtime advocacy to open up the Western-centric art discourse to postcolonial concerns. Much like the “constitutive conceptual dimension” of *Documenta 11*, which was grounded in a series of five *Platforms*,¹⁹ the curatorial-conceptual operative of the *Filters* not only frustrated a homogenizing and unifying view or understanding of the biennale, it also seemed to challenge the notion of *one universal* way of knowing things in general. In other words, opening up the Western-centric canon of art also means opening up the Western-centric system of thought.

Enwezor's curatorial ambitions seem to be inextricable from his political agenda. The same ambitions are often voiced in



Fig. 3 *All the World's Futures*, 56th International Art Exhibition installation view Arsenale, works by Ricardo Brey, Venice, 2015.

discussions on art and knowledge, especially when it concerns the sociopolitical agency of art-as-knowledge. Of course, the subject is as complex as it is contested. Without rehearsing every aspect of it here, I would like to touch upon one key element, as put forth by South African art historian and theorist Sarat Maharaj, to underline how the idea of art-as-other-knowledge (and, by association, the exhibition-as-other-thinking-space) is not just a new, self-legitimizing art-ism, but is in fact tied into a larger emancipatory, political, and somewhat utopian project.

Historically, art has long laid claim to being the occupant and producer of knowledge that is other, or different, to the knowledges produced, authorized, and disseminated by institutionalized producers of knowledge (e.g., science, academia, the state, etc.). However, rather than following this binary setup, Maharaj argues for an understanding of art-as-knowledge that is intrinsically artistic and autonomous. As such, art-as-knowledge is distinguished from classic Enlightenment modalities of knowing without becoming its opposite, both in terms of the knowledge it produces and, more importantly, the way it produces it.²⁰ In another text, Maharaj defines art-as-knowledge as follows: “[It] involves unfinishable thinking, fine-tuning, trashing and starting up from scratch again. We have a dispersion of see-think-feel-map modalities.... These modalities enable both ‘other’ ways of knowing and ‘knowing’ otherness.”²¹ With the second part of his definition, Maharaj connects the otherness of art-as-knowledge to those qualities necessary for the betterment of our society: empathy and (mutual) understanding.

The need to dethrone the dominant model of knowledge production and to make space for not only a multicultural, but also a multi-epistemological society, is maybe best voiced by the Portuguese sociologist, legal scholar, and activist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos. In his influential publication, *Opening up the Canon of Knowledge and the Recognition of Difference* (2006), he writes, “Over the last decades there has been a growing recognition of the cultural diversity in the world.... But the same cannot be said about the recognition of the epistemological diversity in the world, that is, of the diversity of knowledge systems underlying the practice of different social groups around the globe. ... The epistemological privilege granted to modern science from the seventeenth century onwards, which made possible the technological revolutions that consolidated Western supremacy, was also instrumental in suppressing other, non-scientific forms of knowledges and, at the same time, the subaltern social groups whose social practices were informed by such knowledge.”²²

I am including De Sousa Santos here, albeit only via short quotation, to point to the larger and maybe worldlier context in which issues concerning alternative modalities of knowing and thinking (the world) have gained urgency. Both *Documenta 11* and the 56th Venice Biennale opened amidst a world in turmoil: 9/11 and its aftermath, the Syrian Civil

War, terrorist attacks across the world, deadly viruses, and so on. These events challenge the geopolitical status quo, but also the hegemony of the Western way of life and way of thinking. To paraphrase Enwezor, “Everywhere one turns new crisis, uncertainty, and deepening insecurity across all regions of the world leap into view.”²³ Not only do these ruptures demand “a fresh appraisal of the relationship of art and artists to the current state of things,”²⁴ it would be highly ineffective to address these issues merely by way of representation (i.e., by putting them on display the conventional white cube way). In other words, it would be ineffective, if not inappropriate, to present different thoughts without challenging the thought system that produced them.

A Theory of Thought Forms

The idea of the exhibition as a space to facilitate different ways of thinking, coupled with the hope that this may encourage a different way of relating to the world we live in, also seems to drive Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s curatorial practice. In both her introductions to dOCUMENTA(13) and the 11th Istanbul Biennial, for instance, Christov-Bakargiev describes her exhibition-making practice as a holistic enterprise: as the act of locating (art) objects in relation to place, history, each other, and to other fields of knowledge. “They [participants from various fields] contribute to the space of dOCUMENTA(13) that aims to explore how different forms of knowledge lie at the heart of the active exercise to reimagine the world.”²⁵ The motto included on the first page of the catalogue clearly outlines this scope and ambition:

- dOCUMENTA(13) is dedicated to artistic research and forms of imagination that explore commitment, matter, things, embodiment and active living in connection with, yet not subordinated to, theory and epistemological enclosures.
- These are terrains where politics are inseparable from a sensual, energetic, and worldly alliance between current research in various scientific and artistic fields and other knowledges, both ancient and contemporary.
- dOCUMENTA(13) is driven by a holistic and non-logocentric vision that is skeptical of the persisting belief in economic growth. This vision is shared with, and recognizes the shapes and practices of knowing of all animate and inanimate makers of the world, including people.²⁶

Though Christov-Bakargiev’s statement was met with some skepticism from the mainstream art world, dOCUMENTA(13) placed artistic research, other kinds of ontological agents, and other forms of knowledge firmly on the map. Like Enwezor’s *Documenta 11*, dOCUMENTA(13) developed across different places around the world. This itinerant model decentralized the exhibition in geographical and spatial terms, challenging some conventional hierarchies, like center versus periphery, in the process. At the same

time, it forced the visitor to think through his/her own position in relation to these other places in the world, their histories, their sociopolitical situation, etc. It literally destabilized the Eurocentric perspective on—and its presumed power over—the (art)world. Another meaningful destabilization and deterritorialization took shape by placing artworks side by side with objects belonging to other fields of knowledge, “both ancient and contemporary,” evoking a non-logocentric engagement with all animate and inanimate makers of the world.

This notion of a non-logocentric engagement brings to mind Sarat Maharaj’s concept of art-as-knowledge as this neutral gear, neither scientific nor ignorant. However, in Christov-Bakargiev’s approach, this non-logocentric way of knowing is not exclusive to the arts; it can be found in other practices of knowing and thinking, *including* the sciences. In fact, it is through the juxtaposition of these different practices of knowing, through the assembly of its various different material expressions, and through the network of associative relations between these objects, that this other “see-think-feel-map modality” that Maharaj speaks of emerges. “Art offers a platform for experimenting and exercising such transversal alliances between like-minded people, whether they are visitors, artists, scientists, historians, fiction writers or philosophers—to think this complexity with skeptical openness and without falling into a voracious mania for information.”²⁷

In her motto for the 14th Istanbul Biennial, Christov-Bakargiev puts it like this: “*SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms* looks for where to draw the line, to draw upon, and to draw out, through organic and non-linear forms that connect research in art with other knowledges.”²⁸

Taking the figure of the wave and the knot as its starting point, both conceived of as geometrical form, material manifestation, but also as *thought-form*, the biennial explored the different moments in which art, place, and history are connected and then disconnected. Here, too, Christov-Bakargiev places art-as-knowledge side by side with different forms of imagination and knowing that are not subordinated to theory and epistemological enclosures. Or, in her words, “It’s a bit of a surrealist procedure—an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table. It’s a question of folding and enfolding in order to then unfold in different ways. It’s knotting and unknotting history and art. That is what I do.”²⁹

So what is at stake here? These metaphorical ways of describing the discursive operations of an exhibition (which in turn prescribe our way of viewing) are indicative of what I see as a shift in our understanding of the agency of exhibitions. This shift, simply put, from a space dedicated to aesthetic contemplation to a dynamic site for thinking things differently is, as we saw, closely linked to the spatial layout of the exhibition (whether this is done successfully or not is, for now, another question). What these examples hopefully also speak to is the underlying ambition of both curators to

infiltrate our mode of thinking, not just on a representational level (e.g., on the level of information, data, documentary images, etc.), but on the level of thinking itself, the level of *episteme*.

Thus, Enwezor's engagement with postcolonial concerns extends beyond merely presenting emancipatory positions in art. By subverting its main frame, the white cube exhibition model, he also challenges Western art's ideological framework and all the different modernist tropes it has come to represent, artistically and ontologically. Christov-Bakargiev challenges our conventional way of looking and thinking by bringing together objects and ideas from different times, places, contexts, and disciplines. Hers is a profoundly anachronistic and holistic mode of thinking things together, and as such, challenges our monoscopic, logocentric, "single-minded" knowledge system, too. These agendas are inherently political.

On The Channel

A text like this always runs the risk of lingering too long on the abstract level of meta-artistic or meta-curatorial discourse. So far, I have been talking about grand-scale, blockbuster exhibitions, instead of smaller, more experimental (artist-curated) projects, of which there are many. However, despite their differing institutional and public context, their "curatorial-conceptual operation" is very similar to that of the exhibitions curated by Enwezor and Christov-Bakargiev. Echoing Aby Warburg's cross-disciplinary and anachronistic approach, they, too, favor a thinking things together, appealing to the viewer's imagination to create connections between objects that would have otherwise never been considered together. Needless to say, when addressing the intended fragmented nature of the exhibition, we cannot discount the impact here of the spatial sprawl that is now common to most biennial exhibitions.

Let us examine a "one-room" exhibition by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *The Channel*. This small-scale show was part of the 14th Istanbul Biennial, *SALTWATER: Theories of Thought Forms*, and occupied an L-shaped space within one of the main venues. This exhibition-in-an-exhibition contained an eclectic collection of inspirations and references, some shown in glass vitrines, some on monitors, others framed and attached to the walls. Among them, a wall sculpture by Fabio Mauri consisting of the words, "On the Liberty"; five black-and-white photogravures of different plant species made by Karl Blossfeldt in 1928; a collection of beautiful art deco vases by Emile Gallé; a copy of Charles Darwin's *On the Various Contrivances by which British and Foreign Orchids are Fertilised; and on the Good Effects of Intercrossing* (1862); a series of twenty-two drawings by Patrick Blanc with his designs for vertical gardens; drawings by Nobel Prize winner Santiago Ramón y Cajal mapping the microscopic structure of the brain, shown next to some of his



Fig. 4 *Kanal / The Channel*, installation view, *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, 14th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey, 2015.

paintings depicting childhood memories; and a book by Henri Bergson from his private library.

In another vitrine, scientific drawings by Scottish mathematician Peter Tait, illustrating his “knot theory” in his book from 1877, were exhibited. The book was shown next to drawings made by Jacques Lacan in conjunction with his psychoanalytical reflections on the “topology of the knot” from 1979. This juxtaposition prompts an obvious formal connection regarding the different shapes and forms of knots, but also opens up a more informal space, stretching over a century, in which we can think through the connections between Lacan’s ideas on the symbolic order and the social dimension of the formation of identity, and Tait’s attempt to define when two knots were “different” or “the same.” This thought-sphere was further expanded and rerouted by two other works that were shown a couple of meters away: William Irvine’s black-and-white video, titled *Vortex Loops, Knots and Links* (2013), which documents the Italian-American physicist’s experiments to “knot” water within water, performed in order to better understand the possibility to knot matter on an atomic level. But the pièce de résistance that somehow tied things together in an inexplicit way was the series of beautiful watercolors showing various shapes in various colors, bearing mystical captions like “An Aspiration to Enfold All,” or “Sustained Anger and Murderous Rage,” or “The Logos as Manifested in Man and an Intellectual Conception of Cosmic Order.” The watercolors are part of the book *Thought Forms*, published in 1905 by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater. According to Besant, *thought forms* are “embodied entities of both the real world and the imaginal realm, visible and vibrating manifestations of what is generally invisible that can be apprehended in intense states of awareness, meditation, affect and desire.”³⁰

The Channel is conceived as a research exhibition where “a number of elements float together... and conversations between different fields of knowledge occur.”³¹ Christov-Bakargiev describes *The Channel* as a reversed *Wunderkammer*, or Cabinet of Curiosities: “The Channel knots together inside and outside through different lines of flight, recalling a Klein bottle—a form with no outside nor inside although it is a containing vessel.”³² The inside/outside dichotomy mentioned here not only refers to the rest of the exhibition, but also to the expanded field outside of art: the geopolitical shifts and ruptures, scientific discoveries, and historical events that have left their traces around the city; in other words, the real world that the modernist white cube so desperately tried to ban from the exhibition space.

But the most important “knotting” took place among the objects themselves, and all the histories, theories, personal stories, and ideas they embodied. The L-shaped spaces allowed for long vistas, mapping the space in one total view. At the same time, the visitor could focus on one object, exploring it in depth, accessing the online catalogue to learn



Fig. 5 *Kanal / The Channel*, installation view, *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, 14th Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey, 2015.

more about its background and biography, while simultaneously from the corner of the eye connecting it with other objects in the space. The network of associations that emerges while wandering through the space evokes different trajectories, different storylines between the objects. In addition to those mentioned earlier, a story or thinking pattern unfolds around the figure of the knot and the wave—in all its manifestations and meanings across times, places, disciplines, etc. Another thought pattern emerges through the juxtaposition of hard science (neurology, physics, mathematics) and the knowledges produced, for instance, by psychoanalysis or theosophy, both investigating metaphysical matters and the ways in which the invisible can be captured in physical form. These are just some of the connections that emerge.

According to Christov-Bakargiev, *The Channel* operated as a catalyst to enter in dialogue with the exhibition as a whole. At the same time, at least for me, the small exhibition operated as a space where research and thinking took place *in actu* and *in situ*; not merely as a cognitive, rational activity but as Maharaj described, via a different see-read-think-map modality. Like Hans-Ulrich Obrist, I visited the exhibition a couple of times, and yes, each time, even if it was only a day apart, different associations, different connections, different ideas would emerge. Without a clearly articulated point of departure—Christov-Bakargiev’s introduction of the “theme” remained quite abstract throughout—her intentions, her realm of thought, started to become palpable, intuitively. It is a mode of knowing, of thinking things through that, I believe, can only happen in-between different objects, images, pieces of information, ideas, different sensitivities, and my own baggage of earlier acquired knowledges and ideas. It is a form of knowledge-montage that precedes “subordination by theory or epistemological enclosure.” It reminded me of Maharaj’s “unfinishable thinking, fine-tuning, trashing and starting up from scratch again.”

The curatorial as new paradigm

So how do these practices relate to the staple of theoretical writings regarding curating as knowledge production? In her seminal and frequently quoted essay from 2006, “Smuggling – An Embodied Criticality,” British cultural theoretician Irit Rogoff proposes a form of “embodied criticality” that is more attuned to understand contemporary cultural practices “as vehicles to produce new subjectivities in the world.” This notion of embodied criticality, which Rogoff sets against the common practice of critical analysis, proposes a critical understanding of a situation or problem by inhabiting it rather than by analyzing and objectifying it. It proposes “a shift away from a model that says that the manifest of culture must yield up some latent values and intentions through endless processes of investigation and uncovering. [...] Using the vast range of structuralist, post- and post-structuralist tools and models of analysis we have at our disposal, we have been able to unveil, unravel, expose and lay bare the hidden meanings of cultural circulation and

the overt and covert interests that these serve.”³³ But, Rogoff continues, as we have moved “to engage increasingly with the performative nature of culture, with meaning that takes place as events unfold, we need to move away from notions of immanent meanings that can be investigated, exposed and made obvious.”³⁴

In the following passage, which I will include here in its entirety, Rogoff sums up the limitations and false assumptions that underpin the old analytical model and the notion of immanent meaning:

- The fact that meaning is never produced in isolation or through isolating processes but rather through intricate webs of connectedness.
- The fact that participants, be they audiences, students or researchers, produce meaning not simply through the subjectivities they project on works whose circuits of meanings they complete, but that they produce meaning through relations with one another and through the temporality of the event of the exhibition, or the class, or the demonstration or the display.
- The fact that college courses, artworks, thematic exhibitions, political publications and other forums dedicated to making culture manifest, or work to reproduce them into view, do not have immanent meaning but function as fields of possibilities for different audiences in different cultural circumstances and wildly divergent moods, to produce significances.
- And ultimately, on the fact that in a reflective shift, from the analytical to the performative function of observation and of participation, we can agree that the meaning is not excavated for, but rather, that it *takes place* in the present.³⁵

We may quickly recognize how the “old model,” based on an unveiling, unraveling, and laying bare of hidden meanings, still underpins our conventional approach of visitors’ engagement in museums. The learning experience in exhibitions be they historic, thematic, or monographic, are understood as puzzles. Visitors—adults and children alike—are invited to connect the dots, fill in the blanks, uncover the meaning and knowledge that is already there, either put there by way of its art historically constructed narrative, or by the curator-as-expert-author. With this model, which firmly establishes the hierarchy between expert institute and the general public, public information and education departments produce a whole array of explanatory guides, tools, leaflets, catalogs, audio tours, public programs, workshops, etc., all geared towards introducing the not-knowing public to a hidden realm of knowledge.

Much like Okwui Enwezor and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Irit Rogoff recognizes the need for a different “epistemological paradigm,” one that acknowledges and embraces the fact that meaning (and knowledge) do not come into existence in isolation of “epistemological

confinements,” but through intricate webs of connectedness. Similarly, acquiring meaning or knowledge should no longer be considered an act of archaeological discovery or a one-directional exchange between the student and teacher, but an event that takes place; it emerges *in situ* and *in actu*. Furthermore, exhibitions and the like are not vessels of stable narratives or clearly defined knowledges, but fields of possibilities. And, last but not least, the visitor/participant and the “platforms that manifest culture” are not separated entities, but indelible unities.

Rogoff suggests “the curatorial” as new paradigm to understand these shifts. Whereas curating refers to the practice of putting on exhibitions and the various professional expertise it involves, “the curatorial” constitutes the realm of principles and possibilities that frames these activities. These principles include the production of knowledge, of activism, of cultural circulations and translation. As such, thinking through “the curatorial” entails a move away from “intention, illustration, exemplification [...] Because the conventional work of curating that followed along these lines simply *reproduces* existing subjects in the world.”³⁶ A move to “the curatorial,” then, “is an opportunity to ‘unbound’ the work from all those categories and practices that limit its ability to explore that which we do not yet know or that which is not yet a subject in the world.”³⁷

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1. Mieke Bal, “Exhibition as a Syntax of the Face,” *Grammar of the Exhibition, Manifesta Journal #7* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2009/2010): 13.
 2. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Sharp Tongues, Loose Lips, Open Ears to the Ground* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 14.
 3. When Warburg moved his private library to its new location, part of the collection was housed in an elliptically shaped room, reflecting a humanist vision of a holistic world.
 4. From 1925 until his early death in 1929, German art historian Aby Warburg tirelessly worked on his *Bilderatlas, Mnemosyne*. It was a tool to understand how images mutate and live on

- beyond a certain historical period. In 1929, the picture atlas consisted of sixty-plus wooden *Tafeln* on which Warburg had arranged and rearranged photographic reproductions of art historical and cosmographical images, including maps, manuscript pages, and contemporary images drawn from newspapers and magazines, each plate expressing by way of its “visual knowledge-montage” a different theme.
5. More specifically, I will look at a type of exhibitions in which artworks are combined with all kinds of objects, including artifacts, scientific drawings, documents, etc., and that are generally categorized as research-based exhibitions, or essay exhibitions.
 6. There are a few texts that reference Aby Warburg’s picture atlas in relation to socio-spatial-ontological nature of exhibitions. One that I find relevant in this context is Sigrid Weigel’s text, “Epistemology of Wandering, Tree and Taxonomy.” She writes: “When Warburg himself used his boards as a background stage for his lectures in order to visually present a certain configuration of images or to show the ‘migration’ (*Wanderung*) of symbols, motifs, gestures and pathos formulas he was interpreting in his talk, this situation turned the plates into a specific site of knowledge [...] Listening to the lecture, the audience, could with their eyes, wander from one table to the other and visually move between the images of each board, up and down, left and right, back and forth. [...] In this situation... the series of plates effectively constructed a sort of *Denkraum*, a common space of thought.” See Sigrid Weigel, “Epistemology of Wandering, Tree and Taxonomy,” accessed November 12, 2014, <https://imagesrevues.revues.org/pdf/2934>.
 7. Obrist, *Sharp Tongues, Loose Lips, Open Ears to the Ground*, 14.
 8. Ibid., 15. The full title of the exhibition was *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800*. The design of the exhibition resembled other exhibitions by Szeemann, such as *Monte Verita: Berg der Wahrheit* (1987–1990) or *The Bachelor Machines* (1975–1977).
 9. Obrist, *Sharp Tongues, Loose Lips, Open Ears to the Ground*, 19.
 10. See, for instance, Paul O’Neill, ed., *Curating Subjects*, (Amsterdam/London: de Appel/Open Editions, 2008); Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating Research* (Amsterdam/London: de Appel/Open Editions, 2015); Maria Lind, *Performing the Curatorial Within and Beyond Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012); and Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff, eds., *The Curatorial* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015)
 11. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, (London: Allan Lane/Penguin Books, 2014), 32.
 12. For an account of this historical lineage, see, for instance, Bruce Althusser’s introduction in *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions That Made Art History* (London/New York: Phaidon Press, 2013), in which he describes the coming-of-age of the exhibition as we know it today, from the eighteenth-century Academic Salon to the public’s favorite biennials, like *Documenta* in Kassel.
 13. Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1976), 15. First published as a series of three essays in *Artforum* (1976).
 14. O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 16.
 15. Whereas the white cube relies on an emptying out or neutralizing of the interspaces, the hermeneutical agency of Warburg’s *Bilderatlas* relied on a filling up, or rather filling in of these intervals.
 16. Okwui Enwezor, “Introduction,” *All the World’s Futures*, exh. cat., La Biennale di Venezia, 56th International Art Exhibition (Venice, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2015), 18,19. The main exhibition of the 56th Venice Biennale, under the artistic directorship of Okwui Enwezor, took place in the Arsenale and the Italian Pavilion in the Giardini.
 17. Okwui Enwezor, *All the World’s Futures: Curatorial Statement*, press information, La Biennale di Venezia, 56th International

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- Art Exhibition (Venice, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2015).
18. Okwui Enwezor, interview by Coline Milliard, *Artnet*, accessed March 11, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/okwui-enwezor-venice-biennale-karl-marx-havana-biennial-boycott-274420>.
 19. "In a sense, then, Documenta11's five Platforms, in a paradoxical but necessary critical move, begin with a series of deterritorializations which not only intervene in the very historical location of Documenta in Kassel but also emblemize the mechanisms that make the space of contemporary art one of multiple ruptures." Okwui Enwezor, "Preface," *Documenta11*, exh. cat. (Kassel, 2002).
 20. Sarat Maharaj, "Unfinishable Sketch of 'An Unknown Object in 4D': Scenes of Artistic Research," in *Lier & Boog* 18, ed. Henk Slager (2001): 49 "I have used the ancient Sanskrit term Avidya. Its opposite, Vidya (to see-know) gives us the Latin cousin 'video.' By adding 'A' to vidya—Avidya—signals not just its polar opposite 'ignorance [...]. It expresses the middle term as in moral<amoral>immoral or typical<atypical>untypical—the 'neutral gear' of knowing that is neither that of the 3D disciplines nor its conventional opposite 'ignorance.' Avidya stands for that in-between space [...] 'delaying' polar thinking involved in 'knowing /not-knowing.'"
 21. Sarat Maharaj, "Xeno-epistemics: makeshift kit for sounding visual art as knowledge production and the retinal regimes." In; *Documenta 12*, Platform 5, (Kassel, Germany, 2002), p 72
 22. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Another Knowledge is Possible. Beyond Northern Epistemologies*. (Verso: London, 2007) p. ix.
 23. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "The dance was very frantic ...," *The Book of Books*, exh. cat., *dOCUMENTA(13)* (Kassel, 2012), 31.
 24. *Ibid.*, 4.
 25. *Ibid.*, 31.
 26. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed., *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, exh. cat., 14th Istanbul Biennial (Istanbul, 2015), 4.
 27. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed., *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, exh. cat., 14th Istanbul Biennial (Istanbul, 2015), XLVIII
 28. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, motto as reproduced in press release.
 29. Noelle Bodick, "Q&A with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev," *Blouinartinfo*, accessed September 22, 2015, <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1219655/qa-carolyn-christov-bakargiev-on-the-istanbul-biennialinterview>.
 30. *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, online catalogue, <http://14b.iksv.org/> (Accessed 12 October 2015)
 31. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, exhibition wall text, *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, Istanbul Modern (September 5–November 1, 2015, Istanbul).
 32. Christov-Bakargiev, *SALTWATER*, exh. cat., xliii.
 33. Irit Rogoff, *Notes on Smuggling*, EIPCP.net, 2006, eipcp.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling, 6.
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. *Ibid.*, 2.
 36. *Ibid.*, 3.
 37. *Ibid.*