

FROM CURATING CONTINGENCY TO CURATING DISASTER

SONJA LAU

In lieu of an abstract

Dear Sonja,¹

This is Jonida Gashi writing, Chair of the Department of Art Studies at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and the Study of Art in Tirana, part of the Academy of Albanian Studies. [...] kindly gave me your email address.

First of all, I hope you are doing well in the face of this pandemic. We are slowly beginning to emerge from a very strict and very nerve-wracking lockdown here in Albania. I mention this also because it connects to what I am writing to you about today. I'll get to the point without further ado.

I am in the process of finalizing the list of contributors & contributions for the forthcoming issue of the *Art Studies* journal, which is one of two journals published by the Institute of Cultural

¹ Email sent to art critic and curator Sonja Lau by Jonida Gashi, editor-in-chief of the *Art Studies* journal, on 6 May 2020.

Anthropology and the Study of Art (the other one being *Anthropology*). This will be the first issue of the journal under my editorship, with the thematic section focusing on the relationship between post-socialist/contemporary art and the archive, broadly understood. I would like to warmly invite you to be one of our contributors for the *non-thematic* section of the journal, which given the current situation will focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-COVID-19 world.

Specifically, I would like to invite you to further expand on your idea of "curating contingency", only this time beyond the scope of a single exhibition and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In your review of the *Tirana Patience* exhibition you define "curating contingency" as being akin "to arrang[ing] a situation in such a way that it is allowed to speak for itself". I must say that I like your definition very much, however, even as I was reading your review it struck me that a disaster, be it a 6.4M earthquake or an outbreak of a hitherto unknown virus that turns into a pandemic, defies or at least goes beyond being a mere contingency. (For instance, had the magnitude of the 26 November 2019 earthquake been a little bit higher and/or had its epicenter been slightly nearer to Tirana, there could have easily been no exhibition left to review.) To put this another way, while it is absolutely true that artists, curators, galleries and museums, etc., operate under increasingly precarious conditions, a disaster, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, will "quickly come crashing in" on anything and everything in its path. Incidentally, I think that this pandemic will give rise to what I am going to call "curating (the) disaster". My question to you is, what is the difference between "curating contingency" and what I have just called "curating disaster"? Or, when does "curating contingency" become

"curating (the) disaster"? Also, what (if there is any) is the political usefulness of a curatorial approach that has the disaster as its horizon?

Do let me know if pursuing this topic is of any interest to you. Alternatively, if there is another topic that you are dying to cover, do let me know about that as well!

Looking forward to hearing from your soon

Best wishes

Jonida

Key words: contemporary art, contemporary curating, curating contingency, curating disaster, COVID-19

Against institutional vaccines

This text is a dubious and flirtatious attempt to consider possible (future) relationships between the aspects of damage, loss, (self-)harm, and other markers of disastrous events, and the realm of contemporary curating. Clearly, the chasm that these two poles suggest cannot be bridged so easily. Traditionally, anything that threatens a curatorial proposal and/or the safety of the institutional art space must be circumvented at all costs, and it seems even less likely, given the Latin origin of “curare” (“caring”), that curating may claim an interest in unforeseen harm and interruptive events for itself. At the same time however, the integrity of the art institution, and the concept of full mastery and control implied therein, has been tangibly unmasked as a utopian practice of the past that no longer corresponds to the social, political, and above all ecological factors it is surrounded by. “Disaster”, as it is deployed in the title of this text, and as it has choreographed our social sphere ever since the beginning of the pandemic, is not bound to exist only as a metaphor, but has become an active player

inside and outside the arts. Natural disasters, as climate activists and scientists have been warning us for decades, might take up a prominent place on the future global agenda, but political turmoil, coups d'états, civic disobedience and other 'states of exceptions' are also scratching more aggressively on the walls of parliaments, museums, schools, and universities. If the "museum without walls" once recalled a radical yet never literally applied vision, it has, in disguise, resurfaced. The walls of the art institution increasingly show their imperfections. Things slip through from the outside, or pour back out onto the streets.

Against this background, the attempt to tie curatorial work closer to troublesome inconveniences or uncontrollable events, for which "disaster" here serves as a generic denominator, can thus be understood as a response to those power shifts and new constellations. But it is also a call for an alternate curatorial responsibility that differs strongly from the act of 'protecting' or safeguarding whatever happens within the museum's space. On the contrary, as I will try to elaborate, the decisive quality of "curating disaster", is a mode of un-safety and un-protection in its own right – in which (self-)harm, the acceptance of damages, and the acknowledgment of inherent vulnerabilities, are no longer undesired, or simply "horrific", but entail a more apt relationship with the morphing world order, as well as an important position against the dominating neoliberal ideology of optimized risk-management. As the artist Bas Jan Ader has shown in his work *I'm too sad to tell you* many decades ago, today, we will not praise famous men. We will watch men crying, men falling, men disappearing. In analogy to this, "curating disaster" is a call to understand the art institution as a place that permits the right to suffer, to be harmed, to be contaminated, and the opportunity to

explore what curatorial tasks derive from there. Whilst a worldwide process of immunization is in the making, we should not get confused: The arts institution must never be vaccinated.

Curating contingency: A brief trajectory of thoughts

Before disaster, there was contingency. By this I am referring to a text where the proposition of “curating contingency” came into play for the first time – a case study on an exhibition very literally affected by “disaster”: *Tirana Patience* (2019/20).² Curated by Nataša Ilić and Adam Szymczyk, this group exhibition largely dedicated to the gallery's Socialist Realist collection, was initially scheduled to open on November 26, 2019 at the National Gallery of Arts in Tirana. During the early morning hours of November 26, however, a 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck the country, killing several dozen citizens and leaving the National Gallery damaged to an unknown extent. The gallery was declared to unsafe for its visitors to enter. A day before its opening, *Tirana Patience* thus became an exhibition sealed off from view, enclosing the entire installation and leaving it akin to a neatly laid dinner table at which nobody ever arrives.

Back then, my writing about *Tirana Patience* was informed by the attempt to write about at least two exhibitions at once – one in the past and one in the present tense. Clearly, the earthquake and the temporary quarantine that it imposed on the artworks did not only leave their marks on the museum's architecture, but on the curatorial proposal as a whole. It had been, to some extent, split

² Sonja Lau, “From the ground up: Sonja Lau on *Tirana Patience* at the National Gallery of Arts, Tirana, Albania”, *Texte zur Kunst*, 28 February 2020: <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/ground/>.

into two, with a notion of “patience” that belonged to the past and that was never applied, and a notion of “patience” that was actual, yet not anticipated in such a way. Either way, the exhibition had tangibly inflated its range of interpretations under these unlikely circumstances, accumulating layer upon layer of additional readings, and taking in even more through the open cracks in the walls. It was for this reason that I began to ponder on the possibilities of “curating contingency” as a means to acknowledge the limits of curatorial powers as a working method in its own right, which allows for external factors to seep in, disturb, or shape things anew. I was interested in what remains hidden and untried in the curatorial field if it comes to the confrontation with accidents, disturbances, and other confounding elements that are traditionally disliked and barred from the exhibition environment. The point was not to argue for the benefit of such (un)friendly takeovers per se, or to fetishize a calamity or thrive on its sensationalist tides. On the contrary, a lot of projects require, and may only reach their actual scope, through precision and mastery. Yet what I tried to elucidate, was a thread in curatorial practice that is indebted above all to the generating of “situations” rather than rigid constellations. Ironically, I did not consider it mere “chance” that the earthquake and the drastic economic challenges it entailed, would reverberate both inside and the outside the gallery’s space, plotting the title *Tirana Patience* anew, and altering the course of the exhibition as a whole. There was also a curatorial methodology at work, that by means of what I called “curating contingency” anticipated intervention and reiterations from the ground up, thus prioritizing the activation of a situation that is allowed speak for itself.

Essentially, such a practice is not entirely different from what artists such as Tania Bruguera have deployed throughout their

work: namely the stirring of situations, where the institution, eventually, performs itself. In her work, a minor set up or intervention often leads to institutional reactions that can be conceived as “performances” in their own right. It is precisely there, where the artist stops performing and the context, the surrounding, the institution steps in, that the art work begins. It's from now on carried by different hands, but it doesn't fail to be “decodable” in theatrical terms by an audience that is both public and arts related. The outcome is always unknown and unmediated, yet the situation that the artist prompts is carefully choreographed, pierced with a lot of loopholes, hooks and openings for the surrounding context to join in (and complete the work). Many related artistic practices could be quoted here, up to the infamous “bullet” that recently reached the office of the Director of the National Arts Gallery in Tirana by mail, and emerged from there into a 'state of play' that involved lawyers, judges and policemen as interim speakers in a “what is art?” debate.³ (Figs. 1-2) But within the curatorial field, such practices have remained scarce. With “curating contingency”, I was interested in thinking of a curatorial and institutional practice with a similar intent to engage in situations whose mediation is necessarily limited, so that other, economic, political, outlandish, or in the case of *Tirana Patience*, even disastrous aspects of life can – and must – join and settle in. *Tirana Patience* allowed for a first, exemplary elaboration.

The end of euphemisms

Bearing the title of this text in mind – “From curating contingency to curating disaster” – it is striking in retrospect that

³ I am referring here to Armando Lulaj's work *Bullet in Envelope* (2018). For more information see: https://debatikcenter.net/strikes/bullet_in_envelope.

the term “disaster” did not surface much in the text on *Tirana Patience*, although the external factor that struck it was severely devastating. Still, what proved disastrous for the outside of the exhibition space, was rendered less injurious within it, akin to a theatrical wound with artificial blood, that replaces physical pain with impressive verses and dialogues. Whatever enters the museum, it seems, first runs through the museum's internal translation-machine. There is no way to represent pain, e.g., inside the museum, that coheres with its experience in real life, but there is *something about pain* that I would be more confident to find in an artwork than in my own metabolic system.

That is vulnerability, and *there is something about vulnerability*, which often equates what happens inside and outside the museum's space. But this also means that there is a space for (dangerous) ventures in the arts: it allows for keeping the wound open for a while. There is no risk for inflammation, but a unique chance to dwell on something that would otherwise require immediate medical treatment. Against this backdrop, “Curating Contingency”, as developed from *Tirana Patience*, is not only the attempt to collaborate with incidents and outer impacts. More than this, it can be conceived of as a method of deliberate self-contamination, which could not be facilitated in another context. The curatorial responsibility, here, is turned upside down. It is not to provide for a safe space, but for the production of a situation where contamination can take place for the better.

Now, after a year of COVID-19 and presumably more to come, the question is if this is still true. Can “contingency” still serve as an adequate term in an era predominantly shaped by disaster and calamity, especially on the ecological level? The question is also a matter of precision. Where do we enter from a

state of “curating contingency” into a state of “curating disaster”, and if the latter is likely to become commonplace in the future, could this signify a curatorial practice at all, and to which end? Last but not least, will the institution, as such, “survive” at all?

To follow up on this question, it is important to consider first the traditional relationship between the museum, risk, and vulnerability. Today, immunization and risk prevention against all kinds of disasters are high ranking priorities in most governments’ agendas, more often than not incompatible with aspects of transnational sharing or solidarity. Safety has its price and, as it seems, it is a rare commodity. The ideology of safety and invulnerability is also mirrored increasingly inside the structure and interiors of art institutions. As Claire Bishop has written repeatedly, drawing on Rosalind Krauss’ critique of the contemporary museum as an “architectural container” that correlates intimately to the “dematerialized flow of global capital”, today’s art institutions are more than ever related to capital and privatization, which corresponds to a state of constantly growing invulnerability.⁴ The accumulation of power also accounts for an immunization process, where the museum’s clinical, sanitary neatness, its architectural perfection, its healthy employees, and luring products at the gift shop, are complicit with the ideology of safety and security, the crucial promise of capital. More importantly, the “safe” museum is also shielded against undesired discourses, questions and problematics. The immunization process, launched through capital, also has a tangible impact on the “healthy” appearance of the narratives, art histories, and discourses

⁴ Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology, or What’s “Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art*, London: Koenig Books Ltd, 2013, p. 5

it offers to its visitors. The museum, it seems, always gets the vaccine first.

It thus seems that whether a museum or curatorial position can deal with a confrontation with disaster in a meaningful way will majorly depend on a critical revision of the institutional landscape and its relationship with vulnerabilities. Whereas society is indeed in need of support if wounds are to be healed and walls are to be fixed, the art institution must be reclaimed as a site where a problem can be insisted on, where things can be at odds. The art institution must be reclaimed as a site where scars are collected; for (re)learning about the significance of being vulnerable, instead of sneaking away from it. To think of “curating contingency” as a method that allows for the surfacing of external and not fully controllable factors, may serve to reanimate a sense of shared vulnerabilities and mutual dependencies that can no longer be excluded from or ignored by the institution.

The violent curator

As a matter of fact, this is not my first attempt to flirt with damages and other forms of destruction from a curatorial perspective. In 2008, I developed together with my colleague André Siegers a curatorial approach under the claim “About the language of the vandals, little is known”, in which we reflected upon how far we can operate as vandals within the art canon and the art institutions surrounding us. I have always thought it to be a beautiful finding that historians are not entirely certain as to which language the historical tribe of the vandals had used amongst them – they are so to say a “speechless species”. With “About the language of the vandals, little is known”, we could thus claim the following: there is more to the vandal than pure destruction, there

is more to the vandals than mere aggression, because their language has never been heard. At the same time, we wondered if there was a vandalistic tradition that could serve as a practice today, e.g. a practice that is less interested in the looting of religious temples, but rather in resisting the secular temples of our present day, such as language and hierarchies, Western discourses, Western art histories.

In 2008, this served as the basis for a project titled *Re-paintings* that focused on the Socialist Realist paintings in the National Gallery's permanent collection and was completed in close collaboration with former people's painters. (Figs. 3-6) For this project we worked inside the empty gallery, since at the time the National Gallery was undergoing significant renovations – it was quite literally a construction site, dusty and nude. This temporary state of the gallery was important in that it effectively transformed it into a non-place in the art historical canon. The “old” institution had already vanished, whereas the “new” institution had not yet begun to operate. What was awaiting was a new curatorial hanging of the Socialist Realist collection, a hanging that would no longer generate any threat, but a distance.

We thus took this chance to work straight into the temporary void, off-canon and off-institutional powers. The invited painters worked directly onto the rough, vacant walls, at times choosing the spot where their paintings used to be displayed. It was a gesture of resistance as well as a farewell: since we/they worked on the unrenovated walls, all the wall paintings were slated to disappear under the new white coat of the institution, once work on the building was completed. We were literally disrupting the refurbishment process. The paintings never really did disappear

though. They inscribed themselves into the skin of the building; they are still there – evidence of the contingency of history.

Re-paintings was a deliberate and painful act on many levels, as it somewhat theatrically “restaged” the phenomenon of disappearing artists and art histories as a response to power shifts; a phenomenon that would otherwise likely go unnoticed, or seem much less harmful when depicted in schoolbooks. But it was also painful to the institution, whose project of renovation became suddenly related to a violent act, a vandalistic gesture. It became painful for the institution to the point that if you look on the National Gallery's website today for a trace of this project, you will look for it in vain. It has become, as we would argue, part of the “institutional subconscious” of the National Gallery, something that is there, without words.

I have made a case for the “vandalist” appeal at regular intervals, most recently when working with the heritage of Christoph Schlingensief's *Opera Village*. In this context, I argued for “the art of turning the weapons against oneself”, as a vandalist approach in regard to the problematics of asymmetrical working relationships, such as international collaborations between economically strong and weaker countries.⁵ This asymmetry is very present in Schlingensief's work, considering the building of an opera in Burkina Faso. The point I tried to make was simple: If it is unfeasible to provide your collaborator with privileges equal to your own, if perverse asymmetries are consistent, it might be a more interesting move to destroy your own. In my understanding, the *Opera Village* derived from this very incentive: a project that

⁵ Sonja Lau, “On the Art of Turning the Gun Against Ourselves”, in Aino Labrenz, ed., *Christoph Schlingensiefs Operndorf Afrika*, Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020, pp. 352-363.

was less about “building” an opera in Burkina Faso, than about “un-building” or deconstructing the high culture of the opera in the Western concept. It was about “less” not “more”. Schlingensief thus literally vandalized the hierarchies of the (Western) discourse, and with this intelligent gesture basically “reduced” the Western value of the opera by giving it away for its free use. What he was up to, was to make his own position weaker. Whereas the ‘stronger’ partner in asymmetrical relations usually denies the possession of weapons to the ‘weaker’ partner while simulating equality, Schlingensief was aware of the weapons he was given through the chance of history and power. He didn’t deny their existence, but chose to turn them against himself.

Curating disaster, enchanted

If we consider these approaches to artistic and curatorial work, the shift from “curating contingency” to “curating disaster” gradually gains more substance. Clearly, there is no manual to “curate contingency”, and even less for curating disaster and catastrophe. However, my aim in proposing these terms is directed towards the building of a new range of sensibilities that strive to deal more fearlessly with the damages that are awaiting us.

Can we imagine an institution dedicated to the reading of the vandalistic languages? What about an art institution that engages in sharing pain instead of offering to recover from it? Where contamination can take place, and is, eventually, artistically and curatorially articulated?

Whatever the procedure, and regardless which methods might be developed from here, there remains something constitutive for “Curating Disaster” that I understand as the essence of it all: At the end, something always breaks. And this is *not* a tragedy.



Fig. 1. *Bullet in Envelope* (2018) by Armando Lulaj. Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.



Fig. 2. Working material for *Bullet in Envelope* (2018), by Armando Lulaj: Still frame from *Kronikë '97*, an unfinished film. Courtesy of the artist, the Albanian Film Archive, and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.

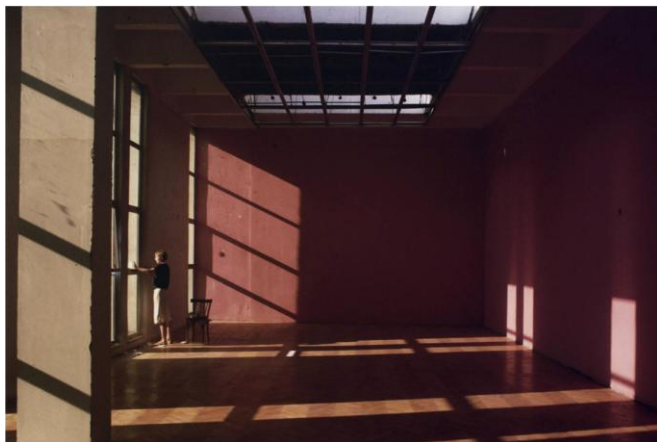


Fig. 3. *RI-PIKTURIM. An Exhibition on Coats*, curated by Sonja Lau and André Siegers, September – October 2008. View of the empty “red room” in which the National Gallery’s Socialist Realist collection used to be displayed just prior to being refurbished. Courtesy of Sonja Lau and André Siegers.



Fig. 4. *RI-PIKTURIM. An Exhibition on Coats*, curated by Sonja Lau and André Siegers, September – October 2008. Exhibition view: Painters Sali Shijaku and Ksenofon Dilo working on the walls. Courtesy of Sonja Lau and André Siegers.



Fig. 5. *RI-PIKTURIM. An Exhibition on Coats*, curated by Sonja Lau and André Siegers, September – October 2008. Exhibition view: Skënder Kamberi re-working his once acclaimed painting. Courtesy of Sonja Lau and André Siegers.



Fig. 6. *RI-PIKTURIM. An Exhibition on Coats*, curated by Sonja Lau and André Siegers, September – October 2008. Post-exhibition view: disappearance of the wall paintings under a white coat as the renovation continues. The white rectangles indicate their former site. Courtesy of Sonja Lau and André Siegers.