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To Fail Better: Curating as a Resilience Practice

Abstract: The text addresses the position of the curator within the contemporary system of cultural production, where “failure” becomes not an avoidable error but a method of work and political articulation. Drawing on the concept of queerness and “fail”, as explained by Pablo Martínez and José Esteban Muñoz, the text analyzes curatorial practice as a form of resilience developed through the limitations imposed by financial, ideological, and institutional frameworks. The text critically examines how curatorial practices are increasingly unfolding at the intersection of the market, state, and activism, and how this intermediate space leads to the instrumentalization of politics through aesthetics, the fragmentation of identity-based struggles, and the exploitation of precarious artistic and intellectual labor. In contrast, “failure” is proposed as a strategy of resistance, not as defeat, but as a means to evade cooptation and create space for new political subjectivity, collective knowledge, and engagement beyond the logic of success and visibility. The text advocates curatorial positions that embrace vulnerability and unproductivity as conditions for opening spaces of genuine solidarity, mutual care, and transformative action. It emphasizes the need to conceive curatorial practice not as a tool of representation but as a practice of acting, listening, and learning from failure.

Keywords: curating; identity politics; institutional critique; failure; solidarity; museum practices; activism.

Marginalization of curating:

Institutional ambivalence and neoliberal fragmentation

Today, art produced for institutions increasingly serves as a tool for political and social intervention. Cultural institutions are positioned as players in the rejuvenation of disadvantaged areas, and museums and galleries act as agents of urban renewal, healing, and community building within contexts of socio-economic marginalization.

Yet, contemporary art institutions embody a contradiction: while promoting transformation and solidarity, they often reproduce neoliberal logic. Funding bodies demand neutrality or depoliticized projects, translating engagement into sanitized, aestheticized experiences.¹ Cultural institutions often offer superficial solutions to

¹ Marwa Arsanios, “Who’s Afraid of Ideology? Ecofeminist Practices Between Internationalism and Globalism,” *e-flux journal* 93 (2018), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215118/who-s-afraid-of-ideology-ecofeminist-practices-between-internationalism-and-globalism/>.

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structural crises, resulting in peaceful but compromised forms of engagement within society.

Curators navigate the boundary between critical engagement and the instrumentalization of art for ideological or economic purposes. They think politically but avoid direct ideology. Rather than engage in local socio-political struggles, they are drawn into general humanitarian projects that reward isolated narratives. In the race for funding, value is placed on personal stories, ones that stand out amidst a sea of project applications. This reinforces identity politics as a fragmented system, where each group (LGBTQ+, labor, youth, feminism, migrations, for example) functions in isolation through its own NGO. The result is a depoliticization of the struggle. Resources are distributed according to levels of marginalization or crisis severity, constructing a competitive economy of grief and disaster.²

A central ethical dilemma in contemporary art practice is its complicity in capitalist exploitation, especially regarding marginalized subjects. There is something in the curators' attitude that leaves them dissatisfied with their position, compelling them to engage with the masses, participate in public activism, and immerse themselves in the "real world".³

Intellectuals who lack the confidence to subvert the system often critique the system, amplifying the voices of the weak and marginalized, and showing a fascination with their subject of study. There are many examples in artistic and curatorial practices that aim to give voice to those silenced within the existing hegemony by using them as material for their work. Françoise Vergès, for instance, describes the museum as part of the colonial infrastructure of knowledge that participates in "racial capitalism" by aestheticizing suffering for institutional gain.⁴

Clémentine Deliss also highlights how institutions capitalize on difference by transforming otherness into content, claiming inclusivity without altering their structures.⁵ Since cultural bodies increasingly rely on marginalization and vulnerability to appeal to funders, curators exploit the lived struggles of vulnerable communities to generate compelling narratives, risking reinforcement of exploitative dynamics rather than fostering solidarity. The labor and lived experiences of marginalized individuals, shaped by precarity, poverty, or exclusion, are transformed into material capital, commodified as value that serves to attract funding, institutional validation, or visibility within the art market.

The fascination with marginalized subjects reinforces power dynamics by positioning the curator as a privileged director rather than a participant in the community struggles. Bojana Piškur warns of this slide from solidarity to representation, where

² Arsanios, "Who's Afraid of Ideology?"

³ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012), 13.

⁴ Françoise Vergès, "Decolonizing the Museum," Medium, January 13, 2023, <https://medium.com/@adamsudewo4/a-decolonial-conversation-with-françoise-vergès-decolonising-the-museum-2776a54cd161>.

⁵ Clémentine Deliss, in Victoria Camblin, "Exhibition and Empire: Decolonizing Museums Requires a New 'Metabolic' Architecture, Says Curator Clémentine Deliss" *032c*, August 11, 2021. <https://032c.com/magazine/exhibition-and-empire-curator-clementine-deliss-calls-for-a-decolonial-museum-architecture>.

institutions simulate inclusiveness while maintaining exclusion.⁶ The rise of “new institutionalism”, as Claire Doherty notes, reflects a shift in which institutions present themselves as engaged while still reproducing the structures they claim to challenge.⁷ According to Rasha Salti, curatorial approaches to suffering can inadvertently replicate epistemic violence, as museums aestheticize silence without engaging the structural conditions that produce it.⁸

Art production is also entangled with economic structures, where writing grant applications becomes a central form of labor.⁹ Attempts to remain critical often take the shape of what Andrea Fraser has called the “aesthetic of administration”, navigating between market expectations, institutional demands, and activist aspiration.¹⁰ Project applications become critical works in their own right, emphasizing aesthetics over political engagement. Curatorial practices that foreground political activism are often constrained by institutional policies and funding strategies, resulting in weakened messages and compromised outcomes. Consequently, the curator’s political positioning becomes commodified, a paid representation rather than activism.

Critical practices are tolerated, even encouraged, but only to the extent that they remain harmless, reduced to symbolic gestures, and do not disrupt institutional hierarchies or funding flows. Gerald Raunig describes this condition as a “double-bind”, where institutions invite critique only within the framework of their own authority. This duality raises questions about curatorial autonomy, caught within dynamics shaped by funders and market forces, its involvement with neoliberal agendas, and the neglect of community needs.¹¹

Within art institutions, politics is treated visually rather than structurally. Protest movements and activist practices are appropriated by museums and recontextualized as aesthetic spectacles. Re-enactment-based works transform activism into an aesthetic experience, and political engagement is reduced to representation or performance, distancing audiences from the actual struggles these movements seek to confront. Theorists like Tiqqun argue that the aestheticization of resistance by the spectacle neutralizes dissent: by operating within the spectacle’s representational logic, resistance forfeits its subversive potential and must instead evade visibility in order to remain effective.¹²

⁶ Bojana Piškur, “Possibilities for Emancipation,” in *The Constituent Museum: Constellations of Knowledge, Politics and Mediation*, ed. John Byrne et al. (Amsterdam: Valiz and L’Internationale, 2018), 174–77.

⁷ Claire Doherty, “Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism,” *Engage* 15 (2004): 1–9, https://engage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Engage15_ClaireDoherty_Theinstitutionisdead.pdf.

⁸ Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri, *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine* (MACBA, HKW, MSSA, Sursock Museum, Framer Framed, 2015), n.p.

⁹ Arsanios, “Who’s Afraid of Ideology?”

¹⁰ Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum*, September 2005, 278.

¹¹ Gerald Raunig, “The Double Criticism of Parrhesia: Answering the Question ‘What Is a Progressive (Art) Institution?’” *Re-public Art* 4 (2004), https://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/raunig04_en.htm.

¹² Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, in *This Is Not a Program* (Semiotext(e), 2011), 38–39.

Boris Groys, on the other hand, examines how contemporary political realities have become aestheticized, shifting politics into the domain traditionally occupied by art. The issue, according to Groys, is not that art lacks political capacity, but that today's political sphere is already aestheticized. Contemporary politics has adopted artistic strategies and operates as a machine for producing images and spectacles. The terrorist acts, for example, produce powerful, recognizable visual narratives, bypassing the need for the artists to reinterpret or mediate them. Their actions are performative, self-conscious events, already designed for media circulation. Political violence functions as an aesthetic regime in itself, where the boundaries between representation, performance, and propaganda dissolve.¹³

This problem is also connected with broader concerns about the spectacularizing of violence in cultural institutions. The visual representations of violence, according to Judith Butler, are never neutral; they are mediated through ideological frames that determine which lives are considered worth being grievable and which suffering is worth visibility.¹⁴ Ariella Azoulay, on the other hand, critiques what she terms “imperial image regimes,” produced by museums and other cultural institutions, which often, unintentionally, replicate colonial logics by turning the suffering of the colonized into curated visual narratives. She also emphasizes that when representation becomes a form of domination, individuals must have the political right to refuse being represented.¹⁵ Susan Sontag similarly warns that the constant circulation of images of suffering leads to desensitization, turning atrocity into consumable aesthetics.¹⁶ These critiques are especially relevant for art institutions that engage with trauma, war, and political unrest through representational strategies that risk depoliticizing structural violence.

In this context, instead of a space of resistance and solidarity, the museum risks becoming a site where dissent is curated and aestheticized. The institution risks absorbing critique into its own cultural capital, producing a hollow simulation of engagement. Instead of challenging violence, the institution might become its decorator. Hence, curatorial practice must not only expose but also resist its complicity with regimes of representation. This challenge calls for alternative institutional models rooted in negation of the neoliberal dictates and a different kind of care.

The paradox of immaterial labor and institutional exploitation

All the previously mentioned institutional contradictions are also mirrored in the broader failure of protest movements, particularly where artistic and intellectual labor are centrally present, yet structurally limited in their capacity to effect systemic change.

¹³ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (MIT Press, 2008), 122–26.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009), 63–66.

¹⁵ Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 23–27.

¹⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 105–106.

The global wave of protest movements has revealed limitations in contemporary activism, particularly in the relationship between art, intellectual labor, and political efficacy.¹⁷

Artists and intellectuals were crucial in initiating these movements, yet the failure to achieve systemic change reflects a deeper structural issue. The inefficiency of protest movements lies in their inability to expand the movement beyond the circles of the “general intellect”, a term Maurizio Lazzarato uses to describe immaterial workers whose presence challenges modernist distinctions between invention and work, creativity and routine. The “general intellect” is a collective of immaterial workers defined by cognitive and creative labor, which makes Marxist distinctions between manual and intellectual work.¹⁸

Intellectuals, or the representatives of the “general intellect”, occupy an ambiguous position: although they establish themselves through knowledge and qualifications, and can afford the leisure to imagine alternatives through art, they lack direct political and economic power. As free thinkers, they belong to the most democratic strata, but they also operate as leaders, though not in commanding roles, within authoritarian spheres such as education and expert governance. While closely linked to the ruling class, they often act from the margins, existing apart from both the elite and the working classes.¹⁹ bell hooks names this contradiction a form of “class betrayal”, where rhetorical radicalism is performed without material alignment with working-class struggles.²⁰

This stratum of immaterial workers, curators, artists, intellectuals, academics, and cultural producers generates value through knowledge creation, affective labor, and communication. The prefix “cultural” functions as a neoliberal form of social literacy, a kind of expertise that knows “how to do it”. Cultural literacy describes a bourgeois virtue that distinguishes the “conscious” bourgeois from the consumer of spectacular kitsch. It creates distinctions between “enlightened” citizens and those deemed less educated, reinforcing social hierarchies instead of dismantling them.²¹

Andrea Fraser argues that the art world’s economy of prestige masks material inequalities behind the illusion of autonomy and intellectual credibility.²² But while some view participation in the art world as democratizing or inclusive, closer scrutiny reveals systemic injustice rooted in capital, geography, and elite networks. Access to contemporary art circles often depends on economic, social, and cultural capital status. The use of appropriate language in applications presupposes class belonging.

¹⁷ Önder Özengi and Pelin Tan, “Running Along the Disaster: A Conversation with Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi,” *e-flux journal* 56 (2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60328/running-along-the-disaster-a-conversation-with-franco-bifo-berardi/>.

¹⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Semiotext(e), 2014), 45–47.

¹⁹ Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 45–47.

²⁰ bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (Routledge, 2000), 104–107.

²¹ Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 39–45.

²² Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions”, 278–86.

Social networks are also important, where do you come from, your educational background, your proximity to global art elites, your ability to travel, the conflicts you represent, and your knowledge of current crises.²³

Today, with broader access to education and the widespread opportunity to become an “intellectual”, the divide between material and immaterial labor appears to be dissolving. However, while education appears to democratize intellectual opportunities, it also facilitates the commodification and exploitation of intellectual labor within neoliberal structures, rendering intellectuals increasingly precarious.²⁴ The intellectual work is now frequently appropriated by institutions that monetize cultural production. Isabell Lorey describes this as “precarization”, not merely a condition of labor, but a mode of neoliberal governance that normalizes social and financial insecurity as a way of life.²⁵

Hito Steyerl highlights this transformation of intellectuals into precarity through the term “occupation”, defining it as an activity disconnected from specific outcomes and driven by perpetual engagement.²⁶ Unlike traditional labor, an occupation lacks closure; it is defined only by the passage of time itself. The cultural sector is engaged in occupation through unpaid internships, prolonged educational programs, and projects that favor process over product.²⁷

Marina Vishmidt also critiques this model, which glorifies experimentation while masking exploitation through continuous occupation and the performance of engagement, which becomes its own reward, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-valorization and unpaid visibility.²⁸ According to Pierre Bourdieu, the field of cultural production systematically transforms economic advantage into symbolic distinction.²⁹ Material capital becomes inseparable from the cultural capital that one builds. Institutions exploit this, often failing to pay artists or curators, offering instead symbolic recognition, ‘cultural capital’, as compensation.

Thus, the critical question arises: should the “general intellect” be defined through terms that cannot be reduced to knowledge and qualifications?

The “general intellect” and its embodiment as the “immaterial worker” must assume a more avant-garde position, siding with the oppressed and recognizing themselves as workers, isolated from their own intellectual instrumentalization. The cognitive and creative laborers, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, will remain politically ineffective unless they develop new collective identities and modes

²³ Arsanios, “Who’s Afraid of Ideology?”

²⁴ Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 45–47.

²⁵ Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Verso, 2015), 10–15.

²⁶ Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 50.

²⁷ Hito Steyerl, “Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life,” *e-flux journal* 30 (2011), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/30/68140/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life/>.

²⁸ Marina Vishmidt, “Value at Risk: From Political Economy to Aesthetic Abstraction,” in *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, ed. Marina Vishmidt (Mute Books, 2018), 109–122.

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984), 194.

of organization.³⁰ Finally, it's time for curators and artists to stop lecturing from their pulpits and learn to step into someone else's shoes.³¹ As Nikita Dhawan will stress, such a shift must be grounded in a decolonial ethics of accountability, where knowledge production is no longer separated from histories of privilege, erasure, and geopolitical inequality.³²

To resist systemic precarization, curatorial practice must abandon its reliance on cultural capital, authoritative lecturing, and visibility. Instead, it should align itself with practices of affiliation with the less privileged and embrace collective accountability, grounded not in success but in failure.

Curating futures: Queer sociality, structural care, and institutional ethics

In advocating such an approach, Jacques Rancière's concept of equality becomes crucial. He insists on the fundamental "equality of intelligence" among all subjects, rejecting hierarchies between "experts" and "non-experts," artists and audiences, curators and communities. It is equality freed from knowledge hierarchies, an equality of intelligence itself. This equality is not based on uniformity or sameness, but on the recognition that everyone has the capacity to participate meaningfully in social, cultural, and political life.

As Rancière argues, emancipation cannot be expected from art forms that presuppose viewer passivity or aim to make viewers "active" through methods borrowed from advertising. Art practice is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of imposed messages, targets audiences, and when it stops trying to emancipate us.³³

For art to transform into life, it must deny its autonomy, privileged position, and participative projects where the curator or artist-as-expert designs the set, whether gallery or public space. Curators must renounce their authoritative stance; they need to step down from their position of expertise and engage as equal participants in shared social realities. This transformation requires dismantling art's privileged autonomy, breaking boundaries between art and life, and embedding theory and practice directly in community struggles.³⁴ As Miwon Kwon has emphasized, such a shift involves moving from "art in the community" to "art with the community," which demands a politics of accountability, not just access.³⁵

³⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin Press, 2004), 66–72.

³¹ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (Verso Books, 2013), 60.

³² Nikita Dhawan, "Decolonizing Epistemologies: The Subaltern and the Critique of Representation," in *Decolonizing Enlightenment: Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World*, ed. Nikita Dhawan et al. (Barbara Budrich, 2014), 265–78.

³³ Jacques Rancière, Fulvia Carnevale, and John Kelsey, "Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Artforum* (March 2007), <https://www.artforum.com/features/fulvia-carnevale-and-john-kelsey-175243/>.

³⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2009), 20–23.

³⁵ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (MIT Press, 2002), 133–137.

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe also argues:

Today, artists cannot pretend anymore to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They can still play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony. In fact, this has always been their role, and it is only the modernist illusion of the privileged position of the artist that has made us believe otherwise. This does not mean that they could alone realize the transformations needed for the establishment of a new hegemony. A radical democratic politics calls for the articulation of different levels of struggles to create a chain of equivalence among them.³⁶

In its most radical forms, art cannot merely represent social critique, but it must transform the coordinates of art itself. Art is imprisoned by its conventional identity. If we ask: how can art contribute to hegemonic struggle, or how can it give voice to the silenced and oppressed, we are already subordinated to a hegemonic idea of what art is and what it does. Ideology lies in the question, not the answer.

By shifting its focus away from questions that presuppose autonomy and expertise in spaces that operate as passive institutions of authority, museums and galleries should become platforms shaped by community voices and shared experience. Curators and artists can no longer merely represent marginalized groups. Rather than offering care from a position of authority, they must relinquish that role, entering collaborative practices rooted in recognition of diverse knowledge and intelligence. This requires merging directly with community struggles and forming genuine partnerships grounded in mutuality and equal exchange. Meaningful solidarity, according to Patricia Hill Collins, must be built on accountability to structural difference, not as abstract empathy, but sustained, coalitional labor.³⁷ Françoise Vergès has described this shift as a move from “saviorist care” to politicized “decolonial care”, which foregrounds historical injustice and collective resistance rather than charity.³⁸

Building on the call for curatorial solidarity and institutional transformation, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz offers a visionary model for rethinking the museum through his concept of “queer futurity”. This concept proposes an alternative understanding of sociality and institutional engagement, one that transcends the constraints of the present, especially the norms imposed by heteropatriarchal systems, and moves toward an inclusive “then and there”. The queer futurity foregrounds minority communities excluded from dominant historical narratives, social visibility, and institutional participation. According to Muñoz, these marginalized groups

³⁶ Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Context, and Methods* 1, no. 2 (2007).

³⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2000), 224–29.

³⁸ Françoise Vergès, *A Programme of Absolute Disorder: Decolonizing the Museum* (La Fabrique, 2024), 12–15.

activate aesthetic and cultural strategies not merely as artistic expression but as tools for survival, resilience, and community building.³⁹

Politicization, as understood by Muñoz, departs from political representation or performative activism. It involves embracing the lived realities of marginalized and minoritized communities and integrating those experiences into the very operations of the institution. Museum leadership and curatorial staff must practice solidarity with those traditionally excluded or misrepresented by dominant culture. This means that curatorial decisions must reflect long-term engagement with LGBTQ+ rights, racial and migrant justice, disability rights, gender equity, and other marginalized groups, not as temporary projects or token gestures but as ongoing, institutionalized commitments.⁴⁰

In practice, a museum informed by Muñoz's queer futurity would adopt a more fluid, horizontal structure, emphasizing collaboration and dialogue over hierarchy. Exhibitions would not just represent marginalized voices but be co-produced with communities, prioritizing their agency, knowledge, and lived experiences. Curators would serve less as gatekeepers and more as facilitators who encourage co-creation with diverse groups.⁴¹ The museum would question hierarchies and exclusions not only in exhibition content but also curatorial methods, emphasizing horizontality and participatory practices that challenge traditional authority. Institutions, as Audre Lorde reminds us, must risk rethinking their own foundational premises, not just redistribute space.⁴² Rather than serve as repositories for prestigious objects or cultural goods, museums would act as responsive social spaces for experimentation and inclusive community-building. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's idea of "the undercommons" goes even further by envisioning not reform but fugitivity, spaces of refusal within institutions where community and experimentation flourish beyond managerial logics.⁴³

This concept also applies to museum collections and exhibitions. Museums often privilege canonical and historically validated forms of cultural production, marginalizing art and practitioners whose narratives or identities resist categorization or commodification. In that sense, T. J. Demos advocates for institutions that support "speculative aesthetics", allowing for future-oriented narratives rooted in Indigenous, queer, and anti-capitalist world-making.⁴⁴ In line with this, Muñoz's vision also resonates with contemporary calls for decolonizing museum practices, challenging institutional structures rooted in colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist histories. A museum informed by the queer art of failure would embrace the experiences and aesthetics

³⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 1–18.

⁴⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 19–32.

⁴¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 19–32.

⁴² Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 110–113.

⁴³ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 10–22.

⁴⁴ T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Sternberg Press, 2017), 45–50.

of groups previously marginalized or erased by conventional histories and dominant narratives.⁴⁵

The conceptualization of failure offers a critical lens through which museums can also reevaluate their educational programs. Institutional education often reinforces standards of productivity, cultural literacy, and legitimacy, marginalizing alternative forms of knowledge, learning, and exchange. In contrast, the queer art of failure proposes educational approaches that are less outcomes-oriented and more flexible, reflective, and critical toward the institution itself, seeing uncertainty and experimentation as valuable outcomes. A queer institution embraces discomfort, uncertainty, and critical reflection as core to its identity.⁴⁶

In this queer vision, curating becomes a practice of refusal of fixed value, and institutional authority. Failure, here, is not defeat but a queer disobedience: a strategy of unsettling and reimagining. As Muñoz remind us, queer failure holds radical potential, not as absence, but as a generative space for alternative modes of life, care, and solidarity.⁴⁷ Letting go of autonomy and visibility, curatorial work is reoriented toward collective care, shared responsibility, and the ethics of becoming, always unfinished, always relational.

Failure as method: Rethinking museum practices beyond capitalist ideals of success

Jack Halberstam, who draws upon Muñoz's concept in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, critiques how capitalism and heteropatriarchy impose normative and false ideals of happiness and success. Hence, instead of interpreting failure negatively, as the absence of achievement, he suggests viewing it as a counter-narrative, as an act of rebellion against the imposed norm.⁴⁸ Within cultural institutions traditionally defined by capitalist logic, hierarchy, and authority, this perspective demands a rejection of well-being based on purchasing power and a resistance to the logic of accumulation, productivity, value, possessions, novelty, and pressure to maintain income and secure sponsorships.

Despite appearing progressive, museums often reproduce structural inequalities. Their success is measured through metrics, visitor numbers, blockbuster exhibitions, funding, and acquisitions that mirror the capitalist ideal towards growth and accumulation. This success-driven model creates precarious environments for cultural workers, curators, and artists, who become entangled in competition, forced to conform to institutional expectations, and marginalized if they fail to produce measurable outcomes or prestige. Museums stage high-profile exhibitions to attract sponsorship while relying on underpaid or unpaid labor.⁴⁹ All these practices reinforce the exploitative hierarchy that Halberstam's notion of failure seeks to dismantle.

⁴⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 19–31.

⁴⁶ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 87–122.

⁴⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 172–175.

⁴⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 87–122.

⁴⁹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 87–122.

In the same line of thought, Pablo Martínez calls for a reorientation of museum practice toward a politics of care that begins internally. Museums must genuinely “care for those who care”, including curators, administrative and technical staff, educators, artists, and all cultural workers. The internal politics of care directly confronts exploitative labor conditions such as precarious contracts, unpaid internships, rigid hierarchies, and institutional burnout. By embedding responsible empathy into their daily operations, museums can model social solidarity through humane working conditions and fair compensation, thereby aligning their internal ethics with their external commitments.⁵⁰ “The museum will have to provide care like a hospital, while still being critical”, as Manuel Borja-Villel will declare.⁵¹ His vision correlates with Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s concept of “crip care collectivity,” where care is not an institutional obligation but a collective, interdependent resistance to structural ableism.⁵²

A museum grounded in the queer art of failure would also reject elitism and fame-driven programming. It would refuse participation in the global race for “mega-star” artists, commercial pressures from blockbuster shows, and elitist cultural tourism, which often overshadow local relevance and community engagement. The museum embracing Muñoz’s queer sociality would cultivate programs responsive to local social concerns rather than spectacle-driven international trends. It would support the local population without being provincial, refusing to submit to the race for rosters of famous artists and low-paid workers.⁵³ The queer curating, as Catherine Lord claims, refuses this alignment with prestige economies by deliberately foregrounding marginal and unruly art histories.⁵⁴

In its queer ideal, the museum must also examine its ethical frameworks, funding models, and programmatic choices. Ivana Bago and Antonija Majaca also discuss this resistance to institutional expectations through their critique of the bureaucratic and PR-driven demands for funding cultural policies. They argue that curatorial practice should not focus on clear messages or broad audience outreach, goals aligned with grant logic, and measurable impact. Instead, they describe curating as a classroom of difficult questions, empowering precisely because it is unquantifiable, transformative in ways that cannot be reported or counted.⁵⁵ By redefining success outside economic imperatives, museums could cultivate environments where creative, intellectual, and social labor is equitably valued.

⁵⁰ Pablo Martínez, “Fail Better – Notes for a Museum Yet-to-Come,” CIMAM News, June 10, 2020, republished from Ctxt Contexto y Acción, May 28, 2020, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://cimam.org/news-archive/fail-better-notes-museum-yet-come/>.

⁵¹ Martínez, “Fail Better – Notes.”

⁵² Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 31–38.

⁵³ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 87–122.

⁵⁴ Catherine Lord, “Their Memory is Playing Tricks on Her,” in *Art and Queer Culture*, ed. Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer (Phaidon, 2013), 224–33.

⁵⁵ Ivana Bago and Antonia Majča, “Exposures: Reflections on a Curatorial Strategy,” in *Exposure: Verletzlichkeit und das Politische in Zeiten radikaler Ungewissheit*, ed. Christine Hentschel and Susanne Krasmann (Transcript Verlag, 2020), 59–76.

Adopting the queer art of failure would compel museums to rethink relationships with funders and stakeholders who prioritize safe, proven, and uncontroversial projects. Embracing failure as a curatorial practice involves risk: honesty about its own limitations and openness about projects that may not meet traditional success metrics. In doing so, museums might become genuine agents of critique, rather than symbolic institutions offering superficial gestures toward diversity or inclusion.

Few people today remember that renowned architect and theorist Oskar Hansen participated in the 1966 competition to design the building for the Museum of Contemporary Art – Skopje. Hansen's radical proposal envisioned a museum as a dynamic, flexible entity, capable of continually adjusting to the evolving and unpredictable trajectories of art and society.⁵⁶ Rather than establishing a static architectural monument, Hansen imagined adaptable museum spaces that could literally transform in response to changing artistic needs and broader socio-political conditions.

His idea of a transformable museum space was based on hexagonal elements mounted on hydraulic lifts, allowing the galleries to fold and unfold like an umbrella, sinking underground when not in active use. Such an institution would literally rise to visibility or withdraw from it, depending on whether art had new contributions to offer or solutions to propose in contemporary society.⁵⁷

Hansen's approach challenges traditional ideas of permanence, stability, and monumentality that typically define museums. Instead, he envisioned an architectural structure grounded in flexibility, responsiveness, and radical adaptability, qualities urgently needed in times of social upheaval.

His design questions the museum's function as a static container of authoritative narratives, urging institutions to consider whether their roles remain relevant or ethically defensible in contexts of conflict, political instability, or societal trauma. Beatriz Colomina notes that modern architecture often conceals vulnerability beneath sleek surfaces.⁵⁸ By contrast, Hansen's design performs vulnerability; it bends, hides, and rests when needed.

This visionary model remains strikingly relevant today, as we face global crises such as wars in Ukraine and Palestine, systemic inequality, displacement, and ecological collapse. It calls for museums to reconsider their visibility and authority, transforming them from symbolic representations of culture into protective and responsive institutions.

Hansen's proposal embraces strategic invisibility when necessary, transforming the museum into a space of shelter and care. His underground orientation marks a decisive break from dominant museum models that emphasize visibility, market presence, and perpetual audience expansion. The museum would reject the imperative to produce spectacle, novelty, or marketable exhibitions. Rather than pursuing

⁵⁶ Aleksandra Kędziołek and Łukasz Ronduda, eds., *Oskar Hansen – Opening Modernism: On Open Form Architecture, Art, and Didactics* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2014), 78.

⁵⁷ Kędziołek and Ronduda, *Oskar Hansen – Opening Modernism*, 78.

⁵⁸ Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 14–19.

institutional visibility or prestige, this model reshapes both its architecture and mission to address urgent social needs. Operating as a dynamic, adaptive platform, the museum would even retreat underground, metaphorically or literally, dedicated to supporting communities most impacted by violence, exclusion, or political instability. Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller argue in their work on transnational museology that museums must become both “porous and grounded”, rooted in local realities while remaining accountable to global histories of violence and inequality.⁵⁹

At certain times, strategic withdrawal or silence can function as a powerful political and ethical response. The strategic museum withdrawal, as referred to in Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, can become an ethical refusal of visibility in systems that exploit transparency for control.⁶⁰

Hansen’s model also reimagines the role of the curator. Implementing Hansen’s concept today calls for curatorial humility: an acknowledgment that the museum does not always need to speak, exhibit, or act publicly, especially when such gestures offer no meaningful engagement or solution. As Felix Enslinn notes, “there may be silent artists, but there are no silent curators”, and yet today’s curating requires more than speech. It demands resonance: a space in which listening becomes a curatorial act.⁶¹ In the spirit of Hansen’s museum, which folds underground when it has nothing urgent to say, the curator’s task may be to create conditions in which others – audiences, workers, the excluded – can speak for themselves. If the curator “fails” from his authoritative position, and if the community begins to transform the curator more than the curator transforms the audience, that reversal would mark a significant institutional shift.

Conclusion:

curating otherwise – refusal, withdrawal, and the ethics of care

To speak about failure is to speak against the current logics that shape the cultural institution: logics of productivity, visibility, accumulation, and prestige. Throughout this text, failure has not been treated as a passive state or an absence, but as a conscious and strategic position. A curatorial position that refuses to perform success, that resists co-optation, and that opens space for another way of doing, knowing, and relating.

This is not a romantic or nihilistic failure. It is a form of resistance: against the neoliberal conditions that reduce curatorial work to competition; against institutions that aestheticize activism while reproducing hierarchy; against the symbolic economies that reward proximity to power. Failure becomes a tool to step aside from the spectacle, to slow down, to withdraw when necessary, and to begin again from a different place.

⁵⁹ Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society,” *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1002–1039.

⁶⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–94.

⁶¹ Felix Enslinn, “Curating and the Role of the Curator: An Essay in the Political Aesthetics of Exhibition Practice,” in *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art*, ed. Maria Lind (Sternberg Press, 2012), 183–90.

The museum, in this sense, must also fail. It must fail to meet the expectations placed upon it by sponsors, metrics, nationalist narratives, and market logic. It must instead begin to function as a shelter, as Oskar Hansen imagined – not a space of display, but of support. Not a stage, but a structure that breathes, collapses, and re-emerges. A space that listens.

Queer and decolonial thinking, as explored by Muñoz, Halberstam, and others, reminds us that institutions do not change solely through inclusion. They change when they question their foundations: when they shift from speaking about care to practicing it; when they refuse authority and embrace solidarity, when they center lived experience over policy language. This is not a call to abandon the institution, but to remain within it with discomfort, to insist that another way is possible.

To curate from failure is to curate with humility, with others, without guarantees. It is to refuse the polished outcome in favor of a shared process. It is to recognize that not all visibility is liberation, and that sometimes silence, withdrawal, or slowness may be the most radical gesture.

In this failure, something else becomes possible.

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