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On Curatorial Responsibility: The Ethics of Continuity

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Before an artwork reaches the wall of a museum, appears in an exhibition catalogue, enters an archive, is discussed in a seminar, or finds its place within art-historical writing, it has already passed through a chain of relationships whose significance is so easily overlooked that they often disappear from view. Between artist and studio, gallery and public, curator and institution, collector and archive, publisher and scholar, an artwork acquires the conditions that make its future possible. None of these relationships, considered alone, guarantees survival. Taken together, however, they allow something contingent to assume the appearance of permanence. Looking back, it becomes tempting to imagine that certain works endured because their historical importance was somehow self-evident. More often, what endured were the cultural structures that allowed those works to remain visible, interpretable, and available for future encounters.¹

That suspicion, rather than an abstract theoretical puzzle, lies behind the questions pursued here. Continuum: Artist Relief for Iran began as a practical response to an immediate curatorial concern: what happens when the ordinary mechanisms through which artistic practice circulates begin to weaken? At first, the question seemed inseparable from one initiative, one historical moment, and one community of artists. It did not stay there for long. The longer I sat with it, the more familiar the problem became. Across cultures and periods, war, censorship, displacement, economic instability, and institutional collapse have repeatedly interrupted the networks through which artworks move beyond the circumstances of their making. Artists disappear from history not only because works are destroyed; they also disappear when the relationships capable of carrying those works into the future (or perhaps even the present) have begun, quietly and unevenly, to dissolve.²

That form of disappearance is slower than destruction. Destruction is dramatic; this other form of loss is quieter. For that reason it often attracts less attention. A work may survive materially while losing the conditions that once made it visible. It can remain physically intact yet slip beyond discussion, scholarship, collecting, conservation, or exhibition until its historical presence begins to recede almost imperceptibly. The question, then, is not simply whether art survives, but how it continues to move through time after the structures that once sustained it have begun to fray. Framed in those terms, attention shifts away from the artwork understood as an isolated object and towards the network of cultural relationships through which that object acquires a historical life.

Contemporary curatorial theory has already taught us to be sceptical of exhibitionary neutrality. Display produces visibility, authority, participation, and exclusion; it never merely presents what was already there.³ Yet visibility and continuity are not interchangeable. An artwork may command considerable attention within its own historical moment and still prove remarkably fragile over time. Asking who is represented remains an essential curatorial question, but it is not the only one. Equally important is asking what enables artistic practices to remain available for encounter once the circumstances of their first appearance have passed. This does not make exhibition secondary; rather, it asks us to see the exhibition as one moment within a longer chain of mediation, a chain that begins before the work enters public view and continues long after the walls, or any vehicle for that matter, come down. It is there, in the space between visibility and historical endurance, that curatorial responsibility begins to assume a different ethical character.

Continuity, in the sense proposed here, has little to do with the comforting fiction and clichéd fantasy of an unbroken tradition. Few if any cultural histories possess that kind of coherence. More often, continuity is assembled and reassembled through countless acts of renewal: exhibition, publication, interpretation, conservation, collecting, translation, teaching, criticism, friendship, and memory. Objects may persist while those relationships disappear; fragile works, conversely, may acquire long historical lives because the conversations around them continue. Continuity, then, is neither an inherent quality of the artwork nor a promise made by history itself. It is a condition of cultural transmission, one that depends upon sustained human labour and can, like any other condition, be strengthened, neglected, interrupted, or repaired.⁴

I. Culture, Memory, and Historical Continuity

If continuity depends upon renewed relationships rather than the uninterrupted survival of objects, culture begins to appear differently. It is no longer simply the expression of a society or the record of a historical moment. It becomes one of the means through which history remains available long after those who lived it have disappeared. The distinction is easily blurred because the past and history are often treated as if they were the same. Surely, they are not. The past is what has occurred. History is what remains capable of being encountered, interpreted, and argued over. Culture occupies the uncertain space between them.

A manuscript, a ruined building, a ceremonial song, a photograph, a painting: none preserves the past intact. No object possesses that privilege. What such things preserve is the possibility of renewed encounter, the chance that later generations might enter into relation with people they will never meet and experiences they did not live.⁵ In that case, one can argue that art belongs to this larger process not because it illustrates history, but because it gives history another life. It allows the past to remain active—not as something fixed and settled, but as something capable of being returned to, questioned, and understood differently with each generation.



The point becomes clearer when approached from the opposite direction. Instead of asking how artworks enter history, it may be more revealing to ask why so many fall out of it. The answer cannot simply be artistic quality, comforting though that explanation may be. History is full of remarkable works that remained unknown for decades, sometimes for generations, before finding their place within cultural consciousness; it is equally populated by artists whose historical presence depended as much upon publishers, collectors, archives, critics, scholars, galleries, and institutions as upon the works themselves.⁶ The historical life of art has never belonged exclusively to the object. It emerges through the continuing relations that allow the object to circulate, to be revisited, to acquire new meanings, and, above all, to remain available for future encounters.

For that reason, disappearance rarely begins with catastrophe. More often it arrives through quieter, almost administrative forms of neglect. A studio closes before its contents are documented. A gallery disappears. An archive survives but remains uncatalogued. A body of photographs enters private hands and slips from public view. A manuscript is preserved but never published. None of these events appears catastrophic in isolation, yet history is altered as much by accumulation as by rupture.⁷ Works survive; their historical lives become increasingly difficult to recover.

Survival and continuity, then, should not be treated as interchangeable terms. Survival refers to the continued existence of an artwork. Continuity describes something less visible but more decisive: the continued existence of the cultural relationships through which that artwork remains historically encounterable. A materially fragile work may continue to shape artistic discourse because it remains the subject of scholarship, exhibition, conservation, collecting, or renewed interpretation. Another, perfectly preserved, may gradually disappear from historical consciousness because the relationships capable of sustaining its historical life have quietly dissolved. Historical significance cannot be measured by the endurance of objects alone. They require communities of interpretation that continually make them legible.

To think about culture in these terms is to move away from the image of culture as a collection of achievements and toward something closer to an ecology of relations. Artworks do not travel through history independently. They move through overlapping communities of artists, educators, publishers, conservators, collectors, museums, archives, galleries, critics, and audiences, each participating differently in the long process through which artistic practices remain available to be encountered, debated, misread, reinterpreted, and carried forward.⁸ No institution can accomplish this alone, nor can any single profession claim responsibility for cultural continuity. Culture persists because these relationships overlap, fail, are repaired, and are renewed by people whose labour is often less visible than the works it helps preserve.

Periods of instability expose this ecology with particular clarity. Political upheaval, censorship, forced migration, economic crisis, or war do not simply interrupt artistic production in the way they are often imagined to do. Artists continue to work,



sometimes with astonishing stubbornness, and some of the most consequential cultural achievements have emerged under precisely such conditions. What becomes vulnerable are the relationships through which those achievements travel beyond the circumstances of their making. The interruption is not only creative or political. It is cultural, affecting the fragile processes through which artistic production circulates, gathers interpretation, and acquires a historical life.⁹

Once this is recognised, the ethical horizon of curatorial practice shifts. The curator cannot prevent historical rupture, nor preserve culture single-handedly; for any curator to imagine otherwise would mistake the limits of the profession. Yet curatorial practice occupies a peculiar position within the ecology of transmission because it moves between artists and institutions, archives and publics, local histories and wider conversations, contemporary production and future scholarship.¹⁰ Its responsibility is therefore neither to determine what history will remember nor to guarantee continuity outright. It is more modest and quieter, though perhaps no less demanding: to help sustain the conditions under which continuity remains possible.

II. Beyond Representation: Curatorial Responsibility and the Politics of Seeing

If culture survives through the relationships that carry it across time, another question follows almost immediately, though it is less often asked: through what habits of perception do those relationships become visible in the first place? Preservation is never simply preservation. To preserve is to select, to emphasise, and to shape the conditions under which future encounters become possible. We never encounter history directly. We approach it through ways of seeing that have themselves been historically formed.¹¹

Museums, exhibitions, catalogues, archives, and collections participate in this process because they organise the conditions through which culture becomes intelligible. An exhibition does not merely gather objects in a shared space; it proposes relations between them. A catalogue does not merely document artworks; it teaches a reader which questions may be asked of them.¹² Even careful curatorial decisions take place within larger structures of knowledge that shape not only what audiences encounter, but what those audiences believe they are encountering. Representation, for that reason, cannot be reduced to the question of who has been included or excluded. It also concerns the interpretive frameworks through which artistic production comes to acquire meaning.

These questions become especially acute when art crosses cultural boundaries. Works produced within one historical and social context inevitably enter institutions shaped by different intellectual traditions, different audiences, and different expectations of what art ought to communicate. Under such conditions, artworks are often asked to confirm narratives that existed before the encounter began. Translation, in the broadest sense, becomes unavoidable and yet, translation is never innocent. Faced with unfamiliar practices, institutions often reach instinctively for all-too-familiar categories. Complexity is compressed into recognisable narratives and what



initially appears to be an act of understanding can, almost imperceptibly, become an act of reduction.

The history of Western engagement with the Middle East makes this difficulty particularly visible. Edward Said's account of Orientalism was not simply a critique of inaccurate images or cultural stereotypes. It described a structure of knowledge through which the 'Orient' became available for Western interpretation before any individual work, text, or person was encountered.¹³ Its effects extended well beyond literature and politics. Museums, scholarship, collecting practices, photography, and the visual arts all participated, in different ways, in producing habits of perception that appeared natural precisely because their histories had been forgotten.¹⁴

Those habits continue to shape the reception of contemporary art. Particularly when artists work from places persistently associated with conflict, political instability, religion, gender, or cultural difference. The expectation is often subtle. Artists are not always explicitly asked to perform crisis, resistance, identity, or national allegory, yet the interpretive field is already arranged in such a way that these meanings appear most legible.¹⁵ The result is not simply misinterpretation. It is a narrowing of attention. Artworks risk being approached less as aesthetic and intellectual propositions than as evidence in support of stories already imagined in advance.

This is where the ethical dimension of curating becomes difficult to ignore. Representation alone cannot resolve the problem if the frameworks through which representation is understood remain unchanged.¹⁶ Inclusion, important though it is, may even reinforce inherited modes of seeing when it merely supplies new material for old narratives. The curator's responsibility is therefore not only to broaden visibility, but to make the act of looking less innocent: to create conditions in which viewers become conscious of the assumptions they bring to the encounter, and in which artworks are allowed to exceed the explanatory burdens placed upon them.

Curatorial activism, understood in this register, is not reducible to advocacy or demographic correction, however necessary those forms of work may be. At its most intellectually serious, it intervenes in the production of knowledge itself: in classifications, juxtapositions, omissions, wall texts, catalogues, invitations, translations, and the small institutional decisions through which an artwork's meaning is either opened or contained.¹⁷ Such interventions need not announce themselves as radical. Sometimes they consist simply in refusing a familiar story, in withholding the satisfaction of easy recognition, or in allowing a practice to inhabit a richer historical and cultural field than the one to which it has too quickly been assigned.

Two responsibilities have therefore emerged, and neither can be separated from the other. Continuity without critical interpretation risks preserving inherited misunderstandings. Interpretation without continuity risks losing the very conditions that make interpretation possible. The ethical task of curatorial practice lies in holding these obligations together, recognising that the historical life of art depends as much upon how it continues to be understood as upon whether it continues to endure.



III. Continuum and the Ethics of Curatorial Stewardship

The questions developed thus far are not confined to any single geography, historical period, or artistic tradition. They belong to the broader conditions through which culture either continues across time or gradually falls away from it. Yet arguments of this kind risk becoming detached from the realities that first produced them if they remain exclusively theoretical. Curatorial work is carried out not only in museums or books, but in conversations with artists, in studios, archives, institutions, and fragile communities of trust where continuity is experienced before it is theorised. *Continuum: Artist Relief for Iran* emerged from precisely such a context. It is offered here not as the resolution of these questions, but as one attempt to respond to them in practice.

The initiative began from the recognition that the interruption of artistic life is rarely confined to the making of artworks. Artists continue to work under conditions that might appear almost impossible from the outside; history repeatedly demonstrates as much. What becomes vulnerable are the structures through which their work is encountered beyond its immediate context. Exhibitions become harder to realise. Publications are postponed indefinitely or abandoned altogether. Archives remain incomplete. International dialogue narrows. Emerging artists, whose practices depend most heavily upon sustained visibility and repeated professional encounter, often bear these consequences first. None of these interruptions appears decisive in isolation. Together, however, they reshape the conditions through which an artistic practice becomes historically legible.

Continuum: Artist Relief for Iran does not seek to construct a new history of contemporary Iranian art, nor does it presume to speak on behalf of a generation of artists. Its ambitions are deliberately more restrained but also more durable. It seeks to help preserve the conditions under which future histories may still be written. By creating opportunities for artworks to circulate beyond their immediate context, by documenting practices that might otherwise remain insufficiently recorded, and by bringing emerging artists into relation with publics they might not otherwise reach, the initiative participates, however modestly, in the cultural relationships through which artistic practices acquire a historical life. Such work is small in scale when measured against the magnitude of historical rupture, but cultural continuity has often depended upon modest acts whose significance becomes legible only later.¹⁸

This objective also requires resisting a tendency that has shaped the international reception of Iranian art for decades. Too often, artistic production from Iran is approached through frameworks that privilege geopolitical context over aesthetic inquiry, reducing complex practices to illustrations of national crisis or political circumstance.¹⁹ Such readings do more than simplify individual works. They narrow the range of questions viewers permit themselves to ask, until artists are made to appear first as representatives of a place and only afterwards as artists in their own right. In practice, this means resisting the temptation to make every artwork answer the crisis that surrounds it.



The curatorial position adopted by Continuum: Artist Relief for Iran begins elsewhere. It does not deny history, nor does it pretend that artistic production can be detached from social and political life. Rather, it refuses to allow those conditions to become the only horizon through which artworks are understood. The artists brought together through this initiative are not united by style, medium, or ideology. They are connected by a shared participation in the contemporary cultural life of Iran, and by a common dependence upon the relationships through which their work may continue to circulate, be interpreted, and enter broader art-historical conversations.

Seen from this perspective, curating begins to resemble stewardship more than selection. Stewardship is not a matter of protecting fixed cultural identities or preserving objects for their own sake, rather, it is the sustained cultivation of relations through which culture remains intellectually alive: between artists and audiences, artworks and scholarship, local histories and international discourse, present acts of creation and the historical futures toward which they move. The curator cannot decide which artists history will ultimately remember nor can curatorial practice shield culture from rupture. What it can do is help ensure that the conditions necessary for future encounter are not unnecessarily diminished.

It is here that the ethical argument of this essay ultimately comes to rest. Curatorial responsibility extends beyond the exhibition, beyond the institution, and beyond the artwork understood as an isolated object. It lies in recognising that culture survives not only because artists continue to create, but because others continue the quieter, less celebrated work of carrying artistic practices forward. Continuity is made, renewed, interrupted, and sometimes repaired through innumerable acts of cultural labour, most of which leave no visible trace. Curating is one form of that labour. At its most responsible, it is neither the arrangement of objects nor the administration of collections, but a commitment to sustaining the fragile conditions through which culture remains capable of meeting the future. Of continuing.²⁰

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Notes

1. Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 25–18, (2011; Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 15–3, (1986.
2. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 38–26, (1995; Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 47–42.
3. Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (London: Thames & Hudson, (2018 29–14; Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 35–21, (2012; Irit Rogoff, "Turning," *e-flux journal*, no. 0 (November 8–1, (2008.
4. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 71–62; Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 24–7 : (1989, esp. 15–8.
5. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed., trans., and introd. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 52–37, (1992; Nora, "Between Memory and History," 22–19.
6. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 28–12; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 53–48.
7. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 30–26. Trouillot's account is especially useful here for understanding historical silence not as a single event but as something produced at several moments in the making of history.
8. O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 11–101; Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 74–12.
9. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 91–84; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 74–68.
10. O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 103–89; Rogoff, "Turning," 7–4; Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*, 55–41.
11. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 34–7, (1972; Rogoff, "Turning," 5–2.
12. O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 71–56.
13. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 28–1, (1978.
14. Said, *Orientalism*, 56–31; Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 63–45.
15. Said, *Orientalism*, 73–54. For the reception of contemporary Iranian art in relation to history, society, and revolution, see Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, eds., *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 18–1, (2002; Hamid Keshmirshakan, *Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives* (London: Saqi Books, 39–17, (2013.
16. Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*, 82–61.
17. O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 32–118; Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*, 118–95; Rogoff, "Turning," 8–5.
18. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 108–94; O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 56–141.
19. Said, *Orientalism*, 25–201; Balaghi and Gumpert, *Picturing Iran*, 76–55; Keshmirshakan, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 104–82.
20. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 25–111; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 52–139; O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 80–167.