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Curating the Field: Art, Crisis, and Cultural Intervention

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Continuum: Artist Relief for Iran

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This text should not be understood as a statement that seeks to provide a unified account of each of the works or artists brought together in Continuum. The plurality and heterogeneity of the project's contributions resist any comprehensive, work-by-work narrative of this kind. What follows, instead, is an account of the rationale and curatorial logic that underpins the project as a whole. At the outset, it is useful to distinguish between two broad conceptions of curating: a Weak and a Strong conception. In its Weak sense, curating may be understood primarily as the selection, assembly, and organisation of artworks for presentation to an audience. The Strong conception, by contrast, does not confine curating to these operations. It understands curating as an expanded practice concerned with the construction of the conditions of encounter; the production, mediation, and sustained articulation of meaning; curatorial intervention; the establishment of relations among artworks; and the structuring of the conditions under which artworks become available to perception, interpretation, and thought.

At first glance, Continuum: Artist Relief for Iran might appear to fall within a Weak conception of curating: a project centred primarily on the assembly of artworks for sale. Such a reading, however, is insufficient—not simply because I reject the reduction of curating to this weak conception, but because the project's curatorial proposition emerges directly from its own meaning and internal logic. The fundamentally curatorial character of Continuum cannot therefore be reduced to the mere gathering of artworks for the purposes of sale.

To elaborate this claim, I would first propose that artists and artworks be understood not as discrete, self-contained units, but as agents situated within the field of cultural production and participating in the relations that structure it. From this perspective, the artist and the artwork cannot be considered independently of the social, institutional, economic, and symbolic relations through which their positions and forms of value are produced. I would then argue that the question of the art market cannot be reduced to an economic question alone. The continued existence and viability of the market under the present conditions constitute a cultural necessity, insofar as the market forms part of the broader field of cultural production.

Finally, I will demonstrate that, while engaging with the art market, Continuum also seeks to constitute itself as a curatorial intervention within the field: one that does not merely facilitate the circulation of artworks, but intervenes in the relations through which artists, artworks, institutions, markets, and forms of value are positioned in relation to one another.

Within Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of the Field of Cultural Production, the value of an artwork or the legitimacy of an artist does not derive solely from the work’s intrinsic characteristics or aesthetic qualities. Rather, it is constituted socially and within a network of institutional and cultural relations. What Bourdieu refers to as the “production of belief” is the outcome of the interactions among the various agents who constitute the field of art: artists, curators, galleries, museums, critics, and collectors, as well as audiences and other art institutions.

Bourdieu emphasises that this symbolic capital operates precisely through the collective disavowal of overt economic interests: any agent who openly makes economic profit the primary objective of their practice risks undermining their legitimacy within the field (Bourdieu & Nice, 1980). This point is decisive for the position of the present project. What distinguishes Continuum from an event organised merely for the purpose of sale is precisely its commitment to the logic of legitimation and artistic continuity—not to sales as an end in themselves, nor to the pursuit of individual economic profit. The galleries and individuals participating in this project have, at different positions within the field of art, waived their usual commissions. In this project, sales do not constitute the ultimate end, but rather a means of securing the material conditions necessary for the continuation of the artists’ practices. For this reason, economic exchange, although placed in the service of a non-economic end, remains an integral and inseparable component of this intervention.

War and large-scale political and social crises do not merely disrupt the economy of art; they can also undermine the institutional and social conditions necessary for the production, circulation, and reproduction of artistic value and legitimacy. Under such conditions, the artist does not simply lose income. Their access to opportunities for exhibition, professional connection, sales, and participation in professional networks may also be disrupted, thereby placing their position within the field of art at risk of erosion.

In such circumstances, the possibility of being seen and of maintaining one’s professional position is itself placed in jeopardy—a condition that might, drawing on Butler’s framework concerning the recognition of “grievable” lives (Butler, 2009), be approached by analogy. I am conscious here that Butler’s argument concerns life and death rather than the art market; nevertheless, I extend the framework to the question of the viability of the artist’s professional life.

In the absence of intervention or of conditions capable of facilitating such pathways, there is a risk that an artist may gradually become distanced from the dominant currents of the field of art and that their presence within it may become increasingly marginal—not because of the quality of their work, but because of the loss of opportunities for visibility, connection, and professional participation. What is damaged is not merely the livelihood of an individual artist, but also a part of the network through which artistic value, recognition, and memory are produced.



For this reason, political crises and war should also be understood as threats to the continuity of cultural life and to the ongoing activity of artistic institutions and networks. As some of the participants and institutions that sustain the field are weakened or lost, a society's capacity for the continued production of culture is diminished; at the same time, the professional relations and mutual trust among the agents of the field may themselves be damaged.

It is important to add that the aim of the curatorial intervention undertaken by this project is not merely to preserve the positions of artists within the field. It is also concerned with visibility, encounter, dialogue, and the possibility of generating new readings. The continuation of the production of meaning (Production of Meaning) and the preservation of cultural dynamism occur through such steps, however modest they may be.

Meaning, moreover, cannot be understood as something produced once and for all, solely at the moment an artwork is created. In many cases, meaning is produced and reproduced over time through encounters with the work, within the context of exhibition, through the possibility of its being seen, and through the dialogue that emerges among the artwork, its audience, and the public sphere. This is why I argue that the curatorial intervention undertaken by this project cannot be limited to the selection and organisation of artworks. Rather, it consists in creating the conditions that enable artworks to participate in cultural life—a set of conditions that itself constitutes part of the process of meaning production.

At a time when war and crisis restrict or bring such encounters to a halt, artworks are likewise deprived of part of their capacity to be present and to participate in cultural life. Continuum: Artist Relief for Iran seeks to create, however limited, a platform for exhibition, sale, encounter, and dialogue, thereby enabling artworks to re-enter the public sphere and creating the conditions for new readings, new connections, and the continuation of cultural dialogue. From this perspective, what is preserved through this project is not merely the possibility of selling artworks or supporting artists. It is also the possibility of artworks continuing to be seen, of cultural dialogues emerging, and of diverse narratives remaining present within contemporary memory—narratives that, in the absence of such a platform, might otherwise temporarily recede from public visibility.

In recent critical discussions concerning the exhibition and sale of works by artists from war-affected regions, concerns have been raised about the commodification of suffering (Bounia & Witcomb, 2024)—that is, the risk that an artist's suffering may be transformed into a commodity for the buyer's ethical consumption. Continuum seeks not to become an instance of this very concern. No work in this project narrates the suffering, hardship, or trauma of war. Of course, the project's title and broader framework necessarily keep the crisis present in the background; yet, at least at the level of the artwork itself, the artist is presented as an artist, rather than merely as evidence of suffering. A visitor to the website can encounter a part of contemporary Iranian art and become acquainted with emerging artists. The project's emphasis is on professional autonomy and the artist's freedom to select and present their work, rather



than on transforming narratives of suffering and crisis into added value for sale. The artist is presented through their history, body of work, and professional trajectory—not merely as a survivor of a crisis.

It is on this basis that I believe Continuum: Artist Relief for Iran should not be understood merely as an event for the sale of artworks or the provision of financial support to artists. The project constitutes a curatorial intervention in the conditions under which cultural value and symbolic capital circulate and are reproduced—an intervention that seeks to sustain the artists' connections to the field of art under conditions of crisis and to preserve the possibility of their continued presence within the narratives of contemporary art. If the art market, alongside institutions such as museums, galleries, critics, curators, and collectors, plays a role in the formation of artistic memory and its future trajectories, then preserving the possibility of artists' presence and activity within this field is not merely a matter of individual benefit. It may also make, however limited, a contribution to preserving the diversity of artistic narratives, the continuity of cultural memory, and the possibility of continued cultural production in the future. From this perspective, purchasing an artwork through this project signifies more than an economic exchange; it can also signify support for the possibility of artists' continued professional practice and participation in sustaining the environment in which art can be seen, circulate, and enter into dialogue.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to all the artists who joined this project—both those whose works were included in the collection and those whose participation could not ultimately be made possible. The formation of this project would not have been possible without their trust and collaboration. I would also like to thank the galleries whose professional trust and support played a role in bringing this project into being—support extended under circumstances in which the galleries themselves are confronting the economic and professional difficulties produced by the crisis. The idea for this project took shape in the early days of spring, in Gilan, on the shore of the Caspian Sea—days in which the events of Dey and the conditions of war cast a shadow over the beauty of spring and the garden. Yet solidarity and companionship prevail over bitterness—and they must.




Notes

Bourdieu, P., & Nice, R. (1980). The production of belief: Contribution to an economy of symbolic goods. Media, Culture & Society, 293–261 ,(3)2.

Butler, J. (2009). Frames of war: When is life grievable? London and New York: Verso . (193 pp.)

Bounia, A., & Witcomb, A. (Eds.). (2024). The ethics of collecting trauma: The role of museums in collecting and displaying contemporary crises (1st ed.). Routledge.

