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Democratising Power Relations in Art Institutions

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Abstract

MoMA's recent launch of the 'New MoMA' (October 2019) serves as a point of departure for a critical reflection on a general tendency in the museum landscape to promote inclusion and democracy. Bourdieu's *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* and Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* provide the theoretical framework for an investigation of museum genealogy questioning its very capacity for democracy. Following Rancière's (2009) appeal for the emancipation of the spectator, this paper sheds light on the great paradox of the museum as both the enabler and inhibitor for democratic action. Unpacking this paradox, the paper provides various examples of art exhibitions, such as *There is no* (2017) at Nordnorsk Museum, which have actively furthered inclusion by democratising the regimes of art and knowledge production - ultimately making the argument that there is no such thing as 'half-open'. Openness requires commitment and museums must acknowledge that in order to make way for aesthetic action and democracy.

Keywords: Democracy, Inclusion, Power, Art, Museums

We Are Open

In February 2019, Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, in New York announced the launch of the 'New MoMA' - an expanded campus and "reimagined presentation of modern and contemporary art" (press.moma.org, 2019a) that opened in October 2019. As the press release and website informed, the motivation for the upcoming \$450m expansion was inspired by the first director of the museum Alfred H. Barr's (1929-1943) original ambition for MoMA to be an experimental museum. Consequently, "the real value of this expansion is not just more space, but space that allows us to rethink the experience of art in the Museum" as Glenn D. Lowry, The David Rockefeller Director of The Museum of Modern Art, stated in the press release (MoMA, 2019a). Along with an architectural expansion to make room for the increased focus on live programming, performance, film and new media, and a rehanging of the collection to further diversity and representation, a central addition to the New MoMA was the launch of The Crown Creativity Lab - a space where "you'll be able to drop in anytime to participate in lively conversations, engage with artists, make art, reflect and relax" (MoMA, 2019b) as well as "programs that connect people more deeply with art and each other." (MoMA, 2019a).

Following the opening in October 2019, the Crown Creativity Lab was inhabited by the ongoing participatory programme the People's Studio, clearly hinting at MoMA's wish to communicate the museum as a space to and for the people. Given that the 'New MoMA' has only existed for less than six months, it would be both insufficient and unfair to perform any type of analysis or assessment of its success, but it can be considered an example of a growing tendency for museums to communicate values of openness and inclusion. As MoMA points out, it had been Alfred Barr's intention from the institution's beginning that the museum should be perceived as a public, dynamic laboratory. Does the introduction of the People's Studio suggest that this original mission was not being fulfilled, or is the programme simply a continuation of MoMA's public outreach goals from its outset? If the new is the old, the question remains whether it is somehow ingrained in the genealogy of the museum to be undemocratic and, therefore, inherently unable to live up to its ambitions to be open and inclusive? In order to examine these questions, this paper investigates democracy as a process of anti-domination rather than a social order.

A New, Old Museum

Even if MoMA and many of the other museums and art institutions referred to in this paper were founded in the twentieth century, or even the twenty-first century, they are undeniably still shaped by the very idea of the museum that came as one of the many outcomes of the French revolution. Therefore, in this context, the concept of ‘the museum’ is fairly new – replacing centuries of art only made for and accessible to the nobility or as symbols of power of state and religion. The dismantling of the monarchy after the French Revolution paved the way for the royal collections to be made public, resulting in the opening of the Louvre in 1793. The Louvre is important to mention here as it conveys an essential shift in power from monarchy to state – and, perhaps even more important, the birth of an ideology linking art and civic virtues. As Tony Bennett writes in *The Birth of the Museum*, the museum was considered a “sanctuary of the example through which civic virtues were to be instilled in the public” (1995, p. 37). The museum as an institution and the role of the arts then



Image 1: Exterior view of The Museum of Modern Art, Photography by Iwan Baan, Courtesy of MoMA

differed greatly from what we today consider ‘a museum’ or ‘an exhibition’. However, it is important to point to the fact that inherent in the foundation of the public museum (in a Western tradition) was distribution of power. The museum was built on (the newfound) state governing. The ‘modern’ museum came with Modernity, bringing a new role to the museum as a space of representation, rather than a space of wonder and surprise. Natural and cultural artefacts were to be displayed for the sake of enlightenment and to increase the knowledge and understanding of Western and Western-governed culture. Moreover, the museum was to be considered a social space in contrast to the private and restricted form, which had preceded it and excluded large parts of the population. Albeit, one must consider that the motivation for the museum to implement the virtues of the modern museum (openness and inclusion) was for the museum to “function

as a space of emulation in which civilised forms of behaviour might be learnt and thus diffused more widely through the social body” (Bennett, 1995, p. 24). The museum was, in other words, governmental instruments fashioned to inspire and enlighten the public to become wholesome beings and for the good and polite manners of the bourgeoisie to ‘rub off’ on the working class. Accordingly, inherent in the formation of the modern public museum was a tension between openness and control, between representation and politics – initiating “a close relationship between the government of the state and the government of the self” (Bennett, 1995, p. 23).

This universalist way of thinking, of equating representation and reasoning, has led to an ambivalent type of ‘double representation’, where man is both considered the object and subject of knowledge. Bennett describes what he refers

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to as the 'exhibitionary complex': "There is [...] a tension within this space of representation between the apparent universality of the subject and object of knowledge (man) which it constructs, and the always socially partial and particular ways in which this universality is realised and embodied in museum displays." (Bennett, 1995, p. 7). As Bennett delineates, museum visitors are led to believe that they get exposed to 'the bigger picture' while in reality they are concealed from the true, underlying power structures – and thereby kept docile, believing themselves to be in a position to freely analyse themselves. Michel Foucault uses the concept of Panopticon to illustrate a concrete example of a disciplinary power system, a prison, in which the inmates are complicit in their own disciplining because they are at constant risk of observation. In the same manner, the public museum is performing similar types of disciplinary mechanisms, incarcerating the public through hidden power structures. Another relevant dimension in Foucault's perception of power is the symbiotic relation between power and knowledge asserted through discourse. He states: "We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." (Foucault, 1989, p. 27).

Powerful Knowledge

While the Foucaultian power-game is a universal principle operating in any field of knowledge, the public art museum is a particularly well-suited example of a self-sustainable demonstration of power referring to, and elevated by, the museum itself. In fact, the public art museum imposes an economy of discourses of truth, governing what there is to know. Foucault states "It is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge" (1979, p. 6). The crucial point being that museums have

been, and still are, an essential part of the accumulation and production of meaning and knowledge – and even if the intent had been to promote a 'universalist' thinking, it was effectively a part of a systematic social exclusion and succeeding interconnection between capitalism and meaning production.

Pierre Bourdieu's critique of the modern art gallery evolves around this exact differentiation between classes and connection, between economic capital and meaning. Bourdieu argues that it is not a mere case of distinction between behaviour of classes but the cultural capital that the museum affirms and reproduces. Cultural capital is a 'habitus', a term coined by Bourdieu to describe symbols, ideas and preferences acting as power resources in social action. In his 1979 work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* Bourdieu writes "The appropriation of cultural products presupposes dispositions and competences which are not distributed universally (although they have the appearance of innateness), these products are subject to exclusive appropriation, material or symbolic, and, functioning as cultural capital [...]" (1979, p. 228). Making an analogy to economic capital, cultural capital is just as much an asset that can be accumulated and invested in. As cultural capital is a 'habitus', a way of acting, it can be passed on from generations – thereby reproducing class inequalities. Accordingly, Bourdieu criticises the concept of 'good taste' and argues that any cultural preferences are embedded in structures of perception, judgement and action formed by social condition: "The official differences produced by academic classifications tend to produce (or reinforce) real differences by inducing in the classified individuals a collectively recognised and supported belief in the differences, thus producing behaviours that are intended to bring real life being into line with official being" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 7).

Bourdieu's project is not to declare the existence of an objective truth. Rather, he is interested in shedding light on the connection between power and (cultural) knowledge, between the social body and meaning production – a connection that becomes particularly visible within the museum. Tony

Bennett reflects: “[To Bourdieu] the art gallery’s capacity to function as an instrument of social distinction depends on the fact that only those with the appropriate kinds of cultural capital can both see the paintings on display and see through them to perceive the hidden order of art which subtends their arrangement” (1996, p. 35). In other words; Bourdieu assigns art (or culture) subjective meaning production. Art is not just to be seen, art is to be understood – provided a person is equipped with the right tools to do so.

To Know, Or Not To Know

In a 1960 interview, Alfred Barr, who was still an active presence at MoMA at the time, was quoted saying “The public is often slow to comprehend; critics and museum people are notoriously blind”, thereby insinuating that there is something to be understood, something beyond mere representation. However, interestingly enough, Barr also called attention to the blindness of ‘his own kind’, which, even if his intention most likely was to deflate the growing critique of his institution, illustrates Jacques Rancière’s perception of the inherent relation between politics and aesthetics (Barr, 1960). Rancière recognises Bourdieu’s position in understanding culture’s capacity to produce and reproduce power differences among social classes. However, Rancière criticises Bourdieu for being part of the very same system that he denounces. In *Thinking Between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge*, he writes ‘Bourdieu’s judgement, and that of all those who denounce the aesthetic illusion, rests on a simple alternative: you know or you do not [on connaît ou on méconnaît]’ (Rancière, 2006, p. 2). By articulating their ‘not knowing’, Bourdieu simultaneously reinforces their status as being ‘subaltern’, according to Rancière.

Rancière illustrates this complex relation, or movement, between actors in his 1987 book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, in which the French schoolmaster Joseph Jacotot practises what he calls ‘intellectual emancipation’ with his students - a method, or philosophy, that lets the students learn in their own right without being taught. Rancière writes: “The ignorant schoolmaster (...) is named thus not because he knows nothing, but because he has renounced the ‘knowledge

of ignorance’ and thereby uncoupled his ‘mastery from his knowledge. He does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified: What is unknown to him is the inequality of intelligence.” (2009, p. 49). Briefly explained, Rancière describes how the dissolving of the teacher/pupil (master/slave) dichotomy is a fundamental precondition for equality. In opposition to what Rancière (1991) calls the ‘old method’ practised by ‘The Old Master’, the ignorance of the ignorant schoolmaster, is a ‘positive’ thing as it presupposes equality - and thereby lays the foundation for intellectual emancipation. In this Socraterian logic, claiming to be ‘open’ and ‘inclusive’ puts the museum in a position as ‘the old master’ (the knowledgeable), thereby eliminating any real potential for democratic processes to happen.

Similarly, Rancière uses theatre as an analogy to call for the intellectual emancipation of the spectator: “According to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons: First; viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second; it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive.” (2009, p. 2)

On the grounds that the spectator is never actually in a position to act as he/she is only presented to the ‘the spectacle’, to the illusion, Rancière calls for the emancipation of the spectator. The upholding of the dominating principles through insisting on the action, or participation, of the spectator is one of the great paradoxes of the museum, as they continue to advocate openness and inclusion. The ambiguity lies in that, through promoting values of openness and inclusion, they are simultaneously endorsing the dominating principles and fixates the visitor in his/her passivity. Professor of geography and heritage studies Divya P. Tolia-Kelly stresses the paradoxical core of existence for the museum: “The museum space is where epistemologies, taxonomies and exhibitionary logics are seemingly dynamic, but are at once ‘fixed’, and in synthesis with imperial hierarchies of culture [...]” (2019,

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p. 129). She continues referencing Rancière: “Democracy is produced and legitimated through aesthetic practices and in turn creates the shackles that bound what can be termed aesthetics” (Tolia-Kelly, 2019, p. 126). In other words, the museum is both the solution and the problem. Rancière asks rhetorically, “But could we not invert the terms of the problem by asking if it is not precisely the desire to abolish the distance that creates it?” (2009, p. 12). However, if trying to reduce the distance between the art/museum and the viewer only reinforces it, have we reached a curatorial impasse?

The Third Thing

It is essential to understand that, according to Rancière, democracy is not a societal or governmental structure. Democracy should be understood as a process, or rather, as a movement that works to redistribute the dominating principles (what is permissible to say or to show) and to enlarge the public sphere. The democratic process is inherently aesthetic and, therefore, has the power to usurp the dominating principles of truth and representation. The problem is, that when the aesthetics succumb to the regime (as in a museum), they are only reproducing the excluding didactics. The artist, curator and the spectator must therefore continuously insist on themselves as democratic beings - not as a producer and receiver, but as a whole. According to Rancière, “what is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs” (2009, p. 4). What he means by this quote is not to make an exhibition without visitors, or to make more initiatives to activate the audience, but rather to dissolve the producer-receiver relation. Rancière describes, “It is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect” (2009, p. 15). The question is, how does this ‘third thing’ appear - and how can curators actively work towards it?

Tolia-Kelly, who has worked with artist Rosanna Raymond

to disrupt (post)colonial narratives in the British Museum, London, writes: “Aesthetics, produced through artistic practices, are locked into an elite world of networks of production and self-perpetuating representational reference points, and thus the dismantling of the ways we think of artistic regimes of production can contribute to a more democratic politics and aesthetics. By equalising the regimes of the spaces of art production with the formal accounts of political democracy, we are able to see exposed the partiality or indeed the hegemonic power of both regimes”. (2019, p. 125).

Accordingly, by exposing the regimes, we equalise them, and thereby open up to new translations and new meanings to form. It is a matter of ‘equalising’ through transparency - of letting the spectator ‘backstage’, so to speak. As Bennett explains, the role of the curator ought to: “be shifted away from that of the source of an expertise whose function is to organise a representation claiming the status of knowledge and towards that of the possessor of a technical competence whose function is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authored statements within it”. (1995, p. 103).

Even if the role of the curator has undergone a dramatic change since 1995, Bennet’s observations of a problematic divide between knowledge production and dissemination remain relevant. The administration of a museum, its governance process and the decisions made therein are rarely accessible to the public. As Professor Graham Murdock demonstrates, “the battle to keep free entry [to museums] is vital but unless policy also addresses the ways collections are compiled, promoted and presented, the organisation of arts education on a life-long basis, and the relations between professional expertise and vernacular creativity, its impact will be limited” (2010, p. 63). In essence, museums claim that they belong to the public, but how much of the institution and its activities can the public actually access? One might compare it to a dinner party where the guests are only allowed into the corridor. The host encourages them to feel at home, yet an awareness of the social and spatial restrictions induces

an equally restricted behaviour.

Backstage

In 1974 American artist Michael Asher (1943 - 2012) demolished the wall between the office and the exhibition space at Claire Copley gallery in Los Angeles and framed the art gallery's 'behind-the-scenes' business operations as the exhibition itself. As art historian Kirsi Peltomäki notes, 'The important implication of the work was the manner in which it foregrounded the 'pre-existing power-knowledge axis' inherent to conventionally accepted social relations and divisions within the gallery' (2007, p. 41). The workplace itself in this project functions as an example of how aesthetics have the potential to disrupt the dominating principles per Rancièrian terminology. There are certainly numerous examples of artists, who have worked in this type of framework, both politically and conceptually, but what is particularly interesting, in the context of this article, are examples of artists and curators who have actively worked to increase transparency by democratising the regimes of art production and knowledge production. In the following, the paper examines concrete examples of recent exhibitions and curatorial methods, which in different ways have created platforms for democratic processes to emerge. In 2017, Canadian artist Joshua Schwebel opened his exhibition *Aesthetics of Administration* at Centrum project space in Berlin. The exhibition essentially started when Schwebel

approached Berlin's arts-funding administration, the *Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa*, in an email, inviting staff members to produce artworks for his show. Two staff members replied to Schwebel's unusual request and both their proposals were subsequently included in the show. One work was Pauline Püschel's interactive installation *Limits* inviting visitors to sit at an office desk (from the senate's basement) and navigate through a computer program mimicking the daily operations of a funding administrator. Throughout the day you could 'accept' to fund various projects, which then had to be properly motivated, printed and filed alphabetically. Another work was Anne Wesolek's series of photographs, entitled *Inside Brunnenstraße*, which showed the senate's personal offices - stacks of paper, post-its, lists, cables, coffee mugs, graph-paper charts and more. The exhibition not only invited visitors 'behind-the-scenes' of an organisation usually invisible to the public, but it reversed the role of administrator and producer, directly pointing to inherent power structures in the system. As Schwebel (2017) explained, 'It also made visible the personal aesthetics and opinions of the administrators of public arts funding, who normally remain unrepresented and unconsidered in the cultural landscape of Berlin, but have great power to determine the definition and determination of contemporary art'. By revealing the hidden structures of art world bureaucracy, politics and capitalism, through the use of aesthetics, Schwebel began an emancipation of the spectator. Two other examples, which



Image 2: Michael Asher, *Untitled*, (1974), Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles



Image 3: Joshua Schwebel, installation view *From the Aesthetic of Administration*, 2017, image credit Ute Klein.



Image 4 Cinthia Marcelle, *1st Meeting of the Legendaries at KW Institute for Contemporary Art/Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art* (Aus der Serie *From the series Legendaries*, 2008–fortlaufend ongoing), 2018 Analog fotografie, Metallplatte, Dokument Analogue photography, metal plaque, document, Courtesy Cinthia Marcelle Foto Photo Timo Ohler

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worked to critically further transparency, are Brazilian artist Cinthia Marcelle's contribution to the 10th Berlin Biennial (9 June - 9 September 2018), We don't need another hero, and curator/artist collective Pro tempore.art's exhibition Bestseller at Copenhagen-based gallery Bo Bjerggaard. Marcelle's work *Lendários do CCSP (Legendaries of CCSP)* shown at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art is part of an ongoing series in which she invites regular employees from a given art institution, in this case the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, to participate in a ceremonial social gathering. During the event a group portrait is taken using an analogue camera. The portrait is subsequently framed and accompanied by a metal plaque and a document vouching for the authenticity of the event. A key element to Marcelle's practice is disturbing the usual order of things by staging situations in which otherwise hidden structures may reveal themselves. As artists and writer Thulile Gamedze precisely puts it:

Abandoning the insularity of a straightforward institutional critique, the work gestures towards the people who have helped shape the character of a given institution as a step in the direction of abandoning modernist institutional mythology. In addition, this focus on a handful of individuals ultimately hints at something very powerful: a shift in the mode of engagement with institutions—investing in sociality as the home of everyday knowledge practice and culture-making (2018).

Along the same lines was the exhibition *Bestseller* curated by pro tempore.art at Gallery Bo Bjerggaard in June 2019. Pro tempore.art is committed to produce ultra-short exhibitions in between exhibition schedules at Copenhagen top galleries. They are 'placing emerging into the established; breaking the ordinary framework of exhibitions, creating waves within the gallery scene and challenging the traditional structures of the art world' (pro tempore.art, 2019). For *Bestseller*, pro tempore.art focused particularly on commercial and capitalistic influences in artwork production. The catalogue included, for example, screen dumps of the artist's lists of expenses and email correspondences discussing logistics and budgets, letting the reader in on 'all the secrets' preceding the

professional looking white cube exhibition.

For any curator or museum professional feeling antsy about the prospect of exposing the office's excel sheets or posing for a portrait, producing transparency does not have to be as literal as suggested in the aforementioned examples. We might compare the role of the curator to that of the schoolmaster. The museum should not 'teach' but rather facilitate an emancipatory environment for the viewer to make their own sense of things. Two additional examples of museums/kunsthallen that have successfully managed to transpose common power structures and created the grounds for democratic processes are discussed as models of curatorial processes that facilitate a liberating experience for viewers.

All-Inclusive

In the autumn of 2017, Copenhagen-based kunsthalle Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art acted as hosts of the large-scale immersive performance-installation *Sisters Academy - The Boarding School* created by the performance group and movement *Sisters Hope*. It might even be misleading to call Den Frie 'hosts', as the kunsthalle was nothing more than the architectural frame of the project during the one month of performance. Several of the staff members took part in the 'all-inclusive' performance, where visitors booked 24-hour accommodations, leaving sleep and diet in the hands of the performers. The entire kunsthalle was transformed leaving no signs of its function as an art institution - no reception desk and ticketing system, no posters, 'no access' sign, nothing - even the toilets were transformed to fit the experience of a new world order - of a space to explore new modes of sensuous learning with the 'Sisters teaching staff'. During that one month, *Sisters Hope* did not only intervene in the daily lives of its boarders but, through aesthetic action, they disrupted the routine of the institution creating an ideal platform for emancipation.

Another brilliant example is the 2017 surprise transformation of Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum into a museum dedicated to Saami art. When the museum opened its doors to the exhibition *There is no in spring* of 2017, not a single soul had



Image 5 and 6: Sisters Academy at Den Frie. Photo: Sisters Hope

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been let in on the experience awaiting. The entire museum, both inside and outside, had been transformed and replaced with Saami works from the past century. All signs of Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, including the website, had been changed into the 'Sámi Dáiddamusea'. The overall performative project of Sámi Dáiddamusea and the accompanying exhibition indigenised and decolonised the museum by giving voice to the Saami people, who had yet to be acknowledged through their own museum. Through this aesthetic action, the project paved the way for intellectual emancipation and produced democracy by exposing the cultural capital governed by museums.

There is no cleverly demonstrated that a traditional museum exhibition is still very much a valid medium, whilst illustrating how we must continuously work to expose structures by making ourselves equally exposed. Without action, without letting the guest in 'backstage', the openness, dialogue and 'lively' conversations, promoted by MoMA and so many other institutions, are really nothing more than, to speak in Platonian terms, shadows on the cave wall.

Conclusion

MoMA's 2019 launch of 'New MoMA' is an example of an increasing tendency in museums and art institutions promoting democratic values of openness and inclusion. Taking departure point in the specific case, moving into theory, and back into practice illustrates the paradoxical position that many curators and art institutions find themselves in when navigating in an art world governed by politics. The museum is a politically charged space formed by traditions, connotations, hierarchies and power relations, consequently making it both the solution and the problem. In the attempt to eliminate the distance between work and viewer, museums and curators easily end up enforcing their own position as the 'knowledgeable' - and thereby practically dissolve the potential for democratic processes to happen. The artist, curator and the spectator must therefore continuously insist on themselves as democratic beings - not as a producer and receiver, but as a whole. The provided examples of exhibitions and performative work, supported by theories of Foucault, Bourdieu and Rancière, suggest curatorial methods to dismantle the ways we think of artistic regimes of production. Most significant, the paper pointed to the fact that democracy does not occur if hosts only invite guests into their corridor. A true democratic



Image 7: Sámi Dáiddamusea ápningskvelden - Photo: Tomasz A Wacko

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process of inclusion and openness cannot happen on the basis of a spectacle, it must be done through the aesthetic exposition of the spectacle itself. One cannot be half-open - openness commits, and curators and art institutions must acknowledge that in order to make way for aesthetic action. By handing over the museum keys to a marginalised group, like at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, or turning bureaucracy upside-down, like Joshua Schwebel did at Centrum in Berlin, regimes of art and knowledge production are recognised and opened up to new readings - thereby creating potential for intellectual emancipation and democracy. It is not simply a matter of letting visitors into the institution's back offices or sharing receipts and email passwords, but a general process for curators and art institutions to be conscious of the unavoidable power structures governing them, and then take action to use these power structures aesthetically to expose them.

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