

Affective knowledge, ethical principles and the position of a responsible mediator

Yulia Fisch

“Situated knowledge” did not merely mean knowledge-is-social but also that “our” knowledge is intrinsically politically and ethically situated by its purposes and positionalities – that is, standpoints.” *Maria Puig de la Bellacasa*¹

I consider myself to be an interdependent curator; this means that I and my curatorial activities are dependent upon political, social, and environmental resources as well as upon different types of knowledge that I either generate or navigate within. This feeling of being interwoven into various webs informs both my personal agency and my curatorial actions.

I have turned to collective knowledge production by acknowledging that my knowledge and its production are never exhaustive and is highly subjective. Starting from a private conversation on the matter of post-soviet identity in its decolonial translation, it felt important for me to put this discussion into a broader context in which different types of knowledge, experiences, and perception might be brought into dialogue. This is how the research collective “Beyond the post-soviet” first emerged and started to address a vast geographical and cultural space, ranging from Europe to Central Asia, the so-called “post-Soviet” and post-socialist territories. Since its inception, the group has been questioning, among other things, Russian imperialism and Soviet coloniality and how they survived over time and in different configurations. The

1 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa: *Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, p. 41.

group has a horizontal and self-organized character that is reflected in the way in which it operates. Each of the group's members equally possesses the knowledge and archive produced by the group and has the opportunity to take the initiative to create and organize events on its behalf.

Since the inception of the collective, myself and my colleagues have agreed upon the three major values that frame our activities: equality, collectivity, and mutual care. It was essential to define collective knowledge production as a non-consensual one, even while the knowledge that we dealt with and experiences that we have had are prone to disagreements, traumas, and arguments. The collective was and is considered a safe space in which all experiences, emotions, and positions are equally respected and are equally valuable. Applying these ethical principles contributes to the organization of events, discussions, and decision-making in which both affective knowledge and expertise are taken into account. It shapes non-hierarchical moderation and leads to different forms of collective work.

In the wake of the Ukrainian war in February 2022, the collective mobilized to both support and promote Ukrainian culture, but also to place the discussion about continuous imperial violence in a broader geographical context. One of the first public events took place at Centre Pompidou and was conceived of as "active listening". Audiences and participants were invited to listen to the direct appeals and testimonies of both artists and cultural workers from Ukraine, instead of talking or discussing issues on their behalf.

We rarely consider listening and hearing as labor, as an active process. However, it can act as a first step and approach to unlearning the models and frames we are prone to and which may replicate and exercise colonial and imperialist thinking and modes of acting. The language that we use is already acting, since we translate, narrate, and manipulate the terms in the way that we name them. Seeking ways to unlearn, I also turn to listening, hearing, and to the ability to understand as an exercise that is applied to my curatorial practice. I constantly seek to reflect and observe my feelings when speaking and hearing by being attentive to the wording that I apply to the narration of the stories and to how I introduce myself. During the projects it is often important to design a space, which I curate, in which one can feel safe to make mistakes while being conscious about the care or carelessness that language can convey when speaking about either the past and the present.

During my curatorial practice, I like to think about the aforementioned principles as being not exhaustive and fluid. In addition to the application of interdependent thinking, it feels equally important to apply ethical principles

as a lens and instrument to projects and to the way in which they are conceived. Having the position of the “responsible mediator” shapes the decisions made about how knowledge is being distributed and about the way in which participants of both the exhibitions and events can become equal members of the spontaneous collective. Having these concerns in mind contributes to acknowledging my vulnerability and, thus, leads to the questioning of both one’s power and position. It opens, in my opinion, the space for the construction of equal, collective, and non-hierarchical ties and relationships.



Figure

Alevtina Kakhidze, Russian Culture is looking for an alibi that it is not a killer, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

