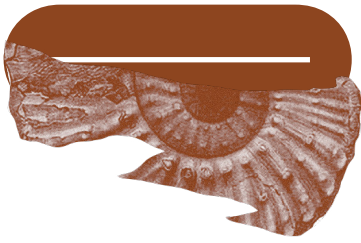




The Curator as Artist (as Curator)
A Draft Toward New Modes of Studio-Based, Visual (Curatorial) Practice
Akis Kokkinos







ver the years, the figure of the curator has evolved from being a caretaker of collections – a behind-the-scenes organizer and arbiter of taste – to an independently motivated practitioner with a more central position within the contemporary art world and its parallel commentaries (O’Neill 2012, 1–2). “Curator is a term in the constant state of becoming” (O’Neill 2006), it is about authorship and agency, rather than the reproductive processes of institutional power structures (O’Neill 2007, 13). Perceiving the curatorial as a device for knowledge production that responds to contemporary urgencies, the current research examines alternative modes of curatorial praxis within the independent cultural realm. This approach is inspired by artistic production itself, instead of traditional curatorial genealogy. While much has been said in scholarship about “the artist as curator” (Jeffery 2016) – a mode of practice where an artist temporarily adopts a curatorial position – there is less discussion on the quasi-reverse: the curator as artist as curator. This essay aims to unpack what this title and role might entail, its methodology, explore its problematics and the opportunities it presents for an alternative or new mode of practice. By sharing a few case studies, personal projects, and observations, this research will provide framing devices through a set of questions on this queer and liminal state within independent curatorial practice.



should start by stating that the curator as artist (as curator) doesn’t aspire to claim an artistic position but predominantly envisions a creative space that offers “artistic” freedom from concerns attached to both institutional and independent curatorial practice – including fundraising, audience reach, or institutional policies. Would that be desired, or even possible? Traditionally, especially in small-scale institutions, curators are responsible for maximizing audience diversification and funding. This process requires a significant amount of creative time and often shifts the initial program to directions well-suited to achieve these goals. When an artist creates an artwork, they do so with the hope to reach an audience but they don’t mean to feed it. In the context of a curatorial practice, the exhibition proposal is structured to reach a specific audience, so it is highly affected by it from its inception; the same applies to funding applications. This practice follows the commercial terms of demand and supply. What would happen if the exhibition or curatorial proposal came first and then reached its destiny audience?

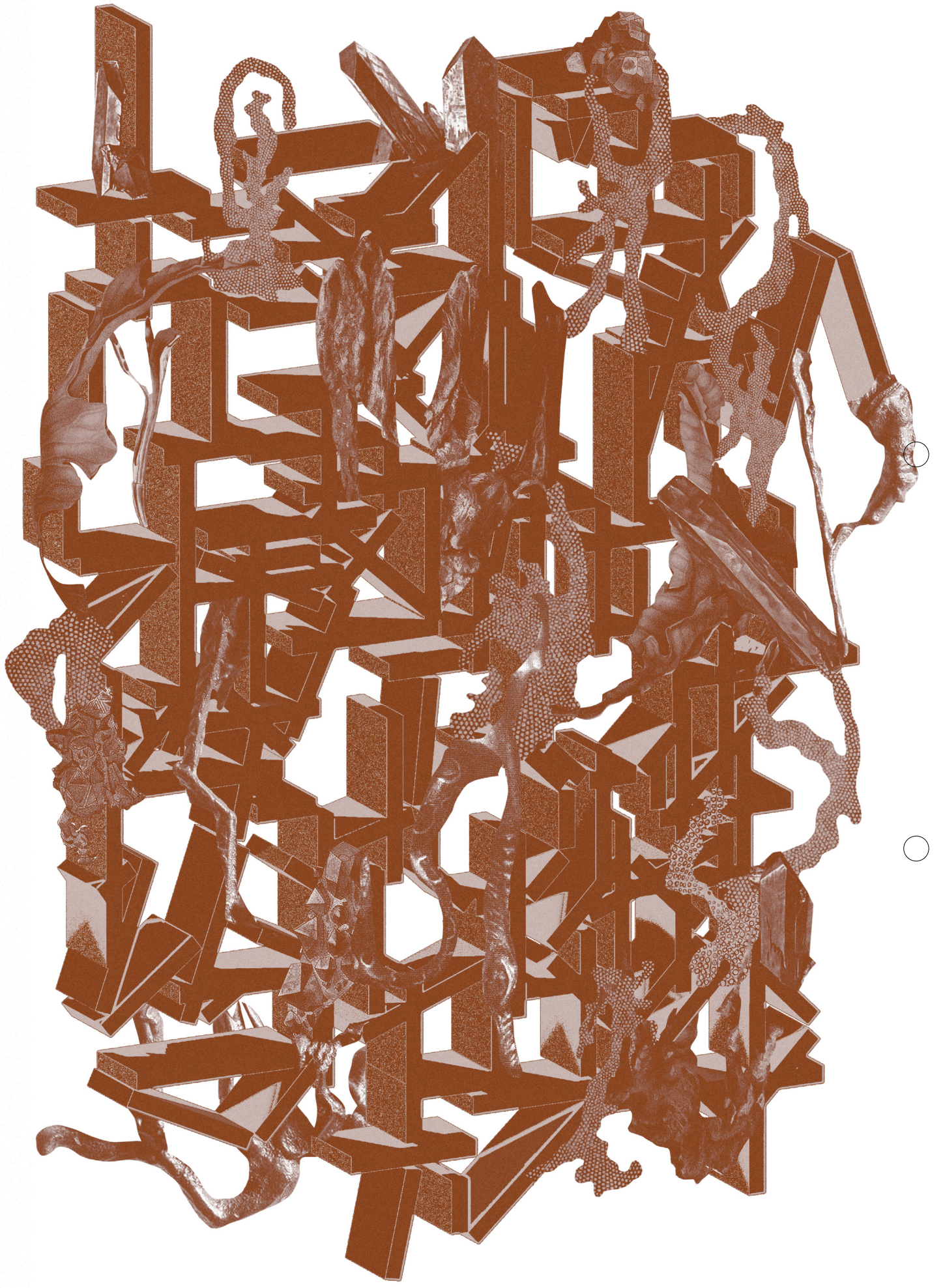


ould we reimagine the Curatorial as a device detached from intellectual justification and theory-driven discourse, but fostering embodied knowledge, constellations of materialities, and intuitive connections across artworks? A device that practices the rituals of actual craft-making with no strings attached?



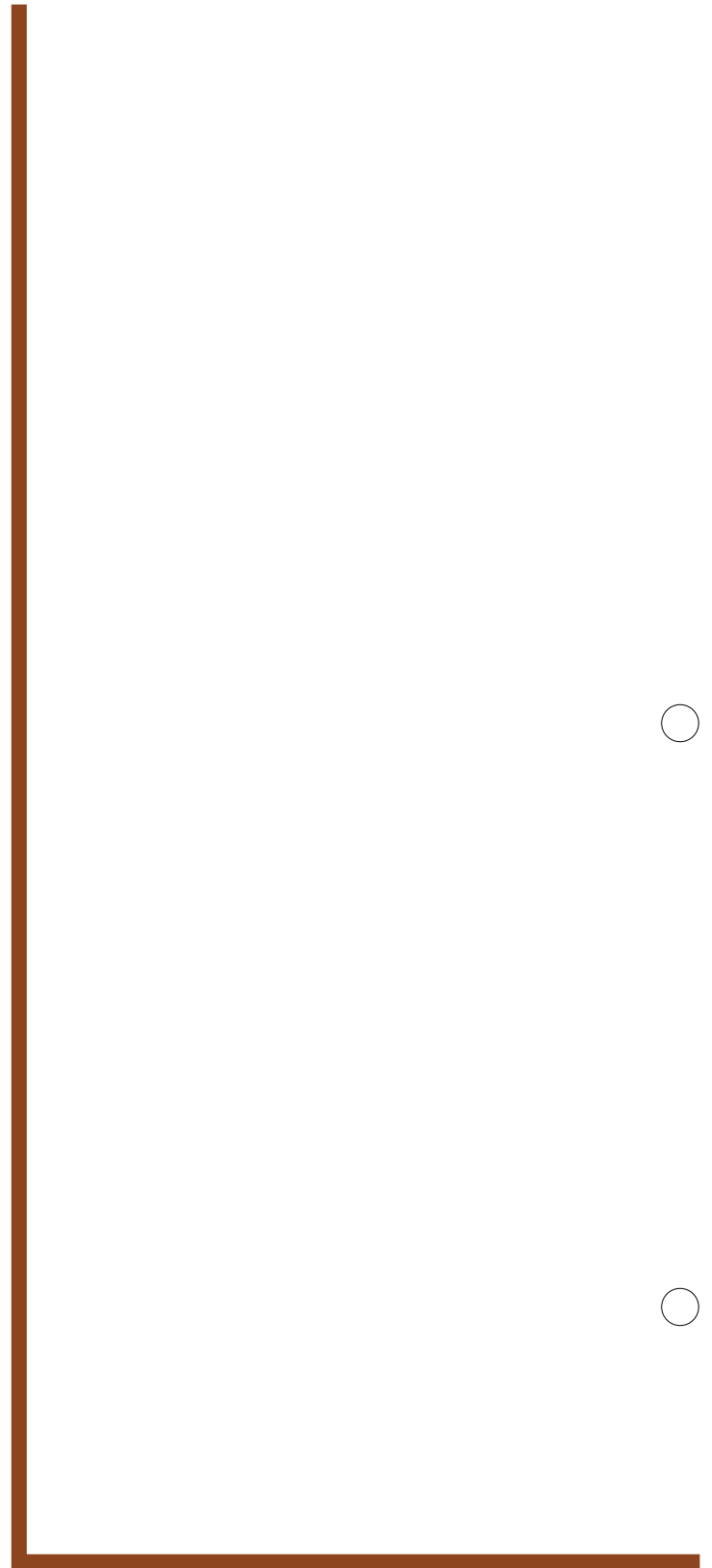
case study that highlights this gap in curatorial practice stems from another field: the fashion industry. The acclaimed London-based fashion designer Grace Wales Bonner has managed to move freely from fashion to the artistic or curatorial realm by adopting the title of researcher. Following her exhibition at the Serpentine Galleries titled *A Time for New Dreams* ^{IMAGE 1} in 2019, Bonner presented the show *Spirit Movers* ^{IMAGES 2+3} at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) between November 18, 2023, and April 7, 2024, as she was selected to curate the sixteenth edition of MoMA's *The Artist's Choice* Exhibition. Quoting from the museum's website, *The Artist's Choice* series began in 1989, when artist Scott Burton was "invited to select, juxtapose, and comment on" works from the Museum's collection. What I find interesting in Bonner's case with MoMA is that it's easier for a museum to imagine a fashion designer as artist as curator than a curator in their own right. The essence of the curatorial





practice I wish to analyze in this text finds comfort in the specificity of Bonner's position in limbo. Through her interdisciplinary research methods, her practice expands through fashion, exhibitions, publications, and films while manifesting a deeply personal meditation on Black expression and diasporic cultures, and her commitment to archival research as a form of spirituality and an aesthetic practice. The viewer can sense the embodied forms of knowledge and all those aforementioned sensorial elements, tied to materialities, intuition, and aesthetic experiences. The terminology of MoMA's program implies an invitation to her as an artist (as curator), and as such, it allows for a freedom to support those elements; conversely, in the case of guest curators, there are other expectations of what they should bring into a museum, which often exclude them from reaching their aesthetical and experiential potential. Those who have attended both her exhibitions, could recognize her strong visual identity and practice, and easily navigate through her extended work despite the contrasting institutional contexts. Therefore arises a question: Can we envision curatorial practice through a visual (-cultural) methodology?

More often than not, curators tend to focus on what the artwork is about, its text, subtext, and context, rather than the artwork itself. The intellectual substantiation of an artwork to appear well-fitted in an exhibition could potentially marginalize all the other non-verbal dynamics that the artwork carries, downscaling its full potential. Introducing a visual methodology into the curatorial practice could open up further possibilities and dialogues across the works. The case of Bonner choreographs this approach. How do you then build this type of methodology? A common thread between a fashion designer and an artist is that they both have a studio-based practice. On the contrary, in the case of curators, their work is developed through an office-based approach. Even in the case of curatorial residencies around the world, it is very rare to find a studio that contains anything more than a desk and WiFi connection, as everything a curator might need is in a book, in a discussion held during a studio visit, or on Google.



example (out of many) that illustrates the specificity of the office-based curatorial profession is that of Latitudes. In 2005, Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa Luna founded Latitudes, a curatorial office based in Barcelona, Spain, which works internationally across contemporary art practices. The term “office,” as Google suggests, is “a room, set of rooms, or building used as a place for commercial, professional, or bureaucratic work.” It implies expertise, provides a service, and, presumably, someone has to pay for it. On the contrary, the term “studio” is a “room where an artist, photographer, sculptor, etc., works.” It suggests the presence of creativity, experimentation, and embodied knowledge. I perceive the idea of a curatorial studio as a space where the curator is enabled to develop their curatorial voice by bringing into their space the energy of artworks, testing out visual references and images,

archival material, and diverse materialities, similarly to what would happen in an artistic studio. The (curatorial) studio is imagined as a greenhouse where you plant seeds, give them time and pause, wait until the seeds become small sprouts, ready to be replanted within the exhibition space and grow there on their own. In this state of mind, Shimmer – a curatorial studio based in Rotterdam – seems to share a similar set of questions. As Jason Hendrik Hansma (Shimmer’s co-founder) shares with curator Danai Giannoglou in an interview: “Artists have their studios to experiment, build, think, test, and allow situations to come to fruition before the work enters its public phase, so why not create an equivalent condition for curatorial practices?” As Giannoglou suggests: “Same as in an artist’s studio, more often than not, Shimmer’s exhibitions fade in and out of each other and stretch over time, embracing qualities that are usually attributed to film and music, re-contextualizing existing artworks and creating hybrid forms that question the limitations of art exhibitions.”

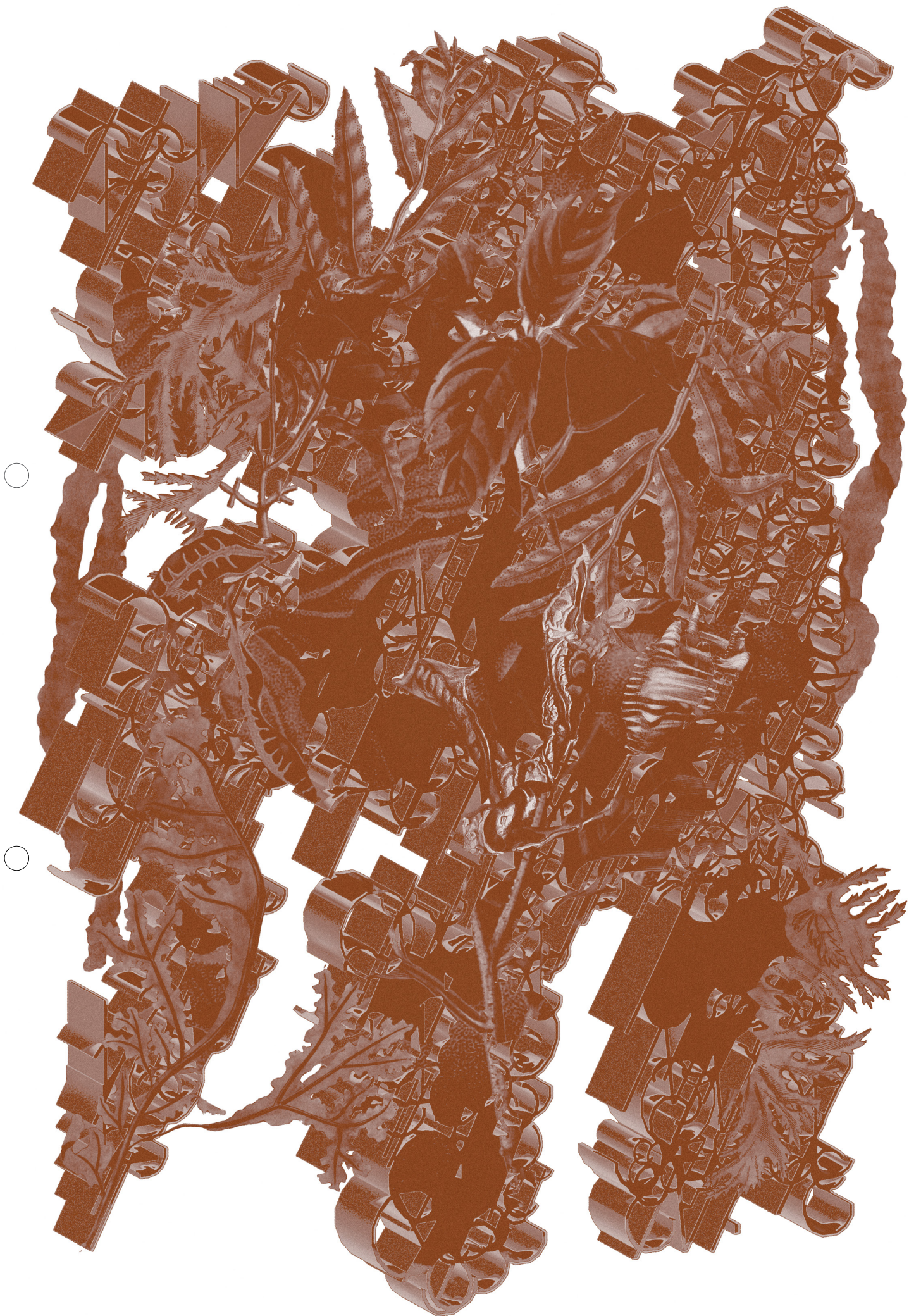


Curators are used to meeting artists for studio visits. As you enter each artist’s galaxy, you immediately feel something from the way they “curate” their workspace. Sofia Borges, a NY-based Brazilian artist, brings her curatorial work into her studios. In 2018, she co-curated the section “The Infinite History of Things or The End of the Tragedy of One” of the 33rd São Paulo Biennial *Affective Affinities* ^{IMAGES 4+5}. Alluding to the case of Bonner, Borges’s work – whether artistic or curatorial, inside or outside her studio – transmits the essence of her practice. I believe that biennials and projects that incorporate by definition an authorial curatorial role can be used as a space for allowing the curatorial voice to be visually explored.





How often can we visually identify the work of a curator when we are in the exhibition space? Could the curatorial interests of a curator be visually translated? This question appeared to me while I was preparing a presentation deck of DEO projects, a non-profit I founded in 2021 on the Greek island of Chios. Unconsciously, I put together two installation photos from different years. Even though the participating artists, the venues, and the curatorial rationale are very different in the two exhibitions, there is some visual intimacy between the two images ^(IMAGES 6+7). In extension, I find there is some value in exploring those associations and how we, as curators, can further develop those dialogues on aesthetics. A problematic aspect of this process revolves around the notions of authorship and appropriation. Even though the same interrogation applies when an artist curates other artists' works, I believe there is yet again a different set of expectations if a curator wants to delve deeper in this space (of curating as artist as curator). Trust, consent, and the management of expectations are essential between the artist and the curator, so as the artist won't feel exploited. By working with many artists on new commissions and site-specific works, I have discovered that there is a space of freedom and influence on the artistic work by the curator within the collaboration, which is as unique and dynamic as the relationship between the two actors. In many cases, even though the artwork remains (and will always remain) the intellectual property of the artist, the curator holds a co-creator agency that relies on the artist's generosity by allowing the artwork to come into being through a mutual exchange and can potentially expand both the artist's and the curator's (visual) practice.





nother avenue for this experimentation would be collection-based exhibitions. Traditionally, when an artwork enters a collection, it's been added to a wider system that fits within the collection identity. Many a time, collections – be they private or public – add credibility to the work, and vice versa. From discussions with numerous artists on the subject, there is more flexibility in the collection display and the afterlife of the artwork, even though instructions and the artist's approval might be required. Especially in the case of private museums and collectors, there is a potential avenue of curating through an artistic perspective, as more often than not the collectors themselves enjoy revisiting their acquisitions regularly through fresh perspectives. *By Way Of: Material and Motion in the Guggenheim Collection* ^{IMAGES 8+9}, is an example presented from March 15,



2024, to January 12, 2025, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Curated by the museum's chief curator Naomi Beckwith, the exhibition examines the ways in which contemporary artists enacted new ideas formed by the social and historical contexts of their time and pushed the boundaries of art-making and materials as a result. Beckwith seems to have crafted the show so delicately, that it reflects her mastering into both the histories of the materials used by the artists, and the dialogical constellations activated across the artworks through racially, geographically, or genderly charged materials. Her work seems to provide an additional layer within the institutional, collection-based curatorial practice, led by visual methodology, stretching the framework of the curator as artist to new directions.





rapping up, and as the title suggests, this essay presents a draft toward new modes of studio-based curatorial practice, exploring the concept of the curator as artist (as curator). This research intends not to reject traditional forms and methods of curatorial practice, but to expand, enrich, and diversify it for those who wish to develop a curatorial voice through non-verbal or linguistic tools, fostering embodied knowledge and intuitive connections across artworks. Case studies of practitioners like Grace Wales Bonner and Sofia Borges highlight the intersection between artistic and curatorial roles, showcasing the possibilities for visual exploration within curatorial practices, even if none of them comes from a curatorial background. Additionally, the concept of the curatorial studio is introduced as a method for creating space for experimentation and development of the curatorial voice, akin to an artist's studio. Lastly, collection-based proposals, biennials, or site-specific new commissions can be the potential avenues for crafting and crystalizing the emerging curatorial praxis of studio-based making.





1. Grace Wales Bonner, *Shrine I*, 2019. Installation view. Grace Wales Bonner, *A Time for New Dreams*. Serpentine Galleries, London, January 18 – February 16, 2019. © readsreads.info, 2019.

2. Installation view. *The Artist's Choice: Grace Wales Bonner – Spirit Movers*. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York City, November 18, 2023 – April 7, 2024. Photo: Emile Askey.





3. Installation view. *The Artist's Choice: Grace Wales Bonner – Spirit Movers*. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York City, November 18, 2023 – April 7, 2024. Photo: Emile Askey. ○

4. Installation view. *The Infinite History of Things or the End of the Tragedy of One*, curated by Sofia Borges at the 33rd Bienal de São Paulo: *Affective Affinities* (September 7 – December 9, 2018). Courtesy Bienal de São Paulo Foundation. Photo: Pedro Ivo Trasferetti © Pedro Ivo Trasferetti / Bienal de São Paulo Foundation. ○





5. Sofia Borges. Self-portrait in her studio in New York City.



6. Installation view. Paulo Nimer Pjota, *fragmented images, fragmented stories*. DEO projects at the old slaughterhouse of Chios. Courtesy of DEO projects. Photo: Yannis Voulgaris.



7. Installation view. Serapis Maritime, *Liquid Grounds*. DEO projects at the Seamanship of Lagkada Cultural Space, Chios Island, 2022. Courtesy of the artists and DEO projects. Photo: Thanassis Gatos.





8. Installation view. *By Way of: Material and Motion in the Guggenheim Collection*. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, March 15, 2024 – January 12, 2025. Photo: David Heald. © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.



9. Installation view. *By Way of: Material and Motion in the Guggenheim Collection*. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, March 15, 2024 – January 12, 2025. Photo: David Heald. © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.





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BIOGRAPHY

Akis Kokkinos is a contemporary art curator based between the UK and Greece. In 2021, he founded DEO, the first contemporary art organization on Chios Island, Greece. For over eleven years, Kokkinos has collaborated with major cultural institutions and private collections, while also undertaking independent projects. He has curated exhibitions and programs for esteemed organizations such as the NEON Organization for Culture and Development D. Daskalopoulos (Greece), Gasworks (UK), Fundación Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Spain), and Art Athina (Greece), among others. Kokkinos has worked closely with international artists on new commissions, including Paulo Nimer Pjota, Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Maro Michalakakos, Francis Offman, Antrea Tzourovits, and many others. His curatorial projects have received international press coverage from *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *ArtReview*, *Frieze Magazine*, *DAMN Magazine*, *Art Basel Stories*, *ESTADÃO*, and *El País*. Kokkinos has been honored with numerous international awards, fellowships, and residencies, including the Fulbright Fellowship at the Solomon R. Guggenheim (2024, NYC), the SAHA Curatorial Residency supported by ARTWORKS (2023, Istanbul), the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Artist Fellowship by ARTWORKS (2022, Athens), the Young Curators Residency Program at the Fundación Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (2021, Madrid), and the “Develop Your Creative Practice” grant by Arts Council England (2021, London). Kokkinos holds an MA in Curating Contemporary Art (2018–2020) from the Royal College of Art in London, supported by scholarships from NEON, the Schilizzi Foundation, and the RCA Continuation Fund.

EP & EPJ

Enterprise Projects is an Athens-based project, run by curator Danai Giannoglou and artist Vasilis Papageorgiou. This venture aims at experimenting and conversing; experimenting with the curatorial proposal, artistic creation, self-organized function, and conversing with the local artistic scene, the Athenian audience, and the very place that houses the project. As a structure, Enterprise Projects has been functioning independently and periodically since September 2015 in Ampelokipoi, Athens.

In 2018, Enterprise Projects founded *EP Journal*, a publishing initiative in the form of an online publication of newly commissioned theoretical and research essays, in both Greek and English. The reader can browse through the journal online, and download or print individual issues, communicated by a design that resonates with each commission’s subject matter.

ARTWORKS

ARTWORKS was established in 2017 through the support of its founding donor, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), and with the aim to create a fertile and nurturing environment for Greek artists through funding and public engagement opportunities. Through the SNF Artist Fellowship Program – its core activity – **ARTWORKS** awards monetary prizes to individuals artists and curators in recognition of their skills and qualifications. Apart from financial support, the organization offers access to skill-sharing events and professional development tools, as well as networking opportunities with arts professionals through partnerships with cultural institutions and international artist residency programs. The goal is to create a dynamic alumni network, a support system for the Fellows that can function with care even after their participation in the Program. **ARTWORKS** has awarded 390 monetary prizes to individual artists and curators to date.



COLOPHON

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