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From Sacred Object to Relational Field

Curating Experience, Dialogue, and Institutional Responsibility in Spiritually Charged Museums

"All real living is meeting." – Martin Buber, I and Thou (1923)

Introduction: The Museum Is Already Charged

Some exhibitions do not need to be activated. They are already charged. They hold ritual residue, ancestral presence, political trauma, devotional intimacy, or metaphysical longing. Whether it is a Sufi cloak transmitted through spiritual lineage, an uli ancestor figure embodying enduring power, a hollowed Guanyin statue stripped of its ritual core, a sacred grove reconstructed within museum grounds, a knitted organ replacing human remains, ritual petitions addressed to a local earth deity, or epigraphic inscriptions that transform script into spatial cosmology, the museum is never neutral.

Across the contributions presented in the workshop "Museum Charge(s): Curating Spiritual Presences," a crucial shift becomes visible. The central question is no longer how to display sacred objects, but how to curate the relational field in which they operate. How do museums activate, mediate, or destabilize presence? How do they design encounters that allow spiritual charge to be sensed rather than merely described?

This commentary reflects on four intertwined dimensions that emerge from these projects; the shift from representation to relational experience, the move from curatorial monologue toward structural dialogue, the challenge of curating depth in an age of attention saturation and the necessity of institutional responsibility in postcolonial contexts.

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that contemporary curating must move beyond object-centered display toward experience-based, dialogical, and structurally integrated methodologies. This shift is not aesthetic experimentation. It is an institutional transformation. In an era marked by accelerated attention, contested histories, and plural epistemologies, the museum must become not a stage for authority, but a mediator of relations.

Interlude: Curating the Yin- Towards a Methodology of Collective Healing

My engagement with these questions does not arise solely from observing institutional shifts, but from an ongoing research trajectory I describe as *Curating the Yin, of a methodology* rooted in receptivity, relational awareness, and the ethics of holding space. This research also emerges from a personal inquiry: not only as curator and researcher, but as a visitor seeking my own place within the museum.

In contrast to the traditionally assertive, authorship-driven model of curating, this approach begins not with proclamation but with listening. Yin, in this context, does not signify passivity. It signifies structural receptivity the capacity of an institution, an artist, a curator, or an exhibition to receive, to contain, and to facilitate processes that move from singular authority toward collective presence.



Fig. 1 From Living Archive project, two ladies watching a video installation from artist Cigdem Yüksel. ©Ipek M

Within my research on collective healing in exhibition-making and art practice, the museum is understood as a charged environment: a site where historical trauma,

spiritual belief, political memory, and embodied experience converge. Healing, here, is not therapeutic in the reductive sense. It operates at the level of structure and condition. It involves designing environments in which suppressed narratives can surface and audiences can encounter differences without being directed toward premature resolution. Such work requires dramaturgy and choreography within institutional space and attentiveness to rhythm, proximity, and duration.

Curating the Yin therefore operates across multiple layers: spatial, relational, institutional, political, and temporal. It recognizes that impact is not measured solely through visibility or attendance, but through depth of encounter and durability of relation. Care, within this framework, is not sentiment. It is infrastructure. It shapes how objects are positioned, how communities are consulted, how rituals are acknowledged, and how shared ownership of history is negotiated.

In my own projects, this has meant designing participatory environments where visitors are invited not only to interpret objects, but to contribute narratives, gestures, or spatial interventions that reshape the exhibition itself. While relational aesthetics and participatory practices have long challenged curatorial authority, *Curating the Yin* differs in its emphasis on sustained holding rather than activation. It is less concerned with producing interaction and more with cultivating conditions of attentiveness, care, and ethical co-presence over time.

The projects presented in "*Museum Charge(s)*" resonate deeply with this methodology. Each, in distinct ways, shifts from presentation to encounter, from object to relational field, and from explanation to mediation. What follows is not merely commentary, but reflection on how these diverse practices collectively point toward a necessary curatorial transformation grounded in relationality, accountability, and collective presence.

From Object to Experience: A Shared Shift

Museums have long operated within a representational paradigm: objects stood in for cultures; vitrines stood in for rituals; interpretation panels stood in for knowledge. Authority flowed from institution to visitor. The stage became elevated and the audience stood at a distance.The projects discussed during this workshop revealed the limits of that model.

In her analysis of exhibiting Sufi material culture at the Musée d'Art et de Culture Soufis MTO, Estelle Brun does not treat kashkūls and khirqa cloaks as ethnographic artefacts detached from practice. Rather, she foregrounds the symbolic charge embedded in their conservation, restoration, and spatial presentation. The decision to display cloaks openly preserving signs of wear is not a formal gesture but an ethical one. The involvement of Sufi practitioners in tying a service garment's belt, and the refusal to present samā' as "performance," mark a decisive break from spectacle. Interpretation is shared; authority is distributed.

Katharina Sabernig's *Knitted Anatomy*, exhibited at the German Museum of Medical History, further destabilizes the conventional museum gaze. By introducing textile organs alongside historical wax models, she interrupts the visual authority of anatomical realism. The softness of wool counters the harsh exposure of human remains, prompting ethical reflection on what she calls the "spiritually charged material" of the body.

A similar spatial transformation occurs in Farnaz Masoumzadeh's proposed honeycomb structure for Iranian epigraphic objects. Here, inscription is not treated as isolated artefact or decorative script; it becomes spatial theology. Meaning emerges through relational positioning through proximity, comparison, and movement within a constructed constellation. The visitor must navigate, not simply observe.

Across these examples, the sacred is not explained; it is encountered. We witness a transition from exhibition as representation to exhibition as relational experience.

The curator's task shifts from narrating meaning to designing atmospheres in which meaning and relationality may emerge. Care becomes methodology. This shift resonates with my own research into relational curating, where care and collective healing function not as sentiment, but as structural strategy.

Dialogue as Infrastructure: From Curatorial Monologue to Relational Governance

One of the most compelling threads across the workshop contributions is the erosion of singular curatorial authority. Dialogue here is not rhetorical; it is infrastructural. It reshapes not only how exhibitions speak, but how institutions operate.

Fang-I Chu's reflection on Green Island's National Human Rights Museum division exemplifies this shift. The proposed co-design of ritual petitions to Tu-Di Gong does not simply acknowledge local cosmology; it integrates it into the museum's mediating function. Writing and burning letters becomes a curatorial device through which political history, spiritual practice, and community anxiety intersect. The museum does not overwrite local belief systems; it negotiates with them.

Valentina Gamberi's *Traces of Guanyin* further complicates curatorial authority through creative writing, drawings, and ethnographic reflexivity. The statues whisper; the curator doubts; fieldwork awkwardness is made visible. Rather than stabilising meaning, the exhibition foregrounds ambiguity. Deconsecration rituals are presented as contested and taboo not resolved through curatorial certainty, but held within uncertainty.

These methodologies resonate with broader critiques of epistemic dominance articulated by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), where representation itself is understood as a site of power. Yet what distinguishes these projects is their operational dimension. Dialogue is not staged as critique alone; it is embedded in committees, rituals, spatial staging, audio testimonies, and participatory practices.

The curator becomes facilitator rather than narrator. Authority is not abandoned; it is redistributed.

Crucially, this redistribution of authority extends beyond interpretation into institutional ecology. Spiritually charged exhibitions rarely involve only curators and visitors. On Green Island, the museum is entangled with NGOs, political victims, ritual specialists, local islanders, and government actors. Chu describes tensions between official human rights narratives and local fears of haunted presences. The museum becomes simultaneously sacred democratic ground and ominous taboo space, a condition that cannot be curated without negotiation.

A similar relational governance model emerges at IGRMS, where tribal communities are engaged as co-creators rather than represented as static heritage. Ritual specialists periodically return to renew sacred structures, maintaining continuity beyond exhibition timelines. The museum operates within a living network of relationships, where curatorial decisions are inseparable from community accountability.

In these contexts, dialogue-based methodologies are not soft ethics. They are governance practices. Curating becomes a form of diplomacy, a collective negotiation among practicing communities, activists, institutional leadership, funding bodies, scholars, and visitors. What emerges is not consensus, but sustained co-presence. Dialogue, here, is not the opposite of structure but the structure.

Curating in the Age of Attention Saturation

In an attention economy governed by speed, metrics, and visual competition, spiritually charged exhibitions risk becoming aesthetic commodities. Slowness, therefore, becomes not only experiential strategy but political gesture.

The VR dhikr experience at MACS MTO invites immersion without explanatory narration. Visitors observe rather than consume. Chu's proposal to create ritual

writing spaces on Green Island introduces slowness into a politically and spiritually volatile site. Masoumzadeh's honeycomb exhibition structure for Iranian epigraphic objects encourages circular movement and relational comparison rather than linear progression.

These are not interactive features designed for entertainment. They are choreographies of attentiveness. In a context of overstimulation, the museum must curate depth. Experience-based methodologies, therefore, are not technological trends. They are structural responses to the fragmentation of perception. The sacred cannot survive as surface-level aestheticisation. It requires temporal investment and embodied presence.

The Intangible as Curatorial Core

A striking commonality across these contributions is the centrality of the intangible. Samā', dhikr, ancestral mediation, ghost pacification, divine names, deconsecration rituals, these practices cannot be contained in vitrines. They are embodied, performative, relational. Museums have historically privileged materiality because it is collectible and classifiable. Spiritually charged exhibitions expose the insufficiency of this logic. But how does one exhibit listening? How does one stage absence? How does one respect taboo without reifying it? The intangible exposes the limits of the museum. It demands curatorial strategies that operate through affect, atmosphere and embodied practice rather than didactic explanations.

Gamberi's hollowed statues reveal how absence (the removed sacred contents) can become the very trace through which interpretation unfolds. Rodemeier's colour-coding proposal for the Oceania room suggests visual systems that indicate degrees of spiritual power without overdetermining meaning. Technology can assist; VR, audio stations, digital storytelling but ethical design remains primary. The line between immersive pedagogy and spectacle is thin. The sacred demands restraint. Across these projects, the intangible is curated and proposed to be curated through

spatial dramaturgy, ritual collaboration, participatory gestures, reflexive narration and strategic absence. The museum becomes a mediator of processes rather than an exhibitor of objects.



Fig. 2 International Sinop Biennale, artist Suat Öğüt's presentation as part of the biennale programming. ©Ipek M. Sur

Colonial Entanglement and Institutional Responsibility

Colonial histories permeate several of the cases discussed: Oceania artefacts acquired during German colonial expansion; Chinese statues collected through missionary networks; human remains displayed within European medical institutions. Acknowledging provenance is necessary but insufficient.

Susanne Rodemeier openly addresses the uncertainties surrounding acquisition in colonial contexts and the ambivalence of displaying human skulls in the Oceania exhibition. Gamberi reveals how missionary archives rarely documented deconsecration rituals, leaving the hollows of Guanyin statues unexplained absence becoming both material trace and archival silence. Sabernig references the colonial circulation of anatomical knowledge between Europe and Asia, reminding us that scientific authority itself was historically entangled with religious expansion and imperial agendas. These examples demonstrate that colonial entanglement is not a footnote to collections; it is constitutive of them as well as their presentation of today.

Institutional awareness, therefore, must extend beyond corrective wall labels or revised captions. A significant example of this broader shift can be observed in the Netherlands, historically one of Europe's major colonial powers. The Rijksmuseum has, in recent years, implemented structural provenance research programs, revised terminology policies, and publicly acknowledged colonial violence embedded in its collections. Similarly, the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (including Wereldmuseum locations) has developed restitution policies and collaborative research trajectories with source communities, embedding decolonial accountability into institutional frameworks rather than treating it as an exhibition theme. Yet even within these frameworks, restitution remains uneven, and symbolic gestures often outpace structural change.

What distinguishes such practices is not merely the act of research, but the

integration of that research into governance, acquisition policies, terminology guidelines, and long-term partnerships. Colonial awareness becomes operational. If colonialism structured the formation of collections, then decolonial responsibility must structure the institution. This requires transparent research processes, reflexive exhibition designs, ongoing consultation with communities of origin that extends beyond project timelines and finally acceptance of unresolved tensions where restitution, representation, or interpretation remain complex and incomplete.

Institutional maturity lies in acknowledging that not all conflicts can be resolved through display. At this point, curating impact becomes strategic rather than reactive. Departments curatorial, education, research, public programming, collections management, and communications, must align to sustain ethical coherence. Provenance research cannot exist in isolation from acquisition policy. Education cannot promote dialogue if governance structures contradict it. Public programming cannot address colonial histories if institutional language remains unchanged.

Policy and curatorial practice are inseparable. Without structural integration between research, governance, and exhibition design, dialogical gestures risk remaining symbolic. Decolonial responsibility is not an interpretive layer. It is an institutional condition.

Conclusion: Curating Impact as Relational Practice

Across all contributions, a profound shift becomes visible. Objects are no longer treated as stable carriers of meaning, but as active participants within relational environments. Sacred charge does not reside in material alone; it emerges through positioning, collaboration, atmosphere, and care. What these projects collectively suggest is that curating spiritually charged exhibitions is less about explaining belief than about holding space for encounter. If we accept that objects can act as subjects, then exhibition becomes a field rather than a format, a space in which meaning is not

delivered but negotiated. The museum, in this sense, is neither a neutral container nor an authoritative narrator. It becomes mediator, host, threshold.

The workshop itself embodied this shift: a space where diverse practices, geographies, and epistemologies met not to resolve differences, but to dwell within it. What follows is not a summary, but a condensation, a curatorial afterimage.

Relational Field

Something has shifted.
The objects no longer wait.

Wood remembers.
Cloth holds warmth.
Hollows breathe.

An ancestor stands
where we once placed a figure.

A knitted organ quiets the gaze.
A grove roots in concrete.
A letter-burns smoke answering silence.

Nothing here is only displayed.

Glass thins.
Labels falter.
The room listens.

If objects become subjects,
exhibition becomes a field.

Meaning gathers

between us.

The museum is not a house of things.
It is a threshold.

And we are responsible
for how we hold it open.

References

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Ipek M. Sur is a curator, researcher, and connector based in Amsterdam. Her practice spans fine arts, performance, film, and social projects. She followed her MA in Photographic Studies at Leiden University and two Bachelor's degrees from the Royal Academy of Arts (KABK) and the Marmara Faculty of Arts in Istanbul. Trained in classical ballet, design and performance art, Ipek brings a sensuous, embodied approach to cultural production. Guided by care, reciprocity, and deep listening, she weaves stories of migration, memory, and transformation. Her recent projects include Collective Healing, a curatorial research exploring ritual, memory, and embodied resistance. She has realized Circular Narratives at the International Sinop Biennale, ArtsMap, and Making Connections Through Arts & Culture, all of which combine art, policy, and community engagement. As founder and Artistic Director of the 7 Hills Foundation, she cultivates spaces where art bridges healing and collective consciousness. With experience as Senior Policy Advisor for Culture at the Dutch

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ipek brings strategic insight into diplomacy, cultural equity, and international collaboration. She serves on advisory boards for European institutions and helps shape platforms valuing process over product and presence over prestige.