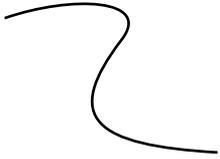


# Elke Krasny

## Caring Activism

### Assembly, Collection, and the Museum



*Access is not a concession but the gorgeous norm.*  
(muf)

We see a group of women gathered around two tables. Deep in conversation with each other, their small assembly appears in a cloister-like niche, shielded off at the side of a much larger space. The two tables at which the group sits curve in such a way as not to harm any of the objects and materials that occupied the space before they were added. The women's gathering takes place in the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries of the London Victoria and Albert Museum. The year is 2015. They have these conversations during their English class, organised and taught by *Women Asylum Seekers Together*, which in turn is supported by *Women for Refugee Women*, a campaigning charity active "at the grassroots to support and empower women who are seeking asylum" in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Next to the colonnades in the Renaissance Gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum is not where the group usually comes together to have their English class, attended on a weekly basis by up to 70 women. *muf architecture/art* invited them to "transplant" their class into the museum.<sup>2</sup> *muf*, a collaborative practice between architecture and art, have focused on the "social, spatial and economic infrastructures of the public realm" since their founding in 1994.<sup>3</sup> Inviting *Women for Refugee Women* to the museum was central to their installation *More than one (Fragile) Thing at a Time*, which they conceived of as their response to the invitation to contribute to the exhibition *All of This Belongs to You*. This exhibition, curated by Corinna Gardner, Rory Hyde and Kieran Long, was shown from 1 April to 19 July 2015, and "examined the role of public institutions in contemporary life and what it means to be responsible for a national collection."<sup>4</sup> Drawing on their long experience of working with the public realm, Liza Fior, founding member of *muf*, explains the importance of starting from the given, from the literal – in other words, of what is literally there. Material conditions are just as much part of this as are cultural practices and legal frameworks. Fior points out that this project started from the legal definition of the Victoria and Albert Museum as "a category D space, a pure public good".<sup>5</sup> Broadly defined, a public good is "a commodity or a service that is provided to all members of society without profit, either by the government or by a private individual or organisation", and it is for the "benefit or well-being of the public".<sup>6</sup> The distinction between profit and benefit clearly shows that a public good has to be considered outside the criteria of capitalist exploitability. This is most relevant to the idea of

1 *Women for Refugee Women*. <http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/about-us/> [4 July 2017].

2 Cf. *City as Host: Liza Fior and Kieran Long* | Victoria and Albert Museum. [www.vam.ac.uk/designandpubliclife/2015/05/21/10-april-2015-city-as-host-liza-fior-and-kieran-long/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/designandpubliclife/2015/05/21/10-april-2015-city-as-host-liza-fior-and-kieran-long/) [12 August 2017].

3 *muf architecture/art*. <http://www.muf.co.uk/profile> [12 August 2017].

4 Corinna Gardner, Rory Hyde, Kieran Long (curators): *All of This Belongs to You*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum 1 April – 19 July 2015. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/all-of-this-belongs-to-you/> and *muf art/architecture: "More than one (Fragile) Thing at a Time"*, in: Corinna Gardner, Rory Hyde, Kieran Long (curators): *All of This Belongs to You*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1 April – 19 July 2015. <http://www.muf.co.uk/portfolio/more-than-one-fragile-thing-at-a-time/> [12 August 2017].

5 Liza Fior, in conversation with the author, London 11 February 2016.

6 "public good", *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*.

public space and, of course, to museum space and collections. Economists refer to a public good as “a product of which anyone can consume as much as desired without reducing the amount available for others”.<sup>7</sup> This can be read in two ways. Firstly, a public good has to be cared for so that it is neither reduced nor exhausted. Secondly, a public good is to be made available for members of the public in such a way as to ensure access without discrimination. *Muf* considered the collected objects on display in the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries, where their project *More than one (Fragile) Thing at a Time* took was located, and *Women Asylum Seekers Together*, the group they invited to assemble for their English class there, as equally important contenders for inhabiting the public space the museum provides, making it a truly public good. *Muf*’s work made the space co-inhabitable for humans and non-humans, members of the public and collected objects alike. The insistence on the literal legal definition of the museum and its collections as a public good and public space is conceptually, materially and politically relevant.

In the following I will work through the political dimension of the museum as a public good, providing public space to collection and assembly. Throughout, I make use of the literal as a sharp tool for critical feminist analysis and practice. The literal is not bound to any one practice or discipline in particular. Quite on the contrary, the literal can become most useful in its complexly challenging translations into material, political, social, cultural, aesthetic conditions and other languages. One can hold the literal up to what it is, what it can mean, what it could do. The literal enables performative acts. In pursuit of the literal, I weave together feminist care perspectives in political theory, political philosophy on public space and assembly, critical museology, urban sociology, and citizenship studies. The aim is to create caring activism as a concept to think and to act with, so that collection and assembly come together in the public space of the museum. This is of importance for decolonising and depatriarchalising the museum collection and for practicing assembly to highlight new features of citizenship no longer bound to the national state or defined only through legal formal status.

### **CARING – CURATING**

Why introduce this concept of caring activism? Using the literal as my tool leads to the Latin origin of the word curating. The etymological root *curare* can be translated as follows: “care I. look after, to take care of something or to take an interest in something, to take something to heart or to worry, to provide or to manage, to affect II. to take care of; 2. to service or to maintain, to foster or to care for somebody; 3. a (sacrifice) to provide; b. to manage, to command; c. (sick people) to treat, to cure; d. (money) to provide, to obtain or to get, to pay.”<sup>8</sup> Care is identified as the core in the translations of *curare* including a wide range of different activities. This requires us to think more about what curating, quite literally caring, is and can do today.

<sup>7</sup> “Public Goods: A Brief Introduction.” [http://www.linfo.org/public\\_good.html](http://www.linfo.org/public_good.html) [12 August 2017].

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *City as Host: Liza Fior and Kieran Long* | Victoria and Albert Museum. [www.vam.ac.uk/designandpubliclife/2015/05/21/10-april-2015-city-as-host-liza-fior-and-kieran-long/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/designandpubliclife/2015/05/21/10-april-2015-city-as-host-liza-fior-and-kieran-long/) [12 August 2017].

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Paul O’Neill: *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Cambridge 2012, 81.

Historically, the “*curator-as-carer*” was considered to be the keeper of the museum collection, with much invisible behind-the-scenes work to take best care of the objects.<sup>9</sup> Such care taking includes the provision of the best material conditions possible, necessary repair and restoration work and, of course, also in-depth scholarly research so that the objects in question can be better understood. Broadly speaking, then, this kind of work can be seen as caring work, as re-productive work concerned with the maintenance of objects kept in museum collections. This bears strong associations with the invisibilised and feminised domestic labour that takes care of reproduction behind the scenes in private, rather than with work performed in the public realm. Throughout the twentieth century, curators have redefined their position and transformed it into the *curator-as-author*. “Since the 1920s, there has been a gradual change from the role of the *curator-as-carer*, working with collections out of the sight of the public, to a more central position on a much broader stage.”<sup>10</sup> This passage from *curator-as-carer* to *curator-as-author*, the passage from the invisible to the public, was described as follows: “Therefore, it is in the name of the privilege accorded invention and creation – of the singularity of the individual creator of an artwork and his or her capacity for innovation when faced with the solidified traditions in the institutions – that the original work, the combination of works and documents, which constitutes an exhibition, can be judged. In other words, in extremis, it is as auteur that an exhibition curator will eventually be regarded.”<sup>11</sup> Asserting independence and authorship came at the expense of care. Recent theorisation in the philosophy of curating has introduced its separation from the curatorial as follows: “If ‘curating’ is a gamut of professional practices that had to do with setting up exhibitions and other modes of display, then the ‘curatorial’ operates at a very different level: it explores all that takes place on the stage set-up, both intentionally and unintentionally, by the curator and views it as an event of knowledge.”<sup>12</sup>

So, why then not simply speak of curatorial activism, why this turn to curating in introducing the concept of caring activism? This move seeks to connect care, curating’s literal core, more strongly with its contemporary practice by drawing on feminist care theory emphasising the ontological and political levels of co-dependence and interrelatedness between non-humans and humans, in our case objects kept in museum collections and members of the public visiting museums. This serves to counteract the strongly held belief that care as invisibilised and feminised labour does not yield aesthetic and intellectually relevant production, which has led to the suppression of the literal meaning of care in the contemporary understanding of curating as outlined above in the short historiography of the *curator-as-carer* to the *curator-as-author*. It equally counteracts the idea of the independent curator, seeing curating as always co-dependent per se, and in fact, caring curating as a form of activism that works with the politics of such co-dependencies, and renders them legible.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> O’Neill (2012), 81.

<sup>11</sup> Nathalie Heinrich, Michael Pollak: “From Museum Curator to Exhibition Auteur. Inventing a singular position”, in: Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson, Sandy Nairne : *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London/New York 1996, 166 – 179 (170 – 71).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Martinon, Irit Rogoff: “Preface”, in: Jean-Paul Martinon (ed.): *The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating*, London 2013, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Elke Krasny: “Curatorial Materialism: A Feminist Perspective on Independent and Co-Dependent Curating”, in: *OnCurating* 29, 2016, 96 – 108.

The following normative definition of care provided in 1990 by Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto is useful to my purpose here, as it supports the claim that curating is a form of care. This is their broad and general definition: “On the most general level we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”<sup>14</sup> If we think of curating as caring, then we see that this has everything to do with the material conditions supporting the co-appearance of humans and non-humans in the public space of the museum. This is of course a deeply political question. Let me look more closely now at the gendered dimension of care which led to curating’s refusal to be literally understood as caring. Historically, the subject positions assigned to those who (have to) perform care labour come with the burdens of political exclusions and the economic realities of un(der)paid labour. Beginning with Aristotle’s *Politics*, care has been assigned to the private sphere.<sup>15</sup> Gender was historically organised along the public-private axis. This divide barred women’s access to the public sphere in cultural, political, social, economic, material, and educational terms, since “their association with dependency and care made them ineligible for public life”.<sup>16</sup> Even though the work of curators-as-carers as keepers of the collection not only sought to guarantee the physical survival of the objects they were responsible for, but also informed the epistemic regimes of knowledge power produced via the museum, their work was primarily done in the “[...] hidden spaces of the museum [...] in camera [...]”.<sup>17</sup> And this, as one easily sees, bears a very close resemblance to the caring labour that is hidden from the public and performed in the private domestic sphere. The historically gendered, sexed, and racialised divide between public and private, visible and hidden, valued and un(der)valued provides a clearer understanding of why the curator-as-carer was transformed throughout the twentieth century into the curator-as-author. My aim is to activate the literal meaning of care in curating as a way of connecting collection and assembly with the politics of the museum as a public space. *Muf*’s practice as a chosen example of such caring activism is particularly relevant, as they speak of “making it possible to inhabit public space”.<sup>18</sup> Inhabitation challenges the commonly assumed boundaries of private and public, visible and invisible. Bringing the idea of inhabiting, conventionally associated with the domestic sphere, to the public space, is a political move that requires a different kind of care for the material conditions supporting such inhabitation. Shifting “boundaries” is not easily accomplished when we think of the written and unwritten norms and rules governing the public space of the museum.<sup>19</sup> The inhabitation of public museum space and exercising the right to assembly requires new forms of curating, which I have chosen to call caring activism.

<sup>14</sup> Berenice Fisher, Joan C. Tronto: “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring”, in: Emily K. Abel, Margaret K. Nelson (eds.): *Circles of Care. Work and Identity in Women’s Lives*, Albany 1990, 35 – 62 (40).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Joan C. Tronto: *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York/London. 2013, 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Tony Bennet: *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*. London/New York 1995, 89

<sup>18</sup> Liza Fior in conversation with the author, 11 February 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche: *Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge, MA/ London 1996, 269.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Marstine: “Introduction”, in: Janet Marstine (ed.): *New Museum Theory and Practice. An Introduction*, Malden, MA, Oxford/Carlton, Victoria 2001, 1 – 36 (15).

## ON PUBLIC SPACE

“How we define public space is intimately connected with ideas of what it means to be human, the nature of society, and the kind of political community we want.”<sup>20</sup> Members of the public fiercely disagree over what public space is, what it does, what it should do, and what its potentials are. In our context here, speaking of the museum as a public space, it is important to underline that the public space of the museum and its collection is historically a “colonising space”.<sup>21</sup> The museum public are exposed to objects kept in collections that bear witness to the “epistemic violence” of imperialist, colonial, masculinist, and patriarchal knowledge power regimes.<sup>22</sup> Even though these issues have been critically examined in urban studies and in museum or curatorial studies, the two fields of scholarship rarely intersect. One can think of productive future work bringing together these fields in public assembly in the museum.

The beginning twenty-first century has witnessed large-scale assemblies and mass demonstrations in cities round the world – Tunis, Cairo, Istanbul, New York, Madrid or Paris, to name but a few. These assemblies have given rise to a different kind of politics, characterised by unusual and unexpected alliances. “Many accounts not only of Gezi but many of the myriad uprisings of the past several years touch on this: the state-free zone became a site for a politics of contact between identities, groups, and organizations that previously would not and could not exist side by side.”<sup>23</sup> When people gather in collective assembly, they not only exercise a fundamental human right, the “right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association”, they also attempt to find out whether a different way of collectively inhabiting public space and of shaping a politics of alliance across difference is possible.<sup>24</sup> Learning from such practices, tested out in assembly for future assembly in the public space of the museum, is highly relevant to the idea of caring activism.

## SAMMLUNG UND VERSAMMLUNG – COLLECTION AND ASSEMBLY

As stated above, I am, and have been for a very long time, interested in the potential of the literal. The literal is political. Language is important to this practice of the literal. Thinking about this essay began in my mother language, which is German. And this language makes a literal connection between *Sammlung* (collection) and *Versammlung* (assembly). Translating the literal is part of its complexly challenging practice.

What can one make of this verbatim connection between *Sammlung*, collection, and *Versammlung*, assembly? A collection is formed through objects that are *kept together*. Of course, in a museum collection, these objects are meant to serve a specific cause. Historically, those who took care of collections were called keepers. An assembly takes place when people *come together* for a common cause. They gather around matters of shared concern. Using the literal as my tool again, we see that both definitions make use of the word *together*. Among the dictionary definitions of together we find the following “in or into one place [...]”.<sup>25</sup> This is useful for my purpo-

<sup>22</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: “Can the subaltern speak?”, in: Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg, (eds.): *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana 1988, 271 – 313 (280). Cf. Natalie Bayer, Nora Sternfeld: *Kuratieren als anti-rassistische Praxis (Curating as an anti-racist practice)*, Wien 2017 (forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> Basak Ertür: “Barricades: Resources and Residues of Resistance”, in: Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay (eds.): *Vulnerability and Resistance*, Durham/London 2016, 97 – 121 (109).

<sup>24</sup> United Nations: *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Article 20. <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> [12 August 2017].

<sup>25</sup> “together” <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/together> [12 August 2017].

ses here, as I wish to draw attention to the spatial, or even more broadly, the infrastructural dimensions, as they matter to the political dimension of collection and assembly. For objects to be kept together as a collection, for people to come together in assembly, they have *to be together in one place*. This means that there has to be a physical place providing the conditions necessary for objects to actually be kept together in collection or for people to come together in assembly.

There have to be material conditions that make it possible for gathered people to exercise their right to assembly. And there have to be material conditions that make it possible for collected objects to be kept together and to be rendered public in the museum space. Judith Butler has worked through the complex dialectical interdependencies between material conditions and assembly. “As much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly and public speech, we also have to ask how it is that assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment.”<sup>26</sup> Even though the material – and I would like to add here, the legal – conditions for public space have to be ensured, the political dimension is not permanent. Each performative act of assembly renders the political dimension of this space public. And, as Butler has further elaborated, public space and public good are very much part of the political agenda of assembly. “The material conditions for speech and assembly are part of what we are speaking and assembling about.”<sup>27</sup>

What can be gained now from moving collection and assembly closer *together*, of literally bringing them *in or into one space*? On the most basic level, museums ensure the physical survival and long-term maintenance of collected objects. This infrastructural support for the well-being of museum collections is a public space that can be useful to assembly in more than one way. Thinking of collected objects and assembled humans, we come to see that they are co-implicated in “dependence and vulnerability”.<sup>28</sup> This helps us to understand that a politics of caring for public space extends beyond humans to include material matters. Thinking of collection and assembly in the same space raises awareness for forms of assembly that are different from large-scale gatherings – they could be called “intimately public”. And, of course, such an assembly, surrounded by collected objects, requires a mindful awareness of the public space that is being used and inhabited. Many museums and their collections round the world offer fertile ground for political assembly addressing the very politics of the objects they keep. Assembly can be understood as a way to further decolonise and depatriarchalise the museum.

Arguing for the collection and assembly to co-use the public space of the museum points towards the ideological implications of public space in more general terms. Many museum collections are obviously implied in “imperialist and patriarchal structures”.<sup>29</sup> And the buildings housing and sheltering the objects kept are representations of the knowledge and power regimes that gave rise to them. This holds true for many of the large-scale museum infrastructures built during the imperial era of the nineteenth century. Today, contem-

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler: “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”, in: *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, MA / London 2015, 66–98 (71).

<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler: “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”, in: *Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, Leticia Sabsay* (2016), 13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Marstine* (2001), 14.

porary museum buildings are implied in neoliberal place making, gentrification, neo-colonial globalisation, and spectacular consumption. And the situation with regard to museum space holds equally true for the representative squares used for public assembly. Many of them were originally built for very different purposes than for that of peaceful large-scale assembly. They were material expressions of imperial, capitalist, authoritarian, or totalitarian power regimes. The vital infrastructural support provided by streets and squares to public assembly comes with violent histories and ideological legacies. Given that the same power regimes gave shape to the public square and the public museum, both of these sites can be put to use for assembly. Using, and even inhabiting, public space therefore raises complex questions of how to address and how to reconfigure its material history. Therefore, the critical work that has raised awareness on a necessary decolonising of the museum space, with colonial and patriarchal structures shaping not only its content, but equally its physical infrastructures, also applies to the public space of the street and the square. Working across the square, the street and the museum raises awareness for their interconnected political dimension, and effectively counteracts boundaries that are drawn between the public character of the exterior – the street or the square – and the interior, i.e. the museum.

#### **FROM RITUALS OF CITIZENSHIP TO ACTS OF CITIZENSHIP**

Historically, the museum has been identified as one of the formative institutions of modernity, playing a major role in putting into practice the ideas of the nation state and citizenship. As the art historian Carol Duncan observed in her 1991 essay “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship”, the museum provides the architectures in which the “ritual of citizenship” can be performed, thus “bind[ing] the community as a whole into a civic body”.<sup>30</sup> These rituals are not only observed by individual citizens, they are also “demonstrations of the state’s commitment to the principle of equality”.<sup>31</sup> In his analysis of the functions of the modern museum, the sociologist Tony Bennett was less interested in rituals of citizenship, and focused more on the governmental purpose of the museum, offering lessons in citizenry and the nation-state. Yet both authors share the idea of museum equality with Bennett, positing that all citizens have “an inviolable cultural right” to the museum.<sup>32</sup>

The prototype for the modern art museum and its new rituals practicing the modern idea of citizenship was, as Duncan remarks, the Louvre in Paris. The French Revolution decreed the Louvre “the property of all”, and effectively nationalised the former royal collection. “The perception of collective ownership helped (...) to confer on the citizen “a national character and the demeanour of a free man.”<sup>33</sup> The museum afforded white male French citizens a new public space in which to perform the ritual of behaving *like a free man*. The French Revolution first introduced the idea of modern citizenship, and then gave birth, as we have seen, to the modern art museum. The close links between the idea of modern citizenship and the modern

<sup>30</sup> Carol Duncan: “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship.”, in: Ian Karp, S.D. Lavine (eds.) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington/London 1991, 88 – 103, 91 f.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Bennett (1995), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew McClellan: *Inventing the Louvre. Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Berkeley et al. 1994, 99.

art museum date back to the French Revolution. Therefore, it is important to examine more closely the gendered and racialised exclusions of the historic concept of citizenship and its subsequent impact on citizenship rituals performed in the new public space offered by the museum and its collections.

On August 26, 1789, the National Assembly of France approved of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. The declaration is made up of seventeen articles explaining the rights and duties of man and of the citizen concerning “liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression” and “free communication of ideas and opinions.”<sup>34</sup> *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* has not only defined the citizen-subject in legal terms, but has equally shaped the political imaginary underpinning the rituals of citizenship. No mention is made of women in the *Declaration*. One needs to acknowledge and critically examine the sexualised and racialised violence engendered in the modern idea of citizenship and its stronghold on the political imaginary for centuries to come. The idea of citizenship impacted on its rituals, for which the museum provided an important site. We have seen here that the museum’s commitment to equality as an inviolable cultural right was unequal and exclusionary from the very beginning. The public space provided by the museum for practicing new and emergent rituals of citizenship was profoundly marked by the sexualised and racialised idea of citizenship. While women and people of colour were admitted to the museum, it denied them the “demeanour of a free man”, and the collections are an expression of imperial, colonial, and patriarchal structures.

Today, in the era of globalisation, we witness profound transformations in citizenship, and the emergence of new ideas of citizenship that are no longer bound to the national state. These changes are owed to mass migration, large refugee populations, diasporic communities scattered around the globe, indigenous right movements, and new forms of the right to define one’s gender. Saskia Sassen has written about “The Repositioning of Citizenship”.<sup>35</sup> She points out that the “necessary connection” between citizenship and the national state is no longer to be taken for granted.<sup>36</sup> The modern museum was, as we have seen, closely linked to instituting rituals of citizenship. Therefore, it is relevant to ask how the contemporary museum, the global museum, can and could be put to use for new and emergent informal citizenship practices. One of the defining features of cities around the globe is the museum as a signifier of contemporary urbanity. Therefore, much museum space is available on a global scale that could be put to use for emergent practices of citizenship, in particular the right to peaceful assembly and association. Inventing and performing “acts of citizenship” rather than observing rituals of citizenship described by Duncan as “passive”, might well include the assembly of individuals and groups otherwise unconnected, including those who are legally and formally denied the status of national citizenship.<sup>37</sup>

In concluding, let us return to the group of women assembled around the two tables at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The two

34 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/declaration-man.htm> [10 August 2017].

35 Cf. Saskia Sassen: “The Repositioning of Citizenship. Emergent Subjects and Spaces for Politics.”, in: *The New Centennial Review*, 3(2), 2003, 41 – 66.

36 Sassen (2003), 42.

37 Engin F. Isin: “Theorizing Acts of Citizenship.”, in: Engin F. Isin, Greg M. Nielsen (eds.): *Acts of Citizenship*, London/New York, 2008, 15 – 43. Duncan (1991), 94.

new tables were designed and brought in by *muf* to offer the material support necessary for the English class held by *Women Asylum Seekers Together*. And they used the architectural element of the colonnades to support their argument that the space can be inhabited like a public space. The colonnades of course were originally part of an exterior public space that had been displaced and moved to the interior of the museum space. So there is public space next to the colonnades in more than one sense. At first, adding tables seemed to be a near impossible thing. The testing for the English class in November 2014 used rectangular tables, which did not correspond with the museum's conservation requirements. Instead of giving in, *muf* designed new tables and had them curved and bent so that they fitted, without touching the colonnades. Even the feet of the tables were lined with synthetic felt to meet the conservation requirements for keeping the floor undamaged. Such provisions are a material part of what I have named caring activism, for the purposes of bringing people and things together in one space.

As the group of women had their English conversation class at the tables, they claimed their right to peaceful assembly in the public space of the museum. *Women for Refugee Women*, the charity that supports the English classes given by *Women Asylum Seekers Together*, "work to empower women who have sought sanctuary in the UK to speak about their own experience to the media, to policymakers and at public events", and they demand "a society in which women's rights are respected."<sup>38</sup> As well as tables being added as material support, the women were also able to show a new object at the museum – an object that did not yet belong to the V&A Museum collection, but was on display in *More than one (Fragile) Thing at a Time*. This object was a large quilt made up of messages by the women, an object assembling individual messages into a collective public statement. The strategy we see at work here connects individuals in collective assembly on the level of their material expression. The form of the object is an assembly. In this particular case, the assembled quilt is made up of components resulting from transversal alliances between women asylum seekers in London and supporters of their struggle from different parts of the world. Such a strategy on the material and formal level points in an interesting direction for creating even closer connections between assembly and collection.

Caring activism addresses the political dimension of the public space provided by the museum to house and shelter its collections. In this public space, objects are kept together in a collection, and people can come together in an assembly. Much work remains to be done in the future to explore collection and assembly *together in one place*, to make the museum a truly public space, useful to emergent acts of citizenship that are no longer bound to the national state. It would also fully acknowledge the fact that "citizenship is partly produced by the practices of the excluded."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Women for Refugee Women*. <http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/about-us/> [4 July 2017].

<sup>39</sup> *Sassen (2003)*, 49.