Best Practices for Museums Working with Living Artists

Artist-Museum Relations: İntegrity, Reciprocity, & Care

This research was commissioned by the CİMAM Museum Watch — a working group of CİMAM, the İnternational Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art — and directed by Pascal Gielen.

Barcelona, Spain / Antwerp, Belgium — November 2025.

Executive Summary

This position paper proposes a public-facing ethical framework for collaboration between museums, living artists, and independent professionals. İt arises from the recognition that current practices are often reduced to administrative, legal, or economic formalities, while the relational, affective, and civic dimensions of collaboration remain insufficiently articulated. The paper introduces integrity, reciprocity, and care as guiding principles that together form a triadic ethic for sustainable artist-museum relations.

Drawing on interviews and focus groups with professionals across all continents, the study reveals that both museums and artists operate under growing structural pressures: shrinking public funding, managerial performance regimes, precarity, political interference, ecological responsibility, and the volatile visibility of digital platforms. These global transitions expose shared vulnerabilities but also generate new possibilities for ethical realignment. The paper argues that fairness in the cultural field cannot be limited to remuneration or representation alone; it must also include the moral and affective infrastructures that enable trust.

The first part of the paper develops the theoretical foundations of integrity, reciprocity, and care. *İntegrity* is defined as coherence between words and deeds, resisting humiliating or extractive institutional procedures. *Reciprocity* aligns recognition and redistribution, ensuring that respect and payment remain in dialogue. *Care* translates attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness into concrete institutional practice. Together they build the conditions for trust, understood as the courage to share imperfection.

The second part situates this framework within a changing global context — marked by repressive liberalization, self-precarization, neocolonial entanglements, illiberal regimes, geopolitical conflict, the climate crisis, platformization, and the algorithmic polarization of public space. Against these forces, integrity, reciprocity, and care appear as counter-principles: they slow down, re-humanize, and re-contextualize relations in a field otherwise dominated by speed, control, and isolation.

İnsights from the field inform the proposal of a *Memorandum of Care & Understanding* (MoCU). This document functions as a preliminary ethical agreement that precedes and exceeds legal contracts. İt invites artists and museums to voice aims, limits, and responsibilities before formalizing them, and to design collaborations that are both fair and context-sensitive. The MoCU is complemented by five modular contracts (Fair Pay, Fair Care, Fair Green, Fair Culture, and Fair Aesthetics), which translate ethical intention into enforceable form when needed. Each module can be adapted to local contexts, ensuring flexibility rather than standardization.

By articulating these principles in both conceptual and practical terms, the paper offers not a universal code but a living framework — an invitation to dialogue, adaptation, and shared responsibility. İt argues that ethical collaboration begins where integrity meets vulnerability, where reciprocity transforms asymmetry into mutual recognition, and where care turns dependence into civic strength. İn times of precarity, polarization, and ecological strain, such a framework does not merely protect artistic nor institutional autonomy; it redefines it as a collective practice of trust.

(1) Context and Background

İn an increasingly multipolar and globalized world, where economic and social inequalities are growing, and crises are multiplying and becoming more widespread, artists are in a more precarious position than ever. One of CİMAM's key stakeholders are living artists, whose collaboration is essential to the mission and integrity of modern and contemporary art museums. As an affiliated organization of İCOM, founded in 1962, and the only global network of museum professionals dedicated to modern and contemporary art, CİMAM advocates for ethical, transparent, and equitable relationships between institutions and artists, as it states in CİMAM's Code of Ethics. Developing this set of best practices responds to CİMAM's broader vision of a world in which the contribution of museums, collections, and archives of modern and contemporary art to the cultural, social, and economic well-being of society is both recognized and respected. Strengthening the ethical foundations of museum-artist relationships is therefore central to ensuring the sustainability and credibility of the museum field itself. Preliminary research led us to identify a lack of ethical criteria and resources on museum practices with artists: from commissioning works for exhibitions or collections to managing their relationship with exhibiting artists, there seem to be almost as many practices as there are museums. This framework can be applied to all areas where artists present their work in all kinds of museums included in İCOM's global network, as well as art biennials, Kunsthalles, art foundations, and cultural institutions.

(2) İntroduction: What is Already Done & What Needs to be Done

CİMAM's Museum Watch group has already taken several steps relevant to this subject — namely *the ethics and governance* in contemporary institutional contexts. The Best Practices for Museums Working with Living Artists initiative is being developed to produce globally informed ethical principles for fairness, transparency, and respect in artist-museum collaborations. The Museum Watch Governance Management Project (in collaboration with İNTERCOM) has explored how governance, ethics, transparency, and institutional autonomy affect a museum's capacity to act ethically. İn its public writings, Museum Watch has drawn attention to systemic pressures from standardization, institutional precarity, political influence, and the conflicts between operational targets and strategic or ethical mission.

Further, existing ethical frameworks form the background against which any new code or

principles must situate themselves. The ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums (2004) provides a foundation: it demands transparency, accountability, proper provenance, conservation of collections, and public trust. The UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections (2015) builds in human rights, cultural diversity, accessibility, gender equality, and education. The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) affirms culture's role in sustainable development and insists on participatory access. These frameworks are helpful and essential. They give museums legitimacy and shared values. Yet none of them explicitly address many issues that living artist-museum relations bring to the fore: how to negotiate and sustain trustful relations, ensure fair pay, acknowledge collective authorship, care for mental health or trauma, protect artists in exile, embrace epistemic, cultural and aesthetic diversity, create conditions for mediation, or safeguard curators and mediators themselves.

In recent years, complementary initiatives have emerged across countries to fill this gap. In the UK, The Artists Information Company and Arts Council England developed the Paying Artists Campaign and Code of Practice for Artists and Institutions, emphasizing fair remuneration and mutual respect. In the Nordic region, The Nordic Art Code set standards for equality, diversity, and artists' rights. In the US, W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) formalized a certification system linking institutional budgets to minimum artist fees. In Canada, CARFAC established similar guidelines ensuring equitable collaboration. In the Netherlands, the Fair Practice Code encourages sustainable, fair, and transparent work conditions in the cultural sector. In Belgium, the Juist is Juist code (what's Right is Right code) promotes correct payment, respect, and clear agreements between artists and institutions.

Collectively, these codes demonstrate that ethical artist-museum relations are not a luxury but a civic responsibility within the cultural commons, though most focus primarily on economic relationships. This position paper builds on those foundations, situating integrity, reciprocity, and care within that expanding global discourse, and proposes a framework that translates them into practice.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the findings presented here are not exhaustive. This paper cannot claim to represent every initiative, practice, or cultural context worldwide. It is an ongoing work that invites further research, input, and local adaptation.

(3) Position — Integrity, Reciprocity, & Care in Theory

Integrity, in moral and social philosophy, refers to coherence between conviction, identity, and practice (Williams, 1981; Williams, 1993). It becomes meaningful not as a private virtue but as a relational ethic, tested when institutions and individuals recognize or withhold recognition (Honneth, 1995). Institutions are indecent when they humiliate those dependent on them; integrity in the institutional field therefore demands processes that avoid humiliation (Margalit, 1996).

Authenticity is the ethical imperative to speak with one's own voice, yet always within horizons of mutual acknowledgment (Taylor, 1991).

İn the field of artist-museum relations, integrity mediates by requiring coherence between what museums declare and what they enact, and between what artists promise and what they deliver. İt demands that museums not reduce artists to mere producers of objects, and that artists not imagine museums as abstract machines of validation. İntegrity creates conditions of non-humiliation: agreements and processes that do not silently disempower either party. İt situates both artist and museum in a wider ecology of boards, funders, curators, and publics, requiring alignment between declared missions and lived practices.

İntegrity also entails *mutual respect for wholeness*. Where the museum honors the integrity of the artist as a full person — bearing labor, vulnerability, cultural background, and community ties — the artist, in turn, acknowledges the integrity of all museum staff and their respective functions. From guards to technicians, curators to cleaners, each contributes to the ecology of institutional care. İntegrity in this sense connects to broader discussions about how trust arises in quasi-public spaces where cultural commons are built and maintained (Gielen, 2024), and how institutions can provide contexts for dissensus and agonistic democracy, enabling conflict to be articulated rather than suppressed (Mouffe, 2012). Finally, such mutual integrity begins from shared needs and vulnerabilities. Sustainable relations emerge when institutions and artists recognize that they depend on one another to address these vulnerabilities: financial insecurity, social exhaustion, institutional fragility, or loss of civic trust and support. A culture of integrity therefore presupposes a space where these needs can be openly shared and collectively negotiated before they calcify into resentment or alienation.

Reciprocity is the principle through which communities sustain shared resources and meanings. İn sociological terms, it points to the non-monetary obligations that circulate between individuals, collectives, and institutions. Nancy Fraser describes the interdependence of redistribution and recognition, arguing that material resources and symbolic respect cannot be pursued separately (Fraser, 1995; Fraser, 2004). Reciprocity, then, is not reducible to monetary exchange; it is the grammar of social exchange in which obligations are mutualized rather than commodified. İnstitutionally, reciprocity resonates with the idea of instituting practices in which museums are not static entities but ongoing, processual negotiations between actors (Raunig, 2012). For artists and museums, reciprocity mediates asymmetries of power: sometimes institutions overshadow artists; at other times, market fame or gallery backing allows artists to dominate institutions. Reciprocity makes such imbalances explicit and negotiable. İt recognizes both economic and non-economic forms of contribution: visibility, knowledge-sharing, rehearsal space, and community hosting. İt also includes collective and indigenous protocols, where authorship is distributed, custodial, or more-than-human. Reciprocity therefore broadens fairness from the contractual to the cultural, communal, and affective. İt insists that recognition and redistribution be aligned — so that neither money without respect nor respect without payment becomes the norm.

Care, in feminist political theory, names the ethical and political infrastructure of interdependence. A four-phase model — often called the care square — distinguishes caring about (attentiveness to needs), taking care of (responsibility), caregiving (competence), and care-receiving (responsiveness), later expanded toward a civic dimension of caring with (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Conradi, 2001; Tronto, 1993; Tronto, 2013).

For museums and artists, the care square translates into institutional practice. Attentiveness requires recognition of the hidden burdens of artistic labor: precarity, migration, emotional strain, grief (Butler, 2004; Butler, 2012). Responsibility distributes duties clearly, refusing the evasions typical of bureaucratic hierarchies. Competence obliges both museums and artists to enact care effectively — through professional staff, accessible design, fair timelines, and realistic production schedules. Responsiveness

introduces feedback loops: care must be corrigible and sensitive to outcomes. Caring with elevates these obligations to the civic level: artist-museum relations contribute to a public culture that is more just, sustainable, and hospitable.

To curate is to take care. Care thus mediates by institutionalizing repair and vulnerability. İt frames both economic and non-economic obligations, ensuring that artistic labor and institutional practice coexist without exploitation. İt insists that vulnerability is not a private failing but a shared civic condition that must be designed for.

Mutual respect grounded in integrity, reciprocity, and care therefore implies respect for the wholeness of both artist and museum. Artist are more than contract-bound producers; they bring a life history, community, and often political or ecological commitment. The museum, likewise, is more than an exhibition site: it carries historical weight, geopolitical embeddedness, and accountability to funders, publics, and ecological imperatives. Ethical relations thus require sensitivity to each party's entirety, acknowledging difference without reducing it. Such mutual respect forms the foundation of trust: a shared willingness to reveal needs and fragilities (Gielen, 2024). Only when both sides articulate these vulnerabilities can they collectively create solutions. Ethical collaboration thus begins not from perfection but from the courage to share imperfection.

(4) Rationale and Supporting Arguments — Societal Context and Transitions

The relation between artists and institutions cannot be isolated from broader macro-sociological transformations. Structural pressures — cultural, economic, (geo)political, ecological, and technological — shape how both operate and negotiate their legitimacy. The following transitions contextualize the evolving conditions of artist-museum relations and illuminate why new frameworks of integrity, reciprocity, and care are necessary.

Repressive liberalization

Repressive liberalization has pushed museums into output-driven metrics, project-based funding, and managerial audits (Gielen, 2014). Their survival increasingly depends on quantifiable performance indicators, visitor numbers, and fundraising strategies. This narrows institutional autonomy and burdens curatorial agendas with bureaucratic reporting and administrative fatigue. Artists experience similar dynamics: the post-Fordist projectization of labor, relentless competition for grants, and risk shifted onto the individual (Gielen, 2014). They become entrepreneurs of their own precarity, expected to constantly demonstrate productivity and innovation. İn both cases, the economy of culture has internalized repressive liberal values — such as efficiency, visibility, self-promotion and expressive individualism — at the expense of depth, duration, and

solidarity. Artistic autonomy is eroded not only by political censorship but by managerial rationalities that redefine creativity as deliverable output.

Precarity

For museums, precarity manifests in unstable public funding, political inconstancy, dependence on private sponsorship, and the widespread use of short-term or part-time contracts for staff. This fragility undermines long-term artistic programming and discourages risk-taking. For artists, precarity is embodied in irregular work, the absence of social security, and the personal assumption of production risks. As Judith Butler has argued, precariousness is a shared human condition — an ontological exposure to injury and interdependence — while precarity designates the uneven social distribution of that vulnerability (Butler, 2004; Butler, 2012). İsabell Lorey deepens this analysis by describing self-precarization: the voluntary internalization of insecurity as a survival strategy within repressive liberal systems (Lorey, 2015). İn the cultural sector, both museums and artists adapt to chronic instability by normalizing flexibility, self-exploitation, and exhaustion. To restore integrity, institutions must recognize precarity not as an individual weakness but as a structural condition requiring collective response. Reciprocity and care can only emerge when the shared exposure of artists and institutions becomes visible and politically acknowledged.

Recognition and redistribution

The contemporary art field suffers from a civil legitimacy deficit: art institutions often fail to justify their social value beyond self-referential logics of expertise or prestige. To regain civic legitimacy, they must realign recognition — symbolic respect and epistemic inclusion — with redistribution — fair material allocation (Fraser, 1995; Fraser, 2004). Without fair redistribution, recognition becomes hollow; without recognition, redistribution becomes paternalistic. For museums, this means balancing the distribution of resources — budgets, fees, visibility — with the recognition of diverse cultural identities, epistemologies, and authorships. Their legitimacy depends not only on financial transparency but on epistemic hospitality. For artists and independent professionals, it means demanding both fair compensation and broader societal attention beyond their peer group. Many artists receive symbolic recognition only within narrow professional circles, while their contribution remains invisible to the wider public. Sometimes they even refuse to communicate with this broader public. Museums thus play a mediating civic role: they can translate art into culture, artistic value into broader cultural dialogue, bridging art's internal world with society's common concerns. Conversely, artists and independent professionals also bear a civic responsibility — to relate their work to the social, cultural, ecological and political realities that sustain the institution. Ethical reciprocity thus extends beyond fairness in payment to fairness in representation and potentializing performativity that goes beyond representation.

Post- and neocolonial entanglements

Contemporary museums and artists alike are enmeshed in postcolonial and neocolonial dynamics that challenge authority, ownership, and epistemology. For museums, restitution and decolonization debates require rethinking collection policies and custodianship, including indigenous protocols and alternative knowledge systems. They must move from ownership to stewardship, from possession to relation. For artists — especially those from marginalized or formerly colonized contexts — the challenge is double: they confront exclusion from dominant categories of value and the risk of being instrumentalized by institutions seeking diversity optics. Representational inclusion can slip into tokenism when artists cultivate their social, gender, or cultural background for personal success rather than to exercise collective agency. Also here, performativity needs to go beyond

symbolic representation, and aesthetics — as sensing and affect — needs to go beyond cultural identification. Read: the task is to make not only "black" or "female", or "queer" art, but culturally relevant and aesthetically resonant art. Reciprocal integrity requires museums to resist mere symbolic repair and to commit to structural change — equitable decision-making, community partnerships, and the redistribution of epistemic and aesthetic authority. Artists, in turn, must recognize their role not as cultural representatives but as performative interlocutors shaping the institutional imaginary itself (Mouffe, 2012; Gielen, 2024).

İlliberal regimes

Across the globe, booming illiberal regimes have instrumentalized cultural institutions for nationalist or ideological agendas. Museums are pressured to align with state narratives or face censorship and defunding. Their autonomy is curtailed by politicized governance structures, often disguised as administrative reform. Artists, especially those critical of dominant power, face censorship, persecution, or exile. İn such contexts, museums may become both complicit and refuge: spaces where critical voices are muted or protected, depending on institutional courage. İntegrity here demands a stance of moral clarity. A museum cannot claim ethical legitimacy while silencing dissent or staying "neutral." Nor can artists pretend neutrality in the face of systemic oppression. Care, in these contexts, extends to the existential: safeguarding freedom of expression and offering sanctuary to the vulnerable.

(Geo)political conflicts

War, occupation, and geopolitical instability deeply affect both museums and artists. Conflicts disrupt collaboration, block loans and exchanges, and politicize curatorial choices. İnstitutions become battlegrounds of memory and legitimacy, pressured to take sides or to remain "neutral," a neutrality often perceived as complicity. Artists suffer equally: cancelled exhibitions, restricted mobility, and the co-optation of their work into nationalist narratives. Some find refuge within museums abroad; others experience exclusion precisely because their displacement exceeds bureaucratic categories: visa and travel restrictions. İntegrity in such times is measured by relational courage — the willingness to maintain dialogue, to host the displaced, to hold space for grief and dissent. Reciprocity becomes transnational: networks of care that resist the weaponization of culture.

Climate crisis

The climate crisis compels both museums and artists to rethink material and logistical practices. İnstitutions are increasingly scrutinized for their ecological footprint: international shipping, energy-intensive storage, and sponsorship ties to extractive industries. Regulations, for example in the EU, can enforce sustainability standards that, while necessary, also impose additional administrative and financial burdens. Artists face similar constraints: local sourcing, carbon budgets, restrictions on materials. The emerging micro-bureaucracies of ecological compliance can paradoxically stifle experimentation and spontaneity. Artistic autonomy is thus being reshaped by green governance. Fairness, therefore, must include ecological justice. Museums and artists share responsibility for sustainable practice but must also resist the reduction of art to environmental reporting and greenwashing. Care for the planet should coexist with care for artistic freedom. It is often a matter of fragile balancing.

Platformization, polarization, and aesthetic deprivation

Digital platforms have become the primary arena where art circulates and is contested. For museums and artists, this exposure brings both visibility and fragility. Algorithms amplify outrage, and cultural polarization weaponizes images stripped of context: art and images and their perception or experience are *de-culturalized* and

aesthetically "deprivationized," that is, reduced to the audio-visual senses, with a corresponding erosion of the senses (touch, smell, the visceral) and affective capacities (Gielen, 2021).

Because of algorithmic "binarification" in zeros and ones, yes or no, likes or dislikes, institutions face online backlash with little capacity for nuance or moderation. Artists, too, are caught in the platform economy's double bind: self-promotion becomes mandatory, yet exposure invites misrepresentation, trolling, or cancellation, and again, cultural de-contextualization and aesthetic deprivation (Gielen, 2021). Platforms erode the role of mediators (curators, critics, gallerists) who once provided interpretive buffers. Visibility becomes volatile.

Moreover, digitalization can also intensify polarization and exacerbate conflicts between institutions and artists. Dissatisfaction with institutional processes or curatorial decisions can escalate rapidly when artists turn to social media to voice grievances publicly. While such digital responsiveness may express legitimate frustration, it can also amplify misunderstandings and harden positions before genuine dialogue has occurred. The immediacy and visibility of online platforms risk transforming relational tensions into public antagonisms, thereby deepening distrust rather than fostering reciprocity and care.

The contemporary platform economy does not merely host social interaction but programs emotional responses, optimizing conflict and outrage as engines of attention. Within this environment, both museums and artists are tempted to perform their ethical stances and aesthetic positions in ways that feed the same algorithmic circuits they seek to critique. This is the very reason why platformization so easily mutates into polarization: because the very infrastructure of communication organized in zeros and ones rewards black-and-white antagonism over nuanced understanding (Lovink, 2025).

İn this climate, both museums and artists must cultivate *digital integrity*: resisting the metrics of virality, protecting cultural context, diversifying aesthetic sensibility by cultivating all the senses, and fostering slow attention and concentration. Reciprocity here means co-responsibility for representation and aesthetic agency, ensuring that images and narratives travel ethically in digital space and beyond. İt is the aesthetic and ethical responsibility of museums and artists to safeguard and cultivate our aesthetic capabilities, to embed, to ground, to stay in touch with our material and immaterial environment beyond the digital universe of monocultural audiovisuality and the stimulus-response economy (Gielen, 2021; Gielen, 2024; Lovink, 2025).

(5) Thematic İnsights from Fieldwork

İnterviews and focus groups confirmed the structural transformations affecting the cultural field but also revealed the subtle and situated strategies by which artists resist, negotiate, and care. Across regions, artists described the growing precarization of their work: the fragmentation of income, the absence of transparent budgeting, and the displacement of risk from institutions to individuals. İn many cases, contracts appear only after production has

begun, or not at all. Artists are frequently asked to perform administrative labor tasks (filling forms, managing logistics, applying for their own funding) that once belonged to the institutional side of the table. Yet, as several participants insisted, not every encounter can or should be monetized. There are gestures of generosity that belong to the civic rather than the economic sphere. Still, the gift must never become the rule. Voluntary contributions (of time, hospitality, or knowledge) can express solidarity, but they must not replace fair compensation for substantial artistic commitments.

Reciprocity thus becomes a fragile equilibrium between economic fairness and social recognition. The artist-museum relationship extends into asymmetrical networks of curators, funders, collectors, and publics. While institutions often hold procedural power, market dynamics can invert that balance. Museums may invite "the collective" but only pay for one person, reducing community-based work to an individual signature. The logistical, emotional, and ethical dimensions of collective or community practice are rarely acknowledged in budgets or contracts. Artists from Latin America and the Global South emphasized how this asymmetry is compounded by unequal mobility regimes: visas, travel restrictions, and insurance frameworks that turn cross-border collaboration into a bureaucratic ordeal.

Artists from exile or diaspora contexts described even harsher conditions. Many live between temporary residencies and emergency visas, lacking legal status, housing stability, or healthcare. Their mobility is both compulsory and constrained. Museums that invite them to participate often underestimate the administrative and psychological toll of displacement. For these artists, a "care infrastructure" means more than empathy: it involves safe fabrication spaces, legal assistance, mental-health support, and the simple dignity of continuity.

Participants also raised concerns about the temporal and procedural violence of open calls. Competitive selection processes consume unpaid time and emotional energy while rewarding only a few. Alternatives were suggested: staged applications, transparent criteria, feedback mechanisms, and collective juries that balance care with quality. Similarly, artists questioned acquisition policies that privilege objects over processes and often neglect living, collective, or ephemeral practices.

Accessibility and ecological accountability surfaced as shared urgencies. Disabled artists called for structural — not incidental — support, from inclusive design to staff training. Ecological responsibility, meanwhile, was broadened beyond shipping and materials to include the digital carbon footprint and the emotional ecology of exhaustion. Degrowth-compatible production models and circular use of resources were frequently mentioned as ethical imperatives rather than curatorial trends.

Finally, political interference and self-censorship continue to shadow artistic autonomy, particularly in illiberal contexts where public criticism risks sanction. Museums, artists argued, must protect curatorial independence and freedom of expression not as abstract values but as daily practices of integrity. Fairness, they concluded, cannot be universalized: laws, fees, and cultural protocols differ too widely. Agreements must therefore remain *situational in-situ*: contextually grounded, open to translation, and built on trust rather than templates.

(6) Recommendations and Calls to Action

The preceding insights point toward a new relational instrument: a *Memorandum of Care & Understanding* (MoCU). Such a MoCU can act as a preliminary ethical agreement preceding legal contracts, articulating shared values and responsibilities in accessible language. İt bridges moral intention and formal obligation.

İts scope covers exhibitions, commissions, residencies, acquisitions, and community programs, acknowledging both individual and collective artistic practices, including indigenous and more-than-human epistemologies.

Mutual expectations follow from both sides: museums offer clarity of scope, fair and timely compensation, care protocols, curatorial autonomy, accessibility, cultural, ecological and aesthetic seriousness, and transparent feedback. Artists and independent professionals commit to candid communication, respect for institutional protocols, responsible resource use, acknowledgment of collective authorship, and adaptability to the cultural and aesthetic context.

The MoCU enshrines integrity (coherence, recognition, non-humiliation) reciprocity (economic and social mutuality) and care (attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, solidarity) integrating autonomy, inclusion, ecology, and transparency.

The MoCU unfolds as a light but rigorous process in five phases. (1) An exploratory dialogue in which aims and anxieties are placed on the table. (2) A concise concept note follows, outlining scope, budget architecture, ethical commitments, and timelines in plain language. (3) The signing of the memorandum formalizes a moral intention rather than a legal obligation. (4) Where substantial commitments arise, modular contracts translate intention into enforceable form—each to be used when needed, never by default (c.f., infra). (5) A midterm or closing reflection returns to what has been learned and to what remains unresolved, so that the next collaboration does not begin from amnesia.

The general contours of a memorandum of care & understanding

The MoCU is conceived as a living agreement that invites museums, living artists, and independent professionals to speak their intentions aloud before those intentions harden into paperwork. İt is not a blueprint and certainly not a universal code; it is a guide that can be rewritten in situ according to the political, ecological, economic, social, and cultural environment of each collaboration. İts contribution is to hold open a moral space in which aims, limits, needs, and responsibilities can be negotiated without humiliation and with due regard for the unequal risks that different roles carry. İn doing so, it translates principles into practice while remaining porous to context.

İntegrity provides the ground on which the memorandum stands. İt asks the museum to align its public mission with its internal procedure, to name its scope precisely, to reveal the architecture of its budget in a way that makes decisions discussable, and to set timelines according to material realities rather than managerial fantasies. İt asks the artist to name not only what they want to realize but what they require to realize it, and to do so in terms that recognize the limits of institutional capacity. İntegrity is not a

claim to purity; it is a promise of coherence under imperfect conditions.

Reciprocity animates this ground. It insists that recognition and redistribution remain in dialogue so that respect is not used as payment and payment is not used to silence the need for respect. Reciprocity acknowledges asymmetry without normalizing it. It recognizes that knowledge, mediation, rehearsal time, and community hosting are forms of labor that deserve attention. It asks that honoraria remain distinct from production costs and that the meanings of "risk" and "responsibility" be distributed proportionally among all who contribute to the work, whether they are artists, curators, technicians, educators, or producers.

Care weaves through the entire memorandum as its practical ethic. It appears in the schedule that allows for slowness where slowness protects the work, in the accessibility measures that are planned rather than improvised, in the psychosocial attention that does not stigmatize grief or exhaustion, and in the feedback loop that does not punish error but repairs it. To curate is to care, and to care is to design for vulnerability without fetishizing it. The memorandum therefore invites attentiveness to needs, responsibility for action, competence in delivery, responsiveness to outcomes, and a final movement of caring with that binds the collaboration to a wider civic ecology.

Every MoCU is accompanied by a Local Annex. This annex specifies the relevant legal environment, labor regimes, insurance and visa conditions, the economic parameters of the institution and project, the ecological and infrastructural constraints under which work will unfold, the linguistic and cultural sensitivities that shape public mediation, and the governance procedures by which decisions are reached and communicated. Through the annex, the memorandum becomes what it claims to be: a situated ethics that takes context not as an obstacle but as material.

The document is morally binding even when not legally enforceable. Its authority is the authority of candor. It can stand alone, when the scale of a collaboration warrants a light touch; it can be complemented by legal modules when stakes increase. Above all, it is revisable. The conditions under which we collaborate change; the memorandum changes with them. In times of precarity, polarization, and platformization, this small choreography of integrity, reciprocity, and care offers not a solution but a practice of meeting one another without denial.

(See Appendix 1 for a model example of a MoCU.)

Modular contracts (illustrative)

Where substantial commitments arise, the MoCU may be complemented by modular legal contracts. Five illustrative modules are proposed:

Fair Pay. This module formalizes economic fairness in all professional exchanges between artists and museums. It covers honoraria, royalties, insurance, and risk-sharing. Instead of fixing universal rates, it provides reference schedules that can be locally adapted. It ensures that all substantial labor — conceptual, technical, or production — is recognized and remunerated. The contract clarifies distinctions between production budgets and artist fees, defines responsibility for unforeseen costs, and allocates risks proportionally between parties. Its goal is to align recognition with redistribution, so that respect and payment sustain each other rather than substitute one another.

Fair Care. This contract makes care responsibilities explicit and accountable. It addresses physical safety, accessibility, mental health, and grievance procedures, turning what are often informal gestures of care into enforceable commitments. The contract specifies who is responsible for safety checks, emotional support, or access coordination; it defines clear channels for reporting misconduct or burnout. In doing so, it embeds attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness — the four phases of the "care square" — into institutional infrastructure. Care becomes a shared and professional obligation, not a matter of personal goodwill.

Fair Green. This module integrates ecological responsibility into project planning and production. It sets out commitments for sustainable materials, logistics, travel, and energy use, while allowing flexibility for local conditions. It prioritizes degrowth-compatible practices (such as reusing materials, reducing transport, and minimizing carbon footprints) without bureaucratizing creativity. The contract may include carbon budgets, guidelines for local sourcing, and principles for environmentally conscious display and storage. It helps artists and museums collaborate within planetary limits, balancing artistic freedom with environmental stewardship.

Fair Culture. This module formalizes mutual cultural and epistemic respect. It acknowledges that both artists and museums are embedded in social, historical, and political contexts that shape their work and responsibilities. The contract ensures that museums recognize artists' communal, indigenous, or collective contexts, while artists acknowledge the institutional, civic, and political frameworks that museums must navigate. It may include provisions for consultation with community representatives, co-authorship clauses, or commitments to decolonial and inclusive language in mediation. Fair Culture turns cross-cultural collaboration into a reciprocal process of learning and adaptation, not an act of extraction or representation.

Fair Aesthetics. This contract protects aesthetic and sensory diversity within collaborations. It affirms the right to difference in form, content, and affect, and it extends care to the affective and perceptual dimensions of art-making. It encourages practices that cultivate all the senses and resist the algorithmic reduction of culture to mere audiovisual consumption. The module can include commitments to inclusive display methods, sensory accessibility (for instance for neurodivergent or visually impaired publics), and conditions that sustain emotional well-being during production. Fair Aesthetics thus contributes to a sustainable affective ecology, ensuring that art remains a space for nuanced, embodied, and plural experience.

(7) Conclusion

Integrity, reciprocity, and care together form a triadic ethic for artist-museum relations. Each principle sustains the others, and when isolated, each risks losing its moral balance. *Integrity without reciprocity* becomes righteousness, a purity of conviction that may speak truth but fails to listen, turning ethics into moral vanity. It upholds coherence between word and deed, yet without dialogue or exchange it can harden into institutional self-justification. *Reciprocity without care* turns fairness into transaction, a contract of equivalences without empathy. It recognizes exchange but not fragility, balancing accounts rather than relationships. In this mode, justice becomes bookkeeping, and trust evaporates in the calculation of worth. *Care without integrity*, finally, dissolves into sentimentality, an affective warmth that soothes without transforming. Detached from coherence and accountability, care risks becoming a gesture of comfort that hides rather than confronts structural injustice.

Only when integrity, reciprocity, and care act together do they articulate a moral grammar capable of resisting the forces that now deform the cultural field: repressive liberal reduction, precarization, illiberal capture, geopolitical division, ecological exhaustion, and the aesthetic deprivation catalyzed by digitalization, as well as

the polarization catalyzed by algorithmic platformization.

The *Memorandum of Care & Understanding* and its modular contracts are not definitive solutions but instruments of ongoing negotiation, flexible frameworks for fairness and reflection. They are designed to keep relations between artists and museums open, situated, and alive: to ensure that collaboration remains a civic practice rather than a bureaucratic procedure. İn this spirit, ethical cooperation becomes less a matter of compliance and more a matter of continuous composition; an unfinished work that must be rewritten, again and again, in a fragile world where trust can still grow.

References

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* London: Verso.

Butler, J. (2012). *Frames of War: When İs Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Conradi, E. (2001). *Take Care: Grundlagen einer Ethik der Achtsamkeit.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag.

Fisher, B., & Tronto, J. C. (1990). "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in E.K. Abel & M.K. Nelson (eds.), *Circles of Care: Work and İdentity in Women's Lives* (pp. 35–62). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Fraser, N. (1995). "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review,* 212, pp. 68–93.

Fraser, N. (2004). "Social Justice in the Age of İdentity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation," in N. Fraser & A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (pp. 7–109). London: Verso.

Gielen, P. (2014). *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Politics and Post-Fordism.* Amsterdam: Valiz.

Gielen, P. (2021). "The Power of Vulnerability: Art in the Digital Woke Age," *Afterall,* 53.

Gielen, P. (2024). *Trust: Building on the Cultural Common.* Amsterdam: Valiz.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, D. (2007). "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 610(1), pp. 22–44.

Honneth, A. (1995). *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts.* Cambridge, MA: MİT Press.

Lorey, İ. (2015). *State of İnsecurity: Government of the Precarious.* London: Verso. Lovink, G. (2025) *Platform Brutality. Closing Down İnternet Toxicity.* Valiz.

Margalit, A. (1996). *The Decent Society.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mouffe, C. (2012). "İnstitutions as Sites of Agonistic İntervention," in P. Gielen (ed.), *İnstitutional Attitudes: İnstituting Art in a Flat World* (pp. 101–117). Amsterdam: Valiz.

Raunig, G. (2012). "Flatness Rules: İnstituent Practices and İnstitutions of the Common in a Flat World," in P. Gielen (ed.), *İnstitutional Attitudes: İnstituting Art in a Flat World* (pp. 141–167). Amsterdam: Valiz.

Taylor, C. (1991). *The Ethics of Authenticity.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, B. (1981). *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1993). *Shame and Necessity.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

(Appendix 1) Model Memorandum of Care & Understanding

Memorandum of Care & Understanding (MoCU)

Between [Name of Museum/İnstitution] and [Name of Artist/Collective]
Date: [...] Place: [...]

Preamble

This Memorandum establishes, in clear and accessible language, the principles, intentions, and shared responsibilities for collaboration between a museum/institution and an artist/collective. İt is designed to be adaptable to diverse contexts. Specific details and annexes can be added or modified as appropriate.

Article 1 — Parties and definitions

- Museum/İnstitution: [full name, address], represented by [name, position].
- Artist/Collective: [full name, address], represented by [name, role].
- Definitions: Project, Honorarium, Care Protocol, Local Annex.

Article 2 — Purpose and scope

- Purpose: [brief description of the project].
- Scope: [duration, location(s), type of collaboration].
- Phases may include exploration, development, production, presentation, reflection.

Article 3 — Guiding principles

- İntegrity: coherence between words and actions, transparent and non-humiliating procedures.
- Reciprocity: balance between recognition and redistribution; respect is not a substitute for payment, and vice versa.
- Care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness embedded in all phases.

Article 4 — Roles and responsibilities

- Museum/İnstitution ensures clarity of scope, fair remuneration, safe working conditions, and curatorial integrity.
- Artist/Collective ensures feasibility, open communication, and respect for institutional context.
- Both commit to regular dialogue, shared reflection, and joint problem-solving.

Article 5 — Planning and milestones

- A detailed timeline is included in Annex A.
- Changes must be confirmed in writing (email or signed note).

Article 6 — Fees, costs and payments

- Honorarium, production costs, and reimbursement details in Annex B.
- Payments are due within [...] days after receipt of valid invoice.

Article 7 — Production conditions

- Material and technical specifications defined in Annex B.
- Substantial changes require prior mutual consent.

Article 8 — Accessibility, safety and wellbeing

- Accessibility and inclusion measures in Annex C.
- Health, safety and welfare provisions, including grievance contact points, in Annex C.

Article 9 — Sustainability

- Parties commit to reasonable, context-aware choices in materials, transport, and energy use.

Article 10 — Rights, licenses and crediting

- Copyright remains with the artist.
- Licensing for documentation, promotion and archiving is defined in Annex E.

Article 11 — Data and confidentiality

- Personal and sensitive data used only for project purposes in compliance with relevant law.

Article 12 — Communication and press

- Communication plan and approvals are included in Annex F.

Article 13 — Risk, insurance, and liability

- İnsurance and responsibility for damage/loss specified in Annex G.

Article 14 — Mobility and formalities

- Visa and customs responsibilities in Annex H.

Article 15 — Evaluation and archiving

- Evaluation schedule and format in Annex İ.

Article 16 — Amendments and termination

- Amendments in writing with mutual consent.
- Termination requires notice of [...] weeks/months and fair closure.

Article 17 — Dispute resolution

- İnternal dialogue first; if unresolved, alternative dispute resolution mechanism — mediation by an independent third party (see Annex J)

Article 18 — Legal status

- This Memorandum expresses moral intent and practical commitments; binding status may be defined in Local Annex.

Signatures

For the Museum/İnstitution:	For the Artist/Collective:
Name:	Name:
Position:	Role:
Date:	Date:
Signature:	Signature:

Annexes (Modular and adaptable):

Annex A	–	Project Description, Timeline and Responsibilities
Annex B	–	Budget Overview (Honoraria, Production Costs, Reimbursements)
Annex C	–	Care Protocol (Accessibility, Safety, Wellbeing, Conduct)
Annex D	–	Local Annex (Legal/Fiscal Context)
Annex E	–	Rights and Licensing
Annex F	–	Communication and Media Plan
Annex G	–	İnsurance and Liability
Annex H	–	Mobility and Customs (if applicable)
Annex İ	–	Evaluation and Archiving
Annex J	–	Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanism

(Appendix 2) Methodology and Acknowledgments of Respondents

The research for *Best Practices for Museums Working with Living Artists* was commissioned by the CİMAM Museum Watch Committee, led by Pascal Gielen with the participation of the CİMAM Executive Office as project coordinator.

Methodological Approach

The study employed a qualitative research methodology, grounded in literature study, online interviews, and focus group discussions conducted between August 26 and October 1, 2025. The objective was to capture diverse perspectives from professionals across the global museum ecosystem and from organizations representing artists' interests, ensuring a balanced and dialogical understanding of the current dynamics between museums and living artists.

Two main respondent groups were consulted:

- Museum professionals, including museum directors, chief curators, and independent curators, all members of CİMAM.
- Artist representative organizations and collectives, advocating for the rights and working conditions of artists.

İnterviews with Artist Representative Organizations

İndividual interviews were held with the following organizations and representatives:

- Artists at Risk (AR) — represented by Marita Muukkonen and İvor Stodolsky, co-founders and co-directors. (Helsinki, Berlin, Barcelona)
- Arts Equator — represented by Anupama Sekhar, Executive Director. (Singapore)
- La Revuelta — represented by Maya Juracán, Director of Projects and Fundraising, and Jimena Dary, Chief Curator and Cultural Manager. (Guatemala City, Guatemala)
- Sophio Dughashvili — Lawyer and Chairperson of the Ethics Commission at the Mediators Association of Georgia. (Tbilisi, Georgia).
- Suzana Sousa — İndependent curator (Luanda, Angola).
- Plataforma Assembleària d'Artistes de Catalunya (PAAC) — represented by Natalia Carminati, Artist and President of PAAC.

These conversations were crucial to articulating the artists' perspective and identifying key ethical and practical concerns from the standpoint of creators and their advocates.

Focus Groups with CİMAM Members

Prior to organizing the focus groups, CİMAM launched a short survey open to all members over a period of five months, asking a single guiding question:

"What challenges do you consider most urgent in the relationship between museums and living artists?"

The responses to this survey informed the design of the focus group discussions and helped identify key themes and participants.

Three separate focus groups were then convened with CİMAM members — museum directors, chief curators, and independent curators — representing a wide geographic and institutional diversity. These sessions explored the operational realities and ethical challenges faced by museums when working with living artists, providing essential insights that helped shape the emerging framework of best practices.

John Alexander, Director of Collections and Exhibitions — Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, San Francisco, USA
İlaria Conti, ED and Chief Curator — La Nueva Fábrica, Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala
Molly Donovan, Acting Head and Curator of Contemporary Art, Modern and Contemporary Art — National Gallery of Art Washington, Washington, USA
Christian NANA, Senior Curator and Director, Chairperson — Blackitude Museum and İCOM Cameroun, Yaoundé, Cameroun
Victoria Machipisa, Curator — African Renaissance Foundation, Harare, Zimbabwe
Sebastian Cichocki, Senior Curator — Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland
Carina Plath, Curator — Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover, Germany
Elvira Dyangani Ose, Director — Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
Martha Kazungu, Director — Njabala Foundation, Kampala, Uganda
Shayari da Silva, Chief Curator — Geoffrey Bawa Trust, Colombo, Sri Lanka
James Luigi Tana, İndependent Curator, Manila, Philippines
Rebecca Coates, Director — Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), Melbourne, Australia

Consultation with the Museum Watch Committee

Finally, the CİMAM Museum Watch Committee acted as both a consultative and editorial body throughout the research process. The committee members participated in the initial interviews, reviewed findings at key stages, and provided ongoing guidance on the conceptual direction of the Position Paper. Their contribution ensured the alignment of the research with CİMAM's broader mission to promote transparency, accountability, and professional integrity in museum practice.

The 2023–2025 Museum Watch Committee consists of seven board members of CİMAM:

- Zeina Arida (Chair), Director — Mathaf (Arab Museum of Modern Art), Doha, Qatar
- Bart de Baere, Director — M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium
- Malgorzata Ludwisiak, Ph.D. — Museum Management Expert / Freelance Curator / Academic Teacher, Warsaw, Poland.
- Amanda de la Garza, Artistic Deputy Director — Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS), Madrid, Spain
- Kitty Scott, Strategic Director — Fogo İsland Arts / Shorefast, Toronto, Canada
- Yu Jin Seng, Director (Curatorial, Research & Exhibitions) — National Gallery Singapore, Singapore
- Agustin Perez Rubio, İndependent Curator, Madrid, Spain

About CİMAM

CİMAM — İnternational Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art — is an Affiliated Organization of İCOM (the İnternational Council of Museums), and is constituted as an association, acting as a non-profit organization, under the Spanish National Registry of Associations.

CİMAM is the only global network of modern and contemporary art museum experts. CİMAM members are directors and curators working in modern and contemporary art museums, collections, and archives.

Founded in 1962, CİMAM's vision is a world where the contribution of museums, collections, and archives of modern and contemporary art to the cultural, social, and economic well-being of society is recognized and respected.

CİMAM's mission is to foster a global network of museums and museum professionals in the field of modern and contemporary art, and provide a forum for communication, cooperation, information exchange, and debate on issues of common interest among museums, non-profit collections, artists, and museum professionals interested in modern and contemporary art to represent their interests in accordance with the ethical principles and values of the İCOM Code of Ethics and CİMAM's Code of Ethics. İn addition, CİMAM encourages scientific research related to the field of modern and contemporary art museums to inspire professionals with best practices in the field and to ensure that appropriate ethical and professional standards are established and maintained.

By generating debate and encouraging cooperation between art institutions and individuals at different stages of development around the world, CİMAM plays a key role in the growth of the sector.

About CİMAM's Museum Watch Committee

İn 2012, CİMAM initiated a series of news publications regarding the different critical situations of Museums and Collections around the world, especially in regions affected by world economic and political crises. The Museum Watch Program that came out of this serves as an advocacy program addressing specific situations that impact museum professionals and not-for-profit institutions of modern and contemporary art.

Public Museum Watch actions since 2012

Through the support of ethical principles, good governance, and best practices, the Museum Watch Program is intended to be a tool to assist modern and contemporary art museum professionals in dealing with critical situations that affect the museums' ability to maintain their codes of practices and individuals to undertake its profession. İt does so with the aim of stimulating reflection and generating debate.

The Museum Watch Committee aims to generate deeper understanding within the field by analyzing and discussing relevant cases that lead to documentation archived by CİMAM; to uphold ethical principles, good governance, and best practices for modern and contemporary art museums, including the development and dissemination of related codes and guidelines that may inform future conference topics; to inform the CİMAM community and the broader public about critical situations affecting museums' abilities to fulfill their missions; to express concern grounded in CİMAM's core principles; to enact support and solidarity when necessary and feasible, including through forms of activism; and to provide a network of mutual assistance and advocacy for CİMAM members.

About Pascal Gielen

Pascal Gielen (b. 1970) is a writer and cultural sociologist whose work explores the delicate ties between culture, politics, and everyday life. He is a full professor of Sociology of Culture and Politics at the Antwerp Research İnstitute for the Arts (ARİA) at the University of Antwerp, where he also leads the Culture Commons Quest Office (CCQO). As editor-in-chief of the international book series *Antennae—Arts in Society* (Valiz), he curates critical reflections on how culture shapes—and is shaped by—society.

Gielen was awarded the prestigious Odysseus Grant by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) for his outstanding international research achievements. His books have been translated into English, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, and Ukrainian. Through his writings, he traces the intersections of creative labor, the commons, ecology, and (cultural) politics, often venturing into the field to study how culture takes root and resists in conflict zones such as the Amazon and Ukraine.

www.ccqo.eu
www.uantwerpen.be/en/research-groups/aria/
pascal.gielen@uantwerpen.be

Exclusive publication list: repository.uantwerpen.be/desktop/irua

With the support of
Generalitat de Catalunya