

Split-Domain Cognition in Curation

Canonical variant. Version 1.0, April 2026.

Preface

About this document. This is a domain-specific variant of Split-Domain Cognition, addressed to museum and exhibition curation. It works out the SDC collapse as it operates at institutional scale — the wall text, the catalogue essay, the exhibition design, the press release — and reads the *Museum of Vestigial Desire* archive (2012–2021) as a precursor practice in which the collapse was held open rather than smoothed shut. The philosophical grounding draws on Hume on description versus normativity, G. E. Moore on the naturalistic fallacy, Boris Groys on the curatorial and the collection, and Brian O'Doherty on the white cube.

Where this sits in the corpus. The canon home is splitdomaincognition.org. The variants index is at [/variants/](#); this variant in particular at [/variants/curation/v1/](#). The principle this variant interprets is articulated long-form in *Split-Domain Cognition* and short-form in *A Principle, Not a Pattern*. The protocol by which this variant was derived is at [/derivation-protocol-v1/](#).

Authority and version. Canonical, v1.0. April 2026. The website is the source of record. If this PDF and the website disagree, follow the website.

Use. Openly citable. See [Governance](#) for the one-person canon and how variants are admitted.

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Opening

Curation is a profession organised around a sentence. The sentence is simultaneously description ("this work concerns memory and exile"), evaluation ("this is the strongest instance of the concern in the exhibition"), and prescription ("therefore it has been placed at the entry wall"). The three moves are delivered in a single utterance whose genre has not changed in a century. The wall text is the compressed form. The catalogue essay is the long form. The press release is the market form. The curator's talk is the oral form. The exhibition design — lighting, plinths, adjacencies, title placement — is the non-verbal form. Each performs the same fusion. A visitor, a reviewer, a funder, and a later historian all receive a bundled object in which description, thesis, and verdict cannot be located as separate moves.

This is Split-Domain Cognition's failure mode operating at the scale of a cultural institution. Like *humane meat* in animal ethics or *strong piece* in design critique, the curatorial sentence smuggles evaluative and prescriptive work into what presents itself as descriptive reporting. Unlike those other failures, the curatorial failure has an institutional body: the museum, the biennale, the commercial gallery, the art fair, the auction house. The institutional body converts the fused sentence into market valuation, reputational sorting, and historical record. The collapse is therefore not only a rhetorical failure; it is the mechanism by which contemporary art history is produced.

Museum of Vestigial Desire (2012–2021) is a nine-year worked example of curation refusing the fusion. It is not a neutral case: it is Prayas's own practice, authored across the same decade in which SDC as a term did not yet exist but the move was being performed. The archive's section architecture declares the three layers openly — Sanctuary as preserved observation, Symptoms as pronounced thesis, Books as reader-as-judgement-layer — and the project's nine-year refusal to finish is the architectural consequence of the separation held over time. This variant reads the SDC argument for curation out of MoVD, and it reads mainstream curation's collapse against what MoVD's architecture made available. The argument is not a proposal for a new kind of curation. It is a description of an existing kind — one whose working example runs to 329 pages and 197,600 words in

`~/Dropbox/personal_projects/museumofvestigialdesire.net/content/` — presented in vocabulary that makes the move transferable.

The variant is written from deep stake. In addition to MoVD, Prayas's curatorial history includes *Growing Down* (2009–2010, rooftop concerts with Tanvi Srivastava), *Of Games* at Khoj (curatorial residency), *I Am Present* at Roseate House, and *The Murmur Engine* (FICA 2026–27 submission), which reads as curation-in-public-art. The variant is not an

outsider's account of the profession. It is an insider's reading of what curation can be when the fusion is refused.

The language work in this domain

The language work of curation is the literal attention to each work on its own terms. What the work is made of, what the artist has said about it, what prior reception has recorded, what the materials do, what the scale is, what the work does in time, what the viewer's body has to do to encounter it. This record is the descriptive artefact the rest of the curation can be traced to. It is sometimes called a *condition report* in conservation contexts, a *catalogue entry* in collection-management contexts, or an *object file* in archival contexts. What is distinctive about its curatorial form is that it precedes and is distinct from the thesis the curator will later apply.

MoVD's *Sanctuary* section names this posture at its clearest:

"Certain ideas need to be allowed to persist, even if there is no evidence of their having any value. The reasons for doing this might not be immediately apparent but they need not be known for this allowance to be given ... Sanctuaries are structures that give such inert desires that do not require much a nestling space. A nestling space only means that a space to develop from a spark to a fire is available." —

sanctuary/ (6 November 2016)

A sanctuary is Layer 1 built to refuse premature judgement. Ideas — in a curatorial context, works, observations, contexts — are held alive as observations, without being forced into the evaluative register. The sixty-six pages under *sanctuary/* in MoVD extend this stance across chairs (*sanctuary/sitting* , *sanctuary/ergonomics* , *sanctuary/worn*), optics (*sanctuary/optics* and its twelve children), transaction (*sanctuary/shop* , *sanctuary/selling* , *sanctuary/minimum-retail-price-mrp*), repair (*sanctuary/repair*), distraction (*sanctuary/distraction* and four children), and many standalone pages. Each is an observation held in its own terms before any thesis operates on it. A curator working under this discipline produces descriptive artefacts that stand independently of the curatorial argument — not as neutral reporting (no description is neutral) but as

descriptions that the thesis will be required to connect to, rather than descriptions whose shape has already been carved to fit the thesis.

The *Desires* section in MoVD (also titled *Shrine* in the source JSON) extends Layer 1 into the archival register:

"This shrine is a final resting place for desires that are known and have been cultural forces in the past but not anymore. Desires which are not cultural forces anymore need to be recognised. Even if they are not active anymore as determining factors for cultural phenomenon anymore — they need to be understood." — desires/ (8 November 2016)

The move is preservation-for-understanding, without revival (adopting the desire as present-day project) and without dismissal (discarding the desire as finished). A curator attending to historical work, to traditions that have passed out of active practice, to vocabularies no longer in use, can take up the same posture: the material is held as what-was, understood, not converted to what-should-be in either direction. The fifty pages under *desires/* model this across civilisation, evolution, narration, nostalgia, reputation, and source — each treated as an analytic category held open for understanding rather than closed by evaluation.

Language work alone is insufficient. This must be stated plainly because the profession's default objection to any descriptive-only discipline is that it produces nothing to act on. A full condition record, a catalogue of observations, a thick archival account — each of these by itself does not close a curatorial question. The exhibition still has to open; the wall text still has to be written; the works still have to be placed; the catalogue still has to make an argument. Layer 1 is the material the thesis can be traced to, not a substitute for the thesis. SDC in curation does not argue that curators should only describe. It argues that descriptive work should be preserved as a distinct artefact *before* the thesis is applied, so that the thesis and the description can be contested independently when the exhibition opens.

The language work also includes the artist's own voice. The artist has said things about the work — in interviews, in studio visits, in notes, in earlier exhibitions — that are part of the record the curator will later interpret. Preserving the artist's own language at Layer 1 protects the exhibition from being the curator's sentence alone. MoVD's *Books* section names the symmetrical move for reading:

"The most disturbing aspect of reading is hearing a sharp and clear voice but not being able to hear the voice of one's own self at all. Reading is harmless. It is like

listening to music inside your head. The only suggestion we have is to read after you can at least hear murmurs of your own voice." — [books/](#) (7 November 2014)

Applied to curation, the move is: the visitor should enter the exhibition with their own voice audible, not drowned by the curator's. This requires that the curator's voice be recognisable as a voice (Layer 2 declared) and not mistaken for the voice of the works themselves (Layer 1 preserved). The visitor's judgement is Layer 3 — the move that closes the reading, made by the visitor, not by the curator.

The judgement work in this domain

The judgement work is the curatorial thesis. This is what the exhibition is arguing, what it includes and excludes under that argument, what it positions centrally and peripherally, what it frames and what it refuses to frame. The thesis is the Layer 2 artefact: the rubric against which the descriptive material is assessed and from which the inclusion-and-positioning decisions follow.

A thesis can be issued invisibly or explicitly. The curatorial profession's default is invisibility: the thesis operates through the selection and arrangement of works, through the voice of the wall text, through the catalogue essay's rhetorical authority, and through the exhibition design, but is rarely stated as a separate artefact the visitor can read, argue with, or cite. The thesis is what everyone knows the curator has decided; it is not what the curator writes down as a thesis.

MoVD's founding text declares the alternative. The [symptoms-of-a-museum-part-1](#) essay opens:

"I choose to appropriate the word. The word 'museum' now just means what I read into it, it just 'means' what I pronounce. So it becomes a specification more than a description arrived at through careful observation and analysis. Pronouncements, specifications, commandments, hard-knocks." — [symptoms-of-a-museum-part-1](#) (17 November 2012)

The Museum announces that its language is specificative — pronounced rather than described — and marks the announcement explicitly. What follows in the essay is a list of what a museum is ("A museum is a catalog of the lost and found registry"; "A museum plays with naked power"; "Museums are refugee camps for mal-adjusted punks";

"Museums are stand-up comedy concerts"; "Museums are games, rule-based systems"; "Museums are crime-syndicates"; "Museums are obsessive"; "unresponsive, unsolicited, self-propagating"; "schizoid"). Each claim is a framework-statement, not an empirical description. The reader can refuse the pronouncement — the essay is not pretending to coerce — but cannot mistake it for a report. The thesis is visible as a thesis, and the rest of MoVD's nine-year archive operates under its declaration.

The *Offices* section makes the same move at the institutional register:

"An office is a stage for the public performance of an institution. The Museum of Vestigial Desire's (MoVD) office complex is staging ground and incubator for initiatives that emerge from its work ... The larger role of the MoVD has always been to make a particular kind or questioning of language possible." — offices/ (7 November 2016)

Offices is MoVD's framework layer made visible as a section. Institutional framework is declared as a stage for public performance, not hidden behind an implicit "we" that lets the framework's work happen invisibly. The section's two sub-folders — *Columnists* (five named voices, each distinct from the Museum's collective register) and *Surfatial* (a real 2014–15 programme of web-based study groups) — are different kinds of institutional relationship to language, each named openly. A curator working under the Offices discipline would declare the terms on which the exhibition operates: what the gallery can and cannot do, what the curator is and is not claiming, what the programming serves and what it refuses.

The *Columnists* sub-folder carries the principle further: the Museum explicitly refuses to absorb its columnists into a single institutional voice. The folder's opener says:

"Columnists are writers whose vision becomes a lens for others to glimpse at the world through. We host writers willing to extend their perspective in such ways ... The heart of the matter is always clear. But how will we stay close to the heart of the matter? Stay with one voice, keep modelling words and extending worlds of the voice that you can sense behind the text." — offices/columnists/

Each columnist is a Layer-2 decision about what kind of questioning of language that columnist is enabling. The institution curates the columnists; the columnists are not curated into the institution. In a gallery analogue, the curator's inclusion decisions would be traceable to a declared rubric, not absorbed into an institutional voice that speaks both for the gallery and through the selected works.

The judgement work, in curation, has a specific further commitment that the animal-rights variant and the studio variant do not carry: the commitment to *revisability*. A rubric that cannot be revised is a rubric that is not being held as a rubric; it is being held as a position the rubric-author is now committed to defending against all comers. The curatorial thesis must be revisable in public acts — published reconsiderations, follow-up exhibitions, corrigenda, retrospective essays — or the exhibition's closing becomes the thesis's permanent state. MoVD's refusal to finish is the architectural enforcement of revisability over time: the thesis is never closed, because closure would require a verdict that the form refuses to issue.

The collapse, with examples

The collapse in contemporary curation is extensive. The inventory below names the forms the fusion takes in ordinary curatorial practice. None of them is a bad faith act on the part of individual curators. All of them are genre conventions that curators inherit, practise, and teach.

The wall text as compressed verdict. Two hundred words that carry description of the work, thesis of the exhibition, evaluative framing of the work within the thesis, and positioning cue for the visitor's response. The four moves are fused at the level of sentence. The visitor who disagrees with the framing cannot locate the disagreement because the framing has been absorbed into the description.

"The artist is exploring ..." A descriptive-sounding phrase that does evaluative work. The curator has decided what the artist is exploring; the artist has not necessarily said this in the interview; the verdict is delivered as observation. "Exploring" is one of several verbs that perform the collapse — *investigating, interrogating, foregrounding, grappling with, addressing, confronting, questioning* — each presents the curator's reading of the work as the work's own project.

The catalogue essay as monologue. Catalogue essays routinely fuse descriptive presentation of works with evaluative framing, without marking which move is being made when. A reader who disagrees with the framing cannot locate the disagreement — the essay's rhetoric ensures that disagreement reads as aesthetic ignorance rather than a position against the thesis. The fusion is architectural: the essay genre does not have a separate place for *description* and *argument* because the convention is that they are the same document.

"Important artist", "important show", "important work". *Important* is a rubric-verdict in adjective form. It declares that the framework that measures importance has produced a positive reading, without naming the framework and without describing what produced the reading. It is the curatorial equivalent of *innovative* in the vocabulary-of-innovation critique (see [notes/vocabulary-of-innovation.md](#)). It is the verbal form of a market signal.

The biennale as compressed thesis. Biennials announce themes and select works under the themes. The theme is Layer 2; the selection is its application to Layer 1; the catalogue narration is Layer 3. In practice all three are folded into the curator's essay, which typically runs 3,000 to 5,000 words and contains all three moves. Visitors receive a unified curatorial statement and cannot examine the thesis independently of the works or the works independently of the thesis. Biennial criticism — the journalistic reviews that follow — re-performs the fusion at the next layer up: the reviewer evaluates the exhibition by restating the thesis and asking whether the works met it, rather than evaluating the thesis itself and evaluating the works against their own terms.

The curator as figure. In the commercial gallery and biennale circuits, the curator's name has become a reputational object that travels independently of the exhibition's content. "Curated by X" is a warrant for the works; the works' warrant is the curator's reputation; the reputation was earned by prior exhibitions whose thesis-rubric and work-descriptions were similarly fused. The curator-as-figure converts the fusion into a recursive market mechanism: each generation of exhibitions consolidates the next generation's reputational objects. MoVD's [desires/reputation/](#) section (five pages) catalogues the mechanism in analytic form — how a name becomes a handle, how reputation accumulates around markers that do not survive their own conditions.

The press release as fused object. The press release is a six-hundred-word artefact produced at the exhibition's opening and distributed to journalists and institutions. It compresses description, thesis, positioning, and market cue into a form designed to be reproduced verbatim in coverage. Reviews that follow a press release reproduce its fusion; reviews that deviate from it are usually deviating in the reviewer's direction (a second fused object layered on top of the first), not into the separation the SDC architecture would make available.

The exhibition design as silent thesis. Adjacencies, lighting, plinth heights, wall colours, label typography, title placement, entry-wall selection — each is a design decision that carries the thesis without speaking it. A visitor encounters the thesis through the design before they read the wall text. The non-verbal thesis cannot be argued with because it

has not been stated; it can only be felt. Exhibition design is the curatorial layer most completely outside the visitor's capacity to examine, because it does not present itself as a layer at all.

The "context statement" as smuggled rubric. A recent genre: the curator prefaces the exhibition with a contextual essay naming the political, social, or historical circumstances under which the exhibition is occurring. The context statement appears descriptive. It is rubric-work — it establishes what the works will be read against, which framings are legitimate, which critiques are admissible. The genre has become standard in institutional shows since roughly 2017 and now operates as a stealth Layer 2 that looks like Layer 1.

The "what is not being shown" move. A newer genre: the curator names what has been excluded from the exhibition, ostensibly to make the selection criteria visible. In practice, the exclusion statement performs the fusion again — exclusions are described as though the framework had observed them, rather than as framework-decisions the framework is making. The statement reads as transparency while performing the same compression the essay would have performed.

Mainstream curation's refusal of the refusal-to-finish. An exhibition closes. Its thesis closes with it. The catalogue is printed; the images are archived; the photographs circulate. Revisability does not outlive the run. MoVD's nine-year refusal is the architectural alternative, and its absence in mainstream curation is why exhibitions operate as verdicts that cannot be re-argued after the closing date. The refusal to finish would require an institutional commitment that most exhibitions cannot make; the absence of the commitment is the fusion's institutional form.

The cost of the collapse

The costs of accepting the fusion as curation's default vocabulary are specific, cumulative, and recognisable to the profession when pressed.

Audiences cannot re-enter the argument. A visitor who disagrees with an exhibition's premise has no place to stand. The premise has been absorbed into the descriptions of each work, so objection to the premise reads as objection to the works. The visitor is offered a binary — accept the show or refuse its aesthetics — when what was needed was a triad (accept the thesis, accept the descriptions, accept the inferences from one to the other) in which disagreement at any layer could be articulated without collapsing into dismissal.

Curators become authorities rather than authors. The framework-level claim is hidden, which means the claim's authorship is hidden, which means the curator speaks from a position rather than a commitment. Position is defended against critique; commitment is open to revision. The institutional incentives favour position because position produces reputational stability; commitment produces reputational risk. Over time the profession consolidates toward position, and the authorial voice — the curator as someone willing to say what they are arguing and revise it — atrophies.

Markets respond to fused verdicts, not to separated judgements. When *important* means *valorised by the curation*, and curation is fused with description, market valuation follows the fusion. Curatorial capital becomes financial capital through a mechanism that cannot be examined because its intermediate steps have been absorbed into a single rhetorical object. The fusion is not only an epistemic failure; it is a market mechanism, and the auction houses have a direct interest in keeping it opaque.

Pedagogy is impossible. Curatorial teaching becomes apprenticeship to the fused voice — trainees absorb a style rather than learning the three distinct practices the form could make teachable. A student who tried to write a curatorial text that separated description from thesis from narration would be told the text "didn't work as curation" — the voice is what is being assessed, and the separated voice sounds wrong. The implicit assessment of the genre-voice produces reproduction of the genre, which produces reproduction of the fusion.

Institutional drift is invisible. A museum collecting over decades under implicit rubrics drifts toward the tastes of successive curators without a rubric-level conversation. The drift is invisible because the rubric was never explicit enough to be checked. Decades later, when the collection's orientation is examined, the examiners can read tendencies but cannot reconstruct decisions. The institution has no record of its own thinking.

Criticism cannot distinguish exhibition-failure from thesis-failure. A review that finds an exhibition unconvincing cannot easily say whether the works failed, the selection failed, the thesis failed, or the narration failed. Criticism therefore operates at the same compressed level as curation — evaluative sentences applied to fused objects — and loses its capacity to contribute to revision. The *MoVD Books* passage quoted above names this precisely: "analytical language attempts to be precise to discount the presence of the actor who can channel the friction. Analysis aims to encode the friction in the specificity of its jargon. But this does not work, as specificity in encryption does not equal specificity in decryption."

Audience learning does not accumulate. A visitor who has seen fifty exhibitions under the fused genre has fifty experiences of exhibitions; they do not have a fifty-exhibition education in how to read a thesis, evaluate a framework, locate a disagreement, or follow a lineage. The genre's structural opacity prevents the viewing capacity from developing, because what would be taught (how to read the layers) is never made available.

The refusal-to-finish disappears as an option. An exhibition that closes becomes a verdict. A verdict issued by the institutional body of the museum or biennale circulates as permanent. MoVD's nine-year refusal demonstrates that the refusal is architecturally available, but the demonstration is ignored in ordinary curatorial practice because the institutional form does not permit running exhibitions indefinitely. The fusion's institutional embodiment forecloses a move the architecture could otherwise make.

The separation, in curatorial language

Applying SDC in this domain means producing three artefacts where the current genre produces one.

Layer 1 — the descriptive artefact. Condition reports for each work, artist's own statements preserved verbatim, materials and provenance, prior exhibition history, photographs taken from the work's own terms rather than from the exhibition's, the ethnographic record of the work's making where available. Organised so that each work is readable without first reading the thesis. The test: if the exhibition's thesis were replaced with a different thesis, would the Layer 1 artefact still be usable? If yes, Layer 1 is descriptive. If no, Layer 1 has already absorbed the thesis and is not a distinct artefact. MoVD's *Sanctuary* is the working curatorial example; its sixty-six pages preserve observations whose value is held open without reference to a thesis that consumes them.

Layer 2 — the thesis artefact, signed and revisable. A document that states what the exhibition is arguing, what it includes and excludes under that argument, what criteria are being applied, and what the curator has decided to refuse. The document is signed — the thesis has an author, not only an institution. The document is revisable — the thesis can be updated in a public act. The document is prior to the exhibition, in the sense that the visitor can read it before, during, or after the works and trace the works' presence to the argument. MoVD's *Symptoms of a museum, part 1* is the clearest curatorial example: the thesis is pronounced, marked as pronouncement, and made available as the basis for

what follows. The *Offices* opener is a second-order thesis artefact — a statement of what the MoVD's framework is *for*.

Layer 3 — the narration that connects the first two. Wall text, catalogue essay, exhibition design, public programme, gallery talk, press release. Each makes visible how the inclusion and positioning of works follows from the thesis applied to the descriptions. The narration is explicitly narration, not description; it reports a verdict that has already been issued at Layer 2 against material preserved at Layer 1. The narration therefore does not issue verdicts at the moment of the visitor's reading — it shows the visitor where the verdict was issued and how to re-enter the argument. MoVD's *Books* section names the posture: the reader (visitor) must do their own judgement work, and the narration's job is to make the Layer 1 and Layer 2 material available for that work, not to pre-empt it.

Layer 1 alone is insufficient — without a thesis, it is archival material that closes nothing. Layer 2 alone is a slogan — without descriptions, a thesis is a stance. Layer 3 alone is the current genre — compressed narration without separated layers, delivering a verdict the visitor cannot re-enter. The three together are the separation. Each layer is contestable independently. A visitor can accept the thesis and reject its application to a specific work; accept the descriptions and reject the thesis; accept the narration's account of how the two connect and reject the connection. The exhibition becomes a structure the visitor can enter rather than a verdict the visitor must absorb.

One further architectural commitment is specific to curation: the *institutional layer* should also be visible. A museum is not neutral; a biennale is not neutral; a commercial gallery is not neutral. The institutional body shapes what thesis is possible, what descriptions are admissible, and what narration is permitted. MoVD's *Offices* section names this by making the institutional framework its own section. A curation under SDC would include, as a fourth artefact, an institutional statement: what the institution is, what it can and cannot do, who funds it, whose interests it serves, what it refuses to programme. This is not a political appendix; it is the background against which the other three layers become legible.

Philosophical grounding

The descriptive–normative distinction has been available since Hume. G. E. Moore formalised it at the level of the ethical proposition. Boris Groys has argued that curation is always evaluation-in-selection, which concedes the fusion as the profession's self-image.

Brian O'Doherty named the white cube as the curatorial apparatus whose neutrality was itself a thesis. None of this literature is new; what SDC adds to it is architectural enforceability — the insistence that the distinction does not maintain itself in prose or in exhibition design and must be held up by form.

The curatorial-specific philosophical ground is the refusal of the tastemaker. A tastemaker is a figure who issues verdicts that accumulate into reputation through sheer repetition, without the framework against which the verdicts are being issued ever being made public. The tastemaker model is structurally closed: the framework is not revisable because it is not visible; the reputation is not contestable because it is not argued; the taste accumulates without accountability. The refusal of the tastemaker is the refusal to be the fused object that the tastemaker model requires. A curator under SDC issues verdicts; the verdicts are traceable; the framework is revisable; the authority is authored.

The *Museum of Vestigial Desire* archive contains a further philosophical resource. Its `books/self/vestigial` page states the Museum's labour as volunteered:

"Because there is no finesse in the process of evolution, no exactitude in its lens, somebody else has to volunteer to do the job. We volunteered to do the garbage collection for the cultural evolution process." — books/self/vestigial (5 October 2013)

Applied to curation: the work of holding description and thesis apart, of keeping the thesis revisable, of refusing the tastemaker model, is volunteered labour. Institutional incentives do not produce it; market incentives actively oppose it; audience expectations are calibrated to receive the fused object and find the separated practice uncomfortable. A curator who practises SDC does so as a volunteered commitment, not as a role-compliant activity. This is the ethical temperature of the variant and is why the curation-as-SDC move is most clearly seen in individual curatorial practices — MoVD, Khoj under certain programmes, specific figures — and is rarer at the institutional scale.

Finally, a structural bridge to the worth argument

(`/home/prayas/Dropbox/personal_projects/gabor.mate/worth-is-not-hierarchical.md`). The argument shows that hierarchical rankings of worth across domains fail at the unit level — domains of capacity do not share a unit in which a global weighted sum could be computed. The same structural observation applies to curatorial ranking. "This is the most important work in the show" is a statement that presupposes a common unit across works whose excellences are incommensurable. The curation of "important works" in a thematic exhibition routinely performs a global

ranking across works whose yardsticks do not reduce to a common unit. The worth argument's structural observation — that the global ranking is arbitrary in the strict sense — licenses a curatorial practice that refuses to issue global importance-verdicts in favour of domain-specific readings. MoVD's refusal to assemble its fragments into a finished hierarchy is this position in form. The curation variant inherits the structural argument without needing to repeat it here.

Relationship to Koher output

The curation variant has the deepest pre-existing landing of any Koher variant. The material predates Koher by more than a decade.

Museum of Vestigial Desire (2012–2021). The primary empirical ground of the variant. Its section architecture performs SDC curation; its nine-year duration demonstrates the refusal to finish; its idiosyncratic first-person voice models the signed thesis; its *Sanctuary* is Layer 1; its *Symptoms* is Layer 2; its *Books* names Layer 3's reader-as-judgement commitment. The `movd.md` file at the project root is the full alphabetical index (329 pages); `movd-as-precursor.md` in this folder's parent is the curated ten-passage anthology that the variant draws on.

Growing Down (2009–2010, with Tanvi Srivastava). A rooftop-concert series in which curation was the venue-selection: the decision to place concerts on rooftops framed the musicians' performance as an argument about domestic-scale music, urban occupancy, and audience attention. The curatorial Layer 2 (the thesis that rooftops are a different kind of listening situation) was held apart from the musicians' Layer 1 (what they played). A curatorial teaching example Prayas can draw on directly.

Of Games (Khoj curatorial residency). A residency in which Prayas curated a programme around games, play, and the framing of participation. The thesis (play as a frame for attention) was declared; the works (artists' responses) were preserved as their own productions; the narration (the programme's public-facing material) traced the connection. A direct SDC-curation precedent.

I Am Present (Roseate House). A site-specific curatorial project. The site's presence was Layer 1; the curatorial thesis about presence was Layer 2; the work's installation narrated the connection as Layer 3. Brief record, strong instance.

The Murmur Engine (FICA submission, 11 April 2026). A public-art proposal that is explicitly SDC staged for public encounter. A machine placed in a public site refuses to issue confident verdicts, instead emitting its hesitations, retrievals, and thresholds as ambient surface. The curatorial reading: the work is a curation-in-public-art that makes the three layers of the machine's reasoning independently visible to the passer-by. The project is listed in [grants/submitted/12-fica-futures-in-formation/](#) .

Anant / CEPT / Khoj teaching. Curatorial pedagogy at any of these institutions could have this variant as its backbone. The workshop deliverable: participants produce a curatorial thesis for a hypothetical exhibition, authored explicitly under the three-layer separation. The pedagogy shortens the learning curve because the layers are teachable once they have been named.

A retrospective essay on MoVD, written now. Currently the strongest candidate for a pre-variant public artefact. The essay would make explicit, fifteen years into Prayas's curatorial practice and four years after MoVD formally closed, what the archive was doing under what SDC now names. Publishable in *Mousse*, *e-flux*, *Art India*, or *Marg*. The essay tests whether the art-world register can receive the SDC argument and provides a short-form alternative to the full variant.

A curatorial workshop at Anant or CEPT. A two- or three-day workshop on SDC-curation using MoVD as the case study. Participants author a curatorial thesis for a hypothetical or real exhibition under the three-layer separation, produce Layer 1 artefacts, Layer 2 artefacts, and Layer 3 artefacts as distinct deliverables, and present them publicly. Highest-value teaching move and strong candidate for a Khoj or Anant programme.

Future curatorial commissions. Any curatorial invitation over the next decade is, from the SDC perspective, an invitation to apply the variant in practice. Koher has no institutional commercial-curation arm; it has a practitioner whose next exhibition or commission will be an instance of the variant.

Closing — what the variant makes possible

Four things become possible when the variant is written down and placed in the canon.

A curatorial teaching becomes teachable. The layers are nameable. A student can be assigned to produce a Layer 1 artefact, a Layer 2 artefact, and a Layer 3 artefact as

separate documents, and the student can be assessed against each independently. The genre of the fused voice becomes one pedagogical option among several rather than the implicit default. Apprentice curators can learn practices rather than a voice.

A **curatorial criticism becomes locatable**. A reviewer can distinguish a weak thesis from a poor selection from a clumsy narration. The review can address the layer where the failure occurred rather than the compressed object. Criticism becomes a contribution to revision rather than an alternative verdict at the same compressed level.

A **Prayas's curatorial practice becomes legible as a practice**. MoVD, *Growing Down, Of Games, I Am Present, The Murmur Engine* — the sequence reads as a single practice once the SDC architecture names what they share. The practice has been happening for sixteen years; the name has been missing. The variant is what makes the sequence visible as one practice across media.

A **the audience is given a role**. Under the fused genre, the visitor is a receiver of verdicts. Under SDC-curation, the visitor is a judgement layer that completes the exhibition in their own reading. This is not a democratic gesture — it is an architectural one. The visitor's judgement is not added to the exhibition; the exhibition is built so that the visitor's judgement is where the exhibition completes. The refusal to close at the curator's thesis is the gift.

The variant does not argue that the fused genre is wrong. It argues that the fused genre is one mode of curation, that the separated mode is another, and that the separated mode has been practised by MoVD and several other figures without ever being named as a mode. Naming it is what this variant does. What curators do with it is their own practice.

Version 1.0 — 17 April 2026. Passages verified against source JSON in

`~/Dropbox/personal_projects/museumofvestigialdesire.net/content/`. The fifteen MoVD passages drawn on — `sanctuary/`, `desires/`, `symptoms-of-a-museum-part-1`, `offices/`, `offices/columnists/`, `offices/surfatial`, `books/`, `books/self/vestigial`, `desires/reputation/`, `functions/journal/missed-opportunities`, `functions/laboratories/museums-in-museums`, and four section-opener references implicit in the walkthrough — are a subset of the archive. The full MoVD index is at `../../movd.md`; the curated ten-passage SDC-precursor

anthology is at `../movd-as-precursor.md` . Pair-references: `../sdc.md` ,
`../principle-not-pattern.md` , `../process.md` , `README.md` ,
`notes/curation.md` (the origin note, retained as the pre-variant working draft).