

GEM

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Editors: **teresa cisneros, Marquard Smith**

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Introduction

Introduction to 'In Spite Of...'

teresa cisneros and Marquard Smith

This issue of the Journal of Education in Museums began with a simple but urgent question: how do we keep making, teaching, organising, and imagining in a world that keeps trying to shut those possibilities down?

Across museums, galleries, archives, classrooms, artist-run spaces, and community infrastructures, cultural workers continue to create, make, teach, organise, and imagine otherwise; often in conditions marked by austerity, censorship, political hostility, burnout, and institutional fatigue. These are environments increasingly hostile to the very possibility of public culture. And yet, in the cracks where institutions both challenge and fail us, people persist. In spite of... it all, they continue to build spaces of learning, connection, and cultural possibility. It is work that is generous, critical, and transformative.

This issue brings together contributors from around the world who are doing precisely that: sustaining cultural, creative, and educational work not because conditions are favourable, but because the work is necessary.

As editors, we wanted to create a space that acknowledges the realities of our moment – the violence, exclusions, and bureaucratic constraints – without being defined or limited by them. We invited educators, curators, administrators, writers, artists, academics, and organisers who think beyond borders and refuse narrow definitions of culture; who understand that learning and creativity are inseparable from justice. They write from contexts shaped by colonial legacies, climate crisis, displacement, authoritarian governance, and structural inequity, as well as from places of deep imagination, solidarity, and commitment.

We were interested in the practices that persist, adapt, and re-emerge; the strategies cultural workers invent to keep going; the forms of solidarity, kinship, and creativity that flourish even when institutions falter. What you will find here are not polished narratives of resilience but honest accounts of labour, refusal, invention, and care.

We invited contributors unafraid to think critically, globally, and radically about what cultural work is and what it can be.

The result is a collection that moves across continents, institutions, disciplines, and generations, offering a textured portrait of how educators, curators, artists, administrators, academics, and organisers continue to educate, create, and transform in spite of everything.

‘In Spite Of...’ is not a celebration of resilience for its own sake. It is a testament to the ingenuity and courage of cultural workers who continue to build, teach, organise, create, and remember. In spite of everything, and because of everything.

We offer this issue in solidarity with everyone who continues, despite austerity, censorship, burnout, displacement, political hostility, and institutional constraint, to institute otherwise.

The invitation we sent to contributors set the tone for this issue: an open call to reflect on how cultural work continues under pressure, and how practitioners sustain their commitments despite political, financial, and institutional constraints. We asked educators, curators, writers, artists, administrators, academics, and organisers to share not only their projects, but the conditions that shape them: the obstacles they navigate, the strategies they invent, and the forms of knowledge they cultivate.

The invitation framed this issue as a space for exchange, for documenting practices that might otherwise remain invisible, and for imagining new possibilities for cultural work in and beyond institutions, across borders, disciplines, and lived experiences. It asked contributors to speak candidly about what they do, why they do it, and how they continue, not to celebrate resilience for its own sake, but to record refusal, insistence, and creative survival:

Dearest Colleague,

We are pleased to invite you to make a short contribution (c1,000 words) to ‘In Spite Of...’, a themed issue of the Group for Education in Museums’ (GEM) Journal of Education in Museums. This themed issue brings together voices from around the world (invited contributors are included below) to reflect on how educators, academics, artists, and curators continue to shape learning, cultural engagement, and creative practice in spite of political, financial, and institutional pressures.

Museums, galleries, universities, and cultural institutions continue to be called upon to confront today’s crises – inequities, exclusion, oppression, racism, climate change, sustainability, social injustice, etc. Despite increasing challenges of political conservatism, ideological backlash, demands to justify relevance, and defunding, academics, artists, curators, and educators continue to teach, create, and engage communities. Doing so under such conditions, in spite of them, demands about thinking responsibility, time and labour, ‘resilience’, resourcefulness and adapting differently.

This themed issue of *GEM Journal*, asks contributors to reflect on how they continue to educate, create, inspire, and transform through their practices, teachings, and collaborative projects. As such, we hope that it will be a space to exchange ideas, share knowledge, and document the projects, critical perspectives, exhibitions, and initiatives that are responding to the challenges we are facing globally through a learning/ arts/culture/pedagogical lens. Whether you work in museum education, academia, curatorial practice, or grassroots cultural movements, we want to hear about:

- how you think cultural institutions and education are changing under today’s (financial, ideological, and institutional) constraints, and what creative strategies keep cultural work alive despite these systemic obstacles;
 - what innovative responses have emerged from educators, academics, and creative practitioners worldwide; what kinds of projects you do with people; how you are facilitating learning and what you are teaching;
 - how you think we exchange knowledge across borders, disciplines, and lived experiences to rethink institutional possibilities;
 - what new models, strategies, and practical insights can both respond to urgent social and political realities and shape the future of museums, galleries, and education.
- We invite you to submit a 1,000-word response offering insights into why you do what you do, and how you lead and innovate despite the obstacles. To help craft your response, in addition to the bullet points above you might consider the following prompts:
- what courses, workshops, or educational programs have you developed despite limited resources?
 - how have you used curatorial/leadership/pedagogical practice to address political or social issues?
 - what projects have you led in collaboration with communities, students, or groups?
 - how do museums, galleries, and cultural institutions navigate politics – do they facilitate political discourse, and if so, how?
 - how does the civic responsibility to serve the public shape museum education, curatorial decisions, and engagement strategies?
 - what are the most innovative, experimental, or transformative approaches in museum and heritage education that others can learn from and build upon?
 - how do experiences from different regions – particularly those in the global South – offer ways of thinking about institutions, education and learning, culture and activism?
- This themed issue about global perspectives seeks a diversity of voices, emphasizing inspiring, practical, and innovative strategies that transform how educators, academics, artists, and curators continue their work in adverse conditions. By sharing projects, methods, and strategies from colleagues internationally, ‘In Spite Of...’ hopes to strengthen conversations around learning, creativity, kinship, and survival – ensuring that knowledge-sharing and collective learning does not exist in isolation but, rather, that experiences and insights move across sectors, disciplines, borders, regions, and generations.
- We hope this platform motivates, inspires, and fosters new ways of thinking about your cultural work and contributions to making it possible.
- Thank you for the vital work you do – we look forward to your contribution.
- Warmest regards,
- teresa cisneros & Marq Smith

Responding to our invitation, together these contributions map a global field of practitioners who continue to make culture possible *in spite of* and often directly against the forces that seek to diminish it.

Responding to our invitation, by way of their thinking/doing/writing, across the issue, five interconnected themes emerge that reveal the breadth of contemporary cultural labour and the shared urgencies shaping it: (1) archives/collections and memory as contested terrain (2) labour, burnout, and the structural violence of the cultural sector (3) the persistence of cultural work under duress as resistance and survival (4) radical pedagogies that defend complexity, and (5) the creation of new infrastructures, solidarities, and imaginaries that are accountable to the people they claim to serve.

1. Archives/collections and memory as contested terrain.

A powerful thread running through the issue concerns the archive/collection as a site of violence, extractivism, erasure, and possibility. **Nathan Sentance** exposes how colonial museum labelling practices distort Indigenous knowledge and proposes new forms of truth-telling. **Janine Francois** connects climate justice to Black and Indigenous worldviews, reframing ecological systems as living archives that resist colonial taxonomies and hold ancestral memory. **Gabrielle Moser's** reflection on the forced removal of Wanda Nanibush from the Art Gallery of Ontario reveals how institutional erasure operates; and how refusal becomes a form of sovereignty. **Amal Alhaag** confronts the violence of the colonial archive and the necessity of refusal as a method of survival.

Together these contributions insist on new methods of witnessing, remembering, and reimagining the archive/collection as a site of struggle, repair, and possibility.

2. Labour, burnout, and the structural violence of the cultural sector.

Several contributors write with clarity and urgency about the exploitative conditions underpinning cultural work. **Louise Shelley** offers a searing account of precarity, exploitation, and the contradictions of working in the culture sector under capitalism. **Nathalie Boobis** reflects on burnout and the impossibility of sustaining care within underfunded institutions. **Barby Asante** examines the 'hold' – the emotional, historical, and institutional forces that shape Black cultural labour – and the necessity of refusal as a strategy for endurance. Together, these writers challenge the romanticisation of resilience and call for structural change, collective organising, and new models of cultural labour.

3. The persistence of cultural work under duress as resistance and survival.

Building on this, several contributors write from contexts where cultural work is in fact inseparable from survival. **Teesa Bahana** reflects on 32° East in Kampala, where solidarity-based programming and community-led infrastructures become lifelines in moments of crisis. **Zoe Butt** describes the realities of artistic production in Southeast Asia, where censorship and political surveillance shape the very possibility of creative work.

Abdellah Karroum traces the emergence of Moroccan artistic movements forged during periods of political upheaval.

Mark O'Neill writes from Scotland about austerity, institutional failure, and the long-term exclusion of working-class communities. Extending this thread, **Balbir K. Singh** explores opacity as a strategy for evading racial and colonial capture – a refusal that becomes a mode of survival within institutions that seek to discipline or silence. Here contributors show that cultural work persists not because conditions are favourable, but because the work is necessary for collective survival, solidarity, and hope.

4. Radical pedagogies that defend complexity.

Several writers insist on pedagogy as a political act that resists simplification and embraces complexity. **Pablo Helguera** critiques the rise of epistemophobia and defends pedagogical strategies that hold contradiction, nuance, and discomfort as essential to democratic life. **Emily Pringle** articulates reflective, critical, and relational approaches within gallery education. **Amanda Cachia's** exploration of disability-led weaving reframes pedagogy as embodied, communal, and interdependent. **Elvira Espejo Ayca** writes from Amazonian epistemologies, positioning art as a living pedagogical system rooted in land, ecology, and ancestral knowledge. **MADEYOULOOK's** Garden Talks reimagine learning as intimate, relational, and grounded in everyday Black life. **Larisa Zmud** brings micropolitics, body-territory, and speculative fabulation as pedagogical strategies that foreground situated, embodied, and insurgent learning. **Yaiza Hernández Velázquez** interrogates the crisis of curatorial education and calls for pedagogical infrastructures capable of confronting institutional collapse.

Here contributors defend pedagogy as a site of political struggle, disability justice, more-than-human relations, and collective transformation.

5. The creation of new infrastructures, solidarities, and imaginaries that are accountable to the people they claim to serve.

A number of contributors demonstrate how institutions can be reconfigured through community-led, relational, and reciprocal practices. **Victoria Hollows** offers a detailed account of Paisley Museum's transformation through community-led decision-making. **David Anderson** adds to this by arguing for cultural democracy and community-led infrastructures that reject elitist museum models. **Carey Robinson** examines the extractive tendencies of the UK cultural sector and argues for infrastructures grounded in reciprocity rather than tokenism. **Anahí Saravia Herrera** describes Cubitt Community Press as a community-led publishing project that redefines institutional relationships, redistributes cultural power, and builds new forms of solidarity. **Georgina Kleege** reframes museum access through the concept of 'reciprocal access', showing how tactile engagement can transform institutional practice. **Domenico Sergi** extends this through participatory research methodologies that position community researchers as co-investigators, challenging the extractive logics of institutional knowledge production. **Janna Graham's** writing on the 'village ethos' of the Deptford People's Heritage Museum demonstrates how community organising becomes museum-making, rooted in care, mutuality, and everyday survival.

Amanda Hunt shows how public engagement at the Walker Art Center is rebuilt through community rooted infrastructures, belonging, and civic responsibility. Together, these contributions propose new forms of care relations, collaboration and co-production, participation and collectivity, shared authorship, and accountability. These contributions point toward futures in which institutions are not merely reformed but reconfigured through solidarity and shared purpose.

'In Spite Of...' is a testament to the ingenuity, courage, and imagination of cultural workers who continue to create worlds in a world that often undermines their efforts. It reminds us that cultural work is not a luxury; it is a form of survival, a method of resistance, untold futures that the walls of institutions cannot contain. Because cultural work is never neutral: it is shaped by histories, politics, and power, and it has the capacity to challenge, unsettle, and transform.

The contributions gathered here show that even in moments of profound crisis – ecological, political, institutional, personal – people continue to build, teach, organise, remember, and create. We hope this issue offers readers not only insight into the diverse practices represented here, but also a sense of companionship, a recognition that across borders and contexts, many of us are engaged in parallel struggles and shared commitments.

In spite of everything, cultural work continues. And because of everything, it must.

1.

Archives/collections and memory as contested terrain.

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What a Label Holds

Nathan mudyi Sentance

'With many of the nineteenth and early twentieth century First Peoples collections, the Country where they are from, the maker, their story, and cultural narratives were unrecorded by collectors. This speaks to the early practice of dislocating cultural belongings from people and their systems of knowledge.' (Moulton, 2025: 2)

The label. The source of truth for many museum visitors. Some read with backs bent, noses forward, hands behind their backs like they're shaking their tail feathers. Treating the label as if it were the object itself. Many trust the label, so if it lies, they carry that lie with them when they leave. Some even carry the lie beyond the museum walls, passing it on as truth. A quiet miseducation, repeated.

I read labels because I'm a good museum goer. I know they take time to research and write. But when I see an Aboriginal cultural belonging on display, consulting the label isn't just curiosity, it is personal. It is preceded by a tornado rising inside my stomach and the sense that the belonging is reaching out to be held by family.

When meeting another Aboriginal person, we ask, "where you from?" "who's your mob?" This might extend to questions about which water we're from, fresh or salt, and who our Elders are to know accountability and knowledge sources. I ask these questions to the labels of Aboriginal belongings. Frequently, labels respond with a blank stare.

*A2000/10 shield, maker unknown, wood, Mudgee, collected 1924¹

Too often, labels look like the one above: silent, incomplete, stripped of kin. In my experience, this is normal. This is considered the basic information a label needs. Despite this being the standard, let me break down what is wrong with it.

Starting with the title "shield", this is an imposed description. As Aboriginal people, we have specific names for our belongings in our own languages. Calling it a "shield" flattens its meaning, removing it from cultural and linguistic context. This title in the database then reproduced on labels becomes the "truth" about what the belonging is and what it was used for.

This shield may have been a tool for protection, but also for ceremony, identity, or passing down knowledge. Without that context, "shield" becomes a placeholder that reflects the collector's worldview more than the item's purpose. As Hannah Turner writes in *Cataloguing Culture*:

Naming is a world-building activity, and naming practices are central to how we imagine the iterative, mundane ways in which information becomes knowledge. Over much of the history of museums, primarily white, male curators with similar education backgrounds have made decisions about objects that come from thousands of different communities and geographic locales. The categorizations of material culture are rooted in the values that these curators have brought to their positions. (Turner, 2020: 154)

This is evident in seemingly neutral categorisation methods. In the Dewey Decimal system, Aboriginal creation stories are classified under 398.2049915 – Aboriginal myths and legends, whereas Christian creation stories are not called myths. They're housed under religion, not folklore. This kind of labelling frames one worldview as belief and the other as fiction.

That is why hosting critical visitations is important. Source communities hold the knowledge that can restore the true names, stories, and purposes of belongings. For example, giran giran is one of six Wiradjuri words for shield that I know of, each specific to type and use. Giran means wind in Wiradjuri, hinting at meanings beyond physical protection. While I don't yet fully understand its depth, I know this: these belongings are far more than objects; they are living vessels of culture, identity, ceremony, and knowledge. Recognising this complexity demands museums move beyond simplified labels and listen to the voices of the peoples whose histories these belongings carry.

As living vessels, the attribution "maker unknown" is deeply inadequate. It often appears on Aboriginal collection materials where the individual maker was not recorded. I believe this is insidious for several reasons. Firstly, it strips the belonging of its individuality and humanity, making it easier to take or appropriate, as if it wasn't taken from someone, but from a nameless figure. Secondly, "maker unknown" disconnects the belonging from the community and Country it comes from, failing to acknowledge that these belongings have living ties to living people.

I first encountered the attribution "Made by Ancestor/s" in the exhibition *kanalaritja: An Unbroken String*, curated by Zoe Rimmer and Liz Tew (Janke, 2019), and it was a game changer for me. We adopted the practice at the Australian Museum, where I used to work (Smith, 2021). Later, when I joined the Powerhouse Museum, my colleague Tammi Gissell (Muruwarri-Wiradjuri), Collections Coordinator, had been using the attribution "maker not recorded". She believed it rightly placed the responsibility on the institution, since the maker wasn't unknown, the collector had simply not bothered to record them. I brought the "Made by Ancestor/s" practice with me, and together we combined the two approaches into the attribution "Ancestor/s not recorded".

Later, curator Ngarino Ellis suggested including the word "yet" as an aspiration. We now use "Ancestor/s not yet recorded". This phrasing reflects our commitment to continuing this work with communities to restore names, relationships, and connections.

Additionally, knowing the type of wood a belonging is made from is something most museum professionals would agree is important.

This knowledge not only deepens scientific understanding, it also supports cultural revitalisation. For many communities, wood type can indicate where something was made, what it was used for, and who had the right to make or carry it. These details carry meaning.

Similarly, the language we use to describe how cultural belongings entered collections matters. Terms like “collected” can obscure the truth, softening the often violent or non-consensual nature of removal. Using the word “taken” reflects a more honest account. It acknowledges a removal rather than just an acquiring.

These changes in attribution and description, including culturally specific naming, restoring recognition of makers, and accurately reflecting acquisition histories, are small but powerful. They represent a shift in institutional practice toward greater care and accountability. They open the door to truth-telling and cultural resurgence.

This work is ongoing. Museums must continue to collaborate with Aboriginal communities to better understand the cultural belongings in their care and represent them with respect and accuracy. It is not about perfect labels, but responsible ones. Labels that reflect presence, knowledge, and sovereignty.

A label might now read:

2000/10 girran girran (broad shield),
Ancestor not yet recorded, mulga timber,
taken from Wiradjuri Country (Mudgee) 1924.

Let that label tell the truth. Let it honour
the belonging, and the people it calls out
for, it remembers and it carries.

Nathan muddy Sentic is a Wiradjuri librarian and museum educator who grew up on Darkinjung Country, and currently works at the Powerhouse Museum as Head of Collections, First Nations.

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Endnote

¹ A made-up example for this text.

Sacred Black Ecologies: A Meditative Offering

Janine Francois

Sacred Black Ecologies is presented here as a response to the context outlined by the guest editors of this themed issue of GEM. The project offers possible framework(s) for reimagining museums, galleries and archives as sites of learning and spaces shaped by Black ecological knowledge, memory, and practices.

Sacred Black Ecologies is the term I coined to describe an ongoing project with a transoceanic framework that positions land, water, and plant life as living archives, temporal epistemologies, and relational geographies. Drawing on community co-production, interdisciplinary scholarship, and artistic collaboration, the project investigates ancestral memory, land-based knowledge, and diasporic cultural practices across the Caribbean, West Africa, and the UK. Its activations take multiple forms: archival research at the Natural History Museum and Wellcome Collection in London, collaborative research to Jamaica¹, a film essay about the Aburi Botanical Gardens in Ghana, a performance lecture (forth coming) and public dialogues in Lagos² and London³ respectively. Through these activations, the project reimagines

climate justice, reframing ecological systems as active participants, knowledge keepers, and collaborators.

'Research' in Black and Indigenous contexts can often evoke histories of harm and distrust, revealing the enduring legacies of colonial scientific practices (Smith, 2012). The methodology of *Sacred Black Ecologies* is informed by consent, reciprocity, slowness, and relational ethics. Robin Wall Kimmerer invites '*the land knows you, even when you are lost*,' (2013, p.36) and this approach guides my work. Engaging the land as a co-collaborator requires seeking permission, returning care, slowing extractive processes, and recognising that each intervention transforms both self and environment. I frame this as '*vibes: as a methodology*.' Essentially, I perform a '*vibe check*': does the land want me here, today, is this even the 'right' moment? Or do I need to return later? Am I truly ready? Are my intentions purposeful and honourable? This framework challenges conventional human-centered design and research approaches, creating space for ethical, attentive, and relational engagement with more-than-human worlds.



Dr. Janine Francois reflecting amongst Hans Sloane's herbaria, Natural History Museum, 2025. Photography by Henry Robinson.

Sacred Black Ecologies situates plants, land, and ecological systems as ancestral and spiritual foremothers, resisting the Cartesian division between mind and body that separates humans from nature. Drawing on African and Taino Indigenous knowledges, the project disrupts colonial taxonomies and herbarium systems, which historically enacted epistemicide by severing plants from the communities that cultivated them. Black ecofeminism (Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 2021; Sylvia Wynter, 2003) underpins this approach, reconceptualising human, natural, and built environments and revealing the structural impositions of colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist logics on ecological and spatial relations.

Jamaica serves as the initial site of enquiry, operating allegorically for hyper-local diasporic communities in the UK, the Anglophone Caribbean, and West Africa, tracing transatlantic trajectories of displacement, extraction, and resistance. The project engages both living landscapes and archival collections, including the Hans Sloane herbarium at the Natural History Museum. During his 1687–89 voyage to Jamaica, Sloane collected hundreds of plant and animal specimens, often removing them from their cultural and ecological contexts. These specimens were catalogued as imperial assets, re-inscribed into European scientific taxonomies.

The herbarium thus stands not as a neutral archive but as a material record of ecological dispossession, informed by colonial science and plantation economies.

Sloane's broader work exemplifies how colonial knowledge production shaped modern scientific and cultural institutions. A physician, botanist, and collector, he amassed over 71,000 objects, that became foundational to the British Museum, the Natural History Museum, the British Library, and Chelsea Physic Garden. Through networks built upon colonial travels, his collections severed plants from the embodied and spiritual practices of the communities that nurtured them. These textual, botanical, and archival landscapes reveal the intimate entanglement of early-modern science and empire, showing how extraction and classification naturalised imperial power. Herbariums then become sites of representation, shaped by Eurocentric perception and memory.

Fieldwork in Jamaica further embodies these ideas. At Castleton Gardens, a site shaped by botanical imperialism, we encountered plants, like cacao, recorded in Sloane's herbarium. Today, the gardens function as spaces of leisure and healing, highlighting the tension between colonial histories of exploitation and contemporary ecological care. At Norsehill Botanical Gardens, engagement with Mr. Valentine, a septuagenarian landworker and elder, revealed deep knowledge of plants, cosmology, and African Indigenous spirituality. His teachings demonstrate that land is cultivated not only for food or aesthetics but for ritual and relational care. Emphasising the interdependence of ecological stewardship and cultural continuity. My film about Aburi Botanical Gardens functions as a visual essay and counter archive. It uses cinematic storytelling to foreground Black and Indigenous ecological knowledge to

reimagine Aburi as both relational and more-than-human networks. This visual methodology emphasises the tension between objectified archival representation and lived, sensory, and spiritual experience of place.

The climate crisis intensifies these entanglements. Rising seas erode coastlines, saltwater infiltrates crops, and seasonal patterns destabilise agricultural practices. Decolonisation in this context is not merely about recovering colonial archives but reanimating what they could never contain: embodied, migratory, and ancestral knowledge.

Extending from Jamaica to the wider Caribbean and West Africa, *Sacred Black Ecologies* situates these practices within long temporal and spatial arcs of the transatlantic world. It recognises climate justice as inseparable from memory work, spirituality, and African/Indigenous knowledge, by tracing the lineages of plants and their communities. Insisting that reparations for land and ecology must account for deep temporalities of displacement, survival, and care and contemporary struggles for land.

Knowledge holders and makers like Mr. Valentine, reminds us that our ancestors are present in the soil, water, plants, animals, and other living beings. Emotional re-engagement with colonial herbariums re-grounds plants as carriers of healing, spiritual, and communal knowledge, reconnecting fragmented botanical histories within living ecological landscapes and peoples.

Ultimately, *Sacred Black Ecologies* invites reflection beyond neoliberal sustainability, and towards an ancestral ethic of care. Black and Indigenous ways of knowing are central, not alternative, to imagining climate futures. More importantly, a climate

now. This ethic is urgent in the context of hurricane Melissa devastating Cuba, Ayiti⁴, and Xamaca⁵, where ecological loss and resilience are inseparably linked. By naming ecology as sacred, the project practices intellectual, spiritual, and material repair, tending to what colonialism fractured and re-enchanting what modernity has overlooked. Land is approached not as a resource but as a living archive, a dynamic network of relations and negotiations, inviting us to learn, repair, and reimagine the world.

Dr. Janine Francois is a Black British feminist scholar whose work interrogates climate justice through the intersecting lenses of Black feminism, anti-colonial theory, and feminist ethics of care. She is Associate Professor and Director of Climate Justice at The Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL). Her interdisciplinary practice bridges academic research, curatorial inquiry, and public engagement to explore the cultural, spatial, and ecological dimensions of climate breakdown. Francois has held curatorial residencies at LCC Studios, Guest Projects Africa, and Hackney Museum, and is an Asiko Art School alumna. She has curated and contributed to programmes at institutions including Tate Britain, the V&A, INIVA, Autograph, Lyric Hammersmith, the Barbican, and the National Portrait Gallery. Her writing has appeared in *The Independent*, *Architectural Review*, *VICE*, and *Journal of Visual Culture*. Her forthcoming debut book repositions the Atlantic Ocean as a living geography shaped by African diasporic histories and the enduring violences of climate injustice.

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Endnotes

- 1** This trip was funded by The Bartlett School of Architecture/UCL, co-produced with Amahra Spence (Hood Futures Studio) and Connie Bell (Decolonising the Archive), with Connie also serving as co-researcher, and video documentation supported by Denisha Anderson.
- 2** I presented a public paper at the Re:assemblages Symposium, organised by the G.A.S. Foundation/Yinka Shonibare Foundation in Lagos, November 2025.
- 3** I invited Kwamena Boison, a textiles artist, social entrepreneur and Head of Design at The Revival to deliver a guest lecture at The Bartlett School of Architecture.
- 4** Ayiti is the Taino name for Haiti. I am trying to build the habit of referring to Caribbean island as how indigenous people knew them as.
- 5** Xaymaca is the Taino name for Jamaica.

Up Against the Wall (after Luis Jacob)

Gabrielle Moser

I spent much of last summer staring at a picture of nothing. On view as part of 'groundwork' – a summer incubator for research into art institutions hosted by Mercer Union in Toronto, Canada – Luis Jacob's large-scale, black and white photograph, *Moving the Museum (What Then Remainz)* (2024), depicts the artist's hand, index finger outstretched, pointing to a seemingly blank wall, suffused with light (Fig.1). But upon closer inspection, the wall's expansive white field is interrupted by clusters of dust and debris that form shadowed outlines of vinyl lettering, now removed: the negative spaces around the words having accrued particulate matter after years of display. Three half-sentences – first in Anishinaabemowin, then English and then French – still adhered at the bottom of the frame, but soon to be removed, provide the only clue to the site of the photograph, acknowledging the private donors that have sponsored the Indigenous + Canadian art collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO).

Established in 1900 and now one of the largest public art galleries in North America, the AGO had, between 2016 and until the late November day the

photograph was taken, in 2023, undertaken significant structural work in decolonising the museum and in repairing relations with Indigenous artists, curators, and visitors. That work was driven by the hiring of the museum's first-ever Curator of Indigenous Art, Wanda Nanibush who worked with the Curator of Canadian Art, Georgiana Uhlyarik, to re-envision not only the museum's collecting practices, but its very organisational structure¹. The Canadian and Indigenous wing of the museum was organised and reversed, with Indigenous art, and language, taking precedence, both in how the permanent collection was hung on the walls and in the didactic labels that accompanied the artworks. Following the structure of land treaties signed – but rarely respected – between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian settler government, Nanibush and Uhlyarik reconceived the department as a nation-to-nation agreement, where both parties share custodianship of the same territory, while respecting one another's agency and sovereignty. The agreement was spelled out, literally, in grey vinyl lettering on the AGO's walls. 'Museums are the cultural keepers', Nanibush told *The New York Times* in 2018, when the newly organised



Fig. 1: Luis Jacob, *Moving the Museum (What Then Remainz)*, 2024. From a series of 5 b/w chromogenic prints. 30.5 x 45.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art opened to the public. 'We come to them to learn our stories, and find out what our humanity is' (Loos, 2018).

It came as a shock, then, when Nanibush's profile disappeared from the AGO's website in mid-November 2023, and when, the following week, the museum confirmed her 'departure' (in their words) from her ground-clearing role. Over the subsequent weeks, it came to light that Nanibush had been forced from her role by donors who had complained to the museum's director about her social media posts supporting the rights and humanity of the Palestinian people – donors whose inflammatory language demanded she be disciplined (McBride 2024). Under the conditions of a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) she signed during her exit, Nanibush has been unable to speak publicly about what happened.

Jacob's indexical act draws attention to the museum's official line that there is 'nothing to see here' in its dismissal of Nanibush, repeated in press releases issued by its director and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in the wake of her exit that declare, 'the Art Gallery of Ontario is an art museum' (a tautological statement that suggests art is a site absent of, rather than permeated by, the politics of restitution and repair). By pointing insistently to Nanibush's absence, Jacob's photograph attracts a surfeit of attention to her work's disappearance from the museum's walls. But the disappearance of the nation-to-nation agreement is also, importantly, an act of refusal on Nanibush's part while exiting – an insistence that the museum could not keep her intellectual property, even as they attempted to circumvent Indigenous cultural sovereignty and acts of transnational solidarity.

What do we do when we are up against the wall? Nanibush's case raises difficult questions about the exit strategies available to us when – as artists, curators, art historians and educators – we find ourselves in insupportable conditions that make it impossible for us to do our jobs. Voluntary forms of withdrawal are increasingly on the rise in the art world – the 'quiet quitting' that followed the COVID-19 pandemic is just one example – alongside more disturbing acts of involuntary silencing. The moral panic around the rise of so-called 'cancel culture' online (Daub 2024; brown 2020), and the ubiquity of the NDA in dismissals of staff at not-for-profit museums not only demonstrate the limits of academic freedom and expression for cultural experts, but, troublingly, also threaten to interrupt intergenerational knowledge transfer and to limit productive forms of institutional critique and transformation (Aisle 4 2024; Maharani & Ng 2023). In Nanibush's case, as with many others in the past two years, widespread calls for boycotts of the AGO – initiated by arts workers who rely on the museum for their livelihoods – mean that artists, curators, writers, and cultural workers invested in the future of arts institutions are effectively boycotting themselves.

Convened at an important juncture in this impasse, the 'groundwork' exhibition at Mercer Union became a model for studying art institutions from outside their walls. Featuring Jacob, the EMILIA-AMALIA feminist collective (of which I am a founding member), and curator Kate Wong, the programme investigated the conditions of the Toronto arts ecology through reading groups, public talks, listening parties, and workshops that looked to artworks and collective organising to offer us models for 'dreaming in dark times' (Sliwinski 2017). While, for Jacob, this work involved visualising the

silent reverberations of events at the AGO – including, quite literally, a framed seismographic reading, taken in Ontario at 12:15 pm, on 16 November 2023 (when Nanibush's 'departure' from the museum was announced) – for Wong, her project entailed researching and offering alternatives to Western institutional models generated by artist-run centres and collectives from the global majority. For our part, EMILIA-AMALIA turned, as we often do, to the past to reactivate its undetonated potential (to borrow the words of Elizabeth Freeman, 2010), transforming the gallery into a community 'hotline' that evoked the spirit and practices of 1970s grassroots organising. Finding inspiration in the Art Workers' Coalition's town hall event, held in New York in 1969, at the height of American complicity in the Vietnam War, the collective restaged our own 'Open Hearing' in Toronto in March 2025, inviting more than 40 arts workers to address the dark times – marked by the intertwined disasters of climate catastrophe, deepening worker exploitation, and ongoing colonial violence (including the genocide of Palestinians) – in which we find ourselves. At Mercer, we invited visitors to listen to an audio recording of the four hours of public statements made at the town hall to generate a manifesto, but also transcribed the recordings, and made copies to mail to local museums, arts councils, and politicians.

Alongside the exhibition, an act of reparation Jacob and I have been undertaking, separately in our roles as faculty members in studio art and art history programmes in our respective institutions, is to teach our students about Nanibush's ongoing work. At Concordia University, in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal, I have been teaching a seminar about repair, reparation, and curating that asks graduate students to confront the fraught histories

of settler colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade and museum complicity with these structures. In so doing, we ask what artworks, and exhibitions, can do to help us encounter the difficult knowledge these histories confront us with. I have taught this seminar before, at OCAD and York Universities, and each year a different text stands out to the students. Last fall, they have returned time and again in our discussions to an essay by the Métis artist and curator David Garneau, called 'Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization'. In it, in an assertion that rhymes with Nanibush's, he reminds us that 'Art is a strange supplement. It is not essential to our survival but is integral to our humanity.' (Garneau, 2013: 16).

As the name suggests, the exhibition at Mercer Union intended to do the 'on the ground' work needed to think our way out the double bind of censorship and self-censorship that threatens to immobilize us. And this work, however provisional and insufficient, ironically required the public art gallery as a containing environment in which it could unfold. The space of the gallery remains, as the title of Jacob's photograph suggests, a site of possibility, of imagining what could be otherwise, when we are up against the wall.

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Endnote

1 Though Nanibush was the first curator to hold the title of Curator of Indigenous Art, and to have contemporary Indigenous art as part of her mandate, other Indigenous curators had been employed by the AGO in the past, under other position headings, such as Richard Hill's important tenure as Curatorial Assistant of Canadian Art in the early 2000s, during which time he worked closely with Anna Hudson to acquire historical North American Indigenous art for the permanent collection.

Eye & Eye Cannot See:

A Note on Unseeing, Distortion and Refusal to Reproduce the Colonial Image

Amal Alhaag

In March 2023, I presented the 'Dispossessed Archives: Subversive Laughter and Colonial Headaches' as an afternoon gathering on fabulation, subversive strategies, and the colonial archive at Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, the museum for film and the art of the moving image in The Netherlands. It was an honour to be joined by remarkable thinkers, troublemakers, and researchers/artists/curators Dr Barby Asante and Jeftha Pattikawa. Together we brought the questions that emerged during my research to peers and the audience. We thought together about the impossibility of sitting, shifting, living, and hanging out with the archive.

Prior to that afternoon, over the previous 18 months I had spent many days and weeks thinking about the horror of processing images of white Dutch colonial officers, daily village life, traditional playful rituals and mundane domestic acts. I was looking for something that would refuse the gaze, only to come across a whole alphabet of gestures that domestic workers offered that *could* be read or imagined as quiet dissent, unruly behaviour. One might wonder, what is

dissent when everyday life is about serving a 'master'? How to dismantle the house of the master, when there are no tools and technologies to break down the archive into minuscule pieces in order to reassemble histories, to make it stretch and not only include mundane acts of being but perhaps also potential moments of becoming.

This note sits, somewhat uncomfortably, in the grey space between being and becoming. It comes after many hours in the archive, sifting through a sea of colonial records detailing the luxurious lives of Dutch colonial officers and their families, alongside the colonised subjects; the Indonesian domestic workers who served them and who are shown in these videos without their consent.

Sometimes it seems that to comprehend Dutch colonial histories one needs to not only hang out in the margins of the archives but to also pull the margins of these archives into the present. It is here, right here, the present, our present, amongst the colonial dust and the un-apologetic romanticising of the 'Dutch-Indies' that seems to match the home-videos of the

colonial officers, the companies promoting terraforming or their colonial business in textile and other goods.

In this note I mostly reflect associatively on the vernacular films made by Dutch colonial officers and companies made in 1920s and 1930s. This is a specific period of time before World War II, which offered space for a reconfiguration of Dutch colonial dreams. Scavenging these possessed archives is to face what Filipino scholar and critical theorist Neferti XM Tadiar (2022, ix) describes as to be in the 'aftermath of and perdurance of decolonization, those processes and practices of quotidian as well as formal, organised, social struggles among the colonized to live nevertheless and otherwise – beyond the constricted fate' of the Euro-American-settler dominant global mode of life.

To hang out with the archive is to attune to the contradictions of working through/with the archives, to despise what lives in the belly of the beast. It is to be haunted by how its images, sounds, silences and violences live comfortably in the collective Dutch memory. Processing footage clips is to digest the white of the Dutch officers' uniforms, the Indonesian servants body movement, the trees that witnessed for decades the colonial status quo, the violence, the abusive hierarchies, the daunting bureaucracy, the call to kiss the feet of the master. The long warm days and the zooming of the mosquitoes. Images and home videos of white Dutch colonial officers depicting village life, rituals and mundane domestic work in what was then known as the Dutch East Indies stay under the skin.

I want to highlight what it means to spend hours with colonial filmmakers. Officers such as J.C. Lamster who was an active soldier, cameraman, and curator. At the beginning of the 20th Century he served as a soldier in the Dutch East Indies. During a leave in The Netherlands in 1911 he was commissioned by the Koloniaal Instituut in Amsterdam to shoot footage in the Dutch East Indies. He was chosen on the advice of General Van Heutsz as one of the few officers with an interest in the local population and their culture. He sometimes staged scenes and always filmed from one perspective, the medium long shot. Falling into jobs, the way colonial film conservator grew into their field. By happenstance.

How does one wrestle with the violence of the archive, the staging of authenticity, professionalism, the classed diction of the Dutch voice-over that shaped how we have come to know the culture of Indonesia or the 'Dutch Indies'? These are not neutral acts of remembering but structured ways of seeing, framed through colonial authority and performance. Always re-centring the imperial perspective.

In recent years I can think of only one activation of the archive that gained broad visibility in the Netherlands: the film *They Call Me Babu* (2019). It tells a fictional story of Alima, who seems to enjoy her life in the colonial world of which she had never been a part. At first glance the film appears to offer a corrective, a tender re-centering of an Indonesian domestic worker within colonial history. But let us call this what it is. A nostalgic colonial dream that claims to give voice to a young Indonesian woman in a story shaped by filmmaker Sandra Beerends 60 odd years later. And if the film centralises an Indonesian young woman, why is it titled *They Call me Babu* (2019)?

A word invented by the Dutch to describe the domestic worker in the most disrespectful way, the very gesture of 'giving voice' is entangled with the language and hierarchies of the colonial archive it seeks to animate.

When I speak of the afterlife of colonialism I am speaking of *Babu*. Its conception symbolises how this past continues to shape the ways this layered and contested history is remembered, written about, recorded and witnessed.

This colonial past and its afterlives are present in almost every fabric of this society through language, embodiment, family histories and food. Yet this relation is still summarised as a sweet tropical dream, although one person's dream is another person's nightmare. That tension between nostalgia and violence, longing and erasure is not accidental but constitutive of colonial memory itself. And despite the nightmare, people who were subjugated to the Dutch empire and its documentation remained self-determined and unruly. Their lives exceeded the frame, their presence unsettled the script, and their refusal survives even in the records that tried to contain them.

Here is where I pause. If we speak of the afterlife of these collections, the ones that populate unconsented promotional videos that sustain and document the colonial empire or the so-called study of the so-called native or the collections of objects or artifacts, I think of the domestic workers and labourers captured as bystanders in someone else's historical myth. A moment that lasts decades, that lasts forever, while the same roll of footage collects dust in the peripheries of the archives. I am interested in listening to these dust collectors. 'What happens when we listen, what world unfolds then?' In 'Venus in Two Acts', the scholar Saidiya

Hartman sharpens the questions I want to invite you to meditate on: 'How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead and the shouts of victory and then assign words to all of it?' (Hartman, 2008)

There is now a whole economy around decolonising. A neoliberal capitalist practice that reproduces value and status quo. Everyone is decolonising, nobody is a mediocre white man or privileged professor. Everyone is living a precarious life, but not everyone has a permanent contract or house.

Matter of fact, I am not cynical. I do not believe that one can trouble the colonial gaze while remaining inside the confinement of institutional policy or walking on the hygienic mat before entering the archive or visiting the stolen or borrowed objects in the collection. Why do the holding spaces of archives and objects resemble a prison? To an extent it seems that we as caretakers or researchers are trying to trouble the gaze of the prison industry complex.

Is it possible to break with the colonial gaze that is always hierarchical and imprisoning the subject? What spaces have people carved for themselves to reconfigure and renegotiate with the archives? These colonial archives and collections hold histories of relations, emotions, materiality, narratives and technologies. However they cannot filter/comprehend/read the multiplicity of lifeworlds that live in their bellies. Here I ask myself why I am spending time with the Eye archive? What is it telling us beyond a white Dutch colonial dream? What is there to study? Whose life forms the backdrop to this nostalgic dream? Similar narratives, gaps,

and historical silences rest comfortably in collections and archives across the world. When we consider the afterlife of the colonial gaze and the ways it attempted and failed to hijack people's agency and ownership of their image and narratives, these questions rise to the surface.

What space is carved for the subjugated subjects, the communities and their dissent, when the archive centralises the colonial everyday life of the master. And how do we side-step and develop alternative methodologies, tools, and technologies that allow us to break down the archive into small pieces to assemble more equitable histories. And is that enough? In these times of duress where white Dutch people are very concerned with being called white and the concept of wokeness mobilises white solidarity across classes and differences and cultural work is still a white leftist modernist project. Where is breath in all this?

So to return to Eye.

How do we rethink how we witness these records? Where is the space for Indonesian, Malukan, and Papua New Guinean communities to rewire these archives and collections of Eye? And what about the archive of the afterlives, these present moments of making that can become parallel monuments of rewiring, and reassemblage? There is much decolonising work, but I have yet to see divestment of funds or structural support directed toward smaller initiatives or community archives such as *Verloren Banden*, co-founded by Jeftha Pattikawa and his community members.

Perhaps this is the moment to consider the possibility. Everyone and their mother is returning objects, films and archives to the communities from whom/where they were taken. We never know when the abolition

of the museum as we know it is coming, but that horizon keeps some of us going.

To conclude, I return to what Black migrant women organisers from the ZAMI organisation taught me as a teenager in the 90s when I attended gatherings with my mother: Nothing about us without us.

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Labour, burnout, and the structural violence of the cultural sector.

Quit That Job: A Cultural Worker's Perspective

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Quit That Job: A Cultural Worker's Perspective*

Louise Shelley

This is a text I've found difficult to approach. How is it interesting or useful to reflect on the multiple jobs I have held in the arts? After two decades working in it, I know it is "structurally f*cked" (Industria, 2023). What have I been seeking, hoping for, what have I learnt and equally why am I still working in this field? The sector, as many of us working in it know and have felt, is exclusionary, exploitative, and like all workplaces, prioritises reputation and survival over people. This is nothing new. To narrate my movement through these multiple spaces and to detail the structural and financial forces that render contradiction inevitable is to describe a working situation that is, in many ways, characteristic of most other employees. But maybe, in sharing again, as so many others have done and continue to do, we contribute to building something different. Or, at the very least, we make visible our experience as workers and form wider solidarities in collective struggle.

I moved to London in 2010 to work as a cultural worker, to find a curatorial role within the contemporary art scene. I had been working in arts spaces in Glasgow for five years, in commercial galleries,

self-organising projects, and at the city's centre for contemporary art, in roles from admin to programming. I realised that commercial gallery work wasn't for me, and I began to value curating and organising as collaborative, critically engaged practice, learning with and from others. The context feels important to note, studying and living in Glasgow, a city with a deeply held sense of its political history and how this context shaped and influenced visual culture, community organising and DIY non-profit activity, including my own, was significant. It sharpens the urgencies for anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal practice, offering an understanding of the entangled construction of the moments we live in, highly constructed by forces we usually have no power in. And so, to form solidarity and collective action is the one lifeblood. When I moved to London the country was going through a financial crisis, acts of collective mobilisation occupied our public spaces, and the workplace could not be separate despite its best efforts. The consciousness raising in the spaces, encounters, sites, spectres of these two cities in my twenties formed my entire relation to work and how to practice politically.

I was excited about the new people, ideas and histories I could learn from and work with, and after a period of multiple interviews and rejections and a few months on Job Seekers Allowance, I was offered a job. I was really excited about this role and the context, as I would be running a community programme at a non-profit, Arts Council funded space in North-West London, a neighbourhood filled with histories and acts of community organising and resistance. I worked here for eight years. As a part time job, I also had other jobs around it, a portfolio career of precarious contracts. The work I did there, the learning, the histories of that neighbourhood, the communities, the artists, the people I met formed a huge part of my political education in so many ways.

So much of the work required emotional labour, care, hosting, and developing trust. To form solidarities across difference, to build bodies of knowledge and collaboration, to form visual practice in dialogue that spoke to and made visible a process, an issue, that socialised a question. Practically it required more than the process of supporting an art commission – filling in someone’s housing benefit form, diverting budgets, cleaning someone’s house before a council inspection, sitting and talking to someone ill or lonely or homeless for hours, prioritising other people’s lives over your own. The job description could in no way outline what was required of me to do this work and there was little reciprocity from the organisation to support me, this work, or fully understand what it meant to build that knowledge and those relationships. The resulting artwork would often be extracted and celebrated away from all this invisible labour and the bodies involved in its actual production and soul.

My experience in this first job in London, I know, is not exceptional; every artworker

knows very well the dissonance between curatorial subjects that an institution presents and what is actioned, what is felt. This is also not unique to art spaces. Institutional functioning, governance structures, financial models and hierarchies of the workplace are not set up to support radical work, care, or equity in power nor in pay, yet they use this language in their programmes and work all the time. To desire or want them in these places is a waste of energy. So, we owe it to each other to demystify their constructions, and maybe that’s the point of writing this. This is nothing new, but it must continually be shared and in solidarity with others, eventually, a shift has to happen. We know we do this work for more than our waged labour relation, and we take and divest what we can but ultimately, who benefits the most? How do we move towards letting go of these places to build something new? There is power in the sharing of frustration amongst colleagues, the recognition and affirmation of the contradictions we were working under was something that kept us going but why did we never unionise? The scale, the illusion, the promise of something, the confusion of doing a job in a sector you love is a perfect storm to obscure a worker movement here.

Consistently, the thing to shout the loudest about, is that the charity model for these art spaces is not going to build any social movements. It is not going to decolonise itself. It is not going to make any radical statements. It is not going to be in solidarity with Palestine. It is not going to support its workers. It will present illusions of progress, and reform the corners of its unjust structures but only just, if at all. It won’t be accountable to its workers, its community. It will not admit fault. It will largely ignore our political moment or tie itself in knots until it can be reframed as a new programme strand. It works to avoid risk and, above all else, to support



Education slide created by Louise Shelley featuring: 'Toolkit for Cooperative, Collective, & Collaborative Cultural Work' Kimi Hanauer, Lu Zhang 'Schooling & Culture Volume 2 Issue 1' Ricardo Basbaum, Diagram from NPB Project, 'Mission & Core Values', Feminist Centre for creative Work LA

its continued existence. This sets up for curatorial gesture, not action – zero-hours contracts, unpaid and underpaid roles, work exploited for love, duty, and the promise of future reputation. We don't need new arts charities!

The fact that most funders, Arts Council in particular, require this model to have their support says a lot. The charity model needs a hierarchy and, importantly, needs a board of trustees who are not workers on that charity's payroll. The legal binding of this structure, the level of bureaucracy, means that as a worker you feel the contradiction. At a fundraising dinner a framework was put around my work where a wealthy patron could donate £300 to support one 'community workshop' and Anita Zabłudowicz chipped in for a couple. You meet the Zionist funder supporting the programme on liberatory practices. The domestic worker of a

patron serves you canapés while the guests celebrate an artworld prize for a project that speaks to the struggle of migrant domestic workers. Your colleague is a zero-hours visitor assistant that invigilates the exhibition on worker photography. You under pay the artist. You're confused by the self-exploiting artist with access to private finance. Art market forces preside over your curatorial research. Processing the conflict of loving the work, the process, the neighbourhood and so many people, I learnt so much – but the structure always fails. I left after 8 years, completely exhausted!

It was *outside* of that arts organisation where I received the support and learnt the skills, and this came from others committed to collective campaign and organising work in the city, and to them I owe everything – how to organise intersectionally on the foundation of social reproduction came

from the women's refuge, the migrant groups, a homeless day centre, ESOL groups, school students, nurseries, the local family centre, youth clubs, a union of domestic workers. They asked what constitutes a political art practice, why the site of a gallery for activism/visibility, who is paid, what gets left behind?

One group in particular was a self-organised group of migrant domestic workers campaigning for better rights for overseas domestic workers in the UK. I worked with them, with many artists and designers – an alliance of solidarity to situate their experience in a long history of the dismissal of women's work, of domestic labour, of women of colour, of migrant workers. An alliance formed where their energy for campaigning and action, despite their precarity and isolation as workers, left no excuse for artists and cultural workers not to unite and organise too.

Organising and working with a group of youth workers and secondary school teachers around the republishing of *Schooling & Culture*, a radical education journal published from a community darkroom in the neighbourhood that began in the late 1970s, was another example. It was a way of building solidarity and visual culture against a context of education reforms and neo-liberalism. Working on this journal was a process of strengthening solidarity between teachers, students and cultural practitioners by exploring politicised praxes of secondary school teaching in the face of increasing conservative toxicity. In 2017, a year after its publication, I became an hourly paid lecturer at University of the Arts London, and I still exist on that same precarious contract now. These are the contracts that prop up many artists and cultural workers across the U.K. The building of work, relationships and knowledge

for *Schooling & Culture* taught me the need to work concretely against the sterilisation of opportunities for encounters with known and unknown neighbours, workers, co-conspirators. Our struggles are interlinked.

The shaping of my work and thinking at this time through the work and writing of many others – through *Variant*, *Mute*, specifically Marina Vishmidt and her writing on Social Reproduction – resonated with my workplace experiences in so many ways. Being tuned into this critique led me to move jobs multiple times, attempting to find a better context for working with the politics I held in community with others. In a way, each job raised my ambition of how it could and should function, each job resulting in leaving, quitting, or desiring better – better systems of arts organising for political agency, collaboration, coalition, sharing, creating, and imagining together.

The salary trap and not being able to get over some overriding normative work ethic, has meant I keep trying to see what it means to work in different places, or keep taking new jobs in new contexts to see if it's any different. These include non-profit contemporary art spaces (understanding the deeply problematic governance of charitable structures), an artist-led coop, an arts programme in a public transport business with a strong organising union, to unfunded models and small-scale precarious projects and organisations.

Moving from that model of arts organisation, then, to one that I understood as an artist-run cooperative was a hugely exciting step for me. What would it feel like to work without bosses, where everyone has one vote power and no one has more, what work could be done? A co-op felt like it could politicise systems of pay in the art world and challenge hierarchies embedded within payment systems. It

could by its very nature produce new approaches to remunerating the labour of artists, cultural workers, and organisers in support of collective political struggle. I was deeply invested in how this artist-led and cooperative model could develop new approaches and resist complicity with an unregulated, exploitative, and exclusionary art world.

Desiring a non-competitive, community-building, risk-averse space within an Arts Council-funded model, precarious and inherently hierarchical and artworld/market adjacent, was a flawed hope, in retrospect. Cooperation needs to be ideologically sewn into all relations, and sadly, this coop wasn't able to enact cooperative politics in full, for many reasons: pragmatic, funding reasons and being a charity model adjacent to the coop and having a broad membership politically. However, there is an energy and a hope here, and I have so much admiration for the many people that continue to insist that this could support a politicised, equitable model. One of the last things that took place before I left was that the membership passed a motion I tabled at the AGM agreeing to a fee structure to pay artists fairly when invited into the public programme, an agenda item they agreed to table every year. We also made the migrant domestic workers group a key holder, to ask what it would mean to share this space with a worker led campaign group. However, my job here was temporary. It was a role given as a rarefied opportunity – a fellowship – but also a fixed-term, low-paid position, an accepted and normalised opportunity in the artworld that we compete for, this was not a position to build with. I learnt, for sure, but after an 18-month contract I was unemployed.

After a period of navigating freelance work, I took on a full-time contract as a curator working for the art programme at Transport for London. I was interested to

work within a public service organisation who since the 1920s had worked with artists and designers as an integral part of their work. Artists alongside engineers, curators alongside train drivers, a socialist dream where art sat alongside transport provision, had a dedicated budget line, where I would work within a history of unionised transport workers. The resourcing of this programme was entirely different, free of competitive funding rounds and constant financial precarity, artists and workers could be paid well and projects fully supported. Understanding the working conditions of my colleagues working in stations and on the trains was a huge education and has meant I understand more fully their resilience as a workforce and their struggle against increasing privatisation but also the power they can yield as a unionised body. I also understood through my own work there the full force of an oppressive corporate workplace and its incompatibility with any critical, political or enquiring voice whether that be from an artist or a worker there. When we proposed a simple internal bake sale for World Refugee Day our request was met with resistance and required sign off from the head of the business, the guidance being that we couldn't be seen to take sides! The sign off required for an artwork that brought together Black and POC women and non-binary TfL staff into a space for conversation, writing, ritual and re-enactment towards a collective public performance was so laborious and hostile. Yet, a billboard for arms maker BAE systems has constant, unquestioned pride of place at Westminster station, a company making significant profit from the Palestinian genocide. When I questioned the level of scrutiny of the artworks in comparison to a BAE advert that had been in place since 2013, my questions were dismissed and shut down. I left this job, and I was glad to, the secure contract and secure finances were nothing in the face

of overwhelming corporate, conservative values that each day made any possible future here untenable.

I am still working, still drawing that small monthly wage, still over-working, while I figure out what to do, where to place my energy and time as a cultural worker. I have since moved back into a non-profit arts space in north-west London again. Despite having only been away from directly working in that environment for a few years, the state of public funding is truly desperate.

Navigating organisational finances for survival in a damaged and withdrawing publicly resourced landscape feels impossible. It passes on the damage, the precarity, the pressure, onto its workers every time, with small concessions to keep our faith intact, just about. This time I do feel like I am amongst a group of workers and a wider community where we share the same politics and ambitions for how we could do this work: both in and against.

How the institution works, or doesn't work, is perhaps a moot point but how we work as caring, politicised bodies and workers is where I still have energy. Quit that job and share that experience. Who we are in community with, who we share and complain with, and provide support and care for is everything for organising and creating as cultural workers. What are we doing that is beyond the means of the dominant imagination? Across our roles and workplaces, don't defend the actions of employers as a professional duty or hide in your role as a position of neutrality. Form alliances and collective resistance: Strike Outset, Boycott Zabłudowicz, join the global strike for Palestine. Fall into community not despair – boycott, divest and sanction.

Louise Shelley is a London-based curator and arts worker currently based at Metroland Cultures in Kilburn. Metroland's collective practice is developing in close dialogue with the organisation's location in Kilburn, North West London, shaped by its long histories of community organising, migration, resistance and cultural self-determination. Louise's work here is specifically interested in how organisations are structured, how ways of working, governance models and a politics can be built collectively and in dialogue. This work desires and builds organisational frameworks to enable not only curatorial programmes but also forms of political organising, mutual support and collective action.

* An earlier version of this text was published in 'Dispassions: Class Struggle in Arts & Culture', Issue 24, Aug. 1, 2025: <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/quit-that-job-an-artworkers-perspective>

Reference

Industria, 2023: <https://static.a-n.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Structurally-F%E2%80%93cked.pdf>

In Spite of Burnout, or, is it in Spite of Care?

Nathalie Boobis

I have an ambivalence about the notion of 'in spite of' when it comes to the art world. It embodies a passion and persistence in the field that keeps it all afloat, but also enables the poor, and worsening, conditions that pervade the sector. I have written a few times now about this, in relation to my own journey towards a curatorial pathway, and with regards to the organisation I previously directed for 6 ½ years. I entered the sector as a way of life first, and a career second, so boundaries and limitations have been learned through necessity, after my attempts to supersede them. I contend that my experience is a common one and that the sector is largely propped up by overstretched arms.

When I left art school in my early 20s, friends and I would scabble money together to hire empty industrial units to put on exhibitions while working bar jobs to pay our rent. We would follow art world conventions with painted white MDF walls, plinths, press releases, private views with printed invitations for VIPs. We started putting in small project grants to Arts Council England to increase the ambition of our projects, and we got quite good at it. I joined an art collective

that had a free building from the council that was earmarked for development. We became ambitious with our programming and successful funding bids followed. We weren't paid. I worked 8am–3pm as someone's home PA and the rest of my time was spent dreaming up and installing exhibitions. It was exhausting and it didn't feel sustainable to pay ourselves nothing and artists barely anything. But I was in my 20s, I had no responsibilities and lots of time.

Eventually I got paid work as an assistant curator in a not-for-profit, Arts Council NPO, in London. The ambition of the programme far exceeded the cash in hand. When there wasn't enough budget to pay technicians to paint the gallery walls, we would do it ourselves into the evenings and weekends. A little resentment started to creep in at what I was being asked to do for minimal pay. But I was used to this; this is what I had been doing before; the doing of the thing; the making of the exhibitions; the long days and nights of the install. And I cared about artist commissioning, exhibition making, engagement and public programming. I was ambitious about doing this as a career and I could see that

I had to cut my teeth in institutions, not just in old warehouses on the outskirts of post-industrial English towns.

A directorship came up in a small organisation that ran a well-respected annual visual art festival in South East London. The autonomy was exciting, as was the artist-led beginnings of the festival that aligned with my own background. I took the role, and I did what I knew how to do best; lead with ambition, deal with small budgets, make promises to funders, work as much as it takes.

The organisation was Deptford X and the way I feel about the work I led there is like one of those 2D holographic images where you see one picture if you tilt it up, and another if you tilt it down. I believed in what I was trying to do in that role; to bring art into a local context for participation, as well as exhibition. I wanted to create programming that enabled young people to make art and take the stage; that supported and provided a platform for the many early career artists of colour in the area that were not historically part of the festival's programming; and that brought impactful commissions into the fabric of the local place. Titled one way, it was a great festival: We held an annual artist-led parade for school children; artists that came through the supported programme have gone on to establish professional careers and reputations in the sector; we held a wildly ambitious dance performance in the local swimming pool. Yet tilted the other way: the team was too small; staff turnover was high; I was burnt out; I wasn't comfortable with how little we were paying artists; the more I tried to increase pay, the less money I had for programming.

During my tenure in the role, I oversaw the Covid years, the loss of our offices and venue, substantial funding uplifts, and the entry of Deptford X into Arts Council

England's national portfolio of regularly funded organisations. Despite the fact that we survived the Covid moment and managed to achieve relative financial stability, the day-to-day reality of the organisation felt fragile. Towards the end of my time there, Deptford X celebrated its 25th anniversary and I decided to mark the occasion by undertaking some reflective accounting, curious as to what and why these not-for-profits keep going when the working conditions are so tough. (I also wanted to make a case to the organisation's stakeholders to roll back on the level of delivery we had been trying to sustain). I went through the records and archive and published, *25 years of Deptford X / Uncertain times: A case history of a London art organisation* (2023). I found a common refrain that echoed through 25 years of minutes and reports: overstretched staffing capacity; insufficient resources. To quote from the book:

Despite the persistent lack of resources, and the shrinking of supportive infrastructure, Deptford X has continued to operate, and even grow, through an often personal commitment and care to art and the area, and the radical determination of artists. Almost 1000 projects have been staged by artists as part of Deptford X festival since 1999. And there has never been enough money to warrant this.

Coming back to my feelings of ambivalence about the notion of 'in spite of', the above quote goes to the heart of it. The success of the sector is due to the fierce passion and care of the people in it, not the defective institutional frameworks and funding models. The work of organisations like Deptford X are vital for arts ecologies to function but they are operating on an unsustainable model; the ways of working I was emulating in my 20s, and carrying into my career, were already broken.

I stepped away from my job at Deptford X last year, and from a directorship role. My interest lies in curating and I was too burnt out with the financial puzzle of keeping an arts organisation afloat; a punishing pace of delivery; and a precarious funding climate to give brain power to that side of my job. I have sidestepped into the disability arts sector where the pace is human, and I am learning about how to institute careful sustainability within an organisation's work. There is a genuine hunger for this knowledge in the better parts of the mainstream art sector, and I welcome it. I question how much longer arts workers will so readily oversupply their labour while living standards continue to drop. We might wonder if the cultural sector might benefit from slowing things down, *in spite of* expectations. Could cultural consumers accept fewer exhibitions in a year? My guess would be, yes, *in spite of* initial protestations. We could no doubt all benefit from doing less but doing it better.

Nathalie Boobis is a curator based in Newcastle upon Tyne. She is currently curator for Disability Arts Online's digital gallery, dis_place, and a trustee for Newbridge Projects. From 2018-2024 she directed and curated the London-based visual art organisation and festival, Deptford X.

Interpretation as Refusal: On Centres, and the Mess of Meaning

Barby Asante

As I walk from Green Park underground station towards The Royal Academy, I muse on the potential of arts institutions being venues, spaces, opportunities. I wonder if this could ever be a possibility. Could the arts institution be a space that *holds* the work of an artist without centring its own agendas and without obscuring its own histories?

It's raining and I am going there to join the second day of the Kerry James Marshall *Conversations* symposium. I am thinking about this particular site and how Marshall's paintings of black life and aliveness sit within the Royal Academy. In the building, its history, the context of London in 2025, the city where in September of this year, it is claimed by the press that 100,000 people joined "Unite the Kingdom", a rally organised by known racist Tommy Robinson. I am thinking about how we, or maybe I'm thinking about me, about how I can operate as an artist in such spaces? If I am ever invited, how would my work sit within this space? What meaning does my work have, or the work of anyone who does not come from this lineage of European creative supremacy, when it is *held* within an institution that is loaded with imperial history?

I think about my ongoing project, *Declaration of Independence*, and the spatial methodology I have employed in the light of a number of institutional engagements I have experienced, where I believe that the institutions have not been able to adequately hold and take care of my work, despite the work being invited or commissioned within the *CURA*-ation of said arts institution. I wrote in the essay. 'The Women. They Were Plotting: Declaring Our Independence in the Spirit of Sankofa':

Declaration of Independence does not merely function as a spectral opportunity for the mostly white audiences of the arts organisations, in which the work has been presented, to see Black and woman of colour speak their truths. Rather, it is deeply grounded in the idea of forum, community, and circle as a virtual space that is created to hold us together. The circle is not open, and the forum is not open for comments, although during the performance there is an unspoken invitation for other Black and womxn of colour to join. Unspoken in that it is not explicitly articulated, but the invitation is in the words we speak. This circle is not open in order to protect

the space created for us to tell our stories. It is closed so that the audience become witness to our circle process, so they hear us without invalidating or questioning our declaration. (Asante, 2024:166-167)

Being *held* evokes something tender, but for me, each time I walk into a building such as The Royal Academy, through corridors painted in heritage colours, lined with paintings and sculptures that revere the supposed genius of Europeans and their contributions to art and culture, I feel trouble inside me. Every time I walk up large grand marble pillared staircases, I am haunted by the histories that hold me in a particular place within the context, the history, the location of that institution. I did receive an invitation to the symposium sent by one of the curators who thought

that it would be interesting to my research. This invitation came with no offer of being an official guest, no discount code for the extortionate ticket price asked for the symposium, however I was asked to share the information about the symposium with my networks. Even as I got around the cover price, because a friend of mine was presenting, the invitation is not a tender one from the institution, even as I have a tender relationship with my friend and there are many others I regard tenderly who will also be present at the symposium. I think about Phaniel Antwi's musings in his 2023 book *On Cuddling: Loved to Death in the Racial Embrace*. He asks questions about cuddling as a form of *holding* that presents us with "a touchy question, in terms of boundaries, exclusion, forming a space of interaction and shared subjectivity." (Antwi 2024:4)



Figure 1. Barby Asante, 'Declaration of Independence', 2023, Art on the Underground, Stratford Station, image by Benedict Johnson.

He queries what happens when such a *hold*, a gesture of intimacy moves from the private space of the home “into the public space of culture...” (Antwi 2024:4) Antwi is thinking about the many ways in which the *hold* permeates through history, politics, and culture in relation to black life. He evokes Christina Sharpe’s description of the *hold* as the *hold* of the slave ship that held captive Africans brought to Europe and the Americas as slaves. This *hold* has metaphoric resonances in black life. Sharpe describes this as from “Womb to tomb” (Sharpe 2014:63). The *hold* as lives limited by structural racism in the afterlife of slavery – the present-day manifestations of enslavement and colonisation in the form of regulated neighbourhoods, inadequate educational opportunities, health inequalities, increased surveillance, incarceration and more. The *hold* that is the borders and seas that limit movement. The *hold* that is the chokehold that was the very public lynching of a black man in 2020, and the compelling desire to be *held* in the grief of this witnessing. Antwi considers these irreconcilabilities as “the overall phenomenon of humanity, messy, violent, loving” untying “its “instituted trace” to comfort – and to romance in order to help us think through the kinds of intimacies that we not only learn but conform to when it comes to (mis)managing Black lives.” (Antwi 2024:5).

As I walk down the corridors to find the space where the symposium is being held, I am noticeably breathless. I slow down and check in with myself. My chest is tight and I feel a sadness wash over me. I am in touch with a haunted feeling, similar to how I have felt while visiting slave forts and castles in Ghana. Only this time the calls of the ghosts are not related to me, they are not calling for me to remember them. They are not calling for me to make sure I tell their stories and live well because they were not able to. The ghosts that haunt these

corridors remind me I am a guest and that I must be obedient and conform to the formalities of the space. I must somehow blend in, despite my obvious difference, accept the supposed masquerade of neutrality. The call is one that *upholds* reverence and supremacy despite the moves in many institutions, particularly since 2020, that finally attempts to respond to the calls for an epistemic disruption of the norms that have been upheld and continue to be. I am physically in touch with that which endures, a tension between the institution’s contemporary programming, the legacy of the now turning responses to very public state sanctioned death of a black man, that we could all witness because we were holed up in our homes during a global pandemic and the building’s enduring grammar, which continues to script normative behaviours and preserve hierarchies through spatial atmosphere and aesthetic order.

And I think about this aesthetic order when I remember sitting in the gaudy neo baroque foyer of the Hesse State Theatre in Wiesbaden at the time of the Wiesbaden Biennale.¹

In 2025, the very simple description, or what the curators described as the “motto” or principle of their curation that centred the work of artists working in performance and performative practice, concentrating on invitations to Black and artists of colour, queer, disabled and Jewish artists was “Make Space”. *Make Space*. I sat in the suffocating grandeur of that foyer with my collaborator Memory Biwa, listening to Zimbabwean artist, Nora Chipaumire be painfully interrogated into providing the audience gathered with an account of ‘the Africanness’ of the work “Dambudzo” that she was presenting at the Biennale. The moderator and the audience were not satisfied with Nora’s interpretation of her own work. The relentlessness of the call to

answer frustrated Nora into getting up and leaving the event, to which a woman in the audience told her harshly to “sit down. You are being paid to talk to us.”

As an artwork *Dambudzo* is an echo of the meaning of the word in Shona, *trouble*. Is it dance? Is it installation? Is it a musical performance? It is purposely slippery, moving between scene to scene, from dance to performance art, to a musical performance – a shebeen, to an installation to a boxing match, to a church, to a township. They employed early analogue moving image technology in the scenography, there was a DJ, live musicians and no distinction between those doing the tech and the dancers/performers. At the Wiesbaden Biennale the piece was presented at the back of the stage, meaning that in order to see the piece audience members had to get onto the stage of the gaudy theatre and turn our backs on its grandeur for the back of the stage. In this action the audience becomes part of the piece. We are the workings of the theatre, and we bring with us to the experience of witnessing this work everything that we know and all the things that we don’t know. The invitation is the experience, yet as Memory and I looked like the performers, we were often approached by other audience members to explain what was going on in the work.

Woman to me – “Why are they barking?”

Me – “I don’t know.”

The woman carries on for a few minutes watching the performance. She uses the rhythm of the music that accompanies the barking to move towards Memory.

Woman to Memory – “What do the dogs mean?”

Memory – “I don’t know.”

The woman continues to watch the performance perplexed as to why Memory and I cannot (or perhaps will not) answer her enquiry. She continues to use the rhythm to move towards our other collaborator Tonderai – who is in fact Zimbabwean (but not obviously) and maybe just maybe might be a little more knowledgeable than Memory and me.

Woman to Tonderai – “Why are the dogs barking?”

Tonderai – “I don’t know.”

In 2017 Zoe Whitely, the co-curator of *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, invited me to review the interpretive texts for the exhibition. A sensitivity read. I was immediately struck by questions of address: to whom were these captions speaking, what narrative were they assembling, and who was ultimately meant to benefit from that narrative? The exhibition was to be presented at Tate Modern and was to be the first major group exhibition of African American artists in the U.K.² As I read, it became apparent that the texts enacted a didactic gesture toward inclusion, offering a stabilised account of a “Black art scene” – or, more accurately, the many Black art scenes – whose genealogies reach back to the creative practices transported to the Americas by enslavement. These practices encompassed visual and spiritual traditions, mythic and oral forms, and the expressive textures of daily life: music and dance, culinary practices, Black vernaculars, and other modes of cultural invention. But there was little about how African American artists cultivated distinctive modes of sensing, perceiving, and forging “embodied consciousness” (Mignolo & Vázquez 2013) that moved beyond – and against – the enduring violences of slavery and Jim Crow. These works were created out of *trouble*. These works were created in remembrance of the passage and in the

hold, in the struggle for self-determination and within the embrace of a community creating practices for itself. There was a little surface context of the *trouble* of the civil rights struggles of the 50s and 60s. And there was this disturbing and enduring narrative within the interpretive texts to contain/*hold* these long excluded artistic practices within the historic discourse of western modernist art.

Melvin Dixon writes in *Black Art Notes*:

Black Art, by definition, exists primarily for Black People. It is an art that combines the social and political pulse of the black community into an artistic reflection of that emotion, that spirit, that energy. As an aesthetic foundation it seeks to step beyond the white western framework of American Art which has enclosed and smothered any previous expression of Blackness. (Dixon, 1971:1)

Note the use of the word *enclosed*. The *enclosure*, the limited space that both Sharpe and Antwi point to. That “instituted trace” that Antwi borrows from Derrida to describe the conditions of the hold. (2024:5) How is such work to be interpreted when the underlying conditions of how black art has and continues to be made is within such an *enclosure*? I want to consider *this hold/this enclosure* as what Christina Sharpe has described as the *weather* (Sharpe 2016:106), the *pervasive climate of anti-blackness*. I’ve been musing about this weather for some time, about seasons, about the cyclical nature of weather and perhaps in this current moment the heating up of planet earth and how the denial of this lives side by side with the increased racism and the ways in which expressions of the experiences of black life and living are being contested, the political backlash on black knowledge production, limiting it and in some cases in the U.S banning it. I wonder how this

becomes contextualised in the context of major arts institutions, how they hold the work of black artists in the context of their wider histories and positionalities within a global definition of what is deemed worthy of being considered as a cultural and historic artefact. Will the video recorded by Darnella Fraizer that shows the lynching of George Floyd by law enforcement officer Derek Chauvin be one of those artefacts? Will it be *held*, collected by a museum as evidence of something in the past, just like many museums collected protest banners from the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.³ I’m sure there is a curator out there thinking about placing this in a collection or exhibit somewhere. For Dixon, then, thinking about art or perhaps let’s broaden the definition, black cultural expression, begins with the making being for black people as an expression of black life and living. Being *enclosed*, being smothered or perhaps work being *held* or presented within such an *enclosure* that still foregrounds its own institutional histories, formal arrangements, cultural mores and modes of address, shapes both the terms of that presentation and interpretation: it delimits what Black art can express and how it can be read, mirroring historical patterns of social and cultural control. Seen this way, *holding* the work is not only spatial or institutional but also structural: a set of rules, that dictates the visibility, value, and legitimacy of Black creativity.

The late Kenyan author and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o reminds us (Wa Thiong’o, N, 1993), the “centre” is not fixed in the West or in elite institutions; it can and should be moved to multiple spheres, to the real creative centres among communities and people themselves. This relocation of authority affirms that knowledge and cultural production are rooted in the contexts from which they emerge. In the opening of Edouard Glissant’s *The Poetics of Relation* in English

(Glissant 1997/2010: xi), the translator Betsy Wing speaks about the stumbling blocks of translation. She says that it is at these points that translation is at “its most productive point.” She continues: “Their usual first effect is frustration caused by obstinate resistance (on both sides), but, in their ever-renewed demand for conjecture, these apparent obstacles can allow us to escape the cramped, habitual postures of our own thought.” Translation and interpretation differ in that translation is the act of language while interpretation is the explanation of meaning, but what Wing points to is to do with meaning, the demand for an opinion or a conclusion where the fullness of what is meant or being communicated cannot be fully grasped.

Can interpretation be an invitation, instead of a closure?

Can it acknowledge multiplicity, contradiction, grief, anger, other ways of knowing and understanding?

Refusal of the centre as a practice of holding open. Refusal of a single story. Refusal of tidy framing.

Refusal of the idea that interpretation is a neutral act of mutual understanding.

Maybe what institutions fear is the mess. The ambiguity. The refusal to resolve. But for those of us who live at the margins of the centre – who live in grief, in contradiction, in remembering – mess is not only familiar, it’s necessary. Perhaps as Françoise Vergès points to with Frantz Fanon (Vergès, 2024), the decolonising of the museum would need to implement a “programme of absolute disorder” to bring the true work of justice to the fore. So the work of interpretation, if it is to mean anything in a truly decolonial future, must hold space for mess. For multiple

truths. For refusal. It may have to also contemplate its own demise, *holding open* the possibility that there is not one way to provide interpretation. It must not simply reflect back the assumptions of the powerful, but open up a field where the unspeakable, the speculative, the embodied, the not known and the ancestral can speak. Perhaps then the art institution will become an open space. A venue and a true host for a multiplicity of different offerings.

Barby Asante is a London-based artist, curator, and researcher who explores the politics of place and memory through social practice, film, performance, and collective writing, grounded in Black feminist and decolonial methodologies. Drawing on her Akan heritage and family stories, Asante engages with the legacies of slavery and colonialism, reimagining practices of liberation and transformation in everyday contemporary black life.

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Endnotes

1 The Wiesbaden Biennale is described as a contemporary art festival bringing together a programme of interdisciplinary work that is from international artists (often but not exclusively from the global south), and work that is considered to be “radical” or “political”, more challenging than the regular programme of the theatre.

2 I perhaps use the idea that this was the first major exhibition of African American artists in the U.K a little cynically as what does major exhibition mean? Does it become major because of the size and international standing of the institution where the work is presented or perhaps it’s to do with positioning this work within a canonical art history, through its staging in a large internationally renowned arts institution. In my art lifetime I recall *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, curated by David A Bailey and Richard J Powell at the Hayward Gallery from June – August 1998. This exhibition was a collaboration between Hayward Gallery, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the Institute of International Visual Arts (iniva, then inIVA). David A Bailey built on that project to co-curate *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary* with Richard J Powell and Petrine Archer Smith, at the Whitechapel Gallery and New Art Gallery, Walsall in 2005. This exhibition was presented as part of Africa 05 and brought together works that explored an African diaspora connections between the U.S, the U.K, and the Caribbean.

3 Examples of this collecting include Glasgow Museums who gathered and added to their collection placards and banners from Black Lives Matter protests in Glasgow Green. www.blackhistorymonthscotland.org/whats-on/black-lives-matter-placards-reflection-1 The Smithsonian also collected placards and banners from Lafayette Square near Washington DC as well as narratives from protestors. www.si.edu/support/impact/art-collecting

3.

The persistence of cultural work under duress as resistance and survival.

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Making Space for Solidarity at 32° East

Teesa Bahana

At 32° East these times find us at a moment of transformation. We embarked on a capital project a few years ago and have spent a lot of time thinking through and reimagining what a contemporary art centre in Kampala can be. In 2023, we opened Phase 1 of our new home and also witnessed the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda, the unrelenting horrors in Palestine and Sudan. All this among many other crises, with climate collapse as a constant backdrop. How to go on, in spite of all this chaos and cruelty?

We've been around since 2011, operating out of shipping containers, providing space for artists to connect and experiment, and to showcase other ways of making art. But now, having our own home, our own land and physical structure designed with artists in mind has meant new possibilities for art-making, and for what an art centre can look like. I've come to realise that there are some benefits from not being a public institution with a longstanding reputation and certain expectations. So it has been easier for us to adapt and be nimble, to try new things that are aligned with our values even when they aren't part of our

typical programming, to be responsive to the world around us rather than continuing business as usual. And we've also seen the benefits of having a permanent space that we own, in spite of the struggles to fundraise and make the case for an investment in art amidst all kinds of competing needs.

Being situated in Kabalagala, a neighbourhood of Kampala, close to the lake and home to thousands of migrants from East Africa, the impact of displacement is all around us. An artist who had been a part of our community years ago dropped by one day in 2024, back in Kampala after leaving everything behind in Khartoum, Sudan's capital. We were one of his first stops, a source of some comfort for him amidst the chaos of forced departure. Witnessing the effect that we had on him, the brief respite we unwittingly provided inspired our Landing residency programme, a fully funded residency in support of Sudanese artists displaced by the war, who had recently arrived in Kampala. Through a simple offering of space and a modest material budget, we saw how meaningful a studio could be amidst devastation (Dehghan,

2024). Each of the 4 artists that were invited to be in residence spoke about how much of a respite the studio was, a place where they could focus on something else, or begin to process the loss and trauma of the war. Beyond this, our centre also became a place for them to host, to host family, friends, other artists, coffee ceremonies and commemorations of the revolution.

From November 2023 to May 2024 we held 4 teach-ins at 32° East on Palestine, in the hopes of creating a place for people who weren't familiar with the Israeli occupation of Palestine to learn that history did not begin on the 7th of October, and for people in Kampala who were a part of burgeoning solidarity actions to meet or find each other. We'd made several posts decrying the genocide on social media, and some of the reactions from our community were genuine interest as to

why we were focusing on this. There was also anger, from all sides, and accusations of us not being educated enough. While we recognised these common criticisms of anyone who advocates for Palestine, we thought teach-ins would be a useful way to offer a space offline for those genuinely interested in learning and dialogue.

We also chose this method considering our strengths as a globally networked organisation with meeting space. Having our own physical space proved to be such an asset, because Kampala does not have that many places for arts and culture. Organisations like Goethe Zentrum and Alliance Francaise have an outsized influence because they have physical space to host events, but these spaces were wary of hosting conversations viewed as controversial or divisive, or complicit as intermediary organisations



of foreign cultural and educational policy for governments actively selling arms to Israel and participating in censorship.

Through our networks we hosted hybrid conversations with guests from Bethlehem, New York, and Kampala, and had audiences showing up online from all over the world, all questions welcomed, and lots of good will expressed, with a diversity of experiences and knowledge leading to stimulating discussions on settler colonialism, imperialism, Zionism, pink-washing, the dogma of the nation-state and more.

Each session had been eye-opening, generating important stimulating discussions, but they had all been sporadically planned. We'd reached a place where we thought we'd benefit from a more cohesive structure with a regular rhythm, that would also encourage discussions on the broader issues of imperialism, colonialism and collective action to be able to connect the dots between Palestine, Sudan, Congo, West Papua, and daily life in Uganda. Thus, Zine Club was born.

Zine Club meets monthly to read and make zines on collective organising. We meet across 4 locations and online, amidst faulty internet connections, fumbling through hybrid facilitation but all with the intention of exploring lessons in organising, and apply them to our own realities. Together, in Bombay, Kampala, Nairobi, and Yogyakarta we read *Tending the Soil: Lessons in Organising* by Ricardo Levins Morales, a zine that breaks down key principles for collective organising. While *Tending the Soil* was made for a US context, the structure of Zine Club encouraged us to think about how each lesson would relate to our own contexts.

These sessions have been a way to combat the doom and helplessness that many of us feel in relation to the cruelty of these times and have reminded us that we are not alone. Through making art collectively, we've found new ways to channel our grief and imagine other ways of being.

I'm thankful for this opportunity to reflect on our attempts to create programmes that are responsive to crisis; while also recognising how inadequate it all feels. I think many of us may feel this way. We do something anyway, however small, in spite of inadequacy, discomfort, excuses, feelings, because we must. You can check out the teach-ins^{1,2,3,4} and download the 'Tending the Soil' zine⁵.

Teesa Bahana is Director of 32° East, a not-for-profit that promotes the creation and exploration of contemporary art in Uganda. As Director she has supported the development and execution of projects such as KLA ART Labs for research and critical thinking through public practice, KLA ART, Kampala's public art festival, and residency exchanges with partners such as Arts Collaboratory, and Triangle Network. She is also currently overseeing 32° East's capital project, raising funds to build the first purpose-built art centre in Kampala. With an academic background in sociology and anthropology, she is particularly interested in the intersection between art and Ugandan society, and how artistic environments should be protected and nurtured. Before her directorship at 32° East, she was on the inaugural organisation committee for Nyege Nyege International Music Festival, and worked in communications and external relations for educational non-profits in Rwanda, Burundi, and South Africa. She is currently on study leave.

References

Dehghan, Saeed Kamali, 'A small respite in the face of horror': Sudanese artists fleeing war find a safe haven, Guardian 27 May 2024: www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/may/27/a-small-respite-in-the-face-of-horror-sudanese-artists-fleeing-war-find-a-safe-haven

'Tending the Soil' zine: www.rlmartstudio.com/product/tending-the-soil-lessons-for-organizing-zine-free-pdfs

Endnotes

1 <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/32-degrees-east/episodes/The-Palestine-Teach-Ins--Palestine-101-with-Ora-Wise-and-Amanny-Ahmad-e2d3mne>

2 <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/32-degrees-east/episodes/The-Palestine-Teach-Ins--On-Colonisation-and-Apartheid-in-Palestine-with-Baha-Hilo-e2d3mgu>

3 <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/32-degrees-east/episodes/The-Palestine-Teach-Ins--On-Uganda--Palestine--Israel-with-Anselm-Kizza-Besigye-and-Dr--Yahya-Sseremba-e2d3li6>

4 <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/32-degrees-east/episodes/The-Palestine-Teach-Ins--On-Decolonisation--Patriarchy-e2h81st>

5 <https://www.rlmartstudio.com/product/tending-the-soil-lessons-for-organizing-zine-free-pdfs>

Re-memembering

Zoe Butt

I'm not sure that 'museums' have a future in Southeast Asia. At least not in the shape, form and definition of a 'museum' as adhered to by the likes of ICOM,¹ who mandate museums as collecting non-profit institutions, supposedly 'all inclusive' in ethos, and *can* appropriately display. I don't say this lightly. Indeed, in writing such a statement it feels rebelliously controversial. Though I am indebted to museum expertise and what I have learnt about the past from their collections (particularly those archived in the West), they are however predominantly situated far from the communities whose ancestral memories matter most to the legacy of such purchase, whose possession predominantly privileges the role of sight, and an object's tangible authenticity. Such institutions rely on and measure the value of art by its circulation, which in turn benefits their argument to possess. But I have seen too many artists in my part of the world in Southeast Asia near quit their creativity, because such privilege in making tangible objects is not feasibly possible, their ability to circulate their own perspectives rare.

The acquisition of contemporary art in Southeast Asia is largely a private affair, those who dare to make their collections publicly accessible with taste determined by little critiqued market forces, lauding what is expensive and popular (as opposed to what is culturally meaningful or locally relevant). The usage of the term 'museum' here is often misleading, where its exhibitions are found often with price-tags, or operate with no collection at all. It has thus been incredibly important to me that my curatorial labour in building arts infrastructure offers informed opportunities for artistic and curatorial intentionality to be nurtured, which was central to my directing San Art and The Factory Contemporary Art Centre in Saigon, Vietnam²; and my founding of in-tangible institute in Chiang Mai, Thailand³. Such work has demanded select programmes to be delivered off-line, strategising the need (or not) for publicity, with select invited interdisciplinary audience, building trust with community towards openness and honesty, critically committed to *how* we think and *why*. Above all, such curatorial labour has believed in artistic *production* deserving of more support, defining such space as

necessarily beyond concern of an idea's final monetary value, that such space of production must be curatorially attended, in order to address the knowledge that sits within its social and cultural zones of artistic experimentation. But why has my labour demanded consideration of what should be made public or no?

Across much of Southeast Asia, artistic communities suffer socio-political interference, in addition to cultural and educational institutional malaise, with many museums and university politically instrumentalized by the State (think Communism in Vietnam, think the economic purview of culture as 'soft power'⁴ in Thailand). Too few academics and curators care for the connect of comparative thinking, interdisciplinary expertise, and the need of a working knowledge of the current international art world. Too many libraries are without critical resource (in any language) thus students graduate ill-equipped and alarmingly without conviction as to the role of art in society. In addition to this, artistic production remains dangerously tethered (either resistant, or financially indebted) to political agencies (think the funding role of Alliance Francaise, Goethe Institute, Japan Foundation), whose purview to support their own national narratives continues to curtail this region's artistic imagination. Such rubric, increasingly surveilled by the State,⁵ stymies the growth and competency of its artistic ecology, exacerbating the desire of its burgeoning mobile elite, who seek to build their own institutions showcasing contemporary art, too often building projects that collapse in parochial mimicry of Western models of arts infrastructure (despite the fact that their local educational institutions largely do not enable a workforce versant in the relevance of contemporary art, art history, or curatorial/museum practice today).

In having had the fortune to live and work with diverse creative communities across much of the once colonized world, whose memories have endured (and continue to face) great conflict and social duress, whose histories and current realities have been robbed, redacted, censored, made taboo, destroyed, confiscated, imprisoned, dismembered and invariably spoken for by an other – my battle as a curator has been conjuring means of re-memembering with an artist's local community. By re-memembering, I mean to demonstrate how artists can give the sensorial body back to the transmission of knowledge and our understanding of the past – despite our limits of socio-economic-political restrictions in visibility – to demonstrate an artist's social value in their ability to speak, perform, listen, dance, walk, sing with their recall of what was, and might be. Such embodied know-how, if even evidenced by a select few, begs acknowledgement that justice, repatriation, and reconciliation are not to be waited upon nor relied, that to survive and endure is to recall with what we have – taking solace beyond our inability to site the authentic, to empower what we can via recall, as anecdote or copy.

Within 'Conscious Realities' (2013-2016), guests from across the Global South spent time in Saigon with my artistic community, collectively reading and listening and visiting text and site in constant translation; dancing to music, visiting shamans, collaborating with local craftsmen, embracing the fabricated as holding truth.

Within 'Pollination' (2018-ongoing), appointed curators from Southeast Asia work together for 18 months with select artists, travelling each other's contexts at times mountainous or in conflict, learning responsive methods of making and circulation and display with artists in *their* sites of production.



Figure 1. Pollination, edition 4, ILHAM in KL, Malaysia, 2025. It shows a map of Myanmar, which was travelled in part, by the artists and curators, in person and in memory, and such memory is pinned to the map to try challenging the violence of its borders.

Within 'Cultivate' (2022-ongoing), select curators from the region are mentored by experienced international guest Faculty, where their current projects/institutions are examined, offering guidance on how to problem solve local dilemmas and obstacles towards the sustainability of their work.

Initiating and leading such *re-membling* has been greatly inspired by the work of my peers, such as RAW Material Company in Dakar (particularly their 'RAW Akademie'); Ashkal Alwan in Beirut (particularly their 'Homeworks'); Experimenter in Calcutta (particularly their 'Curatorial Hub'); Lugar a Dudas in Cali (particularly their 'Escuela Incierta'); Independent Curators International, New York (particularly their Curatorial Intensives) and so much more.

But such *re-membling* in our global engine of contemporary 'art' and its adoration of the visible, tangible, and possessable, faces significant challenge today. In our current geopolitical condition, where the non-profit world is under increasing political scrutiny (and largely dying as a phenomenon of philanthropic giving), where what can be culturally permitted must be with government license, where the desire to collect what is challenging and provocative is deemed risky – how can artists and curators committed to the relevance of art in society survive? It is here that my latest appointment as Artistic Director of Thailand's first social enterprise for the arts, founded by one of Thailand's largest conglomerates, Central Group, becomes a hopeful lifeline.⁶ I want to hope that by increasing mutual awareness of the role of artists as social nodes of knowledge transmission, that art institutions can better engage and support artistic sites of production and *their* communities. Perhaps we might then find a differing model of cultural and social wonder anchored in response to local needs and dreams that encourages sustainable artistic ecologies, anchored in artistic *re-membling* on their terms.

Zoe Butt is a curator, writer and educator, nurturing critically-thinking and historically-conscious artistic communities, fostering dialogue among cultures of the globalising souths. Possessing an extensive exhibition, publishing and public-speaking history globally, Zoe is the founding Artistic Director of deCentral, a forthcoming social enterprise for the arts in Thailand, founded by Central Group, opening 2027. In 2022, Zoe founded 'in-tangible institute' in Thailand, a not-for-profit committed to mentoring the growth of locally responsive curatorial talent in Southeast Asia. She holds a PhD by Published Works, Centre for Research and Education in Art and Media, University of Westminster, London and is currently Lead Advisor, Kadist Art Foundation; and Lecturer, Curatorial Practice, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

Endnotes

1 "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing." <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition>.

2 San Art was founded in Saigon, Vietnam, in 2007 by artists Dinh Q Le, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phu Nam Thuc Ha and Tiffany Chung. I was its Executive Director from 2009-2016. It closed its doors in 2025. <https://san-art.co/language/en/homepage>. The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre was the first purpose-built social enterprise for the arts in Vietnam, in Saigon. It was founded by artist and fashion entrepreneur Thuy Nguyen. I was its Artistic Director from 2017-2021. It closed its doors in 2021. <https://factoryartscentre.com>.

3 I founded in-tangible institute in 2022, offering curatorial mentorship, educational programs, strategic advice, and industry consultation, towards the curation of projects that nurture productive, critical and innovative relationships between curators and their various stakeholders in the arts in Southeast Asia. I am currently its 'Director at Large'. <https://in-tangible.org>

4 See: www.crea.or.th/en/single-research/cea-soft-power

5 As example, in Vietnam, public gatherings of more than 5 people demand government license; the host of a public event is legally responsible for artistic content (not the artist); any re-assessment of historical fact or current political governance is prohibitive and enforceable by its Cultural Police. In Thailand, the monarchy rule with a divine iron fist, the military their right-hand enforcement, whereby citizens are prohibited from challenging their laws and lifestyle. Other countries in Southeast Asia possess their own artistic anomalies of similar political interference.

6 As a social enterprise, deCentral will consign select artwork for sale. All profit generated will go towards the ongoing programme costs of deCentral. deCentral is not a collecting institution. www.decentral.co.th

Our Generations, Zero Zero and Z, Working for Change

Abdella Karroum

Japanese artist On Kawara sent telegrams and postcards from around the world with the words 'I Am Still Alive' on them, giving this basic news to art institutions and people, as if he was surprised to be still alive in his contemporary society, despite increasing conflicts, and the expanding inflation of the value of life itself. The artist produced a painting everyday as a celebration and historical record for future generations.

In Spite Of Everything, There Is Still Life. And where there is life, there are expressions, forms of art to be revealed, and stories to be told. This statement is valid for humanity but also for plants, animals, and sometimes machines that contribute to creating narratives.

Here, in my response to GEM Journal's speculative invitation, I propose to focus on the important dynamic of the Moroccan art scene around the years 2000s and the symbolic 'passage du siècle' from the 20th to the 21st Century. I am writing from my position as a curator and researcher who accompanied the *Generation 00* as actor and witness at the same time, on a few art projects that had a transformative effect on

forms of art production itself, as well as an influential role in shaping interpretations and debate around social and political issues of this era of 'transition'.¹

The formal and philosophical rupture that took place in the passage of millennia is mainly initiated by artists, curators, and scholars, in spite of the limited spaces for visibility, education, and debate associating all generations of artists.

I write this, and I do this, because In Spite of Everything, There is Still Life, and because the present always knows that its conditions of possibility are historical (political, social, economic, cultural and artistic), that change has happened over time, that where we are and where we might go is because of where we have been.

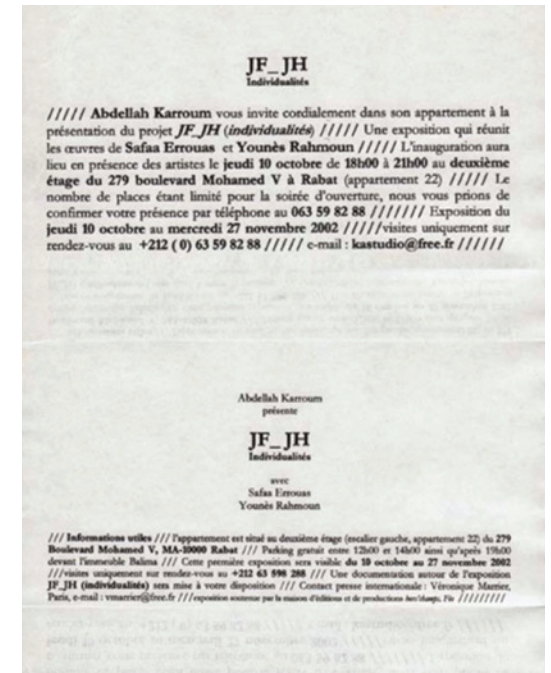
When I initiated the independent and experimental art space L'appartement 22 in 2002 in Rabat, Morocco, the country was engaged in a process of major political changes, an 'alterance' in which the new elite leading the executive monarchy state had started to include multiple voices, associating members from opposition and globally trending ideologies inspired



JF_JH individualités (réédition), at L'appartement 22 in 2022, works by Safaa Erruas and Younes Rahmoun. The exhibition is a reenactment of the very first show at L'appartement 22 in 2002. Photo: AK 2022.

by both Islamist and capitalist models. This period, described by major media and scholars as one of Democratic Transition, was the beginning of a more active participation of civil society in the debate on public policies and human rights. Arts festivals and biennales started to display projects that questioned social issues, persisting taboos, individual freedoms, gender inequalities and systemic corruption, as major obstacles to progress.² The first exhibition at L'appartement 22 was *JF_JH individualités*,³ a provocative starting point for a series of projects dealing with social issues, cultural movements, and political debate.

It was one of a few initiatives in Morocco, that were both embedded in cultural and educational institutions, but also necessarily apart from them, as was L'appartement 22. Around the same time, in 1995, artist Hassan Darsi founded the participatory project La Source du Lion while he was teaching as the Casablanca Art School. Faouzi Laatiris was leading an art studio at the National Institute of Fine Arts in Tetouan, on the path of Mohammed Chabaa reformist approach that opened the school to the art world and allowed



Invitation of the JF_JH exhibition at L'appartement 22 in 2022.

students to present original forms and ideas in their final graduation project.⁴ The Arts in Marrakech festival was born in 2005, at the initiative of a group of Moroccan and International Businesspeople, including Vanessa Branson and Abel Demoussi, with the advice of Mohammed Melehi. In the absence of large-scale public museums, the biennale filled a large gap in the cultural offer of the touristy city of Marrakech, and it immediately grew making its following editions more ambitious, with new commissions and discursive and performative programmes with strong links to the local artistic and creative scene. The second edition took place in 2007, and it was decided, during informal conversations between me and a few advocates led by Branson, to transform the festival into a Biennale.⁵ The process of creating an Association to support the management of the Biennale began, and the organisation

secured strong support from the City of Marrakech, and a symbolic blessing from the Wilaya and Ministry of Culture, but not public funds, at least until the 3rd edition. The Biennale continued expanding, with increased investment and resources, occupying larger spaces temporarily transformed to serve the purpose of display and events, including the historical Badia Palace, the Bahia Palace, and the Jamaa Lafna Square. Having delivered the 6th edition, curated by Reem Fadda, sadly and suddenly it ended in 2016 due to financial challenges. In 2018, most sponsors of the Marrakech Biennale were swallowed by the one-edition Biennale de Rabat initiated by the Fondation Nationale des Musées on the occasion of the celebration of the City as a Capital of Culture with a programme focusing on Africa. The Biennale curated by Abdelkader Damani had a prerogative of presenting only women artists. All these initiatives, including festivals and biennales, started from confidential discussions and expanded into major events that involved debate in highly mediated publications, brought influential world art actors, and played a transformative education role reaching out to diverse audiences. But larger events close when they become too big, seeming like a train locomotive to which heavy wagons are added without increasing the capacity of the engine, while smaller independent projects pursue their adventure despite a lack of political authority's investment and limited funds.

The May 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca demonstrated dramatically the negative impact of old politics' tolerance to Islamist groups, leading to the development of extremist ideology groups that openly promote racial and spiritual division. This awareness provoked a shift of focus and action in the machine of surveillance, which became more interested in radicalised religious groups than it was in human rights activists. Thus

the first public activity of L'appartement 22 consisted of a show titled *JF_JH individualities*, and it was a key statement that put the bar high: no progress without equality between men and women, which became a strategic guideline for the following two decades in terms of both perspective and programs.

The programme of L'appartement 22 during the 2000s was somehow a premonitory to the so-called Arab Spring. Artists and curators I naturally worked with were often working for change, fighting for liberation and freedom of speech. Artists involved in debate had a sense of citizenship, and their works often provoked debate about formal conventions, as both suggest a rupture with previous generations. Other initiatives in arts and media are amplified by the assimilation of the methodology of doing more with less resources, especially in music and literature, which hugely contributed to the *Generation Z* self-education, building on opinion and action. This era of major change in urban organisation, the acceleration of large scale communication, the influence of social media circulating new ideas and amplifying old ideologies, was highly charged with political and social pressure; and in this it resonated with the 1960s with its mass circulation of TV that also witnessed the appearance of new tendencies in art, culture, and other productions that provoked confrontations and solidarities.

When observing the relations that many artists engage with L'appartement 22 today, the way they use the place to produce work and activate networks, the cooperative spirit that genuinely makes the intellectual and art experiences progressive, I see how much this kind of informal initiatives are needed – not only for artists, but also for students and various creative communities whose positions don't fit within formal

and conservative institutions. Artists and human rights believers need to navigate the current systems and look at ways that nurture a large number of small projects surpassing the hegemonic regimes not by mass but by agility and capacity of survival. When the concrete piece by Mustapha Akrim, "Article 13" (2008), literally uses a sentence from the Moroccan Constitution – All citizens have equal rights of education and employment – it speaks to an entire generation of citizens challenging the gap between written law and political practice of human rights. The reign of inequality and injustice in most contemporary societies are leading the world to ever greater tensions, disparity and often violence. In spite of all catastrophes, art spaces are necessary platforms that bring expressions of our time to public debate and progress.

Abdella Karroum is a curator, writer and educator based in Morocco. He is the founder of L'appartement 22 art space in Rabat. Among recent projects he curated "Moroccan Trilogy 1950 – 2020" at Reina Sofia in Madrid (2021); "Our World Is Burning" (2020) at Palais de Tokyo in Paris; "Kader Attia: On Silence", and "Revolution Generations" both at Mathaf in Doha in 2018.

Endnotes

- 1** Generation 00 is the concept defining the generation of artists active in the years 2000s. See the article in *L'appartement 22*, Volume 2 (2009-2022), editions hors'champs, 2022, ISBN 2-914164-52-1.
- 2** Moroccan Parliament engaged for instance a debate on the 'Mudawwana' towards adapting the constitution to serve progress on women rights and responsibility in managing family.
- 3** The first exhibition opened at L'appartement 22, titled *JF_JH (individualities)*, with artists Safaa Erruas and Younes Rahmoun, which ran from October to December 2002.
- 4** M. Chebaa had since the 1960s been an important voice in the leftist movements. He played a major role in creating and contributing to the design and artistic content of *Souffles* journal, with Mohammed Melehi, Mustapha Nissabouri and Abdellatif Laabi.
- 5** www.marrakechbiennale.org

In Spite of ... Failure

Mark O'Neil

Early in 1997 I was sitting in the back of a taxi taking me and the then Director of Glasgow Museums, Julian Spalding, to give a presentation to the Culture & Leisure Committee of Glasgow City Council on our bid for Heritage Lottery Funding to refurbish Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. I was using my own Amstrad – Glasgow Museums hadn't computerised by then – and giving my first ever PowerPoint presentation. As we were leaving the office, we got the letter saying that the Lottery had rejected our application. Julian decided to drop the presentation and just do an update about the rejection. When we got back to the museum, he told me to plan a resubmission. The rejection letter was written in quite a blaming tone (the Lottery became much more sympathetic and supportive soon after this) and was hard to read. I had organised for consultants – a species which had recently emerged in the HLF application business – to give a presentation to Julian about how they would approach a bid. After they left, Julian handed me the printout of their PowerPoint and said, 'It's all there, you do it.' The result was that I had written most of the bid, so the rejection was a major blow personally. Colleagues were equally

demoralised. One articulated a widespread feeling: 'Maybe we don't deserve the money, maybe we're not good enough.'

In spite of ... Evidence 1

Years later I came across lines written by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, as he was dying in one of Mussolini's prisons: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.' By this I think he meant that there were occasions when any rational analysis would conclude that there were few if any grounds for hope. Being optimistic was not an 'evidence-based decision' but one made in defiance of the evidence, an act of will. This was not a justification for wishful thinking – the decision to proceed as if success were possible was made in the full knowledge of the realities to be faced.

Getting agreement to hire consultants, and then learning to pick good consultants became the focus of the next three years. Susie Fisher did a session on the vision for Kelvingrove with an interdisciplinary group of staff. All the pain of the rejection came out, and it is a tribute to Susie's insight and skills that by the end of the day we had recovered enough to move on. The driver was our sense of public service –

our obligation to do justice to Kelvingrove, its amazing collections and civic role, and to meet our obligations to our current and potential audiences. We simply had to become good enough. The phone call telling us we had got the money came in early 2001. I was so nervous I dropped my mobile and lost the call. But they phoned back.

One of the reasons I think we got the money was that our bid combined a deeply realistic sense of our potential audiences in Glasgow, where 40% of people lived below the poverty line and 25% had serious literacy issues. We had created our first ever advisory panels and commissioned our first focus groups. The latter gave us really strong, actionable findings to help us shape the interpretation. We learned to take audience research seriously, and stopped staff cherry-picking results that suited their preferences. We learned to write briefs focused on outcomes, not on telling designers, architects, and other professionals how to do their jobs, so that we got the best out of them. We came to understand what audience-centred interpretation meant, which was basically applying educational thinking to displays, something in which GEM members played a crucial role.

In spite of...Evidence 2

I did the Museums Studies course in Leicester in 1984/5, and I remember the excitement I felt in reading the 1983 article by Marilyn Hood called 'Staying Way: Why People Choose Not To Visit Museums' in *Museum News*. Nothing else I had read that year came as close to capturing the realities of museum visiting and non-visiting. More than forty years later, the basic insights of her research have not been absorbed by museums.

Hood's research showed that museum visitors 'are likely to be in the upper

education, occupation and income groups, younger than the population in general and active in other community and leisure activities.' These facts however do not reveal 'the reasons why some adults choose to frequent museums and why some do not, or why nonparticipants don't love museums.' Drawing on consumer behaviour literature she found that people make leisure choices based on six attributes:

- being with people, or social interaction
- doing something worthwhile
- feeling comfortable and at ease in one's surroundings
- having a challenge of new experiences
- having an opportunity to learn participating actively.

Hood found that a frequent museum visitors value all and found them to be present in most museums. Non-visitors placed a high value on being with people, participating actively, and feeling comfortable and at ease in their surroundings, and ranked the other three attributes much lower than frequent visitors. Interestingly, she found that the assumption that museum visitors, frequent or rare, would share similar priorities as not true. Infrequent visitors were more similar to non-visitors than to frequent visitors. This helps explain why museums can attract infrequent or non-visitors to specific activities or temporary exhibitions but not recruit them as regular visitors. They know where the museum is, how to get there, and they have the confidence to visit – when something that interests them is on. This also implies that museums know what non-visitors and infrequent visitors are actually interested in but only provide it intermittently.

In spite of ...Evidence 3

But the most striking thing in Hood's finding is that regular museum visitors are from what she calls 'upper education groups'. It is an accepted truism in sociology that the main predictor of museum visiting is level of educational attainment – more even than income, class or ethnicity. In spite of the evidence for this, I know of no museum anywhere which has an explicit policy for attracting visits from educationally disadvantaged groups. Many museums have interpretation guidelines about reading age, using everyday language etc., but there are no strategies to address the fact that about a fifth of the UK population are failed by the school system¹. About 7% of pupils leave school with no qualifications at all, and the gap between disadvantaged and other pupils is widening. If museums really want to be inclusive, they need to recognise the primacy of educational attainment as a predictor of museum visiting and reconstruct museums so that they are accessible, welcoming, and relevant to people for whom school was not a happy experience and who often have difficulty reading any kind of text. This is an area where GEM members can provide leadership and expertise – and one where the example of Hood, which combines real empathy with rigorous data analysis is still inspiring for those willing to take up this challenge.

Mark O'Neill has over 30 years' experience in the museum sector, largely based in Glasgow after moving there in 1984. From 1998 to 2009, he served as Head of Glasgow Museums, leading a series of ambitious, award-winning initiatives. These included the pioneering Open Museum outreach service (1990), the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art (1993), the major £35 million refurbishment of Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (2006), and the development of the Riverside Museum, which was awarded European Museum of the Year in 2013.

From 2009 to 2016, he was Director of Policy & Research at Glasgow Life, the charity responsible for delivering arts, museums, libraries and sports services across the city, and one of the largest organisations of its kind in Europe.

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Endnote

¹ https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/intermediate_outcomes/compulsory_school_age_%285_to_16_years%29/attainment_at_age_16/latest

'If You Can't Be Free'

Balbir K. Singh

"Be a Mystery". A line from the poetry of Rita Dove, one I turn to time and again.

I run a lab in the Fine Arts called Dark Opacities Lab. It is located at Concordia University in Montréal. It is one of the great privileges of my life to be able to do this work. I do it because despite everything, it helps sustain me, many of my students, and the growing community of folks within the University ecosystem and beyond it. I do it aware of the many contradictions of doing this work under the crushing conditions, toxic work culture, and the impossibility of our deeply unequal world, where fascism, incarceration, war, and genocide thrive. I do not accept these conditions as a given, as fixed, and do my work in small but significant ways to mitigate the harms of the world.

Opacity animates the work insofar as it is a conceptual or theoretical framework that enlivens many akin concepts and theories: abstraction, illegibility, obfuscation, inscrutability, unknowability, the untranslatable, the thick, the dark. By maintaining focus on political and aesthetic strategies for communities of colour, the Lab

generates work that is based on an ethics of what Katherine McKittrick (McKittrick, 2022, 7) refers to as the "politics of sharing ideas carefully". It is this longer Black intellectual genealogy from Édouard Glissant to McKittrick that I owe many intellectual debts; Black study and anticolonial thought is where I began much of this journey, and I am constantly returning to this work in my teaching and research.

The Lab is predicated on the capacity to consider how we might evade racial and colonial capture – be it material or abstract capture, from the prison to forms of entrapment offered by visual regimes of representation. We outline much of this work in our first zine, a manifesto on the evasion of racial and colonial capture (Dark Opacities Lab, 2023). We set the terms in collaboration. And our collaboration and forms of community are quite vast. We write together, we think together, we gather together, and we share the work via zines published in collaboration with brilliant local artists who comprise the zine press, B+D Press. In making and building community in these small and material ways, we aim

not to necessarily make our ideas and theories and writing accessible per se, but to disseminate them and share them with folks in moments and workshops locally both at the University and in community spaces across the city that are one-offs, fleeting, and we don't produce more than one to two hundred copies. They are free for those who show up, as the usage of my research funds goes to publishing and circulating them as intellectual gifts, in a spirit counter to the oft slow and inaccessible and costly nature of academic writing in journals and books.¹

My funds are from my role as a Canada Research Chair, a title that carries some weight in the North American context. My chair role is at the nexus of art and racial justice. It means that we are funded in part by the Government of Canada, which as somebody not from Canada, is vexed and full of all sorts of moral quandaries. However, if there is one thing I could not enjoy more, it is re-routing funds to where they should go – for example – towards a zine we published with B+D Press in Summer 2024, entitled “Palestine will be Free”. We insist on such work as we respond to the urgent problems of our world. We know this work in the context of the Lab may be hiding in plain sight, but sometimes it is does not hide – for example – when said zine is put on display in the Art History Department Vitrine exhibition of the same name, featuring postcard-sized art using the colors of the Palestinian flag, inspired by the immense Palestine Poster Project Archives. It was intended to be up for a month and was taken down about a week or so earlier.² We do what we can to remind ourselves that the University is part of this world, and that the world is a part of the University, even despite forms of repression and the curtailing of academic freedom.

Dark Opacities Lab's projects are informed by both intersectionality and internationalism. Our current project and theme is entitled “Nazar: A Theory of the Evil Eye”. It is a project that imagines the life of a talisman to ward off the evil eye in unintended and structural registers. By insisting on the capacity of evil embedded in the gaze, “Nazar” as a project is about what we do to prepare and protect ourselves and our comrades, collectives, and communities. Systemically, it takes seriously the relationship between race, psychoanalysis, and colonialism as a means of considering how certain peoples, communities, lands, and territories are surveilled and coveted; it is through this relation that we understand that colonial envy abounds in our enduring present of settler colonialism, war, and occupation.

By doing our work continually negotiating the public and the private – what stays hidden until ready, what remains hidden – how we protect ourselves emerges from an understanding that the university is not a space that was designed for us. My team is comprised primarily of my doctoral students, all femme students of colour, some of whom are from the Global South. Our ethics and politics aligned even early on but have progressively coalesced and merged into sharing and developing into something that is in and of itself alive and contingent, complex and precise. An anticolonial ethos and politics demands that we contend with the realities of the material world that we live in, of which the Lab and the University are very much a part. And while the University may try to do all it can to inoculate itself from such realities, we do what we can to remind them that we are of this world, interdependent, and striving for more just worlds.

Dr. Balbir K. Singh is Canada Research Chair in Art and Racial Justice, as well as Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History. She is the Director of Dark Opacities Lab, a hub for BIPOC political and aesthetic study and strategy. Her work centres the racial, gendered, and sexual politics of embodiment, surveillance, and policing. Using anti-colonial methods of reading and sensing, Singh builds on theories of opacity across two book-length projects. The first, her in-progress manuscript “Militant Bodies: Racial/Religious Opacity and Minoritarian Self-Defence”, takes a materialist feminist approach to explore questions that center post-9/11 racial and religious hyper-policing of Muslim and Sikh bodies. The second book project, “Opacity in Three Acts: The Evasion of Racial and Colonial Capture”, will further analyse opacity, abstraction, and autonomy as essential to a radical politics beyond representation for minoritarian peoples. Balibar K. Singh, serves as Reviews Editor for the College Art Association's *Art Journal*, as well as part of the *Journal of Visual Culture's* Editorial Collective. Singh has been published in journals including *Sikh Formations*, *Critical Ethnic Studies*, *QED*, *Surveillance and Society*, *Rhizomes*, the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, and *Asian Diasporic Visual Culture of the Americas*.

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Endnotes

1 This lack of access and costliness is a direct result of the nature of academic publishing, and the cost-prohibition of academic journals and books through the university and university library systems, writ large.

2 While it is a risk to even note such a seemingly minor event, the promise of the Department's vitrine exhibition space is monthly; instead, about less than three weeks in, we were informed at the department level that the next exhibition had to be installed early. My lab collective, consisting of two lab research assistants, an interim lab director, and myself, speculate that this is due to the nature of academic repression around even the simple mention of Palestine, let alone a project entitled “Palestine will be Free”. It should be noted that the following exhibition was not installed promptly, and the vitrine sat empty for more than our allotted time, and into the following month.

4.

Radical pedagogies that defend complexity.

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Who is Afraid of Education? Pedagogical Sleight of Hand Tricks to Tame an Anti-intellectual World

Pablo Helguera

The elimination of the U.S. Department of Education has long been a cherished goal for many Republicans – so ingrained, in fact, that during Rick Perry’s infamous 2011 debate gaffe, when he forgot the names of the three federal agencies he planned to abolish, the one he *could* remember was education. The irony, of course, is that he might have benefited from a stronger one.

I first began thinking seriously about the neoliberal assault on education in the U.S. when I met education sociologist Christopher Robbins in London in 2008. We were both speaking at a conference organised by the Hayward Gallery titled “Deschooling Society”, named after the famous book by Ivan Illich. That year, Robbins published his book *Expelling Hope: The Assault on Youth and the Militarization of Schooling*, drawing from Freire, Giroux, bell hooks, and others. Robbins’s core critique can be summarized in this quote:

Neoliberal educational reform discards any pretence that schools exist to cultivate democratic citizens or to promote social justice; instead, it promotes a system in which schools

serve as mechanisms for sorting, disciplining, and preparing youth for a life of market compliance and state surveillance.

More importantly, Robbins argues convincingly that the radical educational critiques of the 1960s and 70s – including those of Illich, which challenged the industrial education complex for perpetuating patriarchal, capitalist values, and enforcing conformity – were ultimately co-opted by the right. What began as a call to liberate education from bureaucratic and ideological control was repurposed to justify dismantling the public system altogether, paving the way for for-profit education. This process, which began in earnest in the 1990s and early 2000s with the rise of charter schools, vouchers, and private education enterprises, has reached a culmination point with the effective elimination of the U.S. Department of Education. The circle now closes with a renewed assault – this time targeting higher education – fuelled by class resentment against so-called “woke” intellectualism and cloaked in the very language of liberation once used to critique the system.

Because market-driven education discourages dissent, we are left with a system accessible only to a privileged few – one that punishes ambiguity, rewards conformity, and prioritises “customer satisfaction” over critical inquiry. As a result, the content delivered is often sanitised and intellectually timid, avoiding uncomfortable historical truths such as slavery.

This cultural shift is not unique to the United States. Last week in Mexico City, for instance, the theorist and writer Irmgard Emmelhainz – an outspoken critic of Zionism – was recently dismissed from the University Centro after students expressed discomfort over films she included that addressed the Palestinian cause. The university informed her that she would not be offered further classes due to a “restructuring of the academic plan”, illustrating how institutional anxieties over discomfort now function as veiled censorship.

While all this is deeply concerning, we must recognise that we are living in a political moment where reason, facts, and logic often prove powerless to change minds. What I have been thinking most about, in this context, is fear – fear of learning, fear of knowledge: *epistemophobia*.

What we are facing is not an outright and proud embrace of stupidity (as we sometimes cynically conclude), but the rejection of a way of thinking that feels alienating, elitist, or destabilising – a psychological defence against perceived threats to identity, certainty, belonging, or self-worth. It thrives on insecurity, authoritarian thinking, and the need to simplify a complex world.

In a world where education is being flattened by an anti-intellectual impulse – where nuance is replaced by slogans, and complexity is treated as a threat – our role

as artists is not to retreat into compliant abstraction or aestheticised ambiguity. Rather, it is to insist on complexity as a form of resistance: to craft spaces where contradictions are held, where ambiguity is generative, and where meaning resists simplification. This is not complexity for its own sake, nor elitist obscurity, but a provocative nuance that unsettles consensus, invites reflection, and restores depth to a cultural landscape that is being aggressively levelled. In doing so, we reaffirm the radical potential of art – not as decoration for a disenchanted world, but as a tool to re-enchant thought itself.

The good news is that epistemophobia is treatable, and artistic or performative educational practice can help. While I have no magic solution, I have learned a few things from museum education that, in my view, can support artists, educators, and curators alike.

First, it’s important to remember that the demand for simplicity stems from a fragile emotional space – often activated when we are challenged by uncomfortable ideas. Embarrassing or confronting someone rarely works – it often leads to greater alienation. Nor does it help to condescendingly listen while allowing outrageous or uninformed opinions to go unchallenged.

What is often required in gallery-based experiments that engage controversial or emotionally charged topics is a kind of rhetorical sleight of hand. The first step is to bypass defensiveness and lower emotional stakes – often by inviting participants to share personal stories, thereby shifting the focus from abstract positions to lived experience. Once that trust is established, one can introduce a gentle rupture of expectations – perhaps through a game, a thought experiment, or a role-switching prompt. I have employed

variations of Boal’s invisible theatre, asking participants to speak from someone else’s point of view. This strategy generates a moment of productive disorientation, allowing participants to temporarily suspend ideological reflexes and approach the issue from a less ego-bound perspective. Rather than defending a fixed belief, they are invited to inhabit a situation. In this space, reflection becomes more likely – not from personal pride or tribal identification, but from a narrative distance that opens the door to ethical and analytical insight.

We become better analysts of reality when we are not monologuing ourselves into righteousness but instead narrating the complexities of action from multiple vantage points. A prompt like, “What might the artist’s mother say about this work?” can serve as a simple but powerful reframing device. As I often say in educator trainings, the goal is not to indoctrinate or “convert” a participant to my views, but to demonstrate that things are rarely as simple as they appear. Even if someone remains emotionally attached to their original opinion, if they walk away less certain, more reflective, or aware of the act of thinking itself, I feel the work has succeeded.

One of the advantages of art making – and of the relatively unregulated cultural spaces it often occupies – is that it can function as covert informal education: it can shift perspectives, challenge assumptions, and (as much as I resist the term) serve as an engine of knowledge production.

That said, I must emphasise these are survival strategies, not substitutes for robust institutional support. In a climate where public education is being systematically eroded and dismantled, no amount of facilitation skill or conceptual sleight of hand will be enough.

We must therefore fight on two fronts: to defend and rebuild public education as a democratic right, and to affirm the capacity of art making to generate insight, complexity, and conviction. Otherwise, we may well find ourselves living out the warning offered by Hannah Arendt in *The Crisis in Education* (1954):

“The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instil convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any.”

Pablo Helguera from 2007-2022 was Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and from 1998-2005 Head of Public Programs at the Education Department of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Pablo is an artist, performer, author, and educator, and is currently an Assistant Professor at The New School’s College of Performing Arts. His Beautiful Eccentrics substack, where an earlier version of this text appeared on 17th July 2025 is here: <https://pablohelguera.substack.com>

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The Six Essential Qualities of the Expert Gallery Educator

Emily Pringle

In October 1995 I started as the Education Co-ordinator at Chisenhale Gallery in London. It was my first permanent job in the field of gallery education, although I had been working as an artist educator for a few years before then. In the intervening thirty years to 2025 I have worked as an artist, educator, curator, evaluator, researcher, lecturer, department head, and consultant. I have been employed by large national museums, universities, and small independent arts spaces in the UK and internationally. I have witnessed times when funding has been relatively plentiful and support for education abundant, as well as more challenging periods, when the practice has seemed perilously fragile. Reflecting on these thirty years I can recognise certain characteristics held by gallery education/learning practitioners that have remained consistent. In my mind these qualities comprise the essential bedrock on which rests the practices of creative cultural engagement and learning in and with museums. In the current climate, where creativity and creative learning of all kinds is under threat, I want to use this opportunity to recognise and champion these complementary and interconnected qualities.

1. Vision – Inspiring practitioners have a clear vision and can articulate what they are doing and why they are doing it. Frequently the vision is driven by a desire for greater cultural access and democracy and is fuelled by a belief in the transformative power of art. These professionals have a clarity of purpose; they have identified aims and are explicit about what is happening and what is in it for those taking part. Crucially however, this vision is not autocratic or dogmatic but necessarily accommodates the needs and views of others. Visionary practitioners are flexible and engage in collaborative dialogue without losing sight of their overarching intention.
2. Creativity – Whilst holding an overarching vision, expert practitioners simultaneously embody attributes essential to working creatively, including being able to occupy a state of 'unlearning'. As Kyna Leski (Leski, 2020:12) recognises; 'unlearning is about questioning what you thought you knew'. Skilled colleagues are comfortable asking questions and interrogating preconceptions and can accept that outcomes may not

be what was anticipated at the start. They recognise that working creatively involves experimenting, taking on ideas, and developing new ways of being and working, while responding to collaborators, external circumstances, and the process itself.

3. Knowledgeability – Inhabiting a state of 'unlearning' does not mean that practitioners are not highly knowledgeable. Skilled colleagues possess both propositional knowledge, or 'knowing that' (Eraut, 1994), which resembles theory, facts, and information alongside practical knowledge ('knowing how'), which is learnt through experience and expressed through practice. They bring deep knowledge and understanding of, amongst other things, art and artists' practices, museum processes and structures, audiences' and collaborators' needs and hopes, communication strategies, pedagogy, art history, digital technology, political and social agendas, and education policy. This expertise is generally held lightly and deployed with sensitivity. It is knowledge utilised for the practical purposes of supporting learning and engagement, to devise programmes, resolve problems, nurture learning, and foster cultural engagement.
4. Reflexivity – Expert gallery educators exhibit the characteristics of the reflective practitioner as devised by Donald Schon (Schon, 1983). They naturally surface and interrogate problems they come across in their work and are capable of both being in the moment and reflecting after the moment. They recognise the importance of building on what is learnt through the doing of a practice which requires taking precious time to stop and consider 'what have we done and what have we learnt and what will we do differently in the

future based on what we know now?' Reflexivity allows these professionals to learn and grow continuously.

5. Diplomacy – Gallery education/learning is a collaborative practice that takes place in highly complex and contested spaces and contexts. Navigating internal agendas and hierarchies, negotiating with external stakeholders including funders and policy makers, and collaborating with artists in ways that allow these creatives to expound their practice with participants are essential skills held by expert practitioners. 'Care-full' engagement with collaborators beyond and colleagues within any organisation is vital. Thoughtful diplomatic practice that accommodates the needs of everyone directly involved in the process and/or impacted by it is not just ethically essential. As the curator Anthony Huberman (Huberman, 2011) says, working in the 'key of I Care' requires slowing down and paying attention, which in turn can bring richness and joy to how we work.
6. Resilience – 'Resilience' has become somewhat of a corporate buzzword. However, being able to withstand difficulties is vital in a profession where funding and support can be precarious, and partnerships strained at times. Tenacity, pragmatism, flexibility, and a sense of humour make a big difference. Equally, resilience comes through self-awareness. Being mindful of who we are and what we bring to any situation is key to nurturing sustainable relationships and negotiating tensions to bring about effective and lasting change. Being aware, as Maria Puig de La Bellacasa (Puig, 2017:10) observes, that working effectively with others over time requires 'thinking in the world.... Acknowledging our own involvements in perpetuating dominant values'.

Nowadays I work with brilliant professionals in inspiring institutions who manifest these qualities. From large organisations including Tate Modern in London and Munch Museet in Oslo to university museums such as the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge and smaller museums including KinderKunstLabor in St Polten, Austria. My role is often that of a critical friend, engaging in dialogue and the fruitful exchange of ideas and experiences. I try and bring people together, to build networks and support systems, stimulate research, and raise awareness of different cultural engagement and learning practices.

The history and rich theoretical base underpinning current gallery education work is poorly documented, and I can find myself sharing experiences and narratives with colleagues who are unaware of the trajectory and sophisticated conceptual frameworks of artist-led education work in museums. I hope that by doing this I can strengthen the sector at a time when political, financial, and institutional pressures are conspiring to undermine the vital work undertaken by committed education and learning professionals.

Emily Pringle trained as a painter and worked for several years as an artist educator, researcher, and programmer. She was Head of Learning Practice and Research at Tate in London from 2011 to 2019. In 2017/8 Emily was awarded an AHRC Leadership Fellowship and took a year's sabbatical from Tate to investigate research practices in museums in the UK, Europe, and North America. The text that resulted from this research – *Rethinking Research in the Art Museum* – was published by Routledge in 2019. She was Head of Research at Tate from 2019 to 2022, at which point she left Tate. Now working freelance, Emily undertakes consultancy, mentoring and teaching, and has returned to her studio while maintaining her blog: PRAM (<https://pramresearchintheartmuseum.com>).

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Weave In, Weave Out: Disability as Social Sculpture and Radical Textile Activism

Amanda Cachia

This text reflects on *Weave In, Weave Out*, a major exhibition and participatory programme developed by Intertwine Arts at Positive Exposure Gallery in New York City. Over a three-month period, from January – March 2026, this project brought together contemporary disabled artists and community participants across the five boroughs to engage in site-specific textile work that combines performance, installation, and live social sculpture. What makes this project exceptional is not only the quality and creativity of the work produced, but the inclusive, communal, and accessible framework in which it developed.

Intertwine Arts was co-founded as a non-profit organisation in 2015 by Brandy Godsfil, fashion designer, couturier, on-set tailor and weaver, Ria Hawks, a pediatric nurse practitioner and weaver, and Yukako Satone, owner of Loop of the Loom and a weaving artist. Intertwine Arts was inspired by the weaving philosophy of SAORI. (This is a term that combines the word 'sai', which loosely translates to 'the dignity of the individual', and the Japanese word 'ori', which means 'weaving'.) Intertwine Arts brings free-form weaving to people

of all ages with developmental, mental, physical disabilities and chronic illness. The organisation facilitates art-weaving workshops with organisations that include AHRC, Visions, HeartShare Human Services of New York, Greenwich House, and the YAI Without Walls programme. The workshops are led by approximately 15 art instructors who engage in a variety of weaving projects, ranging from tapestries, circle weavings, triangle weavings, seasonal weavings, and found object weavings. The mission of Intertwine Arts is that weaving is for everyone, and that fiber arts should be accessible, which also ascribes to the principles of disability justice. The Disability Justice movement is a social justice movement developed in 2005 by the Disability Justice Collective that included Patty Berne, Stacey Milbern, and Leroy Moore. Many of the looms that artists from Intertwine Arts use have been designed with accessible modifications to meet the needs of crip time and the unique capacities that disabled embodiment brings.

Non-profit arts organisations often operate under resource constraints, rigid institutional structures, and dominant



Figure 1: Diagram of proposed mock-up of the gallery space

cultural expectations that prioritise passive spectatorship, market value, or normative standards of ability. Against these pressures, Intertwine Arts demonstrates how programming can resist exclusionary norms, foregrounding accessibility, collaboration, and experimentation as central to the artistic process. Weaving, in particular, is a medium that embodies these values: it is democratic, egalitarian, and inherently relational, fostering companionship, shared labour, and a sense of collective accomplishment. The gallery becomes a live social sculpture, where artists, participants, and visitors intersect, interact, and co-create in real time. By centring disabled embodiment, accommodating diverse needs, and inviting visitors to participate directly in making work, *Weave In, Weave Out*

transforms conventional ideas of what an exhibition can be. It is a space where knowledge, skills, and experiences are exchanged; where labour, creativity, and care converge; and where communal, interdependent forms of engagement are celebrated. In doing so, it challenges the ableist and hierarchical norms that dominate much of the art world, offering a model for how art can operate as both aesthetic practice and social intervention – radical, inclusive, and generative.

This collaborative project is one in which we can share in each other's companionship and humanity while using art as a form of mediation. While the work of Intertwine Arts is not clinically-driven, such as art therapy-based interventions, there is a shared and mutual understanding

of the holistic and generative benefits that weaving offers, where it fosters creativity and independence, increases feelings of self-worth and satisfaction, and offers opportunities for unique expressions of memories, lived experiences, and the imagination. Equally important to the generative qualities that weaving work brings on an individual level, is the communal aspect of weaving. For generations and across many cultures and geographies around the world, weaving has been a familial, domestic and social space that centres the benefits of a network for people desiring connection with others. Based on these nodes, this exhibition has been constructed as an immersive environment, where visitors can both observe weaving activities in the gallery space by regular workshop participants across the partner organisations, and they can also participate in weaving themselves. Visitors have the opportunity to be immersed into a large circular formation of looms set up in the middle of the gallery space (see Figure 1), where contemporary disabled artists are making work in real time. Programme artists who run the workshops at partner organisations will visit the exhibition and use the gallery space instead of their usual classroom. As the work is completed, it will be shorn from the loom each day and hung on the surrounding walls, offering a dynamic visual environment that changes and evolves as new projects are devised and executed. In addition, visitors are encouraged to sit down in front of any available loom and can elect to get instruction and training from teaching artists and volunteers in the space regarding weaving techniques.

Positive Exposure gallery has become a renowned space for showcasing work by disabled artists, founded by celebrated photographer Rick Guidotti. Early in his career, Guidotti was a commercial fashion photographer travelling the world for

high profile shoots and assignments with models and celebrities. Soon though, Guidotti became disenfranchised with this world and sought to find beauty in less restrictive forms of corporeality that he found more interesting and representative of a greater diversity of humanity. Owing to Guidotti's leadership, the gallery offers the best in accessible features to accommodate a range of disabled visitors' needs and experiences, including live-streaming for those who wish to participate in weaving and observing virtually, a dedicated webpage for audiences at home, and performative image descriptions of works as weavings are made in-situ. The Bloomberg Connect software will also be utilized to ensure a permanent and accessible record of the exhibition, and it also offers a means to glean image descriptions for the works displayed on the gallery walls as they are fabricated each day.

The title of the exhibition, *Weave In, Weave Out*, alludes to the spatial nature of the exhibition, where individuals will be welcome to come and go within the space, or drop in or out, over the three-month duration that the gallery will become a live social sculpture, or a socially engaged art practice. Within this structure, knowledge is being exchanged across borders, disciplines and lived experiences to rethink institutional possibilities. The title also refers to the materiality of weaving itself and how the methodology and the technical skill of weaving involve threading back and forth and in and out of the weft and the warp, which intersect at right angles to create intricate patterns and designs. But the title also indicates that weaving is not just about threads and bodies moving in and out of the literal architecture of the gallery space. Rather, the bodies of all those who choose to spend time in the gallery and partake in its activities are also inevitably woven together

in this specific place and time as a type of microcosm for the many social circles that we may find ourselves in on a daily basis, and across our lifetimes.

Further, 'weaving in, weaving out' powerfully lends itself as a strategy for surviving the current global political turmoil the world finds itself in. Taken from Marxist sociologist John Holloway (Holloway, 2010), whose work centres on radical anti-capitalist theory and practice, the 'we' in 'weaving' refers to us, the people, who can actively participate in the collective struggle against capitalism, rather than passively observing its effects. The metaphor of 'weaving' in this context represents the collaborative, continuous, and creative work of building a different world beyond capitalism, one warp or weft at a time. 'Weaving' is also a concrete labour of resistance that suggests a more patient and persistent approach to decentralising power to build an alternative social fabric. Within what Holloway calls the 'cracks', or what I liken to the intersections of fabric at the loom, we find spaces to assert a different kind of doing that is not governed by the logic of capitalist value and profit. Instead, these spaces find room for disability community, social gathering, and care.

Amanda Cachia has an established career profile as a curator, consultant, writer and art historian who specialises in disability art activism across intersectional axes of difference, including gender, race, and sexuality. She is Professor of Practice in Museum Studies in the School of Art at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University. Cachia is the author of *Hospital Aesthetics: Disability, Medicine, Activism* (2025), and *The Agency of Access: Contemporary Disability Art and Institutional Critique* (2024). She is also editor of *Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation* (2022), which includes over 40 international contributors. Cachia has a PhD in Art History, Theory & Criticism from the University of California San Diego. She has curated approximately 50 exhibitions, many of which have travelled to cities across the USA, England, Australia, and Canada.

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In Spite Of: Amazonian Art as Living Knowledge, Territory, and Collective Continuity

Elvira Espejo Ayca

For this *In Spite Of...* issue of the Journal of Education in Museums, which gathers voices working across contexts of exclusion, constraint, and structural inequity, Amazonian art offers a vital reminder: art is not only something made *in spite of* adversity, but something that continues *because of* enduring relationships between people, land, and ancestral knowledge. Amazonian artistic practice – whether expressed through textiles, ceramics, feather work, or embodied performance – has always been rooted in a relational worldview that refuses the separations foundational to Western art history. It does not divide art from life, craft from knowledge, or creativity from community. Instead, it emerges from a continuous dialogue between territory, ecology, and collective memory.

This text argues that Amazonian art must be understood not as an aesthetic category but as a living system of knowledge that persists *in spite of* centuries of marginalisation, extractive museum practices, and the imposition of Western hierarchies. It insists that Indigenous communities must lead the representation, interpretation, and

preservation of their own artistic traditions, because these practices are inseparable from the land and from the social, spiritual, and ecological relations that sustain them.

In spite of imposed hierarchies: art as relational knowledge

Western museums and academic disciplines have long analysed Amazonian art through Latin, Greek, and Anglo-Saxon frameworks that categorise artistic expression into rigid genre – painting, sculpture, music, literature, dance. These taxonomies create hierarchies that elevate certain forms as "fine art" while relegating others to "craft", "ethnography", or "material culture". Such frameworks obscure the complexity of Indigenous artistic systems and silence the communities who have generated them for millennia.

Amazonian art does not fit into these categories because it was never meant to. It is not produced for detached contemplation or individual authorship. It is embedded in the social fabric of community life, in the cycles of the forest, and in the cosmological narratives that shape collective identity.

To understand Amazonian art, one must begin with territory – with the rivers, soils, plants, animals, and ancestral beings that constitute the living environment. One must begin with the people who have cultivated these relationships across generations, often *in spite of* displacement, extractive economies, and the erasure of Indigenous epistemologies.

In textile making communities, for example, weaving is not simply a technique or aesthetic practice. It is a form of communication, a way of transmitting knowledge, a record of relationships, and a method of reading the landscape. The textile is not an object; it is a conversation.

In spite of extractive institutions: art as ecological continuity

Amazonian artistic practices are profoundly ecological. They rely on materials – cotton, palm fibres, garabatá, feathers, clay – that are gathered with deep respect for the land. This gathering is not an act of extraction but a sensory, ethical, and relational process. It requires knowledge of plant maturity, seasonal rhythms, and the behaviour of animals. It requires dialogue with the forest.

Feather art exemplifies this relationality. Feathers are collected with care, sometimes by gently stunning the bird so that it is not harmed. This practice reflects a worldview in which humans, animals, and spirits are interconnected, and in which artistic creation is inseparable from ecological responsibility. The resulting objects – crowns, bracelets, adornments – are not merely decorative. They are embodiments of identity, territory, and cosmology.

Such practices persist *in spite of* the pressures of modernity, deforestation, and the commodification of Indigenous aesthetics.



They persist because they are rooted in systems of knowledge that Western institutions have historically failed to recognise or value.

In spite of disrupted transmission: art as ancestral continuity

Formal education systems imposed through colonial and national policies have often disrupted the transmission of Indigenous artistic knowledge. Techniques once widely practiced – openair ceramic firing, double air ceramic firing, air ceramic firing, double, complex knotting, intricate basketry – have been marginalised or lost in many regions. Yet in communities where these practices survive, they do so because elders, artisans, and coiling, complex knotting, intricate basketry have been marginalised or lost in many regions. Yet in communities where these practices survive, they do so because elders, artisans, and knowledge keepers have insisted on their continuity *in spite of* structural barriers.

This continuity is not nostalgic. It is adaptive, inventive, and responsive to changing conditions. Garabatá weaving, once used for carrying yuca or making hammocks, is now often adapted into bags for sale. Feather techniques once used for ceremonial adornment now appear in contemporary jewellery.



The Tierra Bajas (Lowlands), Photo: Elvira Espejo Ayca, 2013.

These transformations do not diminish the cultural value of the work; they demonstrate the resilience and creativity of communities who continue to make art in ways that honour ancestral knowledge while navigating contemporary realities.

In spite of Western definitions: art as embodied pedagogy

Amazonian art cannot be separated from education, because education itself is embedded in the processes of making. Children learn by observing, participating, touching, gathering, and listening. Knowledge is transmitted through practice, through stories, through the land itself. This stands in stark contrast to Western museum models, which isolate objects from their contexts and treat knowledge as something to be extracted, catalogued, and displayed.

In Amazonian contexts, art is pedagogy. It teaches how to live well with the land, how to understand ecological cycles, how to maintain social relationships, how to honour ancestors, and how to navigate the spiritual world. It is a holistic system in which creativity, ethics, ecology, and community are inseparable.

This is why Indigenous communities must lead the interpretation of their own artistic traditions. Western museums cannot adequately represent Amazonian art because they cannot replicate the relational conditions that give it meaning. They can display objects, but they cannot display the forest, the stories, the rituals, the seasons, the spirits, or the collective labour that produced them.

In spite of invisibility: art as political presence

For centuries, Indigenous artists were excluded from the category of “artist” altogether. Their work was labelled craft, folklore, or ethnography. It was collected without attribution, displayed without context, and interpreted without consultation. This erasure persists in many institutions today.

Recognising Amazonian art as art is not simply a matter of terminology. It is a political act. It affirms the intellectual, creative, and cultural contributions of Indigenous communities. It challenges the hierarchies that have marginalised them.

It demands that museums and cultural institutions confront their own histories of extractivism and exclusion.

To honour Amazonian art is to honour the masters who have preserved these practices across generations, often with limited resources and in the face of profound structural inequities. It is to recognise that their work embodies sophisticated systems of knowledge that Western frameworks have long failed to understand.

In spite of everything: art as living territory

Amazonian art is not a relic of the past. It is a living, evolving practice that continues to shape and be shaped by the land. It is a form of resistance, a mode of survival, and a way of imagining futures grounded in reciprocity, ecological care, and collective wellbeing.

In the context of this *In Spite Of...* issue of the Journal of Education in Museums, Amazonian art reminds us that creativity does not emerge from abundance or institutional support. It emerges from relationship – from the forest, from community, from ancestral memory, from the ongoing struggle to maintain ways of knowing that have been systematically marginalised.

It reminds us that art is not only something made *in spite of* adversity, but something that enables communities to endure, adapt, and flourish *because of* their deep connections to land and to one another.

Elvira Espejo Ayca is an award-winning poet, visual artist, weaver, and narrator of the indigenous Aymara and Quechua oral traditions of her home region of Oruro (Qaqachaka ayllu community), Bolivia. She was Director of the National Museum of Ethnography and Folklore in La Paz, and was awarded the Goethe Medal in 2020.

Making Space for the Education We Needed

MADEYOULOOK

Receiving the invitation to contribute to this themed issue of Journal of Education in Museums sparked some new discoveries for us. We were surprised to realise that we had never really considered our work education related, and not given it much consideration. After all, we first began working together in our final year of university specifically because we felt our BAFA arts education to be too far removed from our lived experience, and the general existence of black life happening around the arts school's walls every day. Our first project together, entitled 'Sermon on the Train' (MADEYOULOOK, 2009), was a challenge to our lecturers: to give a university level lecture on the public metro-rail, a quintessential transport system of the underclasses in Johannesburg with a history of political violence and its origins in transporting black labour from the apartheid labour camps to industry centres of the city. 'Sermon on the Train' was an exploration into the value of the knowledge produced within the university, and a questioning of the hierarchies of knowledge production (Alexander, 2003; Illich, 2002). Since then, over 16 years ago, we have become less pre-occupied with challenging formal institutions of

knowledge making, and more committed to creating spaces of knowledge generation that begins to address some of the lacks we identified as students. This has been an exploratory process, with much unlearning and testing along the way. We have had to undo the modernist, de-affective, and de-contextualised modes of much of our university education. And then work out what we wanted instead, in its place. In the process our work has coalesced around what every day, ordinary black life in South Africa – and its long histories – have to teach in how knowledge is formed, shared and applied to the urgent needs of our time (Ndebele, 2006). Learning, therefore, has always been central to why we make art.

This curiosity for learning has been expressed through exhibition-making, self-publishing zines, academic conferences, journal articles, and book chapters. But perhaps no other medium has been as recurrent in our work as the lecture format, not only as a means to speak about our artmaking, but quite often as the artwork itself.

'Sermon on the Train' was the first such lecture project, and we had a number of iterations. In only one of them did



Charles Bronson walking, talking and tasting through his garden ahead of a Garden Talk, 2022.
Courtesy of MADEYOULOOK and Primary, Nottingham

the lecturer, Professor Isabel Hofmeyer in this case, recognise the idiocy of the performance and contradict our instructions, choosing to put down her notes and give a lecture that people on the train might connect with – and was the only person to get questions from the general public on the train. This action showed-up our student-like need to challenge the university and made it a little clearer that our own interest was much more in the potential of collaborative learning that related to our lives.

It was in our later project, 'Corner loving' (MADEYOULOOK, 2012) that the format of the lecture died for us. 'Corner loving' sought to think and speak about issues of black love as a subject worthy of rigorous and critical engagement. As part of an

exhibition of research, drawings and texts, we invited black thinkers already exploring the topic of love from multiple perspectives to each deliver a lecture as part of a series entitled the 'Tenderness' series. We had invited the speakers into a space not too dissimilar to the lecture halls and auditoriums they frequently found themselves in; the lectern in front of rows and rows of chairs, the large audiences in attendance, the post-talk wine on offer. The lectures held no tenderness at all. They didn't, in the form and tone, reflect the knowledge we were trying to create (MADEYOULOOK, 2016). The arthritic form of the lectures had engendered academic tones and language ill-equipped to hold the space nor the softness of the subject-matter, prompting us to ask ourselves how we could reshape the lecture to

reflect, more appropriately, the everyday experiences we're interested in – and could the form itself be moulded into something more ordinary?

First emerging as part of a project on urban black gardening practices in South Africa, and in a sense a response to our learning from 'Corner loving', 'Garden Talks' (MADEYOULOOK, 2018-ongoing) have become our testing space for what it means to create the kind of space that enables meaningful knowledge creation. Each garden talk invites a guest speaker to share something of their practice, in a garden and under a tree or umbrella. A small gathering of mostly chosen others sprawl on the grass or take up their place on cushions, picnic blankets, benches or whatever else they can fashion into seating. The outdoor setting is about being in one's body as much as it is about being in one's head – a somatic and cognitive engagement with knowledge. The gardener, our host, will give us a tour of their special place, tell us of their labour, their favourite flower, their tricks, ecological balance and sharing with the birds. They invite us to pick, and taste, to explore. Nourishment is often shared among the group, with the two of us taking up the lion's share by preparing or purchasing refreshments and asking everyone else to bring what they wish for a collective meal or sharing. Speakers are a range of artists, farmers, activists, community members etc. – all deeply knowledgeable of a subject. The combination of speaker, knowledgeable host and a small community of guests often with some knowledge of the subject, blurs the distinction between the all-knowing and lone expert and the audience as passive, unknowing recipients of knowledge. The people and setting disrupt hierarchies and ease the labour of care often placed on speakers and hosts, creating a conversational atmosphere where even

the most uncertain of guests can feel comfortable enough to contribute to the discussion and occasion.

In creating the garden talks we have come to recognise the kind of education we are interested in – in-depth, intimate, relational, of the majority world and at the intersection of the human, spiritual, more-than-human and the unknowable (Escobar and McGuirk, 2024; Mahashe, 2019; Nkosi, 2024; Wynter, 1971). We see learning spaces as collaborative spaces, of what is generated between living beings and within time. We are interested in knowledge that ends up in books, but also ends up in hands, and in the soil, and in our collective imaginaries. This is the education we seek, and the education we make together.

MADEYOULOOK is a Johannesburg based interdisciplinary artist duo between Molemo Moiloa and Nare Mokgotho, operating since 2009. The works of MADEYOULOOK take as their point of departure everyday black practices that have either been historically overlooked, deemed inconsequential or simply had limited rigorous engagement, particularly within the formal houses of knowledge production. These works encourage a re-observation of and de-familiarisation with the everyday and the spacing of black imaginaries. In reworking and interrupting how we view ordinary black lived experiences and the everyday, we are 'made to re-look' and question societal relations. MADEYOULOOK then makes a claim for everyday black lifehood and relationality as constituting knowledge and having the ability to model ways of practicing and being. These everyday practices have the potential to bring about different perspectives to enable epistemic shifts and create new possibilities.

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Popular Kitchen: Curious Pedagogies for a Defiant Present in the South of America

Larisa Zmud

The debate around situated education in South America demands methodological strategies that overflow the rigid architecture of institutions and embed themselves – critically and poetically – into the fabric of everyday life. These “curious pedagogies” operate like hacks to traditional education, privileging the circulation of minoritized knowledges and the invention of shared ways of living.¹

A central case for understanding these methodologies is the project **Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito (ByFF)** in Villa Fiorito, Buenos Aires Province, Argentina.

I. The Gourmet Soup Kitchen

Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito emerged in 2003, in the wake of Argentina's post-neoliberal crisis, as a school of contemporary popular art in a neighbourhood marked by precarity and exclusion. Villa Fiorito is defined by the absence of basic services, such as drinking water, and is a damaged, abject, and abandoned space. In this artistic, social, and material laboratory space, art, politics, and nutrition function as an indivisible unit.

For instance, the **Gourmet Soup Kitchen** (launched in 2018) transforms the practice of the communal cooking pot into an aesthetic and socially situated action. The project operates in a context shaped by **precarity**, a concept Judith Butler uses to describe politically induced and hierarchized economic and personal vulnerability.² Precarity results from the maximization of harm and risk, and the minimization of shelter and support for certain people. In South America, and specifically in Villa Fiorito, neoliberalism works in criminal alliance with capitalism and machismo to consciously produce this precarity, offering minimal sustenance while demanding the sustained production of inequity.

In contrast, the Gourmet Soup Kitchen embraces precarity as an ontological and existential condition that points to our interdependence – a constitutive fragility of all living beings, requiring others for mutual survival.³ By creating networks of affection and mutual support, the Kitchen affirms that life in these territories is sustained through alliance and vital interdependence.

II. Methodological Strategy: Micropolitics and Defiant Pleasure

The Kitchen's methodological strategy is based on a displacement – a shift away from hegemonic and paralysing rules. Rather than waiting for a possible future or a grand finale (whether paradise or apocalypse), energy is channelled into resistance and persistence in the present through collective and immediate actions. Brazilian psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik argues that abandoning the idea of paradise and apocalypse is key in the micropolitical fight against the colonial-capitalist regime.⁴ This fight does not seek the pleasure of an ending, but a vital joy that arises when something transforms.

ByFF materializes through the **micropolitics of desire**, a concept developed by Rolnik (expanding on the work of Félix Guattari), in which desire, which is not so much personal as it is a social and political force, thus investigates modes of resistance by bodies excluded from hegemonic narratives. Micropolitics consists of everyday actions that, though often invisibilised, sustain the social field and institutional politics. The Gourmet Soup Kitchen acts as a situated device of desiring insurrection, aiming to make the everyday a space of invention, focusing on acts that may seem insignificant but are profoundly important.

This resistance methodology manifests in the affirmation of the right to pleasure and choice. A fundamental pedagogical act occurs when the ByFF Kitchen enables decisions about vital matters – like what to eat – a right historically denied to subjugated populations. For instance, during a past event, a buffet was offered with dishes like hummus, guacamole, and roasted cauliflower, allowing attendees to choose what they wanted to eat for the first time. This collective choice ruptures the didactic and systematic infantilisation imposed on feminised, poor, and racialised bodies.

III. Body-Territory and the Present Catastrophe in South America

While the Global North fears the end of the world, in Argentina – in Villa Fiorito – that dystopia is already a reality. In this South, catastrophe is lived as a present, where paralysis is not an option.

Here, the notion of **body-territory**, as articulated by Verónica Gago, becomes essential.⁵ Linking these concepts moves beyond possession, focusing instead on use and the construction of the commons. The body-territory is a battlefield one inhabits, recognising that being part of it implies acknowledging constitutive interdependence. This idea-force arises from the struggles of women in the Global South against mega-extractive projects, mapping how territorial exploitation reconfigures labour exploitation and leads to the dispossession of common goods.

This struggle intensifies under Argentina's current libertarian government, which has deepened the food crisis. Policies like drastic public spending cuts and halting food distribution to community kitchens aim to dismantle political networks and community care systems, operating from extreme individualism. Voices like Gisella Rivas (ByFF) reveal that the government "pretends poverty doesn't exist" and imposes the logic that "the poor eat like the poor", denying access to the joy of a dignified life. The Gourmet Soup Kitchen resists this dispossession by insisting on the possibility of beauty and abundance.

Resistance is rooted in an **ethics of care**, conceived as a conscious and committed practice that sustains life and becomes revolutionary in a world defined by neglect. At the Kitchen, care is practiced strategically: by synchronising cooking hours with children's art workshops, women are guaranteed uninterrupted time for political exchange, vital gossip, and affective connection.

IV. Artistic Perspective

The Gourmet Soup Kitchen is configured as a living artwork and poetic praxis. Feminist art at ByFF does not focus on representing hunger – it feeds people. The kitchen operates as an artistic and human laboratory where the everyday becomes a space of invention.

The project's artistic perspective uses **speculative fabulation** as a political methodology.⁶ This tool enables the creation of other possible worlds and the transformation of the present. The Kitchen, through its name and menus, materializes this fiction. It opposes capitalist realism, which offers only a fatalistic future, showing

that revolution lies in the perseverance of collective existence despite disaster.

The project aims to create **communal luxury**, a concept encompassing political power, poetic praxis, and the social ritual of its gatherings. This "luxury" is the right to choose and the possibility of shared wellbeing. Serving a beautiful dish with new spices and care in a marginalized neighbourhood is a vital gesture and an act of disobedience against the implicit law that pleasure is reserved for the rich. Art, in this sense, is an aesthetic interface that reorganises the field of the sensible, breaking the notion that "this kind of thing is only for the rich."



V. Guidelines for Contributing to the Debate on Situated Education

The experience of Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito offers concrete guidelines to reorient the debate on radically situated education:

- **Prioritise micropolitical praxis:** Action and experience must take precedence over outcomes, focusing on everyday acts and recognising their transformative power.
- **Activate the body-territory:** Methodologies must explicitly link body, language, and territory. Knowledge must be embodied, and research must be with-the-body.
- **Foster the right to choose and pleasure:** Pedagogies should create contexts of abundance and choice, challenging the logic that denies leisure, pleasure, and luxury – understood as shared wellbeing – to precarised populations.
- **Adopt speculative fabulation:** Use art, fantasy, and science fiction as methodologies to break norms and introduce worlds of multiple possibilities.
- **Integrate care as a revolutionary axis:** Care must be a conscious and committed practice that sustains life. The act of caring is a fundamental strategy in a present defined by neglect.

Larisa Zmud is a curator and academic, focusing on gender equality and social justice through food. She was raised as a nomad, between the coastal city of Mar del Plata and the Patagonian steppe where her father was a rural teacher for Mapuche communities: Colonia Cushman Chubut's Province, South Argentina. She explored ways of living in an alternative economy from the economy of the 90s in Argentina and learnt about Mapuche culture and their knowledge, rituals and relationship with the territory.

Since 2017, Zmud has organised curatorial research projects and Sin Destino Aparente: reading and critical group focused on gender aesthetics, art and activism. She is part of the artistic and feminist collective Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito where she conducts cooking classes and coordinates the Comedor Gourmet, an artistic and gastronomic space designed to redefine nutrition as nourishment, a way of thinking about politics of bodies and desire. It's not just about cooking delicious food in a villa in the Province of Buenos Aires, but enabling possibilities of choice to, through them, create pleasant spaces that promote the right to decide, ultimately the right to exist.

She has founded Cetácea, the first international artistic residency in Chubut, Argentina. Cetácea residency engages with the rural, nature-cultural, and coastal regions of the territory.

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Endnotes

1 'Curious Pedagogies' are radical educational practices that extend beyond the institution – whether that's the school, the university, or the museum and heritage site. Because these situated education practices are so closely aligned to learning in museum/gallery/heritage environments, they give educators (1) a context to understand their own learning activities in the institution, and simultaneously (2) ways to think about engaging not simply with underserved audiences or under-represented communities, not simply 'hard-to-reach' but those actually 'beyond the reach' of formal and informal learning that the institution is incapable of imagining. As a limit case, 'Curious Pedagogies' offers a model for how museum/gallery/heritage learning professionals might imagine collaborating, working beyond the institution, and why working extra-institutionally matters.

2 See Judith Butler, 'Precariousness is a shared condition of human life, but precarity designates the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.' (Butler, 2009, p. 25).

3 Editors' note. Here, the contributor writes of precarity as not simply a temporary economic, social, or physical condition but one that is a fundamental and an inescapable reality of human existence. Hence our need for interdependence to survive. To acknowledge this is to question and re-envision the purpose of the museum/gallery/heritage sector's social justice agenda. What, for instance, might foregrounding survival or dignity or joy do to that agenda, as we have ventured to do in this guest edited issue of GEM?

4 See Suely Rolnik, 'La creencia en el paraíso es una droga. En tal sentido, es preciso deshacerse de la creencia en el delirio de un control permanente y definitivo de los engranajes sociales que llevarían a una supuesta realización plena del potencial humano.' (Rolnik, 2019, p. 86)

5 Editors' note: Body-territory is a decolonial feminist concept, rooted in Latin American Indigenous and peasant struggles, emphasizing that there's an interconnection between the exploitation of land and the oppression of human bodies. The inseparability of their co-habitation is a vital starting point for action, and a vital addition to museum/gallery/heritage debates on ownership, repatriation, reparations, and repair, and for educators collaborating and co-creating with communities.

6 Editors' note: Inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction, speculative fabulation is a concept popularised in academia by the writings of Donna Haraway. In using fiction as a tool to confront reality with alternative possibilities, it has incredible potential to enable educators in museum/gallery/heritage learning to develop new activities that, for instance, disrupt traditional History, propose alternative stories and modes of storytelling, collaborating with children on co-designing inter-species encounters, and so forth. Our guess is that most of GEM's community are already doing this!

Making Necessity out of Virtue

Yaiza Hernández Velázquez

I have been a curating lecturer for a lot longer than I was a full-time curator. This should have been a straightforward text to write. Instead, it has brought to the fore a sense of inadequacy, of not being up to the task. The editors asked how we have developed teaching programmes in difficult circumstances, what is worth sharing about the work that we have done *despite it all*. I thought long and hard about what I could contribute that would offer something of value or even a sense on *how-to-thrive* while the world burns, but every move in that direction takes me further away from the realities of the job. Teaching curating in a UK university today binds your labour to two institutions – the museum and the university – defined by a long-standing and existential twin crisis – of funding and legitimisation. Alongside ever diminishing public support and (badly) managed decline, they have been forced to confront their own sorry histories, even if this has not resulted in any significant attempts to redeem themselves. But as we try to abolish, transform or escape these institutions, they are also under siege by those who feel they are not racist enough, not patriarchal enough, not complicit enough. Our first impulse might be to

side against our enemies to protect our institutional homes, but we must remember that they will not offer us protection in return. However improbable this might seem at present, the task remains to remake them anew.

It is not that we were unduly naïve about the political potential of these institutions, our naivety perhaps laid with how long we believed conspiracy and fugitivity could sustain us within them. At the turn of the millennium, we could bemoan that the command to operate ‘globally’ meant that curators enforced mobility was mimicking the ways of transnational elites. As contemporary art becomes increasingly financialised, we inhabit a present where barriers to the profession (not least the extortionate fees our universities charge), mean that mere mimicking is increasingly not an option, lived experience of privilege has disguised itself as curatorial merit until it has become indistinguishable from it. Teaching curating in the UK is complicit in this process and can involve a fair bit of bad faith. Training the dominant classes the world over to take over an institution you cannot trust is hardly what we signed up for. But whatever our reservations,

there is a curriculum to write and a wage to be earned before the next restructure comes our way. So, we could console ourselves that we are *holding a space open* for a better time to come, one that we await with quietist endurance. This, however, would indulge the fantasy that such a time will come without being wrestled into existence.

The above could be taken as a poor excuse for the fact that I can offer neither wisdom nor experience here, but I make no apologies for that. We are in new terrains, where relying on a form of teaching rehearsed over the last three decades is not going to serve us well. So what follows is just a list of some of the things that I have tried out under duress, without conviction that this can be taken as *best practice* or even good advice.

Don't take anything for granted, not even disaster.

We are – as we are constantly being reminded – entering a different era, one marked by polycrisis and the normalisation of genocide. Abuse of power no longer needs to be disguised, delighting in vice-signalling. The long-held Schillerian idea of art as a democratising factor might become surplus to governmental requirements sooner than we anticipated. In the face of this, curating can seem a rather indulgent past-time. Curating cannot defend you against climate collapse or a government intent on making you war ready. Far from it, curating at a scale not ever seen before is mobilised in processes of algorithmic socialisation and mass data extraction. This might not be, of course, what we mean by curating, but whatever our present skills or appetites, it is *there* that we must operate. We understand taxonomy, hierarchisation, ordering, classification, display and retrieval and how they shape our knowing of the world.

Archival searches – once the specialised domain of the curator – have come to dominate all our lives, fuelled by automated personalisation, recommendations, localisation, filtering and aggregation. Acknowledging we have some power could start from there. Maybe it is not more curating that is needed from us. Instead, a curatorial education could equip us to demonstrate how these infrastructures and techniques are not a window to the world, showing how they intervene in that world they claim only to exhibit while shaping our very selves in the process.

Step out of your comfort zone.

There is not much point in teaching those with prime passports and access-all-areas about inclusivity. The tired idea that curators should ‘welcome communities’ or even do so to make them ‘happier and healthier’ is an odd one, it presupposes that people want in, that there is nothing they’d rather do with their precious time. ‘Community’ is a word reserved in museum-speak for the variously downtrodden, interpellating them on the basis of their lacks rather than their richness. The actual artworld community of those who march confidently into our private views – brought together by race, class and qualifications – continue to operate as a neutral default to which all others must aspire. If we can teach something useful to our students, is not to act as benevolent pastors welcoming their flock. Instead, we need to practice the difficulty of meeting people where they are, of being in the outside looking in, of negotiating on someone else’s terms an entry based on trust or resigning ourselves to being denied. If we are going to treat people one community at a time, we must first acknowledge our own. Sometimes, things are just not for us, sometimes what we do is also not for other people. The task should not be to make things universally

inclusive, but to ensure that all kinds of things get *the perks* of being thought of as art, as culture, as worthy and worthwhile, as valuable.

Get out more.

While your resources might be diminished, so are everyone else's. Do not spend time bemoaning this or trying to be *resilient*. There is no point holding a fort you don't desire. Work at sharing or even giving away whatever resources you have (a room, some time, computers, credibility, WIFI, a budget...). Be extravagantly extramural. What seems like a scarcity of resources inside can become plentiful elsewhere. Museums and universities infrastructures are designed to be cumbersome and expensive; things are often simpler and cheaper when you step outside. Teaching curating in the classroom was meant to allow for thinking beyond the established institutional habits of vocational training, but we now also need to rehearse for a curating that takes place not just *outside* of its traditional institutions, but *in the absence* of them. Needless to say, this is a new problem only for those of us used to operating in the Global North. So, the imperative to get out of the classroom and the museum is not to be understood as working off site, but as a search for a site where you might be wanted, where your work serves some purpose. Taking seriously the value of obtaining, procuring and sharing resources is also a way of questioning what it is that we actually need. The point is not to make a virtue out of necessity and embrace precarity as our *modus operandi*, that is simply where many of us currently are at. But for a next generation of curators to exist at all, they will first have to demonstrate why they are needed, to make necessity out of virtue.

Dr Yaiza Hernández Velázquez's research primarily focuses on the histories and theories of museums, galleries, exhibitions, and archives. Her work examines how the legacies of modernity often remain unacknowledged within these institutions, even as they work towards decolonisation. She often collaborates with the organisations she studies, most recently as a co-curator for the [contra] panorama triennial at MACBA (2022-2025) and as a member of the expert committee for the reconfiguration of the National Museum of Anthropology in Spain (2024-2025). She is preparing a themed issue on tourism for the *Journal of Visual Cultures*, where she is a member of the Editorial Collective. Her monograph *Coleccionismo, Universalismo, Extinción* will be published by TEA (Spain) in 2026.

5.

The creation of new infrastructures, solidarities, and imaginaries that are accountable to the people they claim to serve.

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Paisley's is the Story of the Untold Story

Victoria Hollows

Depending on how they were formed, we know museums have traditionally missed out stories and collections – often meaning that working class people, women, people of colour, and people with disabilities have been less represented. If, in Western museums, a hierarchy of actors has traditionally been permitted to build a narrative on behalf of others, what happens to trust? What might it take to democratise traditional approaches? This contribution to Journal of Education in Museums offers an example of building trust by telling the untold stories, how Paisley Museum – currently Scotland's largest and most significant cultural project – is working in new ways to uncover different histories, shaped by the perspectives and the stories of the people to whom they belong.

Led by OneRen, the organisation that delivers culture, leisure and sport for this area of Scotland, Paisley Museum is being completely reimagined through rebuild, redisplay, and new practices evolved by collaborative decision-making and co-production with over 70 local groups and over 4000 individuals. This approach also addresses issues with historic

collections in relation to contemporary concerns and values, including legacies of empire, colonialism and slavery.

Paisley is Scotland's largest town and a remarkable place. Historically home to radical thinkers and doers, it's a place of invention, entrepreneurship, intellectual curiosity and global impact. 100 years ago, Paisley was home to the world's third largest business – J&P Coats – who manufactured and exported 90% of the world's cotton thread (Smith, 2017). Paisley's thread and weaving economy prospered on the back of the British empire and money flooded back to the town, still visibly present today in major buildings and gifts to the townspeople including Paisley Museum, inaugurated in 1871, and a collection of globally important artefacts.

But Paisley is also a town that has suffered. Globalisation laid waste to its wealth. Boom became bust and Paisley became the by-word for poverty in Scotland.

In 2018, the local authority made a bold move to attempt to reverse Paisley's fortunes by funding a culture-led regeneration programme of investment.

And at the centre of this bid, Paisley Museum, which by then was below the waterline of contemporary museum practice, a museum that was struggling to claim any relevance or currency with its devastated local communities. Despite this, it became a museum that found itself at the heart of a small flame of courage to rethink how Paisley saw itself and could be seen by others. To inspire, to connect, to build on Paisley's DNA as a radical and pioneering place, where people are productive, are curious, and look out for one another.

People have been at the heart of reimagining Paisley Museum (and indeed reimagining Paisley) over the last 8 years. The work has been characterised by critical community practice, a conscious generosity of spirit – deeply thoughtful and principled in every aspect, every conversation, every contract, to the point where decisions have flourished which decentred the museum and traditional hierarchical or curatorial control, and instead, people are weaving themselves into the fabric of the new.

The project has been designed based on extensive co-production, collaboration, and consultation with the local community – a wide range of people including groups representing protected characteristics, also class, lived experience of poverty and care experienced young people, to ensure we create a welcoming social space that is a useful resource for communities. By co-producing on this scale, the museum features a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, which is building capacity and connection across communities, providing fresh and dynamic insights.

Because we are not the experts on other people's cultures, values, beliefs and lived experience – whether these are our local people or international communities

connected to Paisley through items in the collection.

We know that other people's heritage is here in Paisley and we are trying to place this relationship on a different footing than in the past by steadfastly researching and connecting with the ancestors of peoples whose material culture was removed from its homeland, and to be led by them. Where some of Paisley's historical figures may once have been celebrated for their international journeys and role in the Empire, today we would cringe at their actions which showed a lack of respect and understanding for the cultural heritage of others. And so we are building the confidence to sit with discomfort to engage with the difficult story-telling as well.

Co-production is core to what we do, it's based on relationships and an organic process that enables partners to make meaningful decisions for them. We currently estimate there have been over 2500 participants in display development, that's over 4500 hours meaning that 50% of displays have included some form of participation or consultation process in their making, and 16 of our displays have been co-produced in some way.

We also know the challenging environment that our schools are operating in, the impact of the poverty related attainment gap, and poor mental health among young learners. Which is why we have undertaken a poverty proofing audit for the Museum as part of the project's design. For the Schools Programme we are working with every Primary school in the county in the creation and reviewing of new learning experiences and we've had several hundred primary and secondary pupils involved in the testing and development of activities, including Renfrewshire's two Additional Support Needs schools.

For our public programme we consulted with over 70 local organisations and groups which started with a long period of listening to what was important to them and how a new iteration of the museum might serve their needs – and with them we have been working to their priorities which include themes of health & wellbeing, tackling social isolation, supporting employability and skills, and building a sense of belonging.

This isn't just a way of delivering the project but of creating a new kind of responsive and partnership-based way of working for the future that the entire organisation of OneRen is committed to, evolving an integrated way of working with multi-disciplinary teams across libraries, sport, and leisure and the arts, dissolving boundaries between services and building collaborative approaches to programming and content as well as now informing policy development.

There have been no easy passes, definitely no short cuts. We had no track record, no ready champions, no real outside interest. It's been dogged persistence and focus on the vision to persuade people to the cause making it easier to withstand the knocks. The first years were some of the hardest but remain the most critical and valuable – talking, listening, building relationships with a critical mass of key people. Our community as our primary collaborators, then working with architects, consultants, partners and stakeholders to buy into the vision and help amplify it.

So from failing to fearless we are Doing It Anyway. Moving away from an outdated, biased, and, even if inadvertent, an offering that excluded, minimised histories and was silent on the oppressive power bases that had created the museum and its collections.

Paisley's is the story of the untold story (Renfrewshire Council, n.d.). Of innovation and inclusion. Of contemporary communities, not the class structures of old. Of building trust through new forms of decision-making and de-centring the museum. Of failing, rebuilding, redefining. Of inspiring and creating the new. Of making people think again about Paisley. Through a world-class museum with community at its heart and democracy as its pulse.

Victoria Hollows is Chief Executive of OneRen, the culture and leisure charity for Renfrewshire, Scotland. She leads Scotland's most ambitious cultural regeneration project at Paisley Museum, bringing more than 25 years of leadership experience to the role, including a distinguished background driving organisational change at institutions such as Glasgow Museums.

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Seeing The Invisible

David Anderson

Past and current initiatives over decades to address the deep and persistent inequalities of public representation and participation in museums have not resulted in substantial change. It is time to challenge the entire model of museums, not just their individual practice.

The definition of a museum as adopted in 2022 by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), reads:

"A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."

In essence, then, museums are institutions whose professional staff determine what culture is significant and how this eternal cargo, as it sails through time on its everlasting journey, may (if at all) be accessed and used by the public.

If asked to briefly describe the essence of a museum, particularly in Europe and North America, many museum staff would probably refer to collections of objects held securely within physical buildings that offer public access. This summary description is a practical reality, but not a universal truth. A critique is long overdue.

Every culture and community, in every part of the world, has different cultural contexts and norms. It is one of the purposes of this text to challenge the concept of a universal model for museums.

Museums, as envisaged by ICOM, operate in a context beyond time. In this model, as objects are acquired, they pass from the risky, unstable world inhabited by flawed humans into a safe museum building, where they are born anew and protected so far as possible from any further harm. The rules of museums, by strictly defining how collections should be conserved, stored, displayed and used, are designed to ensure their eternity. It is a type of utopia – but, crucially, a utopia for collections, not for people. Utopianism in other contexts can offer a useful social critique, but not as used here. The rationale for ICOM's object utopianism is never adequately

explained, and this in itself is significant and problematic.

Over recent decades many European museums, in their artificially constructed object utopias, have been forced to consider the restitution of collections that were originally acquired from other peoples, often through the exercise of unjust, unequal and violent power. Once more, utopia for collections, but not for people. Why is it so hard for these museums, when considering restitution, also to reflect critically upon the fundamental historical and contemporary failures of the 'professional' codes that have led them to this?

Instead, there is a determined, if fragmented and often intellectually incoherent, resistance from many museums to criticism of Euro-centric museum practice. Tristram Hunt, Director of the V&A, was scathing in his review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Hunt, 2025, 1) of Dan Hicks' book *Every monument will fall* (2025). Hunt writes:

"This book will reaffirm Hicks's critical role in contemporary debate around decolonization . . . Meanwhile, in the real world, the Victoria and Albert Museum has just opened the new V&A East Storehouse facility in Hackney Wick, east London, making one of the world's greatest collections of decorative and applied art available to everyone."

European museums may, if they choose, reject Tristram Hunt's and ICOM's restrictive, materialist and Euro-centric models of cultural practice – models that have been forced for generations upon other nations and minority cultures across the world.

Within the United Kingdom, this is reinforced by the elitist centre-periphery model of power, and a trickle-down

system of funding. English national museums are almost all located in a few boroughs in central London. They are disproportionately richly funded by the UK Government, and increasingly also by extremely wealthy international donors with mixed motives and complex reputations.

As dominant members of the National Museum Directors Council (NMDC), English national museums also have a disproportionate collective influence on UK Government arts ministers and the London arts media. By contrast, the many thousands of local museums in the UK, primarily represented by the consequentially less influential UK Museums Association (MA), often compete with local health, education, social care and other services for funding from an impoverished local government that is itself in permanent crisis.

What would museums look like, in the context of the four nations of these Islands (themselves each very diverse) if they were to reject the elitist professional practices embodied in the ICOM definition of the museum and promoted by London national museums, and sought instead to create a definition which empowers local citizens and communities to lead change where they live through democratic cultural action?

To achieve this at a local level, museums will need to abandon the restrictive separation of museums from other kinds of cultural action, and so far as possible integrate disciplines by combining arts, sciences, and social sciences at a local level. Our cultural institutions will be more effective if they foster community as well as individual participation and prioritise development of skills, research, teaching and learning by citizens for themselves, not just by and for culture professionals. Our local cultural organisations should where possible become an integrated part of community cultural learning

organisations that combine elements of the roles of performing arts centres, colleges, museums and libraries.

Local publicly funded cultural centres will also be far more effective if they are democratically governed, managed and operated by (not just for) local communities. Paid professionals are a vital resource for collective public learning and development of skills, but they should be accountable to democratic community leadership. Museums should publicly and explicitly repudiate the elitist object and staff-centred ICOM museum model that "researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage".

By committing to a more democratic philosophy, cultural organisations can use selected artefacts to achieve new and different community purposes, while still protecting many of these for the future. They can (as many UK museums did in the 19th and early 20th centuries) acquire and form some collections explicitly for creative use by the public, even if this makes them vulnerable to potential future degradation or loss.

The preservation of all collections in isolation, frozen in time, is not in itself a public good. Democratic civic renewal of communities is an essential purpose of museums too. The task of re-conceived local cultural organisations is to negotiate the tensions between these public purposes, not to avoid them.

Direct, community-led development of relevant research is also vital if the cultural sector is to move forward effectively. In her recent, ground-breaking book, *Why Historic Places Matter Emotionally: Responses – Attachments – Communities*, Rebecca Madgin (Madgin, 2025, 2) explores the emotional responses provoked by local historic urban places, the interplay of

environment and experiences in informing emotional attachments, and the reasons why emotional communities coalesce in these. Critical engagement with the relationship between culture and locality is essential if museums are to be effective in their work in communities.

So too is a deeper commitment to cultural democracy. A recent collaborative article in the academic journal *Cultural Trends* (Anderson et al, 2025, 3) Museums as the catalysts for a democratic revolution in cultural policy proposes five key principles for cultural institutions in embarking on transformation: first, social justice and civic change should be the central purpose of all cultural organisations; second, cultural rights and cultural democracy are foundational for development; third, humans and beyond humans are the primary creators of collective cultural knowledge; fourth, place and society, not protected buildings and collections, are our primary locations; and fifth, the role of specialist practitioners is to serve and enable society, not to lead.

This is not so revolutionary. Culture comes from people and always has. It was very often local groups who first sustained cultural activities in their communities, including the early local museums and the Miners Institutes, from the 19th Century onwards. It is the cultures of people and communities, not collections, that are a museum's most valuable contemporary resource. It is people today that define its purpose.

The museums sector urgently needs to undertake a democratic process of systemic change of philosophy and practice. But, are its main sector bodies in the UK – the Museums Association and the National Museums Directors Council (NMDC) – capable of leading this transformation?

Almost certainly, never. It is not in the interests of privileged London national museums to do so, and the MA does not challenge the status quo if this means crossing NMDC. Many individual local and regional museums in the UK have taken determined steps to decolonise and democratise their practice, and to challenge inequalities in every area of their work, but many – most visibly the richest national museums in London – have not.

There are fundamental, structural reasons for this. The Museums Association was founded in 1889, and for its first four decades was the only major professional organisation to represent the whole sector. However, in 1929, the National Museum Directors Council (NMDC) was formed. From 2012 NMDC expanded beyond its Core Membership to include major regional non-national museums. Since 2013, every MA President has been a member of NMDC. Only two of these – David Fleming and me – recognised the conflict of interest and resigned from NMDC. UK national museums once colonised the world. They now colonise UK museums as well.

As a result, English national museums have huge disproportionate power over the whole museums sector in the UK. They have always negotiated their funding directly with the English Government's Secretary of State for Culture, but they have recently significantly expanded their power, activities and share of public and private funding across the UK and are now the dominant voice in the sector, at the cost of the Museums Association, whose influence has significantly diminished in consequence.

National museums in a few square miles of central London also attract the vast majority of the global private money and sponsorship coming into the UK sector, which has become a shadow world of

reputation washing through funding vanity capital projects.

In November 2025, the British Museum staged its first Pink Ball, sponsored and hosted by the Indian Ambani family, which has major petro-chemical holdings, and personal wealth of over \$100 billion. However, it has now emerged that, in that same month Anant Ambani, the son of the company founder, went to the United States to sign a deal to build the first major new US oil refinery in 50 years with Donald Trump junior who – according to the respected US publications *ProPublica* and *The New Republic* – then secretly acquired a stake in the new venture. In effect, the British Museum's lost integrity has been bought for decades to come by the Ambani and Trump families. This is an unusually shameful but not isolated example. It disgraces us all.

Today, it is brave, relatively resource-poor but social research-rich museums, such as Paisley Museum in Scotland, not the London national museums that are leading transformation in the sector, by demonstrating through their practice what can be achieved by listening to and collaborating deeply with their communities.

If they are to have any future, it is essential for museums in the Four Nations to decolonize themselves professionally from ICOM, NMDC and the MA, and politically from the Westminster Government. Perhaps, then, we will see what will otherwise remain invisible – the foundational cultural and democratic importance of local people and places.

David Anderson was born in Belfast and studied Irish History in Edinburgh. A trained teacher, he worked at Brighton Museums, the National Maritime Museum and the V&A, then as Director General at Amgueddfa Cymru. A former President of the Museums Association, he has written two children's books, the Government report 'A Common Wealth: Museums in the Learning Age' and many articles. Now an Honorary Fellow at Cardiff University, he believes that cultural participation is a basic human right.

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In Spite of Desiring Publics

Carey Robinson

Museums and galleries have long been implicated in perpetuating systemic inequalities, as sites where cultural hierarchies are produced and maintained. Even as they claim to be striving for inclusion, the most progressive institutions can end up rewarding extraction, sustaining exclusion and reproducing historical identities. In spite of the rhetoric promising power shifts, access and 'decolonisation', the system keeps reflecting itself. A recently published Race Inclusion Gap Report (Green Park, 2025) shows that while 100% of leaders say their organisations show zero tolerance for racism, just half of minority staff (53%) believe that. Creative UK (2025) report states that only 9.6% of managers and directors are from ethnic minority backgrounds across the entire cultural sector. This imbalance limits the depth of change possible.

Much of the work we devise through learning and engagement seeks to challenge assumptions about the contexts we work in and disrupt surface-level approaches, such as only considering Black audiences during Black History Month. We are adept at designing evidence-led, bi-directional

programming that is relational and generative, nearly always delivered on shoestring budgets. Underfunded cultural institutions are under pressure to reshape themselves amid ideological scrutiny, financial insecurity and rapid social change; if institutional value comes from relationships, museums' civic role remains crucial in facilitating spaces where people and knowledges collide and interconnect.

Engaging with communities (rather than engaging communities with projects) is critical in opening new cultural possibilities and reimagining an organisation's public purpose. Yet learning and community engagement are still often seen as supportive functions rather than strategic ones. Such time-limited initiatives (and/or minoritised staff) are expected to drive change without the organisational capacity to make it permanent. This leaves core structures largely untouched when projects end or staff move on. And when institutions are unclear about what meaningful change entails, or fail to track it through more nuanced and participatory evaluation, the potential of the work remains under recognised and under leveraged.



Figure 1. IN-VISIBLE Festival at the ICA co-curated with GUAP, 2017. Image: Diana Agunbiade-Kolawole.

Briefly, here are three instances of such engagement with communities. In 2016, the Social Creative Network (SCN) was established as a cross-sector cultural education partnership between the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), a university and a housing provider. SCN operated online and on-site as part of a new Learning Strategy designed to increase engagement with young and diverse audiences. The strategy was evidence-led, experimental and hybrid, structured around three strands: peer-led, digital, and partnership. Putting youth experience at the centre of cultural discourse, rather than outside it, was critical. The programme generated open calls, co-curated festivals and residencies. It also offered employability skills and nationally recognised accreditation in

response to the stated needs of the intended audience.

By collaborating with youth-led collectives and creative activists, the programme created opportunities for the young participants and for the institution itself. The programme engaged more than 1,200 people, many of whom had never heard of the ICA. Partner organisations included fashion and media outlets and refugee and migrant charities. These collaborations reshaped how the institution understood itself at that time and clarified who its work was with and for. Young people and communities used institutional resources to shape public culture according to their priorities; relationships and reciprocity increased the institution's relevance.

In 2020, as organisations and funders refreshed EDI statements and drafted anti-racism policies galvanised by the Black Lives Matter movement, the South London Gallery (SLG) developed Convergence (SLG, 2020). Convergence was a digital platform for commissioning underrepresented writing (supported by literature development agency Spread the Word), hosting live streamed discussions exploring the cultural sector's response to BLM protests (e.g. 'Cultural Compensation Won't Sustain Anti-racism', 2020), and an online community film festival (2021), generating new forms of audience collaboration. It ran alongside Making Sense (SLG, 2021), a hybrid programme developed with Mountview Drama School, bringing young people, educators and artists together to explore inclusion and anti-racism in the curriculum online and in the classroom. These programmes were valuable to the organisation, which sits in a highly diverse borough and has established local relationships through its acclaimed education programmes. Funding for both projects was enabled by two factors: the Covid-19 lockdowns moving all programming online, and data highlighting race inequalities and educational disadvantage. While the data were not new, they provided justification for reallocating limited resources and unlocked new funding streams.

In 2025, the Fitzwilliam Museum implemented Future Legacies (Fitzwilliam Museum, 2025), a programme operating across digital and on-site platforms developed to coincide with exhibitions examining Cambridge's relationship to the colonial project. As a multidisciplinary, intergenerational platform exploring and disseminating Black Atlantic thought, the programme offered evergreen, bi-directional content. Turning commissions into hybrid experiences allowed contributors and audiences to

move between online and real-life formats and cultivate ongoing dialogue between audiences and the institution. Still digitally accessible today, the platform extends beyond the life of the exhibitions. Yet unless institutional attention is ongoing, conversations, opportunities and critical knowledge remain peripheral rather than evolving the museum's identity.

This reflects a wider pattern. Cultural organisations risk short-termism, instrumentalising communities to achieve targets (Inclusivity & Relevance is an investment principle for Arts Council England) or align with funding cycles. The new Indices of Multiple Deprivation (2025) show that, despite years of inclusion, access and participation agendas, those least likely to engage with public culture a decade ago are still least likely today. This highlights how deficit thinking and racial logics remain persistent and entwined in museum approaches, whether through assumptions that underrepresented audiences lack interest or knowledge, or when participation is framed as corrective rather than collaborative. When frameworks for understanding multidimensional cultural impact are absent, collective impact gets overlooked. What museums measure does not always matter, and what matters does not always get measured; projects are treated as episodic rather than part of a critical structural commitment.

For traditional museums, repurposing space, such as Manchester Museum's Top Floor (Manchester Museum, n.d.) can create new conditions where diverse knowledges interconnect, offering potential to dissolve boundaries between the museum and its publics. Meanwhile use spaces similarly reclaim dormant urban sites for collective cultural use; the Croydon Arts Store (CAS) (Meanwhile Foundation, n.d.), for example, was a cultural project launched in 2017/18 in the Whitgift

Centre, a large shopping centre that has been awaiting regeneration since 2013. Exploring how arts and culture could be integrated into future developments and occupying vacant units over four floors, CAS was led by a consortium comprised of Croydon Council's Placemaking Team, arts organisation Art Halo, Kingston School of Art, Croydon Partnership, and artist-run space Turf Projects. Such approaches treat cultural infrastructure as civic infrastructure, not outreach, although temporary by definition such work can falter under shifting priorities, limited investment, staff turnover, or competing hierarchies (Turf Projects is now an NPO and continues to facilitate many of the programmes CAS previously supported, as the Whitgift site's new masterplan takes shape) (*Architect's Journal*, 2025).

Despite museums adopting asset-based approaches, co-production or participatory research models to create bridges into institutions, recent analysis suggests these strategies still fail to address the sector's wider lack of vision (Reece, 2025). Decentring the institution is a highly contested demand requiring robust, clear-sighted and collaborative leadership, supported by governance models largely absent from existing organisational structures. By contrast, digital creators are leveraging peer-to-peer interaction, co-creation and community-based initiatives to build trusted, dynamic and accessible cultural spaces online. Census 2021 data shows that around 93% of UK households have access to a smartphone (ONS, 2022). In the attention economy, personal narratives and shared experiences often out-compete the cultural experiences museums currently offer, not due to a lack of engagement, but because communities are engaging with culture elsewhere.

While there are many innovative, exciting cultural projects across the UK, the risk of duplication and the tendency to continually start again becomes acute when the depth of potential change is never fully realised, or even fully comprehended, by institutions themselves. Cultural impact data is still not robust. Years of work to increase access and inclusion have not resulted in lasting systems change. The prevailing paradigm continues to assume that increasing diverse representation in the arts is about fitting more people into existing culture.

Irrespective of these challenges, cultural workers may still hold open the possibility of a different future, one more attuned to a twenty-first-century, global British audience. A knowledge-rich institution only starts to become future-ready when it opens itself to the cultural energies beyond its immediate field of vision. Yet without a shift in the cultural imaginary, alongside systemic and structural change and more useful data, it will remain difficult to reshape what and how we learn, make and value, so that we might cultivate new ways of living differently, together.

Carey Robinson works across cultural strategy, learning and equity in the cultural sector. She is currently Associate Director, Learning UK at Hauser & Wirth and has previously held roles at Tate, the ICA, the South London Gallery, and the Fitzwilliam Museum. She serves on the Advisory Board for Cambridge University Library's Black British Collections project and is a trustee of A New Direction.

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Reimagining Community Work Through Autonomy

Anahí Saravia Herrera

Feminist popular educator, activist, and thinker Claudia Korol (Korol, 2014, 87) describes the process of autonomy as

'[a means of] reinventing existing paths, rethinking our practices [...] challenging pre-existing ideas and knowledge in order to revolutionize them through the subversive gesture of remaking as a collective act. It is about taking theory down from the Olympus of 'those who know', understanding that all forms of knowledge are valuable, and that it is in this dialogue that thought grows most fertile and strengthens its subversive force.'

Reflecting on the role of art in community is not about a curatorial framework, since art and culture have long been woven into the rhythms of daily life. This is a principle that underscores the civic dimension of community work in museums or art spaces. Thinking with Claudia Korol's vision of autonomy, brings us a tool through which we can begin to re-think how we relate as cultural workers to the people we work with, moving away from a framework of curatorial expertise to one that is grounded in a re-distribution of power and solidarity.

What we now call "Artist" with a capital A, may have before existed as an artist-philosopher, an artist-botanist, artist-healer, artist-storyteller, artist-cook. The systems in place that make up what we call the 'cultural sector', are emblematic of a Western centric, neoliberal approach to making culture. This approach is hierarchical, paternalistic and entangled with capitalist ideas of value; it enacts a deeply entrenched belief that we need 'art spaces' to 'make culture', when in fact, creativity is abundant and exists in and among many places, networks and people that are invisible to the sector. In this context art institutions are not spaces that exist outside of political systems, but because of them.

This provides an important frame to my work, both as a cultural worker and as a community organiser, especially in my role as Civic Fellow at Cubitt Gallery in London, where over the past two years I have been thinking about what a meaningful intervention within this context looks like, and what is required from an approach that seeks to disrupt institutions and systems that often disempower, de-politicise, and de-mobilise communities through the vehicles of culture and art. This approach



Photo of poster created by member of Islington Pensioners Forum at Cubitt Community Press, December 2025.

is shaped by my experience living in the UK, where over the past five years I have been working within grassroots, autonomous feminist, and migrant justice groups, alongside my work in the arts. This shapes how I understand the possibilities in community work and also the limitations of the cultural sector.

Cubitt Community Press is a community of neighbours that run a newspaper in Islington, North London (United Kingdom).

It was a pilot space opened through my role in July 2024 as an offer to a porous group of people that attended 'think-in' meetings, spaces run as community assemblies where decisions were taken about what the ethos of the printer would be and what collective projects would come out of it. It was through research into the existing radical histories of the neighbourhood and the rich legacy of autonomous organising – which led to iconic publications such as *The Squatters' Handbook* – that the idea

of hosting a local printer was born, as a way to re-ignite an existing legacy led by squatters, socialists, and feminists that lived in Islington across the 1960s to the 90s (Advisory Service for Squatters, 1979). Over the twelve months of the project, more than fifty people have come into the space, many becoming stewards of the project with more active roles. Cubitt Community Press has engaged residents, members of pensioners forums, art groups, local teachers, parents, community centre workers, and people running front-line support for migrants, women and more. It was envisaged and created as a space where people could learn how to use a risograph machine and decide how to use these skills together for their community. My role was to facilitate meetings, manage administration, and work as a kind of risograph 'technician', as well as meet people in the neighbourhood who might want to use Cubitt as space to host their community work and to hear from them about what they want from a community-led gallery.

From this space, our newspaper was born as "a place to gather, share stories, record our neighbourhood and support local justice projects. [Cubitt Community Press] believes in making things happen in and for our community". Thinking alongside residents, both current and former, this fellowship position became about looking at Cubitt not just as a gallery but as a resource, to be opened to community use, to nourish skills in autonomy and collaboration. This process has felt like reverse engineering a gallery into a shapeshifting social centre, run by all of us, for all of us.

From its inception, this project looked to re-map relationships between the institution and its community. Most public cultural organisations in the UK are structured as charities, tasked with

addressing the symptoms of the 'unequal' society we live in, but this approach does little to re-orient these relations towards long-term equitability. Work that is interested in a politics of liberation must go beyond this to re-map our social relations towards true justice, one which challenges the systems that cause inequality to begin with. There is a question here about power, who holds it and how to re-distribute it in a way that makes the opposite possible. Here, the collapsing of the two worlds I inhabit – the art world and community organising – is what has provided me with a possible alternative approach that is able to straddle a seemingly contradictory space where we are trying to make space for liberation within a structure that is oppressive by design. This approach places the resourcing of autonomy at the centre, as a tool to meaningfully chip away at the institutionalised patterns of hierarchy, paternalism and control, that obstruct empowering work within communities in art institutions.

Resourcing communities means re-wiring how we relate to each other and unlearning what we think we know about the people we work with. It is really divesting power to communities as active agents, while refusing the notion that they are a 'risk' to be managed, in a context where funders and government bodies frame true empowerment and liberation as dangerous. In the UK, we can see many examples of this perception of risk: we need not look further than the proscription of Palestine Action in July 2025 and the persecution of the hundreds of peaceful protestors that have followed since. A democratic liberal process is only desirable until it truly questions power, and this is what cultural workers must be courageous enough to challenge in our practice with communities.

To do this, we must view ourselves as part of a local ecology, really desiring to be a part of it in a meaningful way. It is

a long-term commitment to listening to what is needed by the people we work with and handing over the keys of cultural production in response. The skills needed for this as practitioners are skills in listening and amplifying, an ability to de-centre ourselves, and a true desire to be accomplices and not managers. At Cubitt, the goal of the civic programme has been to empower through ownership and skill building, and we have tried to do this by sharing the means and skills in production alongside access to space. Ultimately, as curators or community workers, we are working towards making our roles obsolete and transforming where they sit in relation to those we work with. This process asks of us to re-orient from a model that prizes individual success, letting go of deeply ingrained practices born from an art sector that trades on neoliberal values and cultural capital. Weaving autonomy and solidarity into our practice creates cultural spaces that become vessels to re-invent these relations altogether, moving us towards embodying a more committed politics of liberation in our work.

Anahí Saravia Herrera works at the intersection of community organising, DIY publishing, and cultural work. She is thinking about how cultural practices can hold political questions and how we can build political alliances through cultural spaces. She is the current Civic Fellow at Cubitt Gallery, cares for curatorial-research platform performingborders and is incubating a community-led feminist press: slow + dirty, based at House of Annetta. Anahi is physically based in London, and thinks/feels from the diaspora, she was born in La Paz, Bolivia.

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Reciprocal Access in Defence of Sculpture

Georgina Kleege

There have been times when the art world debated the relative merits of sculpture versus painting, with sculpture often relegated to second place. Perhaps no one debates this anymore, still, as many sculptors complain, museum display protocols tend to put sculpture at a disadvantage. Sculptures are shoved up against the wall or elevated on platforms to limit visitors to a singular perspective without the opportunity for 360-degree circumambulation to observe, among other features, the play of light and shadow over surfaces. And there is no touching, no opportunity to take in tactile and haptic qualities. Even public sculpture displayed outdoors, is often isolated on plinths, or surrounded by some kind of fencing to limit tactile and haptic explorations.

Here's where I come in. Because I am blind, I have enjoyed the privilege of touching works of art in museums around the world that offer touch tours for visitors who are blind and visually impaired. These programmes have been around almost as long as museums have been museums. I take advantage of touch tours whenever they're offered, and also lobby museum

access departments to gain private access independent of the group events. When sighted people witness me or other blind people touching sculptures, they are often curious. I know scholars who research particular sculptors who have expressed envy that I can touch their works and they cannot. People intuit that touch will give them information and an aesthetic experience beyond what they gain from looking alone.

For about a decade I have assigned myself the title of touch docent, offering my services as a guide to describe my experiences of touching art for the benefit of people who do not enjoy the privilege. I perceive this work as a kind of reciprocity: the institution gives me this special access, and I return the favor by sharing what I gain from it. Through writing, public lectures, and workshops I have endeavored to synthesise my observations about touching sculpture to offer new critical frameworks of analysis and appreciation. Since my writing gives readers only second-hand experience, I have occasionally managed to organise some hands-on workshops, usually for staff in education departments. In these

instances, I comprised a set of techniques best suited to the particular works made available for touching. When people, even blind people, are allowed to touch art, they don't always know what to do and have to overcome the internalised strictures against touching. I make the point that touching must take into account such aspects as genre, media and scale. A figurative work in marble requires a different set of gestures than an abstract work in the same stone. The techniques I recommend draw attention to different aspects of texture, temperature, carving and finishing, as well as the symmetry and dynamism of the form. Interacting with large scale constructions and installations require movement in and around them, and attention to the proprioceptive experience to appreciate how the work occupies space, alters air flow, casts shadows, and so forth.

I would argue that sculpture requires tactile and haptic interaction for full appreciation and have advocated for more touch opportunities for sighted and blind alike. But I fear that my blindness gets in the way of my message. There is still a prevalent notion that blind people have some extra-special touch ability that sighted people lack. So even if sighted people were allowed to touch the art they wouldn't feel what I do. And then there's the idea that the point of touching art for a blind person is simply to form some sort of mental image as a substitute for not seeing it. Therefore, sighted people would have no need to touch the art because they can see it. My interventions are easily dismissed as winsome novelties without relevance to serious critical discourse.

So now I am shifting my advocacy to say that a touch docent need not be blind. In fact, there are many potential touch docents already on staff at most museums. These may include art educators who

conduct touch tours for blind patrons who have touched art as part of their training, and compiled the observations of people who have participated in their programmes. Conservators could also serve as touch docents sharing their knowledge of sculptural materials, maintenance and repair. Exhibit installers, invigilators, fabricators, riggers and others who move, assemble, mount and anchor sculptures in galleries have a lot of information to impart. Custodians and gallery attendants can identify the works that incite illicit touching to enhance understanding of what makes certain sculptures particularly attractive to the touch. What would happen if the observations of all these people were collated and incorporated into wall labels and catalogue essays? What would happen if curators and critics added tactile and haptic detail to their assessments of sculpture, drawn from collaborations with touch docents? How might these new aesthetic values alter the ways sculptures are displayed and appreciated?

My formation as a touch docent, and my recruitment of others with tactile and haptic expertise, shows what happens when an access accommodation bestowed on a member of a marginalised group, inspires reciprocation. Reciprocal access has the potential to challenge institutional hierarchies, amplify new voices, alter exhibit protocols, entice new audiences, and possibly even reorder artistic canons.

Sculpture does not need me to defend it or elevate its status in aesthetic hierarchies. I'm sure that there are many sculptors who are indifferent to the sensory apparatus museum-goers employ to appreciate their work. And I don't believe that access needs to be transactional; blind people have the right to take advantage of touch opportunities when they're offered and then keep the experience to themselves. But access that's offered with no

expectation that it might lead to change is likely to be inadequate and therefore expendable. So, I will maintain my role as touch docent and lobby for others with touch expertise to join me.

Georgina Kleege is a blind writer and Professor Emerita of English at the University of California, Berkeley, where she taught courses in creative writing and disability studies. Her work centres on the place of blindness and blind people in visual culture. Her books include *Sight Unseen* (1999), *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (2006) and *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (2018).

Challenging Hegemonic Knowledge Production

Domenico Sergi

As cultural institutions increasingly recognise the need to democratise knowledge production, London Museum's new Research Centre at Smithfield (opening 2026) signals a stated commitment to collaborative and inclusive research practice. The Centre aims to foster interdisciplinary inquiry that brings together diverse expertise, including lived experience from London's communities, to produce research relevant to contemporary urban realities.

Here I present a case study from the Centre's developmental phase: a 2024/25 project investigating how Londoners experience compassion on public transports (Maratos and Mobey, 2025). The project intended to test participatory methodologies that enable community members to retain agency throughout the research process, beginning with the formulation of research questions. By prioritising community leadership in the conception and delivery of the project, it illustrated how cultural institutions can disrupt hegemonic structures of knowledge production by advancing participatory and methodologically innovative practices.

Methodological Innovation and Care

Departing from traditional institutional research models, London Museum piloted two 'Ideas Generation Sessions' in February 2024, adapting the "sandpit" method commonly used in interdisciplinary research. These experimental workshops invited participants within our existing network of grassroots organising, care work, academia, and youth work around the deliberately open theme of "Compassion". This space enabled participants to shape research agendas organically, challenging the museum's role as sole knowledge gatekeeper, placing participants at the centre of the decision-making process.

These discussions informed the subsequent research project. This was led by Bethan Mobey who acted as the project's research associate, and worked with community researchers (selected through a public call out) Sistah Stella, Reuben Braithwaite, Dana Moreno Perez and Mirza Hazira Begun, and Professor Frances Maratos from the School of Psychology at the University of Derby. This team structure deliberately positioned community researchers as co-investigators, fundamentally reconfiguring the power dynamics inherent in institutional research.

Building on this shift, the project also centred an ethic of care in its operational aspects. It did this by acknowledging the emotional labour of community researchers, by providing debriefing and support after the sessions.

The community researchers led the project throughout its entire lifecycle: shaping the research questions, selecting methodological approaches, designing data-collection tools, and creating a survey that was shared on buses using 4,000 QR-coded business cards. Crucially, they also collaboratively analysed findings and developed recommendations, retaining decisional authority at each stage of the process.

The research findings ultimately challenge characterisations of urban life as marked solely by anonymity and fragmentation. Selecting and focusing on London's public transport system, as a site of constant flux provided a compelling lens for examining social connection and Londoners' everyday acts of compassion and solidarity.

Creative Interventions and Innovation in Teaching

As part of the project's methodology, spoken word artist and community researcher Benna Braithwaite was commissioned to create a reflective response to the emerging findings, which was later integrated into the final report. The museum's methodological commitment to integrating creative practice as a mode of knowledge production was further evidenced through a second art commission, developed via a brief co-created with community researchers at ad hoc workshop. The resultant work, *Careless*, a short experimental film by artist Bella Denise explores the paradoxical 'forced intimacies' inherent to London's transport infrastructure, that she sought to render

through a sensorial, atmospheric aesthetic. By employing cinematic language, Bella transposed the project's conceptual concerns (compassion and emotional ambivalence) into a medium that facilitates wider public interpretation.

By embedding artistic methodologies within the research architecture, the project expanded both the epistemological forms generated and their potential reach to diverse publics who may not typically engage with academic outputs. This approach exemplifies the Research Centre's commitment to interdisciplinary inquiry that traverses conventional boundaries of knowledge production and dissemination and speaks across multiple interpretative communities.

The project also generated a collaboration with the MA Art Education, Culture & Practice, MA Museums and Galleries in Education, and MA Cultural Heritage Studies programmes at UCL. Students on the Curation & Education module engaged with the provocations raised at the initial Ideas Generation Sessions, developing their own creative and critical responses to researching compassion in London. Their work culminated in *A Murmuration III: A Festival of Compassion* at Willesden Green Library & Gallery in Brent (March – April 2025), where findings were explored through five curated exhibitions, public programming, workshops, and screenings. This public-facing exhibition further demonstrated how art, visual, and material-based inquiry can translate research insights into forms that encourage reflection, dialogue, and emotional engagement beyond specialist audiences.

Reflections

In November 2024, the Centre also piloted an Ideas Generation Session on the theme of Sugar, convening lived experience experts, artists, academics, and community

partners. The insights generated during this workshop directly informed a new object-focused research project launched in April 2025, which uses the Museum's collection to investigate the links between sugar and racialised identities in the UK. Developed in partnership with the Department of Public Health at Queen Mary, University of London and the food-campaigning organisation Food Rise, the research attempts to further problematise collections through participatory research practice.

Taken together, these projects model how cultural institutions can move beyond tokenistic consultation toward more substantive forms of participatory research. Yet critical questions remain. The extent to which institutional constraints, funding imperatives, and wider conservative forces ultimately shape even well-intentioned participatory projects warrants ongoing scrutiny. Whether such aspirations translate into genuinely transformative practice or merely reproduce institutional frameworks under the rhetoric of participation, will depend on London Museum's sustained commitment to reflexivity and its willingness to redistribute resources and authority. This is true for all museums, galleries, and heritage sites engaged in participatory research projects: how can we all make sure our good intentions are never mere rhetoric, and always work towards a genuine institutional and societal transformation?

As the Centre continues to develop, these methodologies offer both opportunity and risk: the opportunity to reimagine museums as sites of collaborative knowledge production responsive to urgent social realities, but also the risk of co-opting community voices to legitimise institutional agendas. Navigating this tension will require continuous critical self-examination and accountability to the communities whose knowledge and labour make such work possible.

Dr Domenico Sergi is a senior anthropologist and museum scholar, currently Senior Research Lead at the London Museum, where he is developing the new London Museum's Research Centre. His previous roles include Senior Curator (Curating London), Lecturer in Museum Studies at UCL, and Curator at the Horniman Museum. He holds a PhD in Museum Anthropology from the University of East Anglia, researching museum engagement with refugee resettlement. His work centres on participatory and community-led practice, especially with diasporic communities. He is the author of *Museums, Refugees and Communities* (Routledge, 2021) and serves as a series editor and advisor to the Italian Ministry of Culture's Cultural Access Programme.

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Instituting and Organising 'From the Pockets': A Field Report from a Museum in the Making¹

Janna Graham, Hussein Hamza, Joyce Jacca, Tracey Jarrett/Sister Jahsunray

We write 'from the pockets':

- Geographical pockets: a housing estate in Deptford, South London, a food bank, a library, and community centre, what was a junk-filled corner cleaned to make room for ourselves and our communities;
- holding pockets: frayed and threadbare, pockets from which we draw from the modesty of our resources to fill the social gaps, from which we buy the food and drink that bring people together and help us to survive;
- pockets in time, in which we squeeze an extra hour to visit another friend in the hospital, take care of another child, hold another family member, launch another meeting;
- invisible pockets, full to the brim with stories, with organising and survival strategies, with to-do lists, notes of love, spare change, and passionate and deeply unrecognised labour.
- We also write from pockets of exhaustion, from a year of unacknowledged carrying, visiting, feeding, and healing.

After a week of reflecting and consciousness-raising with women's international groups, we finally write from pockets of joy, difference, passion, and love, the forces that motivated our ancestors to struggle and us to address the troubled and possible histories of where we are today.

Museum-Making and/as Organising

The Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020 brought into stark relief the need for very honest conversations about the distance between the rhetoric of change in museums and the actual work of making it. As curator Yesomi Umolu suggests (Umolu, 2020), 'If we have now arrived at acknowledging the genealogy of violence and injustice in our institutions, public spaces, and personal lives, then the hard work of the days and months to come is to unlearn the practices and behaviours that have emerged from this condition, and seek to build anew along antiracist and decolonized lines.'

Museums, she says, 'must practice empathy and close the gap between themselves and their communities; they must provide space for conversations on the issues that matter

to the lives of their audiences, neighbours, and employees.' Equally, she suggests, they 'must be sites of advocacy, not just for the artistic and art-historical traditions that they hold so dear, but for basic rights to life, safety, shelter, well-being, and economic and intellectual sustenance.'

While Omolu is arguably describing the work of existing museums that must 'commit to practices of knowing and care that critically interrogate the fraught history of museums and their contemporary form', she also talks about 'uprooting weak foundations and rebuilding upon new, healthy ones.'

Our modest museum-building project, the Deptford People's Heritage Museum, started just before these protests. It was not founded on the troubled history of a collection but rather is a collection based in both the troubled and inspiring histories of where we live in Deptford. Initiated by Joyce Jacca and Ken Thomas, the museum begins on the terrain of a conflicted present, in which a multi-national real estate deal has been struck to 'develop' the Deptford Docks without meaningful consultation with our community, and another development flagrantly adorns construction hoarding for new unaffordable housing with the name of 'Sir Francis Drake'. Our museum started here, as an act of contestation, resistance, and community organising.

But the story of our museum is in fact much longer. Where we are located in the Pepys Resource Centre, on the Pepys Estate, is a stone's throw from the Deptford Docks, from which notable ships and perpetrators travelled to abduct millions of people into the transatlantic slave trade, extract resources through the exploits of the East India Company, and at which people plotted struggles for freedom. We are one of a group of organisers including Voice

for Deptford, Deptford Neighbourhood Association, the Lenox project, and others working to ensure that this troubled history is not papered over by shiny new buildings, cafes, and shops inaccessible and unaccountable to local people.

Our story is also located in the long struggle for the reclamation of Black-led spaces, spaces and histories that, in our neighbourhood, are part of a legacy dispossession, chronic de-funding, non-recognition, a continuation, to our minds, of the more overt racist fire bombings of the 1970s and '80s and the violent movement of people and community wealth that enabled the unequal accumulation of property and resources underpinning contemporary Britain. As scholar and Black Lives Matter activist Lisa Robinson said in our recent community gathering, spaces led by communities of colour – and often held up by the practices of African and Caribbean women – are systematically shut down, taken over, and otherwise undermined by the local Councils who claim to serve them.² Occupying and governing our own spaces is an important act of resistance in the face of the dispossession of the past and the present.

Our museum is made by people who live in the surrounding area who trace histories and ancestral links to and from Deptford, tell the stories of local struggles for freedom, and plot these histories in relation to contemporary issues facing their community and others around the world. The building in which we are based – the Pepys Resource Centre – has been open to the community for many years. It was, in the 1960s, part of a thriving social housing estate with communal spaces, courtyards, and parks, backing onto the river Thames. In more recent years, as with the story of many community facilities on housing estates, ideological acts of de-funding

instituted by Thatcher's privatisation and the ongoing stigmatisation of the poor left it in partial use as a storage space and a community library open to the community only ten hours per week. In 2017, a group of women organisers from African, Caribbean, South American, and European backgrounds called We Women, including museum co-founder Joyce Jacca, wanting to reclaim a space for community, removed five vans worth of non-used materials, donating them to the local Deptford market. We Women spent days cleaning up the space and opening it up as a place for community organising and development.

We use the term 'community development' here to describe approaches of a long history of grassroots organising practices (which we will have more to say about in a moment) rooted in women's lives, in antiracism activism, in the anti-oppression pedagogy of Paulo Freire and in pan-Africanist decolonisation, not that of 'developing' community for the purposes of 'betterment' defined from above by the state, developers, medical or social service authorities.

One of the first meetings in the newly founded Pepys Resource Centre took place on International Women's Day. As a member of the We Women group described in one of our community gatherings, '[o]n the day we opened, we saw the ghosts having a party.'³ The ancestors of the struggles of the Docks, and the women who have laboured in the 'wake' of transatlantic enslavement, the ships, the migration of women, and colonial violence as we experience its haunts today were present.⁴ We Women knew already that we needed a place for the ghosts, to honour these ancestors and our conversations with them – the form we have taken for this, perhaps strangely, is a museum.

Three years later, at the onset of the pandemic, in those early days when it seemed our concerns and ways of doing things might shift the world for the better, many of us knew that there was a shortage of food for people in the community. Joyce was making meals and serving them in the Centre, paying for drinks and supplies – again, from her pockets. She asked the Council if there were any resources. They directed her to a community-led food bank, which was looking for space and immediately moved into the Pepys Centre. As people started to gather food on Saturdays, Joyce and Ken, another local community development worker, began to put out objects related to histories of women's work – including objects passed down from Joyce's family in Kenya, as well as remnants of the history of enslavement, including a package of Tate & Lyle sugar, placed to draw attention to the history of the nearby Dockyard – a history that few people who live locally are aware of, even though its legacies are fairly plain to see. Parents and their children started to ask, 'What are these objects?'

These Saturday sessions at the food bank began the conversations upon which the museum was built. We asked, how do we connect our own histories to the troubling past of the river that runs outside, to the ghosts of the ships and the docks that are a short walk away? How does the archaeology of these histories shape our response to the contemporary violence we continue to face as working-class African and Caribbean women?

After a short time, families using the food bank began to bring their own family objects in to engage in this conversation – tooth sticks – toothbrushes used in different parts of Africa, drums, fabrics, pieces of life now nested amongst tables and computer stations, women's meetings,

and exercise classes that compose the daily life of the Pepys Centre.

A local young person, Josh, began to work with Ken and Joyce to assemble *Chip on Your Shoulder*, an exhibition about the naval dockyard and its intersecting histories of exploitative labour practices (the term 'chip on your shoulder' being the name given to workers who literally took wood chips from the dockyard in lieu of payment), and the struggles for freedom plotted in relation to enslavement by communities of colour.

Our emerging process is based on what we describe as the 'village ethos', a way of gathering local people to set collections in motion, become the curators, the exhibitors, and storytellers, and a way of forming collections that function to contest the regular and systematic erasure of our lives. While these terms mimic those used by other museums, much like the 'village values' described by Toni Morrison in her analysis of the urban writing of African American authors of the city, the village ethos draws far more from the technologies we have developed as women of colour (using the most inclusive, self-nominating definition and one that both includes but acknowledges the differences in oppression between women from Africa, Caribbean, South Asia, and South America as we as those from trans and other backgrounds). It comes from our background as organisers and the technologies of communal life and struggle passed down in the stories and experiences of village life that we as diasporic women remember in and through our own community work. From this perspective, a collection is not only a series of objects, but a way to learn collectively and to support our local campaigns and struggles.

These are significantly different from mainstream museums' ideas of outreach or 'engagement' in which the centre, i.e., what is to be engaged with, is almost always defined by the class whose wealth was amassed on the backs of our communities – and even more so those of African and Caribbean women. They are also different from the idea of community organisation or development that does not attend to the way that our objects are interwoven into the practices that shape our everyday modes of survival, historically relegated to the private sphere or to no sphere at all. Making a museum from women's community organising alongside a food bank and self-generated programmes draws from other vocabularies of history-making and objecthood, a different kind instituting and curating, one that is at once set in the very present of the organisation of our lives, but deeply extends into the before of the afterlives of our work.

This definition of what exists in public or in private, what is acknowledged as labour and not, continues to impose blind spots that relegate our kind of work – both in the world of mainstream museology and in the worlds of community development – to 'the pockets', with devastating consequences for our communities.

Municipal Housekeeping

This question also underpins many of the problems of the museum's ability to move beyond speeches and placations and towards meaningful change discussed by Umolu. Most cultural institutions in Western liberal democracies define themselves around an idea of the public sphere steeped in the white, bourgeois privilege of Jurgen Habermas's articulation (Habermas, 1989/1962). Museums and galleries are seen as open to the public, as staging contemporary culture for the public, as taking care of objects in perpetuity

for the public to come, as platforming opportunity for conversation and debate – even about their own troubling acquisition histories, their links to stolen objects, etc. – to inform the public so that it may formulate opinions based on historical foundations. The museum is the point of entry for 'general' publics (usually white and middle-class), or a point of 'access' for specified publics including disenfranchised communities who are seen to benefit from this access. The publicness of this public relies on its visibility, its desire, and/or ability to engage, watch, consume, to be counted in attendance, to congregate and aggregate around presentations of culture often understood to be both neutral and universal. As Nancy Fraser pointed out (Fraser, 1990) in her now historical feminist critique of Jurgen Habermas's characterisation of the public sphere, the idea that certain sites, like the museum or the gallery today, are designated for public culture, for the visible work of making publics and public opinion, does not account for the myriad histories of subaltern organising by women and others who had no visibility, recognition, nor interest in such spaces. In the case of the museum, this is not necessarily because they/we have been banned, nor because they/we have not had access, and not only because our life conditions do not afford the time or the interest in being in them, but because they are organised around the very relations of power that make visible the culture of the most privileged, without any recognition of the ways in which this privilege shapes the everyday lives of subaltern communities. Heston A Baker Jr reminds us (Baker Jr, 1995) in his argument for the Black public sphere, that the very notion of public that underpins the bourgeois public sphere relies on a propertied definition of 'man' that was built on theft from global majority Black communities and communities of colour who are by definition excluded from it.

As Baker further points out, places and processes of publicity built upon the violent expropriation of life and culture cannot provide the neutral frame for negotiation, discussion, or contact without attending to what they have actively participated in and profited from destroying.

Both Fraser and Baker argue for a re-working of the public/private distinction in the conceptualisation of public life, public participation, and the public sphere, to account for the kitchens, basements, quilts, songs, churches, porches, and fields in which the struggles that define the culture of the global majority have taken place. Their call is not for a collapse of the public/private as we have come to know in neoliberal demands of work – that is, work that takes over all aspects of life (this we know well!), but a recognition that much of the labour of constituting the public sphere has and must, reside in reproductive work.

In museums and galleries, while one can see many objects and experiences of the so-called private sphere on display, there has been little to no recognition of the struggles of this sphere nor those of social reproduction more generally in the way that museum infrastructures are organised. This lack of recognition goes beyond histories of cultural theft and expropriation and underscores the museum's relation to contemporary communities. Conditions that shape the lives of communities including museum workers, visitors, and neighbours have been routinely ignored in museums and galleries, as have their own labour practices, making them active contributors to the material dispossession of women (who perform the majority of cultural labour on low pay) and communities of colour (often working in the out-sourced and precarious roles like cleaning and catering). Equally, as perpetrators of universalising definitions of culture they

have systematically expropriated resources from communities to fund their ever-expanding global gaze. We see this, for example, in the ways in which arts council funding in England in the last thirty years has concentrated itself within larger institutions with an increasingly marginal remit for 'engagement' while depleting funding for community based cultural projects – perhaps less discernible as such for their integration into practices of everyday life and survival – that serve differentiated cultural needs, including the need to contest the exclusionary policies of the State. This disregard for what has been relegated to the private in favour of a public canvas for directorial, artistic, and patriarchal genius has also produced materially detrimental effects on neighbourhoods by supplying ideas and aesthetic justification ('good culture') for the destructive processes of speculative capital that regularly result in community displacement and in the privileging of the culture of multinational investment over accountable, collective, and common approaches to community support.

In contemporary society, we can additionally argue – as do Paulo Virno (Virno, 2021) and Isabell Lorey (Lorey, 2015) – that while the performance of certain notions of the public continue in the present, the lived distinctions between private and public has in many ways collapsed. This collapse is not, as Fraser and Baker had hoped, a moment in which public culture has widened to encompass localized subaltern sites of production and resistance but rather made so many aspects of life fodder for an ever-churning communicative capital that turns all aspects of private life into work and all corporeal needs into the terrain of speculative finance, the result of which we experience in generalised social affects of panic and precarity. Here, the earlier exclusions of the public sphere are exacerbated rather

than ameliorated, and the ways and speed through which museums convert vital questions of life into packaged and short-term themes and statements, has accelerated complicity with the forces of capital that routinely unground struggles from everyday conditions and stakes. This was made painfully clear in the endless directorial statements made – and called out for their hypocrisy, short-termism, and disconnection from institutional conditions – in the events following the death of George Floyd.

As Yaiza María Hernández Velázquez (Hernández Velázquez, 2019) points out in her reading of the debates provoked by southern museologists in the Santiago Declaration at the International Council of Museums in the 1970s, this does not have to be the history of the museum nor its conception of the public. She proposes the genealogy of the Community Museum – far more prevalent in the Global South and rooted not in notions of the bourgeois public sphere so much as in frameworks of cultural accountability based in local commons – as an alternative to a notion of the public conceived by anointed 'leaders' (funded by contemporary financiers) with the power to produce and reproduce dominant and universal aesthetic judgement. Rather than feigning political neutrality, Community Museums, she argues, constitute a radical proposition towards locally embedded praxes that do not separate questions of the aesthetic, of collection or exhibition from questions of the production and reproduction of life but rather constitute a radical museology in the relation between the two.

Our museum situates itself within this genealogy but also within histories of community organising and development, which, though broadly speaking exist to support disenfranchised communities, mirror museological dynamics in their

conception of what constitute public and private spheres, problems that underpin logics and approaches that currently justify the continuous pattern of under-resourcing and rendering invisible the efforts of women of colour. In a survey of US community organisers in the 1990s, researchers Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker suggested (Stall and Stoecker, 1998) that dominant and masculinised notions of the public sphere underpin many of the most celebrated practices of community organising – those professed by Saul Alinsky and other grassroots and labour organisers who, in their important struggles at the neighbourhood level, nonetheless can replicate the paradigms of oppression experienced by the communities they are fighting for.⁵ Like the public sphere of the museum, these practices valorise speech, visibility, and the performance of appointed 'organic leaders' in the realm of public debate, a field constituted by competition between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. In their review of the much less visible practices of women of colour and low-income organisers (predominantly by LatinX, African American, and Indigenous women), who do not ascribe to models per se, Stall and Stoecker suggest that organising techniques adopt practices of what they call an 'expanded private sphere', moving beyond or in place of the genealogical or contractual relations of motherhood to create communities of care composed by non-biological 'other mothers', 'who collectivise, share and mutually valorise responsibilities of social reproduction, in turn making their networks and forms of resistance more sustainable.' While there is a risk of gender-based and racialised essentialisation in their analysis, Stall and Stoecker are clear that the practices used are not attributed to the gendering of those who perform them per se but to a difference between those praxes of organising that take social reproduction (the labours and practices

that produce and reproduce life) as their base from those more focused on the visible performances of leadership and negotiation within existing power relations. Where community organisers based in notions of the (bourgeois) public sphere often worked away from and at the cost of relations of care and domestic duties in their lives, seeing the neighbourhood as the space in which power might be gained through competitive negotiations amongst each other and with those shaping local power relations, organisers basing their work on social reproduction stage community resistance through acts of 'municipal housekeeping', serving to reclaim aspects of life from vectors of control – whether these be at the level of the police, corporations, developers or local councils or debt-makers – through direct engagement with the community's needs for survival. For example, Chicana women in the neighbourhood of Pico Aliso in Los Angeles described (Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, 2016) their own practices of 'municipal housekeeping' in delivering food to local drug dealers who, in turn, demonstrated respect for the community, as an alternative to narratives of 'necessary policing' that Councils, real estate developers, and neighbourhood beautification groups perpetuate in the gentrification processes. This is not to say that 'municipal housekeepers' do not produce analysis or antagonism, as in Stall and Stoecker's assessment, like the Breakfast Clubs of the Black Panther movement, the threat they pose is, in the long term, arguably more antagonistic and disruptive to the social order.

Stall and Stoecker point out that, while Alinsky and other 'public sphere' focused models of community organising work to cultivate leaders (much like in museums and galleries) as spokespeople in the movement towards achievable goals or

'wins', this tendency often results in such leaders' co-optation into compromised political positions. Organising practices based in social production emerging from women of colour organising practices are oriented around 'centre women' or 'bridge leaders', who use 'existing networks to develop social groups that generate community consciousness' and to create an ongoing context for engaging with social movements and issues as they arise. In our current struggles against speculative developers, neoliberal and unaccountable Councils, extractive cultural practices, and predatory policing, we do not necessarily have the luxury of choosing one of these organising models over the other. It is, however, important, to mark their differences, particularly as we in this neighbourhood who have organised through the techniques of municipal housekeeping are routinely drawn upon for ideas and expertise while at the same time rendered invisible, overlooked, de-funded, and pushed out. In Deptford, it is often the case that efforts we make to engage in representative dialogue or input are almost always co-opted, our creativity and ideas feeding into Council bids like that of the London Borough of Culture, with little accountability or material resources ever significantly manifesting themselves in our realities.

What is it to make a museum out of acts of municipal housekeeping, out of the webs of resistance we bridge as women organisers rooted in very basics means of survival – food, movement, health, social support, communal struggle, and the ongoing conversation care for and encounter with ghosts? The making of a museum by us is part of the fight for recognition of these practices in the face of a multinational development, a Council who does hear us and community development paradigms that are more attuned to the presentational bureaucracies of local funding and

hierarchy than they are to accountable relations to our community as a common struggle. The building of the museum is about galvanising community power, to advocate and re-constitute our lives based in a more equal distribution. The museum then is also a demand for the resources and reparations to which we are entitled as 'bridges' in and between our communities.

We Carry A Lot

It is important to suggest that – while organising from the pockets poses important questions to the current organisation of culture – it is not a utopian enterprise. It does not afford us the means for adequate recognition or survival. Nonetheless, in the practices and technologies of care we make there lies a blueprint for a more loving, passionate, and sustainable life, albeit one that is barely survivable at present. Our bodies and energies bridge so many gaps. We, as community museum organisers, put everything on the line in the effort to support people. We carry a lot. We are driven by the passion and love we have with our community. No one is recognising this. We spend our own money, of which we have little, we escort our people to the doctor, we risk our lives taking them to the hospital, we make and buy drinks and food to make the groups active, we take care of children on the street, not only our own. We carry a lot. As we do this, as we regularly ask for help and support with no result. We watch as those with degrees who have not done this work of community organising and have little relation to the community get the grants, are celebrated, and made increasingly visible. All the while, we are the ones keeping people alive and putting ourselves and needs aside. We make the heart. We carry a lot.

This is why our conversation with the legacy of the Dockyard – the ghosts! – is so important to our understanding

of the present. As Gargi Bhattacharyya suggests in her writings on racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018, x), '[t]here are new and unpredictable modes of dispossession to be understood alongside the centuries old carnage that moistens the earth beneath our feet.'

In her opening to the book, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, Bhattacharyya described racial capitalism as follows:

'Imagine a house with many storeys – an attic and a cellar, several annexes, that have no direct connections, main rooms filled with comfort and a maze of un-mappable corridors leading to all sorts of barely remembered wings, snugs and the occasional route outside to an isolated out-house. But mostly their movements are shaped by the place in which they find themselves and who they see and who they can be, delimited by the strange geography of the house.'

We live in this house, the one of our local geography, in which we find ourselves regularly limited for options, where we have to fight for every aspect of survival and where our work is not recognised. One aspect of racial capitalism is the processes that grants 'differential treatment to workers and almost workers and non-workers and the social relations that flow from these differentiations.' (Bhattacharyya, 2018, ix.)

As Bhattacharyya says, 'to understand racial capitalism' we must re-visit our understanding of the value of work and the conception of some activity as non-work. The idea of social reproduction, of municipal housekeeping allows us to understand the 'radicalised differentiation of populations as enabling forms of supplementarity beyond households.' (Bhattacharyya, 2018, 17)

To assert a museum that is based amongst our acts of municipal housekeeping is then a demand for the recognition of our labour, a desire for this to be placed at the more visible centre of what is valued in our culture, to have our efforts recognised within the mechanisms of value in our society. To do this would be to undermine or at the very least highlight the logics of racial capitalism that Bhattacharyya describes, a resourced and recognised version of what we do from our pockets.

Afterlives

Our museum exists in the afterlives of the people and struggles that have come before us and, we hope, it pre-figures those of the people who are to come. This past International Women's Week, a year after we began to make our village museum in the middle of the city, we have listened to women from Deptford and around the world who have brought and discussed the objects around which they have survived and supported others through the pandemic. Our ears are full of their acts and our own as we find our way to articulate these stories – our modes of survival and organising – in ways that include display, education, collective decision-making, and other meaningful social actions. In the local assemblies and gatherings that are to come, our question will be this question: how can the technologies, processes, and stories of our survival prove to contest the logics that are re-shaping our neighbourhood, literally just outside the door, logics that render us invisible, unviable, and unreasonable? How do we start a museum from this place, where we are, from pockets that are resistant, threadbare, and without end?⁶

Postscript, November 2025

The article was written in the immediate aftermath of the protests surrounding the murder of George Floyd, a moment in which mainstream arts institutions made pledges to re-visit their complicities historical and contemporary racism and fervently followed curricula on racism and the museum. The immediate commitments of this moment have in many cases disappeared, many cultural institutions reverting back to 'regular' programming in the name of cost-saving measures and post-COVID rationalisation, their interests in Black and anti-racism struggle registered only the archival collection of themed projects and short-lived 'turns' towards racial justice, their organisation of staff and wages still reflecting colonial divisions of labour. Others have carried on the slow, invisible, and ever unfinished work of addressing the many ways in which legacies of colonial administration live on in collections, pedagogical orientations and, importantly, in the institutional systems and routines that enshrine colonial desire and violence in daily practice. While often supporting these latter organisations through commissioned community-based, reparative research, our museum in Deptford has continued on a different plane, working from the struggles of contemporary communities in the neighbourhood who study how dynamics of racial capitalism – surveillance, the plantation, social division – play out in everyday life. This work is what Françoise Vergès has come to call the work of the 'post-museum' (Vergès, 2025), the speculative labour towards what it might mean to imagine the museum from other grounds.

Since we wrote 'from the pockets' we have continued to work in this way, gaining small sums of support from the margins of university, museum, and municipal funding. Our ongoing project, the *Monument is the Struggle* convenes (now seven)

groups to study and engage with how the 'history of present' (Rodney) was shaped in Deptford by the colonial Dockyard, which, from the 16th–19th centuries, saw the birth and sedimentation of epistemic, social and environmental colonialism, imagined complex and intricate systems of dispossession and profit, and that sent the first ships to 'adventure' in India and Africa. As we research more about our present through this history – we learn how key figures in the collection of botanical, engineering, and cultural curiosity were also those involved in the planning and managerial systems of punishment, profit and social death that organised the plantation system for which the Dockyard played a central role. We feel through lines to today in the punitive, pedagogical and juridical frameworks of finance and controls that underpin regular dynamics of dispossession experienced by Black and other marginalised communities in the neighbourhood. But we also learn of the Dockyard as a site of rebellion, resistance, of the 'common winds' described by Julius S. Scott (Scott, 2018), the threat of looming mutinies and mounting pressure. We see how the various striations of class, race, and gender were born of the need to contain something dangerous to their survival.

Today our museum is constituted by 7 working and study groups each plotting routes in the neighbourhood across time and space. In walking these routes we de-sediment histories of racial capitalism based in Deptford's colonial dockyards its role in plantation surveillance and administrative violence to understand the shape of our current issues – health injustice, dispossession of Black-led space, administrative control, young people's experience of surveillance, the fragility of queer and women's infrastructures of care. We plot our own common winds by blocking Council meetings, infiltrating the Dockyard's development plans, honouring

elders, training up young people, naming the problems on our terms, understanding our own organising practices, and tracing international routes to those also fighting from below. We do this in ways that are slow, and endlessly delayed by funerals, court cases, reunions, emergencies, job loss, the conditions that continue shape a museum built from the pockets.

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Endnotes

1 This article was written through a series of conversation amongst us in February and March 2021 of our early attempts at making a museum, prior to and during the COVID pandemic, and a reflective session on this process held during the International Women's Strike in 2021. The idea of 'pockets' emerged from these conversations and our experiences as community-based curators and organisers. An earlier version of this text appeared in *On Curating* (2021), and is reproduced with their kind permission.

2 This is the subject of Lisa's PhD dissertation at Nottingham University and something she contributed to our public conversation 'What could a people's museum be?' in February 2021.

3 This was comment relayed during a Zoom conversation, 'What could a People's Museum Be?' Community Gathering, February 2021.

4 *In the Wake* is the title of Christina Sharpe's 2016 book in which she describes the work of trailing behind the ships, keeping watch with the dead, and how black lives are swept up by the afterlives of slavery.

5 Thank you to Valeria Graziano for this important reference.

6 Women in Transition took place during International Women's Week in 2021. Events were facilitated by us and the second-year students of the BA Curating programme, Shiori Adachi, Kate Gillies, and Eve-Dawn Speight, using an object-based list-making methodology developed by Dr Jorella Andrews, with whom we are grateful to have worked. <https://deptfordpeoplesheritagemuseum.cargo.site/Women-in-Transition>

In Service of People: A Lookback at Public Engagement & Learning Work at the Walker Art Center

Amanda Hunt

A young colleague recently asked me: *How does your work in public engagement change from place to place based on the institution?* It was an astute question that functioned outside of the expected basic-interview-question-set.

I answered then in the way I will now: I have always tried to be responsive to place, and the people within it, and to listen first. My work in education and programming is intrinsically linked to public art. It all started to converge in earnest at the Studio Museum in Harlem after developing a series of four commissioned public art works in four historic Harlem parks, and this commitment has continued to flourish across different cities and roles, from New York to Los Angeles, and now in Minneapolis¹. Coming to this place in 2022 was to enter a space recovering/emerging from a deep, culminating traumatic event: the murder of George Floyd. It had and has reframed most every conversation in cultural spaces and beyond since its occurrence in 2020, a lonely time when we were all essentially living in fear of one another. Minneapolis is a unique place in a unique time, and it continues to be.

My new function as the Head of Public Engagement, Learning and Impact at the Walker Art Center offered clear goals. To rebuild: a staff, audiences, trust, visibility, access. My mandate from the start was that we all "be a good host" as an institution. I heard a lot of warnings about "Minnesota nice" (a very coded, old-fashioned mode of social conduct) early on, and the State's roots in Scandinavian modesty and heritage. As a newcomer here, I was eager to set down my own roots and create a meaningful life and work in community. It wasn't until a conversation with a local Dakota language holder in my first few months that my whole perspective sharpened. She asked me how I was doing because she "wanted to ensure my survival". This blew me away, and it does every time I retell it. It was not the usual idle dinner chatter. She then told me a story that made me think about how the choice of being a good neighbour likely meant your survival (or not) a long time ago, in a place that, yes, is known to experience extreme weather.

It does not matter from what cultural context you come – everyone knows a good host from a bad host.



There is an ease, a generosity and a joy with a good host. There is also often good food. There is an immediate sense of genuine welcome and anticipation of your arrival in their space. So I was lucky to start at a time when the curatorial team had created our Community Openings, which celebrates the artist and their communities and is open to all (not by invitation-only), which my public engagement team now joyously pairs with a legendary local chef offering as a kind of edible programme-within-a-programme.

The origins of the Walker Art Center are also unique. It was started out of a lumber magnate's home in 1897, and in 1940 solidified its reorganisation into a formal arts centre during the Works Progress Administration era, of which it remains one of the preeminent examples. It was a space for learning from the very beginning. I didn't fully realise that until I became more familiarised with its history as my tenure went on.

Sometimes you are called to a place for reasons not completely understood until you get there.

When I arrived here, teachers were exhausted, burnt out, broken. I had gathered a community of teachers in relationship to the Walker, with food and drink, and asked them to imagine a new set of "teaching tools" funded by an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant that would help them aid their students in learning about art through different, embodied pathways when they came for a K-12 [students roughly ages 5 to 18] museum tour.² The budget was generous, the possibilities endless. That gathering was both a reality check and a total gut punch. How foolish I had been. The people working so hard to keep our students engaged as they also struggled through their own personal COVID realities were completely out of gas.

In the end, we successfully collaborated with designer Cas Holman³ to achieve tools that were playful for every person they engage, but the space to do that had to be created, honoured, and facilitated generously. We have to remember that, and to teach it. My beloved former mentor and teacher Leigh Markopoulos taught us as young curators to work with all of our humanity, always leading by example.*

Now that group of teachers has evolved into a more formal group of advisors to help us keep the pulse on what is happening on the ground and in our schools, as the playbook for all of us hoping to support learning, diversity, and accessibility gets torn up. The Walker now also partners with a private bus company to support getting students to the museum for free (thanks to increased foundation funding to our programs) because we understood through listening that our school communities were experiencing the fall-out of bus driver shortages in the employment crisis post COVID. Who would we have been to expect that the priority not be to get your child to school reliably, but to the museum?

We also experimented by offering what we now call in-school residencies to provide a gap in critical thinking development at the intersection of art and art-making. Our educators come to your Twin Cities school and spend time making in connection to works the classroom can find in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden year round.⁴ We found this offering and new model was so successful that oftentimes, schools were setting up our educators in a gym or their library and cycling not just the classroom, but the entire school population through in one day. The "need" we were serving and where we needed to increase our energies was immediately and abundantly clear. Our focus over the next five years is to expand on the goals made evident when I first

arrived, but now to make those learning resources – including arts educators, our family guides and learning resources in the four most commonly spoken languages in the Twin Cities region⁵ – more available, more expansive, more visible and more accessible.

Despite what is shaping up around us in America, the Public Engagement, Learning & Impact (PELI) team has only come to define its work more clearly: the arts bring people together, and at the Walker Art Center, PELI harnesses the arts to help each of us find our place, expand our thinking, strengthen our relationships, and build the community we imagine. Together, we are creating a Twin Cities community cultivating its thought leaders, artists, visionaries, and culture builders, one connection at a time.

The PELI team is focused on making the Walker a gathering place where everyone feels they belong. This has also meant a shift in the diversity of our staff and evolving our interpretive approach in order to prioritise relevant, concise language that speaks directly to the object people are engaging with, without preamble. We want to support people developing skills and confidence in connecting with others, engaging through differences, and dreaming and imagining alongside strangers.

We want people to feel energised to learn and practice being more creative to find solutions and joy together when they visit the Walker Art Center for a programme. A prime example of this is Art Club, which touches on a particularly American zeitgeist of low-pressure, high value art making, that we also happen to offer for free as part of our Thursday night programmatic offerings.⁶ As everyone reading this journal knows, these things have not always been the priority in the

spaces within which we operate. We've been watching old narratives collapse and be rebuilt purposefully.

On a daily basis, through various free programmes, we operate to make individuals feel welcome in contemporary art spaces and to provide equitable access to art, culture, and learning to all Twin Cities residents and visitors. My team takes a hyperlocal approach because we know that free access and programmes are always desirable, and we also recognise that almost half of our group visitors are local (46%). We want to make people feel seen, reflected, valued, and celebrated in places like the Walker Art Center, engendering pride in the arts and culture available to them. Individuals and communities see, experience, and believe that the Walker is *their* art center because of the opportunities, relationships, and welcoming approach we nurture. We are deepening this work alongside our colleagues across departments at the Walker in ways that feel rewarding as both audience members and creators.⁷

I believe that every institution has a civic duty to its community – wherever I have worked, or wherever I will continue to work. That is a fundamental part of my job, and why I continue to work in institutional spaces. I am writing this piece from our central library in downtown Minneapolis that the Walker Art Center's founder also founded, a space that is primarily used as a social service space, as many of our libraries now are. In the spring of 2023, to connect with that civic spirit and service, we collaborated with Minneapolis-born artist Cameron Downey at North Regional Library in partnership with the Hennepin County Library system. In short, it was a beautiful combination of partnership, artwork and public transport, as well as photo shoots, costumes, music, and a community celebration.

It validated everyone's need for joy. It validated my focus on public art as a vessel through which anyone can experience art or that joy.

For me, it always comes back to people. We can't forget that, or each other. And so, in service of this, we are building the world we want to inhabit within and outside of this institution.

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Endnotes

1 *inHarlem*, www.studiomuseum.org/magazine/harlem-art-walk-tour

2 A pop-up message on the IMLS website reads as of October 13, 2025: "The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is closed due to a partial shutdown of the United States Government. As a result, IMLS is not engaged in grant-making or other agency activities. During this time, we will not be able to review or respond to any form of communication. No payments for discretionary grant programs will be made by IMLS until the agency is reopened. Any additional information will be posted on our agency website." www.imls.gov

3 Cas Holman's play structure Critter Party is now on view as part of a collaborative Walker exhibition titled *Show & Tell*, centred on kids and their caregivers, www.minnpost.com/artscape/2025/11/art-is-playful-and-play-is-art-at-kid-friendly-walker-exhibition

4 The Minneapolis Sculpture Garden is a partnership between the Walker and the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, a national award-winning park system. <https://walkerart.org/visit/garden>

5 Hmong, Somali, Spanish and English.

6 www.nytimes.com/2025/08/18/realestate/art-workshops-companies-new-york.html

7 Walker Art Center invites visitors to reimagine its galleries, Helen Stoilas, *The Art Newspaper*, 20 June 2024, www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/06/20/walker-art-center-invites-visitors-to-reimagine-its-galleries

Book review

The Routledge Handbook of Museum and Heritage Education 2025

Edited By Maggie McColl, Pete Brown, Michelle Delaney, Karl Borromäus Murr, Henrik Zipsane, Hardback £184.00 eBook

John Reeve

This *Handbook* is a wrist-wrecking 644 pages, edited by Maggie McColl, Pete Brown, Michelle Delaney, Karl Borromäus Murr and Henrik Zipsane, who are respectively British, American, German, and Swedish. (Pete Brown will be known to GEM members for the Foundation Course he directed.) Its scope is astonishing and every continent is represented, unusually, and 25 countries. I can here draw your attention to only some of its riches.

The claim is that the *Handbook*:

is a unique new international practical reference, combining rich theory with innovative practice in order to address a global need for academic reflection and discussion. It discusses how museums, galleries and heritage sites can continue to offer opportunities for the deep academic, emotional, social and physical engagement that is needed to inform and empower museum visitors and users in a time of political and economic uncertainty and social transience.

That is certainly borne out on closer inspection. The editors are realistic about the continuing challenges for all of us in

the field despite enormous progress and at least four museum and gallery learning specialists becoming directors of museums or galleries in the UK. We still “face an intimidating array of challenges, from precarious working terms and conditions, through ingrained prejudice and insularity, to political interference.” (p3).

Many of these issues are discussed by Wencke Maderbacher in Chapter 7, ‘Empowering museum educators – Achieving equity, inclusion, and professional recognition’. Maderbacher begins bluntly telling it how it is for so many in the profession:

Low self-esteem among museum educators arises from a complex interplay of factors, including the demanding nature of the work, lack of job security, and the often unstable funding structures within museums. These conditions can lead to feelings of unworthiness, inadequacy, and a sense of being undervalued. (p.99)

She points out how everywhere the vast majority of museum educators (and museum studies students in my experience)

are female and discusses the implications of that.

Beginning with contexts, Milene Chiovatto defends museum education as a profession, providing helpful backgrounds political, educational and museological, across several continents. Mette Boritz then details the rise of museum education especially in Scandinavia, ‘From Enlightenment to Empowerment’. Theory and philosophy are discussed in Chapter 3, including ‘Museums as catalysts for the cultivation of philosophical culture’. Here Henrik Zipsane, Director of the European Museum Academy, asks: “who pays the piper and who calls the tune?” He looks at the strings attached to funding, ethical issues and the needs and constraints in measuring the value of museum education, drawing on David Anderson’s landmark report, *A Common Wealth* among other UK sources.

Two museum educators from the Smithsonian discuss museums as pillars of the establishment or agents of change in Chapter 5. Their examples are the creation in 2019 of the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum (SAWHM) and the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative (SCRI). We can recognise the weariness behind their statement that ‘The traditional hierarchy and leadership structure of the Smithsonian sometimes means that change takes decades.’ (p.70). Chapter 6 is an especially useful discussion of decolonisation and its implications for museum education, featuring Dutch repatriations to Indonesia and continuing collaboration.

Section 2 explores ‘Theory and experience in museum education – Pedagogies in practice’, embracing open air museums, children’s literature, intangible heritage, sites of memory and the sense of history, visual literacy, heritage education in Scotland – and of course Piaget!

Annemies Broekgaarden and Margherita Sani focus on connecting children to art and cultural heritage. Their case study is the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam whose educational principles are:

- Authenticity – always starting with an authentic object or story
- Quality – striving for the highest quality
- Personal – giving visitors a personal experience (preferably with a person as intermediary)
- Innovative – innovating and staying innovative in every way
- Clear and simple – remaining accessible to everyone (p.153)

They describe the use of theatre and the development of family exhibitions based on in-depth audience research:

‘In June 2023, the entire exhibition wing, all 1,000 square metres, was given over to a family exhibition entitled ‘Mission Masterpiece’, targeting an audience of young people aged 8 and over. This was the Rijksmuseum’s first family exhibition, through which children and their caregivers learn about the collection by taking part in activities and discovering a side of the museum where art meets science.(p155) Among the problems they have to solve are: questions such as: ‘Is this crown made of gold?’, ‘Are the gems on the crown real?’, ‘Is this ceramic object still in one piece?’, ‘Is this painting a real Vermeer?’, ‘What fabric is this Kimono made of?’, ‘In which period was this cabinet made?’

Other examples come from Boston and Singapore.

Elena Plosnita writes about 'The place of mystery in museum education – archaeological museums' from her experience in the National Museum of History of Moldova where visitors, schoolchildren, and students can take part in archaeological excavations actively and digitally. She references both Kolb and Confucius.

Section 3, 'A virtuous circle' tackles the role of research in museum and heritage education, with chapters on touch with digital replicas, and using archives for example, and case studies from Japan, Barbados, and Singapore (on arts and dementia) as well as Canada and the USA in Lynn Dierking's chapter on science centres. I found chapter 18 by Eric A. Jensen on evidence-based museum education particularly useful in spelling out the process of assembling and disseminating evidence of impact: as part of a delegation to the incoming Cameron DCMS we were firmly told by civil servants that they didn't want to hear epiphanies but hard evidence that could convince the Treasury.

Section 4 focuses on 'nurturing museum accessibility and inclusion for a more democratic model'. Much of this section is quite inspiring. The development of participation for example is contextualised and includes a case study of a project in Augsburg that asked 'How do we want to live together in the future in a diverse city like Augsburg – a city in which around 50 percent of its citizens have non-German roots?' It also included religious diversity, gender self-determination and disability. The author cites Glasgow and Trento following similar models of civic engagement and also the remarkable Trapholt Museum of Modern

Art, Craft and Design, in rural Denmark. We are also reminded of some of the pitfalls of participation as researched by Bernadette Lynch for example. Other chapters look at young adult involvement with Dutch museums, and François Mairesse on 'Changing the visitor social dynamic' talks about the development of a missionary model in the earlier 20th century with examples from the UK and Russia, and provides a stimulating overview of changing museum mindsets and ambitions since then. The Arab world, so often left out of museum overviews, is here represented by a very thorough and revealing introduction to Egyptian museum education from Nevine Nizar Zakaria. We hear also about the Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre, Facilitating visitor identity and relatability in Mexican museums and LGBTQ+ museum and heritage engagement in the UK, a valuable review of a lot of recent activity.

The final section 5 is the one that will probably generate most discussion: 'Future-proofing: How museum education can take a more forward-looking stance.' There are contributions from Greece, India, the Arab world, and South Africa among others: Alexandra Bounia and Niki Nikonanou share a research project they conducted to evaluate the social impact of three museum programmes intended to nurture inclusive museum engagement between refugees and local communities in Greece. From India Tejshvi Jain, Bhanu Ghalot, and Tiggy Allen explore the need for more nuance in presenting controversial issues in India, and the post-colonial implications for authentic, contemporary museum narratives against the backdrop of a complex social and historical landscape. In their organisation ReReeti they practice a more collaborative, community-driven approach to museum exhibition design that includes the sharing of multiple historical narratives and events such as Partition.

From South Africa Crain Soudien examines the pedagogies and practices favoured by contemporary museums to address the prickly issue of enfigurement in a country with a long history of racialisation.

Mike Cosgrave explores the developing role of technology in museums, plotting its use from the creation of the internet in the 1960s through to the embedding of AI. Cosgrave suggests caution before embracing it as the future of visitor engagement. Unlocking industrial heritage meanings and legacies for the post-industrial generations, Massimo Negri considers the potential of industrial heritage, industrial monuments, and industrial archaeology as rich sources of educational stimulation and engagement for future museum and heritage. Darlene E. Clover advocates storytelling as a tool for female empowerment and agency. Henry McGhie (another author familiar to GEM members) provides a strong context for 'Museum and heritage education, and sustainable development', noting the slow pace at which so many museums and heritage organisations are embodying good practice. Exploring museum education practices and perspectives in the Middle East, Maggie McColl and Hsiao-Chiang Wang (Hope) share interviews with colleagues at Louvre Abu Dhabi and The Children's Museum, Jordan. They identify challenges we can all recognise.

It's difficult to think of a key issue that is not discussed. Museum educator involvement in text writing might be one, and more on funding, but these are both very culture-specific. Several chapters were pleasant surprises, such as Chapter 8, on representations of museums and museum learning in and through children's literature; and GEM's Katya Provornaya on the role of museum and heritage education in guiding grief and nurturing collective empathy (Chapter 16) a touchingly personal response

to loss and how art and heritage can help. She describes the Whitworth's Still Parents project and the National Portrait Gallery's large-scale participation project – Hold Still – which invited UK residents of all ages to share their experience of lockdown; and also GEM's One to One Mentoring Programme for freelancers and others who lost their jobs during lockdown.

Only rarely does the editing of this massive book go awry, as in Chapter 19 with the scrambled illustration captions. Otherwise the referencing is immaculate and often very up to date, and the historical contexts are helpfully consistent. This is now the most comprehensive reference for museum and heritage educators, and you should persuade your libraries to purchase a copy if you can. There is of course a much cheaper e-book version. Overall this collection by a wide range of writers from many different contexts manages to demonstrate, as the *Handbook's* Introduction promises, that 'At its best... museum and heritage education stimulates curiosity, reveals mysteries, provokes debate, challenges orthodoxies, promotes inclusion, and enables the making of meaning.' (p.1)

Contributors

Introduction

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1. Archives/collections and memory as contested terrain.

Nathan muddyi Sentance

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2. Labour, burnout, and the structural violence of the cultural sector.

Louise Shelley

Nathalie Boobis

Barby Asante

3. The persistence of cultural work under duress as resistance and survival.

Teesa Bahana

Zoe Butt

Abdella Karroum

Mark O'Neil

Balbir K. Singh

4. Radical pedagogies that defend complexity.

Pablo Helguera

Emily Pringle

Amanda Cachia

Elvira Espejo Ayca

MADEYOULOOK

Larisa Zmud

Yaiza Hernández Velázquez

5. The creation of new infrastructures, solidarities, and imaginaries that are accountable to the people they claim to serve.

Victoria Hollows

David Anderson

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