



**contemporary
art society**

Imperfect Pasts | Contested Futures: Working with public collections in the 21st Century

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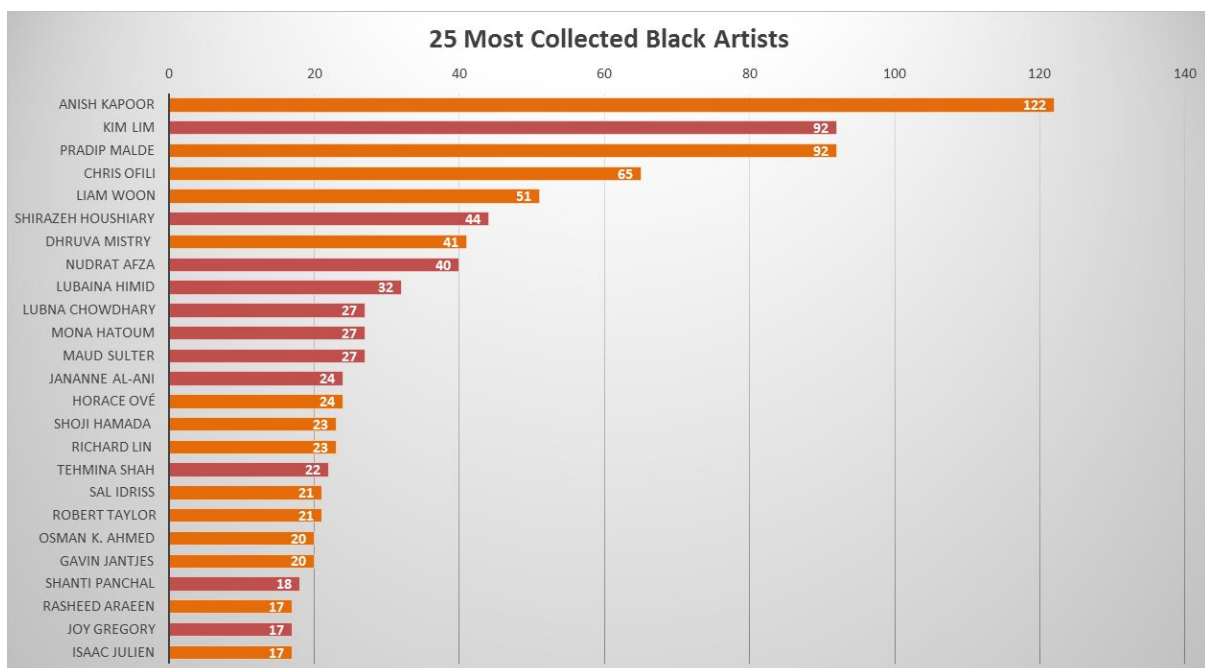
This study day was organised by the Contemporary Art Society as part of its Sackler CPD Programme. The aim of the day was to explore the question of decolonisation in relation to art collections and museums, taking into account notions of history, colonialism, identity and community. It also investigated the role played by museums – through their acquisitions, exhibitions, partnerships and alliances – in grappling with this increasingly urgent task. It was hoped that the presentations and discussion would help those attending to develop ideas about how they (and their colleagues) might work towards decolonising the collections they work with and care for. It was a predominantly white delegation and panel of presenters, ostensibly demonstrating a willingness to engage in a topic of discussion that has typically, until now, been the preserve of 'BAME' (Black and Minority Ethnic) artists, museum staff and academics.

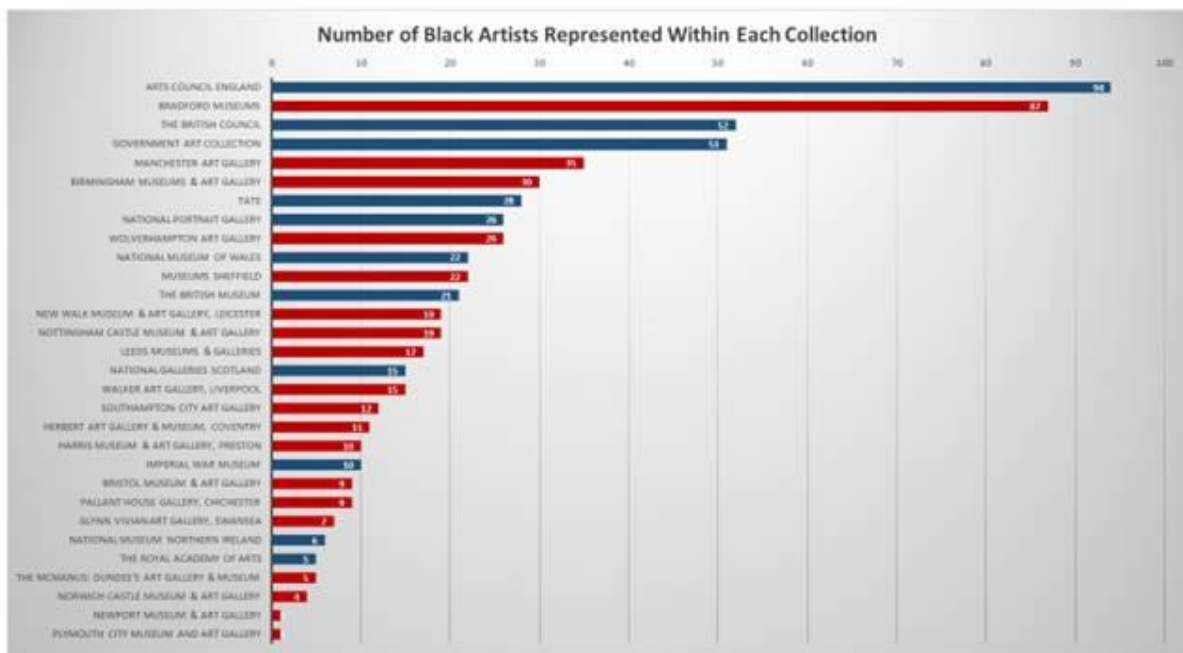
Hammad Nasar, who wears many hats but is currently Director of the Stuart Hall Foundation and a Paul Mellon Senior Research Fellow, introduced the first session of the day, titled *Uncomfortable Truths*, by invoking the expression 'the future is certain; it is the past that is unpredictable' to highlight the constructedness of history and the way the past reasserts itself in the present and future.

Professor **Catherine Hall**'s keynote presentation addressed the forgetting of slavery in the dominant narratives of British history. She discussed how the notion of 'history as progress' has been fundamental to the way history has been written. Although this notion has been increasingly under threat, staff in civic museums continue to struggle with, and acknowledge, the fact that these cultural institutions were built on this problematic principle. Hall discussed how slavery and its legacies are so often erased in the histories that are told in the present, and that slavery, Empire, and race require urgent and imaginative reinsertion into the discourse. She explained that in recent years her research has focussed on the £20m of compensation that was paid out to former slave owners across the British Empire after the abolition of slavery (the biggest bailout the British state has ever given). Over half of this amount was paid to former slave owners based in the United Kingdom (as opposed to the Caribbean), many of whom channelled these funds into public art collections, or personal collections that would eventually be bequeathed to the public via museums such as Birmingham Art Gallery. Hall suggested that,

if we are to begin the task of decolonising our art collections, this history should be acknowledged in museum object labels, in order to make explicit the way that slavery, colonialism and its legacies are integral to our art institutions and collections. She also suggested that curators explore new ways of creating meanings for objects beyond their labels.

I then discussed my nationwide audit of work by black artists in UK public collections, which I conducted as part of my research on the Black Artists & Modernism project at University of the Arts London. After auditing collections at 11 major national and 19 regional municipal museums and galleries, I found 2,314 artworks by 363 individual artists and artist groups. Rough calculations indicated that the proportion that these artworks represent in public art collections ranged between only a fraction of a percent and 4 percent, which is much less than the overall 'BAME' demographic in the UK. I noted that where the numbers of works by black artists were relatively high, it had resulted from conscious, targeted acquisitions spearheaded by individuals committed to diversifying collections and representing local audiences, such as the Cartwright Hall in Bradford. I reflected on why people are not aware of the extent of collecting of works by black artists in public collections, and suggested that it might be because the majority are rarely taken out of storage for inclusion in mainstream exhibitions and displays, because of collection taxonomies and the way these works are often thought and written about with reference to biography, ethnic heritage and cultural difference. I concluded that one of the ways in which we can begin to decolonise our art collections is to prioritise an engagement with the works themselves and not allow questions of race, identity and heritage to obscure our understanding of the works and the artists' contributions to broader developments in art's histories.





Artist **Marysia Lewandowska** discussed her practice which typically examines the production of value and social economics. She focussed on *Free Trade* (2002), a project she led with Neil Cummings, which explored the history and conventions of Manchester Art Gallery through the 1901 Beatson Blair Bequest - the single biggest donation to the gallery, and an example of the entanglement of art and financial capital in Manchester. The project culminated in an exhibition that brought together the remains of the 30,000 objects of the Beatson Blair Bequest (paintings, sculpture, fine furniture, ceramics, silver, and bric-a-brac) into one room. Lewandowska and Cummings' installation challenged the conventions of museum classification and display and hinted at the huge quantity of goods that have continually moved through Manchester in circuits of exchange. Lewandowska reflected on how the project might continue to inform present-day intuitional knowledge and memory within Manchester Art Gallery.

The second session, titled *Collections & Displays*, was kicked off by curator **Jenny Dirksen** from the Hamburger Bahnhof, who discussed *Hello World. Revisiting A Collection* - a 2018 exhibition that took over the entire Hamburger Bahnhof as a critical inquiry into the predominantly Western focus of the Nationalgalerie's collection. It was a collaborative project between institutions and individuals involving scholars and independent curators. Beginning with the questions, 'what would the collection look like today, had a more open and inclusive understanding of art characterised its genesis?' and 'How might wider and multiple perspectives have transformed the art historical canon?', the exhibition focussed on transnational artistic networks and cross-cultural exchanges from the late 19th century to the present, and used over seven hundred works from the collection of the Nationalgalerie to provide points of departure for multiple narratives. Dirksen explained that *Hello World* is the first exhibition to explicitly call into question the Eurocentric character of the Nationalgalerie's collections, opening up a discussion on how a museum collection can reposition itself today.

Kate Jesson, Curator at Manchester Art Gallery, offered a discussion on the role of museums and art institutions in decolonising culture. She began by declaring that Manchester Art Gallery is institutionally racist and also that there is more racism in the city of Manchester than ever before, and especially since the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017. She reflected on the problematics of refugee arts festivals, black history month and the term 'diversify', and

questioned the purpose of rewriting collections development policies when so few institutions state a purpose for their collections. Jesson concluded by emphasising the importance of artists dictating the terms of their own visibility, the imperative for art institutions to nurture communities and creativity, and the need for museums and galleries to critically engage with their pasts, present and futures.

Artist **Lubna Chowdary** provided the final presentation of the day, reflecting on the eurocentricity of her education and the problems she faced in accessing non-western objects during her youth. She discussed her family and the nature of her upbringing to provide a context for the way her practice developed, and explored the ways in which she has been able to combine various cultural influences to produce sculptures and installations that defy easy categorisation.

Across the presentations, the key assertions relating to decolonising and collections revolved around two issues; the first being the issue of representation (artists being able to dictate the terms of their representation and museums ceasing to confine the representation of artists within problematic tropes of race, identity politics and cultural difference), and the second being the issue of museum practices (the imperative for museum workers to critically question curatorial and collecting practices and to find concrete ways of publicly acknowledging the role and impact of Empire, slavery and colonialism within the practices, fabric and holdings of art institutions).

The delegates, who had largely remained silent when opportunities arose for open discussion, were then invited to join the presenters in a brief final discussion, which included reflections on participation and engagement, but not in the way these two notions are usually discussed within the cultural sector. Rather than invoking the familiar sentiment that museums must find new and innovative ways to engage more diverse audiences and increase participation, it was asserted that institutions and curators must be willing to engage openly in critical discussions, not be fearful of scrutiny, and increase their ambition and courage to experiment, even when doing so invites criticism. The tendency for art institutions to invite artists to carry out interventions and challenge institutional orthodoxies was criticised on the grounds that artists do not have the power to change institutional practices and that their intervening efforts are almost invariably temporary. It was argued that institutions must lead this critical work themselves, by encouraging staff to engage in critical self-reflection, finding practical ways to alter their practices, and by developing long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with artists and other external organisations in order to foster positive and permanent change within the institution, and for the communities they exist to serve.

Although delegates had generally seemed reluctant to vocally engage in, and respond to, the presentations during the more formal and structured parts of the study day, I found discussions during the lunch break were flowing more easily between individuals, and there seemed to be an honest and frank engagement in the issues raised through the presentations when there were opportunities to discuss them outside of the large group context. Aside from the usual awkwardness that arises when individuals are asked to 'speak up' in front of large groups, it seemed that the attendees were at a loss as to where to begin with the enormous task of decolonising collections. This is understandable, in part because public collections of art and objects are not the responsibility of any one individual, and also because the notion of 'decolonising' remains so contested and enigmatic. Further small-scale workshops are now needed to explore and break down what this term means, notionally and practically, to support

curators and other museum staff in considering what specific steps can be taken towards decolonising collections.

Links:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>

<http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/>

<http://marysialewandowska.com/>

<https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/hello-world-revision-einer-sammlung.html>

<http://manchesterartgallery.org/visit/about-us/>

<http://lubnachowdhary.co.uk/>

Further Reading:

http://www.internationaleonline.org/bookshelves/decolonising_museums

http://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/

Free Trade, Neil Cummings, Marysia Lewandowska, Manchester Art Gallery, 2002.

[http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/issue-](http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/issue-34/PDF_to_Download/Oncurating_Decolonizing_Issue35.pdf)

[34/PDF to Download/Oncurating Decolonizing Issue35.pdf](http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/issue-34/PDF_to_Download/Oncurating_Decolonizing_Issue35.pdf)

Gurminder K Bhambra (2014) Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues, *Postcolonial Studies*, 17:2, 115-121, DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2014.966414