

Contemporary Art Society Curators' Study Day **12 September 2023, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry**

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The objective of the Contemporary Art Society Curators' Study Day at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry was to explore the concept of a nation and address how this notion informs, shapes, and affects collections of contemporary art. The event included a variety of activities that, through different entry points, offered diverse perspectives on how the concept of a nation is conceived but also lived, experienced, and embodied. Taking place in various rooms across the Herbert, activities included a panel discussion, a performance, a lecture, a guided tour, as well as informal conversations during lunch.

The event was conceived as a response to the exhibition 'Divided Selves: Legacies, Memories, Belonging', curated by Hammad Nasar MBE with Rosie Addenbrooke and Alice Swatton. Thinking alongside the work of 26 artists and collectives, this exhibition engaged ideas of belonging and identity. 'Divided Selves' included works from the Herbert's 'Peace and Reconciliation' collection and loans from the British Council Collection, which, along with the Arts Council Collection, is due to transfer to Coventry when it becomes home to the new National Collections Centre in 2024. As part of the revalidation of culture in Britain's regions, this move will reveal an alternative landscape within British contemporary art. Through presentations and critical and artistic responses, the Study Day reflected on the potentialities of this new landscape, in which museums and public collections emphasized belonging while connecting places, peoples, and worlds.

After a welcome by Rosie Addenbrooke, Exhibitions and Events Manager at the Herbert, the day started with a panel discussion on the geopolitics of national art collections. Introduced by Paula Zambrano, Curator of Programmes at the Contemporary Art Society, the discussion was presented as an opportunity to think about the role of curatorial practice in shaping identities and subjectivities in the exhibition space. In her opening statement, Zambrano asked if one can conceive of a single national identity or if there is a plurality of subjective identities. If the latter, how are these pluralities embodied and represented in national art collections? She proposed to think about institutional and artistic strategies that can be implemented to create more diverse, inclusive and historically conscious communities, particularly focusing on the new National Collection Center in the former Ikea building in the city centre of Coventry.

Emma Dexter, Director of Visual Arts at the British Council, began by reflecting on the British Council's new strategy to advocate for its collections. Moving away from the idea of promoting the UK's visual artists, Dexter stressed a more nuanced approach to British identity and history, for example by bringing new and older works into the collection in conversation with each other. In addition, rather than transporting ready-made packages of UK art abroad, the British Council is integrating works and people from the places that are hosting exhibitions. One example can be found in the 2017 show *We Are Not Alone* in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Organised by six Saudi women selected for the British Council study programme Contemporary Collective, this initiative aimed to build the skills of a new generation of curators and arts managers in Saudi Arabia, and in the process created new and unusual dialogues.

Speaking from a more local context, Marguerite Nugent, Cultural Director at the Herbert, focused on the implications of differences made between national and regional collections. She argued it is not necessarily the definition of national that needs debating in the sector, but more the question of who decides what is nationally important. Stressing the benefits associated with becoming part of Arts Council England's Designation Scheme, Nugent wonders how fit for purpose 'the identification of the best collections held in museums, libraries and archives across England' still is. Who are the experts that decide what is nationally important? Whose voices are being heard? Rather than simply buddying up regional collections with national collections, Nugent proposes place-based curating and acquisition to work more with local communities and experts to bring different perspectives to art collections.

Deborah Smith, Director of the Arts Council Collection, shares this desire to consider local histories and demographics to create eclectic collections that benefit more people. Her presentation included an image of an exhibition juxtaposing a painting by Thomas Gainsborough and a photograph by Vanley Burke, illustrating the necessity of forging new understandings of identity and representation in the museum sector. Envisioning the Arts Council Collection as 'everyone's collection of art and artists', Smith stressed the need to focus attention on the decisions that cultural organisations make about the work that they produce, present and collect. This is indeed the first step towards a wider recognition that choices about which artists to acquire play a crucial part in representing the diversity of the UK.

Finally, Caroline Douglas, Director of the Contemporary Art Society, spoke about how, since its inception, the Contemporary Art Society has adapted to the changing roles of museums by working more collaboratively towards acquisitions. If museums are no longer repositories of treasures, but places where people can come together to debate difficult ideas, any buying of artworks needs to support this. Growing sensitivity to each member museum and their communities, histories, and geographies, the Contemporary Art Society uses the prompts of community consultation to acquire pieces. Billie Zangewa's hand-stitched silk collage *Sweetest Devotion* (2021) is a great example of how an institution may end up buying a work that they would never arrive at themselves or only through consultation with art professionals.

After the panel shared various perspectives on the organisations that are shaping the stories curators tell through collections, curator Hammad Nasar brought the discussion back to questions around belonging, and how this can be enacted through artistic and curatorial practice. His guided tour of *Divided Selves: Memories, Legacies, Belonging* revolved around the idea that to explore practices of togetherness, one needs to look at the physical, cultural, civic, political and symbolic infrastructures that shape and hold space for communities. Using political scientist Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities', Nasar discussed artists in the exhibition that explore notions of belonging at a time when the idea of nation is under stress. Surfacing suppressed histories, amplifying marginalised voices and re-evaluating artworks ignored or sidelined by dominant narratives, his tour invited museum members to imagine the new National Collections Centre in Coventry as a distributed but connected evolving cultural facility that builds on and deepens existing knowledge with shared stories, histories and cultural narratives.

After lunch, the Study Day continued with a lecture by Ben Cranfield, Senior Tutor in Curatorial Theory and History at the Curating Contemporary Art programme at the Royal College of Art. Taking the history of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London as a case study, his presentation explored the open and unfinished proposition of a space dedicated to 'the display, study and production of the contemporary'. Cranfield included a quote from Stuart Hall's text 'Constituting an Archive' from 2001: "Archives are not inert historical collections. They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past." This sparked an interesting discussion about the (im)possibility of sharing histories. If the past is forever changing, histories are always contested. Therefore, allowing the possibility of difference to exist is crucial in sharing histories, including those of marginalised voices.

Uncovering marginalised voices within history, as well as questioning who speaks on behalf of whom and on what terms is what the artist Helen Cammock articulates through a performance following Cranfield's lecture. Her short spoken and sung piece, which took place upstairs in The Studio, brought together materials from a performance Cammock wrote in 2016 and a new project in New Orleans. Sat on a chair on a small stage, Cammock read and sang beautifully, bouncing between, across and through different stories about invisibility, exclusion, and resistance. Moving, vulnerable, funny – Cammock's ventriloquising piece spoke directly to the audience. Echoing notions of what it means to (not) have a nation, to think about what community means and how we sit within communities, the fragmentary and non-linear narrative of her lyrical performance made clear that history is indeed never finished, and as such always part of our present.

The final part of the Study Day was open to the public and revolved around the relationship between hope and courage. In a conversation with the artist Hetain Patel, curator Hammad Nasar argued this relationship is not often appropriately articulated and practiced. For this reason, cultural practitioners need to explore what space for agency there is for people – citizens, artists, curators, beings – to have hope, take courage and act. Patel's short film *Don't Look at the Finger* (2017) can be seen as an example of such practice. Using the familiar tropes of Hollywood films, this 16-minute high-definition film with a cinematic soundscape subverts expectations by including a cast from minority backgrounds and unexpected forms of action. Patel is interested in making interventions and transforming visually and physically those things that we read as identity. The artist's deliberate move away from assumptions about how people dress, speak and move, brought the discussion back to questions around belonging.

Returning to the implications of using and sharing collections to make exhibitions, it can be stated the role of institutions is evolving to create more inclusive, just, diverse, and historically conscious communities. While art professionals continue their work for the benefit of public audiences everywhere, museums and public collections should aim to connect places, people, worlds, as well as pasts, presents and futures, without essentialising shared stories, histories, and cultural narratives. The Contemporary Art Society Study Day at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry demonstrated that this is part of a new landscape in which British and international contemporary art and its institutions are bridging the gaps between the state and communities, between the nation and personal identity, between governance and subjectivity.