

Contemporary Art Society CPD Symposium: New Genealogies of Art History/New Systems of Thinking

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As museums and galleries continue to recover from the effects of the global pandemic, the need to rethink current working practices is felt urgently across the cultural sector. From funding cuts and widespread redundancies to the ongoing fight for decolonisation and social inclusion, cultural institutions face deep-rooted, interconnected, and systemic challenges. Recent large-scale international exhibitions such as Documenta Fifteen (Kassel, June - September 2022) have taken this critical moment as a point of departure to interrogate the status quo, reimagine the civic role of museums and galleries in society, and unpick their internal value systems. What can institutions learn from artists, activists, and local communities? How can new ways of working be incorporated into the daily life of a given institution? How do we move forward and ensure a more equitable, caring, and diverse art ecology? How can this change be sustained?

These questions motivated the Contemporary Art Society's recent CPD Symposium, titled *New Genealogies of Art History/New Systems of Thinking*. The one-day event, organised jointly by Ilaria Puri Purini (Curator of Programmes, CAS) and Habda Rashid (Senior Curator, Fitzwilliam Museum), took place at the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, on 28 April 2023. The in-person and hybrid symposium welcomed museum professionals from curatorial, learning and research backgrounds, based in the U.K. and internationally.

In an opening address, Habda Rashid noted the importance of bringing various voices together and of sharing museum workers' experiences on the ground, to better understand the realities and practicalities of achieving change. The morning session began with three presentations from art professionals, including Poppy Bowers, Head of Exhibitions at the Whitworth in Manchester; Amal Alhaag, Senior Research and Cultural Programmer at the Research Center for Material Culture in Amsterdam; and Stéphane Kabila, Curator and Researcher based in Lubumbashi, D.R. Congo. In the morning session, each presenter touched on the ways they have implemented innovative, collaborative, and community-based approaches in their respective organisations. The afternoon session was more informal and provided an open space to reflect on recent changes and personal experiences within the sector.

The presentations began with Poppy Bowers, who introduced the forthcoming exhibition *Economics: The Blockbuster*, which will open at The Whitworth, Manchester from June to October 2023. The exhibition will showcase a selection of art projects that operate as real-world economic systems, from a community-led drinks company to a Lusanga-based art collective reclaiming plantation land. Together, these projects propose new ways of 'doing business', driven by the needs and concerns of the communities in which their own economies are created. Crucially, Bowers described how the exhibition is not simply a traditional, temporary display of archives or documentation material; rather, the exhibition is an event producing new ways of conceiving museum processes and creating other internal working models. This idea is inspired by artist and activist Tania Bruguera's concept of *arte útil*. Roughly translated into English as 'useful art', *arte útil* conceives art as a real-world activity, and provides a strategy through which artistic thinking can be applied to a social problem.

Brugeura's concept and method was introduced to the Whitworth by its former Director Alistair Hudson, to facilitate more integration between communities and the museum. By incorporating an exhibition that explores the failures and limits of current economic systems, the Whitworth will consider how to redraw its own operations, aiming to demonstrate that models of self-organisation and collective practice may transform large on a long-term basis.

The question of how to maintain and futureproof the outcomes of transformative work was also addressed in the second presentation, given by Amal Alhaag, who spoke in a performative and annotative manner (without accompanying images). Alhaag began by asking: 'What does it mean to not only to speak about things, but to put them into action?', underlining the necessity and usefulness of discomfort when agitating for change. Quoting abolitionist thinker and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Alhaag noted that 'practice makes difference', and 'practicing discomfort probably brings us somewhere closer to change'. Based in the Netherlands, and frequently the only person of colour operating within cultural organisations, Alhaag described the friction between, and resistance from, other colleagues when attempting to (re)introduce the humanness – touch, breath, sweat – of objects to collections and gallery spaces.

As Alhaag suggested, this internal and uncomfortable work is a starting point for change, and it is necessary to prepare visitors to engage with museums and feel welcome. Additionally, Alhaag spoke of her work as Scholar in Residence at the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, where she has been reáresearching its film collection. Formed in the 1920s, this collection includes documentation material on colonial expeditions in the former Dutch East Indies, as well as long documentaries and corporate films made for the government and various businesses. Reflecting on her encounters with these archival materials, haunted by violent histories, Alhaag asked: 'What do we do with such agency of ghosts?'. How might such documents of brutality be activated in a way that reveals the voices, lives and memories of marginalised subjects? Who is allowed to participate in this activation? How do we avoid reproducing the same patterns of silence, absence and oppression?

These questions, central to the ongoing discourse around decoloniality and cultural inheritance, led to the third and final presentation, given by Stéphane Kabila. Kabila discussed his work with the Centre d'art Waza, an art centre that develops exhibitions, publications, and other cultural productions to foster experimental artistic practices and promote alternative ways of sharing knowledge and raising consciousness. At Documenta fifteen, Centre d'art Waza showcased three projects, including their work around La Collection Verbeek-Mwewa –a collection composed of over 9,500 objects, including popular paintings, sculptures, and basketry, relating to Congolese history spanning the 1950s to the present day. Kabila focused on one particular painting within the collection, which depicts Patrice Lumumba on 30 June 1960, at the ceremony marking the Republic of Congo's independence from Belgium. Lumumba is shown holding a globe, indicating that he is powerful enough to control the world. The work was one example in a vast array of works that speak to the way Congolese artists imagined and interpreted the colonial struggle and the fight for independence.

La Collection Verbeek-Mwewa is the most important collection of its kind in D.R. Congo. However, it is physically fragile and in dire need of restoration. Thus, one of the primary objectives of Centre d'art Waza's installation at Documenta was to attract both cultural and financial attention from the wider art ecology in the hope that the collection is saved and digitized. Here, Kabila's work intersects with issues discussed in the previous two presentations. Firstly, Centre d'Art Waza's presentation at Documenta proposes a new way of 'doing business' that is not extractive but is instead generative and directly beneficial to the community that it serves. Secondly, Kabila's practice speaks to Amal's desire to breathe life into objects and archives as repositories of agency and memory and ultimately

bring them closer to the people and localities impacted by their creation. While the Verbeek-Mwewa collection is in danger of disintegration while European collections of colonial film are readily accessible begs more questions: Which stories are preserved and protected? Who has a cultural afterlife?

All three presenters discussed their, albeit discrete, interactions with art collectives and community groups. This reflects a broader shift in the relationship between the art establishment and grassroots activism, studio collectives and other artist groups. How do we ensure this is not just a passing trend, and safeguard against the art world's tendency towards extraction? Using the Whitworth's forthcoming exhibition as an example, if an institution is inviting a collective into its space, it has to accept that this encounter will facilitate a mutual shift and an interrogation. Hence, the museum will be open to critique.

In the afternoon, the group returned for an informal and honest discussion that allowed professionals to share their experiences following the pandemic, and the ongoing struggle to integrate alternative voices within museum and gallery spaces. The conversation covered topics such as the different practices of collecting across regional and national museums; funding structures; and institutional compromise. When considering the role of the market in exhibition-making and collecting, the group questioned to what extent arts organisations can afford to take risks and simultaneously protect the space required for experimental work. Following on from this point, it was underlined that the burden of this work – and the accountability required when working on difficult projects – disproportionately falls on curators of colour, who come under much greater pressure to succeed than their white colleagues.

The second part of the afternoon discussion was prompted by a provocation, which was an excerpt from Robert Smithson's 'Cultural Confinement' (Art Forum, October 1972), stating that 'museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells – in other words, neutral rooms called "galleries"'. Participants drew out the discursive links between Foucauldian theory and institutional critique that compares museums with prisons, and noted that calls for reform often allow carceral practices to continue. Does museum reform merely perpetuate existing museological norms, leaving abolition as the only alternative? A suggested solution to this provocation was to practice 'radical juxtaposition' within the museum or gallery space, in which artists, artworks and objects are given more space for clamour and difference. This approach is less about reforming the museum and more about deformation. In other words, it is about upending the museum's superficial sense of order and taxonomic cleanliness.

In conclusion, a theme consistent throughout the day was the urgent sense that change must happen not only in terms of the objects and narratives that are foregrounded in displays, but rather change must happen within the internal value systems and ideological structure of museums themselves. The administrative, and operational processes of museums, including their work dynamics and distribution of labour, cannot be immune to intervention. Alhaag's argument that revolutions can take place in bureaucratic spaces, combined with the example of the Whitworth's self-interrogation of institutional processes, demonstrate that radical thinking within the daily life of museums or galleries is possible, and it is, in fact, one of the few ways (or at least a primary way), to ensure the occurrence of change.