Doing the Work
Embedding anti-racism and decolonisation into museum practice

Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ilaria Puri Purini
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Critical responses to the online workshop series devised by the Contemporary Arts Society and the Decolonising Arts Institute from January to July 2021.

Edited by Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Iliaria Puri Purini
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Preface

A recent scene: the only non-white person in the room (hereafter TONWPITR) holds the audience captive as they assert the importance of working continually, self-reflexively and critically on one’s individual positionality in any given space. They – the audience – listen intently. One person responds by praising the ‘strong’ presentation. He fails to recognise his ableist choice of language, singles out the issue of heteronormativity, and side-steps the wider charge of shared and internalised racist and colonialist conditioning. He then asks TONWPITR to share resources, while others express a keen desire to work ‘with communities’. There is talk of ‘flattening hierarchies’, ‘common languages’, ‘toolkits’, and concern about being ‘overly critical’ or ‘too negative’. After countless variations of such scenes over decades, TONWPITR hears all this as familiar rhetorical mechanisms for 1) Hiding power differentials while holding on to power; 2) Centering white Western European patriarchal and imperialist thinking and practice as universal; 3) Hoping ‘the work’ amounts to problems that can be ‘fixed’ as opposed to structures that need systemic dismantling; and 4) Thinly concealing cries of fragility – for fear of shame, humiliation, displacement and destabilisation – in the face of named and unnamed, undifferentiated ‘communities’ of ‘others’. Who is the ‘with’ with? Who and what is ‘the work’ for? TONWPITR minds the minefield of tropes and spectrum of stereotypes elicited by their every word and gesture, shifting stance from surprisingly articulate yet self-effacing assimilationist, to faintly exotic oddball/outsider/outlier, to angry, antagonistic witch. TONWPITR implores: Be open, be honest, take responsibility, act, and enact care. Can you listen without prejudice? Probably not. Can you listen without tone policing? Maybe. And what will you do then? Let’s see.

susan pui san lok / susan lok pui san
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Introduction

‘Doing the Work: Embedding Anti-Racism and Decolonisation in Museum Practice’ was a series of seven closed, online workshops for museum professionals that took place in 2021. It was co-produced by Anjalie Dalal-Clayton at the Decolonising Arts Institute (University of the Arts London) and Ilaria Puri Purini at the Contemporary Art Society. They developed their idea for the series in 2018, recognising: a failure within the museum and gallery sector to dismantle its entrenched racist, imperial structures and practices; a nervousness or reticence by museum workers to ‘talk specifics’, especially in exposing, open forums; and a dire need to begin ‘doing the work’. Bearing in mind certain contexts of opposition and resistance that many museum staff find themselves working in, and their need to also consider institutional idiosyncrasies, each workshop was necessarily small, providing participants with an intimate, safe space for focussed conversation where Chatham House Rule applied.

The series was premised on the understanding that it is not possible to produce a one-size-fits-all set of strategies or ‘toolkit’ for embedding anti-racism and decolonisation in museum practice. The onus to develop feasible approaches for doing this work must be on white professionals in the sector. Participants, drawn primarily from the Contemporary Art Society’s museum members, were therefore asked to come prepared to speak generously and candidly about their concerns and experiences, to discuss specific strategies they had trialled where possible, and to offer each other peer support through sharing ideas and offering feedback.

Each workshop focussed on a specific area of museum practice (curating, interventionist strategies, documentation, interpretation, collecting and engagement) and was framed by two presentations given by individuals who have an exemplary track record of implementing anti-racist and/or decolonial practice relevant to the focus of the session. Each workshop was also attended by an early career museum professional who was commissioned to write a discursive account that synthesised and critically reflected on the key areas of discussion, whilst offering anonymity to the participants and institutions involved. Recordings of the framing presentations are available to view on the Contemporary Art Society and Decolonising Arts Institute webpages, and this publication presents the accounts.

The accounts from the ‘Doing the Work’ series offer a unique insight into the specific concerns and experiences of the museum and gallery sector’s ‘frontline’ workers, surface key commonalities across diverse and wide-ranging institutions, and highlight the urgent tasks facing the sector’s leaders. It is hoped that staff working across all areas and levels within museums can use these reports to inform meaningful, embedded and sustainable changes that will, in turn, begin to dismantle the racist and imperial modes of thinking and doing that underpin most museum practices.

1 "Doing the work" is a refrain within anti-racist discourse that refers to the imperative to examine our individual, deep-rooted perceptions, to change our day-to-day habits, and to take meaningful action to contest and counteract racism in our personal, familial and professional lives.
Overview and provocations
— Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ilaria Puri Purini

The ‘Doing the Work’ series was conceived as a space for generative discussion rather than one of instruction. Our contention was that museum workers have to grapple with the challenge of dismantling racism, colonialism and imperialism in museums for themselves – that this work must begin with the committed and self-informed individual alongside any sector-wide guidance and directives from funders and accreditors. We therefore asked participants to come prepared to discuss approaches they had tested in their workplaces and to prime themselves by engaging with a variety of readings and resources shared in advance. Although some participants arrived in the online spaces prepared to develop and debate different strategies, there were many who appeared to have only a rudimentary understanding of the notions of race, racism, anti-racism, colonialism, imperialism and decolonisation and how they intersect with the purposes and workings of the museum. On the one hand, this revealed a heartening interest and willingness to ‘do the work’ despite not having engaged with such work before, and on the other, either a naivety about the knowledge that is required or a lack of time to develop that knowledge. Overall, the participants seemed very much at the beginning of their ‘journey’. There was much discussion about the lack of clarity within the sector about what anti-racism and decolonisation mean and look like, and also about there being a lack of commitment and support from those working in leadership positions.

In consequence, our ambition for the series to provide a space in which ideas for feasible strategies could be developed remains largely unrealised. Nonetheless, the workshops were extremely illuminating in that they surfaced, through first-hand testimonies, the difficulties staff are facing in trying to do the work - difficulties they feel senior management and museum directors do not fully appreciate. This collection of reflective summaries on the workshops therefore ‘feeds information up’, making clear how staff on the ground are grappling with the imperative to ‘do the work’, and outlining the specific issues that need addressing, as seen through the critical lens of the early career practitioners who have written them.

Below, we draw out and summarise the key findings and related provocations from the reflective summaries.

1. Naming and framing the problem

Almost every breakout group in every workshop began with commentary on the performative allyship the participants had witnessed their institutions enacting in response to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Just as these gestures were quickly critiqued on social media for being hollow and for virtue signalling, the participants expressed the view that their institutions had simply not done enough since to live up to their claims of anti-racism and solidarity with the movement. They described this particularly in terms of museum workers not taking personal responsibility for making change, and in terms of museum leaders not instigating transformational change in institutional operations and structures. Sylvia Theuri comments in her summary that a prerequisite for enabling these types of change is not for institutions to make statements about needing to ‘do better’, but instead to name the problem - that is, to openly acknowledge that they are institutionally racist. Another vital prerequisite, as Kathleen Lawther points out, is for governing bodies and museum directors to genuinely frame this change-making (whether that be in terms of the diversity of museum boards or in the minutiae of object documentation) as critical.

Provocation: Name and frame the problem

Openly acknowledge institutional racism and frame anti-racist and decolonial change-making as critical.
2. **White Fragility**

The reason why institutional racism within the museum sector has yet to be widely and openly acknowledged, and why anti-racism and decolonisation have yet to be framed as central, critical work, may be due to the defensiveness and resistance that several participants described having witnessed in their workplaces. Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi's summary identifies this as White Fragility and as a 'system of disbelief' that racist and colonial thinking continues to take place within the broadly liberal-minded workforce of the museum. Both Lowe-Mbirimi and Aksana Khan report that the workshop participants described feeling hyper-conscious about, and having to moderate the language they use when discussing, racism in the workplace for fear of how colleagues and line managers might react, and also that museum workers of colour find themselves absorbing the anxieties of their white colleagues. As Lowe-Mbirimi asserts, when there is White Fragility within the museum workforce, 'honest and productive discussion about the challenges at hand cannot happen, and the status quo remains in place'.

**Provocation: Don’t enact White Fragility**

Accept that racist and colonial thinking is embedded in the museum and create an environment in which open discussion about it is encouraged.

3. **Neutrality and balance**

Another factor precluding anti-racist and decolonial work within museums, as identified across the workshops, was an ongoing commitment to neutrality and balance in the sector, whether that be in terms of museums taking a stand on political issues and social justice, or in how they present and interpret objects, history and the human experience. As discussed in Khairani Barokka’s report, numerous participants described finding it difficult to deneutralize or even alter their approaches in a context ‘where museums and cultural institutions are facing fierce opposition from the press, from funders and from certain audiences to even the most gentle of decolonising efforts’ and in a context ‘of an organisational culture that wanted to maintain allegiances to older, whiter audiences’. Barokka points out that even when museums do not explicitly claim to be neutral spaces, the question of ‘balance’ is often invoked. That is, museums assert that they should not privilege one perspective over another. She astutely notes that a supposed need for balance is only usually expressed ‘when the centring of whiteness is challenged, and not the other way around’, and that ‘balance’ is therefore a deceptive means for maintaining the status quo in the museum.

**Provocation: Forget neutrality and balance**

Take a position informed by ethics, justice and care.
4. Knowledge

Across the workshops, the participants identified deficiencies in knowledge, time and diversity as the urgent issues that need addressing in order for anti-racist and decolonial practices to be embedded within the work of museums. Numerous participants described not knowing what the terms antiracism and decolonisation mean, either in theory or in practice, and that there is rarely an agreed definition of these terms within institutions, let alone across the sector. When combined with what Lowe-Mbirimi describes as ‘the evident complexity of the work that needs to be done’, this lack of knowledge is “causing museum professionals to feel anxious, if not fearful, of “doing it wrong”’, resulting in a failure to take action within their respective spheres of influence. But as Lisa Kennedy highlights, this lack of knowledge results from a lack of time and resources for museum staff to carry out the necessary reading and research to develop a sufficient understanding of these key terms and ideas. As Kennedy asserts, ‘within museums there is a disconnect between the two linked imperatives to do the pre-conditional research (e.g. knowing about collections’ connections to colonisation) and to take action (i.e. staging exhibitions and displays in ways that might be considered decolonial or antiracist). The lack of time and funds to support the former represents a barrier to the latter’.

Provocation: Gain the knowledge

Do the necessary research and define the terms.

5. Time

Numerous participants described having to read anti-racist and decolonial literature in their own time, highlighting how space is not made within the scope of their jobs to do this vital ‘pre-conditional’ research. This points towards a general perception within the sector that antiracism and decolonisation are either optional or that they can be added onto existing work, rather than being understood as central and as a priority. Indeed, as one participant stated, ‘everything to do with diversity and inclusion is extra… we can’t lose any of the exhibitions we have about white male artists – we just have to do more exhibitions… [and that] is replicated in research as well’. Several participants also described how senior management had yet to fully grasp the amount of painstaking work that is involved in ‘doing the work’ and expected them to take on responsibility for decolonising efforts in addition to already full workloads. Describing this state of affairs as ‘shameful’, Lowe-Mbirimi explains, ‘without a demonstrable commitment to change, which involves carving out paid time for museum employees to educate themselves on the issues at hand and the methods with which to address them, significant change within the operating structure of the museum cannot happen’. But perhaps it is the operating structure of the museum that precludes the allowance of time for self-education and research to begin with. As Kennedy shrewdly asks, ‘how can decolonial modes of thinking and doing be adopted by museums if the colonially-rooted systems of our art institutions run counter-current to them, and if their neoliberal structures deny museum workers the time and space to develop such modes in the first place?’ The answer to this conundrum may lie in the total reconception of the form and purpose of the museum. Theuri considers the toppling of Bristol’s Colston statue a metaphor for the ‘significant fall and tearing down of historically problematic ways of working’ that is required in the cultural sector, involving a de-centring of whiteness and a much slower pace in programming that can allow all staff the time needed ‘to read and reflect on what genuine anti-racist and decolonial practices look like’, within their paid hours. But as Theuri asks, ‘how far are institutions prepared to go with radical acts of change that demand tearing down and rebuilding with others from the ground up?’

Provocation: Make time

Ensure that paid time is carved out of existing work schedules for all staff to develop sufficient knowledge about anti-racism and decolonisation.
6. Diversity

The third broad issue that participants across the workshops identified as needing urgent attention was, unsurprisingly, diversity. The issue of diversity was discussed in a variety of ways, namely diversity in the histories, narratives and perspectives that museums present, and also in terms of museum staffing. In fact, several white participants expressed a sense of unease about expanding the narratives featured in exhibitions due to their lack of lived experience of underrepresentation and oppression, and that they would therefore prefer colleagues of colour to lead this work. However, Theuri warns against bringing in new colleagues of colour through short-term interventionist projects, which ‘perpetuate and reinforce the erroneous idea that the only role people of colour can have within institutions is to “intervene” in them or to take up “temporary” space within them, and that it is unnatural/an exception/a deviation for them to be permanently installed in them’. Theuri posits that the only solution to this is for museums to offer permanent leadership roles specifically to people of colour. This sentiment is echoed by Lowe-Mbirimi, who emphasises the need for qualitative research undertaken in ‘collaboration with permanently employed curators of colour’.

Provocation: Diversify

Expand the histories, narratives and perspectives that museums present, and diversify museum staffing through permanent contracts.

7. Power and change

Diversification of the workforce, particularly in terms of management and leadership, is one way in which change can begin to take place, and it also constitutes a partial redistribution of power to the traditionally marginalised. But, as Theuri comments, a genuinely impactful redistribution of power must also involve divesting power away from the institution and putting it into the hands of ‘the very people they seek to engage’, that is, the audiences that most museum ‘outreach’ programmes are geared towards. For Aksana Khan, this necessarily involves the dismantling of long-standing institutional hierarchies and complicated operations, and for Khairani Barokka, it involves a shifting of ‘responsibility for institutional change from those who have the least influence and power to those who have the most’. As one participant commented, ‘somebody [junior] comes in and is made responsible for this huge set of questions that, actually, we are all responsible for, and we all need to make the changes around’. But the question is, to what extent are institutions prepared to radically change the way they function and to reallocate resources from other areas of museum work to do this? Alongside naming the problem and framing it as critical, this should be amongst the first questions that institutions ask themselves, internally, before embarking on anti-racist or decolonial changes in practice and policy.

Provocation: Redistribute power for a radical change

Divest power away from leadership and put it in the hands of staff working at all levels in the museum and share power with museum audiences.
8, 9 and 10. Taking action, self-reflection and care

Across all the workshops there was discussion about how museum workers can actually reach a point of taking action. But before this, as Lowe-Mbirimi identifies, is the question of what constitutes action, because ‘intention can easily be mistaken for action’. Many of the participants described their institutions as being stuck in a cycle of discussion or a state of inertia with regards to implementing any kind of embedded practice that might be considered anti-racist or decolonial. Several put this down to individual and collective feelings of shame or guilt. The most effective way of moving beyond these feelings and towards a point of taking action is to engage in both individual and collective critical self-reflection on the topics of race, racism, whiteness, White Supremacy and imperialism. Kennedy recommends that ‘before museum professionals embark on any [practical] strategies…they first need to understand why they seek to bring about some of the changes discussed’. By reckoning with individual and institutional complicity in upholding systems of oppression, museum workers can move towards a state of feeling compelled to take action. But as Khan points out, there are numerous museum workers who have been ‘doing the work’ all along, including the hard emotional labour that comes with being a museum worker of colour, who struggles daily against the inherent forces of oppression that underpin the museum’s structure, whilst also having to be sensitive to, and absorbing, the anxieties of their white colleagues who are only now beginning to engage in the problems of racism and imperialism. To these museum staff, Khan advocates for care – and specifically, care for themselves.

Provocation: Take action, take responsibility and prioritise care

Encourage individuals to take responsibility for implementing anti-racist and decolonial approaches, and give them the tools to do this well – time, money, power.

Put aside feelings of shame or guilt and engage in critical self-reflection to inspire concrete action.

Care for others and for oneself.
Workshop 2: Interventionist Practices

24 February 2021

This workshop considered the role of artist residencies and interventionist projects staged by independent curators and organisations. It was moderated by Fatoş Üstek (independent curator and writer) and began with case studies from Dr. Sylvia Theuri (artist/curator/educator/researcher) and Priyesh Mistry (Associate Curator Modern and Contemporary, National Gallery).

Questions for discussion included:

What short and long-term impact can interventions by artists and external curators have on problematic but long-standing institutional practices, orthodoxies, and attitudes?

How can interventionist voices and practices be embedded into museum and gallery work?

How can relationships with artists and external curators be meaningfully and ethically sustained after interventionist projects end?
From Institutional Racism to Duties of Care: Moving Interventionist Practices Away from Racism and Colonial Dominance by Sylvia Theuri

The tearing down of the Colston statue in Bristol in June 2020 was a significant and pivotal moment in British history with its effects felt both nationally and internationally. As Dorothy Price has commented, ‘The fall of the statue of Colston and the subsequent symbolic drowning of his effigy in the waters from whence his profits arose were prompted by a far more urgent necessity than scholarly debates on the rights and wrongs of public monuments’. The death of George Floyd, less than two weeks earlier on 25 May 2020, which was watched by the world through social media, was the catalyst for the tearing down of the statue. This significant moment can be seen as an example of the ways the arts and those who engage with them should be thinking in relation to anti-racist and decolonial practices. Within the arts there needs to be a significant fall and tearing down of historically problematic ways of working in order to bring forth new ways of working. On 24 February 2021, museum and gallery colleagues from across the UK came together online for a workshop looking at ‘Interventionist Practices’. This event was part of ‘Doing the Work’ – a series of workshops co-produced by the Contemporary Art Society and the Decolonising Arts Institute, taking place across 2021, and which focused on the challenges of embedding anti-racism and decolonisation in a range of different museum practices. Here, I synthesise and discuss the conversations that happened in that workshop.

What was the objective of the workshop?

The objective for the series as a whole was to respond to the needs of a wide range of museum colleagues wishing to engage meaningfully and practically in anti-racist and/or decolonial practice. This particular workshop considered the role of artist residencies in museums and galleries, and interventionist projects staged by independent curators and organisations, and focused on drawing out their short term and long-term impacts. The workshop proposed wider questions for discussion such as: How can interventionist voices/practices be embedded into museum and gallery work?; and How can relationships with artists and external curators be meaningfully and ethically sustained after interventionist projects end?

The day began with presentations by two curators who critically reflected on and discussed interventionist projects that they had engaged in. Priyesh Mistry, Associate Curator of Modern & Contemporary Projects at the National Gallery, London, discussed the Artist Residency programmes and contemporary commissions, with a particular focus on the exhibition ‘Rosalind Nashashibi: An Overflow of Passion and Sentiment’. I was also one of the presenters, and I reflected on my curatorial residency at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum focusing on my experience of being a Black curator engaging with sites and strategies of resistance as a curatorial endeavour.

Participants were then placed in various breakout rooms and offered the space to discuss anti-racist and decolonial practice with other museum colleagues in a more intimate setting. The conversations in these smaller groups raised a number of key issues and many more questions than answers, giving food for thought to those that attended. The three most prevalent discussion topics were: barriers to long-term change; legacies of interventionist projects; and duties of care. I detail and discuss them below.


Barriers to long-term change

The tendency within arts institutions to favour temporary engagement in decolonisation and anti-racism instead of investing in long-term organisational change was explored in various ways across the breakout groups. The first of these was in terms of where decolonisation happens in the museum, and through whose initiative. Several participants highlighted that most of the work around equality, diversity and inclusivity was being undertaken by women staff members and/or younger staff members who have less agency and power to enact change. Some participants acknowledged that decolonisation was happening predominantly with audiences in mind rather than staff and organisations themselves. There was a sense that learning and engagement around art and decolonisation was focused on exhibitions, programming and public events with limited focus around the learning that needed to happen for staff as part of their professional development.

Participants questioned how institutions could move beyond superficial action, beyond simply talking about the anti-racist work they were prepared to do and truly engage with transformative justice. Transformative justice prioritises the agency of individuals and process over outcome, and challenges unequal power relations; for art institutions this means centring the internal work needed to change racist structures and seeing this as lifelong work. Engaging fully in this requires institutions to change the way they work, to significantly slow down their pace to allow all their staff time to read and reflect on what genuine anti-racist and decolonial practices look like for their organisation. As one participant commented, ‘We can’t just call up other people to come and do the work that we should be doing’. This comment identifies that the work of eradicating racism in arts institutions is the work of all staff members; institutions should not be relying on temporary staff (predominantly staff of colour) to carry out this work in isolation.

As was the case in all the workshops in the series, discussion amongst the participants did not always remain focussed on the workshop topic. In this workshop, the participants talked at length about institutional racism and Eurocentric thinking being a barrier to long-term change and how, if these two issues remain unresolved, short-term interventionist strategies will have little to no impact in ridding art institutions of racism and colonial attitudes and practices.

Acknowledging the existence of institutional racism within the arts was identified by some of the participants as an important first step in moving beyond talk towards action. The term ‘institutional racism’ came into prominence in 1999, following the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1997. The UK Home Secretary at the time called for a public inquiry into Lawrence’s death, resulting in the 1999 Macpherson report, which concluded that the Metropolitan Police was institutionally racist. The report also identified that institutional racism was rife in all major institutions, not just law enforcement, and that as a result, minoritised groups were being significantly disadvantaged. One participant questioned whether art institutions could openly admit to being institutionally racist, even though twenty years have since passed. As one exasperated participant questioned, ‘Why can’t they make a commitment and actually admit and say what Black artists have been saying for many, many years? These are institutionally racist institutions’.

One participant shared an example of how they saw their organisation working to make changes to their institutionally racist practices, primarily through fundraising to buy artworks created by artists of colour. The participant acknowledged that their institution should have collected these artworks many years ago but had failed to because of institutional racism. Conversations then arose around how museums and galleries make decisions about new acquisitions. Some participants questioned how and why art institutions determine what constitutes ‘good’ contemporary art and how they decide which artworks are ‘worthy’ of collecting. They discussed the Eurocentric thinking that underpins notions of ‘good’ art and which guides decision-making when collecting. The consistent use of a Eurocentric knowledge base within this process has resulted in a widespread and collective failure by institutions to acquire artwork by artists of colour. Research shows that artists of colour are significantly underrepresented in public art collections. The impact of Eurocentric thinking within museums was also discussed in terms of the way artworks are interpreted. One participant discussed the importance of abandoning ‘the so-called neutrality principle’ that is embedded in curatorial work, often leading to a refusal to see, or a dismissal of, the wider socio-political framework affecting artworks.

Some of the participants acknowledged that Eurocentric thinking remains embedded in the curriculum presented to art students on university courses. Students tend to be taught a primarily Eurocentric curriculum by predominantly white educators, with little space given for non-Western ways of thinking. This is further perpetuated and ingrained in the system as students graduate and enter the art sector where Eurocentric practices, ways of being and ways of thinking continue to be centred. This points towards the notion that knowledge itself – how it is constituted, by whom, and for whom, and also how it is diffused – needs to be decolonised in order to bring about long-term change. By engaging in the practice of decolonising knowledge systems, museum workers in
decision-making roles would begin to make genuine space for diversity in exhibitions and programming, thus negating the need for interventionist practices in the first place. There was also discussion about the need to actively listen to communities of colour and to genuinely respond to the changes they are asking of institutions by opening up museum spaces to engage with non-European knowledge systems. Relatedly, an important point was raised about what institutions should be doing in response to communities of colour demanding radical changes to organisational structures, including a collapsing of existing structures altogether. Whilst the workshop participants did not suggest what radical change could look like, it might involve white staff members in leadership positions stepping down from their roles and handing over that leadership to people of colour. But how far are institutions prepared to go with radical acts of change that demand tearing down and rebuilding with others from the ground up?

The points raised in this section identify some of the deeply embedded institutional problems that exist within art organisations and which staff are grappling with. Long-term institutional change is difficult and complex work and must be undertaken alongside any short-term interventionist projects that art organisations engage with and produce.

Legacies of interventionist projects

Interventionist projects, when undertaken well, can leave powerful, lasting legacies within art institutions. For example, one of the participants talked about an artist residency having a long-term impact on their institution. They identified several ways the artist challenged and interrogated issues of gender, sexuality and race within their collection, which in turn prompted a whole strand of new work that the institution was still engaged in during the time the workshop took place. This also led to larger, longer-term questions being asked within the institution about who makes decisions, and how to work more democratically with external people.

However, and rightly, criticism has been levelled at projects that are used by institutions to give the appearance of engaging in decolonial and anti-racist work, when such work is short-term and when little thought is given to issues of sustainability and embedded, lasting impact within the institution. In her self-published essay, ‘This Work isn’t For Us’, Jemma Desai (2020) provides an excellent critique of short-term interventionist practices in art organisations that do not result in long-lasting change.¹

¹ Desai, J. (2020), This Work Isn’t For Us, Google Docs.

In the essay, Desai discusses the performative nature of temporary professional development programmes, residencies and public programming ‘targeted’ at people of colour. Her argument is that they only benefit the institution by providing ‘colour’ to white spaces, while the deeper, systemic issues around racism and discrimination, which staff and/or audiences of colour face on a daily basis, continue to be left unaddressed.

The extent to which interventionist projects are or are not embedded in art institutions after such projects end was a key topic of discussion in many of the breakout sessions. In particular, the participants reflected on what the legacies of short-term projects framed around anti-racism/decolonisation should be, focussing on the related factors of temporary change, staff turnover and movement and institutional memory. They raised questions about what happens to knowledge when staff or practitioners involved in anti-racist or decolonising projects leave, taking their knowledge with them, and what impact their leaving might have on anti-racist work being embedded in an institution. They also identified the archiving of previously undertaken anti-racist and decolonial short-term, interventionist work as key to creating a lasting legacy. Archiving not only preserves such work within institutional memory, but also creates a research resource that can enable staff who were not involved and future staff to take it forward, thus broadening and lengthening the impact. In relation to this, the participants also spoke about permanent staff not always being invested in temporary projects, but that such involvement needed to be fostered because of the ability of permanent staff to continue the work in different ways after projects end. Whilst each institution is different, generally the pace at which art organisations move from one project to the next leaves limited time for permanent staff to invest in thinking through legacy initiatives that can come from interventionist projects.

One possible way of encouraging investment amongst permanent staff working on temporary, interventionist projects, as one of the workshop participants described, is building in time for curatorial reflexivity and reflection within them. They gave an example of a strategy now in place at an organisation they had worked for: staff are coming together for dialogue and reflection near the end of a project in an attempt to embed staff learning and potentially initiate change in the institution’s practices before the project ends, rather than after, thus ensuring a more impactful legacy for it. However, because projects often do not go to plan, time for reflection and learning, when placed at the end, is often dropped. One way to counteract this would be to build in reflection at a number of key points throughout the project - making it a fundamental and routine element, and thus improving the chance of impact and legacy.

Available at: https://sourceful.us/doc/337/this-work-isnt-for-us--by-jemma-desai (Accessed 07 October 2021).
Another participant discussed the challenges of undertaking a curatorial traineeship and artist intervention in their institution’s collection. The institution was aware that the temporariness of the project was problematic and was looking for funding to provide a long-term post for the trainee (who was a person of colour) that would last beyond the project. Part of the reason for this was an awareness that the majority of the institution’s staff is white. Many participants spoke of their awareness of the lack of diversity of (permanent) staff in art institutions and within the arts industry more generally, and how their own workplaces are no exception. However, there was little discussion during the workshop about making changes in this area, and what that change could look like. Interventionist projects are often the way that people of colour are afforded opportunities in and are able to find work in art institutions, but they rarely lead to longer-term or permanent roles. The resulting problem is that, by using temporary interventionist projects to notionally ‘shake things up’, institutions perpetuate and reinforce the erroneous idea that the only role people of colour can have within institutions is to ‘intervene’ in them or to take up ‘temporary’ space within them, and that it is unnatural/an exception/a deviation for them to be permanently installed in them. The only way to dismantle this idea is to ensure permanent roles are offered to people of colour, and this might need to involve positive action over several years until there is drastically improved representation in museum staffing.

Duties of care

How do art practitioners of colour have agency in institutions? How do institutions honour the voices of people of colour? What value and challenges can this bring? How can art spaces belong to all? These questions, which arose during the breakout session, focused on notions of care and the duty of art institutions to look after the people they collaborate with on interventionist projects. One participant questioned how one can work with community groups in ‘the right way’. Another talked about wanting to devolve curatorial decision making and curatorial control and to transfer agency to others. Another participant expressed that they were keen to think through methods of working on interventionist projects that did not require asking people of colour and queer people to continuously rearticulate their lived experiences. They were interested in keeping a dialogue active and keeping artists who have been marginalised by institutions involved in discussions around their work and projects, as well as ensuring that all staff in institutions had an understanding of the artists’ practice and their reasons for creating their work. The participant was interested in thinking through working with artists in ways that were not exploitative but centred on enabling agency and prioritising care. Interestingly, whilst these various desires were spoken about in the session, the participants did not offer any specific strategies that they could put in place.

One participant discussed what it meant to be better aligned with their gallery’s audience who were predominantly university students and from culturally diverse backgrounds but did not feel that the gallery was representative of them. The participant wanted audiences to come in and feel that it was their space. This conversation brought to the forefront questions around what it means to care for the audiences that enter art institutions. Zahava Doering and Andrew Pekarik (1996) have written about the entrance narratives that museum audiences bring with them when they visit exhibitions, stating that, “museum and gallery visitors are not blank slates on which we write”. Audiences come to these spaces with entrance narratives, which are the fundamental ways that audiences ‘construe and contemplate the world’ and the ‘personal experiences and memories that verify and support their understanding as they engage with art’. If museum workers genuinely seek to welcome more diverse audiences and, moreover, to offer ‘care’ in the process, they must develop an understanding of this concept of ‘entrance narratives’ and then apply it in audience research and when devising visitor service strategies, exhibitions, displays and public programmes.

There was also discussion within the breakout session about the ways art institutions do or do not hold space for people of colour when certain subject matter, artworks and projects have the potential to cause pain and bring up trauma for audience members. Participants asked: How do institutions do this well or not? How can institutions create healing spaces? How does one centre audiences who have historically been marginalised in art spaces? How do institutions bring people into their spaces safely? These questions foreground the importance of institutions privileging practices and acts of care, since significant damage can be done when this does not happen.

A problematic example can be seen in relation to the ‘Steve McQueen: Year 3’ exhibition at Tate Britain in 2019. The exhibition comprised group photographs of Year 3 children across London’s primary schools and was described by Tate as offering ‘a glimpse into the capital’s future’. A key criticism surrounding the exhibition was that care was not taken in relation to audiences of colour that engaged with it. McQueen’s exhibition was placed in close proximity to the ‘British Baroque: Power and Illusion’ exhibition, which included the Portrait of Hortense Mancini, Duchess of Mazarin, as Diana (c.1674-1688) by Benedetto Gennari.

which depicts Mancini surrounded by four young Black ‘attendants’ and two dogs. Three of the Black ‘attendants’ wear silver collars which mirror those of the dogs, and mark them as being enslaved. They are depicted as being the property of Mancini and under her control. Discussions subsequently arose on social media about the trauma and pain that Black audiences experienced after having visited the McQueen exhibition.8 Situating the Steve McQueen exhibition in close proximity to an exhibition that included such a deeply problematic artwork was a huge failing in Tate’s duty of care to its audiences, and not only Black audiences, because all people should be triggered by the sight of enslaved children, no matter what their race is. However, it is important to consider how many Black children came to see themselves represented in McQueen’s exhibition, only to walk into an adjacent exhibition and see children who looked like them depicted as slaves. What does this communicate to Black children and their families about their place and value in British society? Some have argued that trigger warnings should have been in place, while others have questioned why such an image was considered fit for display in the first place. Perhaps if Tate had considered the ‘entrance narratives’ of its audiences in this instance, this shocking failing could have been avoided. The duty of art institutions such as Tate to look after their audiences should be a priority in all areas of museum work.

Conclusion

The three key issues raised throughout the workshop were barriers to long-term institutional change, legacies of interventionist projects and duties of care. These are important and significant areas impacting the working practices of museum staff and the institutions they work for.

The use of interventionist strategies by art institutions to engage only temporarily with racism and decolonisation, rather than prioritising and investing in long-term change, was a major topic of discussion during the workshop. Participants questioned who is currently invested in the issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity, and talked at length about institutional racism and Eurocentric thinking being a barrier to long-term change, highlighting that these two issues needed to be resolved in order for short-term interventionist strategies to have any impact in relation to anti-racism and decolonisation. Participants also expressed their desire to engage in practices of care for staff, collaborators and audiences, and to ensure this was practiced within interventionist projects. The example of the ‘Steve McQueen: Year 3’ exhibition at Tate Britain in 2019 highlights very clearly the harrowing consequences of art institutions failing to fulfil their duty of care to the people of colour they seek to engage.

I have discussed radical change and transformative justice as being central to the ongoing work of museum workers (of all types and levels of seniority) if they are seriously committed to embedding anti-racism and decolonisation in their institutions. It is essential that art institutions create space within their core for the work, perspectives and agency of individuals of colour, that they give as much energy to process as they do to outcome, and, that they work continuously to redistribute power (both externally and internally) to the very people they seek to engage, alongside any temporary interventionist projects they may choose to put in place. Engaging fully in this requires institutions to work differently, to work more slowly, more carefully, to build in time for reflection so that interventionist projects can initiate genuine change in institutions before they end, ensuring their legacy for decades to come.

Some of the workshop participants identified that acknowledging institutional racism within the arts is the necessary first step in moving away from simply talking and towards action. However, art institutions have yet to openly admit that they are institutionally racist, despite twenty years having passed since the term first came into prominence. If we are seeking radical change in museums and galleries, and if we are seeking to tear down old and problematic structures, this admission is a minimum requirement and starting point.

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8 The White Pube (the art critics Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad whose content is shared largely on social media) identified and highlighted this issue via Twitter stating, ‘Tate Britain investing time n money in revamping their image as Not Racist, and then exhibiting a painting of a white woman surrounded by dogs and black kids all wearing shiny collars, in the middle of an exhibition you can only get to past Steve McQueen’s portraits of year 3 kids’; Available at: https://twitter.com/TheWhitePube/status/1231902512689760277 (Accessed on 3 November 2021).

Dr Sylvia Theuri is an art educator, researcher and independent curator.
References


Afterword

The events of the summer of 2020 provoked an immediate and powerful response in arts organisations in the UK. An awareness of this, and of the acute emotional impact the events had on PoC colleagues, impelled us to make a radical change to the Continuous Professional Development programme we run for our Member Museums in 2021. Anti-racist and decolonial issues had been the focus of a number of influential events in our programme in preceding years, but by the autumn of 2020 it was clear to us that we needed to devote an entire year’s programme to examining them as pertaining to all areas of museum practice. As an almost entirely white organisation, we knew that we could not deliver such a programme alone, and we are profoundly grateful to Prof susan pui san lok and Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton for agreeing to collaborate on this, for us, ground-breaking endeavour. We went into the programme knowing we would learn alongside our colleagues from museums around the country, and indeed we have learned many and deep lessons.

We thank the workshop participants, speakers and hosts for sharing their concerns and experiences so generously with one another, and also the teams at the Contemporary Art Society and Decolonising Arts Institute for administering and managing the series with such care.

Finally, we are indebted to Khairani Barokka, Lisa Kennedy, Aksana Khan, Kathleen Lawther, Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi and Sylvia Theuri who took on the considerable task of synthesising the complex discussions that took place during each seminar. Their accounts are candid, personal and passionate. Individually and collectively the accounts map a broad terrain and surface many of the key issues that confront museums and their staff, trustees and governors.

Everyone involved would agree that the year’s programme constitutes a beginning. It is our hope that by publishing these texts we provide a stepping stone for further work, and that we may one day look back and see them as having contributed to real change in this country.

Caroline Douglas
Director, Contemporary Art Society

Recommended Readings

Curating


Burns, R. (June, 2020) ‘How can we approach Anti-Racist Curating?’. Available at: https://museumofhalftruths.co.uk/Anti-Racist-Curation (Accessed 23/3/22).


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**Interventionist practices**


Noble Umoja, S. (2014). *How biased are our algorithms? (TEDx Talks)* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXwJ8yQf6dI (Accessed 31/03/22).


Interpretation


Collecting


Engagement


