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.

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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
Director, Decolonising Arts Institute, University of the Arts London
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 anti-racism 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 5: Collecting Practices and Acquisition Strategies

26 May 2021

This workshop was moderated by Dr David Dibosa (Reader in Museology, University of the Arts London) and opened with presentations from Dr Nima Poovaya-Smith (former curator at Cartwright Hall Gallery) and Sepake Angiama (Iniva) on the approaches and initiatives they have developed to impact the makeup of collections in public museums and art galleries.

Questions for discussion included:

What can short-term, targeted acquisition strategies achieve in terms of diversifying collections, compared to long-term changes to collections development policies?

Is diversifying a collection the same as decolonising a collection?

How do racist and colonial modes of thinking and doing manifest in the way art museums and galleries develop and make use of their collections?

What does an anti-racist and/or decolonial acquisitions or collections development policy look like?

What are the challenges of embedding anti-racism and/or decolonisation in collecting practices and policies, particularly in terms of navigating between ethical imperatives, visitor expectations and the interests of funders/donors/trustees?
Towards Radical Acquisition Futures?

Forging Meaningful Change in a Climate of Fragility and Underrepresentation

by Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi

The concept of decolonisation is not new, yet the word has been used by arts institutions in their recent rewriting of policies alongside other buzzwords such as ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ and ‘equity’. What does it mean to create fundamental changes in practice and address issues of systemic marginality? In this summary, I critically reflect on the discussions that took place at the fifth workshop in the ‘Doing the Work’ series, which focused on how decolonisation and anti-racism can be embedded in the collecting practices and acquisition strategies of museums. This workshop provided an opportunity to delve into the various challenges and barriers curators are facing when attempting to engage in anti-racism and/or decolonisation through collecting artworks.

The workshop began with presentations from Dr Nima Poovaya-Smith who was Keeper of International Arts at Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford in the 1980s and 1990s, and from Sepake Angiama who is the current Artistic Director at Iniva. Poovaya-Smith discussed her efforts to diversify (rather than decolonise) the collection at Cartwright Hall during her time there. She emphasised the importance of learning about and collecting work by artists who are creating in the present and not simply collecting older material. She asserted that it is not acceptable for museums to continue collecting the same limited range of artists over several decades, particularly artists who are already well supported by other organisations, and around whose work there is already an abundance of art-historical scholarship and criticism. Angiama then spoke about Iniva’s ‘Future Collect’ initiative – a legacy project involving three year-long partnerships between a curatorial trainee, a contemporary artist of colour and a museum or gallery, resulting in the museum acquiring an artwork by the artist involved. ‘Future Collect’ is a model that art institutions can learn from, particularly those that made public statements of solidarity with social justice movements in 2020 and are now seeking to centre decolonisation and anti-racism within their organisations.1

1 Future Collect has roots in the data collected by the ‘Black Artists and Modernism’ project in 2016. The audit funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and carried out by Anjalie Dalal-Clayton at University of the Arts London revealed that less than 4% of the artworks held across 31 UK public collections have been made by Black artists (African, Caribbean, Asian and Middle Eastern heritage) (see Dalal-Clayton, 2020). Several participants cited the Black Artists & Modernism audit as the impetus for subsequent, recent audits, which anecdotally reveal that comparable figures in other collections are as low as 2% of the artworks in their collections.

After the presentations, the workshop participants broke out into smaller groups for more focussed discussion. Several important questions were raised during the breakout session, including: What does it mean to do anti-racist work in the museum space and structure? How do racist and colonial modes of thinking and doing manifest in the way art museums and galleries develop and make use of their collections? How does a collection embody a framework of decolonisation beyond diversification? How can museum staff navigate change despite an apparent lack of meaningful commitment to decolonisation and anti-racism from museum leaders? The discussions across the various breakout groups revolved around five key themes, which I will synthesise and critically discuss. The themes are: intention versus action; making policy; support and buy-in from the top; grappling with White Fragility; and embedding change through the workforce.

Making policy

Many of the participants reported that they had been tasked with rewriting or creating a new acquisitions policy for their institution in the aftermath of the re-ignition of the Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall movements in 2020. Rewriting policy is where imbalance within collections should be acknowledged and where clear steps for embedding anti-racism in collecting practices should be articulated transparently, so as to enable accountability. One participant said that they would like their institution to commit in writing, and as part of its collections development policy, to a set percentage of new acquisitions by Black, Brown and minority artists within a specific time frame because ‘statistics hold weight within museums’. Another participant suggested the opposite; instead of placing emphasis on the commitments that had been made, the policy should highlight what the institution had not yet done to encourage action. Policy making is where change can be initiated and embedded within museum practices, and there are a variety of ways public art institutions can go about developing policy so that it can make change in the areas of anti-racism and decolonisation. The question is what institutions are willing to commit to after having recently made such bold claims of solidarity with social justice movements.
If museums are to move beyond diversification towards decolonisation, those with the ability to create change in the museum should constantly question how a new acquisition can encourage decolonial thinking or can support anti-racist strategies within the museum as part of the selection process. Some recent acquisitions that were supported by the Contemporary Art Society – including John Akomfrah’s film Vertigo Sea (2015) for National Museum Wales & Towner Eastbourne, two works on paper from Barbara Walker’s Shock and Awe (2015) series for Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, nine works on paper by Jade Montserrat from What Should White Culture Do? (2017) for York Art Gallery, and Moses: Burning Bush (2015) a film by Samson Kambalu for Bury Art Museum – are possible examples of museums contributing to anti-racist efforts because those acquisitions support living Black artists whose work honours Black history and the contributions of Black communities to the UK and beyond.

Intention versus action

In the workshops and more widely across the last year, there have been numerous conversations about decolonisation and anti-racism. Whilst conversation arguably enables the foundations of decolonial work to be laid, in my view change can only be facilitated through action. Thus a common theme across the breakout groups was the understanding of what constitutes action, how action is manifested and implemented, and how intention can easily be mistaken for action. One group delved into the concept of an ‘atmosphere of disbelief’, which describes an environment in which there is widespread disbelief that anyone would actively work against anti-racist and decolonial efforts, and crucially, how such an environment or atmosphere functions as a barrier to change. This occurs because the disbelief is underpinned by a denial that the institution or its staff are capable of supporting or even enacting racism within their work. Thus, if individuals and institutions believe on a deeper level that they are doing no wrong, there is no impetus from within to change their attitudes and practices. In order for institutions to move from a position of supposed intention to one of action, they must accept that their staff and the institution as a whole can, and does, perpetuate and reinforce inequality, inequity, sexism, homophobia, ableism, colonial thinking and racism, one way or another. The essential starting point for making change is to presume that these varied forms of discrimination and oppression are already in place, and then to put aside feelings of guilt or shame and instead commit to identifying or rooting out the precise processes through which these various forms of oppression are enacted, followed by concrete steps to undo those processes.

Support and buy-in from the top

In order for policy changes to be initiated and authorised, and for institutions to move from positions of intent to action, there needs to be buy-in from those working in senior leadership roles within the museum, and from the bodies that they report to, including boards of trustees and funders. One participant described their institution as being reactive rather than proactive, which they felt was evident in the words and actions of their senior management. Several of the participants expressed a desire for support from leadership through clear policy or advice from an acquisitions committee comprised of both internal and external stakeholders. These are examples of what support from above might look like, but what does the current lack of support look like? Commonly, it manifests in a failure by senior management to allocate time for curators to research and put into place practices or measures that are focused on anti-racism and decolonisation within their working hours, which in turn forces curators to conduct research on their days off including weekends. This is frankly shameful, particularly after the public expressions of solidarity that public art institutions made during the BLM protests of 2020. 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. Decolonisation and anti-racism must not be treated as an extracurricular task, nor should it be treated as work to be undertaken solely by passionate (but typically underpaid) junior staff or by staff who find themselves underrepresented in the collections. Having attended all the workshops in the ‘Doing the Work’ series, I noticed that the majority of participants were in curatorial and assistant curatorial roles, and very few were in senior management roles. When senior management do not attend such workshops, not only does it leave curators feeling unsupported (as many participants expressed during the workshops), but it also indicates that despite public statements of solidarity vis-à-vis BLM, the anti-racist and decolonial agendas that are supposedly shaping policy are not a priority for those in leadership roles. Such lack of engagement, and crucially, lack of commitment to attending professional development workshops alongside more junior staff, in turn prevents meaningful, long-term change across the various departments and strata of the museum. Indeed, as one participant commented, ‘What good is it to have people working together yet independently?’

2 This only applies to the curators who are committed enough to do this in their own time.
Grappling with White Fragility

Participants expressed a range of experiences and concerns around their own whiteness and dealing with white defensiveness or White Fragility within the workplace (DiAngelo, 2011). A participant asked, ‘how does acknowledging one’s background [i.e., proximity to whiteness] contribute to or hinder the progress of anti-racism and decolonising in acquisitions?’, while another questioned, ‘for a predominately white team, is intellectual passion without lived experience enough?’ If so, they further wondered, is it ok to use one’s ‘voice as a curator to advocate for and articulate another person or communities’ representation among their peers?’ Some of the answers to these questions lie in the asking of further questions: In practice, what does acknowledging one’s proximity to whiteness look like? Do you attend workshops and conduct research related to the colonial history of the museum or town you are in? Have you established relations with the artists whose work you have acquired or wish to acquire (by attending exhibitions nearby, accessing publications or inviting them for talks and projects)? Do you work with and support emerging curators from diasporic communities, particularly if the collection does not reflect local demographics? By asking and then responding to these additional questions, one can assess whether one’s own proximity to whiteness, or one’s own lack of lived experience as a person of colour, are barriers to engaging with or implementing change.

White Fragility is clearly a significant, ongoing issue within the sector and presents a major barrier to change. Some participants described that key terms relating to racism and colonialism were being treated as buzzwords in their institutions due to there being no clarity or shared understanding of their actual meaning, or, an unwillingness to engage with their meaning due to white defensiveness. One curator described being labelled and potentially dismissed by colleagues as the person who continually points out racism (because their colleagues did not like being confronted about it), while another discussed instances of severe defensiveness from senior management who took constructive criticism

Embedding change through the workforce

As Sepake Angiama commented at the start of the workshop, ‘Where are the positions and voices reserved for the freelance curators, curatorial trainees, and researchers from the African and Asian diaspora?’

‘Why are they not operating within the institutions to facilitate and provide much needed context and embed change?’. Several white participants admitted finding it difficult, and even uncomfortable, to implement change without having lived experience as a Black or Brown person, and explained that they have asked management to hire Black, Brown and minority curators and practitioners to provide the relevant expertise. This led to further discussion and concern about the more general underrepresentation of people from the Black and Asian diasporas in museum staff and about how the labour of such individuals could be appropriately acknowledged and remunerated. When the workforce is not diverse, the institution is not able to provide appropriate guidance and direction when it comes to engaging with anti-racist or decolonial practices. The impact of this on collecting practices can be seen in the way museums and galleries seem to always be ‘playing catch up’ with the diversification of their collections, sourcing new acquisitions from the same small range of Black and Brown artists, and tokenising the more established artists among them. The subsequent impact of this process is that public museums and galleries fail to nurture the careers of emerging and local artists, which is an important dimension to diversifying and improving representation.

Many curators engage in dialogue with local community groups. Whilst this approach provides an opportunity for the wider public to inform the development of collections and to include a broader range of perspectives, several participants raised concerns about it: that it is typically funded and run through short-term, temporary projects and therefore fails to become sustainably embedded within the long-term practices of the institution; that community ‘networks’ are often assembled for such initiatives but dissipate when they end; that this

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4 Having attended all of the workshops, and listened to over 20 curators in each one discussing these complex topics, it is clear to me that key terms and concepts within anti-racism and decolonisation were either not being used or were being misconstrued indicating the need for deeper engagement and understanding of these terms by museum workers.

5 I observed this process in action when working as a curatorial trainee at the Contemporary Art Society – curators looking for new acquisitions tend to refer to a very limited range of Black, Brown and minority artists.
valuable curatorial work is sometimes extractive (i.e. it is not based on a relationship of genuine exchange) and unpaid; and that those providing expertise and/or sharing lived experience are perceived and treated by institutions as ‘sources of information’ rather than as valued holders of much-needed knowledge or as peers in the acquisition, interpretation and curatorial process. The latter point is particularly revealing in terms of how gatekeeping and hierarchies are perpetuated within the museum.

Conclusion

Museums and galleries have been grappling with the issue of diversity for many years, and decolonisation had slipped quietly onto the agenda for some museum workers in recent years. But it has really only been since the re-ignition of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020 that decolonisation and anti-racism have really begun to take up space within the discourse around the future and frameworks of museums, shaking some institutions out of a long-held collective amnesia about Britain’s colonial history and its ongoing impacts within museum work. One participant commented that BLM did not simply place pressure on institutions to diversify, but instead asked them to think critically about every step or decision they make and have made in the past.

Over the course of the various conversations that took place within the workshop, it became clear that the lack of consensus on what it might mean for museums to decolonise, combined with the evident complexity of the work that needs to be done, is causing museum professionals to feel anxious, if not fearful, of ‘doing it wrong’. It is therefore imperative that museum professionals develop a greater awareness and understanding of how racist and colonial modes of perception manifest in the way collections are developed, utilised and displayed in museums and galleries. Without this basic grounding, any new policies or strategies that are developed in an attempt to engage art institutions in anti-racism or decolonisation will at best achieve very little, and at worst, exacerbate existing problems.

I am left wondering if it is possible for museums to take that step beyond diversification and towards anti-racism or decolonisation if at best less than 4% of the modern and contemporary artworks held by public collections are by Black, Asian and minority artists. If diversifying is the process of acquiring more artworks by Black, Brown and minority artists, then decolonising requires changes to the structure of acquisitions, which can be initiated by asking questions of the collection before and after making acquisitions. Those questions need to critically interrogate the decisions that are made around acquisitions, how they are made and what attitudes inform them (an understanding of how new acquisitions shape or are shaped by the hegemonic, Eurocentric or Western-derived narratives that are already embedded within museums’ structures is important here). And those critical interrogations need to be underpinned by quality research and critical self-reflection, rather than White Fragility and defensiveness, and carried out in collaboration with permanently employed curators of colour. Furthermore, museums should not simply be rushing to fill the huge gaps that exist in their collections through short-term initiatives to collect work by Black and Brown artists. They should also commit to long-term strategies that can achieve the aims they so boldly made to their staff and audiences in the summer of 2020.

Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi is a social anthropologist focusing on cultural heritage and contemporary art from the African and Caribbean diasporas, and was a curatorial trainee at the Contemporary Art Society from January 2020 to November 2021.
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**


Interpretation


Collecting


Engagement


