

MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

MMF Convening: Board Culture and Composition

November 8 2021
12–1:30PM EST

ATTENDEES: 26

- I. INTRODUCTION AND GROUP AGREEMENTS
- II. MMF SURVEY
- III. SPEAKER BIOS

Seena Hodges (she/her) is a connector who loves people and is passionate about equity, intersectional feminism, and access to brave spaces for all. She founded The Woke Coach® in 2018 because she wholeheartedly believes that racial equity is the defining issue of our time. Seena is the President of the Board of Trustees at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She is the first person of color to hold this distinction. She is also a member of the Black Trustee Alliance for Art Museums (BTA), an organization created to increase the inclusion of Black perspectives and narratives in North American art museums. Seena is a member of The Women's Presidents' Organization (WPO), and Minnesota Women's Economic Roundtable. Seena is currently writing her first book, *From Ally to Accomplice: How to Lead as a Fierce Antiracist*, to be released in early 2022.

Victoria Rodgers is a creative business strategist living in New York, a current MFA Candidate at Parsons, an art collector and a Trustee at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and Creative Time. She is also co-chairwoman of the Black Trustee Alliance for Art Museums. She is widely recognized as one of the youngest trustees of an American museum and I mention that because I believe she brings this perspective to our discussion today. She holds an MBA from Stanford and a BA in art history from Yale and was a curatorial fellow at the Whitney Museum early in her career before working at Kidstarter and is currently a strategist for 2x4 a design studio where she works on brand and organizational strategy. Victoria has been outspoken about the need for museums to reflect the artistic and cultural diversity of this nation.

Amy Gillman is currently Director of the Chazen Museum of Art at Madison Wisconsin where she has been since 2017. Prior to that she was director at the Toledo Museum of Art where she spent more than twelve years and held positions as deputy and associate director, as well as curator of modern and contemporary art. She began her professional museum work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland where she was associate curator for four years. She holds a PhD in Art History from Case Western Reserve University as well as an MFA in photography from Columbia College. "The Era of the Visionary Museum Director is Over...Or it Should Be" is the

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title of an op-ed that Amy wrote for Hyperallergic in July 2021. She also represents the Midwest which is an important sector we don't often have represented on these calls.

IV. PRESENTATIONS

Seena Hodges: Building connections between communities and museums

In her role as “the highest ranking volunteer” at the Walker Art Center, Seena has been building connections between the museum and the community it serves. There are three key characteristics Boards need to have to make progress:

1. Greater awareness. Individual self-awareness and as a group.
2. Courage. Don't let fear get in the way of the work.
3. The ability to move to action. What they do to implement change.

Awareness:

Seena made the other Board members aware of the disconnect between trying to attract Black and Brown people to their Gala and setting the ticket price at \$125 per person. She pointed out that an evening out for a couple could run close to \$1000.

Action:

\$25K allocated to create a ticket and membership fund for BIPOC folks, who are invited to events all year long.

Victoria Rogers: The Black Trustee Alliance for Art Museums

The Black Trustee Alliance grew out of a conversation among Black Trustees. Their mission is to increase the inclusion of Black perspectives and narratives in American art museums to make our institutions more equitable and excellent spaces of cultural engagement. Equity and excellence are positioned as a false binary in the art world. “An equitable institution is an excellent institution.”

Culture takes time to shift.

- A 2018 Mellon study of arts museums found that “intellectual leadership positions” had grown slightly more diverse (in terms of race/ethnicity) than they were in 2015 (5%) but conservation and museum leadership remained the same.
- Williams College 2019 study revealed that “85.4% of the works in the collections of 18 major US museums are by white artists...African American artists have the lowest share with 1.2% of the works.”

Against this backdrop, the Ford and Mellon foundations brought together group of Black board members of arts organizations to discuss ways to incite change.

Data driven. This week, the Black Trustee Alliance is launching a study of trustees across the country, to be published in April/May 2022. Hopefully, it will be a tool that all art museums can use to compare themselves to others.

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Three areas of focus:

- Staffing and leadership
- Exhibitions, collections and programming
- Vendors, contractors and service providers

Amy Gilman: Fostering a relationship between Boards and non-executive Staff

- Was in Toledo for 12 years and worked in a non-Executive role.
- She brings a Director's perspective to the table.
- There is a lot of fear about changing the status quo.

V. DISCUSSION

Community and Constituency

What methods are being used to build community (internal and external)?

- Co-create programs in conjunction with the communities, within and outside the museum.
- Invite colleagues to the table.
 - To defray tension between staff, executives and Board members, the Brooklyn Museum held weekly meetings for 3 months, facilitated by the DEI committee and staff.
 - At the Walker, they shifted to a "Race First" perspective post George Floyd's death. The Board wasn't doing enough on the subject of equity within the organization.
- Centering diversity as the cornerstone of excellence is key. Have to reframe the traditional view that sees excellence and diversity as binary opposites.
- Cultural institutions are extremely hierarchical; wrapped in privilege. At Brooklyn Museum, meetings are open to the entire staff.
- Difficult to do your job effectively if you don't work closely with the Staff.

What is the difference between DEAI and Racial Equity? Are there tools to make that distinction?

- Race = the Original Sin: we have to solve for different racisms and Anti-Blackness
- "Solve for the worst of all ills". Helping one group benefits everyone else.
 - e.g. Creating curb cuts for the disabled helped everyone to better navigate sidewalks.
- Brooklyn Museum sent out an anonymous Staff survey and reviewed the Open Letters posted by various groups.
 - Leadership, Board, and DEAI subgroups brainstormed a list of 135 activities to make the museum more equitable, then talked through all of them.
 - Hired a full-time DEAI person to facilitate the process.

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- What about the issue of fatigue and loss of focus? People seem to be quickly forgetting the energy of the racial reckoning of summer 2020. Is it difficult to keep the focus on racial equity?
- In Minneapolis, the fatigue is real, but there's no escape from it because the trials are ongoing (e.g. Derek Chauvin). Constant cycle of bleeding and healing.

Solutions to fatigue:

- Create better policies/procedures to counteract the bleeding, when it begins.
- Develop an ally-ship across races. Helps people to carry the burden and stay on message.
- Education-based approach to address anti-Blackness: making space for people to learn and understand.
 - Intentional, focussed conversations.
 - Monthly coffee hour chats.
 - Hiring a racial equity person or Director of DEAI.

Hiring a DEAI staff member doesn't work if they aren't very intentionally supported and structurally positioned to be successful. Turnover is really high for those positions.

How to turn education into action?

- Partnerships.
- Paths to leadership.
- Make space for people who are willing, enthusiastic and those who are open to education.

How to go about fostering relationships between the Board and the Director/Executive Director?

- Model positive behavior: "Make space for honesty; make space for the truth".
- Embrace partnerships, transparency and "Brave Spaces", where everyone is encouraged to speak freely (Directory and Board).
- Keep empowering the Staff and the Board with encouragement and positivity so they can continue to make progress.

What is the elephant in this room – what hasn't been said?

- Financials: does equity include pay equity?
 - Yes - Brooklyn Museum hired a consultant, along with a subcommittee, to tackle wage equity and transparency.
- Ambassadorship: an aspect of Board life/duties/responsibilities that is often overlooked.
- Access: how does a Board hear from Staff that's "closer to the ground"?