

# MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

## MMF Convening: Collections Transparency & Equity

November 15 2021  
12–1:30PM EST

ATTENDEES: 27

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

**Yvonne Lee (she/her)** is a first-generation immigrant-settler of Korean descent and the Head of Integrated Systems, Digital and Technology, at The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. She held prior roles at LACMA, Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture, and worked as an independent data manager for arts nonprofits informed by her human-first approach to data and technology that examines assumptions coded into prevailing information practices. She serves as President of the Museum Computer Network Board of Directors, is a founding member of LA County's Arts Datathon, and consults on UCLA Department of Information Studies' Professional Programmatic Committee. She holds a B.A. in Art History from UC Berkeley and an MLIS in Archival Science from UCLA.

**Asma Naeem** is the Eddie C. and C. Sylvia Brown Chief Curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, where she has organized exhibitions on the work of such artists as Candice Breitz, Isaac Julien, and Valerie Maynard. Prior to the BMA, she held curatorial positions at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, where she presented, among other shows, an early career retrospective of the work of Titus Kaphar, and an historical and contemporary exploration of the silhouette through the lens of gender, race, and technology. She has written widely on American art, contemporary art, critical race theory, the South Asian diaspora, and museum studies. Her book, "Out of Earshot: Sound, Technology, and Power in American Art, 1847–1897" was published by University of California Press in 2020. She is currently organizing a presentation of the work of Brooklyn-based painter Salman Toor (forthcoming 2022), a sweeping social and art history of the hip hop movement both as an American and global phenomenon (forthcoming, 2023), and a transatlantic, multigenerational exploration of the Partition of British India in terms of trauma, dignity, and futurity (TBA). Naeem holds a B.A. in art history and political science from the Johns Hopkins University, and a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Maryland.

**María Elena Ortiz** is Curator of the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), where she is spearheading the Caribbean Cultural Institute (CCI). At PAMM,

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Ortiz has organized several projects including *Allied with Power: African and African Diaspora Art from the Jorge M. Pérez Art Collection* (2020); *The Other Side of Now: Foresight in Contemporary Caribbean Art* (2019); *Latinx Art Sessions* (2019); *william cordova: now's the time* (2018); *Beatriz Santiago Muñoz: A Universe of Fragile Mirrors* (2016); *Ulla von Brandenburg: It Has a Golden Sun and an Elderly Grey Moon* (2017); *Firelei Báez: Bloodlines* (2015); and *Carlos Motta: Histories for the Future*. Her writing has been published globally. A recipient of the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (CPPC) and Independent Curators International (ICI) Travel Award for Central America and the Caribbean, Ortiz's curatorial practice is informed by the connections of Latinx, Latin American, and Black communities in the US and the Caribbean.

## IV. PRESENTATIONS

### **Yvonne Lee: Existing Models and Promising Practices**

She is an archivist by training. In her work with the Los Angeles County of Arts & Culture, she has studied the intersection of demographic data and actionable data. How do you disrupt notions of linearity, periodicity and subjectivity?

- The fundamental question of data collection is “Where do you live?” (Why? How long?)
- There is no such thing as “raw” data: it is always set in the context of culture, environment, etc.

#### *Existing Models:*

- Registration practices usually take the form of secondary or tertiary research as part of an incoming loan or in the accession process.
  - Impacted by volume of collection and rate of accession. Priority is completion, not accuracy, with little time to evaluate sources.
- Surveys for contemporary artists require further discussion on issues of privacy, periodicity, consent/use.
  - How will the data be used?
  - Do we have a right to know?
- Smaller institutions lack the leverage to utilize surveys; how would this tactic serve them?
- For so-called encyclopedic collections, this doesn't address deceased and unknowable makers.
  - What about the right to be forgotten?

#### *Promising Practices::*

- Michelle Caswell published *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* earlier this year.
  - Writes about chronoautonomy and challenges to the Western understanding of time, linear progress, start and end dates.
- Challenges to the heteronormative narrative of identity as stable.
- Co-creation and citation, not just of non-museum staff but museum staff too.

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- Poieto is working with Chickasaw Nation on citation, approval, and compensation platform for memory and knowledge work. (*From Product Design to Creative Code, poieto offers projects a sandbox to explore social considerations in tech*).
- Funding; building into operating budget the need for this labor and practices.
- Data policies around collections information; we have European GDPR and the California Consumer Privacy Act but nothing in place with access to knowledge, privacy, the right to forget and be forgotten.
- Radical Transparency Model (Minneapolis) and informed consent:
  - Survey sent out with a warning to participants that any information provided may be made public.

## Asma Naeem: Updating the Collecting Roadmap

She outlined the process at Baltimore, an encyclopedic museum. She has been at the museum since 2018. At that time, the collecting roadmaps didn't match the current mission.

### Step 1

The Contemporary and Senior Research Curators reviewed the collection for 7-8 months, looking at existing buckets. Divided the collections into key buckets, according to new priorities.

### Results

- Identified the collection's current strengths (e.g., Pop Culture, Minimalism, etc.)
- Mapped new directions museum would like to go in (e.g., American diaspora).
- Decided to clearly state for each object how it reflects the collecting priorities.
- Created a clear articulation between roadmap and objects coming in
  - Realized that gifts are problematic.
- Development is involved, but they would like to bring in community stakeholders (such as members of the Indigenous communities) currently not at the table.

### Step 2

- With reacquisitions funds in 2018 were able to bring in an influx of works by BIPOC artists (mostly contemporary).
  - BIPOC and women representation = 20% and growing.
- "Now is the Time" exhibition pulled back the curtain on the museum's list of acquisitions. Brought to light the inequities of the market and donors who guide us to white supremacist practices of collecting.
  - As few as 7-8 objects represent millions of dollars.
- After the deaccession, the acquisition budget in Contemporary grew from \$200,000 to \$1.5 - \$2 million.

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- Decided to share the wealth with other departments in tandem with collecting roadmaps.
- Range of fund distribution to other departments went from \$50,000 - \$300,000 to \$500,000 - \$1 million.
- Other models to tip the scales?
  - Understands that there are different sides to the debate about deaccessioning. Open to hearing other opinions, but deaccessioning has, in her opinion, been the most effective of the models out there.

## María Elena Ortiz: Collecting Strategies at PAMM

PAMM's strength is in works that address the issue of Identity. PAMM started as a kunsthalle and then started bringing in works by artists like Al Held. They couldn't compete with larger institutions due to their budget, but could focus on works that were relevant and more responsive to local Afro-Caribbean populations.

- Developed a collection strategy under Franklin Sirmans: photography, books, Christo, African diaspora, local Miami artists, etc.
- Although the collection sounds diverse, it depends how you think about it:
  - 75% of the collection are white males, but that also includes white Latin American artists.
  - 8% of the collection are Black Americans (that doesn't include other Black artists, e.g., Black Cubans).
  - 14% of the collection are Caribbean.
  - 21% of the collection are women.

## *Budgets & Acquisition Avenues*

- Acquisition budget is around \$500,000; 99% goes toward Contemporary artwork.
- 35% is allocated for BIPOC artists.
- Acquisition avenues are determined by different affiliate groups — different funds such as Latino artists, Black artists, women artists, local art, etc.
- This strategy — different affiliate groups — has worked well for their museum.
  - *Cons:* It results in collecting fewer well-known, top flight artists, e.g. Donald Judd.
  - *Pros:* They have a large holding of BIPOC artists that are representative of the Caribbean, African diaspora, and Latin America.
  - *One major hole:* Asian American artists.

## *Fundraising*

Although started with this focus they had difficulty fundraising in the beginning. A lot of the Caribbean works initially came through donations.

- In 2017, they decided to make the Caribbean a central focus of the museum's platform.
- Received \$1 million from Mellon. Provided 1) seed money for exhibitions

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and 2) more visibility demonstrating that it is something that they are committed to at all levels of the museum.

- Created a fellowship for researchers, and scholarships.
- Has kept the curatorial department and donors accountable.
- Trying to build-in structures that will outlast the staff.
- Also trying to think more holistically about the Caribbean to include Haiti, etc.
- The collection's audience is 75% Cuban.
- They have a nonlinear approach to collecting and no issues with accession. In 2020, 16% Caribbean; currently at 18%. Their strategy has helped to push the needle.
- They now have a Caribbean specialist on staff. Investing in knowledgeable staff who can handle the work.

## V. DISCUSSION

*What other methods are you using to persuade institutions to shift the collections focus to be more inclusive and diverse?*