MMF Roundtable: Editorial Committee

Discussion over Zoom moderated by Hailey Loman, March 26, 2022

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Hailey Loman: How would you characterize the state of art museums at this moment?

Alex Klein: Confused.

Margot Norton: I feel like we're in a wavelike pattern of moving forward, then a bit backward, and then forward again. A state of confusion for sure, trying to figure out how we got here and where we are going.

AK: Building on these sentiments, I feel like this confusion partially results from signals that suggest a will to change while simultaneously defaulting to previous modes. And of course we are all operating under extremely precarious conditions two years into the [COVID-19] pandemic, when we are beginning to understand that you can't rely on the old systems. But those are the only systems that are in place, even at this moment, when everyone is asking for change. It really feels like there are so many roadblocks embedded within the bureaucracy.

Connie Butler: I think that the crisis in museums reflects the crisis that the country is in. Museums are not alone in grappling with systemic racism and all the different issues of our histories. But I also think there are moments of great hope. I think we're at a moment of incredible potential change and, as Margot says, it comes in waves. I feel this is a moment where change is really possible. I don't think we're going to go back to the old ways of doing things in museums. It's just not possible.

Mia Locks: I agree. I would characterize the internal state of art museums right now as in crisis. Part of the problem is the exponential growth (in terms of dollars spent on art collecting and museum expansions) over the last few decades while far less attention has been paid to the internal aspects of museums as workplaces. That gap has created a crisis. The internal structures and

organizational cultures remain effectively the same as they've always been—very hierarchical, patriarchal, siloed, white, with power concentrated at the top of a pyramid and with virtually no accountability. Museums are in crisis because staff are finally coming out and naming the issues they are seeing and the problems they are experiencing daily. And I think leadership has been shocked to a certain extent to hear these things said aloud.

Makeda Best: I think that what's different about art museums is that the public believes the art museum and the field as an entity in society are unlike the organizations or institutions that they've already lost faith in. They've lost faith in the government. People don't go to church. They also have doubts about education. But [not about] people in arts institutions. This is a serious moment, and we could potentially lose a generation if it sees this institution like those that have failed them or as hypocritical. So it is also a moment of possibility for change. It has to, because otherwise I don't know that we're going to have the audiences or donors anymore that we need to sustain our work. We're not going to be as robust as we used to be, and people will turn toward other kinds of culture—culture that they will create, culture that will not require the same kinds of systems and structures that they see as faulty.

Liz Munsell: Yes. I was hesitating to use the word "crisis," but that's exactly what came to mind. In crisis internally, at my own institution, with the extreme reduction in workforce during the first year of the pandemic still reverberating, and then also externally, in terms of many museums' identity crises and a seismic shift from being largely elitist cultural institutions to institutions with increased civic responsibilities and broad appeal. There is an enormous tension between a community-center model and a much older colonialist paradigm of what a museum has been in this country. And the pressure of that, the weight of that, is falling on staff at all levels. I think of, in particular, women-identifying staff who are often dealing with emotional labor—the unseen and unvalued labor of caring for colleagues in crisis. And then, of course, BIPOC employees who are on the frontlines of having to navigate between these "new publics," which is often code for the people of color that museums know they can no longer exclude if they plan to be "relevant" and, more importantly but related, inclusive.

MB: Along those lines, I feel like there is enormous pressure to create the thing that's going to bring about change—the event, the exhibition. The expectations on the field are enormous. People want the field to speak for them, or to hold people responsible, to provide a forum for the unrepresented, or even such practical things as to take care of the archives that need to be saved. There are always questions or considerations to make sure certain kinds of artists are seen or creators are saved.

CB: I think one of the sources of pressure is that museums don't know what they are anymore. I think all of us came into museums believing that it was an environment that we knew and could work in and change, but now there's a demand for it to be so many things. I think even among this group, we probably have different ideas about where on the spectrum of museum-to-

community center we should be. There are also so many different demands on what we as curators are expected to do and be. I think that's part of why we came together, as curators, because we sit in this middle zone between audiences and administration and the upper levels of management and boards, trying to navigate how the museum can change and become something different. But the demands of what those different roles should be are much more complex than any one institution or any curatorial or frontline staff can manage. That, to me, is the heart of the crisis too.

AK: I totally agree with that, Connie, and I think it connects so well to Makeda's point, too. Fundamentally, museums have these antiquated infrastructures that really are not conducive to the many things that people desire and expect. Liz was speaking to their civic potential, and that people see these institutions as places that should serve them in many different ways. And so, I think the crisis also comes down to both expertise and infrastructure, because museums just aren't set up internally to do the things that they say that they want or that they are being asked to do now. And they also don't necessarily have the people inside of them who have the skill sets necessary to truly support the well-being of workers and publics.

ML: Yes. I've been thinking about the hypocrisy that Makeda mentioned. Art museums fancy themselves as stewards of culture, and yet their internal cultures are incredibly unstable and unsustainable. It's like somebody walking into a bank to open an account and the banker saying, "Yes, of course, we will take such good care of your money." And then saying, "Oh, our books? Our own accounting is a total mess, but don't worry, your money will be fine." Who on earth would trust that kind of hypocrisy? I think that's part of what younger generations are pointing out. All of us in this room have devoted our lives to being in these museum workplaces and trying to make them better in our own ways, and we have accepted some of the hypocrisy consciously or not. But now we have this younger generation basically showing up and calling "bullshit," which feels like part of the crisis. They're asking us to examine ourselves and our own complicity too…

MB: But you know what else? It's also that they don't want to do the emotional labor. They say, "I'm not going to do that to myself. I don't want to be in those spaces." So that's also different.

ML: Well, they're not wrong! [*Laughs.*] It's exhausting.

HL: Can you speak more on the emotional labor that you're watching happen? And how maybe another generation or a different group does not want to participate in [it]?

MB: I'll say for myself that, when I was younger, I knew that I was entering a world where the people didn't look like me and that I would do whatever work I had to do because I was in the room, and I had a responsibility to do that. I don't think that younger people today feel that way anymore. And they shouldn't. I did that under a different context. I don't know that I would feel

the same thing today, either. I am from a different generation, different kinds of expectations were placed upon us, we inherited a different legacy.

ML: I think they've also seen what's happened to us, you know?

MB: Yeah. That's true, too.

ML: Whether they've been in an institution with a front-row seat or heard about it from friends or read about it…

MB: Or just in society. They've seen people giving their health, their time, trying to do things and just being demoralized. And they're saying, "I'll imagine something else. There needs to be something new." And that's quite beautiful and admirable.

AK: I think you're right. For a younger generation, they see how broken the system is. They see what our cohort has gone through and they think, "You know what? There are better jobs out there that are not going do this to me." Or, "maybe the museum is not the place where I need to do this kind of work."

ML: I was just reading an article about how a workplace toxic culture is more than ten times more powerful in predicting an organization's attrition rate than compensation.[1] Of course, this data isn't specific to art museums, but it's worth thinking about how important organizational culture is. On a similar note, a 2021 study by AAM found that one in five museum staffers think they will leave their job in the next three years.[2] So while I think we should pay people better in the museum field, we also need to assess what's really happening in these workplaces, what the culture is like, measure it, and support a field-wide culture shift. Because I know many museum leaders care about retention and have noted a staff turnover problem in recent years, but even if we pay people better I'm not sure it will really have enough impact if the toxicity continues. We also need to address the larger problem of workplace equity and organizational culture.

AK: I 100 percent agree with that. People in our field are often in it because it's a personal passion, right? So, there's an ideal for many individuals of working towards something bigger than

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[1] Donald Sull, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig, "Toxic Culture Is Driving the Great Resignation," MIT Sloan Management Review, January 11, 2022, https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/toxic-culture-is-driving-the-great-resignation/.
[2] American Alliance of Museums, "Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on People in the Museum Field," based on a survey conducted March 9–17, 2021, https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Measuring-the-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-People-in-the-Museum-Field-Report.pdf.

yourself, something bigger than the paycheck. However, when there is both low pay and a toxic workplace culture, it breaks the camel's back.

MB: Going back to something you said earlier, Alex, about the younger generation. I think that, perhaps [with] social media and other factors, to do this work you don't need the legitimacy of the institution anymore. You don't need the imprimatur of anything. You can do something somewhere and still have an audience and get attention and make it in the so-called field or be satisfied. And I think for some it's a question of, why should I participate in this institutional or older culture when I can make something and still be successful?

CB: I agree with everything everyone has said about the toxicity, of course, but it also takes a really long time, and you have to be patient and committed for the long haul to make the change. I was talking to a colleague the other day about change at MoMA [the Museum of Modern Art, New York]. The difference now in the leadership at that institution in the last two years, it's actually huge. There's such a different view of what the arc of work, the arc of a career, the arc of a commitment to something should even be. I think that's a real factor too.

AK: I think that's such a valuable point. Reminding us of the temporalities is important because of the presentism of social media and a kind of impatience for it all. I think the thing that gives me hope is that many museums are quite young and actually have changed quite a lot. And I want to be optimistic that individuals within institutions have the capacity to shift them. Things are really different from what they were even five or ten years ago, and keeping the long game in mind is quite important.

MN: I think that these things are crucial in terms of sustainability, and how we have to grow and change as younger generations are coming into these positions. We see ourselves as knowing the systems, being accustomed to that emotional labor, and knowing that what we've survived cannot continue. Part of what I think brought MMF together is that we have all survived these systems to get where we are, but at the same time we feel an urgency to change these systems so others do not have to go through them. It's our responsibility in our organizations to listen and learn and think about how we can shift without too many steps backward. It's true that things are moving forward quickly, and we see that happening, but it's also important to pay attention to the ways in which the system is also ingrained in us.

CB: Absolutely.

MB: In some ways I wonder if a lot of this pressure is because the field has done such a good job over the past twenty years talking about justice and representation. We have a generation that has absorbed a lot of the ideas that we thought were new, that people were writing and saying years ago. Now those ideas have been absorbed as true. We don't even know where they came from

because they're a part of the fabric of everyday culture. But we've been hearing about justice, and we've been reading about representation, now where is it in the actual institution?

HL: Yes. Off that, particularly in the last few years across the sector, art museums have produced exhibitions and programs that have featured BIPOC and other marginalized artists' work. I'm curious about these recent efforts at diversity and inclusion. Has this been a meaningful rupture, like in the structures that sustained racism as well as gender discrimination?

LM: There've been a lot of successes, which Makeda was alluding to, in socializing and normalizing greater diversity in museum programming. And that is a change that, at least in my institution, has happened in the time since I came into the field about twelve years ago. I arrived at the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts], Boston, from a small cultural center in South America with the goal of working with Latin American and Latinx artists and connecting with Latinx audiences. At first, it was a real struggle. I got the smallest spaces, the smallest budgets, and had exhibition proposals rejected. An enormous percentage of the program was flat-out white and male. And now, just twelve years later, that looks a lot different because we've done the work of advocating and insisting on correcting the racism and sexism that is inherent to our institutions. Also the larger movements within this country are calling out the problematics of those exclusionary, systemic ways of operating. We've been a part of how and why these shifts have manifested in art museums, which is huge, and we have a lot of momentum to build on.

ML: I would like to ask you, Connie, if you would share your perspective on this because I often think of you as somebody who's been quietly, maybe even secretly, doing this work for decades...

CB: [*Laughs*.] I'm laughing because you say secretly. [*Laughs*.]

ML: Well, I wonder if it was like a Trojan horse? Or at least I imagine the language and the stakes were different twenty-five years ago?

CB: Totally. I think historically the conversation has even differed geographically. I've always felt like there were certain things that were possible, honestly, on the West Coast that were not possible in East Coast institutions because the relationship to history is different, and there wasn't a history of how to act, how to make acquisitions, what histories to pay attention to. Things were more possible, and it's part of why I came to the West Coast when I did. I knew that, for example, the feminist show that I organized[3] wouldn't have been possible on the East Coast in any of those museums at that time.

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[3] *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), organized for The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, featured over 120 artists.

It's funny how you frame it in terms of secrecy because yes, there was a time when it was work that you just wouldn't talk about. You just would try to chip away at it through acquisitions and exhibition decisions. But yes, there's been a huge shift. Now it's important to articulate one's strategy for collecting or for diversifying a program, and there's a desire for that on the part of trustees and museum leadership, or at least they know enough to pay lip service to there being a desire for that.

I'm a person who just prefers to put my head down and do the work. But thank goodness now there is a way to articulate a strategy. That said, the question about DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] initiatives, I think it's too early to say whether or how those initiatives will change the institution. If you're speaking specifically of the work that's being done with DEI consultants, for example, at the board level, or even with staffs, there's a lot of organizing but it's not clear to me yet how we're going to undo these systemic things that are operating at the board and leadership levels and whether the DEI work will do anything.

Like the group that we have at the Hammer, for example, which we've had since about 2014, is a really wonderful, self-selected staff-led group, but we're at the point where we can't do any more than what we've done. We've picked all the low-hanging fruit, and now the really hard or more nuanced work that has to happen at the board and leadership level, we don't actually have any effect on. So, unfortunately, many of my BIPOC colleagues have left the group. But I do think we've made the discussion more public within the institution and we've normalized it. That's a really important step, but the tough granular work that has to happen at these other levels, where money or a whole host of issues is at stake, is harder.

MB: A lot of actions are being taken, but there's still the lack of a true understanding of injury and harm and history. Going back to exhibitions, many institutions are just rushing to put something up that makes them appear to be responding to the current moment. I think that's harmful because this work deserves scholarship. Some of this so-called desire for change is genuine, but we don't respect that this takes knowledge, self-study, and a lot of work, and it constantly requires acknowledging your privilege. These efforts appear to be ways to please audiences, to avoid getting in the news, to not be accused of things, and to not seem unhip. It's encouraging in some ways to see the difference, but in other ways it's discouraging because people think that they've done the work but they haven't arrived anywhere. They've just put some stuff up on the wall and said some things, but they actually haven't done anything or changed.

ML: I think you're saying something really important, Makeda. You mentioned the importance of self-reflection, acknowledging privilege, and taking a moment to be self-critical. Unfortunately, a lot of people in positions of power in museums are often afraid of that level of vulnerability. But we need to normalize this kind of vulnerability as part of leadership. I think the folks here in this room have demonstrated a commitment to being the cycle breakers and to shifting course, which is hard work. We have inherited a lot of toxic stuff from our years in the field and some of it's

already inside of us, but we are self-examining and making sure we don't pass it on. And even when someone might miss the mark, we have all been willing to keep working on ourselves and to not give up on each other and to work together. It's easier to avoid the discomfort or give up or to do what you said, Makeda, to perform or pretend, to do the bare minimum. There are plenty of folks out there who are hoping that this "equity stuff" is going blow over soon...

MB: And it's time consuming. I think some people are doing this work because they think they're going to get to a point where it's over.

ML: "We solved racism!"

MB: But there's no answer! It doesn't "end." And people are uncomfortable with that, but that's what this is.

ML: We're going to be here, on a journey, and it's just going to be hard, for a long time.

CB: Part of what also creates this cycle and reinforces it is the problem of the money. That sense that the directors have to run after the money and if they stop long enough to actually look at the whole structure of philanthropy, somehow the whole thing is going to fall apart. So nobody is doing that work of trying to rethink the philanthropic model. It's a real problem. How do we rethink board membership and its nominating structures? People on boards are nominating their friends and the people who look like them and come from the same social stratas. That's part of the toxicity of a very old nonprofit model that is very American.

ML: No one's courageous enough to think much more creatively about it.

AK: Yeah. It's a fear of failure on that level, right? It's a cliché, but change is hard. You need to totally mess up and own it. And I think we've seen that in our own group. We've fallen apart as a group only to come out, I think, stronger for it and more nuanced. But when it comes down to money, institutions are afraid of failure; there's no end game after that.

Something else I just wanted to pick up on is under the umbrella of DEAI [diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion]. I think a lot of institutions are letting themselves off the hook because they can domesticate this work under a more corporate kind of committee. There are definitely grassroots self-initiated things that are happening within institutions, but you can also have a completely DEAI mission–driven leadership that is really hiding their mistakes underneath those umbrellas and corporatizing or neutering them.

MN: I think we can all acknowledge that museums are showing a lot more women and non-binary and BIPOC artists right now. In DEAI groups, we often talk about care as something central that institutions need to focus on. But I feel like there's no care without money and time. And money

and time are often compromised when institutions do this outward posturing. When showing an artist of color, we have to also ask questions like, What space is it in? What does the budget for that show look like? What are the resources and timeline for the scholarship? All of those aspects are crucial to pay attention to. This connects to something I've always admired about this group. Back when we were looking at the numbers of women artists in collections and exhibitions, we acknowledged that there are so many other factors to consider besides the general statistics.

HL: How do we focus the conversation on the philanthropic sector? Do we get the philanthropic sector in a rigorous conversation and still chase the money, or do we thwart that system completely and go for more transformational fundraising strategies or crowdsourcing?

MB: There's a real funding challenge, especially in so-called encyclopedic museums, but I think there's also opportunity. You have to bring donors along on these journeys instead of assuming that they can't get there, because they're feeling the pressures too. Many of them don't want their spaces to be the ones where nobody goes or that nobody is talking about. I certainly know donors who are very open. If you're lucky, they realize, "I don't know what this generation wants, but you do. So please try to do something about this." There are ways of bringing people along, but we still need new funding models.

LM: I agree with that, Makeda. It's also a problem of the funding structures being so centered on individuals of wealth... It's also an issue of audiences for colonial museums in particular, the audience being largely white and over fifty-five—in the MFA's case, from the suburbs of Boston—and the ticket structure being an important source of revenue (at least pre-pandemic). That's where that program actually plays a really important role in thinking through not just the ethical responsibilities to the audience, but the relevance of institutions to the cultural interests of present and future generations.

When we look back to the Culture Track study a few years ago, about the competition that museums are facing in terms of other cultural industries, we're pretty low on the totem pole in terms of what people want to dedicate their time to. And I think that's in part because we weren't offering programming of interest to broader and younger audiences. I do see that changing, but it's being met with resistance from those who are more traditionally aligned with these larger, "encyclopedic" or colonial museums that we've been talking about. The advent of NFTs is just another reminder that there is a whole cultural industry that does not depend upon or relate to the visual arts sphere within museum exhibition spaces. How are we going to contend with the drive away from the in-person, physical experience of art?

CB: In the contemporary sphere, we've seen such a rise in the collector-billionaire model. The amount of power that those people have in the market and therefore in access to boards and programs has been really damaging. One thing that's interesting about the model that my director and board have started or has tried to build is to stack your board not with collectors but rather

people who are more broadly philanthropic—in our case, those interested in the so-called social justice mission of the museum. What it means is that they're very hands off in terms of the program. They just want to support what they see as the platform for public discourse, around issues of social justice, in the museum.

I was also thinking, one of the most problematic things I feel are binaries that have been talked about in the current environment, this idea of objects versus people. I have such trouble with the notion of a museum as just a hoarder of objects, which of course, in the colonial model, it is in one way. We have to do a better job of communicating what it is that we do. I don't ever think of my job as being one of just amassing objects. In fact, we're caretakers of histories and, to Makeda's point of scholarship, we're people who are trying to lift up histories and do scholarship and tend to the lives of artists within these institutions.

HL: Coming off of what Connie was saying, how did we get to this place? Now that we have this sense of where we are now, we can begin to think about, historically, the circumstances that shaped the perception of the museum to the public. So my question is, do you think that public confidence in the museum has remained the same? I'm curious where it's still stuck.

We were talking about this younger generation that is looking critically at the museum. Could you continue speaking about this shift and where the public hasn't shifted, or where they're fine with the state of things.

CB: I think one audience that almost never gets talked about, but is part of our constituency, is artists. I think that artists believe in museums as much as they also want them to change. They still want a place to show their work. They still want a curator to work closely with and to do scholarship and to write and do deep thinking about their work, but they definitely want museums to change. And I think you see that particularly with the younger generation of artists, especially BIPOC artists—many of them are now holding out and making certain demands of museums, which I think is really, really powerful. Whether it's the demands of the artists in the Whitney Biennial getting Warren Kanders to step down [from the board], or even to a more granular level, which I think in the long run is more powerful. Artists, BIPOC artists, demanding writers of color for their publications or insisting that the photographer who documents their work be a person of color. All these small gestures are really more than symbolic and are hugely important to long-term change. I think general audiences so far don't even really know that much about the turmoil that's going on in museums.

MB: There's been a lot more coverage in the mainstream press, whether the *New York Times*'s coverage of museums or other outlets. There is a wider awareness among the general public that something is happening (or needs to happen!) in museums. And that was one of the surprises in all our research areas, just how much you'd find these articles in journals and general-interest publications talking about the art world, or where, for example, authors are contextualizing the

worker movement growing in museums within a broader kind of American labor movement and sociocultural history. The public is being exposed to a narrative about the way the challenges in society are mirrored in museums, which I think is important. It's important that we're not seen as an elite entity that can take care of itself.

HL: There has been a lot of talk about how art museums play an active role in shaping a democratic society. It would be interesting for you all to talk a little bit about when the museum has harmed this vision of a democratic society and when has this benefited the museum?

MB: The diversity that we see in art institutions benefits civic society. The new perspectives offer a wider public new kinds of access—they can reach audiences that aren't as familiar with us. It's not just new content, it's asking totally different questions. In my own field—I'm a photo historian—the kind of materials that we would've put up on the wall and the kind of exhibitions that we would've seen, those things are all being questioned. It's important that we're making these changes because people are now seeing the kinds of photographs that they know to be important in their lives, but they're seeing them analyzed and historicized and contextualized in really important ways. So I think that there's a lot of civic good going on right now.

CB: I also think that museums have become places that more and more people feel are accessible to them. I remember many years ago when people would talk about how intimidating it was to cross the threshold. And while I think that still holds for a lot of people, I think we have done a better job of being welcoming and making museums more social and civic spaces. I can't get out of my mind visiting the Kaws show at the Brooklyn Museum and thinking about the crowds taking selfies, enjoying that exhibition, but also at the same time maybe wandering in to see John Edmonds's photographs or an exhibition on Georgia O'Keeffe's clothing. Part of the challenge is just simply letting people know that the space is for them. And I think we are doing a better job of that for the most part.

HL: I'm curious about the burdens that you carry from the myth and memory and legacy of the museums that you work with. Because we haven't really talked about your individual institutions.

MN: It's interesting that you brought this up, Hailey, because we all work in very different institutions, and our publics are different too. I feel like I'm constantly reminding people that the New Museum is not a collecting institution. Looking back to when Marcia Tucker founded the New Museum in the 1970s, I can imagine that idea of a "new museum" was a kind of oxymoron. Museums were places of preservation and historical canonization, not living or evolving places that would embrace experimentation or challenging work. I also think that what the public might think of museums is also changing and evolving. It's certainly a moment where there's a lot more attention placed on how museums are contending with their pasts, and even though I work in a museum that's only been around since the 70s, it still inherits the museum structure.

LM: In my case—working at a so-called encyclopedic museum with holdings generated from collecting practices, many outlawed today, that extracted from many parts of the world—the question is how to deal with this history. I realized that I could not, as a museum employee, critique the institution the way that artists could, and so I chose to bring in artists to address areas of the collection that were of interest to them and that were potentially problematic for being in a museum in Boston. That is one way to leverage our positions as contemporary curators and generate institutional critique from within.

AK: In my case, we don't have a collection at ICA. Like Margot, we have a core ethos, but the program is constantly changing. In some ways we have a different audience every season or every few years. I've really seen that in my eleven years at ICA. We'd like to think of ourselves as an institution that's nimble and responsive, but then we're also housed within a very bureaucratic, Ivy League structure. So there's this kind of push and pull between those different systems that makes the work really complicated, because you're constantly confronted with the infrastructure of the university while you are buoyed by its resources, which I'm sure is something Makeda can empathize with. You can be really experimental and fast paced, but then you also hit a lot of walls. It's surprising how traditional, and retrograde, some of the infrastructural stuff is.

It's been hard to grapple with how the program, and ultimately the external function of the organization, can be held back by outdated notions of what hierarchies need to be within institutions and the way that work needs to happen internally. At ICA we've been increasingly moving away from "museum" as a term, because of all its connotations, and really embracing the "institute" in our name. Something I'm personally really interested in is how we can be an institute in a doubled sense: within the context of the university, in that we are a Kunsthalle-like space to see art, but also a center for artistic knowledge production and research that complements the work being done on campus by scholars working in other disciplines.

We've also been discussing what it might mean to try and remove the perception of "the museum" for people when they come to our space because of everything that it connotes and brings with it, how internal infrastructure really affects the external culture of a space. There was a long-term negotiation to remove the lobby desk and make the area a reading space, which, as all of you know, is a long, really hard thing to do in an institutional way. But it makes a really big shift in the way that somebody holds their body when they enter the building. It's not the final answer, but it was an initial barrier that needed to be removed so that we can begin to rethink how people are welcomed in.

HL: Maybe this is a nice time to tell me how Museums Moving Forward formed?

AK: I'll just add something quickly to Makeda's and Liz's points. We're all coming from very different institutions. But I think the thing that aligns all of us is we've all had resonating experiences. Even though we all come from very different institutional structures, our stories are

strikingly similar, and that's the tragedy of it. There are different degrees with respect to different positionalities, of course, but you don't have to go very far for everyone to tell a story in this field.

MB: But it seems that the different degrees and ways have offered us insight... We always came together. We've always come to a point where we're all saying the same kind of thing, but then another thread starts to develop out of that and we realize that is where we need to go.

AK: Yes. And it's not to say that the stories are homogenous at all, right? Not to toss around a term like intersectionality, but I think the nuances and complexities have only gotten more and more heightened as we've gone forward, which is a positive thing.

CB: I could speak a little to the part of the origin story anyway, thinking about Margot being at the New Museum with its history of Marcia Tucker, which is an activist history. She founded the New Museum in reaction to the failures of the Whitney Museum in many ways and...

ML: How she was marginalized to the point that she just left and started her own thing, right?

CB: [*Laughs*.] Yes. Sounds familiar, right?

MN: Yeah. She said that the only way for her to become a director of a museum as a woman was to found her own.

CB: I was thinking of that and how MMF originated in the #MeToo moment in 2018. I believe it was Thao Nguyen, a collector in town and an agent in Hollywood, who approached Helen Molesworth [a well-known curator who had recently departed her position at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA)] and said, "Is there a need for this in the museum sector?" And Helen said, "Of course, yes." [*Laughs*.] Anyway, we gathered as quickly as we could, a group of women, curators and directors mostly, in Los Angeles and New York, to discuss the current state of the field around issues of gender equity. And it evolved from there.

ML: For the record, that group was called Time's Up Museums. It was a feminist group where a lot of folks came together to share experiences of harassment, discrimination, and other unfair treatment, basically what it's like being women in this field. Things were relatively informal until we were fortunate enough to get some grant money, and then MMF grew out of the need for more structure and planning. MMF built off the ideas generated by Time's Up Museums and grew from those early conversations about gender equity in 2018 and 2019, and more conversations about racism, racial equity, and intersectional feminism in 2020 especially. We spent a lot of time and energy figuring out how to do this work in a more structured way but without losing the horizontality and collaborative approach that got us to that point, so we developed a shared leadership model and this was the first step we took as Museums Moving Forward in late 2020. That leadership team includes those of us here right now, a group hitherto known as the

Editorial Committee, as well as our co-directors of research, Marissa Del Toro and Matthew Villar Miranda, who joined MMF in June 2021.

MB: But I think that MMF really originated in the moment when you, Mia and Connie, went to the AAMD [Association of Art Museum Directors] conference in Atlanta in early 2020 with documents we had been collectively drafting in working groups. We had been working throughout the fall of 2019. Everybody took a section, and we wrote "10 Ways to Move the Needle" and a corresponding "best practices" document for implementation. And it was really grinding work for two months, where these groups were meeting in person and over the phone (this was pre-Zoom!) in LA and in New York. And then Mia and Connie were nominated to take it to AAMD, and that was a moment where we realized we needed something else, another approach, and this was January 2020.

ML: Just before the pandemic hit.

MB: We were anticipating that we were just going to show up with our documents and lay them on the table and that everyone was going to get on board. [*Laughs.*] But it didn't pan out that way...

ML: We presented it to the women directors group within AAMD and they were generally supportive, but that was it.

MB: So we were in this moment of doubt. What next? What does this work mean?

ML: And what's the strategy to get there?

MB: And when are we going to be heard? We had been working since July of 2018. We did it—the coalition—then COVID happened. And then it was George Floyd. First, we changed with it. Now we really needed to figure out the path forward.

LM: In July 2018, when we first came together in New York, there'd been a series of very high-profile firings of women leaders in the field. This was also following the moment when many women came forward about being sexually harassed and discriminated against by Knight Landesman, the publisher of *Artforum* magazine. There was a field-wide call to end his tenure at *Artforum*, and a group came together called We Are Not Surprised, borrowing from the artist Jenny Holzer, with her permission, which was linked to a larger call against the systemic modes of sexual harassment in the field, especially for younger women. That was called out in this moment, in addition to the firings of women who had made it to positions of leadership, despite all of those obstacles.

AK: I think MMF grew out of a moment where there needed to be more refinement and alignment. I think everyone was angry for different reasons and also for the larger issues that Liz laid out. And that's also when, coinciding with what Makeda mentioned, a smaller group reconvened over in Zoomland and started the work again. But there was a moment where there needed to be a reconfiguration.

CB: As we talk, my mind goes back to that moment where we presented to the museum directors and naively thought they would all jump on board. But in fact, even though everybody knows there's a problem, there was a need for evidence. There is a need to document and articulate what many problems are in the field, because otherwise there's just too much fear. Nobody wants to be the first person to jump on to support an initiative like this. None of the directors will take the lead—from the women to the feminist men.

AK: And then there was a moment where we thought we were going to become like an ombudsman group, which is maybe still on the table. I think that shift to data seems to also be at the forefront of questions of equity, right? We were looking for ways we could help prove the problem, despite the positions that we're all in institutionally. And not to digress, but Margot's point about Marcia Tucker starting her own institution, I think that's certainly a historical model we can look to and embrace, but we're all in institutions. We're all institutionally affiliated, and there's something important about our roles as curators in institutions. That's a huge part of this group.

ML: After we went to AAMD to share our platform and got generally positive feedback but not much traction, it forced us to focus on a new strategy. A few folks in the group suggested we might tweak the language in our document to make it more palatable for directors, and others were not on board with that idea. Some felt more aligned with the movement for change we were seeing driven by various staff members and were far less interested in appealing to leadership. And I think some real clarity came out of these internal debates because we came to recognize and more consciously articulate our collective position as the folks "in the middle," embracing the mediating role as curators or educators or managers, and as art museum workers who have been in the field for many years if not decades and may not be eligible for unions. We love museums, and we believe they can and must change from the inside out, so we are pushing from the center, if you will.

For me personally, MMF is linked to my departure from MOCA and my passion for creating more equity inside museums. What appealed to me was this incredibly smart group of women trying to answer the question: can we harness our collective power to work together across institutions to establish some real pathways for fieldwide change? Can we focus our efforts on the system rather than individual people or institutions? We know this work needs to be data driven. We need to measure so we can assess progress. Otherwise we will end up having the same conversation a few decades from now, just like the conversation today echoes to a shocking degree

the calls from the late 60s and 70s, from the 90s. We have been consolidating information in one place so that it can serve as an ongoing resource.

MB: It's not only the data piece that we realized was important, but our infrastructure has also been validated; we see similar models, and a lot of people in the field are now thinking about organizational structures. We made a very conscious effort in the beginning to do something that was very different, to have this shared leadership model that has evolved and shifted based on the projects at hand. Two years ago, we did it on a hunch. We did it to try it out, to be creative and to see if it could work, and it's been exciting to see that it worked and is something that other people are trying in other ways as well.

MN: Something else that brought us all together was recognizing the need to document, to collect this information, and to share it so that it doesn't get repeated. We don't want to give up and allow for harmful patterns to repeat, but to make sure that we tell these stories so that we can move forward without them happening again.

HL: Thank you. That's really where I wanted our last thought to be: where you're all headed with MMF.

CB: One of the things that the convenings have made clear is the alliances with other groups and the importance of that solidarity. There have been several moments where we have reaffirmed for ourselves the belief that museums can change, the belief that the work will actually yield something that can move the field and that it's worth doing. I think we all feel a love for this work and a commitment to trying to make the museum a better place.

LM: Absolutely. I think it's also worth recognizing that many of us have decided that the best way to further the work is to practice self-care by leaving the institutions they've been a part of, and how great a travesty that is because of the brain drain that it represents—these are experienced curators who are just absolutely burned out and don't see a way forward. One of the reasons why I'm so invested in MMF is because I wasn't making headway in my own institution at the time. And I knew that I could no longer keep banging my head against the wall in that space, so I decided to work outside in a way that I know will filter back in.

So many of us are leaving museums because we can't continue to work like this. It's a redirecting of energy: invent new institutions or work for private collectors or smaller scale operations, or found a new museum. The field is broadening in exciting and healthy ways, but museums are losing talent. Some of this exodus is generational, and some of it is just survival. [*Laughs.*]

CB: It's a way of surviving in it for those of us who can't actually leave, and that's generational too, on the other end. How do we make it better and more viable for ourselves and for others?

ML: I saw a lot of nodding while you were both speaking just now, and I hope MMF will continue to serve the purpose that you're both describing: to offer ongoing support for museum workers who are trying to create more equity and better workplaces. Even when things get frustrating in your individual institutions, it can be really meaningful to know that MMF is still here moving the work along, slowly but surely, on behalf of the field.

MN: It's also important in coming together to be self-critical toward our own positions at our institutions. There's no way to move forward and affect change in this field without sharing these stories and holding each other accountable.

LM: To pick up on the question of where MMF is going, and to some of what Alex was speaking to as well, Mia and I are just coming off of a meeting with MASS Action, the group that we're partnering with on a series of convenings that they've been organizing. Basically, the idea would be to channel some of the grant money we've been privileged to secure into their very grassroots effort. They've been doing this longer than we have and have amazing ideas about an accountability metric for every time a museum is accepting funding, asking, and I'm paraphrasing, "What are the kind of ethical standards that we're applying?" "How does that line up with the identity of inclusivity we project?" That's just one of the many things that they're trying to develop.

I bring them up because I do think that when they proposed a metric in their early years, like 2015 or 2016, maybe even 2017, there were not many curators involved. Curators maybe saw that work as antithetical to the content work they are traditionally charged with, but that has changed drastically in terms of curatorial responsibility to the public and the engagement piece But it's our job to knit together some of the privilege that we have in our positions of (limited) power, our access to funding and to funders, and to partner with these more grassroots educator-driven initiatives like MASS Action and the incredible unionization work that's happening right now. We have to work towards solidarity and strengthening this broader movement. The pressure is there from staff across museums, but the curatorial solidarity has been lacking. And so I see that as part of MMF's role as well, as much as I see the data collection as part of what's going to fortify our argument and our ability to generate energy around this movement.

HL: That's a really nice note to end on. It's such a gift to take something that, for many, feels shrouded in mystery and to make it clearer.... It's inspiring work, what you're all doing, and you're very inspiring women for me. Thank you.