

MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD



MMF and MASS Action Convening: Curation, Care, and Collections: Part 2

September 13, 2022
1–2 PM EST

ATTENDEES:65

I. INTRODUCTION AND GROUP AGREEMENTS

Mass Action and Museum Moving Forward's partnership is predicated on our shared belief that museum educators, curators, and staff more broadly need to work in closer communion to collectively advance a field-wide culture shift. We believe in pooling resources, networks, and knowledge to produce research, data analysis, cross-sector community, and professional development opportunities that are widely available to the field to ultimately advance the core goal of making a more equitable, accessible, diverse, and inclusive museum spaces.

La Tanya S. Autry, Jeanelle Austin, Jane Henderson, and Yesomi Umolu shared their insight on existing models and strategies on how to create and prioritize the care of museum staff and community over objects through action-oriented approaches, followed by a group work session/discussion on best practices.

II. PRESENTATIONS

Yesomi Umolu is Director of Curatorial Affairs and Public Practice at Serpentine. She was previously Director and Curator, Logan Center Exhibitions at the University of Chicago. Prior to joining the Logan, she held curatorial positions at the MSU Broad Museum; Walker Art Center; and Manifesta 8, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art.

How can institutions renew their missions towards care?

- Recently museums have aimed to rectify harms done to communities that have been victims to regimes of power as seen through land acknowledgements and reparative measures; yet there is more to be done.

How to address reparations and acknowledge our difficult histories, especially with contemporary communities who have been victims to regimes of power?

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- Museums are actively working through the issues of race relations and equity and diversity, and inclusion that came to the fore in the past two years.
- Our (institutional) communities have a natural inclination to be caretakers, but we usually direct that action towards our objects and artists.
- But working within institutions with larger public missions, we can extend the caretaking beyond the walls of those institutions.
- As an industry we haven't turned away from the sort of hard work that needs to be done in these areas.
 - Recent efforts suggest an increasing mindfulness and new language in recognizing the change needed in institutions, yet we have to be able to move from the conceptual to the functional.

Challenges We Face

- How do we recognize the changes that are needed?
- Figure out how we would like to reposition care within institutions
- Face up to the reality of what it might take to make that happen
- We have found the aspirational language of change, but actually *how* is it implemented on a day-to-day basis?
 - We have to be mindful of falling prey to exhaustion/malaise.
 - The intellectual labor and emotional labor required impacts everyone's well-being.
- Institutions are microcosms of broader society — lots of layers to work through, all at the same time: diversity, equity, employment, rights, unionization, healthcare, etc.
- It's okay to admit a certain level of burnout in relation to some of these questions, and that there might be stop-starts throughout the process.

Moving Beyond the Challenges

- We may not have the answers — it may be up to the next generation to articulate — but the fact that conversations are happening is very important.

Institutional Care

- When I think about care in the context of my kind of work in life right now, it is very much about my role as a leader and my team. How we can care for each other and practice self-care is vital.

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- There is value in caring for oneself and in taking the space within an institution to do that.
 - Once that's done, you have to make sure that everyone across the institution feels, 'well fed.'
 - How do you replicate that over and beyond, into our programming and institutional best practices?

Conflicting Concerns

- It is also important to acknowledge that there are conflicting concerns that may take precedence in the moment.
 - For example, right now in the UK, one of the major concerns that everyone is having is around questions of the cost of living, especially working in a field where the remuneration is very low compared to the level of commitment that we all give.
 - A lot of institutions consider themselves to be warm, safe havens for people who might have difficulty accessing gas heat over the winter, because of the skyrocketing prices of wholesale gas.

What is our public good?

- Do we say we're going to shut our doors and become a shelter for people who are going to really need us over the winter?
- The pandemic showed us that we can make fundamental shifts to make our spaces available to various communities for use.

Jeanelle Austin is executive director and co-founder of the George Floyd Global Memorial and founder of Racial Agency Initiative. She serves as lead caretaker of the memorials and guides a team of volunteers to stand in the unique space of preservation and protest.

Formation of The George Floyd Global Memorial

I want to begin with just bringing us to remembrance that on May 25th, 2020, George Floyd was lynched by the Minneapolis police department.

- The global response was reported across the world, where people marched and protested on all 7 continents.
- People also traveled to Minneapolis, to the intersection of 38 and Chicago, more commonly known as George Floyd Square.
 - People begin to lay down what we call offerings in the memorial to George Floyd.
- But it wasn't just a memorial to George Floyd.

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- People were laying down tributes and writing the names of their loved ones, too.
- This memorial grew and it's now about George Floyd Square. They're marked 2 blocks by 2 blocks with the addition of the "Say Their Names" cemetery installation that has names of hundreds of stolen lives due to police violence.

Caretaking of the Memorial

We established two fundamental guidelines. We keep those two values at the center of our work:

- Everything is somebody's offering; therefore, nothing is thrown away.
- The people are more sacred than the memorial itself. The second guideline is critical and core to this protest element of people over property because of the way in which racism has historically worked — property has always been prized over people.

The Conservation and Preservation of The Offerings

What does it mean to reshift that paradigm, and to say, we are going to center the needs of people over and against the objects and the offerings that we are working with, and how do we understand the offerings?

- This idea of people over property really shook some of the volunteers that came from the museum/conservation industry, because their world is objects.
- As the uprising settled down, the focus shifted to forming an institutional organization.
 - Decided to forego accreditation because the accreditation policies didn't work for who we are as an institution.
 - It's far more important to ensure that people aren't hurt over and against the objects that we have the privilege to be stewards of, because we are in a movement for Black lives and that has to be our priority.

The Remembrance Ethic

What are your institution's stories, and what is your Why? Why do you do the work?

- The person or persons who have died is the center of the remembrance ethic.
- The objects that are left behind are the center of the remembrance ethic.

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- We have to weigh the value of those things because if we don't, we will make decisions, institutional decisions, that will have a long, lasting impact.

Challenges Going Forward

- Will our decisions lead to a kind of experience where Black people are valued more in their death than they are in their life?
- How do we then create and build an institution that doesn't perpetuate this kind of systemic racism where Black people don't count until we die?

People over Property

Everything is rooted in the kind of ethic that we designed for our organization, the kind of ethic that we hold as a people, the kind of ethic that we hold in our protests, to say are we going to uphold and value people over property in everything.

LaTayna S. Autry is a cultural organizer in the visual arts, who centers social justice and public memory in her work. She co-produced #MuseumsAreNotNeutral — an initiative that exposes the fallacies of the neutrality claim and calls for equity-based transformation in museums—and the Social Justice and Museums Resource List — a crowdsourced bibliography.

Institutional art history = worship of the object

- It was a way to disavow the institution's relationship to communities (neighborhoods where the objects come from.)
- A way to avoid talking about the real social inequities and the way we basically exclude and take advantage of people.
- We need to shift the object paradigm to counter the silencing of people.

Where can we make a crack or break in the system around power?

- Epiphanies about how surviving cannot be sustainable — can't be in places that don't allow truth.
- Telling the truth is part of care for ourselves, communities, ancestors, and future generations.
- The system is training us to do XYZ, but what is my goal? What seems like a possible methodology/assessment type of work/praxis?

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- We have to take our knowledge and apply it to the world to change something and refuse domination.
- Can't keep up the same schedule if you are taking a praxis-approach within the system as it exists; certain things have to be let go, we have to go slowly

Where is care located with the museum? How can we begin to care as a collective?

There is an extreme care put on donors/rich people which very hierarchical. There is not a lot of care for *everyone* within the museum structure.

- Learn about how we can work together.
- Not collaborative; maybe cooperative. We don't often get to create something together from the ground up.
- Requires deep change and addressing power: we need to understand how to build coalitions.
- We need to analyze the power dimensions of care.

Research Sources

- Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider*
 - Important for talking about working across differences
- Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, "The Myths of Coalitions," in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*
- "Combahee River Collective Statement," Barbara Smith's thoughts on the Combahee River Collective's work, interview in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor
 - She talks about coalitions and their importance
- Charlene A. Carruthers, *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*

Jane Henderson is Professor of Conservation at Cardiff University and Secretary General of the International Institute for Conservation. She also serves on the editorial panel of the Journal of the Institute for Conservation.

How do conservators contact stakeholders about what an object means to them?

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- Letting stakeholders comment on how they do their practice was not possible; had to go to the established “experts”
- Rejection of advice/input
- Issue is about power and respect: conservators see conservation as their domain.
- What does neutrality mean in conservation?

Conservators traditionally maintain things for as long as possible into the future, in perpetuity

- What opens when expanding on a lifetime beyond the object in itself?
- Help people value things, not just to keep things for longer. The conservator’s role is not just to extend object lifetimes, but to extend the life experiences of people who engage with them.
- Providing better life experiences is a fundamental ethic.
- Sometimes it’s for conservators to see larger picture — nature of work is very granular

Cost of living crisis

- On the previous question of it means for public spaces to be warm and safe (turning heat down usually is the conservator’s position, but how do we make the space comfortable against what might be generally accepted as beneficial for objects?)

Conservation can be more disruptive in the profession

- What does, “not doing any harm” mean in terms of an object? Not just not wanting to scratch a painting, but realizing the harm and history of the path of how collections come to be.
- Why are we always trying to be neutral and invisible in our practice? Can conservation be more disruptive in its physical practice?

Shared Resources

- [Anti-racist Wales Action Plan](#)
 - The culture sector can keep doing some thinking about how that manifests itself.
- [Jane Henderson, “Beyond lifetimes: who do we exclude when we keep things for the future”](#)

III. DISCUSSION

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(Matthew Villar Miranda)

The term “heritage preservation industry” seems antithetical, because “heritage preservation” implies something that is not extractive and closer to community. Yet it has been called an, “industry.” How can a community’s memory be “industrialized?” But many times, monuments and museums have become an industry and have compromised our, as Jeanelle [Austin] says, “remembrance ethics.”

When an artwork or an offering comes in, how do you accession it? Who do you forefront? When you decide to exhibit it and show it? And then how do you take care of it after it's on the side of remembrance?

(Jeanelle Austin)

On the idea of cultural heritage as an industry, I think that is the nature of capitalism. That is the nature of when you take things that are meant to be just held and experienced and known and lived and wring it through a kind of economic industry to say, “how do we make money off of it?”

With the offerings, they are, first and foremost, offers of protest, and so we actually allow them to live outside for as long as possible in the memorial. And then when it comes to a place where either they're not able to live outside...because either the weather keeps blowing it away; or they're under the threat of someone trying to steal it; or the conditions that they're in are actually harmful to people; whether or not something has broken; whether mold is starting to develop...We bring them indoors for indoor conservation treatment and archiving work.

At this time, we do not take items that have not been first laid down as an offering of protest.

We also have a geographical boundary. We strictly limit ourselves to 2 blocks by 2 blocks, and in that we're estimating we have on or around 5,000 indoor offerings, so that doesn't include what's outside. But we do not plan to accession anything ever. And we have conversations about what does that mean and what does that look like?

And what does that mean? If an offering has — 100, 200 years from now — completely disintegrated, what does that look like? And so, we have these conversations with conservators, with community members, with families. We are trying to navigate new territory as we go.

(Matthew Villar Miranda)

MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD



That gives me the sense that you, in that commitment, do not need accessioning. That means that things that are left outside could degrade and be left to loss. I'm really interested in the way that institutions are actually welcoming loss: loss of objects without accessioning an object...things that are tenuously set up and impermanent.

(Jane Henderson)

Well, the first thing that we have to say is that museums have always tolerated loss and cultural heritage, what's called an "acceptable loss." What we've done, though, is we've judged what loss is good loss, and what loss is bad loss and all the sort of stuff that is behind it. I think it's definitely being tackled by some of these questions — who's allowed to touch things and who isn't? Is that a sort of tangible engagement? And if we stop being like a lot of organizations in the past and talk about keeping things in perpetuity. And hopefully, that's an idea that people have moved away from and just talking much more about curated or managed change. I also wanted to mention that the fear of loss has really inhibited some organizations in terms of how they collect, because, if you are scared of collecting, the language won't last long. You tend to collect from the marginalized communities less. You tend to collect more from an established community, because who has the gold? Who has the well-made, well-built things made of the most permanent materials? And whose lives are traditionally put on the margins? Who has the most intangible, the most flimsy things? How long do we expect this to last when we collect it?

(Jeanelle Austin)

How do people get to experience what it is that we are trying to remember, and what it is that we are trying to allow ourselves to be shaped by? If I save this pen and the pen has a story and the story is inspirational...If I keep it in storage for 100 years, who is it inspiring? And so, to be able to think about how we suffer the good loss, because it's actually adding value to people.

IV. NEXT STEPS

We're going to continue to explore these topics over the next few months, in October and November. In the next 2-part series, we'll be shifting our focus to think about care and communities: **How do we center care and our relationship with communities which change?**