

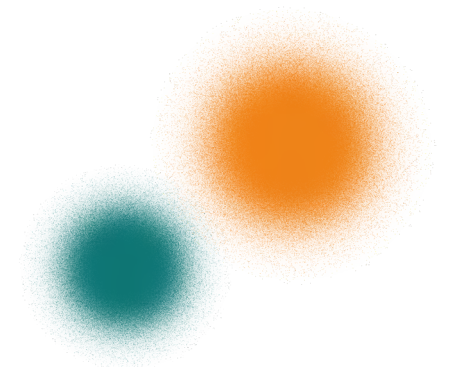
# Doing the Work

**Embedding anti-racism and decolonisation  
into museum practice**

Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ilaria Puri Purini

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Embedding  
anti-racism and  
decolonisation into  
museum practice



**Critical responses to the online workshop series devised by the Contemporary Arts Society and the Decolonising Arts Institute from January to July 2021.**

Edited by Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ilaria Puri Purini

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# Preface

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’.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘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.

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.

# 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.

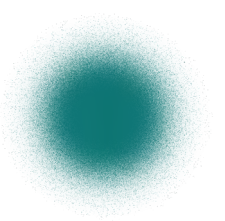
Below, we draw out and summarise the key findings and related provocations from the reflective summaries.

## 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.**

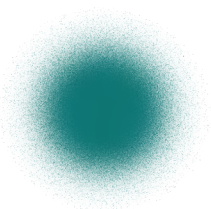


## 6. Diversity

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.**

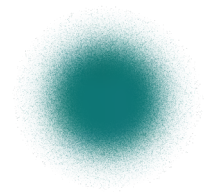


## 7. Power and change

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.**



Harold Offeh, *Reading the Realness*, 2017. Performed at Tintype Gallery with six students from Kingston University. Image courtesy: the artist and Tintype Gallery. © Harold Offeh. Photograph: Jo Addison. Presented by the Contemporary Art Society through the Rapid Response Fund, 2020.

# Workshop 6: Rethinking 'Engagement'

6 July 2021

This final workshop in the series focused on the practices and ethics of 'engagement' in art museums and galleries. It was moderated by **Sandra Shakespeare** (Black British Museum Project) and opened with presentations from **Barby Asante** (artist, curator, educator and occasional DJ) and **Amal Khalaf** (artist, curator and Director of Programmes at Cubitt).

Questions for discussion included:

**How can an art museum's public/audience/community 'engagement' practices be expanded to also account for its relationships with, for example, minoritised artists, external collaborators and its own staff?**

**How can extractive or exploitative 'engagement' practices be reshaped and reconceived as equitable, co-productive and reciprocal?**

**How can an ethics of care be embedded in 'engagement' practices?**

**What does an anti-racist or decolonial approach to 'engagement' involve?**

**How can approaches to 'engagement' expand beyond engagement with people, to engagement with issues, ethics and power relations?**

# Collective Care is Different from Self Care

## Rethinking Engagement in Art Museums and Galleries in 2021

by Aksana Khan

“More radical, meaningful change that truly includes in an equitable manner might not be easy. It will require noticing the thing which has become invisible through its ubiquity. It will require noticing how whiteness feels and lands in different bodies...” Jemma Desai (2020).<sup>1</sup>

The sixth workshop in the ‘Doing the Work’ series focused on the practices and ethics of ‘engagement’ in art museums and galleries, and how anti-racist and decolonial approaches can be embedded in them. It was a space for those who work in museums engagement to not just listen, but to contribute, and learn horizontally about the issues that we face day-to-day. This group included me. My role was to participate, facilitate, and observe as someone who has done/still does engagement work in a heritage, charity, and theatre context. Here, I reflect on what was said during the workshop, as interpreted through my lens. When I use the pronouns ‘we’ or ‘our’ I am referring to the workshop participants and staff who work in community engagement. I also refer to us as ‘frontline’ staff as we’re at the front of an organisation, dealing with members of the public.

<sup>1</sup> Desai, J.D. (2020), ‘This Work Isn’t For Us’, pp. 56-57 [Online]. Available at: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HGBSsBsERxSaD1t0Oq\\_9acqAqiAPPLekBxaJ8tk-Njw/edit#heading=h.rwhnpmaszsvh](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HGBSsBsERxSaD1t0Oq_9acqAqiAPPLekBxaJ8tk-Njw/edit#heading=h.rwhnpmaszsvh) (Accessed: 20 September 2021).

## Context

When learning from one another’s lived experiences, context matters. This workshop took place in a pandemic, at a time when we had become used to working from home and through Zoom. What hadn’t changed was (1) the caffeinated jitters at the start of an event and (2) that we brought ourselves. As someone whose job is to facilitate conversations, you become conscious of our respective ‘baggage’ – the energy we store within our bodies when we enter a space. It affects the vibe, the confidence in contributing, and the flow of the conversation – lest we have ‘dead chat’. We do not check our personal lives at the door when we enter work. It informs what we do.

For anyone who works in engagement, there has always been this struggle to ensure ‘best practice’ is used, even before COVID. If you’re working in an institution that is incongruent with what ‘best practice’ is, it leaves anyone on the frontline ‘doing the work’ feeling uncertain and disembodied from what they consider to be true. This feeling of being out of sorts has only been magnified over the course of the pandemic.

As workers in museums and galleries, we needed a moment to restore ourselves. That’s what these professional development workshops offer, a moment to pause, reflect, and validate the thoughts and concerns we have about our respective workplaces and the state of the sector. This workshop helped to fill that void but what we had to say could easily have spilled over the time allocated.

It’s not that COVID is the only reason we came into this virtual space feeling heavy; it’s the way this pandemic has been (mis)handled and has exposed the impact of austerity. Our screens showed the victims of institutional racism, sexism, and ableism in healthcare, education, and policing. We also had extra worry for our loved ones, for ourselves, and our income. Furloughs and redundancies made people who were otherwise financially secure conscious of the slashed welfare safety net. There was talk of ‘the new normal’ and the fear or the reality of ‘going back to the old normal’. These anxieties are almost Tetris-like in the way they build up. For some participants, they had internalised them within the bigger picture, feeling that their work in the arts was all in vain, that their work doesn’t matter when hospitals are overrun, and when there’s more demand for food banks than ever before.



**Tick all that apply:**

Are you worried? ☐

Are you breathless? ☐

Are you exhausted? ☐

Are you feeling heavy? ☐

**Best practice**

- What does it really mean?
- Who decides what it means?
- Is this formally recognised?
- How often is this updated?
- How can you do it when your cup is full?
- How do you do it when your budgets are slashed?
- How do you convince people that it's a worthwhile investment?
- How can we make it adaptable in a COVID world?

Author's notes made during the workshop.

A crisis in confidence is hard to deal with for anyone, regardless of their background. But to return to work meant, firstly, going back to institutions that were reckoning with increased social inequalities in the communities they serve, and with their own complicity in causing some of these inequalities through the provision of insecure contracts and low wages to gallery and museums staff. Secondly, they were also dealing with the *imagined* public, the media, and government outrage over how museums are (mis)behaving in a 'culture war', especially in reaction to the Black Lives Matter summer protests.<sup>2</sup> It's a lot. 'Rethinking Engagement' in this context meant zeroing in on how we can't wait for a better future to arrive, and how we can create one within our own spheres of influence.

## Discussions

The workshop opened with gifts from Barby Asante and Amal Khalaf through their respective presentations. Barby read out her beautiful written piece, which showed that declaring our independence from oppressive structures is simultaneously a declaration of our interdependence with others. We cannot make change alone, we do so with others who we're 'Breathing with, sharing with, planning with, fighting with, daring with, loving with' to create a better world now. Amal also shared Barby's ethos of working in, and in collaboration with, communities. She asked us, when doing engagement work, to name power for what it is, so that it is not the bogeyman hanging over our work, and also to think about our desires when doing the work, since our work is about bringing to the forefront the desires of artists and communities – not of the institution. In these ways, we can think of divesting power away from institutions, and re-investing it into the people who are creating better futures and doing a better job of it than the institution ever could.

Barby and Amal's presentations helped to set the tone for the breakout sessions that followed. In the breakout groups the participants initially talked, in quite general terms, about what it means to be engaging with communities, how to work ethically and equitably, and different ways of collaborating with artists and freelancers. But the overarching issue that was voiced in lots of different ways is that something must give. That is, there are several problems with the way art institutions operate, and those problems impact how we as museums workers carrying out public

<sup>2</sup> Duffy, B., Hewlett, K., Murkin, G., Benson, R., Hesketh, R., Page, B., Skinner, G. & Gottfried, G. (2021), 'Culture Wars in the UK: How the Public Understand the Debate'. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/culture-wars-in-the-uk-how-the-public-understand-the-debate.pdf>. (Accessed 20 September 2021).

engagement feel and work. We are exhausted. We are exhausted by the way things currently work and are structured. We are exhausted by having to mitigate this so as not to enact harm on the museums' publics and on ourselves. And it's even more exhausting now that the global COVID pandemic has exposed to a wider public the vast inequalities in UK society and across the world that we were already aware of in our work with communities and young people. Perhaps this exhaustion is why we didn't manage to come up with many solutions during the workshop. Instead, we took it as an opportunity to verbalise the problems we experience at work and what this means in our everyday lives, or as Amal advised, we made visible our conflicts.

For clarity, we identified four problems with the way art institutions operate, and then four ways that these problems impact us as engagement workers. These are...

Problems:

- working in hierarchical institutions
- having to deal with obfuscated ways of working
- institutions clinging onto the idea of being neutral
- engagement work being impacted by a 'white saviour' complex

Impact on us:

- feeling hyperconscious about the language we use
- absorbing the anxieties of our white colleagues
- being the antenna and the translator between the institution and the communities we serve
- worrying that we may be 'co-opted' by the institution and become the 'enemy'

I will unpack these problems and impacts below.

# Do you work in an art museum or gallery

that's very hierarchical?



with obfuscated ways of working?



that's holding onto the delusional  
of being politically neutral?



where public engagement is very  
"white saviour"-y?



## You are stressed and need to join a union





### Is your art museum or gallery very hierarchical?

It's worthwhile working in partnership with other collectives, charities, forums, networks, and organisations. You can advocate and support their work, not duplicate what already exists. You can do this by either offering a space or investing funds from your budget e.g. a charity that supports refugees, food banks, helping ESOL learners from a local college etc. In this way, you're not competing for limited resources. You're supporting those that already have the specialist knowledge and relationships to do the work.

### Does your art museum or gallery have obfuscated ways of working?

Well, the smallest and simplest thing you can start to do is getting in the habit of asking what something means or saying "I don't know" It's a better way of running meetings, and having better email communication. Chances are that someone else feels like you too! But if you're already doing that anyway, how are you with managing your projects? We need to re-think how we already do things and conceive change. You can build the budget to make your "dream" project come true, instead of fitting everything around the budget. Change doesn't happen in neat 3-5 year business plans. We need to think of our work as more long-term, not project-to-project.

### Is your art museum or gallery holding onto the delusion of being politically neutral?

Just as museums are not neutral, they can also be unwittingly complicit in causing and perpetuating oppression. For example, have you looked into whether your pension fund invests into fossil fuels? Or have you thought about how your organisation hold space and recognises the grief and traumas of the colonised and the diaspora? Colonisation isn't over, it's still happening - from gentrification in the UK to what's happening to Palestinians.

### Is your art museum or gallery's public engagement very "white-saviour"-y?

Do you listen to public feedback or have events for visitors and participants to have a say in what your art gallery or museum does? If you do, is this something that all teams and trustees can listen to? How democratic are our organisations really? And be prepared to value people over objects! If art museums and galleries fashion themselves as a place of teaching, especially about unpacking the legacy of empire, there needs to be a move towards talking about racism, not just material culture.

**None of this applies to you? Congratulations, you work in a great place! Please teach us your ways or tell us there's a job opening? Either way, you are a unicorn.**



## Problems

Let's expand on the problems listed in the poster:

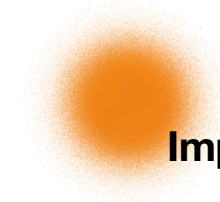
- 1. A hierarchical institution, especially one that is old, is not nimble enough to be as transformative an agent in our communities as organisations that have flatter structures.** This was something several participants remarked on. Hierarchical structures preclude genuine co-production as power is unequally distributed. As engagement staff tend to be at the bottom of the ladder, they have less power to share with communities in the first place. Moreover, hierarchical structures guarantee an unequal distribution of emotional labour. If power lies with those who confirm what our budgets are, then directors and senior management who don't engage on the frontlines are at best unaware, or at worst ignorant about what it takes to do the work with communities. The teams (or in most cases, the individual) engaging with communities and members of the public are often poorly paid, which reflects the institution's overall devaluation of engagement work. So how can we truly expect the hierarchical art museum and gallery to be a part of changing society when its top-down structure denies change?
- 2. When the participants talked about obfuscated ways of working, they were referring to organisations having bureaucratic processes and how this bleeds into community engagement work.** A key example is in the use of inaccessible language when working with communities. Whether it's intentional or because of ignorance, it results in poor communication and confusion. Clear communication is political because what's normal to you is jargon to another; jargon can decrease accessibility, and discourage people from being involved in the arts because they don't know what you're talking about. The participants also talked about the need to completely rethink how we plan our projects and how we conceive change. For example, they reflected on the stresses of having to deliver big numbers with small budgets. This undermines our perceptions of care and makes our ethics of care seem unrealistic and expensive. If the legacies of our projects are to ensure care, then we need to invest our time and resources in them from the beginning. It shouldn't be treated as an after-thought.
- 3. To avoid becoming yet another example in a think-piece about why museums are not neutral, art museums and galleries need to acknowledge and be brave about their political stance.** They already are political (with a capital P) in terms of the partnerships they choose to have with multi-national corporations and other businesses, and in terms of the kinds of private events they host. To pretend otherwise is highly disingenuous. Those choices reveal a

lot about what political stance an institution is taking. Although it is challenging for art institutions to openly acknowledge being political (with either a small or capital P) when most are registered as charities, and especially after witnessing the abuse directed at organisations like the National Trust, it doesn't absolve them from saying and doing something with regards to social injustice.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true if you take the viewpoint that charities exist because the government fails to support those that need it. If more art museums and galleries were confident and consistent in taking a stance on 'small p' politics, activism could become core to contemporary museum work. In this way, activism isn't seen as something that happens outside the museum. It would help museums to contribute positively to social justice rather than just talking vaguely about it in their mission statements.

- 4. A 'White Saviour' approach to public engagement does not create a space for communities to heal and repair.** In the culture and heritage sector, 'culture' is usually viewed as only existing inside the museum building and what it displays instead of what's 'out there'. As a consequence, local communities are only 'listened' to when it's politically expedient to do so, and are otherwise ignored. 'Listening' in a contemporary colonial context means that knowledge, especially about traumatic histories, is extracted from others and repackaged in a way that is palatable to white audiences. In this process, culture is not understood as happening or being created collaboratively in a back-and-forth process involving multiple actors or constituents. Instead it is understood as either being 'done' to communities, a process whereby the museum 'reaches out' to engage communities in the culture that is happening inside the museum, or as being 'saved' by the museum and its staff for representation and preservation in the supposedly 'safe space' or 'hermetically sealed' environment of the museum. So this begs the question, is the art museum and gallery truly 'charitable' if it's not listening to the communities it's supposed to serve, or even attempting to dismantle its colonial approach to engaging with them?

<sup>3</sup> Cathcart, B. (2021), *The National Trust and the Culture War: A Dissection of Dishonest Journalism as the Tool of the "War on Woke."* [online] Byline Times. Available at: <https://bylinetimes.com/2021/07/26/the-national-trust-and-the-culture-war-a-dissection-of-dishonest-journalism-as-a-tool-of-the-war-on-woke/> (Accessed 28 September 2021).

We must rethink engagement as the antithesis of the four problems I've explored above. It must be done in the absence of hierarchy, involve clear communication, develop from a moral or political stance, and involve active listening as part of an open and equitable process of exchange. Getting to this point, as Barby said during the workshop, will be necessarily painful – 'decolonising is painful'. It will be especially painful to those of us who have benefitted from schemes that encouraged us - the historically excluded - to get into the sector, because the burden to 'do the work' has been placed so heavily on our shoulders. As one workshop participant said, when 'you enter these kinds of institutions... suddenly you become the activist'. But, depressingly, just because we're here now, or just because we might look, think or speak differently, doesn't mean the system is fixed.



## Impacts

"We might...assume that diversity workers are appointed to unblock the system. But a blockage is how the system is working. The system is working by stopping those [who] are trying to transform the system. To transform a system we have to stop the system from working. We might need to pass as plumbers (fixing the leak) in order to become vandals (making a leak)..."  
Sara Ahmed (2017).<sup>4</sup>

Museum workers who are Black or PoC have been 'doing the work' since long before the summer of 2020. We – and I include myself in this - feel the expectation placed on us by institutions to somehow 'fix' white supremacy, but aren't encouraged or supported to actually take it down. This has made us:

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed, S.A. (2017), *Institutional As Usual*. [Online blog post] Available at: <https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/10/24/institutional-as-usual/> (Accessed 20 September 2021).

1. **Hyperconscious about the language we use.** Even the term 'decolonising' was raised by one participant as being inaccessible, and perhaps not reparative. That's in part because the term has been co-opted by institutions of power (are we in the Age of Decolonising™?). It has been misinterpreted to mean equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), but decolonising is not about making white people comfortable. It is about unlearning and undoing.
2. **Absorb the anxieties of our white colleagues.** We know which teams are nervous about, or reluctant to, change. And for the not-so-traditionalists amongst us, it feels as if it is yet another cultural re-awakening for those who benefit from being white. Those who have 'seen things they can no longer unsee' (e.g. racism, White Supremacy) struggle with the heaviness of it all. Their predecessors didn't do enough to combat the legacy of colonialism and oppression within their spheres of influence. After all, as the performance artist Jaamil Olawale Kosoko says, 'it may be the historical lack of social engagement, political investment, and the delusion of national socio-economic progression among white curators and cultural producers in positions of power within most institutions throughout the US and the Western world that landed us in this crisis of monotonous curatorial praxis and vague cultural understanding in the first place'.<sup>5</sup>
3. **The antenna and the translator between the institution and the communities we serve.** There's a lot of talk in our jobs. Engagement staff are socially conscious, reflective, and are mindful of not doing harm. But to be the 'community call-centre' as one participant put it, meant taking on a lot of noise and chatter from different groups, and being able to transmit it into a cohesive narrative. This is especially true when it comes to putting on exhibitions. It's a lot of information to take in, especially when it's qualitative and involves nurturing relationships. The workshop participants voiced their frustration towards institutions. They noted the irony that institutions expect their frontline staff to have good communication skills when they (the institutions) are wildly inconsistent in the way they communicate internally with their staff and externally with their publics.
4. **Worry that we may be 'co-opted' and become the 'enemy'.** The workshop participants expressed a fear of being 'co-opted' whereby they are required to be the brand spokesperson for their institution even though they don't fully agree with their institution's ethics. It's hard not to feel that there is a clear-cut binary: you are either with or against the institution; you either work with an institution or you create your own space that feels more liberatory. But what if you try to do both? When it comes to working with communities and artists,

<sup>5</sup> Kosoko, J.O. (2018), 'Crisis in the Gallery: Curation And The Praxis Of Justice' in Liepsch, E. and Warner, J. ed. *Allianzen: Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, p. 128.

as one participant put it, we work hard to do what we can to 'channel resources [from institutions] in different ways that speak to their desires'. But being the go-between, or the 'vandal' as Sara Ahmed suggests, is not without its stresses and challenges. Frontline staff are conscious of how they are perceived by others.

"If funding weren't as gatekept, if **universal basic income existed**, if housing was seen as a human right rather than an asset... we might have a fucking chance of evening the way the scales tip. In the in between, we are all just treading water, stealing moments to make incredible art under the circumstances, side hustling... and ultimately too burnt out to present or organise a significant challenge to the institution when they come knocking to exploit us." Zarina Muhammed (2019).<sup>6</sup>

So, what's the solution to this?

## Care

"The smallest and the biggest thing you can do as the practical staff is [to] lead with care. Whether that's with your colleagues that you manage, or participants, that's the ultimate North Star."

"How is the practice that we're doing actually resolving the issues that we're having in society right now?... Sometimes I feel like the work that I do kind of goes in vain...The bigger issue is that people within the community still feel unsafe and unable to go to certain parks and areas because of the violence that takes place."

<sup>6</sup> Muhammed, Z.M. (2019), The Problem with Representation. Available at: <https://www.thewhitecube.co.uk/representation>. (Accessed 20 September 2021).

“Do we actually think about our matrixes of accountability? Do we write our own? What is it that I want to bring to this project? How do I want to be? How am I bringing myself? How am I presenting myself? And how do I keep myself accountable?”

“I think it’s the funding bids that are the issue... you have to outline [all the benefits or outcomes] from the beginning in a certain way with a certain language or with certain numbers next to them...[But] if a participant experiences a degree of good mental health during their workshop, you can’t put that down on a list [it’s unquantifiable, maybe even impossible to describe or write about]... funders and institutions [need] to re-evaluate, ‘what are the methods that we’re evaluating projects by?’”<sup>7</sup>

Care felt very much like the buzzword for 2021. The desire to care for others was expressed in many of the conversations in the breakout groups. The majority in the space spoke about caring for communities on the outside, caring for our ‘troublemaker’ colleagues that we empathise with, and caring for the artists that we work with who say more than we can safely do. But there is also the question of caring for ourselves, which only a minority of the participants highlighted. One participant commented that the notion and practice of care is currently ‘a Participant-dominated environment’, another noted that ‘a lot of the policies that exist [around safeguarding] will probably prioritise the health of the young people... over the wellbeing of staff’, and one said that caring for ourselves felt ‘almost like guerrilla work’. But why? Why is it easier to talk about caring for others before ourselves? Is it because:

- We entered the arts believing that it is a form of social care (not just something that is superficial) and so the work feels heavy?
- It’s harder to imagine what care should be when workplaces only abide by the bare legal minimum?  
(By this I mean, legislation that clearly outlines wellbeing for those aged under 18 and vulnerable adults).
- ‘The lower down you are on the pay, power or seniority ladder...the more emotional labour you’ll find yourself doing’.<sup>8</sup>
- Engagement staff are typically women, and women are traditionally seen as having a ‘caring’ role at home, so much so that they are socially conditioned to be concerned about ‘care’ for others when they enter the workplace?

When I closed my laptop at the end of the workshop, I rubbed my eyes and scribbled down my thoughts. One of the main take-aways from the workshop I had was that *we need to take care of each other, but we need to look out for ourselves too*. Is this too deceptively simple? It reminded me of these quotes from the presentations by Barby and Amal at the beginning of the workshop:

<sup>7</sup> Quotes from the workshop participants.

<sup>8</sup> Uwagba, O., (2021), *We Need to Talk about Money*, p. 171.

“Our ancestors dreamed us, we are here to continue that work of dreaming, and we are here in the process of becoming ancestors...”  
Barby Asante (2021).<sup>9</sup>

“We’re meeting together to intentionally practice futures we long for... futures grounded in justice, love and possibility...”  
Amal Khalaf (2021).<sup>9</sup>

During and after the workshop, I realised that what was missing amongst the participants, was a conversation on how we care for ourselves. We spoke a lot more about the desires of others before our own. But, to care for others and not oneself makes the equation horrendously lopsided. If ‘best practice’ only applies to those who are outside of the art museum or gallery, instead of those who work inside them, it pushes engagement staff towards burn out. Institutions can’t change if they don’t recognise the challenges that engagement staff are facing right now. It feels like burn out has turned our thoughtful, caring, frontline colleagues in arts museums and galleries into ghosts.

<sup>9</sup> Barby Asante and Amal Khalaf speaking during their respective presentations at the ‘Doing the Work’ workshop, ‘Rethinking Engagement’, 06 July 2021. Recording available at: <https://vimeo.com/586355054> (Accessed 20 September 2021).

"The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other's vulnerability and fragility and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care." Hedva, J. (2020).<sup>10</sup>

Rethinking engagement, then, requires engagement staff to extend to themselves the same generosity of care that they show others. Collective care, or caring for others in our midst, first requires self-awareness and self-care. We need to be conscious of our own limitations, listen to ourselves, and be in spaces or in commune with others who will also care for us too. We need to do this so that there is a critical mass of people in the engagement sector who are stubborn enough to make care the norm – not the exception. If we factor in self-care as much as collective care in our practice, we can do more than survive; *we can dream*.

**Aksana Khan** is a producer currently creating joy for Arts Emergency and China Plate Theatre.

<sup>10</sup> Johanna Hedva, (2020), *Sick Woman Theory* (essay). Available at: [http://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory\\_Hedva\\_2020.pdf](http://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory_Hedva_2020.pdf) (Accessed 20 September 2021), p.13.

Here's something to put you, the reader, to work...

## Workplace Exam Paper

**Using these sources in their context, come up with solutions which centre care. 30 marks.**

### **Source A. Small museum outside of London.**

Our engagement team have work experience placements in the programmes team. We offered one of them to write a blog and to take over our social media for the day, to highlight what they've been up to. Unfortunately, there were trolls/criticism who didn't see the point in our "politically correct BS" heritage. I'm worried that this has put off the young person under my care. What should we do as institution to look after them?

*This is a white person who is new to the arts but has experience of working with youth services. There's only two people in their marketing team.*

### **Source B. Local council museum in London.**

My workplace never really opened their doors to hearing from members of the public. But now they're a part of the local council, there's forums and I don't think we are prepared for hearing the bad. We know as the community team, there's so much we can do better, but I don't just want it to be my team who goes to these spaces. It needs to be more people from different teams. How do I encourage this?

*This is a Black man who has experience in doing partnership work for charities and councils, but is relatively new to the sector.*

### **Source C. National Museum.**

After 'Black Lives Matter' – well it's still happening because Black lives still matter, there was extra attention on what my team were doing, as if it let the whole organisation off the hook. It feels really performative because they're pumping extra money but it doesn't feel like it's coming from a genuine place. What do I do to keep holding their attention, but to not have my work boxed in as doing good for everyone in my organisation?

*This is a white woman manager who has 5 years experience in the institution, two of it in their managerial position. They were furloughed.*



**Source D. Freelancer.**

Contracts in the arts are becoming more and more short term, or just going into freelance. And I want to be able to do more, but it's becoming increasingly unlikely that I'll be able to work long-term with communities. How can I be agile enough to ensure that decolonising/anti-racism is embedded in everything I do when I'm not given much of a chance?

*This is a POC woman with 10 years experience.  
They're returning to work after a career break to look after their family.*

**Source E. Undisclosed.**

There's only me and one other minority in my organisation. We're not having a good time, I feel guilty for even looking at another job ad but I do need to leave. What do I do for my exit strategy?

*This person is working in 2021, in a context where living costs are increasing, jobs are competitive, and funding in the arts is being slashed.*

These examples are not representative of all participants in the workshop. They're there to show that advice given needs to be mindful of the intersections of one's identity and the context they're in.

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# 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

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