

Radical Imaginations: Decolonizing Art Institutions Through Practical Actions in the post-COVID Landscape

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses decolonial actions in the post-COVID world, that can or have been taken in contemporary art spaces in the global West. Following antiracist movements and in an ongoing global pandemic, I argue that cultural institutions have an opportunity and necessity to change for the better, envisioning decolonial futures for these spaces. Research was conducted through interviews with various art institutions during the first lockdown in the United Kingdom (March-July 2020), seeking a degree of accountability beyond the immediate urgency surrounding this topic. Actions, opportunities for growth, and an analysis of whether these changes have or can be instituted with long term visions will be discussed through a combination of interviews and decolonial theory. The study maintains that in order to see a truly decolonized art museum, we must first experience a destruction of systems of power and oppression – despite hopeful actions taken so far, we must let collective imagination take the lead and truly begin to push further for radical change.

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INTRODUCTION

The museum is in crisis. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and social uprising centered around Black Lives Matter, conversations around art institutions have jumped to the forefront of calls for decolonization. Yet one major question remains: What will a decolonized museum look like, especially now? Since beginning this study, the world has changed dramatically and conversations around a ‘new normal’ have become commonplace. Meanwhile, the murder of George Floyd and the response by individuals, institutions, and corporations posting ‘blackout squares’¹ on Instagram began another conversation, focused on racial equity. This involved simultaneous public calls to consciousness and action centered on antiracism and diversity measures, alongside museums’ posting of action plans within staff teams, reading lists, and effectively ‘black-washing’ their websites. This trend encompasses the ease with which institutions can co-opt a social movement and pay lip service to a topic without fully addressing the concerns being brought up, effectively neutralizing radical calls for change. It is up to us, as museumgoers and art workers, to hold institutions accountable to continue to do the work after museums have used aesthetics in ‘decolonial washing’ – an alibi for sustained change.² As Boaventura de Sousa Santos says: ‘We don’t need alternatives, we need an alternative thinking of alternatives’.³

My interest in this topic stems from this intersecting moment of COVID and Black Lives Matter (BLM), but aims to go further, initially asking the pre-pandemic question: Where do you begin the action of decolonizing the art museum? Theoretical bases of calls to decolonize (be it one of the many calls we are seeing, including decolonize your bookshelf, decolonize your diet, or the subject of this work: decolonize art history and the art gallery) may seem disparate. Within the art world, where and how to decolonize remains a major question. Yet, despite the heterogenous nature of this topic, the

¹ For more information see: Heilweil, Rebecca. “Why People Are Posting Black Squares on Instagram.” Vox.

² Siegenthaler, Fiona and Allain Bonilla, Marie-laure. “Introduction: Decolonial Processes in Swiss Academia and Cultural Institutions.” pg 4.

³ de Sousa Santos, Boaventura. “Toward an Aesthetics of the Epistemologies of the South (Twenty-Two Theses).” pg. 133

extent to which coloniality and culture remain intertwined is evident; underlining the close relationship between the two makes clear that these calls are not so heterogeneous after all, and the necessity to challenge this relationship becomes ever clearer. Racial and social justice are similarly not disparate topics, and all closely linked in this conversation which has become so urgent worldwide.

Decolonization is not a one-off event, but rather a restructuring of the systems with which we interact daily.

In attempting to answer these questions I spoke directly to institutions, seeking to bridge the gap between theory and *intent* to do something versus *practical* measures in sustained action that can be taken. This dialogic approach granted a lifting of the curtain to what institutions are doing and saying, giving them a voice to speak about these issues in their own spaces. Rather than taking their words at face value, this work seeks to challenge and hold major institutions accountable while looking at potentially decolonial options in practice around the world in contemporary art spaces⁴ – I will not address ethnographic institutions nor questions of restitution. Particularly important were discussions in regard to the crisis of the art world in the face of COVID furloughs, layoffs and the positionality of the museum in the ‘new normal’. This is a pertinent moment for decolonizing to play an active role, as institutions are *forced* to reshape regardless, with social distancing and safety measures changing how we interact with public spaces and in turn changing how these same public spaces react to audiences.

Coming back to this study in the second lockdown in the UK and stricter measures across Europe (November 2020) has made clearer the disparate nature of the workforce in the museum at this time – where the wealthy museum professionals and board members (primarily white) stayed home during reopenings late this summer continuing to earn high salaries, the front of house staff (primarily BIPOC) put their health at risk without hazard pay and often without further addressing of the issues of race and

⁴ In the US and UK ‘gallery’ has a different meaning: in the US this is most often a commercial space – in the UK a gallery is an institution where art works are shown, often not in a collecting context. The terms ‘museum’ and ‘gallery’ are used interchangeably in this work.

racism in institutions brought up throughout the summer. Instagram account @ChangetheMuseum called for a boycott of museums in October for these very reasons,⁵ putting further focus on issues within arts institutions as the effects of COVID continue even now to lead to redundancies and impact the greater conversation of racial inequality.

Working from theory to conversation presents an opportunity to build this discussion and more deeply address the issues at play. Section 1, therefore, is a theoretical summary of topics of decolonization. These concepts and texts will guide the rest of the work. The urgency of the current moment is also importantly not without precedent, and further history of museum critiques will be addressed. Section 2 of this work addresses the local, looking at public audiences and the call to action to create a safe environment in museums. This safe environment has a double meaning – safe from the structures of power that delineate our lives, as well as safe from the virus which threatens the global community. The combination of COVID and civil uprising across the globe has put the art institution at a peculiar nexus, where these institutions now more deeply realize their role in the local community. The decolonial options in this will be further interrogated in this chapter using examples provided in interviews. Finally, Section 3 looks at the internal structures and actions of institutions. This includes a brief discussion of curatorial actions that can be taken, and how diversity measures and task forces can be used as forces of change as opposed to reinstating the ‘coloniality of power’. I chose to call attention to action plans, antiracist reading lists, and other such methods currently in use, while simultaneously looking at public diversity reports published, and analyzing museums’ online presence in regard to BLM prior to interviews. This allowed each interview to be more targeted and conversational, with respondents seeking to be more informed and make changes accordingly. Following up on this study months later allows an opportunity to call attention to what has not changed and what urgency has been lost in institutions due to factors like pandemic fatigue and the United States’ presidential election.

⁵ See; https://www.instagram.com/p/CFrf1N-Fsq8/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

I propose that the decolonial option in museums and galleries across the world must go deep into the background of whose history is being told, how and why professionals are chosen, their monetary influence and capital gains, the networks they can access, and the practices of the museum beyond the social justice/social media one-off actions. Digging into Fanon's *tabula rasa*⁶ – the decolonized museum, as has been suggested to me throughout multiple interviews from Berlin to New York to Barcelona, would look nothing like the museum as we know it now. It would be a 'program of complete disorder'.⁷ For many this instills fear – the fear of the unknown, the fear of revolution, the fear of losing power – but for others, this is an inspiring option for collective imagination to take the lead, as destruction of art spaces' internal orders leads to rebirth and opportunities for justice.

I. CENTRAL THEORY : SO, WHAT IS DECOLONIZATION?

Museums stand in a unique position in the art world and the world at large as creators and amalgamations of knowledge and history. This allows a certain flexibility – despite the art history canon, past exhibitions, and so on – the art institution holds relative freedom to *adapt* and *respond* to critical analysis. It is in this response that new forms of knowledge and new conversations may be formed. It is important to underline that these have been ongoing discussions long before the current moment, led primarily by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)⁸, scholars, and activists. This positionality must be brought to attention so as to not erase the very intersections which such theories aim to protect. Institutions must also question themselves in inviting theories before inviting actual leaders in the conversation into their spaces – as artists in the collection, speakers on context of artworks, curators of exhibitions, or academics pushing knowledge production outside of hegemonic

⁶ Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. pg 35

⁷ *Ibid* pg 36

⁸ For more see: Grady, Constance. "Why the Term 'BIPOC' Is so Complicated, Explained by Linguists."

structures. The process of active decolonization involves pushing through the museum in crisis to the museum in active response.

Ongoing critical action against museums can be seen in the work of Extinction Rebellion, who carry out actions at various institutions in protest of funding from major oil corporations⁹, and Nan Goldin, a photographer who fights for divestment from the Sackler family (a name common in museums and galleries, notoriously associated with the opioid crisis).¹⁰ Within the art world, critical conversations and pushes for inclusivity have gone hand in hand with workers attempting to hold institutions accountable, such as Inluseum (since 2012) and Museum 2.0 (since 2006)¹¹. These are only some examples of vast lists of individuals and groups fighting for a better future. Literature and action in critique of the museum therefore has precedent, and the current moment is only the latest iteration. To date, museums have superficially responded to critique, and not always in ‘trustworthy’ ways, often completing face value actions without deeper analysis of the structures at play in the world of art. The necessity of active decolonization has been brewing for some time; museums have been in ‘crisis’ long before 2020 and the current sense of urgency did not start from scratch.

a. Critical Race Theory and Otherization

As coloniality and race are so inherently connected, one cannot be explained without the other. Therefore, any argument for decolonizing a space created by and institutionalizing whiteness would go nowhere without critical understanding of race and racialization. The impacts of such distinctions, that is to say otherizations, particularly impact historically bourgeois and ‘high culture’ spaces – in this case,

⁹ See: Pes, Javier. “As Museums Ditch Controversial Donors, Climate Activists Are Eyeing a BP-Sponsored Blockbuster Coming to the British Museum.” *Artnet News*, 19 June 2019, news.artnet.com/art-world/climate-activists-bp-british-museum-1578280.

¹⁰ See: Brown, Kate. “Nan Goldin's Activist Group Escalates Its War Against the Sacklers With an Open Call to Action at the Met.” *Artnet News*, 11 Feb. 2019, news.artnet.com/art-world/nan-goldin-sackler-met-2019-1460413.

¹¹ See Appendix C

the art world. Collectively understanding the history of race and the implications it continues to hold in art spaces is important in moving beyond lip service. Further, this understanding must occur in the top of museum management, with directors, curators, and managers recognizing the roles that race play in these spaces.

As a counter to Western history-telling methods, a group of scholars in India focus their historical studies on what occurs at the levels of society that are not the elite. This focus sees ‘subalterns’ (that is those who are inferior in a capitalist system because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) as the agents of political change.¹² Rather than positing these histories as ‘other’, the subaltern scholars seek to present history from and by those who have experienced it. In the world, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of *all* histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe”.’¹³ Countering this by using ‘history from below’ is a method which can be absorbed easily in a museum context globally, taken seriously in methods of (re)presentation which give agency to non-white, non-Western, non-Eurocentric subjects and resists existing elitism.

Further discussion of the role of racialization and history building comes from Cheryl Harris,¹⁴ whose article *Whiteness as Property* exemplifies the conversation of race and property, illuminating structures of whiteness built on the domination of Black and Native American peoples in a United States context. In society, whiteness was historically created as an antithesis: whiteness is NOT black, and NOT capable of being enslaved. From there, whiteness builds benefits – such as ability to acquire property. In Harris’ words, property is not only physical but includes rights, self-identity, and

¹² Chakrabarty, Dipesh “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts.” pg. 5

¹³ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History.” pg. 27

¹⁴ I thank Haul Gallery for bringing this work to my attention. See: [Instagram.com/haul.gallery/](https://www.instagram.com/haul.gallery/) for their ongoing series of antiracist workshops centered on the art world.

personhood, and thus expands to jobs, entitlements, and capabilities.¹⁵ These ideas are based around a legal understanding (of affirmative action), but can extend into the art world, where racialized privilege, in collections and in jobs, is an obvious and contested issue.

Museums, in doing antiracist work, must publicly come to terms with the fact that racism is not simply the work of an ignorant few, but deeply entrenched in our society and its structures. Rather than being non-racist, or partaking in a bad/good binary, one must recognize their position on a continuum.¹⁶ This continuum may seem inescapable, and rather than getting stuck in questions of whether or not a museum is racist, the questions must instead tackle what can be done to actively challenge racism at both an individual and institutional level. Combining Harris's calls for better affirmative action with subaltern histories, we can see beyond 'diversity' measures, into a world where property interests in whiteness are put to rest.¹⁷ This, inherent in the call for decoloniality, provides a powerful alternative to the institutions that we know today.

As the United States has become the center of the globalized world, it is important to note that this definition of whiteness as property is not solely isolated to the context of the USA. Its' specific growth, dependent on slavery and Native Americans land claims, codified in the law of the United States, exists only on the continent of America; but eugenic racialization made its way to Europe under the Nazi regime, and denial of Aboriginal Australian land claims echo legal precedent in the USA and Canada. As Anibal Quijano importantly points out in *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*:

What is termed globalization is the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism as a new global power. One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world's population

¹⁵ Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." pg 1728

¹⁶ Korducki, Kelli María. "Accept That You're Racist. Then, Get To Work Dismantling Racism."

¹⁷ Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." pg 1791

around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power [...] The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality.¹⁸

b. Globalization and Eurocentrism

In the contemporary era, we celebrate the interconnectivity of our lives across space and time, facilitated by the internet and ever-faster land travel. Globalization is this precise trend of an extensive network of economic, cultural, social, and political interconnections and processes which go beyond national boundaries.¹⁹ In the art world, this is evident as art spaces apply such language in their identity, programs, and their name (i.e., Tabakalera – International Centre for Contemporary Art or Tate Modern – International Modern and Contemporary Art). Biennales, art fairs, and exhibitions²⁰ push the same structures that uphold the art world further onto the global scale – those focused on Eurocentric values, whiteness, an otherization of the global South, and reduction of various cultures and traditions to broad stroke amalgamations in the museum or classroom setting.

The term Eurocentrism describes a worldview which focuses on European history and values as ‘normal’ and places it against other histories and value systems as being superior, thereby justifying ‘the West’s’ dominant position in the world’.²¹ This idea, as mentioned in the quote by Quijano in the previous section, began as a colonizing project, in order to assert a binary in the world where white, European, and therefore civilized was juxtaposed with Black, Indigenous, and therefore underdeveloped

¹⁸ Quijano, Anibal. “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America.” pg. 533.

¹⁹ Yeates, Nicola. *Globalisation and Social Policy: beyond the State?*

²⁰ Examples of exhibitions attempting to address globalization are often accused of being misguided efforts; some of the most famous being *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) and the third Havana Biennale (1989).

²¹ Franzki, Hannah. “Eurocentrism.”

in order to maintain power. As Quijano explains, the continuation of this project across space and time through to our modern era is what is known as the ‘coloniality of power’.²²

Quijano succinctly states that ‘Europe’s hegemony over the new model of global power concentrated all forms of the control of subjectivity, culture, and especially knowledge and the production of knowledge under its hegemony’.²³ We must remember that museums are European inventions as well as sites of knowledge production. They are steeped so deeply in colonial missions that calls to decolonize prove much deeper and more intricate than simple actions (such as diversifying internal orders).

c. Decolonization

Exactly *how* to decolonize art institutions is the question surrounding this conversation, and no straightforward answer exists. True decolonization would look at the structures at play within the institution, those in positions of power, the voices being amplified or used at all, the narratives being told, and by whom they are being told; then question and problematize each of these topics. It would require interrogating the position of museums as ‘caretakers’ of non-Western arts and artefacts.²⁴ Rather than Eurocentric arts practices and market-driven elitist culture, a decolonized institution would have a non-Eurocentric vision of art; as de Sousa Santos puts it, ‘communal, non-commercial, functional and holistic, a part of people’s daily experience and lives’.²⁵

Furthermore, postcolonial is not decolonial. In a brief linguistic analysis, we can see the passive action taken in adopting *post-* colonial as opposed to *de-* colonial; *post-* is a state of being, *de-* is a state of action.²⁶ Decolonial texts are critical of postcolonialism as they see the latter as upholding the

²² Quijano, Anibal. “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America.” pg. 536

²³ Ibid. pg. 540

²⁴ Jilani, Sarah. “How to Decolonize a Museum”

²⁵ de Sousa Santos, Boaventura. “Toward an Aesthetics of the Epistemologies of the South (Twenty-Two Theses).” pg 141

²⁶ Siegenthaler, Fiona and Allain Bonilla, Marie-laure. “Introduction: Decolonial Processes in Swiss Academia and Cultural Institutions.” pg. 5

language of colonialism – in the context of art institutions this is important as postcolonial language and scholarship (such as works by Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire) are adopted while decolonial theories are only beginning to appear in the art space, in a potentially bastardized and neutralized manner.²⁷

Decolonial scholars, based in South America, underline a rejection of systems and establishments which do not break away from Western canons and produce radical thought.²⁸ Walter Mignolo summarizes this theory and practice in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, stating:

[...] decolonial thinking and doing focus on the enunciation, engaging in epistemic disobedience and delinking from the colonial matrix in order to open up decolonial options—a vision of life and society that requires decolonial subjects, decolonial knowledges, and decolonial institutions.²⁹

The ever-increasing calls for decolonizing in the current moment are pushing further than theorizing; calling instead for action, now. Decolonizing is not a friendly affair, rather a process deeply rooted in conflict and struggle. A decolonial museum must be decolonial in its existence, with every individual and object within taking part. This means a reimagination, and inherent destruction,³⁰ of the museum as we know it. Institutions are built on a specific history and within a framework that will not change with only the diversification measures, quotas, and antiracist reading lists only being proposed in the wake of social uprisings. As Mignolo reminds us, the decolonial option is only one in a series of events to step away from Westernized values and constructions.³¹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. pg. 6

²⁹ Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. pg 3

³⁰ See Death to Museums monthly unconference, destruction does not mean physically ripping apart structures but doing internal work to change structural orders: available at: deathtomuseums.com/

³¹ *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Pg 21.

d. Bringing Theory into Action

From March through June 2020, I carried out interviews with thirteen arts institutions, academics in the field, and attended two online conferences on the topic of decolonizing museums in addressing this topic.³² Further, as open letters penned by primarily Black art workers came out alongside my own interview questions, I collected these resources and relayed them along during interviews as possible action steps. This included that of Jasmine Gregory and Yesomi Omulu, as well as the Instagram account @ChangeTheMuseum.³³ My goal in interviews was to hold art institutions accountable, using their own language posted online to challenge the steps towards decolonizing they seem eager to take.

In interviews, I was made aware of how my request was shuffled through staff members, often ending up with the one staff member of color across various institutional positions, from director to assistant and head curators to commercial gallery staff. I wrote to approximately forty institutions and individuals requesting further correspondence either via a video/phone interview or by an email response to questions. There were no responses to interview requests from major galleries in the USA (SFMOMA³⁴, MoMA, Whitney³⁵, the New Museum, Getty, the Broad, Hammer³⁶, MOCA) nor France (Centre Pompidou³⁷, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Centre Pompidou Metz, Gaîté Lyrique, Palais de Tokyo). Negative responses were explained in relation to reopening post-COVID and funding issues. This is important inasmuch as the fact that the post-COVID situation holds a position of centrality (alongside BLM) as an impetus for many of these decolonial actions.

I sought to challenge the assumption that this was predominantly a conversation for permanent collections, as rotating exhibitions equally provide opportunity for decolonizing. One question that was

³² See Appendix A.

³³ See Appendix C.

³⁴ During writing, a head curator faced backlash for racist remarks. See: Ting, Eric. "SFMOMA Curator Resigns after Reportedly Invoking 'Reverse Discrimination'." *SFGate*, 14 July 2020.

³⁵ See Appendix C, Decolonize This Place, for actions specifically against the Whitney

³⁶ See Appendix C for the online conference led by curator Erin Christovale.

³⁷ See Appendix C for conference held by Centre Pompidou.

posed retained a similar answer across all those who answered – smaller galleries have more flexibility in a decolonizing mission than larger institutions. Further, many remained hopeful that changes within smaller galleries would see reflections upwards as the questioning of the art world continues to call out the colonization, Eurocentrism, and elitism that have underlined arts culture for so long. This work is only one piece in a complex compilation of calls for decolonization being discussed contemporaneously around the world, and thus leaves a particular lacuna in the conversation.

II. THE TURN LOCAL AS A TURN TO DECOLONIAL

As travel is severely limited and with international audiences being the primary targets for so many institutions, museums must re-evaluate to *whom* they are speaking and *how*. This poses a unique set of issues. Now, we can see a shift in positionality as institutions look at who surrounds them, and who they can bring into their spaces lacking international audiences (who previously traveled around the globe for leisure, biennales, or art fairs). Further, a general feeling of coldness and elitism has often kept the local public out of art spaces. The art museum is generally seen as an activity for the wealthy, white, and educated to enjoy, with visitors of color often noting that they feel followed by security, unrepresented in displays, and with language used being inaccessible to those without a degree in the arts. These barriers, along with entry costs and the situation of museums in often affluent areas of cities, limit access. Addressing local audiences is both novel and a long time coming, offering an interesting approach to decolonizing in action.

As public space is problematized, so is the concept of the local. Under continuing COVID restrictions and regulations, the public sphere is policed and delineated in a new way, where our movements and actions are watched at every step. As institutions enter a cycle of reopening and closing again, how they address space will alter how we experience culture as well as who experiences culture, offering a chance to address existing inequality. To be an inclusive space, an authentic connection to

communities must be established. This connection must go further than one-off, tokenizing invitations into the space, but create a structural change – first by acknowledging deficits and limited perspectives, then taking action steps to provide art and a safe haven to the local community. As opposed to neocolonial endeavors to expand global art collections without expanding context in these spaces, I argue that a turn to community and local projects in the ‘new normal’ is in itself a decolonial action. The pandemic allows for deeper work and reflection on this topic to be done; alongside boosting mutual aid groups and reopening plans, institutions can address the communities they have an ignited interest in, countering their past focus on global audiences.

As Walsh states: ‘Decoloniality, without a doubt, is also contextual, relational, practice based, and lived. In addition, it is intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and existentially entangled and interwoven.’³⁸ Praxis is necessary for such a mission to make decolonial paths in local struggles which ‘resist and refuse the legacies and ongoing relations and patterns of power established by external and internal colonialism’.³⁹ There is nothing more lived and practice based than that which occurs in the spaces surrounding art institutions.

a. The New Normal in Unprecedented Times

What is the ‘new normal’? The ‘new normal’ is around us, being discussed constantly as a vaccine for COVID seems to be further distant and longing to return to ‘life before’ pushed people out of confinement and back into workspaces, leisure activities, and travel in the late summer before leading back to lockdowns and tiered systems of restrictions. The uncertainty surrounding so much of our lives is seemingly suppressed by politicians and friends who perpetuate the rhetoric of settling into a dramatically changed world. This rhetoric pushes coping before adapting and processing of trauma and

³⁸ Walsh, Catherine E. “The Decolonial For: Resurgences, Shifts, and Movements.” pg 19

³⁹ Ibid. pg 16

grief, not allowing ourselves to be scared or aware of the fact that ‘the “new normal” in fact describes a reality to which many do not have access’.⁴⁰ It is important that in fact, this ‘new normal’ looks nothing like what existed before, a ‘normal’ which did not work for a majority of the world’s population and will not start working now without dramatic changes. The discomfort and uncertainty that we feel must be addressed with a new paradigm, as opposed to returning to the world as we knew it. We also must not solely examine the world through the lens of the ‘new normal’⁴¹, where disparities in health and wealth are ignored and inequalities intensified.

Transparency and specificity in language must be the two driving factors in responding to this moment. When reopening plans across Europe went into effect, cultural centers were at the top of many people’s desired places to revisit. By August 2020 (merely two months after the blackout square Instagram takeover), these plans overshadowed Black Lives Matter, with websites of institutions such as Tate, MACBA, and MoMA returning to ‘normal’, no longer featuring articles addressing their stand against racism but instead focused on safety protocols, missing the mark on the interrelation of these ideas. Accountability regarding further action plans and antiracist actions behind the scenes are thus included in the aforementioned driving factors. COVID, BLM, and the ‘new normal’ are all inherently connected and must not be treated as disparate – as is underlined in new understandings of public space, where BIPOC visitors will undoubtedly be policed differently than white and as previously mentioned, BIPOC workers will risk their health for a low-paying job in order to survive.

Cultural institutions play a major role in the ‘new normal’ and a response to ‘unprecedented times’, offering a space to face difficult situations head on through the lens of art. These spaces exist in communities (often with a history of gentrification), not a neutral vacuum. Knowledge of and connection to the local community, providing support as opposed to alienation is an important action in

⁴⁰ Asonye, Chime. “There's Nothing New about the 'New Normal' - and Here's Why.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

this process. Using examples already in action in various art museums creates an easily adaptable paradigm opportunity to take into other art institutional contexts. Further, open conversation as opposed to competition between institutions in the wake of COVID allows for museums to hold each other accountable and speak about actions being taken.⁴² This offers a form of ‘group therapy’ to institutional workers, for honest and open conversation⁴³ – be that regarding re-opening or accountability for antiracist initiatives. Museums are realizing that mutual aid and working with local audiences and artists provides a two-way street of support – museums are helping communities around them and those communities are helping the museum.

i. Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo

CA2M is an idiosyncratic institution, in that it is the only center for contemporary art in the Spanish capital and located 17 kilometers south of Madrid’s city center, in Móstoles. This location and the primarily migrant demographics around the gallery, as was explained by museum director Manuel Segade Loreda, allow options for decolonizing in action through watching how the public interact with the space outside of the exhibitions. As the center has created low institutionality (no security and no ticket), the 500 square meters of the building often become a place for interaction without being homiletic about what and how to achieve community or artistic production. Before the COVID pandemic, CA2M was already dedicated to expanding programs to the local community. This involved saying yes to offers from the local community to interact with the space in various ways.

There are two programs that were discussed regarding youth projects. One is the under-21 group, an opportunity for youths in the area ‘to inscribe themselves within the museum and stay for a year’.⁴⁴

⁴² It was mentioned in interviews the amount of resource sharing occurring amongst institutions in this moment, led by COVID and attempting to best respond to BLM.

⁴³ The idea of “therapy for museums” was discussed with MACBA, as a potential for accountability.

⁴⁴ Segade Loreda, Manuel, Centro de Arte dos de Mayo. Personal Interview. 17 July 2020.

These teenagers thus produce the program for other teenagers, keeping the work inside relevant and interesting (as Segade said: ‘I don’t know what a teenager wants right now’⁴⁵). Rather than dictating what they should be interested in, this opportunity opens the door for engagement and action within a mixed-race, mixed-gender community on their own terms, as they approach the institution as opposed to the other way around. When the pandemic began, they continued to meet via Zoom dinners as weekly meetings in the space could no longer continue. These relational practices and community grew from creating a space that is approachable and open to listening and responding to the local community.

The other program, Segade states, comes from CA2M being a ‘mutant space, and production of subjectivity’⁴⁶, and is a community (as opposed to a workshop) that runs year-round, giving the tools to create an audio-visual work. At the beginning, ‘attendance was random, with children and teenagers from the borders of discussion coming to museum to get refuge’.⁴⁷ Eventually, this became the norm. Segade underlined the opportunity for empowerment through this technology, where the youth champion their own stories, working with other youths and artists in doing such. In very simplified terms, this opportunity has brought a change in point of view, as these communities feel appreciated and recognized through their work. This program led to another interesting local opportunity; ten minutes walking from the institution, there is a center for teenagers who have arrived in Spain (primarily from North Africa) without their families. Educators and artists from CA2M create workshops and unique projects with these youths in the house.

Segade stated that these are ‘not designed as decolonial projects to insert into racialized communities, but a chance to think decolonially’.⁴⁸ This distinction proves important throughout this work; but in the instance of working with local communities, it is important that the projects which

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

unfold in the space are designed for and by communities themselves. The combination of international and local focus here comes from direct action related to Africa and Latin America – global areas directly impacted by Spanish colonization. Allowing the space to be used as it is used, without dictating how that needs to be done, and watching what projects arise from within allows a decolonial mission in the education and programs realm of institutions.

ii. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

MACBA similarly recognizes its location in a primarily immigrant neighborhood. However, curator Hiuwai Chu discussed the difficulty of getting local communities into the space. Citing the pandemic as impetus for a renewed interest in the local community, MACBA has attempted to be self-reflective and has a recent history of looking at local perspectives. Unlike CA2M, programs that we discussed are focused on engagement with the works in the museum. This involves the '*Parlem de...*' series, where individuals from outside of the art world lead tours of exhibitions from their perspectives, encouraging new and unique methods of activating the exhibition space. From a curatorial perspective, we discussed the necessity for change – where purely academic perspectives give way to first person narratives.

The location in the community means that self-reflection has become a driving factor in deciding how to establish a dialogue in this space, one that best serves the public and pushes beyond geopolitical decolonization to actions in the museum that re-question epistemology. Chu stated that this would 'involve analyzing who creates meaning and how, and will necessitate an unlearning before a relearning, one that must be done in tandem with the local community that MACBA seeks to serve as a public institution'.⁴⁹ In action, this would involve programs with locals which are based on what *their* interests and concerns are, and what would encourage them to come to the museum in their own words.

⁴⁹ Chu, Hiuwai, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. Personal Interview. 15 July 2020.

Decolonizing is, in Chu's words, 'one-part structural and one-part listening – this emphasis on listening is being worked out in MACBA'.⁵⁰

MACBA has been called out in the past as being too elitist and over-focused on international exhibitions, which Chu underlined was not necessarily true as there have been and continues to be programming of Catalan artists. They do nonetheless recognize that more can be done and the COVID pandemic has drawn focus on the necessity to intensify the dialogue with the local context. Part of this effort involves this year's acquisitions being only from local artists and galleries. While working in Barcelona and coming out of confinement conversations, seeking to not sideline existing actions in the city which promote local and emerging artists, MACBA is holding onto this emphasis on dialogue, part of the gallery's overall mission.

This dialogue in MACBA is a decolonial option which may seem 'simple'. This however requires much more work than inviting new perspectives into the museum, involving an active non-otherization of perspectives outside of the hegemonic history and uni-directional communications that museums are often accused of. This dialogue, Chu stated, should not be overly didactic,⁵¹ but rather a conversation and include actions which 'prompt considerations that take us beyond the centrality of academia and its subjects, contexts, and confines. [... and] confront the idea of historically excluded, subalternized, and racialized peoples as "objects" of study'.⁵² These actions being taken in MACBA are easily adoptable in any institutional art space, granted they are carefully considered before.

iii. Serpentine Galleries

The Serpentine Galleries' planning allows ease in addressing urgent matters, as a focus on such programs has long been in place. This moment has prompted a renewed dedication to such actions,

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Walsh, Catherine E. "The Decolonial For: Resurgences, Shifts, and Movements." pg 28

inviting works and programs which speak on relevant contemporary issues. Due to their planning and not being a collecting institution allows a ‘closer alignment of artists and representations of what is going on in the world – a finger on the pulse, contemplating reality’.⁵³ Wider political issues enter the programme through the artists and their concerns, as well as through issue-based interdisciplinary strands of the programme such as General Ecology and Civic Projects. Reflecting the current moment is, as was discussed with curator Lizzie Carey-Thomas, the responsibility of such an institution, ensuring artists’ voices are as unmediated as possible.

Serpentine engages in particularly interesting programs in their local community (the London borough of Kensington – known for some of the biggest wealth disparities in the UK⁵⁴), engaging through their education and civic projects curators in ways which are meaningful and push beyond the white walls of the gallery. These are primarily programs which occur in the local community such as schools, childrens centres and working with minority groups, addressing issues that affect the daily lives of those communities. For example, Serpentine’s *Radical Kitchen: Recipes for Building Community and Creating Change* series of talks, introduced in 2017 and staged in the outdoor pavilion invited community and campaign groups to give public talks on themes of housing rights, gentrification, food poverty, unemployment, and migration and motherhood. Like MACBA, Carey-Thomas pointed out to me that there remains a certain difficulty in bringing the local community into the art space, but that engaging this audience is crucial and should be addressed before international reputation or audience. ‘Inviting diverse audiences involves the same checklist as onboarding diverse staff’,⁵⁵ stated Carey-Thomas, explaining that the space must be welcoming, with structures already in place to provide a mutual benefit to all. For *Radical Kitchen*, the curators organised transportation and meals for invited guests; actions which may have been a deciding factor for whether the guests participated with the

⁵³ Carey-Thomas, Lizzie, Serpentine Galleries. Personal Interview. 29 July 2020.

⁵⁴ Grenfell Tower is notably located in Kensington, a mile-and-a-half walk away from the entrance of Kensington Gardens.

⁵⁵ Carey-Thomas, Lizzie, Serpentine Galleries. Personal Interview. 29 July 2020.

gallery or not. Curatorial actions in this vein would involve having not too much nor too little information available, requiring reviewing interpretation strategy and generally providing a space where questions are invited, reflect a plurality of voices, and explanations are easily understood.

Through interdisciplinary live programs that are not only adjunct to exhibitions (which can initiate a conversation which continues after an exhibition closes) the greater community is involved and welcomed into the art space. Again, we see the importance of dialogue as a step towards a decolonial mission, in tandem with attempts to reckon with the struggle of connection to a community who may lack desire or tools to attend art exhibitions. These actions can be adopted in other galleries around the world by uplifting local community groups and associations, creating a safe space for action as well as being reliably informed on and influenced by the contemporary condition.

iv. Minneapolis Institute of Art

The post-COVID landscape of the institution and the local played an important role in conversation with Anniessa Antar, a staffer in the marketing team and contributor to MASS Action⁵⁶. Antar discussed the necessity of holding the institution accountable from the inside, especially responses to social uprisings occurring around the United States this past summer. In action, this involves having a public response, specifically one which is sustainable and horizontal. In doing as such, we can approach museum programming from a ‘harm reduction lens’, allowing for active planning and conversation with those who have a relationship to what is going up on the walls.

In the sense of public programming, Antar is involved in Third Thursday events, which have switched to an online presence in the wake of COVID. These virtual sessions begin with a call to action in the local community. Examples of this highlight mutual aid groups, a specific opportunity Antar cited involved offering aid to a community of people experiencing houselessness in a local park. Calls to

⁵⁶ See Appendix C

action make the museum a more active space to learn about ones' neighbors as opposed to a 'neutral monolith'.⁵⁷ This is especially important as the museum has in a sense colonized the very neighborhood in which it is situated, and reestablishing agency for local communities can provide decolonial options in action through upsetting traditional hierarchy.

Just as discussed with the previous examples, Mia recognizes the goal of using art to address the hard subjects of the world. Antar went further in this discussion, underlining the true decoloniality that lies in this goal. In her words, 'it is a disservice to the visitor when there is no nuance or complexifying of these subjects, and museums have a responsibility to provide this nuance as creators of cultural capital'.⁵⁸ If we were to experience museums without education, they would simply be boxes of stuff. Breaking down the constructed tension between curators and education departments will allow for museums to better address local audiences, engaging them in actions of pedagogy. Mia is currently reworking their public programs, creating lectures which are less top-down and niche. The previous programming was often geared towards donors interested in very small slivers of art history; Mia is now seeking for deeper horizontal and cross-cultural exchange. This is being tested in a virtual context, due to ongoing COVID concerns in the USA, offering another option for accessibility in art spaces when the space itself is closed.

v. Tabakalera Donostia

In Spain, as Latin American immigration increases, formerly colonized populations are further otherized and folded into the hegemonic narratives in tokenizing ways. Spain has a unique experience within this structure, as the Basque and Catalan regions fight for autonomy within their own country, while reckoning with their own roles in the history of colonization abroad. This was discussed with Tabakalera

⁵⁷ Antar, Anniessa, Minneapolis Institute of Art. Personal Interview. 21 July 2020.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

in San Sebastian, as well as with MACBA. Both galleries discussed how the art space offers an opportunity to problematize this, in presenting non-Western narratives alongside the ‘dominant’ narratives, showing the true history of the nation in question.

This problematization of past is an important process to undertake on a local level. Tabakalera spoke to the nature of complicating Basque independence within Spain, stating that ‘often the most international is in fact the local’.⁵⁹ As Tabakalera attempts to make a name for itself on the European stage, they are aware of historical revisionism that occurs in art spaces. Challenging Spanish hegemonic narratives with ‘Basque leftist nationalist discourse’, while recognizing the role of the Basque in the process of colonization offers a decolonial opportunity. The decolonial ‘may be simply investing deeper in the colonial past and bringing the public to face it’, in their words.⁶⁰

Recognizing the role of colonization as a continuing project as well as a historical moment with obvious lasting reverberations is particularly important for art institutions, who benefit from both past and present. This involves a combination of efforts mentioned in this section: local audiences, public space, facing histories of colonization, and a focus on empathetic connection before profit. An art institution which embraces this does not exist and would evidently require a deep structural change in order *to* exist at all. This moment of crisis and opportunity for structural destruction also offers opportunity for imagination to lead us into a new era of the arts. These individual actions from spaces (Mia, MACBA, CA2M, etc.) can be a guidebook, but in order to see a truly decolonized space, we must go beyond a single action.

⁵⁹ Etxeberria, Oier, Tabakalera Donostia. Personal Interview. 24 June 2020.

⁶⁰ Ibid

III. INTERNAL STRUCTURES, OR CURATING THE DECOLONIAL

It is worth briefly mentioning the money interests at play in art institutions, and to take a minute to look at board members of various art spaces. Often, money lies in what the museum supposedly stands against – including funding ICE, weapons dealers, and warmongers. There is a unique issue here, where galleries *need* funding, and (particularly in the USA) depend on donors as they do not get such funding from the government. As this happens behind the scenes, we are not necessarily faced with this facet of neocolonialism in the gallery. A general museumgoer will see the progressive, even radical socialist, narratives presented in the space, and will assume this is a reflection of the gallery. Collections may be steeped in colonialism, but hiring practices and boards represent the lack of BIPOC representation in the art world and the structural violence they face. Now, in November 2020, as lockdowns seem to be a part of the ‘new normal’, the first-fired staff are the very same members who put their health at risk in order to reopen. Redundancies in the cultural sector receive glib advice from political officials, such as UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak’s call for artists to ‘retrain’ and adapt,⁶¹ offering little to no financial support for institutions and individuals in the arts but promptly releasing an online career test to see what kind of job participants would best be suited to.

White privileges and supremacy, reflected quite simply in the numbers of professionals working in high positions at arts institutions, reproduces Black (and Indigenous, and all people of color) subordination.⁶² In arts institutions across the world, only 4% of top positions are held by Black professionals.⁶³ (A powerful emphasis of this can be seen in a letter written by a collective of conservators, signed by 13 professionals – representing over 80% of all Black art conservators in the US.⁶⁴) As such, whiteness is continually codified and privileged, creating systems of oppression across

⁶¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-54505841>

⁶² Harris, Cheryl I. “Whiteness as Property.” pg. 1731

⁶³ Morgan, Kelli. “To Bear Witness: Real Talk about White Supremacy in Art Museums Today.”

⁶⁴ See Appendix C, percentage from Hammer Museum Conference – LaStarsha McGarity spoke on this.

the world where a hierarchy is underlined: BIPOC are socially lower than whites, and whites will act unconsciously to uphold this. This is seen in the museum itself; Who owns the artworks?; Who decides what is on display?; For whom is this being displayed?; To whom is this work addressing? Antiracist reading lists and diversity measures alone will not solve this issue. Decolonizing requires action beyond a list, and particularly sustained action.

a. Diversity Measures and Antiracist Reading Lists

For a moment during the pandemic, our email inboxes were filled with everything from local takeaways to clothing brands proclaiming their solidarity with Black Lives Matter and generalized ‘we’re here for you in isolation’ statements. This strange phenomenon underlined the importance of differentiating messages and getting proper communication across.⁶⁵ Art institutions in particular *can* provide something for the public now, offering cultural connection. Communication of plans, be they reopening post-COVID or antiracist and diversity measures, *cannot*, however, be done via vague platitudes – institutions must use specific language in a timely manner.⁶⁶

Decolonizing is not a checklist that will be completed; these processes are long and will require thinking and parsing out in a transparent manner if we are to eventually see a destroyed, rebuilt, decolonial art space. The aspect of staff diversification must be a mission built into the art museum alongside decolonizing arts education, accessibility, history, and so on. Many institutions will have posted their ‘blackout square’ on Instagram and shared an antiracist literature list but will not have questioned power structures within their spaces. The ‘blackout square’ becomes another tool of capitalism, a way to virtue signal and elicit a response (maybe done with good intentions) but which will not see drastic changes to museums. Upsetting structural orders requires work from the inside, and from

⁶⁵ Cortes, Sara. “Not ‘Now More Than Ever’: How Museums Can Talk Straight in Weird Times.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

the top down. Following the blackout square and public letters, there have been various levels of dedication to this work. When speaking to institutions, it was clear across the board that many jumped into this moment with unsustainable goals and have had to reassess. My work initially set out to hold art institutions accountable in this journey, but in a sense is passing a baton to the reader, offering an inside perspective and a call to action to press museums to continue, and to go further. Months later, as @ChangetheMuseum and colleagues within the art world report back, the moment has ‘passed’; racism within ivory tower walls continues unchecked, and stories of individual micro- and macroaggressions in these spaces have not slowed.

i. The Whitworth and Manchester Art Gallery

Part of acknowledging deficits requires a willingness to learn in public, being transparent about areas of improvement and listening to and engaging with feedback from the public. The Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester provides an example of this. Following an initial statement of solidarity and partaking in ‘blackout Tuesday’, the gallery received criticism for ‘symbolic statements [with] lack of commitment to practical action’.⁶⁷ Rather than taking the defensive, the Whitworth has deepened its commitment to this work, publishing and updating action steps on their website at regular intervals. However, since the month of June, action steps have not been updated and public access to these conversations is limited as the museums’ focus turns to reopening plans at the end of August. A statement was released for Black History Month in October, making the important statement that they would use the month to celebrate Black achievement while recognizing that a one-off, one-month celebration otherizes Black achievement and that we should no longer think of this history as alternative.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ See: Hudson, Alistair. “Black Lives Matter – Part 2.”

⁶⁸ See: Hudson, Alistair. “Black History Month.”

In an email response to my questionnaire, staff were open with me regarding their decolonization project stating that they aim to ‘redress the imbalance of power in who constructs and narrates culture and history, and to tell a more accurate story of our society’.⁶⁹ A series of exhibitions at the gallery address this same goal, working with artists such as Sonia Boyce and Jade Monserrat. They are also ‘recasting modernism’, recognizing the role modernism plays in Eurocentrism.⁷⁰ No one action, nor series of actions, is ‘perfect’ in this process, yet the seemingly public transparency and willingness to learn undertaken by the Whitworth is a step in a positive direction. Their readjustment of initial statements to be more realistic is something that makes the institution more human, opposed to the constant ‘correctness’ institutions generally emanate.

ii. Tate Modern

Tate faces a complex history of actions to decolonize, as a well-known and major institution. As power within is so bifurcated, and with so many staff members, actions to decolonize can be difficult to carry out if they do not come from the top positions. It seems that any given moment, Tate is involved in multiple call-outs (in June this involved a mural in Tate Britain by White Pube⁷¹ as well as strike actions due to redundancies following COVID⁷²). Many of these call-outs state that Tate just doesn’t get it – that any action does not go far enough, and subjects are not confronted in a meaningful way which will bring change.

All of this was on my mind as I spoke to Emily Pringle, head of research at Tate. Pringle spoke to me regarding an internal taskforce, as well as the huge diversity in opinion on this topic within the institution – she importantly underlined that she cannot speak for the whole institution, as well as stating

⁶⁹ See Appendix D

⁷⁰ Bonilla, Marie-Laure Allain. “‘Is It Conceivable to Decolonize the Collections from Western Museums of Modern and Contemporary Art?’ Theoretical and Practical Aspects.” pg. 81

⁷¹ See: “Protesters Launch Petition to Remove Tate Britain’s Racist Mural.” *Observer*, 5 Aug. 2020,

⁷² See: “London Art Scene Unsettled as Tate Workers Vote to Strike, Southbank Centre Challenged over Major Restructuring.” *ArtForum*, 6 Aug. 2020.

that an antiracist museum is not a decolonized museum. In the heat of uprising, as was the case in institutions globally, a taskforce was created with lofty goals of education and actions to be undertaken. The taskforce at Tate would eventually be responsible for identifying action plan steps, but this has been delayed due to the ongoing issues regarding COVID, reopening, as well as seeking to address *meaningful* actions. There is importance in slowing down in this situation, aiming to create a sustainable action plan that truly does unsettle power, but also ensuring that it does not get forgotten. Publicly, nothing more has been said about this taskforce.

Pringle stated that this must be work which requires every individual within the institution to reflect internally and interrogate their own position, consistently working toward equity.⁷³ This holds potential to further decolonial action, but the conversation with Tate underlined an important factor: an institution is a collection of individuals, and as long as *some* are benefitting, *all* will not be equal. This cannot briefly be the conversation of June 2020, but a sustained process that is embraced by institutions. A focus on internal work toward decolonization must be an ‘intellectual exercise to distance ourselves from the theory; it’s not about having another conference about decolonizing but to focus our energy on doing it, and to keep doing it’ Pringle states.⁷⁴

iii. The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery

One of the most intriguing conversations that I had was with Gaëtane Verna, director of The Power Plant in Toronto. Verna’s words and actions underline what must be the goal in any institution on the move to creating a truly antiracist space. The ‘Power Plant Plan’, as I have called it, is incredibly adaptable into any art institution. In Verna’s summarized words: ‘Want to make a change? Then just do

⁷³ Pringle, Emily, Tate. Personal Interview. 22 July 2020.

⁷⁴ Ibid

it. Hire diverse professionals, seek them out, show diverse artists – set yourself a goal, shorten the timeline, and make a change. Everything is possible – you just have to *want* it.⁷⁵

Verna’s plan at the Power Plant has worked, featuring a diverse staff (allowing for a space of trust and conversation) and curatorial actions which invite in BIPOC artists/visitors and white visitors/artists together in education. In response to uprisings, Power Plant posted works from BIPOC artists currently in collaboration with the gallery and quotes from *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou as opposed to a blackout square. All of these actions are in direct conversation with audiences – local and international alike. (Verna stated that her goal in the institution is to break from the trend of a program which could be in London, Paris, or New York, questioning instead what is not being said or done in art in Toronto, responding on a local, regional, and national level. This is not about being the ‘first’ to hold an exhibition, but reflecting on how to bring exhibitions into conversation in the contemporary moment.⁷⁶)

The ‘Power Plant Plan’ is not as difficult as institutions would like to make it seem. It requires an individual step to decolonize our minds, as was mentioned with Tate, and then takes a step further to bring this into practice – this is an obvious disruption of power structures that is inherent in a decolonial mission. It means *embracing* diversity at all levels in the institution, beyond cleaning and security staff, and not simply *talking* about diversity, or reading antiracist books because this is the *à la mode* approach. It also features an element of emotional intelligence and empathy that must not be overlooked.

b. Curation as Mediation

As is clear in the mission statement of any gallery, art institutions are places to learn as well as to experience works of art. Beyond internal diversity measures within staff, curation offers a bridge to the

⁷⁵ Verna, Gaëtane, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery. Personal Interview. 16 July 2020.

⁷⁶ Ibid

audience. If the role of the museum is to tell the story of the world, it is important to start at home and truly tell the story *of the world* as opposed to continuing dominant hegemonic narratives. In action, this means hiring BIPOC curators and artists, but also building trust and a feeling of safety in representing such histories. BIPOC professionals must not be tokenized nor taken on to continue the neoliberal agenda of museums – the work and stories presented must be adequately represented and not continually retold ‘via canonical artists, instead disturbing knowledge and values’.⁷⁷ This necessitates unlearning the white supremacist culture within the museum and is truly a top-down endeavor, especially as museums ‘find themselves in a dilemma between their decolonial agenda and limitations set by established policies and practices’.⁷⁸ If those at the top are not willing to change, the curation will not make a dramatic difference in the world.

Just as decoloniality will not come simply from diversity measures regarding staff nor from diversifying collections, it will not come from curatorial actions alone. That is not to disparage any of these actions, but to state that the actuality of decolonizing is much more complex. Rather than getting caught up in theories of *how* this will look,⁷⁹ we must start with curatorial actions already undertaken. Curation offers an opportunity for mediation between the local, the audience, the works, the education, and those employed by art museums. If rethought, with reinvigorated gallery spaces and accessible conversations, we could see a more interdisciplinary and dynamic readings of exhibitions. Every institution that I spoke with had a statement regarding curatorial actions that they believed could be undertaken in order to achieve this, these are simply a few of the unique responses which directly addressed the aforementioned challenges.

⁷⁷ Siegenthaler, Fiona and Allain Bonilla, Marie-laure. “Introduction: Decolonial Processes in Swiss Academia and Cultural Institutions.”pg 6

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ ‘Theory is a tool that can be used to justify certain choices and orientations, but it is not by any means self-sufficient. How to make theories efficient within the framework of museums?’ Bonilla, Marie-Laure Allain. “‘Is It Conceivable to Decolonize the Collections from Western Museums of Modern and Contemporary Art?’ Theoretical and Practical Aspects.” pg. 84

i. Chatsworth House

Chatsworth House is a country house in Derbyshire that has a contemporary art program alongside the historical aspects of the house. Curating a contemporary art program in a lived-in house is an interesting task. When speaking to the curator of exhibitions, Alex Hodby, we discussed the unique experience faced in such a space, as well as general curatorial actions which can be undertaken whether in a major art institution or a National Heritage site⁸⁰. These curatorial actions begin with one's own learning, and acknowledgment of structural benefits – especially as a white curator, addressing and verbalizing privilege and responsibility must be high on the list of action steps, Hodby stressed.

A major takeaway from this conversation was addressing curation in a manner that Mia and MACBA had also mentioned. Racism and the effects of structural disadvantage are traumatic, and we must not solely depend on the unpaid labor of BIPOC to lead this conversation and action. In changing the structure of museums, there must be a curatorial space of care and mechanisms of support. Curators (particularly of contemporary art working with living artists) must ask themselves what additional support is needed; Hodby stated that this is 'either when dealing with works that are based on previous trauma faced or when working with a BIPOC artist, recognizing that racism is in all of the structures at play and in everything that they face'.⁸¹ These steps for recognition and work within a curatorial team are decolonial steps of care, that which the power structures of neoliberalism do not prioritize or often even care about. Any curatorial team is capable of undertaking the individual work necessary for a collaborative and caring environment.

⁸⁰ See: Dresser, Madge, and Andrew Hann. *Slavery and the British Country House*: English Heritage, 2013. For further information

⁸¹ Hodby, Alex, Chatsworth House. Personal Interview. 27 July 2020.

ii. KW Institute for Contemporary Art

KW in Berlin is notably the location of the Berlin biennale, but also hosts programs throughout the year, with an intent to champion communities and stories that are ‘different’ – for example AIDS in the global queer community, told from the point of view of those living it at different points in their lifetime.⁸²

Alongside curation, involvement with marginalized or underrepresented communities should be undertaken; this offers a chance to expand and decenter basic forms of knowledge around exhibition history and display. This is part of a greater action of decolonizing – one which questions having a ‘taste in art’ (rooted in Eurocentric practices) and general understandings of art history. There is a movement to do this at KW, but not one which necessarily connects to the greater Berlin in meaningful ways.

From the point of view of the person whom I spoke with, ‘curatorial actions are limited tools of decolonization as they are ephemeral opportunities for engagement within an art space’.⁸³ KW also mentioned their long-term engagement with an artist over time (not having a ‘conveyor belt of programming’ but commitments throughout an artist’s career⁸⁴). This is one way of bringing in other voices without otherizing them, yet also faces its own issues. In a city with a small art scene, there runs the risk of bringing in the same artists; if the focus of the gallery is global, there runs a risk of a neocolonial undertaking for the benefit of the institution. A balancing act must thus be sought out, one which KW works on in their own programming in order to prioritize decolonization beyond the subject matter of the exhibition or the artists involved. Though a curated exhibition as a 6-week opportunity to engage with works may not be decolonial, the opportunities in how to work as a curator with artists in a decolonial way are built further in this example, taking on a space of care for one show to become a long-term commitment to artists who are underrepresented, be that due to racialization, gender, or age.

⁸² See: Wojnarowicz, David. *Photography & Film 1978-1992*. 9 Feb. - 5 May 2019, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin.

⁸³ KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Personal Interview. 8 July 2020.

⁸⁴ Ibid

iii. Marie-Laure Allain Bonilla

Marie-Laure Allain Bonilla is an academic who studies the curatorial practices of contemporary art. Her research has focused on decoloniality in the West. In conversation about antiracist actions undertaken currently and decolonization as a general goal and subject, we discussed whether there is a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to go about this mission. Allain Bonilla stated that a ‘wrong’ way would imply having just one or a few events related to decoloniality, something for institutions to say ‘yes, we have done that’ and then no longer pursue, what Allain Bonilla calls ‘decolonial washing’; a ‘right’ way would be, among other actions, to talk, be open and inclusive, and to trace and address legacies of colonialism in institutional spaces.⁸⁵ In action, and in terms of the colonial, Allain Bonilla suggested an action which is easily adoptable into any art institution: address the lacks of the collection.

In globalized exhibitions, unless they are specifically focused on non-Western art, the Eurocentric biases of institutions are extremely evident. Rather than bragging about a globalized collection, not noting that which is not represented,⁸⁶ it is important to say where in the world works are not represented and speak about the blank spaces in such a collection.⁸⁷ These curatorial actions hold space for decoloniality in two ways: not otherizing the works outside of the Eurocentric focus of institutions, as well as offering a space for conversation and honesty from an institutional space. Honesty, and transparency, as noted throughout this work, are incredibly important decolonial actions for bastions of power in the world, namely museums and art institutions – spaces where we intend to see the world reflected back to us and to learn from.

⁸⁵ Allain Bonilla, Marie-Laure. Personal Interview. 20 July 2020.

⁸⁶ See: *Multiple Modernities 1905-1970*. 23 Oct. 2013 – 26 Jan. 2015, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

⁸⁷ See: *How Far How Near*. 19 Sep. 2014 – 31 Jan 2015, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

CONCLUSION

As the world tiptoes toward the post-COVID era – featuring localized lockdowns and mutual aid groups providing funding that governments do not provide – and as we see social uprisings and relearning of public space occurring all around us, cultural institutions must also reassess how to address their public. Initially, when writing on this subject that instilled fear in me: how does one write about the world of art when the world of art is so drastically implicated in the current situation; how does one write about a change while the change is ongoing? I still do not know the answers, but with the help of curators, directors, and education outreach program leaders in museums around the world, I am happy to begin to imagine options which address these issues, and to hopefully begin to see a change that goes beyond lip-service, offering guidance on promoting decoloniality in new structural orders. Imagination will play a major role in this restructuring of museums, a reconstruction (often inherently following ‘destruction’) which is necessary in order to reach a decolonial mission in such spaces.

In the immediate aftermath of the urgent crisis the world faced, it was hopeful that we would see dramatic changes in structural orders of culture and life. Months later, it seems that this may not be the case after all. White supremacist culture runs deep and wide in the museum: spaces which are constructions of coloniality in themselves, not neutral as generally considered.⁸⁸ Confronting and adjusting this culture is both simple and requires long-term dedication beyond diversity measures and one-off lectures or posts on Instagram. Goals of decoloniality in art institutions require *doing* decolonial actions, such as some of the examples listed in the above body of work, rather than theorizing and focusing on ‘learning about’ the structures of power and racism (which are obvious) within institutions in conferences, audits, and action plans. As of November 2020, it seems that sustained action may be

⁸⁸ As museums are European inventions and now European exports, this culture makes its way across the globe. For example, in Chinese museums where Impressionist works are sought out to bring international audiences. See: Thompson, Jennifer. “Asian Buyers Snap up Impressionists.” *Financial Times*, 6 May 2015, www.ft.com/content/acfe0fb8-f3bc-11e4-99de-00144feab7de.

much slower and less radical than anticipated. However, I do remain hopeful that with pressure, art institutions will continue to adapt and respond, creating mutated versions of the spaces that many love.

When bringing voices to the table, particularly voices of BIPOC artists, professionals, and creators, a trustworthy and safe environment for expression must exist. For white professionals, this involves letting go of and naming behavior and thought processes which perpetuate the situation at hand. Diversity initiatives are a start, but how can this alone make any difference when the only BIPOC staff onboarded are the cleaning or catering staff rather than the upper echelons of museum management? If a museum is a place to educate, to build narratives of past and present, and to offer dialectic options to all (as seems to be in the mission statement of most galleries around the world), why is this change seen as radical? We must get uncomfortable and challenge dominant narratives of history in this work. We must make space and give up space – meaning a relinquishing of power and white supremacy, with more BIPOC creators and professionals in positions of power. I hope to see radical change as galleries challenge these issues head on. As a global and local community, we must harness this moment, keep up the pressure, and imagine a radically different future; then we must bring that imagined future into action.

APPENDIX A : LIST OF INTERVIEWS

I held interviews with the following institutions:

- *Tabakalera - San Sebastian, Spain*
- *Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) - Barcelona, Spain*
- *Centro de Arte Dos de mayo (CA2M) - Madrid, Spain*
- *Louisiana Museum of Modern Art - Humlebaek, Denmark*
- *KW Institute for Contemporary Art - Berlin, Germany ** host of Berlin biennale*
- *Haul Gallery - New York City, USA ** commercial gallery*
- *Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) - Minneapolis, USA*
 - *Notably where George Floyd was murdered, also home to MASS action - (Museum as a site for social action)*
- *The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery - Toronto, Canada*
- *Tate Modern - London, UK*
- *Serpentine Gallery - London, UK*
- *Chatsworth House – Derbyshire, UK*

As well as Marie-Laure Allain Bonilla, an academic based in Basel, Switzerland.

I received written responses to questions from:

- *Manchester Art Gallery - Manchester, UK*
- *Camden Art Centre - London, UK*

APPENDIX B : INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What would a decolonized art museum/gallery look like to you?

- In the UK specifically, a “gallery” is different from a “museum”. A “museum’s” collection is tainted already, steeped in colonial history (such as the British Museum). Would you say that a “gallery” has more facility in changing gears and decolonizing due to this?

- Anti-Racism

- What is being done to divest from whiteness? What might this divesting look like in action?

- What can your gallery do for reparative justice (including acknowledging the methods in which slavery has benefitted the gallery, or the land on which the gallery was built) A conversation in the USA currently includes paying reparations. Are you prepared to pay reparations based on artworks that your gallery may have profited off of with ties to slavery/colonialism?

- Has the gallery made any public statements about its ties to colonialism? These ties could be through the obvious - direct pieces being in the museum as a product of colonialism - or through the general profiting of whiteness that museums benefit from. How will these statements be incorporated further into the gallery’s existence, beyond a webpage?

- When displaying artworks in which the pieces or artists may have a troubled past (for example, Gauguin or Picasso) do you address this in the placards or explanations of the exhibition?

- What does being an “anti-racist” organization look like to your gallery?

- Curation

- What would be involved in an action plan to accelerate progress in this area?

- What curatorial actions can be taken to decolonize the art museum?

- Instead of hiring white curators or collectors to bring together works from continents, such as Asia, Africa, or South America, have you contacted first directly the artists you may seek to show? Would you consider doing exhibitions in tandem with these communities directly?

- Would you hire a BIPOC curator for an exhibition on art by BIPOC creators? For an exhibition on art by white creators?

- Diversity

- I have seen the 2018 diversity report available online, is there a more recent report available? Have numbers changed dramatically in one direction or another?

- In this report are gender pay graphs; is there access to race pay breakdown? Do you pay BIPOC employees equal pay?

- Do you have equal representation initiatives? How are these held accountable if yes?

- Collections and Creatives

- What commitments do you have in place currently to displaying artworks by BIPOC artists?

- What concrete initiatives do you have in place for supporting BIPOC artists?

- What commitments do you have in place for expanding BIPOC representation in the gallery?

- How does the museum feature exhibitions of BIPOC artists' work? How are works chosen? Are there conversations regarding how to accurately represent the pieces, sometimes taken out of cultural context?

- Do you invite BIPOC speakers and experts to speak at symposia regarding exhibitions or artworks, be those works by BIPOC or not?

APPENDIX C : RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This list is an incomplete collection of the resources currently available on the topic of decolonization of the art world. As this topic takes a place of urgency in the collective mind of art workers, resources are constantly forthcoming. The following are those which influenced my writing the most and are mentioned throughout the work.

Open Letters

Black Art Conservators. “Join Black Conservators and Demand Racial Justice in Art Conservation”

Open Letter, 13 July 2020, available at: blackartconservators.com/

Black Artists and Cultural Workers in Switzerland. “Open Letter/Offener Brief/Lettre ouverte”, 9 June

2020, available at: blackartistsinswitzerland.noblogs.org/

Umolu, Yesomi. “On the Limits of Care and Knowledge: 15 Points Museums Must Understand to

Dismantle Structural Injustice.” *Artnet News*, 25 June 2020, available at:

news.artnet.com/opinion/limits-of-care-and-knowledge-yesomi-umolu-op-ed-1889739.

Organizations

Attia, Kader. “Décolonisons Les Arts !” in collaboration with La Colonie, 2018, available at:

www.lacolonie.paris/archives/2018/septembre/decolonisons-les-arts/.

Décoloniser les Arts. “Le Blog De Décoloniser Les Arts.” Club De Mediapart, 19 Aug. 2020, available

at: blogs.mediapart.fr/decoloniser-les-arts/blog.

“Decolonize This Place.” DTP, 2020, available at: decolonizethisplace.org/

Incluseum “About.” Available at: incluseum.com/about/

MASS Action. “Museums as Site for Social Action.” Available at: museumaction.org

Museum 2.0. “On White Privilege and Museums.” Museumtwo, 6 Mar 2013, Available at:
museumtwo.blogspot.com/2013/03/on-white-privilege-and-museums.html

Conferences Held During Time of Writing Used as References

Centre Pompidou, “Discriminations raciales: que peut faire la culture? Débat au centre”, July 2020,
available at: centrepompidou.fr/cpv/agenda/event.action?param.id=FR_R-50d87160-cc21-40c3-9fe4-fc044bb555ec¶m.idSource=FR_E-103caa4b-349a-407d-b05d-2c7ddd08967f

Death to Museums, unconference “monthly dialogue series”, Aug. 2020, available at:
deathtomuseums.com/

The Hammer Museum, Reimagining the Museum program series, July 2020 available at:
hammer.ucla.edu/programs-events/2020/reimagining-museum

Instagram

@ChangeTheMuseum, available at: [instagram.com/changethemuseum/](https://www.instagram.com/changethemuseum/)

@Histoires_Crepues, available at: [Instagram.com/histoires_crepues/](https://www.instagram.com/histoires_crepues/)

@PunkOrientalism, available at: [Instagram.com/punkorientalism/](https://www.instagram.com/punkorientalism/)

@TheWhitePube, available at: [Instagram.com/thewhitepube/](https://www.instagram.com/thewhitepube/)

@HaulGallery, available at: [Instagram.com/haul.gallery/](https://www.instagram.com/haul.gallery/)

APPENDIX D : WRITTEN RESPONSES TO INTERVIEWS

- **Manchester Art Gallery** - 3 July 2020

Dear Rachel

Thanks for your email. Your research is very timely.

I am really sorry but I have very limited time - we are gearing up to reopening at the end of August and pretty much throughout the day I am in zoom meetings or even, excitingly, go into the gallery, to work out how we are going to reopen safely.

So what I thought would be helpful is if I sent you some of the information we have relating to decolonisation. We recently put this statement on our website which gives some context and lists some of the projects we have done - <https://manchesterartgallery.org/news/black-lives-matter/>

We have been working to decolonise and de-modernise the narrative of our collections and exhibitions. Recently, we have been inviting and supporting a wide range of constituents to use the gallery to speak up and out to others and to provide space for a multitude of voices and experiences. We have done many exhibitions and projects over the years including *We Face Forward: Art from West Africa Today*, *Revealing Histories, Remembering Slavery* (<http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/home.html>), *Speech Acts*, *Waqas Khan* and *Sonia Boyce* to name a few. *Speech Acts* was particularly important as it came out of the Black Modernisms Audit which was set up to identify work by black British artists in UK collections. For that project we had a group of Black Critical Friends who were involved in discussions which shaped the project.

Last summer we convened the School of Integration, a project by Tania Bruguera which asked the question why is integration always the responsibility of the immigrant and saw 104 Manchester residents, hailing from 53 countries all around the world, delivering classes on a wide-ranging curriculum – including languages, food, customs, ethics and politics. <https://manchesterartgallery.org/exhibitions-and-events/exhibition/school-of-integration/>.

We are currently working with [Jade Montserrat and INIVA](#). Jade will be making a new work which will enter the collection. She is also convening a series of conversations with people in Manchester - now online of course - but these are open to the public so if you are interested, please do sign up for our mailing list or keep an eye on our social media channels when they will be scheduled over the coming months. This is the page on the website which tells you more about Jade's project <https://manchesterartgallery.org/news/future-collect-jade-montserrat/>

These are just some examples of how we are trying to be part of the conversation and actively contribute to change.

We have also been updating our collecting policies – in our collecting today, we are working to rectify the historic imbalance between white male artists and other artists who have been side-lined. We want to collect art that is representative of all our communities, and this means continually educating ourselves and listening to a diversity of voices. We have recently been successful in securing grants to buy works by Berni Searle, Adeela Suleman and Deborah Roberts.

We also had a freedom of information request some months ago which you might also find useful

Has the museum publicly acknowledged that any artefacts or other materials ended up in its collection due to slavery or colonialism, e.g. in the labelling of artefacts on display?

Yes we have not only done this in individual labels (for example in our current display Trading Station) but also we are changing who tells the story to include more voices. We want to be transparent and also ask questions about power and control and who gets to construct history or the cultural narrative. We are working with constituents to co-curate displays, programmes, events and activities so that many more voices are included.

Our decolonisation agenda is broad in scope, essentially redressing the imbalance of power in who constructs and narrates culture and history, and to tell a more accurate story of our society. This goes beyond discourse around race and identity and also includes class, gender, identity and politics. As part

of this we accept that we must embrace the complexities of our context and history as institutions, as citizens of a city and the UK as a whole. Manchester Art Gallery is a product of the wealth of the city's industry and economics and its people. As such it is entangled with a history of colonisation, but also a history of art—colonisation, supporting the city's campaign against slavery, the suffragettes and social movements of the working classes. The project of decolonisation is also one of de-modernisation that will repurpose our infrastructure for a more positive social effect. Our new mission and vision underpins our plans to represent our collections in a new light and use them in new ways to tell new stories that have not previously been told – and advocate for a more inclusive society and culture. We are doing this in partnership with artists (such as Sonia Boyce) and users of the museum as well as organisations such as BAM (the Black Artists and Modernism project), [INIVA](#) and the L'internationale Confederation of Museums.

The Manchester Museums Partnership, under new leadership, is embarking on a new phase of programming that takes an active role in decolonising our museums. Examples of this include the Manchester Museums' (ritualised) repatriation of objects to Australia, the Reno project at the Whitworth and Speech Acts at Manchester Art Gallery.

Has the museum apologised for contributing to and profiting from slavery and other forms of coerced labour during the colonial era?

Manchester Art Gallery has not apologised as this is a much more complex issue, with every British Citizen and the national infrastructure complicit in the history of colonisation to one degree or another. We are committed to being transparent about how some of our collection, which was gifted to us, was bought with the proceeds from slavery. We condemn colonisation and all who profited from it and regret that our predecessors didn't ask questions about where their donors' money came from. Today we have strict procedures when acquiring works for the collection.

I hope all this helps your research. Do come back to me end of August if you need any further information and I can assess how my diary is looking at that point.

Best wishes

Natasha Howes

Senior Curator

Manchester Art Gallery

- **Camden Art Centre – 30 June 2020**

Dear Rachel

Thank you again for contacting Camden Art Centre and sending your dissertation questions to us. We are pleased you approached Camden Art Centre as one of the institutions to talk to for your dissertation. Due to staff furlough and the closure of Camden Art Centre due to COVID-19, we are rather stretched in our capacity and as such it is harder than normal to facilitate requests of this kind at this time.

Remaining staff are taking a period of leave in July, and we are currently focusing all capacity on reopening plans.

Whilst we do not have capacity to meet with you, I wanted to offer some signposting in case that is of benefit to your research. Some of your questions will be answered when we share our Anti-Racism action plan on our website later in autumn. You may also find information on artists we have worked with across the programme if you look back through our online archive. This platforms and partners we have worked with across our exhibitions, residencies, learning and public programmes since 1991. As you mentioned, some of the other questions are more related to larger museums or galleries with collections, so do not feel as connected to the collaborative way we work with artists on a regular changing exhibition programme or the smaller scale of CAC.

Thank you for being in touch with us about your dissertation and I apologise that we do not have the capacity at present to talk to you further. We wish you the best with your studies and research.

All my best

Gina Buenfeld

Exhibitions Curator

Camden Art Centre

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