

## REVIEW

Two-Day webinar titled ‘Art Criticism and the Pandemic’ jointly organised by The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Chris McCormack, Associate Editor of *Art Monthly*, one of UK’s leading magazines of contemporary visual art, held 9-10 July 2020.

### Building with Care:

#### A review of ‘Art Criticism and the Pandemic’

Located in central London, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art<sup>1</sup> is an important institution engaged in supporting and cultivating new ways of understanding British art history and culture. It has a rich collection of more than 26,000 printed material in its library and archives, which include books, pamphlets, catalogues, theses, research papers of art historians, art critics; and more than 1,00,000 reference photographs of British paintings and drawings from 1500 to 2000. Among its various activities, including publishing monographs and catalogues and the journal *British Art Studies*, running in-house research projects, offering grants and fellowships for academic research and disseminating of knowledge, the centre also holds various art events for scholars, students and connoisseurs of British art regularly – the event under review is one such event.

The two-day event had a very well thought-out line-up of ten speakers who ranged from art historians, art critics, curators to practicing artists, like David Dibosa (art historian/critic), Juliet Jacques (writer/journalist), Khairani Barokka (artist), Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz (curator), Rehana Zaman (artist), Neo Sinxolo Musangi (artist), Larne Abse-Gogarty (art history), Marina Vishmidt (writer, editor, critic), Robert McRuer (disability scholar), and Jade Montserrat (artist/ writer). However, this review will not touch upon all the content but only those issues will be highlighted that in some way or other are relevant to disability research and activism. Furthermore, the presentation by Barokka has been reproduced in full in the Provocations section of his journal (see pp. 68-70).

The event was organised with the twin aim of first exploring the possibility of a reorganised globalised art world and renewal and healing of structural inequity driven by a differential attention to certain bodies, the former the theme of the first day titled ‘Resetting the global’ and the latter the theme of the second day titled ‘Whose body?’ – I will henceforth refer to these twin aims as Resetting and Body. Quite naturally then, disability figures and features prominently in both of these engagements. Themes of both the days were geared towards finding alternatives, in general, to the existing structures of the colonised art world, arising out of the current conditions defined by the pandemic. Although, it was targeted to discover renewal strategies for the existing wronged but

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<sup>1</sup> The website for the Centre is at: <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk>

currently interrupted art world through by (re)looking critically at the existing structures, it is an admirable goal from the perspective of any such wronged system of structures – including, and more so, disability – that preferentially ‘allow’ only certain positionings to exist and dismiss or suppress certain others.

Looking carefully, we discover a common final hope arising across these two themes. The event was carefully curated not just to examine the current situation through a critical lens but to in fact arrive at a hopeful possible future strategy arising out of a renewed reconceptualization of a space defined by care and healing. This attempt at organising work around care, to develop a community of care, a code of conduct built around and beyond predefined categories where every actor feels safe, is guided by an ethics of care articulated by disabled people’s movement and the well-known feminist ethics of care that criticizes notions of independence – I will come back to this issue immediately below.

Listening to the panellists, I felt a certain sense of liberation and relief, not only was the composition of the panels were very well thought-out, extremely diverse for one, and all the panellists making excellent points, I had the distinct sense that the event made definite progress towards its stated goal of evolving a framework for a renewal informed by notions of care. Though the hope of a renewed form of activism addressing inequity and injustice in the art world may not have been realised, there were enough seedlings identified that may germinate and sprout new ideas of art activism elsewhere – I briefly mention one possibility below, which can be constructed around traditional spaces rethought from the vantage point of care.

In fact, the first speaker David Dibosa, one of the authors of the book *Post Critical Museology* (2013, Routledge), and a trained curator with a PhD in Art History from Goldsmiths College for a thesis on art, shame and commemoration, introduced the audience on the first day to a model of distribution that can provide one dimension to such a renewed form of activism, where global art centres move towards distributing contents in different ways including accessing newer groups of people. With interest ranging from addressing ways in which exhibitions act as focal points for social practices, through exhibition as a site of mourning and commemoration to examining ways in which museum exhibitions can be places for staging of national identities, Dibosa engaged in a stimulating discussion on the second day on the notion of the museum as a space of sanctuary – an expression invoked by another presenter on the that day, Barbara Rodrigues Muñoz, curator at Wellcome Collection, London and the author of the recent book *Health* published from MIT Press, whose own presentation was titled ‘The land of the healing’. Dibosa interpreted such a notion of a sanctuary as an invitation to rethink our relationships to spaces – how we make sanctuaries, which refer back to his own nuanced form of a distributed model of engagement. One idea to explore in the domain of activism then would be to seek ways of creating safe and supportive sanctuaries informed by an ethics of care.

Khairani Barokka, an Indonesian born disabled artist currently operating out of London and the only disabled artist/ critic present in the panel, did not necessarily think that museums as sanctuaries can be as uncomplicated as discussed or be thought of outside

the power network, often informed by funding and leadership structures, that they are a product of, demanding therefore of us to go beyond the binaries of these being places of resting and challenging.

Although disability found a clear presence in only two of the presentations – on the first day through Barokka's passionate presentation and on the second, through the disability theorist Robert McRuer's presentation – nine out of the total ten papers presented talked about issues concerning marginalities and their relationship to art, therefore some way or other, all the talks were relevant for examining the thesis of ways of decolonising art; the only exception being the presentation by Larne Abse-Gogarty, a lecturer at UCL's Slade School of Art, London, which rather stayed within the limits of a more conventional art talk and did not much concern itself with the raging issues arising out of the current emergent situation (although she did mention black subjecthood), which McRuer in fact went as far as calling it 'dangerous times'.

I really liked David Dibosa's inaugural intervention (he called it 'provocations') that I already mentioned briefly above, which set the tone for the whole event. He offered his provocations in relation to what he called 'cross-winds' of the current crisis. I found it amazing that the metaphors that figured prominently in Dibosa's talk were all climatic, for example, 'cross-winds' (already pointed out), 'headwind' – the Pandemic itself, turbulence – the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement spontaneously triggered by the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police, third-wind, and storms, referring to a concurrent receding global economy. However, though these changes may seem like unprecedented, Dibosa challenged that view by discussing how similar they are to the changes that have been noticed both at the beginning of the 19th (Napoleonic wars) and 20th (initiation of modernity) centuries that brought about abolition of serfdom and slavery – a precedent of BLM, if you like. These changes are therefore seen as epochal shifts rather than radical and unprecedented changes. However, one must be cautious in perceiving parallels across what are exclusively dominant tropes in the history of the west/global north as there are well-known other similar tropes elsewhere (for example, the Dalit uprising in India in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), predicated upon categories that are comparable (if not equivalent to) race.

He organised his short talk around three pointers that are all very relevant to the current conditions of making and viewing art, namely, audiences, collections and the structure of patronage. All these intersect in very relevant ways with the twin aim of the event – Resetting and Body. The audience interface has changed due to COVID, in fact he says, 'the model of blockbuster is now bust', that is, mass consumption of visual art has now come to an end. In this altered scenario, which he calls 'a reversal of the modern', the only way to engage with art is through a distributed model of engagement mentioned earlier. Similarly, collections/ holdings have now to be rethought in the face of questions arising out of challenges thrown up by struggles for racial justice – toppling of statues in public is a form of this questioning. We need to now revisit the national collections and holdings (for example but not only, institutions like the British museum) and rethink how collections have been put together. Similarly, the structures of patronages, although have

a prior history of critique based on carbon/ fuel fossil companies supporting art institutes, these criticisms have now become accelerated in the current crisis.

Barbara Rodrigues Muñoz's presentation titled 'The land of healing', already mentioned above, seeks ethical inspiration from the young artist Tabita Rezaire's work on decolonial healing, in fact, the title of the presentation is from the sentence 'The wound is the land of healing' in the latter's prologue in the recent *Handbook of media and migration* (Sage, 2020). Incidentally, Rezaire exhibited her installation titled 'Sorry for Real Sorrow' at the increasingly important Kochi-Muziris Biennale in Kerala, India a couple of years ago. The quotation that inspired Muñoz, is the following:

To overcome the disconnection to ourselves, to each other, to the earth and the universe mandated by coloniality, the healing we require is not solely physical nor mental but emotional, political, historical, technological and spiritual.

(*ibid.*: xxxll)

Rezaire advocates healing as transforming, as unlearning, as aligning, and as listening. This I think is a good formula for creating safe spaces informed by care. And Muñoz does exactly that when she invokes the notion of a 'sanctuary' for a space like a museum. Her work is also inspired by another important, and recent contribution in matters of care (no puns intended), namely the work of María Puig de la Bellacasa, especially her 2017 book *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. The quote Muñoz uses (although she sates the chapter name 'Thinking of Care'; rather than the book name) is the following, that clearly establishes the importance of interdependency as a basic condition for life – one of the ten principles of the Disability Justice movement:

Interdependency is not a contract, nor a moral ideal – it is a condition. Care is therefore concomitant to the continuation of life for many living beings in more than human entanglements – not forced upon them by a moral order, and not necessarily a rewarding obligation.

(*ibid.*: 70)

Muñoz's work also directly references work in disability, in fact in Disability Justice (see the article 'The killing of Eyad Al-Hallaq by the Israeli border police on 30 May 2020' in the Provocations section of this journal, pp. 71-76). She quotes from Philadelphia, US based artist and activist with chronic illness, Carolyn Lazard's accessibility in arts guide called 'Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice' (2019), commissioned by a community art organisation New York called, Recess, again, directly talking about access not in juridical terms but in terms of interdependence:

The creation of accessible spaces cannot be done without dismantling the pernicious liberalism that pervades our lives and our relationships with each other, not just as artists and art workers, but as subjects of the state. To commit to disability justice is to redefine the terms of subjecthood. It's to undo the rampant individualism that is a fiction for both disabled and nondisabled people: everyone has needs.

(*ibid.*: pp. 9-10)

The Kenyan queer artist, Neo Sinxolo Musangi enters this space in her talk via, what I think, another Disability Justice theme – if not by the Principles but by implication – namely, speaking from where one *is*, in her terms, *thinking blackly*. She frames this as thinking from a care ethics perspective which is to speak from where *I am standing* – this is *my* place, where *I* have been set, where *I* have been put – the *locātus*. She derives this as a strategy – contra Morrison, and more in line recent Black scholarship of Saidiya Hartman (*Scenes of Subjection*, OUP, 1997), Sylvia Wynter and others – to not to speak back, to not to insist on being included in this human community, but rather to start figuring out ways of surviving *from here*, from within that blackness. This, I believe, is a good model for a renewed activism that is waged from within a *locātus* of care.

I want to close this review with Robert McRuer’s presentation that yet again touches upon Disability Justice and survival – as in Neo’s thinking blackly above – and how it is thriving as a movement in Latin America. Although his presentation was mostly about his last book *Crip Times* (2018, NYU Press), it underlined the importance of “crip ways of knowing”, in other words, cripestimology (explored by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer’s Introduction to two special issues of the *Journal of Literary Cultural Disability Studies*, 2014). He mentioned how neoliberalism spectacularises disability neglecting disabled peoples’ actual lives and how disability remains as an under-theorised component of the global austerity politics.

This is an important event that situates itself firmly within the current global situation yet at the same time suggests ways of looking beyond it, and as this review has hopefully shown, how disability figures prominently in much of current thinking – in not just theoretical circles but in worlds that disability scholarship is yet to engage with meaningfully.

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