

VANITY FAIR

WHAT SHOULD A MUSEUM LOOK LIKE IN 2020?

As the art world experiences renewed scrutiny, curators, administrators, and artists
imagine templates for change.

CULTURE

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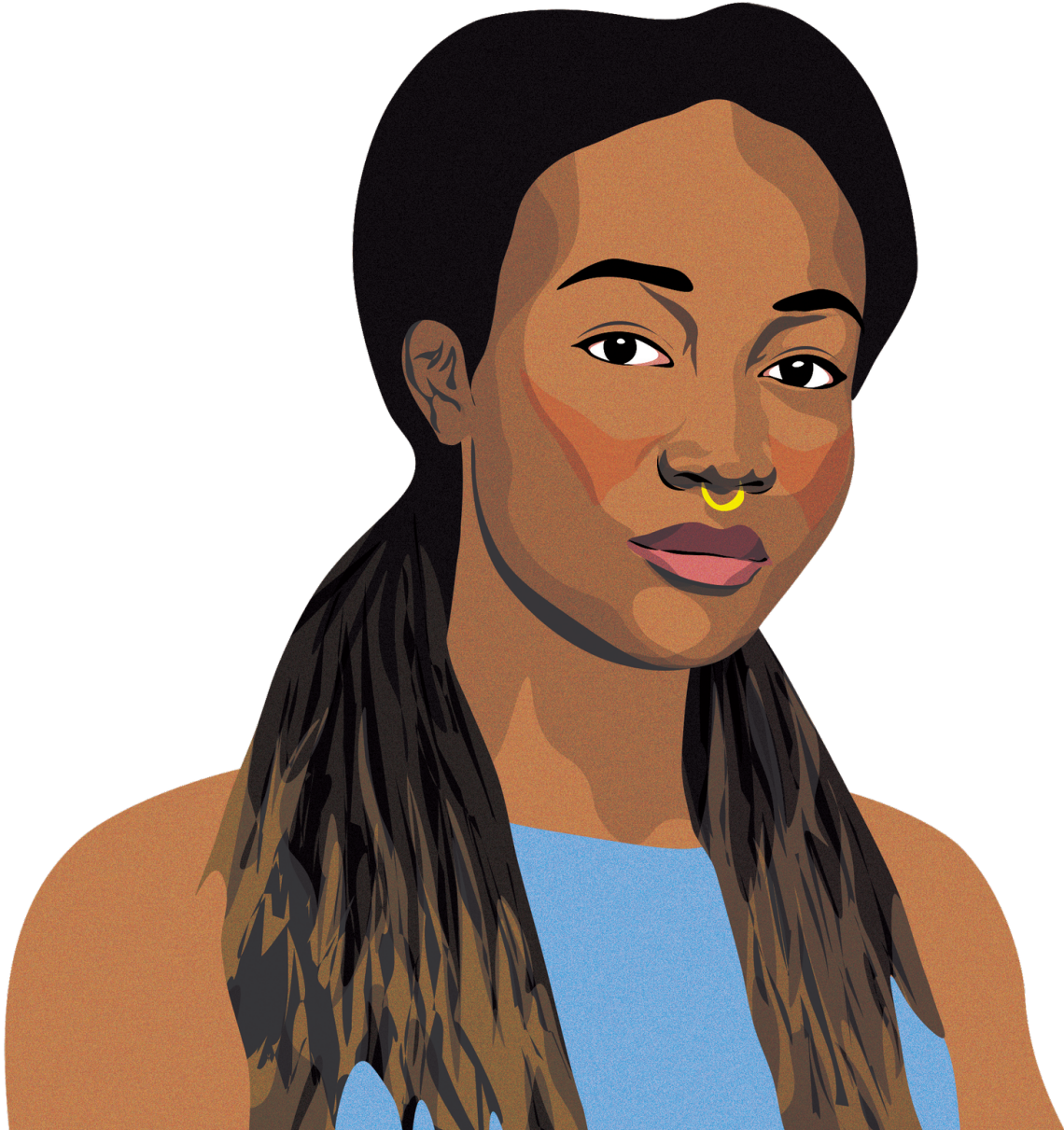
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Black life—our joys and our oppression—has been embedded into American history since the first ship of enslaved Africans arrived in 1619. Now we’re seeing a seismic shift in how individuals, corporations, and institutions are reckoning with our nation’s racism.

On social media, companies use marketing dollars to value signal their “wokeness”; a trend that has made its way into the cultural sphere, with museums sharing the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag alongside works by African American artists. In an ideal world, this show of solidarity would be powerful. But, as a former employee of Creative Time, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I, like many art workers and visitors, have been underwhelmed. Watching museums like the British Museum and

the Met—institutions with historic ties to colonialism—use a slogan rather than admit to their own roles in the “race problem” ignites a desire for a more holistic investigation of museums not only as homes for art and culture, but as entities with both the buying power and the political ties to make a lasting impact on life beyond this uprising.



Kimberly Drew, author of *This Is What I Know About Art* and the forthcoming *Black Futures*.

There is a chasm between institutions issuing newsletters about “standing in solidarity” and those, like the Walker Art Center, that have, for example, stopped contracting their local police force for public events. Historically, museums have used themed exhibitions, acquisitions schemes, or public

programs to signal a shift, but otherwise they continue with business as usual. Real shifts must be seen from the sidewalk to the boardroom. There is an urgent and long-standing need for long-term commitments to diverse hiring and executive leadership, divestment from the police, accessibility, and a zero-tolerance policy for racism from staff or visitors.

Of course, none of these demands are new. They've been introduced by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, the Art Workers Coalition, Women Artists in Revolution, and others since the turn of the century and before. Until changes are made, there is no volume of social media posts or public letters that could undo museums' willing complicity in white supremacy. Here, a group of art workers share testimonials, observations, and ideas for a path forward.

ART + MUSEUM TRANSPARENCY

Workers' collective

“At AMT we have appreciated most those who have made clear statements of intent and particularly those that have already started to follow them with concrete actions: the Walker Art Center's immediate divestment from the MPLS P.D.; the Vera List Center's direct connection of racial justice to labor justice within the structures of cultural organizations. Some museums have been talking about taking this moment to support and lift up those already doing this work, which we applaud but have not seen concrete action on. One way would be to redistribute wealth to museums in the Association of African American Museums, many of which operate on budgets magnitudes smaller than places like MoMA or the Met and, unlike those museums, are under existential threat from COVID-closure revenue losses. The African American Museum in Philadelphia is threatened with the loss of its entire city budget funding at the same time it reasserts its duty as ‘remind[ing] the public of the historical context of police violence against Black people.’

What comes to mind are mostly examples of cultural institutions' failures to pivot that we wish museums would acknowledge and apologize for. The Metropolitan, for example, and its failure to learn from the intervention of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in 1969. MoMA and its failure to learn from the intervention of the Art Workers' Coalition during the Vietnam War. One positive example that comes to mind in this moment, and we don't see people referencing, is that of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam during the Second World War. Under Nazi occupation, curator Willem Sandberg joined the Dutch resistance and used Stedelijk offices and equipment to print forged

identity papers and plan the resistance operation to bomb a civil-records office used to identify Jewish citizens.”



From left: Thomas J. Lax, Jessica Lynne, Laura Raicovich, Tiona Nekkia McClodden.

THOMAS J. LAX

Curator, MoMA, New York City

“I don’t want to be part of a response that does not begin with the premise that there can be an end to white supremacy and that institutions historically organized to safeguard culture and civilization must play an active role in this struggle. We might call that a romance or a speculative fiction, but these are the genres of anti-racist work. Okwui Enwezor used to say that museums are repositories of the human imagination; Linda Goode Bryant, founder of Just Above Midtown Gallery, says that cultural institutions should be in the business of turning can’ts into cans. The Black curatorial tradition is one of radical possibilities; any claim to do otherwise under the name of Blackness is a travesty to our collective inheritance.

Within days the Public Theater installed B. Peppers’ portraits of George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in the street cases in front of their building, announcing that they were offering water and bathrooms to protesters. This was the idea of a young staff member, which to me says that part of responding meaningfully to this moment is toppling the vertical order of institutional hierarchies and being willing to try out good ideas before they have time to be fully baked.

As I have listened to the chorus of demands to abolish the police grow increasingly louder, what I have heard is an analysis of how the police are not only *out there*—in the streets and in poor and Black communities—but *in here*, which is to say in our buildings and psyches. A call for divestment involves an

acknowledgment of the ways that museums rely on local police departments to do the work of mental health providers and emergency medical technicians, as well as the implicit ways contracts with police departments protect property over people.

Disability activists and freedom fighters in South Africa used the slogan, ‘Nothing about us without us is for us’; the conversation must begin with prioritizing who we mean by us. And because Black people are not an indistinguishable mass or one collective unconscious, but a social formation of differing interests, agendas, and ideas, this conversation needs to be an open-ended one without fixed outcomes in order to flesh out these differences.”

JESSICA LYNNE

Art critic, ARTS.BLACK

“I think about the emergency of Black arts organizations in the 20th century, and I think of places that had no choice but to root themselves in community, to serve not just as cultural spaces but sites of education, political organizing and direct-action campaigns, places for childcare, and other forms of stewardship. I wonder how different our communities would look if all of our cultural institutions took seriously this type of ethos, not just in moments of crisis.

Meg Onli, associate curator at ICA Philadelphia, organized the Art for Philadelphia Community Bail Fund benefit, and I have been really energized by her effort. The benefit featured a suite of prints by seven Philly artists, with the proceeds going directly to the city’s bail fund that posts bail for individuals who are not able to do so, with the mission of ultimately ending cash bail entirely in Philly.

I want to acknowledge Visual AIDS as an important example of an organization that, to me, emerges as an artistic and political intervention. I recognize that V.A. is not an organization that ‘pivoted’ but rather *came to life* in the midst of the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and early 1990s. I think about just how consequential the organization’s archival work, Day Without Art initiative, and, really, the institutional spirit was/is/will always be. I think about the clear moral failings of so many, including the Reagan/Bush administrations, and how the V.A. founders and community embodied a care and a love so deep so as to ensure that the (by and large) public silences about how HIV/AIDS was disappearing an entire generation of artists would not become permanent.”

LAURA RAICOVICH

Interim director, Leslie-Lohman Museum, New York City, and author of a forthcoming book on art and protest

“There’s something that really has bugged me about a lot of the statements coming out, and it’s about listening. I think that the conversations and the demands, especially around race in the United States, have been made for so long that if you’re still on ‘listening,’ there’s a problem. You’ve got to be figuring out what to do and doing it. Obviously you have to continue to listen.”

TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN

Visual artist

“Right now I feel institutions with public audiences should be spaces of mobilization and organization for real and thorough change. There must be action in real time. There should be a sharing of resources. This could be mutual aid gestures, such as offering space, skillshares, sharing equipment, etc. There is also the issue of the redistribution of funds that many institutions are hoarding. When COVID-19 hit, many of these institutions were exposed for having excessive endowments. Many are hoarding funds under the guise that they will lose money, when the endowments were set up for these exact times to begin with. So there must be a redistribution of those funds to support actual efforts within the institution and on the ground.

As an artist myself, I am looking to what Black artists have produced and the efforts they made in great times of unrest. This is where the archive comes in. As an independent curator, I’m also invested right now in ensuring that my peers are able to continue to do their work now, as planned, by sharing administrative and other skills they may not possess. So many of us were hit with canceled or flat-out delayed exhibitions due to COVID-19 and are now conflicted about sharing our work. But I find it necessary and important to do so. Black artists should not stop working or presenting our work at this moment. Art is language, and for many of us that is how we process and work through the intersections of our lives.

I do not feel that it is the time for primarily white-staffed and led institutions to speak through Black artists’ works and *over* their Black staff. I feel they need to listen to those who have *been* doing this work, if they feel the capacity to share. They must accommodate those staff members’ time financially and holistically because the workplace has its own violences. Cultural institutions

must understand that they will have to be reworked from the inside out. Change will not occur without conflict in the attempt to repair many years of exclusion, and institutions must care for the Black artists and staff within these spaces.”



From left: Taylor Renee Aldridge, Legacy Russell, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Taylor Brandon.

TAYLOR RENEE ALDRIGE

Art critic, ARTS.BLACK

“I appreciated MoMA’s furtive response to Trump’s entry ban of people from Muslim countries in 2017. The museum facilitated a quick rehang of their permanent collection to feature works by artists from majority-Muslim nations. This gesture was poignant because the museum responded to the state’s erasure and refusal of Muslim people and their heritage. The MoMA’s effort to respond with increased visibility of that same heritage was highly effective. I do believe, however, that the pervasiveness of anti-Black violence (that is so foundational to the making of many American museums) will require more than a curatorial shift, and rather a systemic institutional one.

I think museums should take inventory of their economic ties with U.S. police. Non-Black museum staff should not rely on the labor of their Black colleagues to tell or teach them about race and anti-Blackness. Non-Black museum workers should work to educate themselves, and ask how they perpetuate and benefit from white supremacist violence.”

LEGACY RUSSELL

Curator, the Studio Museum in Harlem

“I’ve deeply appreciated Jackie Wang, Sarah Lewis, Bryan Stevenson, Glenn Ligon, Tina Campt, Xaviera Simmons, Alexandra Bell, The White Pube (Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad), Mona Chalabi, Nina Chanel Abney, Che Gossett, and Christina Sharpe as voices always, but also right here and right now. Each in their own way is taking time to center the issues at hand as well as providing critical feedback on, and analysis of, this moment in time.

The Studio Museum in Harlem has 50-plus years of actioning on and advancing a mission of making space for artists of African descent. That is what long-term political and cultural investment looks like toward the goal of building a sustainable and creative Black future.”

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

Artistic director at the Serpentine Galleries, London

“I’ve been thinking a lot about Édouard Glissant. His activities as a poet, philosopher, public intellectual, and curator not only encompassed literary and theoretical work, but he consistently said that what matters is the production of reality. First as a member of the resistance who spoke out in favor of Martinique’s independence from France and then, from 1967 onwards, through the Institut Martiniquais d’Études, a school which was an agent for change, intervening in political issues and implementing Creole into a school system mostly dominated by French.

Later Glissant imagined and prepared a museum for Martinique, which is unrealized but remains a source of many ideas. Glissant imagined the museum as an archipelago; it would not house a synthesis but a network of interrelationships. Glissant wanted to create a museum which would not only point at urgencies but also find agency to respond to these urgencies. He imagined it to be a quivering place which transcends established systems of thoughts and which is looking for the utopian point where all the world’s cultures and all the world’s imaginations can meet and hear one another.”

TAYLOR BRANDON

Curator

“Performative gestures like social media statements in solidarity with Black life do nothing when Black staff are being treated unfairly. Yes, you have the work of a Black artist on your wall, but do you have staff that are a

representation of that and can speak authentically to the cultural nuances of said work? Are that same staff equitably paid? Are they listened to and cared for? Do roles for them exist outside of educational and community engagement departments? A complete overhaul is in order that centers Black voices until museums are abolished. A lot of people won't agree with me, but I would like to envision a future without museums and large cultural institutions. History and Black scholars have been telling us that reform is often more harmful. In the meantime, the leadership of these spaces need to be working towards equity and better working conditions for Black staff.

I would encourage folks to find the small, local, Black-led cultural spaces in their own communities. Black people have been creating space for ourselves in lieu of a continuous hellish political landscape. The Transgender District in San Francisco was founded by three Black trans women in 2017 and is the first legally recognized transgender district in the world. Rainbow Sign, founded by Mary Ann Pollar in Berkeley, California, was a cultural hub during its operation from 1970 to 1977. East Oakland Youth Development Center is another Black-woman-led cultural space for youth in East Oakland that's been in operation since 1978."