

Ready for the art-world reckoning?

The Ready the Museum group has created a blueprint to help institutions address inequity within their own walls—and to make the public, rather than trustees, their key priority



Of the people, for the people: *Angela Davis: Seize the Time* was a 2022-23 show at the Oakland Museum of California that examined the political activist's life and image through the lenses of race, gender and economics
Photo: Kamiko Fujii. Courtesy of the photographer and the Oakland Museum of California

You probably do not need me to remind you that, as uprisings over systemic racism and police brutality filled the streets of US cities in the summer of 2020, another reckoning was taking place inside the country's museums. The Instagram account @changethemuseum began publishing anonymous accounts of mistreatment and abuses of power, sending shockwaves through the cultural sphere. There were protests. There were open letters. In private Zooms, museum directors wrung their hands.

"I saw leaders struggling to make sense of it—feeling really reactive," recalls Miki Garcia, the director of the Arizona State University Art Museum. Together with the artist Xaviera Simmons, Garcia wondered: what if there were a blueprint for how individuals, institutions and the sector at large could reckon with these issues in a meaningful and productive way?

It starts here

Now, four years and \$1.6m later, *Readying the Museum (RTM)*—a coalition of museum leaders and artists formed by Garcia and Simmons—releases its blueprint. Publicly unveiled on 6 September, it takes the form of a website chock-full of case studies, podcasts and questions for people at every level of a cultural organisation to ask themselves and one another.

The website offerings include a 101-page booklet of grievances gathered from artists, museum leaders, arts workers and community members. There are also discussion guides and commissioned essays on subjects such as whiteness, reparations, radical hospitality and the restitution of land to Indigenous communities.

Together, all these resources aim to model how a museum might operate if its primary responsibility were not to its board of trustees, but to the public—and more specifically, to those who most often experience harm in the community, including Indigenous, Black and brown people as well as rank-and-file staff.

RTM arrives at a very different social, political and cultural moment than the one in which it was conceived. Many curators of colour, especially women, who were hired by museums in the wake of the 2020 uprisings have come and gone. (RTM outlines this process, from tokenized hire to repetitive injury to departure, in one of several stylish posters available for download on its website.) Funding that was diverted to inherent-bias training and community town halls has been

rerouted yet again as museums face budgetary shortfalls. The US Supreme Court has deemed affirmative action unconstitutional, and at least ten states have already signed anti-DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) bills into law. In other words, the previous status quo is working hard to restore itself.

But those interested in that status quo are not the target audience for RTM. “If you don’t want to change, then you probably won’t want to be in *Readying the Museum* and you are going to have to live in a world where you risk being called out in social media or by the press,” Simmons says. RTM’s belief is that change is coming, regardless of whether institutions are ready. Its audience is the people who (at least theoretically) welcome that change but have not necessarily done the uncomfortable self-inquiry required to navigate it well.

In fact, uncomfortable self-inquiry is at the heart of RTM. While some of the group’s terminology might sound obscure to the uninitiated, what distinguishes RTM is its willingness to lay bare its own messy and turbulent process. A section on the website dedicated to whiteness includes an unusually frank account of a 2022 retreat in Santa Barbara, in which tensions between the cohort’s white and Black and brown members came to a head. (Each white member offers a written reflection on what happened and the role they played.) It also includes a letter that Olga Viso, a former director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, sent to Indigenous colleagues laying out her role in a 2017 public art controversy with the Dakota people. “It’s critical for white leaders in museums to have this kind of self-reflection,” says Lori Fogarty, the director of the Oakland Museum of California.

When the members of RTM told me they wanted to be interviewed in a group Zoom meeting, I was worried they might be less candid or direct than they might be one-on-one. Instead, they demonstrated the kind of communication they describe on their website. They gently pushed back on one another and voiced differing opinions on how to interpret some of RTM’s methodology. “We’ve done this ourselves,” Garcia says. “What we want to talk about is our experience.” (The cohort has fluctuated over time; currently, it comprises six people as well as an “accountability group” of more than 200, who serve as advisers, facilitators and contributors.)

RTM has already informed the way some of its members operate in their day jobs. For example, in an effort to go beyond a simple land acknowledgment, the Oakland Museum agreed in 2023 to

pay a land tax to the Bay Area's Indigenous community. ("Our board really struggled with understanding the concept of Native accountability," Fogarty says.) Earlier this year, the museum also voluntarily recognised its employee union and permitted its members to develop their collective bargaining agreement during work hours.

Organisers are adamant that RTM, which is funded by the Ford and Mellon foundations with administrative support from Arizona State University, is not a DEI initiative. "A lot of the work that comes under the heading of DEI is quite transactional and reflective of checking boxes," Fogarty says. She describes RTM instead as "an accountability tool". In its next phase, RTM will turn its focus to broader issues of governance, including philanthropy and tax policy.

Raison d'être

I know what some of you are thinking right now. How many museums would collapse under RTM's frameworks or just outright reject them? Is it possible to imagine, say, the New Museum in New York pausing its construction project and giving the now vacant plot of land next door back to the Lenape people? (If you ask me, the answer to that one is no.) But if you agree that conventional museums, as they operate today, are irredeemable, does that not demand a bigger, scarier question about whether they should exist at all?

"This is not a seamless thing, where everyone gets to keep everything," Simmons says. "I think there are institutions that will dissolve. The community may be saying, 'We don't want this institution any longer.' The museum has to reckon with that." Of course, museums are also facing dissolution as a result of funding challenges and dwindling philanthropy. RTM's provocative proposal is that they may have a better chance at survival if they fundamentally change their understanding of the audience to whom they are most accountable.

In reality, this may be true of some institutions and not others. But if you find yourself feeling sceptical, consider the case of the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara. In August 2022, it closed due to financial pressures exacerbated by the pandemic. The following January, it reopened under a new leadership team that included Frederick Janka, a member of RTM. The fledgling institution serves as a case study for what a museum implementing RTM's methodology might look like.

For one thing, the museum's funding is separate from its governance. While costs are largely covered by grants and individual support, the board includes a “graphic designer, photographer, publisher, writers, artists and a former head of installation who knows the facilities history of the institution”, Janka says. Furthermore, more than half the board members are Latinx—in a region with a population of around 50% Latinx. The people who keep the institution running day to day have suddenly found themselves “at the top”.

There are challenges to operating this way, Janka acknowledges—and money is a big one—but they are the kind of challenges he wants to be facing. “When you support people and listen to their ideas and grievances and needs, you see beautiful things happen,” he says. “It’s absolutely wild.”