

ARTnews

New Arts Workers' Group Will Fight Inequities Maintained by Museum Management

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The Barnes Foundation.UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY

A group of US-based museum professionals, artists, and cultural workers have banded together to launch a new group that they hope will remedy decades-old fractures within art institutions.

The group, known as Readying the Museum (RTM), was first kicked off in 2021, but it was not until Friday that the first stage of its program was made public. RTM will now put a focus on how managers and executive staff, and the ways these power figures maintain inequities in their ranks.

RTM emerged from a response to a global protest movement against racial injustice in 2020, spurred by the police killings of George Floyd and others. Around that time, Miki Garcia, director of Arizona State University Art Museum, and New York–based artist Xaviera Simmons received pleas from their peers, asking for advice.

Simmons and Garcia found that DEI workshops were limited in their effectiveness. “The workshops were not enough,” Simmons said. “We needed a way to address the deeply entrenched issues that inhibit real change.”

“We saw museums leaning into reactionary methods: colleagues doing token hires, museums using artists as cover, and others being ousted from museum associations,” Garcia said. DEI hires were not sustainable solutions, she continued. “There was no desire to look at root causes and issues. There was a vast delta between what the workers were saying and the approach of those at the administrative level.”

Backed by a \$1.5 million grant, RTM labels itself a proof of concept: its model can be implemented at larger institutions, the group says. Taking its cues from activist groups like Decolonize This Place, whose protests at the Whitney Museum led the institution’s vice chair to resign, RTM is primarily focused on racism, patriarchy, labor conditions, and museum collections.

The core group—which includes Lori Fogarty, director of the Oakland Museum of California, and artists Cannupa Hanska Luger, Frederick Janka and Cruz Ortiz—is exploring how senior-level staff can shape a museum’s environment. To begin fleshing out the model’s concept, the group’s members led uncomfortable conversations with advisers, with whom they spoke about white fragility and other hard truths of their professional lives. “We talked about how patriarchy is a disease,” Janka recalled.

There are many museum consulting groups that work with management at institutions. But Garcia and Simmons went in a different direction. Garcia said she looked to local organizers rooted in Black feminism in Phoenix and that the group was asked by their coaches to read writings by Dean Spade, a lawyer who has addressed forms of mutual aid, solidarity, and trans rights.

The cohort is in the early stages of examining how museum boards exclude non-governing staff and artists from fiscal decisions affecting them. Janka, who is based in California, said the group’s research on trusts, donor-advised funds, and foundations

will shape phase two of the RTM model. Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts director George Scheer, a founding member of RTM, added that through talks with financial advisers and trust attorneys, RTM is cataloging ways that museums benefit donors by acting as “vehicles for wealth management.”

The work has culminated in a website, ReadyingTheMuseum.com, which publishes the cohort’s findings in case studies. There are also commissioned essays and interviews.

Since its formation, the group has tapped 250 people, from labor organizers to museum staff, and asked activists for input, building out a network it’s aiming to partner with as RTM develops its concept. And its concept looks to be only more important over time, as curators of color hired in 2020 and the years afterward abruptly depart their posts.

“The United States is not a mysterious place,” Simmons said, emphasizing the art world has enough information about its foundational ties to stolen land and forced labor. “We don’t have to keep asking for more data or PhDs. That is white perfectionism, which is something we’re trying to say does not work. It’s a delay. It’s a con.”