



Contemporary Art Society Annual Conference 2019: Re-Writing the Canon?

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Report by Christian Berger

Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow, The Courtauld Institute of Art

At a time when historical narratives are increasingly questioned, both in the context of art and society at large, the notion of the canon as a system of inclusion and exclusion is imbued with a renewed sense of urgency. What could be its role nowadays, and can there still be one canon, or a multitude? Or is the concept itself obsolete? Given the necessity to make different voices heard, to debunk established narratives, and to represent the world in its complexity instead of upholding a selective account of the achievements of great white Euro-American men—which tactics and strategies can museums and other cultural institutions employ to achieve these goals?

These were some of the questions that the Contemporary Art Society raised in its Annual Conference, titled 'Re-writing the Canon?', organised in partnership with The Courtauld Institute of Art Research Forum and held at the Courtauld's new Vernon Square Campus on the 14 May 2019. During the full-day event, scholars, curators and museum professionals from different backgrounds presented some of the ways in which they have sought to diversify their collections, programmes, and audiences, as well as the challenges they have been faced with in doing so.

Following the introductions, first by CAS Director Caroline Douglas and then by Martin Caiger-Smith, Head of the MA Curating the Art Museum programme at the Courtauld, the morning session revolved around the question raised by Caiger-Smith of 'how we are to understand, and bring audiences to understand with us, a broader art history', and the specific role of museum collections in this endeavour.

In the first paper, Christopher Bedford, Director of the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA), outlined the significance of his institution's vision to achieve 'equity and social justice across the institution' against the backdrop of the specific situation in Baltimore, a city with a large black majority. Bedford presented the programme of exhibitions that he devised after taking office in 2016, including large-scale exhibitions by important Black American artists like Jack Whitten, a revisit of the pioneering show of Black art that the museum held in 1939, and contemporary interventions into the collection by younger artists such as Meleko Mokgosi. On the occasion of the centenary of women's suffrage in the U.S., the BMA's 2020 exhibition programme will be entirely dedicated to women artists. This will include a retrospective of Abstract Expressionist painter Joan Mitchell, organised jointly with the SFMOMA in San Francisco and traveling to the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Much to the audience's astonishment, the catalogue for this exhibition will be the first monograph devoted to a woman artist in the history of the BMA.

In his talk, Bedford addressed the importance of securing sustainable change within the institution, which he is seeking to ensure by appointing new members to the board of trustees, but also through his unorthodox collecting strategy. Not without controversy, the BMA deaccessioned works by Franz Kline, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and other notable figures of U.S. post-war art that are represented with a number of works in the collection, in order to acquire work by contemporary artists of colour such as Isaac Julien, Wangechi Mutu, and Amy Sberald. Having altered the course of the BMA's contemporary programme and collection significantly with these and other measures, Bradford sees the question of how to achieve similar changes with regard to the museum's more historical holdings, which includes the largest collection of works by Henri Matisse worldwide, as the museum's next major challenge.

While Bedford and his team have decided to specifically focus on Black art in their collection strategy, larger institutions have the opportunity, and perhaps also the responsibility, to diversify their collections on an even broader scale. A good example of this is Tate and the way it has changed the presentation of its modern and contemporary art collection since the opening of Tate Modern in 2000. Sook-Kyung Lee, Senior Curator of International Art and head of the 'Tate Research Centre: Transnational' presented examples of the institution's continuous efforts to represent artworks from across the globe and to reflect their broader social, economic, and political contexts in their displays—a long-term strategy that became prominently visible with the opening of the new building at Tate Modern in 2016. Lee described the transition from the former 'Research Centre: Asia' to the newly formed 'Research Centre: Transnational' as a new emphasis on wider methodological change and highlighted the importance of collection-building as primary focus of the research centre.

Tate is presenting these newly acquired works mainly as part of their collection displays, which are open to the public, free of charge. As Lee explained, the arrival of each new work changes the whole collection, because it allows for new connections to be drawn and juxtapositions to be made within the thematic presentations that have been a signature feature of Tate Modern since 2000. Displays such as *A View from Tokyo: Between Man and Matter* (and its counterparts that focus on Buenos Aires and Zagreb) allow for the rediscovery of different art histories and for slight changes of perspective on art of the

1960s and 1970s, by showing work that will be unfamiliar to many viewers. As part of Tate's efforts of re-writing the canon, Western-centric categories such as 'minimalism' are largely avoided. Furthermore, Tate has programmatically started to collect work that used to be regarded as uncollectable, for instance performances by Tania Bruguera and Tino Sehgal. They also started to systematically build a collection of Australian art beyond work by European settlers and their descendants—an example that Lee presented in order to highlight the urgency of discussions on indigenous art that are currently taking place across institutions and events, such as the last Documenta or the current Venice Biennale.

Hilke Wagner, Director of the Albertinum in Dresden—the Dresden State Art Collections' branch for modern and contemporary art—presented a significantly different perspective on the challenges that institutions confront in their attempts to change the canon, namely, the resistance of audiences to accept such changes. Following her appointment in 2014 to the Albertinum, a major art institution in Eastern Germany, Wagner started to present art from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) that is still less well-known than formerly state-sanctioned Socialist Realism. She staged exhibitions that, for instance, commemorated the experimental 'Intermedia I' festival, held in the adjacent town of Coswig in 1985, as well as a retrospective of the concrete painter Karl-Heinz Adler to celebrate his ninetieth birthday. To her surprise, however, Wagner was confronted with most controversial and aggressive reactions, criticising her for the alleged underrepresentation of East German art in the collection displays, and accusing her of playing a part in a 'cultural colonisation' of the former East by predominantly West German directors and curators. Furthermore, the right-wing populist AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party that has a particular stronghold in Dresden, instrumentalised this debate to serve their own political purpose and agenda.

In her talk, Wagner described some of the ways in which she then addressed the situation and the issues at stake: first, by literally counting the works in the collection. This revealed that a significant proportion of works came from artists who started their careers in the former GDR before emigrating to the West, such as Gerhard Richter and A. R. Penck, demonstrating the difficulty of applying categories such as 'East' and 'West' German. Second, Wagner sought ways of dialogue by initiating a series of

round-table discussions under the title 'We need to talk' ('Wir müssen reden') and also by contacting authors of hate letters and emails personally. Third, Albertinum organised an exhibition of GDR art from its own collection and gave audiences the opportunity to participate by voting for works that should stay on permanent view. For her, the results of this survey and the whole controversy revealed the significance of art to create and maintain a sense of identity in the face of fundamental change, and the prominence that reverberations of the Cold War still hold within cultural debates in present-day Eastern Germany. Wagner argued for the need to confront them directly and to diversify the established narrative of GDR art, still largely dominated by male Realist painters, through the inclusion of work by women artists and of practices that were not supported by the state, as well as contextualising these works within the situation in East-Central Europe more widely.

The afternoon session, which focused on exhibitions and displays, took up some of the issues that were brought up by the first speakers, but also broadened the scope of the discussion. Denise Murrell, curator of the exhibition *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University in New York and co-curator of *Black Models: From Géricault to Matisse (Le modèle noir, de Géricault à Matisse)* at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, presented her research on the widely overlooked significance of black models in 19th century French painting. Both exhibitions revolve around the formerly unidentified black maid in Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, whom Murrell was able to identify as a model named Laure. While *Le modèle noir* in Paris considers the treatment of the black figure in 19th century French art more widely, the presentation at the Wallach specifically addresses the figure of the black female and shows a stronger focus on contemporary artists' engagements within this lineage.

For the Paris show, black figures in historical paintings, e.g. by Marie-Guillemine Benoist and Théodore Géricault, who had hitherto been exclusively — and problematically — been identified through racial characteristics, were identified by name and the paintings' titles modified accordingly. This research-based strategy to confront racially coded art historical narratives was mirrored in New York by contemporary artists' interventions, as for instance in Elizabeth Cumba's imaginary reconstruction of the model Laure's lived experience. Her painting depicts Laure dressed in a shop girl's attire on the rainy streets of Paris, on her way to a modelling session for the painter Manet. With her talk, Murrell presented an important case in point for the need to re-write the canon of both historical and contemporary art and for the exciting new insights that originate from such an enterprise.

E-J Scott, founder and one of the curators of the Museum of Transology, an institution created through a commission by the Fashion Space Gallery at London College of Fashion in 2017 and currently presented at the Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, presented this institution as an exemplary case of how museums can choose to tackle social othering and fight back against social inequality. The museum started with objects donated by members of the trans community in Brighton (the largest in the UK) and has now 110 curators who select the objects (the museum accepts and displays any object by a person who identifies as trans). Every object is presented with a handwritten tag that tells the story of its personal significance for the donor.

Presenting a range of examples of vernacular objects and their significance in trans people's process of becoming, Scott demonstrated the possibility to engage audiences with contemporary debates surrounding gender and identity through material culture. Furthermore, he stressed the importance to create an archive of trans identities for future research—something that has not existed in past decades. On a more general level, Scott advocated a strong commitment to curating and collecting as forms of activism and as instigators of positive social change.

Helena Reckitt, Reader in Curating at Goldsmiths in London, presented the Feminist Duration Reading Group that she initiated in 2015. Since then, the group has explored feminisms outside the Anglo-American canon in monthly meetings at different locations. They have also presented public programs such as *Now You Can Go*, dedicated to the work of Italian poet, feminist, and former leading art critic Carla Lonzi (2018), and will begin a year-long residence at the South London Gallery in June 2019.

Reckitt emphasised the importance that the curation of a certain atmosphere has had for the project, describing some of the group's experiences and methods to create an intimate and vulnerable context in

which ideas and questions can be articulated in a non-competitive manner. Where new participants are welcome, and which is also a space for friendship. On a practical level, to give one example, the texts are read out loud together by group members during the meetings, in order to reduce the pressure of having to do the reading beforehand, but also 'to bring a sense of people's difference into the room'. As she described, these concerns resonate to a certain degree with those of Italian feminists who have similarly privileged the instigation of change on a grassroots level over large-scale political campaigns.

Despite the differences in scale, focus and context addressed by the presenters, the panel discussions identified a number of common concerns and particularly touched upon two issues: First, and very broadly, the question of the relationship between art and society. While all participants could subscribe to the imperatives of reaching broader audiences and engaging with local communities, it also became clear that museums, as spaces where people of different generations and political and social backgrounds come together, need to be defended against the dangers of populist politics and campaigns.

Second, the roles of different actors in the generation of multiple, non-hierarchical, and horizontal narratives: this accounts for museum professionals and for the art community who both have the chance to create complex webs and narratives and negotiate new canons which should include 'exemplary works from multiple channels of production' (Denise Murrell). It also applies to the holders of economic power, such as trustees, donors, private collectors, and other participants in the art market. Most importantly, all participants expressed a strong confidence in artists as 'agents of change', as identified by critic Ben Luke (The Art Newspaper) in the final discussion.