

The Museum – A Conversation

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What follows is a gathering of whispers exchanged as we have visited galleries, instant views we have made immediately after leaving a museum, and thinking we have shared with each other over voice notes, upon reflecting on glass boxes, a framed image, sculpted vessels. We come to the archive and probe the archive, based on our experiences as critical legal scholars, writers, as storytellers. Here, we consider African and Afro-diasporic art more in terms of storytelling and memories. Instead of offering a definitive interpretation to black aesthetics, something we worry many museums in the UK have succumbed to doing, we think about the archive in relation to black aesthetics – and we attempt to be responsive to what we cannot collect and grasp.

What are museums, archives, and black cultures?

In the past few years, we have seen in the UK, London probably more specifically, larger institutions showing black artists, solo or group shows, with a particular interest in the subjects of colonialism, slavery, and decolonialism, and increasing debate about museums returning stolen artefacts to African countries. While there is certainly racism within these institutions, and black cultural workers and staff subjected to unfair and precarious conditions, in regards to the discourse, there does appear more initiatives to showcase archives and black culture in the arts, museums, and other public forums and spaces. Perhaps we could start with assessing this. What has this museological turn or move to black archival cultures been conditioned on, and what are its implications in terms of how we think about our relations, our stories, and memories?

Perhaps we'll start by expressing a concern we have had for a while, from noticing the increasing visibility of black art, or Afro-diasporic art, in London. We think it is important to stress the globality of this capital, as we know this is not strictly the case outside the city in other parts of the UK (e.g. North-South divide), but still we think it applies to a certain extent. Our concern is over how the museum seems to have assumed lately this role and this area of being the site for the exchange or sharing of culture, and how it's put this pressure on black artists to be educators to the public. Now in some respects, this isn't new but it does seem now that the museum is ostensibly a public sphere that acts like a gateway to an archive or history. So often now, we seem to encounter African and diaspora folktales, myths, narratives, musics, textiles, from and through the

museum – that is the European museum, an inheritor of colonialism and capitalism. Or, maybe, rather what we are trying to get at is that this internal reflection that museums are doing at the moment, where they confront their colonial past and links to slavery, is tied to these interests, as is their exhibiting on black artists, and themes of personal archives, cosmologies, and speculative reimagining. And maybe this is another way of thinking about this emulation of public art galleries to be more like museums and museums seeking to be more like public art galleries: a mirroring that is differential in the scale either one sets their programming to.

Of course there are black artists and black cultural workers working outside these institutions, but the discourse of representation that is still so dominant really is designed to make black aesthetics understandable and communicable – objects of evidence. You know, so long that it is made interpretable and intelligible, we can leave the museum not as experts but with a good sense or grasp of a particular culture. We suppose our worry is also about that presumption, because it's like there is more to the story than it just being an event, a unit of information that we take or intake. How do we share these stories? There's a story about the sharing – and also about what we don't share! If we are talking about African and Afro-diaspora art and cultures, there is more to sharing than an exchange simply on the level of giver and receiver – i.e, the art and the art goer/seer. While sharing in one sense can be facilitated by the museum, it is not solely attributable to the museum. Memories are not exclusively the domain of the museum.

What's in a museum? What's in the concept of a museum?

The museum works by making the visitor see and be themselves as “visitor”. There is something reflective in this being that reaffirms and reproduces a subjecthood or relationality to that artwork or archival object. In relation to the museum, we become archivists, or we become the producers of the culture by engaging with it, so we have a position, or stake, or a claim. This claim or position tends to correspond to a particular way of representation and representing, a particular mode of communing and consciousness. In other words, we come to the museum with a particular way of sharing a particular way of viewing. In some way, it follows some kind of viewer- creator participatory model from the arts, but one that is somewhat like a membership – *if that makes sense?*

And so, the museum is like where we muse the muse. Which is to say, we become embroiled in a process of objectivisation that is fascinated by the object and the spectacle of the object – for our amusement – without particularly giving the object some critical appraisal and without considering all the different ways in which the object has come to be mused upon in the first place. In this process of musing and amusement we become inspired to produce even more objects that will be mused upon thus providing a degree of collective amusement and

collective perception. We also become a muse. The level of understanding the work, or art, or object (*and maybe not fully understanding, but a homogenised or closed understanding at least*) gives us a cognition, and appreciation of our own faculties – psyche, sin, or kin – to read and recognise our own work – our work in the work of others, this representation – the work *as* ours or of others.

The question of a black museum?

How could a black museum counter the spectacle of the object for our amusement? This is a two-fold question: 1) on the level of culture and pedagogy, but then also 2); in terms of practically i.e., how do we address the issue of black art being funded by European and US financiers, gallerists, museums, and collectors?

In attempting to answer this question, the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in Brixton comes to mind as an example. Here we are putting aside the financial issues and local/national politics of BCA, but we're bringing it up as an example in terms of geography and property, and to raise this issue about the museum always being a site, a building, on and as land. And connected to this is who maintains it, the labour of running that museum, and what often is not discussed or avoided is about, who is there to clean, invigilate, open and close the doors at the end of the day. What we're getting at is this question about how to financially and intellectually support a black museum that doesn't rely on governmental aid or philanthropy to support itself but isn't punished or left to fail by those institutions.

Giving Birth, 2014. video, 30'. Courtesy of White Cube Bermondsey

Another thing to consider is the lack of support on the African continent for the arts. At the White Cube Bermondsey last year, Senegalese sculptor Seyni Awa Camara's work was shown alongside Michael Armitage's in the exhibition *Amongst the Living* (2022). As part of this exhibition was a film, *Giving Birth* (2014), directed by Fatou Kandé Senghor, in which Camara discusses how when she makes work in Bignona, Senegal, the government or civic organisations don't appreciate the work she is doing. Camara doesn't get the exhibitions in Senegal, she doesn't get financial support from the ruling elite there. She gets it from European and US collectors, gallerists, and museums. This makes us appreciate how difficult it is for her to sustain her work. Camara's work isn't intentionally for Europeans and yet it is Europe that funds this work, it is Europe that hoards and holds this work. Camara mentions that her ability to sculpt is a gift from God, so in some respects, she is honouring this by doing this work. In *Giving Birth*, her children are helping her in the process of making the work, like assistants would, she has her studio, and so there is a method and practice, a tradition she is following. The museum – or a black museum – isn't in this studio, even if it goes towards that – or attempts to visit that. A black museum – if there is such one – is always going to be beholden to a European, anthropological, capitalist structure. What was particularly striking for us is that

the White Cube represents Camara through a very particular Eurocentric anthropological lens. Her work isn't taken on its own terms. Camara herself becomes a spectacle and amusement. What we mean is that the *screening* – not the film per se – almost speaks for the work, gives a frame for the work, an autobiographical authorship to the work. Yet again, Camara is the muse. But anyway, coming back to that studio, Camara's studio, is where she makes the work but it's not where the work is received, in that sense of a valuation. We don't think she is seeking that, a recognition, or desiring it, but making the point that the work is made in studio but is then transported and exhibited abroad.

Thinking outside the museum

There are things the museum can hold. There are things the museum attempts to hold but cannot hold. There are also things the museum will never hold. Rather than hold or hoard we want to think of gathering. Gathering differently as what is never held but as what is always from the point of its emergence shared. Sharing here is key because it is what blurs the temporal capitalist notions of holding and splits apart memory allowing for memory to ever change. Such memory is circular oracular non-linear memory. And we doubt that institutions or institutionalisation is where it can be gathered or is where it is gathered, it is what also allows for memory to be played polyrhythmically in black backbeat time. We are saying that we would rather not hold onto memory but we would rather gather memories. To hold memory is to order memory and thus to exclude and determine how others remember, think, be, relate, play. We leave this conversation at the breach of holding, we choose to withhold memory which is to say, this conversation will also not have an end, it will not have a conclusion, it is an ongoing gathering conjuring what is elsewhere. Which is to say what is always "non-object" & happening beyond and outside the hold of the museum.