



Curating New Openings: Rethinking Diversity in the Gallery

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Curating New Openings: Rethinking Diversity in the Gallery

Amanda Cachia

In spring 2016 I curated *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* for the San Diego Art Institute. For the exhibition, I aspired to activate the sensory qualities of objects in order to illustrate alternative narratives regarding access, place, and space for the benefit of a diverse audience, especially for people with visual impairments or blindness. I was especially interested in challenging the ocular-centric modality of curating exhibitions and the tendency to rely on the convention that objects must be

experienced through vision alone. Like my experimental show, this *Art Journal* forum, “Curating New Openings: Rethinking Diversity in the Gallery,” draws attention to the experimental ideologies and methodologies that might guide curators as they initiate and plan exhibitions of diversity in a range of ways. It derives from a panel discussion of the same name at the 2016 College Art Association conference in Washington DC, sponsored by CAA’s Committee on Diversity Practices. As chair of the panel, I sought to expand the borders of diversity in a bid to conduct a more intersectional conversation beyond conventional considerations of difference, where diversity is recognized and represented, but also to explore what “access” or “voice” means within these contexts. In organizing the forum, and as a scholar and independent curator who identifies as disabled according to the social model of disability, I also aim to place and so to emphasize disability first among the list of minority subject positions, rather than placing it last, as so typically happens, as if it were an afterthought. In *Art Journal*’s Spring 2016 issue, which offered “Diversity and Difference,” a forum exploring these topics from scholarly and pedagogical viewpoints, the organizer, Jordana Moore Saggese, similarly wrote of a desire to “produce a truly intersectional scholarship” so that such dialogues could be “mobilized by scholars outside that field.”¹ *Artforum*’s Summer 2016 issue also focused on “Art and Identity,” proving that these debates and complexities remain prevalent in contemporary art discourse. While this forum also wrestles with the definitions of and approaches to diversity, it does so from unconventional, intersectional curatorial perspectives, asking, how do curators approach or define diversity through their projects? How might curatorial practice itself be interrogated through diversity-based exhibitions that occur either inside or outside institutions like the museum that are built on unequal power relations?

Some of these questions are examined in the influential book *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, in which the museum studies scholars Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd write of an “activist museum practice,” intended to construct and elicit support for alternative, progressive ways of thinking about and representing minority identity categories that usually occupy marginal social positions within power structures.² In her book *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, the art historian Jennifer González suggests that artists (and by extension curators) have tried to work around what she calls the “double bind,” by “choosing to mix dominant and subaltern discourses of representation to draw our attention to the sites of their intersection, not as a simple celebration of cultural fusion, but rather as a carefully considered analysis of unequal power relations.”³ The double bind can be described as the limiting framework artists are placed into when they emphasize differences based on disability, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, or religion, as a critical white audience will automatically label each of these as “other.” On the other

1. Jordana Moore Saggese, “Introduction: Diversity and Difference,” *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 70–74.

2. Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd, “Activist Practice,” in *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, ed. Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 3.

3. Jennifer González, “James Luna: Artifacts and Fictions,” *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2008), 31, emphasis in original.

hand, while the omission of otherness might be accepted by the mainstream, this curatorial move is also at risk of being emptied of social critique. It seems the challenge for curators is a push and pull: to generalize without minimizing and to specialize without ghettoizing, segregating, or isolating. They must also develop radical voices either in unison with, or against, the often oppressive politics of the institutions for which they work. Therefore, without appearing to superficially support policies of cultural diversity, how can curators offer social critique while also offering other ideas within an exhibition, so that the outcome will provide a multimodal experience that conforms neither to a framework of “other” or “multiculturalism,” nor to the mainstream imperative to assimilate? This forum examines exhibition case studies that offer experimental curatorial approaches while straddling these complex objectives, in the form of essays, interviews, reports, and artworks by an international range of curators, scholars, and artists.

Certainly, curators must continue to speak from a number of minority subject positions, and the forum offers this continuity of the conversation following the Summer 2017 issue of *Art Journal*, which contained a forum on Indigenous curatorial and cultural practices. Given that the voice of the Indigenous curator is regrettably absent from the present forum, I direct the reader’s attention to the excellent Summer 2017 forum, particularly the essay by Candice Hopkins (Tlingit: Citizen of Carcross/Tagish First Nation), “We Are Always Turning Around on Purpose: Reflecting on Three Decades of Indigenous Curatorial Practice.” My essay in the present issue considers how *The Flesh of the World*, a twenty-four-artist exhibition that I curated in summer 2015 in three different gallery spaces at the University of

Toronto, offers a more nuanced and empirical approach to issues of dis/ability and complex embodiment. Helena Reckitt expands further on the feminist curatorial implications of “Now You Can Go,” a thirteen-day program of events, discussions, and screenings held in London in early 2016, which explored Italian feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s and how they apply to a contemporary art context. In the contribution by Jonathan D. Katz the forum includes a perspective from a curator who takes issue with how the word “diversity” is associated with non-normative artistic and curatorial practices.

Critically, the three interviews in the forum engage curators who take diversity in new directions: the first, between Matt Smith and Catherine Flood, provides a discussion on the tongue-in-cheek notion of “disobedi-

ent curating,” inspired by Flood’s *Disobedient Objects* exhibition of 2014, which examined the art and objects of protest movements from the past three decades. Smith and Flood explore what it means to disrupt and queer ostensibly normative narratives in the museum through past and present projects. In the second interview, and using *The Encyclopedic Palace* at the 2013 Venice Biennale as a jumping-off point, the Italian curator Massimiliano Gioni and I consider how “outsider” art has moved beyond its common, albeit problematic, definitions in the art history canon, toward a curatorial methodology that expands the very notion of the art object. In the third interview, the curator Naima Keith discusses some of her



Aaron McPeake, *Gongs, 2007–10*, installation view, *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, curated by Amanda Cachia, San Diego Art Institute, 2016 (artwork © Aaron McPeake; photograph by Ryan Gambrell)

Image description: Woman with short brown curly hair standing in the middle of an art gallery, right hand poised high and holding a mallet as though about to hit a bronze gong strung from the ceiling of the space. Other gongs of different shapes hang from the ceiling close by.

recent exhibitions and her plans for the California African American Museum in Los Angeles; she considers how a museum dedicated to the representation of a particular constituency speaks to issues of critical race alongside other aspects of difference in order to encourage an intersectional dialogue.

Other contributions include reports on two recent events that grapple with the challenges of curating diversity. The first is Eliza Chandler's account of the *Crippling the Arts* symposium held in Toronto in April 2016, hosted by Tangled Art + Disability. Chandler provides compelling evidence of the current surge of interest in disability arts in Canada and North America overall. This is followed by Sara Reisman's thoughts on her exhibition *In the Power of Your Care*, held at the Rubin Foundation's 8th Floor Gallery in New York. Reisman implements the foundation's Art and Social Justice initiative, which aims to broaden artistic and cultural access in New York in order to promote more cohesive and resilient communities, and greater participation in civic life. Reisman's essay further expands definitions of disability art, as considered through the lens of temporary illness.

In dialogue with these textual and conversational engagements, the forum includes works by selected artists and brief accompanying texts by curators who also engage questions regarding inclusion and exclusion, access, the materiality of bodies and objects, and how diversities and intersectionalities continue to be quite multiplicitous. These contributions include works by Christine Sun Kim, introduced by Matana Roberts; Fayen d'Evie, with her own accompanying text; Nadia Myre, introduced by Rhonda Meier; Firelei Baez, introduced by Franklin Sirmans; *Gender/Power*, introduced by Kris Grey and Maya Ciarrocchi; and Alison O'Daniel, introduced by Anne Ellegood.

All the forum's contributions simultaneously speak from multiple and intersectional subject positions, while at the same time refuting, pushing against, and stretching the contours of diversity to reflect new ontological, epistemological, and philosophical approaches that can indeed be mobilized by scholars, curators, and artists, both inside and outside the field, but also from the center, the margins, and the gray zones in between.

Description and access further intertwine in the forum with the inclusion of visual image descriptions that accompany the images in every article, interview, and artwork. The descriptions are intended to function as access points—as Georgina Kleege writes, “Audio description is the umbrella term for techniques meant to make visual media accessible to blind people”—but they also introduce readers of *Art Journal* to a new modality of digesting visual information, regardless if the user is blind, visually impaired, or sighted.⁴ The descriptions are therefore an extension of audio description, although in written form, and offer compelling and vital reference points in improving the comprehension and durability of visual content. The ambitious project of incorporating descriptions into scholarly publications is at a nascent stage, and I am pleased to introduce it to *Art Journal* in the hope that the practice becomes permanently embedded in its culture, both in theory and in practice.

Amanda Cachia has curated over forty exhibitions, many of which iterate disability politics in contemporary art. She is an assistant professor of art history at Moreno Valley College in Riverside, California, and director of the new Moreno Valley College Art Gallery, scheduled to open in fall 2018. She completed her PhD in art history, theory, and criticism at the University of California, San Diego, in spring 2017. Her exhibition *Automatisme Ambulatoire: Hysteria, Imitation, Performance* will open at the Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick in fall 2018.

4. Georgina Kleege, “Audio Description Described: Current Standards, Future Innovations, Larger Implications,” *Representations* 135 (Summer 2016): 89.