

Curating as Anti-Racist Practice

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Natalie Bayer, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński and Nora Sternfeld About Curating as Anti-Racist Practice

Five years ago, when we began talking about a book project, we had the idea of gathering different postcolonial, feminist perspectives from past projects that critically examine representation,¹ and juxtaposing them with approaches from recent critical migration research. We felt that this was necessary, for even today the museum still remains an uncomfortable place,² despite critiques of representation now being more commonly found in cultural-political debates and museum programming. Migration and colonialism, for example, are now (after tenacious insistence) increasingly and regularly taken up as main themes of exhibitions, mediation programmes, and in new research projects of cultural institutions. However, the actual experiences of exclusion, violence and self-empowerment that are directly connected to migration and colonialism largely still remain largely unaddressed, and oddly absent in the political contexts of cultural works. And at the same time, racism is by no means a thing of the past: its existence remains a fact, inside and outside of cultural institutions. Critical discourse

1____ Cf. the book series by schnittpunkt. ausstellungstheorie & praxis, published between 2005 and 2012 by Turia + Kant. <http://www.schnitt.org/publikationen>

2____ schnittpunkt, Belinda Kazeem, Charlotte Martinz-Turek, Nora Sternfeld (ed.), *Das Unbehagen im Museum. Postkoloniale Museologien, Ausstellungstheorie & Praxis* Vol. 3. Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2009.

has not necessarily brought about any significant structural and programmatic changes within the institutions themselves. In this present age, in which contradictory situations often coexist, racism has proven to be an effective apparatus to differentiate, marginalise

3 ____Cf. Mark Terkessidis. *Psychologie des Rassismus*. Opladen/Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1998. pp. 74–81.

4 ____Cf. Sara Ahmed. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity at Institutional Life*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012.

and normalise.³ However, the presence of racism in cultural policies and in cultural institutions is not always easy to spot, especially when it comes to new diversity and equality policies.⁴ Hegemonic cultural institutions may now invite people with critical positions as guests, whether as individual voices in the programme or as staff, but given that no change has yet occurred within their structures, self-image and working methods, these actions seem more like isolated measures devoid of long-term impact.

Activists today still have to continue the work of critics from more than three decades ago, who were calling for the voices of people who are usually excluded from representation to be *heard*, and for structures of erasure to be exposed. After all, institutional structures and the canon have been the subject of critique for a long time. Marginalised people have kept on staging performative interventions voicing their political demands in public spaces, and continue to insist on the right to remain critical. While contradictions persist in institutions, individuals with different subject positions come together to form collective structures. They create their own spaces for a cultural practice that can allow for something more—or even something else—than representation to come into being.

This anthology is not a theoretical work about critique, racism and cultural practice. Rather, we have collected different contributions from authors and artists whose conceptual work, research and culture-creating practices are concretely related to anti-racist struggles in the present. Their work also updates postcolonial feminist approaches, and anti-racist positions in the field of migration research. In this book we do not differentiate

between practice-oriented, theoretical or artistic contributions. Rather, all contributions are arranged as positions in four sections that relate to different starting points for anti-racist cultural practice.

The chapter *Don't get over it, if you are not over it*⁵: Action Instead of Representation presents different approaches to anti-racist practice in cultural institutions. Rather than ignoring criticism, these approaches work with it when developing new concepts for cultural practice, and when designing new spaces for action and spaces of reference.

5. _____. The chapter heading is borrowed from Sara Ahmed's lecture, *Diversity Work as Emotional Work*, at the University of Vienna, presented as part of the lecture series *Gender Talks*, on 22 November, 2013.

The second part, *Strategies of Intervention: Uninvited Speaking Back*, is dedicated to modes of resistances that dare to insist on critique, despite not having a platform.

On the other hand, the contributions in the following section, *Appeals: Sustained Resistance*, reflect strategies that make it possible to engage in critique *within* institutions, even when the object of critique is the institution itself.

The last chapter, *Appropriations: Carrying On Despite It All*, focuses on forms of practice that—in the face of divisive hegemonic forces—advance strong-willed self-definitions in cultural institutions, all the while following their own questions and those of others, a way of resisting the national, ethnic and exclusionary categorising logics of cultural institutions and discourses.

In the present volume we have collected very different anti-racist positions and voices; they are sometimes contradictory, and may sometimes even appear incompatible. We see this anthology as a curated collaborative effort presenting contemporary anti-racist strategies in the cultural sector. As editors coming from different disciplines and different fields of practice, struggles and experiences, we want to attend to these different contexts, and avoid simplifying the contradictions present in anti-racist discourse. Hence, the contributors' different experiences, conflicts and negotiating

struggles all find themselves reflected in the book. We find it important to present these positions side by side rather than against one another, even if they may *appear* contradictory. This allows for transversal solidarities and a common struggle towards a world with more freedom, equality, and solidarity, free of racist structures, discourses and practices. In this sense, we understand curating as a possible practice of anti-racism, so that from this present moment in time, a better future can be imagined for all, even if it is not yet real, and even if in today's society, the possibility of leading a good life with equal opportunity and equal rights still seems sorely out of reach.

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came before us, whose perseverance opened up spaces for action, who carried out astute analyses of racism based on their precise observations, and whose insights are imbued in our research and action.

