

Pamela Edmonds

AS A “CRITICAL” CURATOR, I AM INTERESTED not only in the notion of decolonization within white-cube spaces, but also of “curating in the expanded field” to explore alternative spaces outside of the institution. My practice is largely about institutional critique and claiming space for a greater range of expressions of identity within Canadian art and Black visual cultures and developing strategies for thinking through a representational field dominated by the over-determined figure of the Black body and the normative assumptions of race, protest, and identity articulated through it.

Despite multiculturalism initiatives in Canada, work by artists of colour is still primarily viewed as “educational” or “ethnic.” The dominant cultural and funding bodies have, so far, succeeded only in accommodating certain elements of change, without really altering hegemonic structures. Currently, it seems that the most striking feature of contemporary race relations is the widening division between race as it is depicted in commercial popular culture and race as it exists in sociopolitical reality. The paradox of marginalization and empowerment seem to coexist in the ideas of representation and resistance. If artists of colour work uncritically within the dominant tradition of practice and theory, they risk participating in their own subordination. At the same time, working completely outside of the system is naive and impossible. It is a constant negotiation. Agency remains a key issue. However, the more contentious problem of how to attain and maintain it remains unresolved.

In her 1992 book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks posits the idea of an “oppositional gaze” working through film and the visual arts as a critical intervention to reclaim (mis)representations, and as a means of forging a communal space of “mutual gazing.” With respect to my own curatorial practice, an example of this critical strategy was exemplified in a group exhibition called *28 Days: Reimagining Black History Month*, which I co-curated with Sally Frater in 2012. Presented

at two venues in Toronto—the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and Georgia Scherman Projects—the exhibition brought together the diverse work of Canadian artists with that of their international contemporaries in the United States and the United Kingdom in an exploration of the staging of Black History Month. This annual observance has continually sparked debates about the value of a designated month committed to the history of one particular race. While some artists refuse to show their work during Black History Month as a political stance against the marginalization of their practices, others feel it is one of few opportunities they have to participate in the broader cultural landscape. What do artists and curators from these historically marginalized communities do when they are interested in presenting issues of difference, but are working within a system whose colonial institutional structures are still largely intact? Do they challenge or reinforce them? ¶

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28 Days: Reimagining Black History Month, January 19–February 29, 2012, curated by Pamela Edmonds and Sally Frater, organized by Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and Georgia Scherman Projects (Toronto). Works pictured by Wangechi Mutu and Godfried Donkor. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

