

AS A CURATOR OF COLOUR WITH A BACKGROUND in South Asian historical and contemporary art, it is impossible not to be always already aware of the implicitly colonial and capitalist structure of art museums and public galleries. In more traditional art museums, this coloniality is underpinned by frameworks of art history that tend to reinforce ethnographic and Orientalist paradigms. But in smaller, perhaps less-formal institutions, it may be possible to challenge and shake up these foundational assumptions of the art museum. I am interested in the question of whether it is possible to curate critically from inside the institution—that is, to subject the institution to processes of systemic inquiry that reveal its biases and blind spots—and through this process unsettle, trouble, or complicate the various structures of the institution. What agency do we have to do this work? Can non-Western cultural paradigms or ways of seeing, experiencing, and understanding objects and artworks infiltrate the art museum in challenging and productive ways?

One constructive approach towards the possibility of critical curating from inside the art institution might be to go back to an original idea of curating as *curare*, meaning “to care.” Traditionally, this approach to curating has meant to care for objects and collections in taxonomic, materialist, and administrative ways. However, in recent years, curatorial practice has become increasingly focused on exhibition-making, such that this traditional, art-historical notion of “care” has become almost redundant to curatorial work. But can an idea of care continue to have relevance? Can a more expanded view of artworks, collections, and their relationships to communities restore notions of care to the practice of curating? What does it mean to care for culture and the role of culture in society? Is the notion of care culturally neutral? How do we recognize and facilitate the multiple historical and contemporary meanings of objects and their relationships to communities?

The idea of “care” operates on a number of levels for me. The idea of caring for one’s (non-Western) culture—of working to redefine curatorial and institutional practices—is an activist practice, not a placard-carrying activism, but a practice of calling certain ideas, belief systems, and assumptions into question. It is challenging and provocative work, because by raising these questions you are inevitably asking your colleagues and the institution to reconsider foundational assumptions and entrenched ways of doing.

Curating in this way is also a process of advocating for a kind of art history that does not objectify our cultures in colonial and Orientalist ways, but which dignifies cultural histories, beliefs, meanings, and practices by advocating for systems of knowledge and forms of experience that are sensitive to communities and community understandings. One of the big questions I grapple with has to do with how to account for the coexistence of modern and non-modern epistemologies in the experience and understanding of art. We assume that ways of looking at and experiencing art is universal, but this is an assumption.

There are very few curators of colour in institutions in Canada and around the world. The issues of race, representation, and coloniality are difficult to raise and discuss at any depth, let alone resolve. The problem of secondary Orientalism is barely discussed or acknowledged in the field of art history. We have to be aware of these issues in art museum settings, especially when we are looking to engage diverse cultural communities in the Canadian context, where we argue—rightly, in my view—for the social value of our cultural institutions. ¶

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