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# Brussels Museums presents

in collaboration with Zinnema

Co-curated by  
**Anne Wetsi Mpoma** • Wetsi Art Gallery  
**Jessica Gysel** • Girls Heart Brussels

# openmuseum

Re-imagining museums as safe spaces

\* Online event  
FR/NL/EN

# 9 MARCH 2021



# Open Museum

## 2021 Conference Report

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[Re-watch the entire conference here](#)

**code:** openmuseum9march

# Introduction by Gladys Vercammen-Grandjean, Open Museum Coordinator

(00:12:30) – Original in Dutch, French, and English

## Open Museum

- What is Open Museum?
- What are the plans for 2021?
- How to use the [openmuseum.brussels](https://openmuseum.brussels) website
- The concept behind the Think Tank: what it will do in 2021 and what will the museums achieve during the co-reflection moments
- Program overview

### *What is Open Museum?*

Open Museum is a project of Brussels Museums, the museum federation of Brussels and the association that organizes Museum Night Fever, Nocturnes, Comeback, and the Brussels Card. These initiatives attract new audiences to the museums, in a way that encourages co-creation. But how to go further? How can we structurally implement a participative and inclusive approach to the museum experience?

We started with a question: what does a museum look like in our ideal world? We first thought about our publics. An ideal museum is one where people feel comfortable and safe. This led us to a concept borrowed from the queer community, i.e., the "safe space" (Jessica and Wetsi will explain this in more detail).

An ideal museum for us, therefore, is a safe space where everyone feels welcome regardless of gender, skin color, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, education, or age. A museum that is not only created for everyone, but by everyone.

In the structural approach to this, we focus on the 5 Ps, namely

- *Personnel*: those who work in the museums, the museum as a workspace
- *Public*: those who come to the museum and visit it (or not!)
- *Program*: the content museums create and share

- *Partnerships*: the people and associations with whom museums work
- *Place*: the museum itself as a physical space, without forgetting it as a digital footprint

## *The 3 Levels of Open Museum*

### 1. *Internal: Starting with us, the Brussels Museums team*

At Brussels Museums, we have a small team of 8 people. With the Actiris, we've set up a mini-diversity plan that we will put in place until September 2022. This will largely center on the first P, *Personnel*.

After doing an analysis of our team, we've decided to focus on four important aspects over the next two years.

- How to recruit and select candidates
- How to manage staff
- How to talk about diversity internally
- How to position ourselves externally as an organization with a diversity policy  
i.e. Brussels Museums starting Open Museum

### 2. *External: connecting with museums*

- In-depth interviews
- Workshops on unconscious biases: how they've been embedded in our society and in our institutions
- Conference Day
- Sector convention: how to inform museums about our internal work with Actiris and how to encourage them to do the same
- Call on Brussels' museums, in collaboration with our Think Tank, to come together and reflect upon make these institutions more inclusive and participatory
- The aim: by the end of 2021, the goal is to create together an inclusion charter for the museum sector, a list of concrete recommendations that can be adapted according to each museums' context.

It is important to mention context. We represent 120 museums of varying sizes, covering diverse topics, and financed in many ways. It is impossible that the inclusion charter will

be applied in the same way by each one, but it is possible to create one that can be adapted if we come together and seek assistance from external experts. We will present this document at next year's conference in March 2022.

### 3. External: collaborations with associations and activists

One of the principal questions we asked ourselves in this process was how do we avoid developing such a charter from solely the museums' perspective. So, we sought out activists to ask them: what is your museum experience and how can we make museums more welcoming and representative places?

To start, a deconstruction of certain societal norms is necessary.

During in-depth interviews and the internal Open Museum trainings, we tried to analyze our own blind spots and to see how they influence the way we operate in our institutions. What exactly is considered a "norm"?

We discussed:

- The effects of living in a patriarchy
- Our very binary interpretation of gender (masculine vs. feminine)
- The distinction between cis and trans
- Heteronormativity
- The Eurocentric and Western views imposed on the rest of the world
- Our colonial past and its modern consequences
- Whiteness as a norm and the issue of white supremacy
- The prevailing ableism that discriminates against people with disabilities
- The way people's socio-economic situation influences their status and treatment

**The act of naming these items as norms is in no way meant as a personal attack; it is intended to expose structural problems.**

The questions we need to ask ourselves are as follows: where do these issues manifest themselves in our institutions? How can we talk about them open and honestly in order to move forward and to include voices that have been (historically) under-represented? How do we talk to these communities and not for them? It's only in this way that we can design projects that are more inclusive and participatory from the start.

**This is a call to stop, look and listen.**

The website **openmuseum.brussels** was developed as a tool to help nourish this reflection process with museum professionals and the general public.

- **News page:** updates on Open Museum as well as highlights of projects that fall within the scope of this project → we want to better represent and highlight what's already happening in our institutions. In this way, we can work together instead of separately.
  - You can filter the news by type
  - Call to museums: feel free to share your projects/news if you want to highlight them!
- **Tools:** this page will always be “under construction” and will include:
  - Putting forward the best practices in our museums
  - (inter)national inspiration
  - Links to experts, associations, and activists; those who fight structural discrimination on a daily basis and can share their knowledge with the museums.

## *Open Museum Think Tank*

In combination with the museum co-reflection moments, the diversity charter will be based on discussions with activists, in what we call our “Think Tank.”

### *How the activists were chosen:*

To find the members for the Think Tank, a simple Open Call was launched in which candidates were asked the following questions:

- How do you identify with Open Museum's mission?
- Can you share a positive or negative experience you've had in a museum?

The call was online for less than two weeks, and in that time, we received no less than 150 applications.

In seeing this response, it became clear that avoiding asking for too many details or for elaborate CVs had a positive influence on the number of applications.

In the end, 6 candidates were chosen:

- **Vanessa Vovor:** anti-racism workshop leader. She works for a German development agency, where she currently works on European climate and energy projects. Before that, she focused on projects for people with disabilities.

- **Apolline Vranken:** architect, known for her "ungendered architecture" (*l'Architecture qui dégenre*). She investigates how gender plays a role in our experience of public space. She co-organizes the Matrimony Days.
- **Nour Outojane:** currently working for BePax, is a graduate of Maastricht University, where she studied an interdisciplinary course in gender studies, cultural studies, and sociology.
- **Ichraf Nasri:** Tunisian artist, founder of the Xeno- platform, an artistic collective specifically for queer womxn of color.
- **Samuel Hus:** bilingual Brussels native who co-created the Museum of Capitalism. This was an interesting case study, not only because of its temporary nature, but also because of the non-hierarchical way in which it was created.
- **Tilke Wouters:** wrote the "Safe(r) Space Manifesto" in Ghent and helps people and organizations to take concrete steps to make their spaces as inclusive and safe as possible

In addition, there are a few experts who are participating in non-remunerate roles: Philippe Harmegnies, director of Passe-Muraille (expert in inclusion spaces for people with disabilities), Céline Galopin (head of museum division at Article 27), and Laurent Fastrez (lawyer specialized in anti-discrimination law).

One last thing before we launch the day's program. Our approach today is quite intellectual, it is a conference after all. But for me, Open Museum is a project in which we are aware that being in a museum is an experience as emotional as it is physical. My personal slogan while setting up Open Museum was, and still is, "get comfortable feeling uncomfortable." When a topic feels uncomfortable, take a moment. Listen, reflect, question your assumptions, and discuss. I hope that, above all today, we empathetically embrace criticism. This way, we can evolve in a constructive way towards museums that are inclusive and participatory.



# Introduction by Delphine Houba

(00:31:01) – Original version in French

## *The Speaker*

**Delphine Houba** is the Alderwoman of Culture, Tourism, Big Events and Municipal Equipment at the City of Brussels

## *The Presentation*

I would like to thank Brussels Museums for this excellent initiative and for organizing this day of debate and reflection on inclusiveness and diversity in museums.

This is an enormous task that must now be tackled head on. Whether we are talking about access for all to our cultural venues, demasculinization and decolonization, our institutions, our collections, and, of course, our cultural programmes. Admittedly, there is still a lot of work to be done. I am delighted to have such a study day in the company of speakers whose expertise in museums is unquestionable. It was put together with such aplomb despite the circumstances. We all know that this coming crisis makes it so difficult and I'm so happy to be here with you today and that you managed to organize such a tremendous debate.

We would have preferred to exchange our point of view face-to-face, in real life, but here we are. And I hope that by the end of the day we will have made progress on the issue that brings us together today and that unites us. Namely, that of a genuine policy of inclusion in our museums. I am convinced that we are on the way to better inclusive management of our museum institutions. **In fact, our museums are already "safe spaces" because everyone is welcome, regardless of their gender, color, origin, religion, sexual orientation, age, or level of education. However, our museums must be even safer. They absolutely must develop and promote inclusiveness at all levels in relation to them. Not only in terms of welcoming all audiences, but also in terms of their staff policy, their programming, and their partnerships.** This mediation work must be strengthened so that everyone feels comfortable, safe, and secure, without any sensitivities being compromised. **Women must be more represented at all levels: artistic, programmatic, and hierarchical. The same applies to LGBTQI people and audiences of diversity.** Moreover, it is not for nothing that this study day takes place the day after International Women's Rights Day and during the month of March, which is also Black History Month. So, in 2021, there is no longer a question of considering museums as elitist sanctuaries from which one would be almost afraid to push open the door. This is a totally archaic vision, but we know that it unfortunately still exists, especially among young people. It was with this in mind that I launched the free admission option for students

during Carnival week. This action was a phenomenal success. An action that is part of the intention to further break down the barriers of culture.

I congratulate Open Museum, again, for their professionalism and dynamism. It has led to constructive and positive first conclusions. May this day help in the drafting and implementation of a diversity charter for all our cultural institutions and not only museums.

I wish you an excellent day, full of passionate debates, and avenues for action to explore.

# Introduction by Co-Curators Anne Wetsi Mpoma & Jessica Gysel

(00:35:20) – Original version in French and Dutch

## *The Speakers*

**Anne Wetsi Mpoma** is an art historian, curator, author, and gallery owner.

She proposes solutions to deconstruct and reinvent the arts and the imaginary for a more inclusive society. Director and founder of the Wetsi Art Gallery (2019, asbl Nouveau Système Artistique), an independent space that builds bridges with diverse audiences, by showing marginalized artists' work, be it due to their race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin and/or disability.

In her essay, *Resisting in the Arts and Culture in a Postcolonial Context* (in *Being Imposed Upon*, 2020), she analyzed the power relations between Belgian Afro-descendent women artists evolving on the margins and the contemporary art scene's dominant holders of power. The exhibition project *Through her (True her)* addressed the same theme by bringing the works of these marginalized artists into dialogue with those that have joined the collection of the Ghent Museum of Contemporary Art (S.M.A.K.). This was arranged along the research carried out by the co-curator of the project, Pascale Obolo.

Wetsi is currently participating as an expert appointed to draft a first report designed to guide the House of Representatives members as they work on the commission charged with analyzing Belgium's colonial past and its current consequences.

**Jessica Gysel** is an editor and consultant living in Brussels.

She's the founder and publisher of *Girls Like Us* magazine, a queer and feminist arts publication. Next to the magazine, *Girls Like Us* hosts a plethora of events, ranging from film screenings, exhibitions, talks, workshops, presentations, temporary shops, and parties.

Jessica is also the founder and programmer of Girls Heart Brussels, a platform to discover a hand-picked selection of the best things that Brussels lesbians and feminists have to offer.

Finally, she's one of the people behind Mothers & Daughters, a Lesbian\* and Trans\* Bar, the first ephemeral queer bar in Brussels since 2005.

With a background as a marketing consultant specialized in scenes and communities, Jessica knows the whole spectrum – from corporate hell to DIY utopia and everything in-between.

[www.girlslikeusmagazine.com](http://www.girlslikeusmagazine.com)

[www.girlsheartbrussels.be](http://www.girlsheartbrussels.be)

[www.mothersanddaughters.be](http://www.mothersanddaughters.be)

## *The Presentation*

**Jessica:** Welcome and thank you to Brussels Museums for this invitation. My name is Jessica Gysel and I am here to discuss some of the projects I helped set up.

***Girls Like Us:*** a queer, feminist art magazine that explores alternative ways of doing art. We want to focus less on the artist as a genius and more on how you can work together, how you can learn from each other. It is from this position that I speak out about inclusion and safe(r) spaces because this is at the heart of what we (try to) do in practice with the magazine. I have no museum background and I am an editor rather than a curator. I am someone who tries to change things from within the community. So, we have been to museums several times with the magazine, organizing workshops or setting up events where we offer our communities a platform in a slightly more institutional context. We learn a lot from these interactions.

The latest issue of *Girls Like Us* is about the club scene and is an investigation into ten years of queer spaces in Europe. The concept of safe space is important there. This concept comes from the feminist and activist margins and creates a safe place where you can come together and discuss certain political ideas (whether problematic or not).

***Girls Heart Brussels:*** A spin-off of this magazine that has been around for six years now. The main goal is to give more visibility to queer, lesbian, and transgender people in Brussels. With this group, we go to art fairs, visit museums and festivals. This has created a big community. It's necessary that people have places where they can meet and continue to meet.

***Mothers & Daughters:*** a lesbian and trans bar in Brussels, this collective (we are now 13) was founded in 2017. I always find it difficult to talk as a private person about a project that has so many different voices. This once again explores how to create a safe place for queer people in Brussels, the kind of place that is unfortunately still rare.

Besides the bar that we keep open for two months a year, we also focus on other things. For example, we have our own beer, *Transition*, co-brewed by the transgender people in our community. We also support other projects that puts specific communities first, such as the POC\* Pride in Antwerp.

As a lesbian, trans bar in Brussels, we have a specific policy that I want to zoom in on, our "ally flyer." It underlines that we do not exclude anyone and that everyone is welcome in our bar, but that it is a place that is primarily meant for those who often do not have a place of their own – and you should always respect that. By setting some protocols and working with hosts, you give context to your audience and help people feel safe. This happens, among other ways, through the use of language, how you name things. These are reflexes that museums and institutions can also apply.

**Wetsi:** I would like to thank Open Museum and Gladys Vercammen-Grandjean for organizing this conference day. I would also like to thank all the artists who have agreed to participate in this day, as well as the public. My name is Anne Wetsi Mpoma, I studied to become an art historian. I am an independent curator and a decolonial thinker. In my work,

I propose solutions to deconstruct and reinvent the arts and the imaginary for a more inclusive society. A more inclusive society seems necessary to me because black populations are still excluded as target audiences of museums in Belgium. To try to remedy this situation, there are many Afro-descendant women in Belgium who are setting up initiatives. My project is called the **Wetsi Art Gallery (WAG)** and it exists since the end of 2019, supported by an ASBL, called New Art System, of which I am president. It functions as an independent space within Café Congo managed by Gia Abrassart.

The aim of the gallery is to create bridges between artists of the African diaspora, who work in Belgium and who are looking for spaces where they can work professionally. But also, as spaces for exchange or spaces to show their work. I also try to create bridges with other audiences – mainstream audiences – and institutions so that they can come and meet these people and discover their work. Their work could inspire art historians to research the diaspora artists' artistic practices. I work with diaspora artists who are marginalized because of their ethnicity, but our aim is also to work on issues of gender, parity, sexual orientation and sometimes disability.

Indeed, people of the diaspora can find themselves at the intersection of all these positions. In an essay called *Resisting Arts and Culture in a Post-Colonial Context*, which appeared in a collective book called *Being Imposed Upon* released last year, edited by Lukas Verdijk and Vesna Faassen De *publiekeacties* two curators from Antwerp, I had the opportunity to write about the interest of decolonizing the arts, culture, and the imaginary. This is a theme that I will develop in detail later during the presentation with Pascale Obolo, who was co-curator of the exhibition *Through Her (True Her)*. This exhibition exclusively showed the work of Afro-descendant women artists from Belgium and would have been held at the cultural center in Strombeek last year. It did not take place because of the lockdown. Pascale was involved in this exhibition because she integrated works by women artists from the collection of the S.M.A.K., the Ghent Museum of Contemporary Art. The idea was to bring the works into dialogue. What I tried to do was a critique of society since we have a problem of structural racism that we are trying to change. To do this, we tried to create new dialogues and bridges.

Earlier in your presentation you said that, for you, the notion of "safe space" is something important. This is an issue that is present among Afro-descendant women activists in Brussels today. So maybe there are things we could work on or learn from together. You said that you had already drawn up a protocol on these issues. How did it work out for you?

**Jessica:** It is not a real protocol. I would like to quote a definition by Marnie Slater, a member of the Mothers & Daughters collective, who tries to explain what a "safe space" is. We prefer to talk about safe(r) spaces because a safe space is an ideal that does not exist. It is much more about an intention, a consciousness, a will to create one. The road towards it, however, is just as important as the end result. Marnie's definition comes from activism, from the queer club scene:

Safe(r) spaces are self-defined situations of mutual care, pleasure and support. They're often incomplete, experimental, precarious, collective, leaky, flawed and beautiful

This says it all: we do this together; we learn from each other; and we support each other. Given the museum context of this study day, I wanted to make another attempt at a definition. This quote comes from the Museum of Impossible Forms, a flux museum in Finland:

A safer space is a supportive, non-threatening environment that is open-minded, respectful, with a desire to learn from others, and thus tries to build a place that prioritizes both a physical and mental sense of security. At the same time, it is also a place that is critical, also about power structures that affect our daily lives and that takes into account the dynamics, the different backgrounds of people.

People often forget this, too, especially in museums: you can be welcoming and try to listen to and learn from each other, but structurally certain oppressive patterns just live on.

**Wetsi:** The notion of a safe space is a notion that applies to spaces that are on the fringe. Can a museum become a safe space?

**Jessica:** It is a difficult task. It starts with the realization of those structures. I also refer to Kaaaitheater's slogan: *How to be many*. How can you break through a certain dominant discourse and bring in people from different communities, with different backgrounds? Without necessarily falling into the trap of developing a program especially for this or that target group. This is what happens a lot now: they get a stage. You must tackle this at a much deeper level. Those in your staff, those on your board of directors...

Wetsi, you are currently researching the concept of the "margin." Can you elaborate on this?

**Wetsi:** I am inspired in my work by bell hooks, a feminist author who, in 1984, wrote *From Margin to Center*. She explains that the feminist revolution has not the possibility to take place yet because it excludes a part of women and leaves them in the margin. She explains that to be able to create this revolution in society, it is not only necessary to work with the people in the center, but also with all the people in the margins. You also must work with people who are outside the community but who feel concerned by the revolution and who want to act as active forces to transform society, to move towards more social justice, more gender equality, and things like that. I find this notion very interesting because in all the associative projects and in the exhibition projects or in the gallery project, I always feel a bit on the fringe, but always with this will to go towards the center and to create a dialogue. It's a way of working that suits me for the moment, and in which I feel comfortable, because the center is not yet a safe space for me today and so I need my space.

# *Healing the Museum with Grace Ndiritu*

(00:55:32) – Original version in English

Grace Ndiritu invites us to get into the right mindset to tackle the issues that will be raised today. In 2012, Ndiritu went to live in a series of rural, alternative communities, expanding an ongoing body of research into non-rational methodologies, New Age nomadic lifestyles, and shamanism. This research developed into a body of work entitled *Healing the Museum* which sought to re-activate the “sacred nature” of art spaces and to restore a meaningful relationship between museums and their audiences.

## *The Speaker*

**Grace Ndiritu** is a British-Kenyan artist whose artworks relate to the transformation of the contemporary world, through film, photography, paintings, and social practice projects with refugees, migrants, and indigenous groups. Works like *The Ark: Center for Interdisciplinary Experimentation*; *COVERSLUT©* fashion and economic project; and shamanic performance art series *Healing the Museum* have been shown all around the world including the Africa Museum in Tervuren. Recent exhibitions include Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool (2019), S.M.A.K. & M.S.K., Belgium (2019), Eastside Projects, Birmingham (2018), CAG Vancouver (2018), Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona (2017), Museum Modern of Art, Warsaw (2014), Musée Chasse & Nature and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2013).

## *The Presentation*

*Healing the Museum: A meditative performance*

## *Interview with Grace Ndiritu*

(01:17:45)

**Gladys:** Well, that was quite something, Grace, thank you. It also took me a moment to unwind from all the build-up stress I’ve had about organizing this day. Could you maybe start by telling us how *Healing the Museum* came about and how you would like to see it evolve?

**Grace:** I began HTM in 2012. This was after many years, when I graduated art school, being a contemporary artist, but also having a deep esoteric practice (going on meditation retreats, doing yoga, having different gurus and shamans) – so I had a double life for many years. There wasn’t really a space in the art world at that point to be talking about these different healing modalities. In 2012, I was very frustrated, and I began to think about how museums were disconnected with what’s going on outside – politically, economically,

energetically – with the real world, let's say. And so, I wrote this essay, called *Healing the Museum*, about the idea that museums were dying because of this disconnection. Then it grew into different performances in different museums (Centre Pompidou, Paris – Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw...). Today I've done probably about ten performances, always with different types of audiences. Sometimes, we had all audiences, but sometimes we had specialized audiences – like doctors, refugees... It's still growing today and I hope this will continue.

**Gladys:** Even if virtual?

**Grace:** Yes, even if virtual. What has been interesting in the pandemic is how many people have suddenly understood that there might be something bigger, especially in the art world. They have started doing yoga or meditation online. You can use this new technology because it's about the transmission of energy. Whether it's through a camera or face-to-face, it should be possible.

**Gladys:** In your artistic practice, you focus a lot on what you call the non-rational methodology. You also critique the Western divide – and I think rightfully so – of minds, bodies, and spirits. You also mention in your works that museum spaces tend to be shaped by rules of quiet and passivity. That's quite true: when you enter a museum, they mainly tell you what not to do (don't speak, run...). What benefits do you think that having a more emotional approach, or at least trying to release that gap/divide, could bring into the museum space? Especially now, as you mentioned, when mental illness is at an all-time high.

**Grace:** My idea of non-rational methodologies, that's when I began to think about bringing different energies and different types of people into the museum – through using yoga, shamanism, meditation, etc. It has to do with my critique of how museums value objects, the audiences that visit them, and the people that work in the building. Especially in ethnographic museums (e.g. Africa Museum, Tervuren), how we had for a long time this Western idea of 'this is only death matter', the denial that there might be something else – while almost 80% of the world believes in something bigger. This denial of shamanism, allows this idea in the West that anything can be used for profit, can be exploited or be productive. That trickles down into the way that we value objects and why we collect objects. **We collect objects monetarily first, then culturally, and very low down is the spiritual aspect. Most objects in ethnographic museums were made for ritual purposes, rather than practical ones. For example, totem poles – which I've written about – were meant to be outside in the rain, the sun and the wind, because they're living beings. So when you put them in a glass cage, it's really like killing them.** This idea again of stolen land, stolen culture, and stolen climate – how important that is to look at.

In terms of the quiet and the passivity, as we talked about, I wouldn't say I criticize that, because I think contemplation is really important in today's society, because now there's very few places in the modern world – except for museums, parks, churches and libraries – where you should be able to switch off from the endless consumerism. **You need these public spaces of contemplation, they aren't just about entertainment or spectacle, because that helps balance this whole mental health issue. The reason why people are so stressed and overloaded, is because they don't have any time to switch off and**



**contemplate – apart from in their houses, which is very hard for people to do** (switch their phones/Netflix/... off). I'm the same as well, but you really have to be structured about it. **These places like museums, to me, they are sacred spaces because they can allow that kind of quiet mind-time.**

**Gladys:** Maybe then it's about finding this balance between being a quiet contemplative space, but also being aware of the energy that hangs around that and maybe emanates from objects that they hold?

**Grace:** You can only understand what the objects are trying to tell you, or what the building needs, by being quiet. **If the museum is just about entertaining and keep going, then there's no difference between the outside of the museum and the inside of the museum.** Museums should be held accountable to be on a higher standard than other institutions – just like libraries, churches and parks should be. Maybe I'm a bit nostalgic, but I do think that balances out. Just as we need nature, we need parks, we need places to go and unwind. They exist for a reason, you know.

**Gladys:** In a sense I do feel that, since the pandemic hit, talking about mental health has slowly become a little less taboo. It makes sense that cultural spaces would like to integrate that in their work. But however: how do you make sure that you do that in a genuine way, and by not coopting methodology without questioning the framework that you're putting it in? Going further than, although I'm not against it, doing yoga at the museum. I guess what I'm basically asking is: what kind of structural work does it take by museum professionals to engage with this non-rational side?

**Grace:** For example, one of my early performances was called *A Therapeutic Townhall Meeting* (part of *Healing the Museum* series, held at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervillier – Paris) and was inspired by a lot of things to do with truth and reconciliation that happened after apartheid had ended, by the idea of the perpetrator and the victims coming together and healing. I did this performance in a conference that was about mental health and I talked about how all the political conflicts, and terrorism, environmental issues... are all reflections of the deep fragmentation in our own minds and in our own human consciousnesses. This mental health issue sure is a big issue.

As for spiritual practices though, I do think it has to be thought by practitioners who have had many years of experience and who have ethical behaviors and backgrounds, especially because you're working with a general public, and you might not know who's coming in (eg. someone with a mental health issue). The things I work with can be very powerful energetically, so I do have some guidelines for myself. For example, I only ask people to do things that I've done many times; you don't experiment on the public. Another thing is, I always give guidelines before a performance, that people shouldn't drink or take drugs in the days beforehand. But sometimes, I also think that if the public wants to take part, they have to take some responsibility as well. It's not just going to a quick fix thing. That's why I have a lot of problems with the whole wellbeing and wellness community that they have commercialized; the neoliberal thought of "Oh, but you can fix anything within five sessions." Those things are good in the sense that it makes the ordinary, let's say Middle-America, find out what those things are. But the things I'm talking about, the esoteric practices, you can't really commercialize them. There's a reason there is a ritual.

So, when you reduce something like yoga to just physical movement, you take away all the esoteric stuff, then it's not really yoga – it's exercise. You've got to be careful with that.

**This idea of rationality, that's really loved in the Western canon, is a dangerous takeover of the creative mind.** The left brain, of this rational, categorizing thinking in the West, is revered, whereas the right brain, which is where dreaming, shamanism, different states of consciousness are a part of, is forgotten; not understanding that you need a balancing of both sides. In my work, that's a key thing: the balance. Everything that we're doing has to have an intention. I think that's one thing for institutions: they have to have a clear intention why they're doing it. Are you just having mindfulness or yoga to have coffee mornings? That's very different from having a clear intention. These healing methodologies are powerful processes that can be used for changing things politically and socially. It's not just, "hey, let's hang out."

**Gladys:** We'll get back to a good example of how you use this methodology to get leaders around the table and use this non-rational approach to actually make things change. Before we do that, you do in your work – and this is also what Open Museum is about, at least trying to – address that institutional critique of the glass ceilings we have of sexism, racism, and classism. Could you maybe expand a bit on that? And maybe this is a bold question, but if you were to reimagine power in our institutions, what would you say the main issues are?

**Grace:** I've been writing a bit about these issues because I write essays as well about exhibition making, race, and politics. I've obviously encountered all of this "-isms." And for me – especially because my family is from rural Kenya, so I grew up there, but also in England, where the class system is very structured – this class has been a huge barrier.

**Gladys:** It has been the main one, is what I read in your essay.

**Grace:** As a working-class person to go further. In other countries, I know, it might be different. At this point, I think it's very interesting, especially since the pandemic and the current social unrest, of how institutions now want to do anti-racist work and the different ways of doing it. Obviously, you can pay lip service. I'm very weary of just hiring a black person, or the blackening of certain situations, because that's not going to help either.

**Gladys:** Not structurally anyway.

**Grace:** Yes, but also because all black people are different. I think that's one thing that has to be made clear: there are different types of white people, there are different types of black people. Not all black people have the same ethics or the same politics. Sometimes I use the example of Kanye West: clearly me and Kanye have very different ethics, the way he jumped on Trump and on that bandwagon. He's a black person, we share that in common, but we have different ideas of being black and what it means.

**I feel why curators and institutions have to be really careful about their white guilt: because if they don't understand that they're actually triggered, and so when they're making decisions, it's important they don't just make decisions from a guilt-based thing.** They must look, do research, and say: 'okay, this person has a track record of doing a certain cultural work' and then choosing people – not just choosing people because

they're black. For example, for the most recent Davos World Economic Forum that happened there was a huge thing about diversity and women. But like most of those people working or who are being promoted in some of those forums, they have a completely different ethics. It's still neoliberalism, it's still the same bullshit going on and on. It doesn't really matter what color you are in that sense. Yes, it's good for institutions and museums to be collecting black artists or colleagues, but you've really got to look at the actual deep-rooted situation.

**Gladys:** We will maybe conclude with the example of getting power around the table, as I like to call it. Could you maybe expand on your project *A Meal for My Ancestors*, which is also part of *Healing the Museum*, if I got that correctly. It was able to gather representatives of the UN, NATO and the EU around the same table as activists and refugees, which resulted eventually in EU parliament briefing where the term 'climate refugee' was coined. I think it's amazing it led to that. Maybe you can expand on what it was like? And then maybe how it would be possible to copy such a practice within the power ranks of our museums? If you want to address the directors of our institutions, or invite them, now is your time.

**Grace:** *A Meal for My Ancestors* was indeed part of *Healing the Museum*. I did this project in Brussels in 2017, so just after the terrorist attack and while the refugee crisis was building up. I spent four months here and I basically worked with two groups of people. One group of people were refugees, migrants, and activists. I gave them free meditation classes in Molenbeek. The other group were people who work in agencies, like the parliament, the UN, NATO, but I also had a high court judge from Lille, who does a lot of the asylum cases; I had someone in the terrorist department... And they've really got into the project. I've worked with them doing creative ritualization.

I think these two groups of people have different issues. The first group of people, with the activists and refugees, has a survival issue – they're not physically safe. Whereas the second group of people, has physical comfort, but they have no ability to make creative decisions, because they're trying to tick boxes because of bureaucracy. That limits their understanding and connections of the ramifications of doing their jobs. When they tick a certain box, it affects millions of people. So, the project was to bring these different types of people together, to do the shamanic performance and to have a conference – and that's what we did. It was really good because when the two sets of people came in, they lay down on the floor and all of the power dynamics between them fell away. They just became bodies on the floor. Then the project was about healing trauma, using food, shamanism, and mediation. A lot of the participants saw in the shamanic journey issues to do with climate change and so they saw images of this. **One woman of the parliament was greatly affected by what she saw, so afterwards she was inspired to write this briefing paper and to start this think tank about changing the law to deal with climate change refugees. And this really inspired me. The dream is to do something totally non-rational, performative, spiritual with a practical outcome.**

**Gladys:** An actual law!

**Grace:** I think it's the same with, which we can talk about later, reparations, and restitution issues: how these things, the spiritual and the practical, need to go together.

# Re-imagining Collections: How to Feminize and Decolonize Museum Collections? By Anne Wetsi Mpoma & Pascale Obolo

(01:50:50) – Original version in French

Talk between Anne Wetsi Mpoma & Pascale Obolo, followed by Q&A with Grace Ndiritu

A discussion on how to feminize a collection and produce counter-narratives based on the professional experiences of decolonial thinkers and activists Pascale Obolo (*Afrikadaa* Review, *Museum On/Off – Musée l'ont l'eux*) and Anne Wetsi Mpoma (Wetsi Art Gallery, Essay *Decolonize Arts and Culture in a Postcolonial Context* in *Being Imposed Upon*). The two speakers also presented the exhibition project *Through her (true her)*, which attempts to respond to issues on the relationship between racialized audiences and artists and museums.

## *The Speakers*

**Anne Wetsi Mpoma** is an art historian, curator, author, and gallery owner. (See full bio on page 11)

**Pascale Obolo** is an independent filmmaker and curator, editor of the magazine *Afrikadaa*.

Born in Yaoundé, Cameroon, Pascale Obolo studied directing at the Conservatoire Libre du Cinéma Français, then obtained a master's degree in experimental cinema at the University of Paris VIII. A feminist filmmaker and director of *Calypso Rose: The Lioness of the Jungle*, she investigates the place of women in artistic circles. Many of her films have been shown and received awards in several international festivals.

As an activist, her work questions memory, identity, exile, and invisibility. Her research focuses on the different practices of knowledge transmission and decolonial education in art and in militant circles. By constructing post-colonial historical narratives, she questions political and economic history in archives and visual & cultural representations.

Pascale Obolo is also at the origin of *Afrikadaa*, a revue of contemporary African art that makes space for new institutional and non-institutional artistic practices. She also runs the African Art Book Fair (AABF), an independent publishing fair that focuses on qualitative editorial practices. Pascale Obolo is also a member of the Scientific Council of the Reunion Island School of Fine Arts.

Finally, she is currently preparing a publication on counter-narratives following her research on the feminization of S.M.A.K.'s collection.

## The Presentation

**Pascale:** I would like to thank Wetsi and Open Museum for inviting me to this discussion: rethinking museums. My name is Pascale Obolo and I am a curator based in Paris. I run an art magazine called *Afrikadaa* and I have also set up a project called Africa Art Book Fair. I work on transmissions linked to colonial issues and also on the possibility of rethinking a more inclusive history of art, i.e., one that includes the history of diasporas. I'm going to tell you about an experimentation I started with *Afrikadaa*, a revue run by a collective of racialized artists. It is a journal that was conceived as a curatorial space to give voice to the voiceless and to show the work of artists of the diaspora. *Afrikadaa* has been around for over ten years now.

I'm going to tell you about the experience of the *Museum On/Off*: an exhibition that took place at the Pompidou Centre where I was invited as a curator by the curator Alicia Knock and in which I proposed a project. I had already worked on a performance that posed this problem: **is it possible to think about decolonizing a museum in a Western, universalist museum such as the Pompidou Centre?** Why should we decolonize a museum today?

**However, we cannot decolonize without first understanding the underlying principle of colonialism and its role in museums as we know them today.** For example, being aware of the historical and colonial contingencies under which the collection was acquired or revealing the Eurocentric biases in Western museum discourses. Decolonizing a museum means recognizing and including diverse voices, especially from minorities and multiple perspectives. It is the transformation of the museum through critical analysis supported by concrete actions. **During the transformation, we rethink not only the content of the stories told by museums, but also who is allowed in, who is not allowed in, who is allowed to speak, who is not allowed to speak.** However, the decolonization of a museum also concerns its functioning and therefore also those who work in that museum. We have to find a way of thinking about a museum with much more diversity and go less towards a monochrome museum. The way we in which we rethink museums is very important. How can we show the other and who is this other that we are showing? **We must not show the other as a body-subject or an object, but as a producing body.**

**We must also rethink museums in their hierarchy.** Today, when we go to a museum, radicalized people are at the bottom of the ladder: that is to say, the cleaning ladies, the guides, or the people at the entrance. The higher up the hierarchy of power you go, the less radicalized people there are. The aim is to offer more diversity and to rethink the construction of this elite so that there is more diversity in the social class of museums.

The *Museum On/Off* exhibition was an opportunity to rethink these issues. My role was to study the question of decolonization in relation to the Centre Pompidou. After this experience we realized that it had been a failure. For this reason, we said to ourselves that the museum was the master's house. How can the radicalized person be invited to the master's table? It was unthinkable, it was impossible. **We came to the conclusion that decolonizing museums means proposing to the periphery – a periphery that from our point of view represents the center – other ways of doing things and other forms of institution.** After this exhibition, we returned to our fundamentals with the publication of this magazine *Afrikadaa*, a curatorial space with the aim of rethinking and reimagining

museums: a concept that we called "**paper museum.**" **It is a space of emancipation and freedom that can propose new narratives, other ways of doing things, and that can make visible certain works by artists who have long been invisible in the museum space.**

What is interesting in the exhibition experience is that we selected some fascinating artists: for example, a collective of krump dancers who were rehearsing in front of the Pompidou Centre. **They were great dancers who had won battles, but they had never been inside the museum.** They worked, danced, and performed in front of the museum but they had never been inside. So, I invited them. **I wanted to question the representation of the black body in the museum space. How is this black body shown? What does it say in this museum space – the house of the master?** They were guides and the performance lasted all day. What was interesting was that they could start dancing at any time and thus become producing bodies. In this way, they were no longer subjects of study of their own history and their own movements. On the contrary, they were proposing a new force. In other words, they produce in this way more inclusive narratives that generate a more inclusive art history. **From my point of view, Western museums today are obsolete spaces. The museum of tomorrow is a space of refuge that must heal society through artistic practices.**

Can a museum be a safe space for everyone? We are not going in this direction, at least in France. I have the impression that museums are toxic spaces. To deconstruct toxic spaces, many experiments are necessary. You have to do it with activists and people who work on the periphery which question the exhibitions in a different way. At the same time, it has to be done with the people inside the museum. **The change requires a new way of thinking about education and the way we train people who work in museums.** How can we teach a more inclusive art history? Proposing new imaginaries pass through education.

**Wetsi:** Thank you very much Pascal for this intervention. I would like to start with a quote. You were talking about the tools of the master; I would like to start with a quote from Haut Rylard from *The Master's Tools in the Master's House*: **"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."** **Indeed, we have to co-create new tools with people who are affected by marginalization but also with those who have taken the time to think about solutions.** That is to say, people who could be concerned by marginalization but who have decided to play the role of the dominant world simply to gain a little place in the sun, a seat at the master's table. I would like to start with a quote from Haut Rylard, which I take from his text called *Uses of the Erotic*:

in order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. In order to perpetuate itself, domination must therefore corrupt the various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.

Audre Lorde's theory says that, for example, with regard to women, oppression will play on erotic energy. On the other hand, regarding the ex-colonized people – the Afro-descendant populations who are evolving in Europe, in the West, or even evolving on the African continent – oppression tries to erase all traces of their past to prevent them from

regaining strength. **They have been told that they are a people without values and that their culture is subaltern. This is the result of colonialism.** Therein lies the root of what is really problematic today in our society in relation to black or Afro-descendant populations. The problem is not only to have institutionalized racism, but especially to have supported the alleged inferiority of all kinds of different peoples. Today, this is problematic at the institutional level. The problem is complicity, even if innocent or unconscious. Institutional racism refers to practices which, without necessarily taking race into consideration, affect some racial groups more negatively than others. I take this definition from a Brazilian author, Adilson Moreira, who wrote about "recreational racism." He is more interested in Brazil, but "black face" exists in Belgium, too. He is interested in the way people of African descent are made fun of and how their culture is mocked.

Let's go back to the question of what is wrong and what needs to be changed here in our institutions. Museums are the institutions that, par excellence, represent the house of the master. Structural racism becomes an integral part of the functioning of public or private institutions, when they do not consider the impact of their decisions or programs on the lives of different racial groups. It may be problematic, for example, that some individuals do not have access to the services of an institution, or that these are offered in a discriminatory way. This is not necessarily the case in Belgium, but what does happen is that some people cannot access jobs at certain levels. Not all people of African descent aspire to guard the works or clean the floor. There may also be people who aspire to curatorial positions and not necessarily curators in an African art museum, but perhaps just curators in a Magritte Museum because like me they were Magritte fans as children.

The final point this author has made is the reduction of professional opportunities because of race. These discriminatory practices can be explained by the racist cultural practices that have penetrated the norms regulating public and private institutions and the mentality of those who represent these institutions. **Of course, the people who work in these museums are not necessarily responsible on an individual level for racism; such acts of racism are relatively rare. On the other hand, the institutional practices are part of the society.**

**Pascale:** I would like to talk about our famous exhibition project *Through Her (True Her)* and maybe we can show it too...

**Wetsi:** I try to promote artists from the diaspora but also African artists here in Belgium and maybe one day internationally. I have a particular sensitivity for artists who are committed and who have induced a societal change in terms of proposing representations that will perhaps change the situation in the end. This is a photo that was taken during the *Art congo et arts* exhibition. It was an exhibition that I did in partnership with Café Congo. For the 60th anniversary of the independence of the Congo, a dozen Congolese artists who live in Belgium were selected to show their work in September 2020. It was a pleasure to see children who could find in the public spaces works that remind them of their culture of origin and that could for once make them feel proud to have this double culture and double identity.

Kool Koor's exhibition at Les Halles Saint Gery – Part of the exhibition *Past Present and Future* to be seen until March 5, 2021

This is the latest project the gallery has done with the artist Kool Koor. She is an artist who comes from a hip hop and graffiti writing background but has been working on canvas for many years. She still does a lot of work in the public space too. She is one of the few Afro-descendant artists to have works in the public space in Belgium and Brussels. Her work is called *Guérison* and it proposes a particular interpretation of the colonial past and a representation of people oppressed by colonization.

THE ART OF RESISTANCE: Political engagement in the figurative work of Mufuki Mukuna. Open to the public from 14 to 18.00 from 17 to 24.12.2020  
www.wetsi.gallery – Rue des Goujons 152, 1070 Brussels

This was an exhibition project at the gallery with the artist Mufuki Mukuna for whom I also wrote an article that was published in *Art Magazine*. There is so much to do to spread the word about these artists and their work! It's not normal we are a few people with so little money to be interested in this cause. The appeal is launched! The idea is that there should be more people with my profile working in museums in Belgium. **It would also be good if there was a movement from the centre to the margin and from the margin to the centre so that we could work together and advance the struggles.**

This is a work by Laura Nsengiyumva that was selected for the *Through Her (True Her)* exhibition, on which Pascal and I worked.

**Pascale:** The theme I worked on for the *Through Her* project was: can a collection be feminized? I did my research in the collection of the S.M.A.K. museum in Ghent. While working in this collection I realized that 13% of the works were by women. Within the 13% of women, I was interested in the types of works that had been bought for this collection and their content. **Afterwards, I realized that there were zero women artists in the S.M.A.K. collection at the time of the diaspora. I asked myself: why weren't these artists there, why weren't these stories there? When I work on a collection, I try to really express what the collection is about. Does the narrative of this collection resonate with the narrative of the history of the city where this museum is located, etc.?** We'll start by showing an extract from one of the artists, Hélène Amouzou, who is part of this exhibition *Through Her (True Her)*. This is an extract from the film I made, *The Factory of Counter-narratives*, which stems from the research I carried out at the S.M.A.K. museum.

**Pascale:** You have just seen the extract from the film *La Fabrique des Contres-recits*. It lasts an hour and talks about the struggle against discrimination, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the self, learning and unlearning, and the difficulties encountered by black women artists in museums but also in art schools in Belgium. Through the different trajectories, we explore the possibilities of alternative social paradigms. We also question the way narratives are constructed when it comes to women, subalterns, and migrants in art history and in museums. This film questions the absence of not being, i.e., of not belonging. Being nowhere does not allow racialized artists to fully construct themselves in the art world. Yet many have done so! Those who have tried and are trying, who are fighting in their daily lives to rebuild themselves and thus take care of their history. **To take care of one's history is to try to share it in order to include all voices, even the voices of artists who are minorities.** Despite the erasure and violence of the lack of representation,



the discriminatory micro and macro aggressions experienced daily, these women artists are a force of proposal. In this film they propose ways of resisting and continuing to produce work while knowing that they are invisible. They want to continue to produce their own discourse despite the discrimination they have suffered and to counteract these injustices, whatever their motivations, their secrets, their fears, their remedies, and their battles. In this film I wanted to give them a real voice, because being able to tell their stories from their own experiences is something that interests me.

In the magazine we explore the question of "situated narratives": it is a way of fighting for the reappropriation of our artistic practices and our narratives.

**Wetsi:** Thank you Pascal, I'd like to follow up on what you said about the question of situated narratives. Can you still see my PowerPoint with the image of Laura Nsengiyumva's work? Laura is an artist who trained and worked as an architect in several firms in Brussels and who, at one point, felt caught up in her artistic practice. She is currently doing research on the traces of the colonial past from a geographical point of view on Belgian territory, at the University of Ghent with students. We selected the work *The Renarration Tutorial*. She had worked with an art center in Sint Niklaas in the Antwerp region with the curator Joan van Bellingen. She worked with old Nazi propaganda magazines. For example, *Signal*, which was characterized by a very pleasant aesthetic. At the time, even left-wing sympathizers bought these magazines because they were seduced by the aesthetics they conveyed. Moreover, these old magazines are very valuable. She chose to make paper pulp out of these magazines and thus recreate a support on which she literally tagged with a stencil. She tagged the figure of the unknown Congolese soldier. I don't know if everyone knows this story: there were Congolese soldiers who voluntarily took part in the fighting in Belgium during the First and Second World Wars. The unknown soldier is a photograph in the archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. It is an image that is somewhat familiar at least in Afro-descendant activist circles.

#### *Laura Nsengiyumva - Portrait of Augusta Chiwy, Re-narration tutorial*

She also chose to print the image of Augusta Chiwy who was a mixed-race Congolese nurse. The history of mixed-race people during colonization was quite tragic as mixed-race children were not wanted and were often taken away from their mothers and placed in orphanages in Belgium. This was the case of Augusta Chiwy, who grew up here and during the Second World War was a real resistance fighter. She cared for the soldiers who were fighting for freedom in this country. I think Laura exemplified really well what you meant by narrative, regarding situated narratives.

#### *Through Her (True Her)*

Curators: Anne Wetsi Mpoma & Pascale Obolo

Artists: Hélène Amouzou, Wata Kawatza, Rokia Bamba, Muhiba Botan, Agnès Lalau, Albertine Libert, Laura Nsengiyumava, Mireille Asia Nyembo, Pascale Obolo, Marlene Dumas, Ingrid Mwangi Robert Hutter, Ann Veronica Janssens, Zoe Leonard, Nathalie Nijs,

Maria Nordman, Pipilotti Rist, Erika Rothenberg, Adriana Varejão, Kara Walker, Nymphose: Debbie Engala, Lauren Lizinde, Luna Mahoux, Leila Nsengiyumva.

We are slowly coming to the moment of welcoming Grace to continue the discussion together and answer questions from the audience. Our work through this project was to decolonize the imaginary by having a critical look at society. Of course, there are also male artists doing this work, but this time we chose to focus on female artists who are even more invisible in all discourses on art. This intersectionality makes them doubly, even exponentially, discriminated. We want to show that these artists come up with truly innovative ideas that bring a breath of fresh air to the contemporary art scene.

**Pascale:** I still feel a bit pessimistic because the project we have set up and are coming to the end of is still a failure. The exhibition has not taken place yet. **Conservatism is still very present and there is still a lot of work to do. There seems to be a willingness on the part of the institutions to transform themselves, to be more inclusive, etc. On the other hand, when it comes to taking action, we see that it is still difficult to carry out this kind of project. It has to start with education, from the very early years, for there to be a real societal transformation. We need to teach new artistic practices by transmitting new inclusive narratives emanating from radicalized people who are mostly silenced.** How can we break this silence? The solution is to propose counter-narratives, to create our own spaces. Before we talked about the center and the margin. As far as I am concerned, I am my own center with a narrative. When this center moves to meet other centers, a kind of construction is created. **The center is not something fixed. The center moves from the periphery to the centre and from the center to the periphery, from my point of view there are several centers. Each one is its own center with its own "self", its own experience.**

**Wetsi:** I would like to add that Françoise Vergès, with whom you are working on this question of decolonizing the arts, says that we should go beyond the concept of intersectionality to talk about a radical feminism. To avoid putting different struggles in competition with each other, or different priorities in the struggles. Otherwise, the question of the black woman always comes last. So, we have to work on these different aspects at the same time. I like this idea of saying: we are our own center... we can welcome Grace.

## *Q&A with Pascale Obolo, Anne Wetsi Mpoma & Grace Ndiritu*

(02 :38 :30)

**Wetsi:** We are back, and we are going to answer to the questions that we have been asked by the public. Thank you very much for participating and for asking us so many interesting questions. Let's start with Grace. Grace, you received a question, can you tell us what it is?

**Grace:** Yes, someone asks where do I base my diagnosis on museums dying on? Earlier in my talk, I was talking about museums dying and any other objects to facts. This is really connected to my personal research as an artist but also as a member of the general public. I feel that public museums, especially in 2012, when I started the project, were really reflecting what was going on – I'll talk about private foundations and public institutions later. At this time, abstract expressionism was very popular. Outside there were still a lot of people recovering economically from 2008 crisis and terrorist issues going on. There were very big disconnections. I think that public institutions need to reflect that, the museum is not only a form of escapism from the world. Sometimes going off from reality is nice, but some connection is good! Of course, private foundations, private museums, they don't have the answer. This because their own source of money which are not coming from the government. However, one would hope they'd also want to benefit the public by connecting with what is going on outside. That's my analysis.

**Wetsi:** We were talking about art museums, but there are also other types of museums.

**Grace:** **The museum is a western invention. It wants to categorize objects and people and things. The question is, why the museum came about in the first place?** Scientific museums and natural history museums and so on are usually connected with academicians. The contemporary art museums have a different mission. **Every type of museum has to understand what their role is and what's their place in society.** For example, here in Brussels there is the European parliament museum. They are obviously trying to promote European harmony and the idea of understanding European citizenship. So, I think some of the points we have discussed can apply to all museums but some of them have to be specific to the type of institutions.

**Wetsi:** There are other questions that have been asked to Pascale and me. So: will the *Through Her (True Her)* exhibition still take place?

**Pascale:** I think you are the best person to answer because I started to answer by saying that it has not happened yet. You can answer because you are based in Belgium, and you know better what is going on.

**Wetsi:** Okay, the opening of the *Through Her (True Her)* exhibition was scheduled for 20 March 2020, that's a date you can easily remember. It didn't happen because of the lockdown; I think the lockdown started on March 13th. Then the artistic director of the cultural center that was hosting us resigned quite abruptly, so the exhibition project was not renewed at the cultural center in Strombeek. Today, this *Through Her (True Her)* exhibition exists on paper, and she is looking for a place that could host it.

**Pascale:** A place that could take the risk...

**Wetsi:** ...that could take the risk of hosting this kind of exhibition that only shows works by Afro-descendant women artists from Belgium. There is also the general question of museums that are not art museums, but for now it is deliberate to stay on the issue of art museums. Of course, a museum on chocolate, for example, does not problematize the way in which the chocolate industry has developed and prospered in Belgium. The cocoa beans were imported from the Congo. Belgium had access to this market of cocoa beans

at a very good price and so it was able to have better quality chocolate. That's how it was able to establish itself on the international market and win over the Swiss market. **A chocolate museum that did not take this reality into account, that concealed it, would be a violent museum. It would be a museum in which I could not feel like coming with my family to relax and spend a quiet Sunday afternoon. It would not be possible for me.** We haven't talked about ethnographic museums on purpose. I don't want to get into discussions that are painful and would deserve three days of discussion. There is, of course, the question of ethnographic museums and therefore of objects from non-European civilizations in these museums. We have campaigned for the restitution of looted African objects. Afro-descendant associations have been campaigning here in Belgium for several years. These questions deserve to be explored further, but I didn't want to go into them today, I don't know if anyone wants to do that.

People want to see the film *Counter-Narrative Factory (La Fabrique des Contres-recits)*, Pascale!

**Pascale:** The film is distributed by the Simone de Beauvoir center in Paris, the audiovisual archive of feminist films. If there are people interested, they can contact me to have access to the films. I recently finished the film, so it hasn't been shown at all in Belgium yet. However, we had the opportunity to show it at a symposium that took place at the art school, Villa Arson. It dealt with critical pedagogies in art schools, in order to make art history more inclusive and to question queer themes, questions arising from the decolonial movement, etc. The film also talks about questions about pedagogies in art school and the fact that the point of view of radicalized women in Belgium is very little taken into account. And what about the knowledge of "situated narrative" in the art school, the place where tomorrow's artists are made? It was in this context that we showed this film for the first time.

**Wetsi:** So, this film can still be programmed in Belgium, and this is a possibility of collaboration with you. Another question about your work for this exhibition *Through Her (True Her)*, a question that comes from Yamina from the fine arts. Yamina is in charge of diversity and inclusion at Bozar. She asks what methodology, what criteria did you use to research the S.M.A.K. collection?

**Pascale:** The idea was not to use an academic methodology, but rather to take activist tools and from these tools to set up a research methodology. The idea was not to produce a purely academic publication, but that this publication – which is entitled the fabrication of counter-narratives – should be a kind of inclusive discussion with the people of the museum who had welcomed me. A discussion also with the artists who were not present and who were invisibilized, that is to say, who did not exist in that museum. So, I worked on texts that questioned the erasure of narratives. **What interests me each time is to tell the way stories are told. How are the collections? What do they say? Why do they recount a certain type of story? Why are there certain types of stories that don't exist in the museum, but which exist in the society in which these museums are present? I didn't want to be in an academic approach but rather in an activist sphere with the objective of moving the museum from the inside.** How do you turn research into positive action? There is a work by Laura that was in the SMAK collection at the time I was doing the research and when I was questioning that very collection. That's what interests me

above all: doing research to make things happen so that there is concrete action behind it.

**Wetsi:** Thank you, we will take some more questions from the audience, a question for Grace. Are some museums still doing a good job in pushing enhanced narratives? A question from Mary. Do you have examples of museums doing a good job?

**Grace:** Doing a good job at what?

**Wetsi:** At pushing enhanced narratives. Yes, I know. The question is tricky.

**Grace:** I think the museum of anthropology has a good history of working with indigenous communities and bringing them into the museum, not just as spectators, but as actual participants within the collections. So, for example, working with objects and with the conservatives behind the scenes as well, or doing rituals with the objects for example. I was also being allowed to take some of the objects back to their homeland, either permanently or temporarily. That museum was very advanced, and it has been working with people like James Clifford over the last 15 years. Last year I went to the museum of anthropology, they invited me to workshop, and to speak and to work with different communities there as well.

For example, during the project of the Goethe Institute we went in different museums: in the Africa Museum in Berlin, we went in Barcelona's ethnographic museum, Bordeaux, and other different places with a group of artist activists, academia's, and museum directors. They were closed workshop organized by Jana Haeckel for Goethe. It's a chance to debate these complex issues from all different points of view. For example, concerning the Hamburg Forum opening in Berlin and the controversies about that. In the first conference, we had the director of the Hamburg Forum.

I've wondered how the renown museums in Britain would be if they were involved in this project: like the British museum and the Pits Rivers. In England, and I guess is the same in Belgium, the denial of coloniality and the trace of slavery is very present. The British museum, the National portrait Gallery, the Buckingham Palace are all built with money from slavery. So, there are certain individuals doing a good job, but institutionally I have to say the Everything Passes, Except the Past Project was really powerful and actually that's the book that's coming out. I'm just contributing to it and there are many voices in this book. I recommend to get it when it comes out soon.

**Wetsi:** Okay the Goethe project and the museum of Vancouver in Canada. Next question is maybe more for me and Pascale. How to diversify the leadership positions? What about socio-economic inequalities reinforced by budget cuts? I answer the question of how to diversify the management positions. Socio-economic inequalities reinforced by budget cuts; I confess I can't say much about that.

**Today we have human resource selection methods that allow us to identify competent profiles for management positions on the basis of completely anonymous tests. So, without knowing the person's name, without being able to identify a non-European origin, without knowing the gender and without knowing the age. Only the personality type and skills are identifiable. We need to call on companies that offer**

**this type of method to find staff in a way that is innovative and not always based on the CV.** "So... after his or her humanities he or she went to work for two years instead of going straight to university. Oh no, we're looking for people who did what I did: at 22 they had finished their studies with great distinction and could start working at the museum!" So, I don't think we have to use quotas, but we have to put up advertisements that really look for new profiles. Profiles that are perhaps going to go off the beaten track. Since, apparently, having brown skin means going off the beaten track.

**Pascale:** I'll answer by adding something. In order to have this transformation, i.e. the fact of having more diversity within an institution, there must be also a political response. **As long as there is no political will to allow this transformation to take place, it will not happen.** In order for women to be better represented and also to move towards equality in terms of salaries, we need a parity law. For example, in France, a parity law has been put in place, even in the political sphere. It encourages women to run for office etc. Thanks to this parity law, there has been a transformation. Now there are more and more women in leadership positions etc. I think that, as long as there is no political will, even the proposal that you have just made for an anonymous CV will not be enough. The result remains problematic.

**The issue of diversity reflects the society we live in today. Whether in Belgium or in France, society today is much more diverse. The institutions must reflect this diversity, and this must be done through politics.**

# Re-imagining Practices: Queering the Museum by Claire Mead

(3:12:00) – Originally version in English

What is a queer practice within a museum and its archives, in terms of representation and working with LGBTQI+ communities? How do we reinvent the ways we share these stories and identities to bring forward feminist, lesbian, and trans voices that are often forgotten by cultural institutions? Claire Mead presents these experiences and the obstacles that remain to be overcome as a queer curator and activist.

## *The Speaker*

**Claire Mead** is a Franco-British independent curator focusing on feminist and LGBTQI art history and its representation in museums, helping them make their collections and programming more inclusive. Her practice includes consulting, curating exhibitions, in-person and online workshops, talks, tours, and drag performance. Claire has collaborated with a range of British cultural institutions including the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Museum of London, and the National Archives. She has also delivered several events for *Visites Particulières* in Brussels, including a guided tour of the Keith Haring exhibition at BOZAR.

Website: <https://clairemead.com/>

Twitter: @carmineclaire

## *The Presentation*

I am Claire Mead, a freelance curator who has been working with museums and heritage sites in the UK and beyond to make their programming more inclusive of women's histories and LGBTQI narratives – and the way they intersect. In short – I “queer” the museum. There is a temptation for some to see this as a “censorship” or “cancelling” of a so-called official history, a “reduction” of artists and figures to their sexual and gender identities, and a “rejection” of any display of cis white straight man in the museum. So, let's first have a look at what “queering” the museum actually means.

Queering the museum on one level means exploring the legacies of gay, lesbian, bi, trans and intersex whose stories have so often been erased, due to the museum as a space which has favored and been led by a white, patriarchal status quo ever since its emergence in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. However, what it does not mean is a labelling of figures that reduces them to only one perspective. In fact, a fear of museum subjects and artists being “reduced” to their gender or sexual identities rather than being valued for their artistry is disingenuous. **After all, do we “reduce” Picasso to his heterosexual and male**

**identity when we talk about the way his love life informed his art? Or are we simply used to not asking ourselves these questions when it comes to straight, male artists?**

So-called “neutrality” in considering an artist for aesthetics alone often assumes the author or subject is straight and gender conforming and erases any other identities. In fact, museums are not neutral. And they never were, given they have traditionally favoured a white, male-centric, gender-conforming and straight version of history and art. When we decide to decentre our perspectives from this so-called neutral status, queering the museum happens. Not by reducing a museum’s artists and subjects to a range of labels but by expanding our mindsets and conversations with one another to consider how gender identity, expression, sexuality, and love can be explored and engaged with in different ways.

“Queer” is a term which was originally an insult to denote “strangeness” or “difference”. It was later reclaimed as an insult in the 80s for feminist and LGBTQI activists to challenge gender and sexual societal norms rather than assimilate into them. This was as a direct reaction to many gay men and lesbians who wished to distance themselves from political action to “blend in” to normal society – as white, cisgender middle-class people who had the privilege to do so. In the same way – **if we do not apply intersectional politics to queering the museum and fail to understand the need to make visible women, trans people, Black people and people of color, disabled people, and working-class people within the LGBTQIA community we are in danger of reinforcing the status quo of exclusion and privilege museums still, unfortunately stand for and need to break free of.**

Which is why, in recent years, I have wished to focus on what I perceived as a marginalized group within an already marginalized community – lesbian, bi, and trans women and their stories in museums. The history of women loving women and gender non-conforming women is a complicated one to record because it is vastly a history of erasure in records written by and often for men. While we have some records of men loving men because these relationships were often openly prosecuted, relationships between women are often not even on the radar, considered impossible and reduced to platonic friendships. And being able to look on a wider level at the way women conformed to or challenged gender norms can open new realms of possibility from both LGBTQI and feminist angles, beyond single labels or narratives. I would like to explore a few here.

My first case study is the exhibition *Living Beyond Limits*, the outcome of my curatorial residency at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art. The exhibition looking at the collection via a queer lens was co-curated with the help of the museum’s local audience via monthly workshops led with members of the local LGBTQIA community.

Its exploration of femininity & womanhood across a range of themes led us to place the *Conundrum* triptych local openly trans queer artist Lizzie Rowe had painted to reflect her experience of gender alongside other women artists who did not necessarily identify on the LGBTQI spectrum to expand on this conversation. For example, Chila Kumari Burman expresses and reclaims ideas of kitsch to explore her South Asian heritage, while Ana Mendieta’s work seeks to define and outline her body in the natural landscape to seek to renew with her Cuban roots. Both drew powerful connections to the idea of feminine



attributes and bodies that were explored in Rowe's work and also drew new connections around the idea of migration and displacement that would relate to many experiences for inhabitants of Middlesbrough.

In the same way, we wanted to draw connections that could look at what it means to reclaim, queer, and decolonize a museum, via a work that did the same with a 1940s Hollywood film. We displayed as our only external loan *House of Women*, by Michelle Williams Gamaker, a fictional queered recasting with British Asian women and non-binary people of the film *Black Narcissus*, which had featured an Indian character in a non-speaking role played by a white actress in brownface. This was presented alongside Adrien Piper's *Hypothesis Situation 7*, in which she documents her experiences of media as a Black feminist artist.

Aware of the fact that the exhibition was lacking a whole range of different perspectives, **we introduced a magazine library presenting external activist voices and that visitors could add to include their own stories in the museum.** We created a rotating vitrine for different members of the community to present work. While the rotating nature of this failed, this led to the creation of a *Trans Day of Remembrance Vitrine* which lasted till the end of the exhibition and created an activist space in the exhibition to commemorate trans lives.

We wanted to ensure that local visitors experiencing the exhibition would be able to relate to the need to disrupt the norms on different levels, in which different experiences and identities spoke to each other helped by a queer lens that could create new dialogue. We also wanted to challenge how fine art has been categorized as more valuable and worthy of display than craft practices and activist print art – placing these when we could in the exhibition as a part of queer and feminist activist histories. However, this was often limited by the collections themselves.

We also wanted to add more connections between some of the works and activism taking place within the art world. However, we were not able to show the zine of the collective WHERE IS ANA MENDIETA, a collective of queer and trans women and people of color campaigning for more visibility for marginalized women artists and protesting the circumstances of Mendieta's death. This was due to the collective being divided on being shown in a space that was ultimately, an institutional one.

The second case study I would like to look at is one that is directly related to the current pandemic. That is my work in collaboration with Bankfield Museum and Shibden Hall, the residence of a central figure within UK LGBTQI history, Anne Lister, considered the first "modern" lesbian we have a record of, thanks to her diaries who documented her life and her love stories with other women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Yorkshire. This took the form of a social media week-long takeover on Twitter engaging with Anne Lister's lesbian heritage – which was closed to the public at the time.

The new challenge in talking about this story emerged in how to connect her exceptionally preserved story to a wider lesbian legacy and community. **The danger of focusing on "major" figures in LGBTQI history is that the very survival of their story often depends on their immense privilege. The danger is also to view these figures in a very positive**

**light as “icons” and “role models” while also erasing their flaws.** Anne Lister was a white, upper-class aristocrat who may have benefited from a privileged status that did allow her to express her gender non-conforming identity as well as ultimately symbolically “marry” her wife Ann Walker. She would also not be considered a feminist today! In many ways, there were failures in fully acknowledging this in the space of a week of collaboration, but also some attempts to use Anne’s legacy to reflect other lesbian spaces and modes of expression, both back in Lister’s time and now.

For example, we explored the way in which her representation in media could be contrasted with other inclusive representations of butch, gender non-conforming queer women on film. We also looked at the way in which her use of masculine fashion could be related back to fashion trends within a wider lesbian culture from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. And looking at Shibden Hall as a queer space allowed for a wider look at the idea of places that held significance across the LGBTQI community as spaces of visibility and activism. Many online participants shared their own research around her story, eager for involvement in a museum reflecting their own lives and interests in Lister. This has only for me highlighted the importance of this queering of heritage sites and museums being a shared process with its audience – and making these stories collaborative, activist communal histories and not the successive histories of solo figures.

The last case study is an ongoing project to **seek out stories of women, including women-loving-women, trans and gender non-conforming women in spaces which would at first sight seem traditionally male – museums and collections of arms and armor military history.** This draws on the existence of a range of warrior women who challenged the gender norms of their time by taking up arms, adopting masculine dress and attitudes and loving other women. These stories are fascinating – from the 17<sup>th</sup> century bisexual duelist and opera singer Julie d’Aubigny to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Chevalier or Chevaleresse d’Eon who we could consider as an openly trans woman today, to 17<sup>th</sup> century Catalina de Erauso who fled her life as a nun to become a soldier, whose autobiography details her lesbian encounters and who many have interpreted as a trans man or non-binary person at a time these identities were not described as such.

**Whether these figures are historical, legendary, or somewhere in between, they draw up powerful feminist and LGBTQI connections and conversations.** A workshop led at the Imperial War Museums around the presence of fighting women in a WWI and WWII context revealed new connections to feminist and LGBTQI legacies which could be related to a wider framework of WWI and WWII warfare and visual culture. Figures like the WWI lesbian ambulance-driver Toupie Lowther or the legacy of soldier and pilot Marie Marvingt could challenge what we mean by the involvement of queer, gender non-conforming women on the battlefield and the nature of traditionally “male” heroism. And the presence of WWII propaganda imagery of Joan of Arc could lead to new, interesting connections to her status as a feminist and LGBTQI symbol for gender non-conformity.

**These stories show us we need to resist the idea of a single narrative in which women are occasional guests rather than being at the forefront – and within that inclusion, consider which voices are routinely being ignored.** These figures and artworks can become a mirror through which we can work on our own gender assumptions and relationship to our identity – however we identify within or outside the LGBTQI community.

Which may also reassure some who are afraid that an LGBTQI program or exhibition will “only” attract an LGBTQI audience. **If an inclusive program is done well, and done bravely – including traditionally marginalized identities in the museum and creating new connections via universal themes around gender and love, exclusion is never the aim – a better understanding of ourselves is.**

**Mistakes come across a lot in my talk. That’s not a mistake.** Much of this queering process creates discomfort and disruption – whether accidental or intentional. **If today’s museums truly want to be inclusive, they must be activist museums that can look at their past mistakes in their way of collecting and engaging with various communities critically.** They must reject acknowledge their own history of privilege and exclusion and invite new feminist, queer and trans voices from outside the museum to express what they would want to see there. **They must embrace the idea of experimenting with their collections and in doing so, embrace trial and error.** Only then will the museum truly become a space of dialogue, exchange – and change. Thank you.

## *Q&A with Claire Mead*

(03:28:50)

**Gladys:** Hello, how are you?

**Claire:** I’m very well, thank you. I feel really riveted by all the amazing conversation that have taken place this morning. I think it is very interesting to have these group perspectives and it gave me a lot of ideas in terms of my own practice. How can we do more in a way that isn’t sectional? That takes into account black voices, different feminine voices, the colonization. I feel energized.

**Gladys:** Thank you, it’s the same for me. The first question, a very practical one, is from Frederique. How do you reach out to those different communities? Do you have a gain plan to reach them?

**Claire:** Yes, a very interesting question. It varies a lot from museum to museum and it varies whether I am working with an institution or more from the outside, from the activist perspective. For example, when I worked with the LGBTQI collective in Paris I was campaigning to the new archival center. In this case we were working from the outside of the institution to the inside, in order to reach cultural institutions. When you are inside the museum it could seem difficult to reach out to the public that has been disenfranchised from what has been happening in museums for so long. So, there are different strategies that I adopted: starting with small interventions. That’s to say, bring the people in and build a relationship of confidence and trust in a long term before going into long term projects. That’s the case of Middlesbrough that had preestablished relationships with the local communities in terms of weekly time to talk, to provide community lunches. But there wasn’t a great link with local LGBTQI communities. Creating free open interventions within the museum, inviting new voices in. It is a sort of testing weather to introduce long term workshops that led in the end at the exhibition *Living Beyond Limits*. The most important

thing to engage with communities from the LGBTQI perspective and beyond is tailoring and not holding them in what the museum wants.

**Often museums want the diversity. They want the inclusion, but they don't understand how to make that work and with which communities to engage with. If you really want to engage with the communities, you need to listen what the communities want to do.** In some workshops, some people needed to go through a process to open up and just talk and do something with their hands. They need to be in a space where they can feel included and safe but, at the same time, where they don't feel like they have to express themselves constantly. In this way they would be more likely to come to the next session, where we introduced the zines by the way. A space where people could come and talk, make something, show it at the end or not. In this way they felt as though the space of the museum had become a second community space for them, especially in towns in which there are not many visible LGBTQI spaces. **So, it is important not to make communities conform to the way in which museums want to work but being flexible and listening and see what people want from the museum. That could also lead to reviewing the entire structure of what a museum means in the first place and transform it into a public forum or a community space. That's the kind of challenge that it is supposed to be in the first place.**

**Gladys:** For you it is very important that the museum doesn't approach those communities with a preset idea. So, is it an open conversation? Could you go a little bit more into details about how you manage that mixity of voices?

**Claire:** Absolutely, it is something very important to acknowledge if you want something collaborative. You could have some ideas and outcomes from the beginning, but your plan is going to change course and expand in different ways. That could lead to very interesting conversations. For example, we invited different participants to select some objects in the collection stores, that could reflect their own different identities and the way of expressing their gender. At the beginning we thought that there would have been more engagement in the representation in terms of portraiture, but actually different participants decided to show elements of craft and abstract objects. For them it represented a view of their gender that was a little more personal or specific. It was a way of acknowledging those voices. It was the same in the Anne Lister project: we had a direction in terms of themes we wanted to explore, but then we left many gaps that had to be filled with their own ideas and perspectives. So, they really could feel that they had the ownership of the project. Moreover, we provided a space where they could discuss things more openly. Of course, there are some challenges in the management of the project. One wants to end with something good: the presentation of different themes, good design and very interesting educational content so that you can interest your audience and provide some different ideas or perspectives.

**Gladys:** Annelies asks: how do you reconcile those diverse experiences of the LGBTQI communities especially considering the museums' practice of categorization? We tend to categorize in our displays but also in our databases, in archive communications etc. So, how do you do that?

**Claire:** That's an extremely interesting question since often there is a lot of fear in assigning labels, or key words and so having just one prescriptive way of describing a museum item. **Some museum fear to define an artist as gay or trans without allowing any other definition and making it a reductive approach. I think that the "queer," that is a political and intersectional lens as well as a LGBTQI lens, could allow to different parallel readings.** There is not only a single label or a single way at looking at an object. We could see the object from a cultural perspective or a very academic standpoint. There is a potential for them to have many different and multiple meanings. For example, "queer" and LGBTQI identities and communities could have so many different meanings for different people, no one can say there is a single monolithic community or experience. It has to be done collaboratively. A "queer" curator can't assume to be speaking for the entire community when curating an exhibition. That's why we have to bring all those voices in. It is also very interesting to consider that you can apply this framework to lots of different heritage sites, museums, and collections. As soon as we talk about "queer" or heritage there is a heritage that sometimes cannot be found. Sometimes you have to work with the evidence you have and sometimes you have to invite some new voices in to interpret what could have been. A way of queering a museum could be also to bring in queer performers and queer voices just to say: "this is how I feel myself in this space, this is how I like to involve in it with my presence, even though the objects do not necessarily reflect my own experience." It is important to make the most from this living experiences, ways to inhabit the museum queerly in many different ways.

**Gladys:** One last question. Jérôme and Bas are almost asking the same question: some advice in how to sensitize the predominant hetero direction of cultural institutions. Does LGBTQI have a place in museums, do they matter to non LGBTQI people? Do you have any recommendations for museums staff who would want to convince their museums board and their directors about the importance of the LGBTQI inclusivity? Let's say you go to the big boss, how to you get him on your side?

**Claire:** I say, start small and then show demand. **There is huge demand for the stories we told and also generally for space for everyone, whatever they are identified with. It is a demand for more conversation about gender identity expression and sexuality.** It's about showing that you are not going to contact a niche subject and a niche audience, just use these different themes to expand their own standing agenda. It is a theme with which anybody can identify. My director has a lot of feelings about masculinity. There is a lot of examples from UK museums showing, starting with a small tour. Even social media take over show that there has been huge response. We need to let people wanting more and make sure that there are more interventions and then show that more long-term collaborations are possible. I would start with that.

**Gladys:** Thank you very much.

# Re-imagining Archives: Belgian Black Archives by Aminata Ndow & Olga Briard (Black History Month Belgium)

*(03:45:40) – Originally version in Dutch and English*

In 2021, Black History Month Belgium will be all about archiving and documenting the past and present of black people in Belgium. The goal is to work towards the creation of a black community driven and controlled archive that will collect documentary, audiovisual, digital, material, and artistic works related to the black diaspora in Belgium. Their mission is to actively provide materials that express and represent the black experience in Belgium, both past and present, from the black perspective. The ultimate goal is to gain a more complete understanding of the black experience in Belgium through primary sources and to provide information that supports the construction of personal and community identities as well as the social life and shared memories of black communities in Belgium. The month of March serves as a laboratory for what a Belgian Black Archives could look like. By both thinking about new ways of archiving and diving into the existing archives. Archives that have often emerged within a white, Eurocentric framework and would particularly benefit from being viewed through a black lens.

## *The Speakers*

**Aminata Ndow** (born in 1995) is a historian of Belgian and Gambian origin. In 2017, she founded the student association AYO with Mohamed Barrie and Emmanuel Iyamu and since March 2018, she coordinates Black History Month in Belgium with Mohamed Barrie.

Black History Month (BHM) is an annual celebration (in March) of the resilience of the black community in the present and the past. It is an attempt to transform the way in which we represent the past and the present through conversations, exchange moments, lectures, film, debate, performances, and exhibitions. Through a people's history/history from below (the past told from the perspective of everyday people instead of leaders) they strive to make history more honest/truthful and inclusive, so more about all of us, regardless of our socio-economic, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. The ultimate motivation is to demonstrate the importance of conserving and promoting cultural diversity and the right to culture for everyone in our society.

**Olga Briard** (1993), a Brussels native with Belgian and Rwandan roots, studied African foreign affairs and now works as a production assistant at Bozar Agora. In September 2020, she started working for Black History Month Belgium as the person responsible for community work with Dutch-speaking organizations in Brussels.

## *The Presentation*

**Aminata Ndow:** Together with my colleague, Mohamed Barrie, we started Black History Month in 2017. It started from the student union AYO, which was the first black student union in Flanders. We decided it was necessary to have such a thing as a BHM in Belgium. BHM has to do with my background as a history student, and Mohamed's background as a social worker, and how we can create something that combines those two aspects – the historical part (about the relationship people have with the past and the way the past relates to the present, but also to the future) as well as the social part (the community-driven side) of it. We started thinking about this end 2017, and we had our first BHM March 2018. The reason we decided to go with March was because of the practicalities. February wouldn't be ideal for people studying in Belgium because they have exams in January and the first week of February, they will take some time off. We decided to go for another month, to approach it from our own context and not to just go with February because that's when it's celebrated in the US, Canada, and Germany.

Another decision that was important was it to be very focused and for it to center the black experience, black people in Belgium. That's why we decided to have an annual team: to work around something and have a conversation together, and really think together very deeply for one month, to have almost this overdose of conversation and engagement in the hopes that – because March is the third month of the year – the rest of the year people will keep thinking of and working with the topic. It's important this keeps going on.

In 2021 we chose to work around archiving and documenting, because one thing we've noticed throughout the years of organizing BHM, and other similar types of events focusing on black people (in Belgium), is that there is a lack of black institutions. **We think that there is a need for there to be a Belgian black archive, community-driven, that would center what it's like for black people throughout the years to have lived here in Belgium.** One of the things that we as black people face here, is that the reality of a lot of our experiences is not really visible, because race is not something that's considered – often when you do have documentation, it's based on nationality instead of race. At this point we all know there is no scientific basis for race, but socially it is very important. It's about how people approach you. It has a big role to play in how we experience being in the world.

This month we wanted to think further about:

- What would that mean for us to have an archive, to start this process of documenting?
- How would we archive?
- What would we archive?

Given the current situation, with Covid and a lot happening online – we have a very full program, and a lot of our events are online – it starts with making sure that those online events will be documented and will not be lost (those conversations, stories that are shared...), so that in a few years we will still know what was happening now. At the same

time, we have a lot of events planned that do engage with the past. As I said, for us BHM is starting from the present, having a conversation with the past and also looking forward to the future.

**Olga Briard:** What is planned this month? Which events have already happened?

Today I would like to talk to you about our programming this month.

#### *A mapping of Black womxn and feminist networks in Brussels*

I'm going to start with – and I think this is quite important, especially with yesterday (the start of the project) – a series of conversations about feminist movements and women of color in Brussels, moderated by Graciela Dutireue (who is doing an internship at the Centre d'Archives et de Recherches pour l'Histoire des Femmes and who will therefore be able to – with her research – create conversations, which will be published every Monday, which has already started this week and will continue for the rest of March.

#### *The program in Brussels: DeBuren*

We have a partnership with DeBuren, especially with BAM (Black Achievement Month in the Netherlands). It's very important for us to work with them, as they already have an Afro-descendant archive in the Netherlands. To know how they go about creating a black archive. Furthermore, with DeBuren we also have the We Object project, where we invite Afro-descendant artists and activists in Brussels to bring an object that is valuable to them and in which they recognize a legacy of colonialism. The discussions are centered around these objects.

#### *Partnership with Ancienne Belgique*

Great conversations about the black Brussels music scene and the opportunity to organize a festival that, unfortunately, can only be broadcast online. A festival with a lot of Belgian Afro-descendant artists, like Badi, IKRAAAN, nanaKILL, ...

#### *Other partnerships with cultural spaces that want to try to diversify:*

- Nightlife Talk with Vice and Beursschouwburg
- Rainbow Nation with Black Achievement Month
- Residency at BibSophia
- Partnership with CIVA: visiting their archives with an Afro-descendant architect to analyze documents from the colonial period. This gives some idea of how Brussels was built (urbanistically and architecturally) and reflects Belgium's colonial past.
- The Just Imagine project by We Don't Know Yet



## Q&A with Aminata Ndow & Olga Briard

(04:00:00)

**Gladys:** Hallo Aminata, bonjour Olga. Thank you very much for telling all our museums and all the 131 people present here about BHM. I think some of them already knew what it was about, but I'm sure it was new for a lot of other people. The audience has some questions for you. A question of Vanessa Vovor: How do you see black archives working out in the long run?

**Aminata:** Of course, when we think about archiving and starting the process, you do need to have a long-term prospective: how are you going to preserve the collections you have? We're now starting really thinking through the different steps that are needed before we actually start the process. For us it's a long-term project, which is why we don't want to rush into it. **We want to make sure that we have a three-year game plan, so that once we have a building and once, we can start the process, we know that it's something that will be a long-term project where we keep learning and expanding along the way.** In the long term, we do see it as something very big, as something that'll require a lot of work – but we have all the motivation and commitment in our team to do the work necessary to build it up.

**Olga:** I have something to add. I think for now the most important thing is creating a relationship with the institutions who do have archives. It's the first step to be able to – in the long run – make one of our own, because that's where we're going to find these archives of course.

**Gladys:** We've talked about this before, there are definitely two parts to the archive: there's looking at the already existing archives through a black lens, and then obviously the new ones you want to build. This is maybe a more personal question, because as I said in the introduction about Open Museum, we as Brussels Museums specialize in events that make museums more feisty, more accessible to new audiences. The philosophy of Open Museum is how can you take an event and turn it into more structural work. It seems to me that this is what you're doing with BHM; you're creating a whole month of events, but then to actually continue the work afterwards. And so, I was wondering, how do you do that? How do you make sure that it's not just one collaboration for the month of March and then the partnership falls apart? How do you stay consistent in that work?

**Olga:** The partnership we have with CIVA at the moment, for example, is meant to have some events now – during the month of March – but we're continuing to work together for a series of conferences they have during the summer, and we truly hope we can continue visiting their archives, maybe discovering more things along the way.

**Aminata:** Like Olga said, when it comes to partnerships we have with institutions, a lot of times there will be other collaborations throughout the year (beyond March). But also, when we do work with artists or community organizations, it's very important that we establish a relationship there and that we follow up with them afterwards. We've seen that in the previous years: we do really nurture those relationships, so that it continues throughout the year, but also so that for BHM the next year we work together again – and

thus establish a network of black organizations in Belgium, that all come together in the month of March.

**Gladys:** I got a question through a personal chat. Should a (community-led) Black Archives initiative be created rather by institutions, by museums, or is there a need for a higher level that coordinates all this (for example the city of Brussels or even the federal level)? Is this multiple aspect important or is centralization desired? What would be the ideal structure of Black Archives?

**Olga:** Personally, I'm not sure I have the answer. I'm not sure if a centralization of this archiving job would do the job particularly well. For me, that's why I like being part of BHM, it's because I feel like it's a bit more of a citizen's initiative in a way. I don't know how much confidence I have in the centralization of an archive, but maybe Aminata wants to add something.

**Aminata:** The idea is that the archive itself is centralized. It is BHM Belgium, and when it comes to BHM you have the different teams in the cities, but those teams are still part of one organization; we all work together, the communication comes from BHM Belgium. It's the same with the archive; there's one archive for Belgium (Belgian Black Archives). Those different cities are mostly the connection, who make sure it's rooted in the city, that you have that urban perspective as well in the whole. In Belgium, there's already so much fragmentation that we really want to bring it together in a space that is centralized.

**Gladys:** Are you actively seeking to enter the Belgian education system or are you largely focusing on a more global reach in the larger culture?

**Aminata:** We're not actively seeking to enter any formal systems here in Belgium. We see it more as working outside of these systems, but by working outside of it, also contributing. So, we always welcome schools or teachers that contact us to work together – it just isn't our primary focus. We don't center our activities in the hopes of collaborating with certain institutions or within certain systems, we really just do the work. And if certain institutions or if the educational system is interested in working with us, then from there we can see how that collaboration would be. Our focus is black people in Belgium, serving them the best as we can.

**Olga:** Maybe we don't have the purpose of going within schools, but we're definitely trying to have a contact with student organizations – it's not exactly the education, I suppose the question was referring to, but I think it's still important to try to connect with university groups.

**Gladys:** There are two more questions that came in, but sadly we're running a bit short on time. I will however send them to you, so maybe you can answer them by email, and I will make sure they'll get back to the people who've asked them. Anyway, thank you for taking the time to talk to us in this busy month. We're looking forward to attending some of your many events. I would recommend everyone to go on to the website [blackhistorymonth.be](http://blackhistorymonth.be) and also follow them on socials to stay up to date. I'm especially very excited to see where this project goes beyond the month of March, so thank you very much.

# Re-imagining Structures: Inclusion in Museum DNA by Aspha Bijnaar (Musea Bekennen Kleur, Netherlands)

(05:10:00) – Originally version in Dutch and English

In March 2020, the Musea Bekennen Kleur (Museums See Color) partnership was launched during the opening of the exhibition *Black in Rembrandt's Time* in the Zuiderkerk in Amsterdam. Musea Bekennen Kleur is the first platform in the museum world where museums can enter in-depth dialogues with each other on the question of how to jointly realize diversity and inclusion. The aim is to sustainably unite museums in their efforts to truly embed diversity and inclusion in their DNA. They do this by focusing on the four Ps (Program, Public, Personnel, and Partners) with room for the exchange of knowledge and (self-)reflection. At Musea Bekennen Kleur, the participating museums aim to strengthen their efforts together.

## *The Speaker*

Dr. **Aspha Bijnaar** is an independent researcher, consultant, writer, concept developer, and director of the EducatieStudio Foundation. Having studied sociology, she obtained her PhD at the University of Amsterdam in 2002.

Bijnaar worked as a researcher on several scientific publications, exhibitions, and educational cases in the field of slavery, the legacy of slavery, and the Second World War. In this vein, she published the first Dutch comic book about slavery, one that was based on a real-life story, *Jacquelina. Slavin van Plantage Driesveld* (Jacquelina. Slave at Driesveld Plantation) with KIT Publishers in 2010. In 2013, she launched the educational website [www.slavernijenij.nl](http://www.slavernijenij.nl). She also toured her theatre production *Rebelse Vrouwen. Een voorstelling over verzet van vrouwen in de slavernij* (Rebellious Women. A Performance about the Resistance of Women in Slavery). For this, Bijnaar helped research the history of women's resistance in slavery and as she developed the basic idea for the play. In 2018, the research was published internationally by Routledge Publishers as *Reframing Criminalized Resistance Strategies of Female Slaves in the Dutch Caribbean and Suriname during the Era of Colonialism* (Bijnaar, A., Lurvink, K., Joosen, K.J.). Bijnaar is also general coordinator, concept developer, and spokesperson of the Dutch national cooperation project Musea Bekennen Kleur, which brings more than 31 museums together as they work to increase the sustainability of diversity and inclusion in the Dutch heritage sector.

[www.educatiestudio.com](http://www.educatiestudio.com) [www.museabekennenkleur.nl](http://www.museabekennenkleur.nl)

## *The Presentation*

Musea Bekennen Kleur – Who’s afraid of being vulnerable, self-critical and curious?

I would like to present a new museum project running in the Netherlands at this moment: Musea Bekennen Kleur, or Museums See Color, in English – literally meaning acknowledging color, but actually meaning focusing on diversity and inclusion in the museal sector.

MBK was initiated two years ago by four museums in the Netherlands (Centraal Museum, Bonnefanten, Frans Hals Museum and Van Abbemuseum), when the Rijksmuseum announced an exhibition on the Dutch history of slavery for 2020–2021. The efforts made in the Netherlands during the last 30 years to improve diversity and inclusion haven’t been successful so far – so the urge to do something about it is getting stronger. After a procedure in which candidates were invited to pitch a plan of action me and my teammate, Sylvana Terlage, were chosen to further conceptualize and develop the initiative. We started with four museums, but after a short period of time, 13 other museums joined. This group consists of small and large museums located all over the Netherlands.

Thirteen museums are already part of MBK: Amsterdam Museum, Bonnefanten Museum, Centraal Museum, Dordrechts Museum, Frans Hals Museum, Museum Arnhem, Museum het Rembrandthuis, Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Rijksmuseum, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Van Abbemuseum, Van Gogh Museum, Zeeuws Museum.

Twenty museums will be joining MBK later this year: Belasting en Douane Museum, De Pont Museum, Foam, Fries Museum, Fries Verzetsmuseum, Keramiekmuseum Princessehof, Haags Historisch Museum, Mauritshuis, Musea Zutphen, Museum Dr8888, Museum Het Valkhof, Museum Rotterdam ’40-’45NU, Nationaal Archief, Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid, Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Stedelijk Museum Alkmaar, Stedelijk Museum Breda, Teylers Museum, West-Fries Museum, Zeeuws maritiem MuZEEum, Zuiderzeemuseum.

### ***Procedure in these museums:***

Interviewing the team (director, curator, head of communication...) to find out more about their motives to join MBK

- Vision, goals, efforts, problems with inclusion/diversity
- Conclusions:
  1. Museums admit there’s a problem in the field with representing diversity
  2. Most projects are mainly visible for the public from the outside, hardly leading to structural change within the organization
  3. Recruit colleagues with a diverse background is the most challenging aspect for the organization

4. Lack of an inter-museal platform to exchange knowledge about diversity-problems
5. Wish to create such a platform
6. Willingness to publish a statement on how museums will work on diversity and inclusion

**The objective of MBK is to unite museums in a sustainable way in their aim to anchor diversity and inclusion in the DNA of their organizations.**

MBK focuses on four elements:

1. Program
2. Public
3. Personnel
4. Partners

Based on a diversity and inclusion code that was developed in the Netherlands last year, there are five principals for the cultural and creative sector to work out this code:

1. Know where you stand regarding diversity and inclusion
2. Integrate diversity and inclusion in your vision
3. Create support within your organization for compliance with the code
4. Draw up a plan aimed at continuous improvement
5. Monitor and evaluate compliance with the code. You're accountable for it.

How you think and act inclusively in all activities on a daily basis determines the operation and strength of the code! The motto is "Apply and explain how. Think and act according to the code, reflect on it critically and be publicly accountable."

MBK was launched in March 2020 during the opening of the exhibition *Rembrandts Blacks* (Rembrandthuis). This exhibition caught worldwide attention because it showed underexposed works of art by Rembrandt and his contemporaries featuring black people.

Right after its successful launch, MBK faced several challenges:

- Covid-19 locked down society
- George Floyd was killed. Numerous people came out on the streets to demonstrate and join the Black Lives Matter movement.
- Museums were suffering loss of income because they had to close their doors

But none of these critical issues had a negative effect on the development of MBK. Remarkably enough, MBK saw itself growing – also thanks to awareness the Black Lives Matter movement brought us. Within a short period of time, no fewer than twenty museums and archives subscribed to MBK. And still others are seeking to participate. At this moment, MBK connects 33 of the almost 600 museums and archives in the Netherlands.

Despite Covid-19 we were able to continue our activities for this project, especially setting up the core activity of MBK: the reflection sessions (more about this later on).

### ***What are the advantages of the collaboration MBK?***

It's the first time in Dutch history that museums on this scale will collaborate in the field of diversity and inclusion. This cooperation is strategic because:

1. It's the first time that museums have joined forces to formulate and implement a joined policy
2. Of a cooperation at board level and the establishment of a joined responsibility in the pursue of an inclusive museum sector
3. Of the long-termed nature of the collaboration in which the awareness process in central, not the output
4. Of the structural exchange of knowledge about inclusion between museums
5. Of the regional spread of the partnership
6. Of the participation of visual art museums as well as city- and historical museums
7. They join forces to present a public and educational program

To stand in their mutual partnership and cooperation, **MBK is developing the following projects:**

- An inter-museal platform for reflection with a statement as output
- An educational program for children between the ages of ten and twelve
- An international symposium in 2022
- project exhibitions are brought to the public in the participating museums highlighting the themes of slavery, colonial legacy or cultural diversity. These exhibitions form the flywheel of MBK: Van AbbeMuseum's Exhibition *Victor Sonna – 1525*; BonnefantenMusuem's Exhibition *Say It Loud*; Arnhem Museum's Exhibition *Living, Forgiving, Remembering*
- Website/LinkedIn/Instagram...

### ***What's the structure and content of MBK?***

The central part – or the heart – of MBK’s strategy is the use of reflection sessions to research and discuss uncomfortable and sensitive issues to bring together the thoughts of the participating museums. These sessions are conducted under the guidance of a professional process supervisor.

The point of departure is a safe setting to have these conversations.

Core values:

- Vulnerability
- Self-criticism
- Curiosity

To have these core values embedded, we organize a ritual meet and dialogue beforehand, called the Ketu Kotu Dialogue Table. This table is an invented tradition introduced by Mercedes Zandwijken, who has – like me – a Surinamese background. “Ketu Kotu” refers to the Dutch history of slavery and literally means “breaking the chains.” These dialogue tables are now becoming increasingly popular, both nationally and internationally. The table is used before every session to get acquainted with each other and to come closer together. The Ketu Kotu Tables, originating from the Jewish and the Surinamese traditions, aim to increase the awareness of the inner and social conflicts and of the blind spots that arise from the complex historical and social background of the Dutch slavery and colonial past to obtain new insights.

### ***Reflection Sessions***

We have gone through seven sessions around several questions: What does diversity mean to me and for the organization? What is my role in the organization when it comes to diversity and inclusion? What are the non-written, cultural symbols, heroic attributes, patrons, norms, and values of our organization? How does the organization cope with institutional racism, discrimination, and exclusion? What is the perspective from which we create and develop our programs? How can we recruit new colleagues concerning diversity? What can we learn from the outlooks of our website and the architecture of our museums concerning diversity? ...

Three physical sessions, four online sessions (Covid-19). Not easy (no eye contact...), but everybody took their participation very seriously.

### ***Expertise Group MBK***

Sessions: every three weeks, 3 ½ hours. The participants were given assignments to be carried out within their organization.

The participants no longer wanted to talk *about* the order concerning diversity, but *with* the order. Therefore, we had created the expertise group MBK, bringing together different perspectives, new knowledge, and insides. These new insides will be tested and explored for the purpose of our statement.

### ***What is the output of these reflection sessions?***

The results of where we stand now are expressed in a statement (in process at this very moment), that will lead to joined effort for substantive policy changes, making agreements about this and ensure that these agreements are complied with. Hereafter, the participating museums will continue their partnership to keep working on the above-mentioned points in the coming years – and in order to realize that we no longer need to be afraid of being vulnerable, self-critical, and curious.

### ***Q&A with Aspha Bijnaar***

*(05:25:00)*

**Gladys:** Thank you, Ashpa, for your contribution. For Open Museum, MBK and the code of diversity and inclusion is a great source of inspiration. There are some questions from the audience. One of them is, "From where did the initiative for MBK come from – within the museums or from outside?"

**Aspha:** That's a central question. Museums started to feel uneasy about the debates in society, about racial/discrimination issues (eg. the zwarte piet discussion). So, the urge to organize diversity better than before came from the museums themselves. I work with the intrinsic motivation of the museum; I'm not going to tell them, "This is what you should do," because there's no blueprint for a project like this. What they think, and what they would like to, is put together in a concept that I work out with them, together.

**Gladys:** Before I switch back to an earlier question, a new question came in. "To what extent are museums followed up after they apply for MBK. Is there long-term cooperation? Is there constant dialogue? I think it adds to what you were just saying – as in, how much does MBK do and how much does it leave up to the museums?"

**Aspha:** MBK was launched in March 2020, and within that year we have been exploding, or imploding, with 33 museums connecting now with this initiative. We would like to – and are working hard to do so – sustain this platform. We would like to make it sustainable. Even if this project has its time because the funds are no longer there, we are going to move on with this platform. We will be looking for new funding because we, and all the museums, really want to keep this platform alive. We need to discuss and see what we can do about the issues in our society, and especially in our museal sector.

**Gladys:** Absolutely. I think that's what we'll have to keep doing with Open Museum, as well: keep this platform alive – not seeing it as a one- or two-year trajectory, but as a constant work in progress that also changes throughout the project. You said earlier, there's no blueprint for this kind of project, but at the same time that gives you a lot of opportunities.

What are some of the obstacles that you have already encountered in year one of MBK?

**Aspha:** There are a few obstacles. The main challenge we are facing is: how far are we going to let the public know where we stand? That's a very interesting question for many of the



museums. Some of them have bad experiences with the press and they are quite uneasy to express everything about this project, this process, to bring it out in the open. We have a communication program: we put things on LinkedIn, Instagram... But this usually is an interesting debate on how far we will go to express our findings and share them with the world. This is also why we have these core values: vulnerability, curiosity, and self-criticism. Within these four core values, we invite everyone to be more open about the process.

**Gladys:** So, you would say that transparency is also very important? Because it seems to be an issue that museums don't always know when or how to communicate on what they're doing.

**Aspha:** Especially with this project, you know. Because we have these reflection sessions and in these reflection sessions, we discuss uneasy issues (inclusion/exclusion, discrimination...) and how to cope with diversity within your organization – something that starts with you: in your head, your mind, and your stomach. These conversations are very sensitive and so it's difficult for the museum to let the world know what they are talking about in it. So, we have to keep this input for ourselves, but is a challenge for them to share this with the world. Now we are working on a statement that will address how far we have come in this diversity-process.

**Gladys:** I have time for one final question before we sadly have to leave you. But I'm sure we will stay in touch because I do think there's a lot of synergies between what MBK is doing and what Open Museum is aiming to do for the next few years. A beautiful question from someone of the House of European History, whether you could elaborate a little more about the value of vulnerability. What do you mean by that?

**Aspha:** With the value of vulnerability, we actually want to invite museums that it is not bad to say that you do not know something and to admit that you have not got that far with something yet, that you need help from others, and that sometimes you do not know what it is like in society either, but also that you don't know yet – or that you haven't admitted yet – that perhaps you do not yet have a sufficient network to apply diversity, that you are shy about letting professionals look at your collection from a certain perspective. That is what we mean by vulnerability. Just show it, because we are a platform, and that platform wants to meet each other halfway.

**Gladys:** It is a philosophy that we will take along in our reflections on Open Museum. Thank you very much, Aspha.

**Aspha:** Thank you for the opportunity, it was a pleasure.

# Re-imagining Heritage: Emotion Networking by Hester Dibbits (Reinwardt Academie Heritage Lab, Netherlands)

(05:36:00) – Original version in English

Emotion networking is a method of discussion or negotiation aimed at understanding others and alternative views – rather than coming to a jointly shared conclusion or compromise. Emotion networking originated in the practice of heritage work: if heritage tells us who we are and who we want to be, then everyone should have a voice in what that actually means. Emotion networking around heritage items leads to heritage wisdom. The meaning we attach to objects (tangible or intangible) is fluid and can take many forms over time. Heritage wisdom recognizes that heritage is not a given, but a choice. That choice is the temporary result of negotiation, of a conversation in which ideally everyone can participate. Emotion networking and heritage wisdom are competences that come in handy in debates on identity and identification. They work against fragmentation and for connection.

## *The Speaker*

**Hester Dibbits** is a lecturer in Cultural Heritage at the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam School of the Arts). She approaches heritage through a network theory; today's society, and also heritage, cannot be divided into fixed groups but is a capricious, fluid structure that is constantly changing. Throughout the years, heritage has often been used to create a national identity. This implies a connecting role for heritage, though heritage can also be the cause of friction. Operating from this field of tension, Dibbits proposes to look at relationships, associations, and connections between people, heritage items, and each other. In this way, one can look at emotionally charged heritage with an inquiring mind.

## *The Presentation*

### **Idea, notion, and method of emotion networking**

#### **How heritage literate are you?**

Let me start with the definition of *heritage literacy*, sometimes also called *heritage wit* or *heritage wisdom*: "A skill that aims for conscious and critical approach to heritage. It enables people to critically relate and discuss heritage, whilst paying attention to their own position and the societal dynamics."

Question to the public: *how heritage literate do you consider yourself?*

Poll Results:

- |                         |                            |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. A little – 18%       | 3. More than average – 22% |
| 2. I'm doing okay – 40% | 4. Very much – 18          |

We can come back to this later on and see if your opinion has changed.

### **Slide: Heritage literacy = 21<sup>st</sup> century skills**

This idea of heritage literacy is the ability to reflect on the idea or concept of heritage from a meta perspective. I would say it's a 21<sup>st</sup> century skill we all need to:

- Deal with complex situations
- Be skilled in critical thinking
- Be able to step in and step out of your own 'bubble'

### **How do I approach heritage?**

As a start, it's important that I tell you a bit about how I approach heritage myself. For me, heritage is a concept/label that applies to objects, places, and practices in the present that, by referring to the past, are experienced by people as significant for the future. Keep in mind that this concept is used in the present.

### **What is experienced by people as significant by referring to the past?**

At the Reinwardt Academie we often get questions like: what is heritage? What should I consider heritage? I rephrase this to: what is experienced by people as significant by referring to the past? (So immediately taking this meta perspective.) Maybe *The Nightwatch* or the Brussels' Town Hall first pop up in your mind. It's something that is self-evident for many people, and yet there are these questions.

### **Slide: Briefly**

In everyday life, we often talk about heritage in brief sentences. Heritage is everything:

- That's important enough to keep
- We deem important enough to keep
- Society thinks we should keep

But then the questions arise: Who says so? Who is we? Who is (part of) society? Here we already start reflecting on why we do so easily think that we know what heritage is.

### **In summary, heritage is...**

We could also rephrase this and put a focus on heritage as:

- A label that is, through interaction in network, placed on something (objects, habits, traditions...)
- Dealing with the past in the present whilst keeping an eye on the future
- Emotionally charged and always causing friction because there is something to gain or lose
- Not neutral!

### **Implications: culture as practice**

Let's take a step back. When I lecture at the Reinwardt Academie, and at the Erasmus University as well, I try to invite students to reflect on heritage. I tend to start with everyday practice and to consider culture as a practice – taking an ethnological or social-anthropological perspective.

Thinking about everyday life and how we relate to objects, places, and the past helps to take a network approach. Network theories can help us here.

Taking this everyday life as a starting point makes clear: heritage is everywhere. People have backstage and frontstage behavior, and they foster things in their houses. So already in the private domain, heritage making starts.

### **Why is 'heritage literacy' so important?**

Why is this dynamic approach and this heritage literacy to think about these dynamics so important (everyday life and how people deal with the past in everyday life)?

The world is adrift and rapidly changing with issues such as:

- Climate change and migration
- Globalization and technological changes
- Social injustice: racism, discrimination, and exclusion

Because of these challenges people feel:

- Like life is changing radically
- Familiar certainties are disappearing
- Heard/unheard, seen/unseen – because change can be good, but change can also hurt depending on the background, situation, or context

We have the idea that if we label things as heritage, then we can have a grip on everyday life. But of course, this is where it all starts because we have conflicting feelings and emotions about heritage.

## **Heritage literates makes the difference**

Whenever you start thinking in this sort of anthropological, ethnological manner, you become 'heritage literate' and then you can make a difference because:

- You can offer insights in the dynamics surrounding heritage and the handling of the past
- You can start to offer tools to deal with heritage as a thing that is made over and over again in interaction, in power relations
- You are a future-oriented, creative designer of making connections in times of change

This applies for everybody.

## **Emotion networking**

The second part of this lecture is about emotion networking.

Thinking about heritage literacy and taking a meta perspective – being able to step out of your bubble – taking this network approach, Imagine IC (an Amsterdam based heritage organization), the Reinwardt Academie and Erasmus University started to think about emotion networking – as a tool for heritage literacy.

## **Emotion networking: instrument for heritage literacy**

Emotion networking is an instrument to discuss sensitive toppings, that might come up everywhere (eg. zwarte piet discussion in the Netherlands also mentioned by Aspha Bijnar, notion of the Golden Age, etc.).

What is emotion networking?

- A noun: "The fickle constellations around a heritage object."
- A verb: "Working with the fickle constellations around a heritage object."

Use "heritage object" (= an object labelled as heritage) instead of 'heritage'

## **Visualize networking**

We can visualize the idea of an emotion network by using the example of the Golden Carriage in the Netherlands (Amsterdam Museum), a highly contested item because of the images of enslaved people on it. Every year the royal family used to be driven around in it, but now it will soon become a museum item.

You can take a position in how you relate to this item, and in a conversation with a mixed group of people this position can shift – so the emotion network and its visuals will change.

## **Garage Kempering, Amsterdam South-East**

Long collaboration with Imagine IC.

Another example is that of the car park Kempering. For some inhabitants of Amsterdam South-East, it was a wreck, but for others it was a monument filled with nostalgic emotions, as the place where they went to church on Sunday, etc.

So, what to do with it? We discussed these different positions on several meetings, also on the spot. (Can be discussed later on in the Q&A)

### **Emotions around heritage in educational settings surrounding religious heritage**

With Museum Gouda and Imagine IC, we worked on items of religious heritage within this notion of emotion networking. Primary and secondary school children gathered around, for example, a plastic cross that every year was carried along in the Passion of Christ and answered questions like 'How do you relate to it?', 'Can you share your emotions?' and 'How does your position shifts after hearing about everybody's feelings?'

At the end the big question was: 'What should happen with this item?'

But note: the method wasn't developed as a decision-making instrument, but as an educational instrument

### **How to collect and visualize networked and dynamic emotions?**

What is an emotion? And what is a network? To get a better inside in these dynamics, for us as a team working with these methods, it was also a question of how to collect, visualize, and address these networked emotions.

These questions always came back to us, and we had to discuss them in several sessions. As a collaborative research project, we reflected upon them step by step in collaboration with the museum field and the heritage field.

### **Emotion network diagrams**

In developing these methods, our ways of working also developed. We started with very simple mind maps, and then later on we had sessions with a lot of post-its. In a minute, we will have a try-out with yet another instrument – because of Covid we have to do everything online and so new challenges arise.

### **Emotion networking in the heritage field**

We practiced a lot and every time, we tried to involve our partners in the further development of this method. It's a process, it's an ongoing challenge of how to best visualize the networked emotions around in relation to items of heritage.

Now it's time for an exercise.

I wanted to invite you all to reflect for a moment on how you feel about the Amsterdam canal district.

Poll: what do you feel when thinking of the Amsterdam canal district?

Parts of the emotion network diagram:

- A: Intense pleasant – 30%
- B: Mild pleasant – 59%
- C: Mild unpleasant – 7%
- D: Intense unpleasant – 2%

What we normally do, now, is ask participants sitting around the table to elaborate on the chosen position.

Then the question is, after exchanging emotions or feelings: ‘Have your own feelings changed?’ This starts another conversation.

Some of the response in chat about the Amsterdam canal district:

- Brings back memories (visiting...) – can be both pleasant and unpleasant
- Hesitating between A and B – interesting for this exercise, that even in the beginning you don’t necessarily have one position
- Difference between first impression and real experience of the city
- Difference between visiting as a tourist or living there permanently

### **Elaboration**

In this exercise, we usually have a moment where we bring in extra information or different sorts of knowledge. Not only traditional knowledge but bringing in another stakeholder or speaker, for example. In this case, you can bring in historical research or a historian talking about the involvement of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Amsterdammers in the slave trade and the fact that a lot of owners of plantations and enslaved lived in these beautiful houses – the rulers of the West- and the East-Indian Company, the merchants of colonial products.

I think the Canal district is a nice example, because it’s overloaded with all these touristic connotations and it’s at the UNESCO world list, but still there are these other histories. Now, more and more, heritage and museum professionals decide to work on this and make this visible.

But there are different interests. How do you make this visible? How do you work with this sensitive information?

### **The West India House.**

The West India House: what do you tell about it?

### **Geelvinck–Hinlopen House**

And what do you tell about the people who lived in the Geelvinck–Hinlopen House, owned by a family that's less interested in telling the difficult history/the other side of history? This rich family got a lot of money with this slave trade.

## The Coymanshuis

The Coymanshuis, another example, where a family lived who earned thousands of guilders with the transport of enslaved Africans. And by coincidence, it also is the headquarters of Amnesty International.

It's interesting to look on their websites to see how the story is told in all these cases.

## Map your position (II)

And then, again: reposition yourself in a new poll. How do you feel now after I shared some more information and maybe showed you the flip side of this history? What happened?

- A: Intense pleasant – 1%
- B: Mild pleasant – 42%
- C: Mild unpleasant – 44%
- D: Intense unpleasant – 10%

I'm curious to hear what happened. It's not that I'm happy when people change position, but it's the fact that it's interesting to see. What happened? Why did it happen? How did it happen? Maybe you feel now that you're in several places in this diagram. It's not only about changing position, but it's about reflecting on how change happens or doesn't happen – because maybe you didn't change at all.

Normally, we sit around a table, and you can imagine that you're in a completely different situation: sitting in a small group, talking about issues, exchange...

So why did or didn't you make a switch?

- Contextualizing my personal happy memories of the space and sharing that space with the memories of injustice, violence, or exploitation, that continues to be dismissed, stains my personal memory, and makes me guilty – mild pleasant

*(Questions to think about: Where does this feeling of guilt comes from? Does it help us for the future and to work with the past – knowing how our feelings change when we're informed? How can we make this history more visible in the city itself?)*

- In my first answer, I only took my personal experience and my personal history into consideration, whereas in the second time, I could not avoid taking into consideration some of the aspects of the shared history you've been talking about

It's interesting: on the one hand we walk around as tourists (some of us); depending on the knowledge you have, on the conversations you have, on your background and history you also walk around in a certain manner. And then your emotion changes when you get this



new information. But this also depends in how it 'enters' and in what you do with it in consequence. I hope you got some idea of how this method works.

### **Mind-map with post-its**

This is how it looks at the end of the afternoon when we had a discussion – I think it was about the Golden Age. There was a stakeholder – the tourist information office – who had a very pleasant feeling. So, we also challenged people to think for other stakeholders, that were not at the table at that moment.

These are interesting variations on this method you can play with and we want to develop further. This very simple mind-mapping can be done online, on Miro for example, or on any other advanced online tool.

I hope this was enough to give you some idea about emotion networking.

### **How heritage literate are you now?**

And the final poll at the end of the afternoon: how heritage literate are you now?

- Not at all
- I'm doing okay
- Very much
- A little
- More than average

This is the evaluation we usually ask at the end of the session before people have a post-conversation and reflect on the method as a whole.

## *Q&A with Hester Dibbits*

*(06:18:00)*

**Gladys:** Thank you very much for this great presentation and especially – even if it was virtual – to keep it very interactive. I thought it was very interesting to follow how people's emotions changed whenever they got a bit more context. Before I ask some of the questions of the audience, I have a few questions myself. When you map emotions, how do you deal with objects where the community that they belong to are communities that have for a very long time been underrepresented or not heard?

**Hester:** I hope that I've showed that you can choose any object you would like to choose. It can be an object in your collection. I would say the professionals or the people you want to build a relationship with decide which object you choose. You can choose an object nobody knows anything about and then ask: What is it? What are we looking at? And then the challenge is to not immediately looking for the origin – that's extremely difficult, especially when it's immaterial heritage. What is the origin of a tradition? Often there is no origin, or exclusive ownership. But in the case of objects, of course, then you enter a more radical discussion. And at the end that is not what the exercise is about: it's not about ownership, it's about how we relate in the present – to these objects and to each other.

**Gladys:** One thing, when we talked privately about what emotion networking was, is that you also said that emotion networking is not necessarily a solution to come to a compromise where everyone feels the same way about a certain artefact or an object. Could you maybe elaborate a little bit more on why it's not a solution and why – maybe – that's also not necessary.

**Hester:** I think the solution is in creating new connections, in doing the research and in doing the exercise together, more than coming to a new, uniform vision. You need time for that, and maybe you never come to a unisono vision of feeling – people have different (and mixed) feelings, that change all the time, all day long. So, I would say it's an educational instrument and not a quick fix. Often politicians ask me: can I use it? For decision making, for example. And of course, in advance you can say: we have to reach an agreement in ten minutes, but that's not how it goes in real life. You become sensitive of the complex dynamics and the layered dynamics – and that's what this exercise is about.

**Gladys:** I have a very interesting question from the audience. It's one by Sam Deschutter, who has a question on the methodology. How can you know to what extent people's emotions have really changed or whether they feel somehow pressured to say their emotions have changed? So, to what extent do the questions guide the participants to answer in a certain way? This also mixes in with the question I was going to ask you: how does the person leading this really be neutral – because that seems almost impossible? So, how do you distinguish between real emotion or feeling pressured to feel something?

**Hester:** When we take emotions as feelings that have been made social in this interaction, you never know what is real. Maybe people pretend, but then at the end the constellation becomes even more complicated. You can raise this question, because it is about meta reflection and about creating awareness of how people shift emotions – how they feel not safe enough to express themselves. So, you can even ask or say as a moderator: I can imagine that you might not feel safe enough to share your feelings and that's okay, but we have seen something happening here and that tells us something about making heritage together, in interaction and in all these complex layers. At the end of the day, the only thing you take home, is that you realize – and maybe you knew already, but again – how we make heritage together in the present. It's not self-evident that *The Nightwatch* is heritage or that the canals in Amsterdam are heritage – it's much more complicated. And then again, at the end, we can even agree that sometimes heritage is something that some people really abhor and don't like at all. But still, it is there and we have to deal with it, stay with it and discuss it.

**Gladys:** Another question which came earlier, by Pieter: *hoe en wie bepaalt er wie er allemaal rond de tafel gaat zitten om uit te wisselen rond een bepaald thema, welke meningen en groepen komen wel of niet aan bod?* So: who and how do you determine who goes and sits around that emotion networking discussion table, how do you also decide what themes are going to be discussed and which opinion and groups will or will not be heard?

**Hester:** That's an extremely relevant question, and I think this is why these trainings and programs for heritage professionals are so important. At the end you are a sort of curator, and it's a profession and there is a certain sensitivity you need – because you are in charge of deciding who is sitting at the table and who is not. We want a group that's as mixed as possible, but what is that? And still, who do you invite and who not? You could also say we start with one group, and then we have a second with new people coming in, so the group is bigger and different combinations can be made (in more sessions). In a classroom it's easier: then the class forms the group, already given. But even then, in certain places, you might want to have two classes combined, because you think: we need more diversity. At the end of the day, it's indeed the moderator or the curator of the session who has to be very sensitive and who has to collaborate with others, discuss with others: what is at stake and what are the conflicts here?

**Gladys:** And I'm guessing that's also a type of training that you can have, via emotion networking: how to become such a moderator?

**Hester:** By doing it and by feeling what it does to people. That's also why we work with a colleague who is more specialized in non-violent communication, to be prepared and to get some tools on how to respond to people who really become emotional. Do you want to go home with a pleasant feeling or not? How do we end this? Are we now all sad, at the end of the afternoon, because the Canal district has changed forever – for some people, for others it already was extremely unpleasant maybe? The ending of a session, that's also something for the moderator to be trained in.

**Gladys:** What might be interesting is that, when people were responding to you on why they switched from unpleasant to pleasant, pleasant to unpleasant, Fanny said that she felt unpleasant knowing about the history of these buildings, but then on a more positive note she says since we can work on the future to reappropriate those places, that's why she ended up putting mildly pleasant. I guess you can be sad during the conversation, but still leave with a positive feeling.

**Hester:** And it's exactly this what creates a new connection because you have been doing the exercise together. Like with *Musea Bekennen Kleur*, that's a similar idea of a reflective session that gives you the feeling: okay, now we're working on it, and we should work on it together, investigate it further. Where is more information we didn't know of before and what can other people tell us? We need each other.

**Gladys:** There are two more questions. Lien asks: what can a museum do with conflicting memories and emotions?

**Hester:** I think first of all, being aware as members of the staff that they are there and that they are not going away. Making exhibitions being well-informed. Maybe doing emotion network sessions with the staff, but also on the floor: with visitors or in extra programming in the archives... It's not only the museum, it's the heritage world at large where heritage professionals work. Train yourself and invite other people to work on it. Make it visible that there are different emotions (text labels), but at the end also make it visible and comprehensible how feelings are connected, how people respond to each other and how

people can be heard by others. It's not only about the object and the multi-perspectivity, it's also about making the connections visible.

**Gladys:** The last question, to end this on a deep note. Jan Dehaan wonders: do you go a level deeper and also discuss the hidden needs behind the emotions within non-violent communication?

**Hester:** That's an important question and I invite him to think along on how we could do this. Usually, when you're in a group – like this session as well – it's one hour or two hours, but you can also take a full day. It depends on the situation how deep you can go. Sometimes indeed, also in classrooms where we worked with emotions in relation to religious objects, unexpected things happen, and then you take time for this, and suddenly you are on a deeper level. In other cases, people go home and think at home, and maybe a week or two weeks later it comes up again. It's an ongoing process I would say, but I'm very interested in thinking about the tools we can add to this emotion networking, to take it a level deeper.

**Gladys:** I think this is an interesting tool, especially within the whole idea of Open Museum to address these difficult topics in an empathetic way. Thank you for giving us some insights in how emotion networking works.