



## Press Placement

Cool Culture Laboratory for New Audiences

Artsy.net

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-what-the-art-world-must-do-to-diversify-museums>

For OCT 3RD, 2016



From left to right: Candice Anderson, Margaret Morton, Tom Finkelpearl, Miguel Luciano, James E. Bartlett, and Nicole Ivy. Photo by Margarita Corporan, courtesy of Cool Culture.



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It is clearer than ever that museums are not isolated spaces, able to float above the political currents twisting across the country. More and more, artists are creating socially charged works to address the racial and socioeconomic inequalities that are a constant presence in the national dialogue. Museums and the governments and philanthropic institutions that support them, meanwhile, are rethinking their roles in order to leverage their institutional clout and mobilize the art establishment toward creating a more equitable and diverse world—rather than being walled-off spaces for the wealthy.

To address these issues, Cool Culture—which helps tens of thousands of low-income families access New York’s cultural institutions for free— assembled a panel of individuals (moderated by Cool Culture executive director Candice Anderson) at the Centre for Social Innovation in Chelsea on Wednesday night. Present on the stage were Margaret Morton, who serves as part of the Ford Foundation’s Creativity and Free Expression Team; Tom Finkelpearl, commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA); James E. Bartlett, executive director of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA); Miguel Luciano, an artist; and Nicole Ivy, a museum futurist at the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). The panel also coincided with Cool Culture’s launch of the second Laboratory for New Audiences, which brings together 34 museum educators from 22 cultural institutions to think about how museums can address today’s rapid social, political, and economic transformations, and advance equity.



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Though the speakers represented different segments of the art world, the conversation was far from segmented—further evidence, if you needed any to begin with, that none of these roles functions in isolation. There was a great deal of consensus among those on stage about issues that art institutions must attend to, including cultivating the work of socially engaged artists, diversifying museum staff at every level, and thinking more expansively about how museums should position themselves in relationship to the communities they serve.

### Rethinking a Museum's Position

While broader social movements—Black Lives Matter and the Fight for \$15, to name just two examples—have increased the urgency with which museums need to engage with inequality, this is far from the first time that institutions have grappled with their place in the political dialogue. “The idea of cultural institutions being prompted or having a stake in social and political change, that’s not a new thing,” Ivy said. But the digital age has changed the way people approach cultural institutions. Buoyed by the public’s expectation for accessibility and openness, museums are pushed to “think *with* our communities and not simply as spokespersons,” she said.



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Bartlett noted that museums should challenge how they've historically been situated and question their tendency to look backwards and inwards. "Is it primarily preservation, or is it primarily effecting change, affecting people's lives?" he asked. Luciano, who teaches a graduate class at the School of Visual Arts on the role of art and museums in affecting change, cited Simone Leigh's work creating group spaces in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, as with her recent exploration of African-American self-care at the New Museum. He called it an "exciting example of where institutions empower artists to really reshape and rethink those spaces for specific audiences."

We all have ideas of what socially engaged art can look like, but Bartlett challenged the audience to think more expansively about this field of art. "It's one thing to have an Abstract Expressionist exhibition, but if you make a conscious effort to bring in groups of kids from public housing in order to expand concepts of possibility and creativity, I think that's just as much a form of social change as presenting something very overtly addressing a social issue," he said. It's possible to "infuse" this kind of social mission into everything a museum does, rather than just showing overtly political works of art.



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### Diversifying Institutional Staff

But getting a diverse audience through the door of a museum is only part of what needs to happen. More fundamentally, museums must think self-critically about the structures of power that govern them and who it is that gets to decide what is hung on the walls. In 2015, Finkelppearl sent out a cultural survey to New York City institutions and found that curators—no surprise—remain, for the most part, white people with art history degrees. “The people curating museums need to be more diverse,” he said. “There needs to be a pipeline.”

Politically charged art movements have sprung up at various points in history, only to subside without leaving a lasting impact since the institutions displaying art haven’t grown more diverse. Art engaging in social practice and institutional critique, for example, brought attention to these issues but have not reshaped museums. To prevent a slide backwards into complacency, Finkelppearl, whose agency is currently working to develop New York City’s first cultural plan, said institutions have to change. “They have to change at a fundamental level,” he said, “from the board to the staff to the idea of what it means to walk in the door.”

“The tension in that,” said Ivy, “is to figure out how you make such a potentially amorphous term like ‘institutional change’ translate into something actionable.” One place to begin is the creation of a pipeline of young, diverse talent that can one day





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take on prominent roles and shape institutions. At the most basic level, this means paid internships.

“Every time you open the door on a non-paid intern, you’re closing the door on someone who can’t afford to do it,” said Finkelpearl, who pointed proudly to the recently announced \$1 million initiative (a 50/50 mix of public and private dollars) to provide 85 paid internships for CUNY students at arts and cultural institutions across the city.

Hiring on every level is important. “Think about ways you can reduce unintended bias in your own individual hiring processes,” said Ivy. “How can you lead institutionally from the positions that you have?” Curatorial diversity is being fostered by institutions like the [Studio Museum](#), which Finkelpearl noted has an informal practice of training African American curators for five or so years, then sending them out to institutions across the country. Fostering diversity means an institution should, “as much as possible, reflect the community it wants to serve,” said Bartlett. Morton noted that diversity problems plague much of the art world. “There is a dearth of diversity across the board, in terms of journalists who write about artists and culture,” she said.





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During the Q&A, Sandra Jackson-Dumont, the chairman of education at the Met, suggested that the role of education departments in institutions is often absent from the narrative (this received lots of applause from the audience, most of whom were educators). “Education has been the number one gateway for people of color to have a presence in museums,” she said, citing Lowery Stokes Sims and Thelma Golden. Agreeing, Luciano noted that for all their importance, when budgets get squeezed, educators get squeezed “fast and first,” adding that in his experience as an artist, “they’re always the unsung, biggest heroes of institutions.”

### Structural Opportunities and Next Steps

Towards the end of the discussion, each panelist was asked what should be done to turn ideas of inclusion and diversity into meaningful action. “Talk to artists, engage artists, involve artists in meaningful ways,” said Luciano. “Not in token gestures but in ways that maybe we can have a seat at the table.” Bartlett suggested institutions should start from scratch. “Instead of thinking about the museum as a building, as an entity,” he said, “think about what you want to do.” Social missions shouldn’t be tacked onto museums, he argued.

“Trust the expertise of people you don’t typically imagine as having it,” Ivy said, pointing to the need to broaden and diversify staff. “Trust people who may not have a museum studies degree.” It’s a sentiment Finkelparl agreed with, saying, “Don’t just hire the next art person who thinks they



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can do outreach. ‘Outreach’ is the wrong word anyway.” If you want community organization, he said, hire community organizers, as he did while he was director at the Queens Museum. Morton noted that one should “think about access, and think about access broadly.” That means addressing not only racial and socioeconomic inequality, but also disability access—an often overlooked aspect of creating more diverse institutions.

Museum boards—crucial for building financial capacity and expanding reach—remain predominantly white and socioeconomically lopsided. Seventy-eight percent of board members in New York City are white. “Museums can be enforcers of social division,” said Finkelppearl, noting they have often been founded by “elites” to “reinforce their own community cohesion.” During her time at DCLA, Morton said that her focus was on building the boards of smaller institutions of color rather than diversifying large institutions. “If you had to pick your priority, that was of greater need, as far as I was concerned,” she said.



Thelma Golden Reflects on 10 Years at the Helm of the Studio Museum, and Harlem’s Changing Face  
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## A Cultural Plan for New York

During the Q&A, Naiomy Guerrero, founder of the GalleryGirl.NYC





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website, described her own experience growing up in New York City, one in which she was not made aware of the cultural wealth around her. She also drew a distinction between the on-paper commitments museums make to their community and what actually happens, asking Finkelpearl about how his agency's forthcoming cultural plan for New York City might actually overcome these structural and historical challenges.

"One of the barriers is the word 'museum,'" Finkelpearl noted, while pointing out that New York City ID cards provide free access to institutions across the city. "There isn't a good answer because you're right," Finkelpearl added, acknowledging the challenges and asking for input from the audience on the cultural plan. He reiterated that the De Blasio administration's commitment to getting arts education into schools was one of the answers.

"It's so important that the institutions hear that problem," said Luciano. "In general, there's a lack of awareness as to how these have been generational problems that are still challenges today." Luciano is on the Citizens' Advisory Committee for the Cultural Plan and noted that one of the central questions they're addressing is who could be left out. "That's a question that's been put to the committee to address from the onset," he said, "and I think that's a really promising way to begin the conversation, at least."

—Isaac Kaplan