

**ON**  
**ABOUT**  
**THINGS**  
**LOVED:**  
**BLACKNESS**  
**AND**  
**BELONGING**

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CAL CONVERSATIONS

# **ON ABOUT THINGS LOVED: BLACKNESS AND BELONGING**

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“Can blackness be loved?”

-Fred Moten

## **Table of Contents**

(On) Beginning

*Lauren Kroiz and Leigh Raiford*

(On) Our Predecessors

*Delphine Sims*

(On) Writing a Mission Statement

*Angela Pastorelli-Sosa*

(On) Belonging(s)

*Pascale Boucicaut*

(On) Planning an Exhibition with 15 other people

*Laura Belik*

(On) Educational Programming

*Jamie Danis*

(On) The Installation process

*Tory Jeffay*

(On) Misuse of the Sacred

*Ree Botts*

(On) Practicing Responsible Stewardship

*Sierra Edd*

(On) Enunciation

*Andrea Jung-An Liu*

(On) Processing the violence of (certain) museum  
collecting practices

*Leslie Huang*

(On) Accepting our Work as Work-in-Process

*Lesdi C. Goussen Robleto*

**Installation Shots**

**Working Bibliography**

## **(On) Beginnings**

*Professors Lauren Kroiz and  
Leigh Raiford*

In fall 2013 graduate students in the Department of History of Art at Berkeley began participating in a three-year pilot program funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, intended to supplement academic training with curatorial skills. Through a few incarnations, the “Mellon Initiative for Graduate Study in Curatorial Preparedness and Object-Based Learning” has supported the creation of new courses, including an exhibition seminar, of which *About Things Loved* is the second iteration. We began with the idea that art history students should have greater access to object-based learning, and that broader knowledge about them that could come from museum professionals. Deepening partnerships between History of Art and the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, as well as the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, have been vital to this process. Learning from curators, conservators, educators, registrars and preparators has opened new career opportunities and avenues of academic inquiry.

At Berkeley, we also pivoted with the Mellon Foundation in 2015 to consider the challenges and opportunities for achieving greater racial and ethnic diversity, equity and inclusion in art museums. Here, we recognized that such work meant looking beyond History of Art itself. For this exhibition, an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Departments

of African American Studies and History of Art developed a cross-listed course called *Diaspora | Migration | Exile*. This seminar drew a diverse group of students from half a dozen different departments. In the process of examining artwork, extensive reading in Diaspora studies and speaking with artists, our students collectively decided to focus on the many manifestations of anti-blackness in museums. Rather than find answers, our exhibition makes proposals around five sections, which think about the ways blackness belongs within the museum. We were guided by a central question: What are the ways in which blackness, Black people, and Black cultures have historically belonged and can be made to belong in and to the museum?

We took the opportunity to do deep, hands-on research in the permanent collections of BAMPFA and the Hearst Museum, as well as in campus library archives. We decided to highlight works that hadn’t been exhibited recently or ever at Berkeley, from Raymond Saunders’s *About Things Loved* (1986) to Mildred Howard’s *Safe House* (2005-15), as well as touchstones of the collection, including Carrie Mae Weems’ *The Shape of Things* (1993) and Fred Wilson’s *Wanderer* (2003). We also thought about how to make the museum a more welcoming space to our surrounding communities, particularly the Black community on

campus and in the Bay Area. We met with Berkeley's Black Staff and Faculty Organization and the African American Student Development Office, among others. We found that several Black staff and students had never been to BAMPFA. They didn't feel welcome or like it spoke to them even though museum admission is free with a UC Berkeley ID.

Ultimately, we come to this work because we love art and we love art museums. We took on this work with love as well as radical critique. We were guided by the root of the word curate, which is care. In our course, we were guided by a Black Feminist practice of care and caretaking—for the artwork, the artists, the museum's staff, audiences, communities, and ourselves.

Building from the work of Black Studies as a critique of Western Civilization, we understood our work in the classroom as a critique of Western Civilization in the museum, itself an institution born of, buoyed by and often complicit with the transatlantic slave trade, settler colonialism and Western imperialism. During the course of exhibition planning, a number of movements and initiatives emerged across the country and the world that called for "decolonizing the museum": from repatriation of objects from European and American museums as sites of imperial or colonial collecting and hoarding, to their cultures of origin. Another strategy was to rethink the

metanarratives and curatorial strategies used to tell and display these objects. We hoped our work might contribute to this growing movement and we asked ourselves: what would it mean to undo these power relations and imagine the museum as a different kind of space?

World-renowned curator Koyo Kouoh— founder of RAW Material Company, an art gallery, intellectual center and community space in Dakar, Senegal— became an important model for our class. After the checklist had been finalized and we were in the midst of editing wall text in the Spring semester, members of our class spent an afternoon with Kouoh. Recently appointed Chief Curator of Zeitz Museum in South Africa, Kouoh's path to curation was by her own account "sideways." Her goal was never to be a "curator" and at the center of a cult of personality. Rather, her path has been to center Africa and to "make community" to "share knowledge" through the recognition of "art as a thinking system of its own." Kouoh's vision returns the role of curator to its Latin root *curare*, as a practice and model of caretaking. Her curatorial practice at RAW Material Company offered a model for our own: "to defend sites of criticality and dreaming, to care for the health and vitality of our society, [and to engage] with new and undervalued artistic practices."



This catalogue includes reflections, manifestos, surveys, meditations and recountings from our class and an archive of the exhibition's didactic materials. We thank our students for their careful thinking. We also thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, BAMPFA, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum, Oakland Museum of California, the Departments of African American Studies and History of Art, Black Staff and Faculty Organization, Office of Equity and Inclusion, African American Student Development Office and the Fannie Lou Hamer Center. We thank the artists whose artwork is included in the exhibition, especially those who answered our installation questions: Peter Bradley, Mildred Howard, Kamau Patton, and Raymond Saunders. Thanks also to Victor Albarracin, Sadie Barnett, Kelly Bennett, Natalia Brizuela, Stephanie Cannizzo, Bridget Cooks, Erica Deeman, Ashara Ekundayo, Diane Frankel, Leslie Freund, Pamela Joyner, Naima Keith, Lynne Kimura, Koyo Kouoh, Ira Jacknis, Benjamin Porter, Larry Rinder, Sherrie Smith-Ferri, Lava Thomas, Patricia Cariño Valdez, and Linda Waterfield for their extra time and insight. We also thank the museum staff for their tireless efforts.

## **(On) Our Predecessors**

*Delphine Sims*

*About Things Loved: Blackness and Belonging* is indebted to the scholarship and tireless advocacy of artists, curators, gallerists, and academics who have pushed the art world's center towards artworks and artists related to and of the African Diaspora. If we must cite one foundational event that initiated radical shifts in museums and art history we might begin with the founding of the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1968. Created out of the passionate protests and artist groups that fought against elitism, segregation, and the erasure of blackness (amongst many other transgressions) in museums, these individuals imagined and realized a culturally specific museum that would continue to catalyze broad investment, celebration, and support of artworks of the global African Diaspora. In California, institutions like the California African American Museum (1976) in Los Angeles were later conceptualized with the help of state and local governments after similar controversial events at regional institutions occurred and were met with swift critiques from local artists.

While museums made slow, and often failed attempts to exhibit and acquire art by marginalized artists, publications by artists and scholars championed them, such as Samella Lewis and Ruth Waddy's *Black Artists on Art*, volumes 1 and 2 (1969 and 1971 respectively), and more locally to the Bay Area, Edward Sprigg's *Black Dialogues* (1965-1970).

Additionally, small-scale, Black-owned gallery spaces, including Just Above Midtown in New York, as well as Gallery 32 and Brockman Gallery, both located in Los Angeles, were commercial spaces, stewards for marginalized artists, and havens for experimentation. Many of the pivotal historical moments that actively molded a better artworld were the result of organized activism through individual and collective artist efforts such as: *Spiral, Where We Art: Black Woman Artists, Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation, Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, Women Artists in Revolution, AfriCobra, The Watts Towers, Kamoinge, Black Photographers of California*, amongst many, many others. Data-driven critical writings have exposed the deep-seededness of institutionalized anti-blackness within the artworld—for more information, see writings by artists Howardena Pindell and Adrian Piper, as well as recent articles and graphs from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and *The New York Times*.

A vision of a more equitable artworld within the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) begins in the early 1970s with the creation of the Committee for the Acquisition of Afro-American Art, of which featured artist, Raymond Saunders, was a member. After selections were prioritized by the committee, a National Endowment for the Arts accessions grant helped fund the purchase of numerous artworks by

African Americans featured in this exhibition— including Peter Bradley, Margo Humphrey, and Charles White. While records have failed to reveal thorough information about the *Black Art* exhibition at BAM in 1983, it is likely that local museum professional and artist, Arthur Monroe, curated the exhibition, which likely featured artists acquired through the committee, such as Richard Hunt, Jacob Lawrence, and Barbara Chase-Riboud.

Another significant acquisition under the committee's direction was Betye Saar's *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), one of the most frequently reproduced and loaned artworks in BAMPFA's collections. It is also one of the most recognizable objects created by an artist of African descent, which is partially why the artwork is not featured in this exhibition. *Aunt Jemima's* fame and tokenization showcases what a detriment it can be to a broader understanding of art history to perpetually exhibit one work by one artist as *the* example of artwork by artists of African descent. While Saar's work might be emblematic of the Black Arts Movement, as outlined by writers such as Amiri Baraka and artist Tom Lloyd, its ubiquity in the public imagination has partially overshadowed an awareness of the many other aesthetics, movements, regions, communities, philosophies, etc. that complicate the limiting identifications of terms like Black art or Black artists. This has been explored on numerous occasions, but perhaps most notoriously with Saunders' brief

with Saunders' brief quip against distinct categories and labels, like Black artist, in "Black is a Color". His text initiated our seminar as we tried to grapple with a need to put forgotten objects and artists of African descent on view, while also paying homage to the various genres, mediums, forms, histories, etc. of each artwork.

While the artworld has made incremental progress diversifying staffs, exhibitions, and collections, it has done so inconsistently. The Black survey show has therefore remained critical to redress a long history of neglecting Black artists. Most recently, exhibitions that might be considered surveys, like this exhibition, are organized more appropriately around concepts, rather than racial identification. This is essential for art history to understand, for blackness can never be singular; it is defined by multiplicities, it is historically situated, it is always changing. Necessarily, the work of Black artists reflect this constant transformation.

Aruna D'Souza's *Whitewalling*, Bridget Cooks's *Exhibiting Blackness*, and Kellie Jones's *South of Pico* trace the historical failure of the Black survey exhibition and how white art institutions have committed wrongs against Black life and artists. Such texts also note the exception, necessity, and somewhat success of a few survey exhibitions, including David C. Driskell's pioneering installation *Two Centuries of Black American Art* in 1976 and

Kellie Jones's recent 2011 exhibition, *Now Dig This!* Our class had the pleasure of visiting *Black Refractions*, an exhibition on loan from The Studio Museum to the Bay Area's Museum of the African Diaspora. *Black Refractions* surveyed the Studio Museum's history of treating blackness as the norm rather than the exception. The exhibition was a testament to the temporal shifts and growth in art history and Black culture, alongside and through the museum. Experiencing the Studio Museum collection locally helped situate the global influences of artists of the African Diaspora and their distinctive contributions and intervention within art history. Nearing its fifteenth year, MOAD exemplifies many of the Studio Museum's missions. MOAD was an essential interlocutor for *About Things Loved*, as an example of how to care for a community of people and artists of the African Diaspora through installations and education.

This is just a sprinkling of names, texts, and exhibitions that are pivotal to an understanding of the history and stake of arts of the African Diaspora in the United States. The history of art often fails to contextualize artists of the African Diaspora. Please see our working bibliography which acknowledges the boundless complexities and nuances of Black artists' histories and work.

# **(On) Writing a Mission Statement**

*Angela Pastorelli-Sosa*

The mission statement was one of the first manifestations of our curatorial process. We were expected to present to the director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive a concise, cohesive statement, modeled after other institutional and company mission statements, on our overall exhibition goals. Despite this seemingly simple task, writing the mission statement became a space where we grappled with the difficulty of curating an exhibition on institutional anti-blackness, as mostly non-Black students from different disciplines. It was the first place that we deployed Stuart Hall's "positions of enunciation" to communicate our positionality and privilege in curating this exhibition, and it was also the first place where we articulated how an "ethics of care" would serve as our curatorial praxis. What was initially supposed to be another institutional task evolved into our class's guiding mini-manifesto, that aimed to be transparent about our process and hopes for the exhibition. Our mission statement has undergone multiple iterations since we first wrote it in October, but the following is its final form.

## Mission Statement

To what extent can any exhibition be a liberatory process for Black art and artists, given the fraught relationship between museum institutions and Black culture? Museums have historically perpetuated a hegemonic gaze on the Black diaspora through the theft of cultural objects and appropriating styles, while also devaluing skilled practices, and excluding Black art from collections. *About Things Loved: Blackness and Belonging*, thus addresses the narrowly defined spaces in which Black art has been positioned, and as a diasporic praxis reclaiming institutions, this exhibition centers the voices, experiences, and creations of Black artists.

This exhibition rejects hierarchical curatorial practices that so often assert, rather than ask. We do not present ourselves as authorities on the multiple narratives of Black diasporas, but instead as invested members of communities that desire to work toward a more just art world that uplifts Black art and Black artists. In making space for Black art within the gallery, this exhibition aims to rethink what care and love might look like in practice. It is our hope that foregrounding an ethics of care as a decolonizing strategy will generate possibilities for liberation and healing in the museum.

# **(On) Belonging(s)**

*Pascale Boucicaut*



Describing freedom in 1973, Maya Angelou explained, “You are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all.” One challenge of the curatorial process is that it is difficult to pursue the work of freedom within institutional settings where many have been made to feel they don’t belong. As the organizers of *About Things Loved* we attempted to create a space for freedom *through* the curatorial process—using objects to challenge the ways that blackness has historically belonged to, and been excluded from, the museum. Drawing from the collections of two campus museum institutions, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, we found ourselves grappling with two contradictory truths about belonging.

The first emerged organically, following a difficult visit to the joint collections storage facility. It was here we began challenging whether objects and artworks should belong to museums. We recognized that, particularly for those pieces which were collected archaeologically and ethnographically, objects belonged to individuals and communities well before they were acquired by collectors. To maker-communities in the past and descendant-communities in the future these objects have significant, meaningful lives and uses which may be unrecognized by the museums that hold them. We pondered how we as curators might tend to objects, like our

featured Gullah basket and walking cane, not just as museum property but as cultural “belongings” that occupy social, political, and spiritual worlds.

In other scenarios we worked to challenge the marginalization of Black artists in the museum by surfacing their unseen works from the collection archives and insisting that Black art does in fact belong on gallery walls. We were fortunate to have access to pieces by local Bay Area artists, such as Mildred Howard’s *Safe House* and Raymond Saunders’s *About Things Loved*, which reminded us that the museum itself belongs to the city community where it resides. We highlighted works of abstraction by artists of the African diaspora, including Hervé Télémaque and Peter Bradley, to draw attention to wider legacies of erasure within art worlds. We even painted the walls black to emphasize these points, simultaneously countering the constructed idea that white is neutral while black provokes.

By putting objects and artworks from these two collections together, *About Things Loved* fused two seemingly oppositional challenges to belonging within one shared gallery space. Perhaps this is how we pursue Maya Angelou’s paradox of freedom, offering more than a curatorial statement about inclusion and instead insisting that Black arts belong in no one particular place, but in “every place – no place at all.”

# **(On) Planning the Exhibition with Fifteen Other People**

*Laura Belik*

Experiencing the joys and challenges of curating a show with a large and interdisciplinary group was one of the highlights of this learning experience. Throughout the process we were reminded that planning went beyond the group of colleagues and professors in our weekly classroom meetings into a larger cohort of collaborators—including UC Berkeley-wide staff, the museum team, supportive scholars and professionals and, of course, local artists (to name just a few). It became clear that the work of a curator is never for one person to do, and despite long meetings and conversations in the classroom, the “final say” was achieved through multiple collaborative steps.

Since we had to delegate different tasks to different people, it was challenging to have a handle on both the larger picture and the show’s moving parts. This could be frustrating at times, but was sometimes a relief as well. On the one hand, reaching a consensus on smaller tasks was hard given our group’s size; but on the other hand, our group’s interdisciplinary nature allowed us to think through and foreground broad conceptual frameworks.

Having the professors as mediators was also essential. The different approaches and opinions amongst the group would come to light mostly during theoretical discussions. As such, our preparation in discussing readings and concepts was

fundamental and played an important role during our final selection of works for the show. Our varied opinions led us towards a common set of questions and desires for what we wanted to share with the broader audience. Having a large group of curators, despite all of its demands, was key in understanding what was important to show.

# **(On) Educational Programming**

*Jamie Danis*

In April 2019, we organized a colloquium, *Ethics of Care: Blackness, Art, and the Institution*. Hosted at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the colloquium previewed our exhibition and invited the public to engage with complex intellectual frameworks. The panel featured artist Mildred Howard, curator and educator Naima Keith, art historian Bridget R. Cooks, and artist Erica Deeman (the last through a written statement). In inviting our speakers, we deliberately chose to foreground four Black women, as the majority of our conceptual and theoretical discussions around curating the exhibition, and the title of the colloquium itself, drew from Black feminist thought.

Additionally, we worked to invite Black communities into the museum space, recognizing the historical practices of marginalization and discrimination that have excluded them from this space. Given that the museum's "universal viewer" has historically been conceived of as white, we worked to move beyond standard museum practice and to actively program and invite Black audiences into the museum space. We produced postcards with reproductions of artworks featured in the show along with excerpts of our wall texts, which we hope will encourage sustained engagement with the exhibition.

Considering the standard timeline for curating a show is three years, our nine month deadline for producing this

show inevitably compromised our programming goals. Future projects could cultivate more substantive relationships with, and programming for, a wide range of local communities.

# **(On) The Installation Process**

*Tory Jeffay*

Although we worked with a model of the gallery, somehow the artworks seemed bigger at the install—except for a few pieces, which seemed smaller. The work looked surprising, familiar yet unfamiliar. Even the works we had seen in person, in the print room and storage facilities, looked very different when propped up against the painted walls of the gallery. By the time we got to the installation process, it had been months since we'd seen anything in person and the artworks had become lodged in memory as low-resolution jpegs. There they were in all their fullness—textured, reflecting light. Spatial relationships suddenly came into view—works on one wall were descending in size, the blue in one work brought out a detail in another. There were the frames and mattes, the vitrines and cords... thematic relationships needed to be weighed alongside visual ones, historical pairings against medium-specificities.

*Is there too much text in one corner? Will viewers be able to see the connections better if we moved these works closer? Sightlines offered their own challenge, but also possibilities. Standing here, what would one see? What about here?*

The installation process let us see the show as a visitor would. Some decisions could still be tweaked – *this could be swapped with that, this could still be removed, these two could be hung vertically or side by side*. Other things were fixed. The labels were done. The vinyl was approved. The walls were

painted. Truth is, by the time the work was arranged in the gallery, our curatorial process was almost complete. It was a little scary, but also exciting, gratifying, and affirming.

# **(On) Misuse of the Sacred**

*Ree Botts*



This process taught me intimately about how whiteness works. I knew in theory, but to witness with my body and spirit the inner workings of institutional hierarchy within creative processes hurt me deeply. The visceral experience of exacerbated disregard of all that made me Black and woman and free felt like a deep ancestral violence. It hurt me to see sacred ceremonial objects shelved in the warehouse of white walls and white bodies. It hurt me deep to know that the term anti-blackness was a trigger word, yet the terms of hierarchy continue to be sanctioned by those in power within the art world. This process of pain was felt deep in my body. To see the depths of my lived experience flattened to a buzzword, only incorporated when convenient, made my stomach churn. To see Black art have nowhere to live made my heart drop into my gut. To see the erasure of blackness in discourses of Black art made my bones ache. Exhaustion. Black women be exhausted from saying the pain we know through embodiment.

This poem was written after a visit to the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology storage facility and speaks to the ghostly presence and haunting of sites that house sacred objects.

## **MISUSE OF THE SACRED**

mourn down  
dusted hallways  
of stolen stuff  
from my people  
heart heavy  
angry, like  
my ancestors  
must have been  
borrowed and sold  
our bodies  
not our own  
our objects  
not our own  
our bodies as objects  
we ain't never our  
own.  
can't never make  
legitimate claims to  
nothin  
not even our fuckin  
selves.

we and all that we  
hold on to  
will be stripped. stolen.  
whipped. broken.  
we, black niggers  
natives. ancients.  
exotics. erotics.  
ain't never owned shit  
not because we never knew how  
because y'all always stole us.

i'm silent  
like i was  
at the slave castle  
in cape coast

i'm silent  
at the grave site  
this is burial ground  
limbs broke  
throat choked  
silent  
could not scream  
could not breathe  
because i have said  
all the words  
i can afford  
to say today

brought home with me  
horrors  
of the cold dusted warehouse  
where white people  
store stolen things  
from ancient lands  
of exotic peoples  
where lullabies  
of battered lands  
brainwashed  
then white folk  
into thinkin they had legitimate  
claim  
to what is ours  
silent, numb  
i have read this battle  
but never felt on skin  
how violated. how strip searched for  
everything i ever had  
slip through my fingers like sand  
traces of her memory linger  
in my clothes  
but the moment i hold her  
she is gone

i have read this battle  
but never knew with my teeth  
how violent  
my altar. my home  
hung for walls of white museums

MOMA, Hearst, BAMPFA  
where the fuck we at?  
you wanna erase us  
then collect our remains  
then regulate what the fuck  
we say about it  
you wanna speak about our things  
as if we are things  
then be appalled at our boldness  
to say somethin bout it  
speak of our belongings  
as if we never had rights to belonging

let us free, let us free

black souls  
stored in drawers  
raped in white plastic  
in pasty white warehouse  
where black bodies  
are housed  
what horror  
that haunts my bones

arms worn  
back aches  
i hate  
to carry haunting  
on my body today  
bare bones flesh  
of my fuckin people  
scattered about  
the museum

without my name on it  
whose art is this  
whose ancestors is this  
who have right  
to make legitimate claim  
to this?  
don't you know  
i wasn't never supposed  
to have legitimate claims to nothin?  
not my body

not my home  
nothin was my own

and i wish to create from that space  
that silence. that crack  
to slide my story through  
the white walling.

# **(On) Practicing Responsible Stewardship**

*Sierra Edd*

Throughout the organization for this exhibition, we have thoughtfully confronted harmful processes of collecting that are interwoven with systems of power and mechanisms of erasure. We have asked of ourselves in our curatorial practice: *how can we intervene on projects of extraction and removal and redirect our efforts toward responsible stewardship?* We have dwelled on issues of community engagement and representation(s) in the context of diaspora. In actualizing forms of responsible stewardship, we have been deeply informed by conversations of collecting practices in museums and institutions. While we have carried with us an “ethics of care” that has informed our positioning and curatorial practice in *About Things Loved*, we have nonetheless been faced with structural limitations. UC Berkeley as an institution has pervasive and ongoing contradictions within itself that have been inherited from its fraught past and continuing problems in the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology as enterprises of object accumulation and extraction. Such histories of Indigenous displacement as well as past and present anti-black mechanisms have been important to the work our course is doing.

Our practice attempts to bridge a method of healing in our present through coming to terms with violent histories of rupture and fragmented knowledges. We have invoked a framework of recovery by constructing a dialogic forum for collectivizing a journey for our

knowledge-building in the present moment that engages with complexities of the past and seeks to build resources for the future. Struggles for liberation, justice, and confronting anti-blackness do not end here, and we do not intend for our exhibit to fully address and eliminate these structures of oppression. Rather, our exhibition and our practice calls for self-reflexivity as students who are beneficiaries of anti-black operations in the University, and we hope the visitors to this exhibition will join us in interrogating the University more broadly.

# **(On) Enunciation**

*Andrea Jung-An Liu*

A museum is not just a place where works of art are seen; in fact, most objects in museums are stored in the basements, hidden from the public eye. What makes a work “worth” being seen? How do displays and exhibitions shape our understanding of art? What kind of role do art institutions play in the writing of art history? These are the questions that brought me to museum curating.

While our Mellon Curatorial seminar started off with three key terms—migration, diaspora, exile—we began to seriously think about our relation to the often overlooked images and objects made by artists of the African diaspora at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology. As such, belonging and care surfaced as guiding terms and questions. To curate is to enunciate, and to enunciate is to make things visible and loved. As a non-American, non-Black person, yet someone whose family has experienced migration under colonialism and economic pressures, at times I found myself in an awkward position during our class discussions. While the works and their concepts resonate deeply with me, I know I cannot and should not speak for them. In the end, I think the exhibition title not only reflects our criticism towards institutional anti-blackness, but also our very own stance: to whom does blackness belong? Where does blackness belong? How can blackness belong within the museum? Or at least this is how I understand our

exhibition, as a non-American, non-Black person who wants to love, take care of, and make visible the arts of the African diaspora.

# **(On) Processing the Violence of Certain Collecting Practices**

*Leslie Huang*



Can museum collecting practices be truly non-violent? How can we determine which processes constitute as violent and which do not? In some cases, the narrative appears blindingly transparent, such as the historic practice of collecting and cataloging of human hair to propagate essentialist racial narratives, or the ransacking of treasure in the aftermath of war.

Who determines which processes are violent? As a pastiche of private collections, museums accession not only objects but also private ambitions. The presence and absence of certain types of works collected speak to those whose ideas, and whose cultures, were worthy of objectification and collection by the rich and affluent, and those whose were not. The legacies of these early formations hold influence to this day. Although the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology both archive objects of cultural importance, it is only in the former space that these objects have the privilege of being “art”.

Where does violence center? Should we speak exclusively to the theft of objects, or also to the many ways that museums tacitly uphold and validate other forms of violence? I think of the handful of names— Brundage, Sackler, Mellon, Ford, Getty — that grace the edifices of arts and cultural institutions. These gilded letters absolve these families’ participation in historical legacies of exploitation, beginning with the deliberate forgetting of the countless

peoples whose actual work generated the wealth for which monuments are built. Should museums consider how their benefactors accumulate the excess of riches they give to institutions? Understanding that these violences are symptoms of the structures, how can a museum committed to decolonization speak to these legacies?

Although museums have been pushing to produce exhibits that foreground works by artists of color and public programs giving voice to artists of color, what does it mean when the audience of that museum doesn’t reflect that same push for inclusion? Is it really revolutionary to have a show for a black artist if the audience they speak to is predominantly white? Something I’ve pondered in the process of creating *About Things Loved* is how a show takes the shape of the space that it inhabits, and how this itself becomes a violent practice. Standard museum processes, such as editing exhibition copy, when in the hands of predominantly white staff enacting the vision of a white leadership, became a site of struggle against the totality of the white gaze. In this space of violence, how can a show resist assimilating into that shape? Break it, if need be?

Where does acknowledgment stop and restitution begin? What does restitution look like in the aftermath of violence? From an institutional

perspective, healing often looks like a kind of narrative forgetting, a collective exorcism in the interest of looking towards the future. But what is overlooked is that a ghost cannot be expelled if what you are trying to expel it from is its own body. For better or worse, the current home for many objects is the museum collection. Repatriation, if at all a possibility, remains a long complex process, which requires finding a body to give it back to, if such a thing is wanted in the first place.

My questions are not to invalidate the work being done, or to deny institutional efforts to address past and inherited legacies. This current call to action, to undo a colonial legacy of conquest and plunder is historically unprecedented. To see one thread of violence in the present moment is to unspool an innumerable array of violences. But simply acknowledging that there is a wound does not constitute a solution. Collective healing needs a collective body. We do not need new solutions, we need new processes.



# **(On) Accepting our Work as Work-in-Process**

*Lesdi C. Goussen Robleto*

Throughout the planning of this exhibition, we have learned about the difficulties and tensions that emerge when trying to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and the emotional and intellectual labor that is involved when you seek to go against the grain of institutional hegemony to propose alternate practices that foreground, first and foremost, an ethics of care. Through these moments of tribulation, we have come to the conclusion that our duty as curators is not to propose a cohesive, linear and finite exhibition that adheres to institutional expectations, but instead to inquire, to grapple with, and to put forth questions that will complicate historical narratives and institutional practices.

In the exhibition, you find that a series of questions punctuate several panel and image label texts. Questions like: “How might artists envision transcendent possibilities and healing through a practice of weaving?” are meant to initiate a dialogic relationship between the viewer, the work, and the exhibition at large. By prompting the viewer to become implicit and self-reflexive in their viewing, we hope to activate the museum space and produce a rippling effect that can carry on beyond the walls of our exhibition. Thus, *questioning*, as a curatorial intervention, has allowed us to imagine an alternate approach that unhinges from dominant models of knowledge-production and exhibition display, and continues to reproduce itself even in the afterlife of the

exhibition. These questions, like the works on view, have their own autonomy and agency, that enact on us, the viewers, in unexpected and generative ways.

*About Things Loved: Blackness and Belonging* is just one site that proposes to contend with institutional histories, curatorial practices, and art historical narratives, in order to make and hold space for the multiplicities of both *blackness* and *belonging*. As such, this exhibition forms part of a greater constellation of ongoing work and practices that seek to decolonize the museum space so that Black artists, Black art and Black life can belong.

Alongside the joy that this exhibition has gifted us, we continue to grapple with the imperfections and shortcomings of our curatorial interventions. We did so much, and yet there is still an insurmountable amount of work that needs to be done—this much we know. While I cannot say that we ever came away with a sound resolution, I have spoken to the process of lingering in the shortcomings of this exhibition. These limitations, after all, are what give affective and tangible contours to our work and efforts, and our refusal to be done.

We are indebted to the work of Black feminist scholars, artists, and curators- many of whom. are cited

on the gallery walls- who have made it possible for us conceptualize this exhibition.

\*Section Panel, *Roots and Routes:*  
*Blackness as Belonging*

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