

Carpenter Center

IN  
CONVERSATION

KEMI ADEYEMI

WITH JESSICA  
BELL BROWN,

LAUREN HAYNES,

AND JAMILLAH  
JAMES

for the Visual Arts

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Lauren Haynes, and Jamillah James  
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Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,  
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DAN BYERS : Hi, everyone. I'm Dan Byers, the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director of the Carpenter Center. Thanks so much for joining us tonight for our last event of this very eventful year. It happens to be the first night of Hanukkah tonight, so Happy Hanukkah to those who celebrate.

Our event this evening is a conversation I've been looking forward to all semester. When we opened Tony Cokes's exhibition *If Ur Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol. 2* last winter, our Curatorial and Public Programs Assistant, Liv Porte, suggested that we invite Kemi Adeyemi to the Carpenter Center to speak on Cokes's work in relation to her own work on queer nightlife. When we had to cancel that event due to the pandemic, we shifted gears. Now, nine months later, we have invited Kemi to engage with her recently published project, "Black Women Curators: A Brief Oral History of the Recent Past," which documents the perspectives of Black women curators working in the United States from the mid-2000s onward.

Kemi spoke with an incredible group of curators across the country for this project, and the result is a conversation that maps a series of shared and divergent experiences, histories, and conceptual approaches to curating. We hope tonight's event might offer an opportunity for a more in-depth conversation with a smaller group. Joining Kemi are three curators whose exhibitions and writings I have admired for a long time: Jessica Bell Brown, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art; Lauren Haynes, Curator of Contemporary Art at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and The Momentary in Bentonville, Arkansas; and Jamillah James, Senior Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

I'm really grateful to Jessica, Lauren, Jamillah, and Kemi for sharing their work with us tonight. And I want to thank my wonderful colleagues: Liv Porte for their work managing this event series, Gabby Banks for her support of tonight's program, Laura Preston for her role in editing and managing the booklet publications, and Katie Soule for editing the videos for each event, which will appear on our website. And thank you all for joining us.

KEMI ADEYEMI : Hi, everyone. There are so many people watching, but it feels like it's just the four of us. Thank you to the Carpenter Center, thank you Dan and Liv, and thank you to everybody else who's done so much work to bring this conversation into being. It's hard

work to do public programming, and it's really hard to do it online.

I'm very grateful to be in conversation with the three of you tonight. You're such an incredible brain trust, and I'm really looking forward to the conversation. Before we start, I will give a little bit of framing about how we got to this point in the first place. In winter 2019, Eddie Chambers asked me to contribute to the *Routledge Companion of African American Art History* [Routledge, 2019]. I pitched a kind of rushed, compacted oral history of Black women curators in the United States, and I only had three months to turn it around. That was three months to cold-call a bunch of people I knew about but didn't know and ask them for their time and for them to give their lives over to me in short interviews. I'm really grateful they were down to give me their time. Jessica, who is on this Zoom call, was one of those people.

But there are so many people I wasn't able to connect with because of that rushed timeline. Tonight's conversation is very much an extension of what should and will be a much longer, larger conversation about the place of Black women curators in the history of arts and culture industries in the U.S. and worldwide. The piece I wrote, and this conversation tonight, is an effort to recognize the growing number of Black women who are assuming curatorial positions in museums and galleries throughout the U.S. This is to say nothing of the growing numbers of Black people and people of color that we're seeing in a variety

of institutional positions. And it's an effort to recognize these Black women who are doing such immense amounts of work, work that is directly shaping how we see, think about, commune around, and fund the arts.

Tonight's conversation is also an effort to intervene on the ways that Black women can be siloed in their institutions and disconnected from one another. Even if Black women curators do know each other formally and informally, the systems and structures are often set up in order to make sure we are not in conversation with one another in order to capitalize on the isolation we feel. So I am trying to use this space as a site to intervene on how that happens, and in the process, intervene on the ways that we, the arts-consuming public, may underappreciate your labor, because we do not understand it as labor or understand why it is valuable.

The project of curating is incredibly difficult, and it requires a lot of creativity and intellectual, administrative, and interpersonal skill. In my humble opinion, Black women are some of the most skilled curators that we're ever going to find, because they're doing this work as racialized people—as people marked by racialized gender—who are navigating boards, donors, artists, arts writers, presses, and various publics that sit on a spectrum from unfamiliar with Black women, period; to capable of performing a progressive liberal discourse; to outright hostile towards the idea that Black women might have a say in how museums and galleries operate. And this is to say nothing about

the unique demands placed upon the kinds of work that you're expected to be thinking about, exhibiting, and creating conversation around.

So I'm eager to be in conversation with the three of you, and if anything comes out of it, it might at least be an enhancement of the relationships that you already have, a strengthening of more sustainable relationships that can carry you beyond this Zoom call and into a post-pandemic future.

I have a series of questions that I've been using to put us in conversation, and the three of you have brought questions and conversation points for one another. We'll also be looking at questions from the audience, so if you have questions as we're going along, please use the Q&A function. I will be holding a lot of things in the air in order to make this feel generative for all of us.

I want to begin this conversation about your careers and about your practices by asking you about things that you like. When we feel so ground down by work, it can be easy to forget how we got here and what keeps us excited and interested.

So my first question is, what were some of your first experiences with art that sparked your imagination, that sparked your thinking, and that sparked feelings that you wanted to keep working with and thinking about? What were the experiences that clued you into the idea that you might be able to make a career out of thinking closely with art, or being in proximity to artists?

JAMILLAH JAMES : I could start with this question. Thanks Kemi, Jessica, Lauren, and everyone at the Carpenter Center for tonight's event. I'm really excited to be among this esteemed group of colleagues and friends.

I came to the arts through music and film. It was a long, slow trajectory towards working in the visual arts. I grew up in New Jersey, and as a kid I would go to museums in New York. For most of my life until I was an adult, there was a disconnect between the things I was seeing in New York museums and what I thought my possibilities could be as a working person in the world. So before I came to curating and to working in museums and institutions, I was a musician and working towards doing film as a career. Slowly I got less interested in the technical aspects of film and more into the critical aspects of it, which segued into media studies. I then became more interested in theory, and then that connected to art history, theory, and criticism, which is how I ended up eventually becoming a curator or at least thinking about arts as a viable field for me to work in.

KA : What was that switch? I'm curious how that even became an available possibility. Did you have curators in your life from whom you learned about the forms and processes of curating? Or were you raised in a community where thinking about the arts as a career option was available on the horizon of possibilities?

JJ : No to both questions. My family was musically inclined. Visual arts weren't of interest necessarily. When I was in school, I started studying art history, theory, and criticism, and I was more inclined towards writing about art than actually having an institutional job or working as a curator. I didn't quite understand what that meant until much, much later. I had some encouragement in school when I became involved with the gallery system at the college I went to in Chicago. That was the first time that I actually recognized curatorial practice as an actual profession, and that exhibitions don't magically appear. It's because of scholarship, hard work, and collaboration that those things materialize.

But as a quick answer, no. It wasn't something I thought was in the realm of possibilities until much, much later.

LAUREN HAYNES : For me, I was born in East Tennessee. We lived there until I was twelve, and then we moved to New York City. I think I moved to New York past the age of school trips to museums, so I didn't necessarily grow up going to museums. I took art classes as a kid and took photography classes all the way through college, but not because I wanted to be a photographer. I just loved the process and loved the idea of it.

I went to Oberlin, and when I got there I needed a work-study job. As I was applying for things I saw one at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, which is the museum on Oberlin's campus. I sort of made that assumption that you

do when you're eighteen, which was, "I can do this. I'm sure it's fine."

The job was to be the assistant to the director's administrative assistant. The director at the time was Sharon Patton, who was a major, important, African American art historian. I didn't know that at the time, but what I saw was a Black woman in charge of the whole place. It opened up everything for me. I was like, "Oh, okay. I don't quite know what goes into a museum, but someone that looks like me is in charge. Let me learn more about this." And, at the same time, I started taking art history classes and I fell in love with the behind-the-scenes aspect of the museum.

So I became an art history major. Oberlin has something called Winter Term where you do a project and get credit over four weeks in January. I interned at a gallery. I did docent programs throughout undergrad. Every summer I engaged in a different art experience to help me sort of see the different entry points. It wasn't until I actually graduated and was looking for a job and my mom was like, "Well, what are you going to do with your art history degree and African American studies minor?" that I was like, "Oh, work in a museum." And luckily, I was able to do that. But I don't think it was really until I started working at The Studio Museum in Harlem after being at the Brooklyn Museum for a little bit that I came to understand curating as a thing.

JESSICA BELL BROWN : I just want to say thank you, Kemi, and to the good folks at the Carpenter Center for

gathering us here. Lauren and Jamillah, it's such a privilege to be in conversation with you in this way.

I'm reflecting on a moment of magic for me that harkens back to my time in undergrad when I took a graduate seminar called "The Black Metropolis" with Huey Copeland and Darby English, who was at The University of Chicago. I remember going to Patric McCoy's house—he's this incredible collector. I remember walking through the doors and seeing his entire place just filled from top to bottom, ceiling to floor, wall to wall with art of different kinds. Historical art, sculptures, so-called self-taught art. It was a phantasmagoria. I think that experience stayed with me because it reminded me of the magic in what we do. I was an art history major, so I was very much living the life of the mind, but stepping outside of the academy and stepping outside of the museum. Being in spaces like private collections and studios provided an incredible opportunity to think about the magic of curating. We also went to the Johnson Publishing Company building and saw its incredible collection.

That time was such a gift for me because it really solidified that there are real implications to the histories that we write and think alongside of. And there are people outside of the ivory tower who are part and parcel with those histories. So when I think about what it means to be a curator, it's about stepping outside of your institution and being curious.

KA : I have a lot of questions. I would love to hear you all talk about what it means to curate. Not necessarily to be a curator, but Lauren, you mentioned there was a moment where you learned that curating “was a thing.” But curating is also a process that, like you were saying, Jamillah, is deeply intellectual. It is not spontaneous. The show doesn’t emerge out of nowhere, and you’re all coming from backgrounds in which the formal academy was a space where you learned how to do the thing called “curating.” But as you’re saying, Jessica, curating extends far beyond that. It cannot ever just be the work of formal trained academics. And there are lots of examples of people who come to curating from completely outside of an undergraduate degree, or a PhD, or a fellowship kind of model.

So there are a lot of experiences that you three are drawing on that demonstrate curating as a varied thing. I’d be curious to hear you talk about what that process and that practice means to you. Literally, what does that process look like for you? When do you start the process of something called curating?

LH : Right, it’s very expansive. When I try to explain to my nephew and nieces or to other kids what I do, I try to think about it in terms of the pieces and how I bring them together. Working at an institution with a collection is one part of curating, right? You are caring for objects and putting them up in collection installations, and that’s

different than the work we do for exhibitions. But it’s still a part of the care work. You’re growing a collection, you’re acquiring objects. If you work at a collecting institution, that’s part of it.

And then there’s the ideas part: the exhibitions, how you’re thinking about being a contemporary curator, and how you’re working with living artists. The work of curating is about those conversations with the artists. I also like to think about conversations with colleagues, because that very much informs my practice. I can have an idea and think it makes a lot of sense, but talking it through with artists and other people helps put a shape around it. It feels very much like the research part. So you’re researching the idea, then researching the objects, then figuring out how it all comes together. I think there are also questions like who else you bring into the process. Who else are you talking to? For me, curatorial work is not only about curating and caring for artworks but also caring for artists.

JBB : Sometimes I think about curating as care, as you so lovingly articulated, Lauren, and sometimes I’m curating as a harm prevention specialist. My job is to prevent harm, which happens so frequently in institutions. I think maybe this goes back to what you were saying, Kemi, about being Black women in institutional spaces, in these positions that require us to step outside of any kind of expectation of difference. Because for those of us who work with living



artists, we are working on behalf of them, and there's a certain amount of advocacy that we are always doing. When I think about what sustains me, it's the dialogues that happen with artists, thinkers, and makers.

Part of this is also taking permission to be mischievous, as my friend Kimberly Drew would say, and to think outside of the box to present alternative modes of being and knowledge through conceding that I don't know. When I start a project, I literally have to say, "What is it that I don't know, and how can I work alongside my peers as artists to give shape to something that didn't exist before?" And that happens through conversation, mostly.

JJ : It's a mutual learning experience, and I don't think it's always necessarily framed that way.

Curating is also about relationships. My relationship to an object spurs interest in an artist, then working very intensely with an artist towards an exhibition or publication builds an interpretive framework around that artist and their practice. It's also about talking to the public in a direct way. Artists often can't speak to an audience directly; there is always the intermediary of the institution. So there's the object, and then there is the work that we do as curators to try to show through writing and scholarship what the practice is, why it's important, and why a viewer should be interested in it.

Curating is also doing the work on the behalf of the institution to engage a public and get them interested in

art. Not everyone feels comfortable with museums. We must recognize that the public at large still has misgivings about institutions that we as curators can help massage. So curating is stewardship, it's advocacy, it's taking care. I sometimes describe curating as being a den mother of sorts, a den mother of ideas, of artists, of people. Curating is a complicated thing that takes a lot of care and fortitude, because you are representing, working with, and working on behalf of so many different people, the artist, and the public.

KA : I like this language of service and care, and of being a harm reduction specialist. You are intermediaries—literally, physically, if you're working with living artists. But you are also a part of the discourse machine that can help an artist be legible to the institution as well as to the publics that the institution serves.

I wonder about the more difficult aspects of that work. I wonder about the emotional labor that goes with being the intermediary between the institution and the public, especially when the institution can give up the curator as the person who will be the target of most people's energies, if the institutional structure is, for example, being racist. An institution might point to you as if to say, "Look, we have a Black woman curator, so we're not racist." So then you become the person who not only has to carry the load of the institution but has to caretake for the artists in question.

I'm wondering if you've had to navigate the curatorial process in that way, and if so, what modes of fortifying yourself have you had in those moments? Or maybe you haven't experienced this, but given our political climate, you might be building yourself up to an inevitably fucked-up interaction.

LH : I think about what it means that my first real curatorial job for almost ten years was at the Studio Museum in Harlem. I think about the colleagues I had, the director, and all of the people I learned from—the system you had to navigate was very different there. My experience at the Studio Museum is infused in me and has become how I think about curating. I understand that, yes, museums are incredibly layered and complicated places, with boards and visitors, and you have to navigate all of these things. But the attitude at the Studio Museum was very much that the curators were part of a larger team where everyone was bringing their ideas to the table. Learning that kind of teamwork and collaboration is much easier to do when you're at a small institution.

I work at a much larger institution now and I still value that cross-departmental engagement, because I think it is important to share some of the burden and pressure that falls on you. And it's important to prompt not just your other curatorial colleagues but also other colleagues of color, and the people in your institution in general, to think about these pressures.

I think the events of this year have continued to help people understand and navigate the various layers of pressure on women of color. I look forward to a moment when we don't have all of this happening, but it also feels like something that will continue to be a part of our world, both post-pandemic and in the aftermath of that moment when more people realized that the world is racist. The pressures on Black women curators will still be there and still part of what we're navigating. I think Black women in every field have to navigate these things as well.

JJ : I feel this is something that's consistent in many workplaces. Amado Padilla wrote about this idea of cultural taxation: that feeling of being in a position to speak on behalf of your own lived experience and to have to stand in for what the politics of the institution might be. I think a lot of people feel that kind of pressure. I don't, necessarily. It depends on the institution you're working in. Lauren and I have both been at the Studio Museum, which is a very different institution. There are a lot of Black folks that work at that institution.

When you go to another museum where that might not be the case, it's a very different ballgame. You realize the broader implications of your role at the institution, and the long history of racism in institutions, how it's manifested through different staffing practices and the program itself. There are all these things that you have to contend with. And then when you throw in social unrest,

which was the case this summer, it's hard to have to be the person that speaks, or that gives the pointers and tips. You want people to be your colleagues, to figure it out without the added pressure on you, because you've already got enough to do. We all have enough to do. Especially this past summer, just squaring with the fact that we're Black folks in America, putting that aside from the work that we do at our institutions, and just trying to have a moment to breathe without having to then be spurred into action on behalf of our workplaces was tough. It's a tough, tough, tough situation that a lot of us find ourselves in.

KA : I think people are feeling as empowered as ever to demand more from their arts and cultural institutions and to present their rightful, valid demands about the ways the institutions we interface with—whether they're universities, museums, or galleries—produce and maintain cultural and financial structures of white supremacy. We are Black people working in them, and as you were saying, Jamillah, there are multiple layers of how we feel that demand in our personal lives.

I'm wondering if you have thought about ways you want to be called into conversations about institutional accountability differently. I think there's a way that the "institution" becomes a flattened word. We've been talking about the differences between the places we've worked—you've worked at the Studio Museum, for example, and that institution doesn't necessarily look or operate as if

it's funded by evil white money. So our roles and positions within those institutions have different inflections. I'm wondering if there's a way that you want to be called in differently by those demands for structural change in the particular institutions that you're working in.

JBB : When you're inside an institution, you are privy to the myriad decisions that get made. You're privy to a number of conversations that sometimes overlap or that are sometimes disparate, and you're privy to the competing priorities that are always ongoing in this larger process of culture-making. I think those who see curation from the outside in, or who have this idea of museums from a particular distance, often forget that the path to the level of autonomy we all aspire to as curators is very long, arduous, and indirect.

As a more junior curator institutionally, I have to constantly remind myself that I'm accountable outside of this space and this structure. And I'm accountable, most importantly, to artists whom I hold near and dear, and to the various publics that I consider myself a part of. At every level, I'm trying to cultivate a perspective that allows me to hold myself accountable, to ask questions, and to corral other people I can hold accountable to doing this work collaboratively, because it takes a village. Sometimes we forget that the institution is not one person holding puppet strings as you were articulating, Kemi. Institutions are matrices of competing priorities and agendas.

LH : And I think a lot about the different ways people get brought into these larger conversations. I find it most successful if Black people and people of color aren't just being brought into the conversations specifically about race. How can we bring in voices around all of these topics we're talking about? For me, these conversations are the most successful when you are being brought in to contribute your knowledge base; which is to say, working with artists, contemporary art, and the variety of knowledge bases we all have. We should be brought into conversations around these topics and not just asked what the institution's anti-racist statement should say. We should especially not just be brought in if a problem has occurred. How do you bring people into a conversation before it feels like you're just trying to do damage control?

JJ : No one wants to feel instrumentalized in that way. Having respect for us in the work that we do means always having engaged us, and not just tapping us to talk about issues of diversity or Blackness. Meg Onli said it really succinctly in your oral history project, Kemi: diversity isn't just Blackness, it's socioeconomic status, it's ability, it's other marginalized people. We all want to see the institution get to a just place that feels reflective of our ideals and our politics, and of what the real world looks like. But sometimes there is this tendency to not always bring all the people who could have a viable impact to the

table. There is also a tendency to bring people in to do damage control, to protect the institution from itself, and this isn't always fair to the people who are brought into that conversation at the late stage.

JBB : To add to those points, we, as curators, are also responsible for stymying the kind of paternalism that museums often enact upon their audiences, particularly audiences of color. I think about this one experience I had with my husband when we went to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. We were with a dear friend of mine, and my friend and I wanted to go see the Cy Twomblys, which were absolutely glorious. My husband wanted to stop and see a Courbet painting and ditched us to go spend more time with this nineteenth-century work. I think about that often, because we make so many assumptions about who our audiences are and where publics are.

I think our job is to take risks and be as expansive and capacious as possible in centering certain artistic formations and practices that may or may not sit within our own identity constructions. And so I think that's an important part of it—the precarity within which we sit in our institutions. We also sit in a place of immense privilege in being able to slow down the assumptions that get made about what shows and objects certain audiences will respond to.

JJ : It's been a real shock to the system of the institution over the past couple of years that the public has spoken

back to institutions. A lot of people do not feel comfortable with that idea. I know many of us would love to go back to the world pre-Twitter, but people feel like they have a voice and can speak back to museums and hold them accountable for certain decisions. And that means that in the roles we play as curators, we have to get in front of the artist and be protective of them. But we also have to be ready and prepared for when the public has questions and concerns and wants to hold us accountable for our decisions.

KA : Part of the museum's accountability system has to be accountability to you, and letting you do the work that they've brought you in to do.

In the oral history published in Routledge, Jessica, you were talking about what it means when an institution hires you into a position to curate contemporary American art and assumes that you're just going to be curating Black painters with a high market value. In that oral history, you clearly outlined how you wanted to put those kinds of people in conversation. You wanted to have a conversation about how you're more than a representative figure in the museum itself who is expected to reproduce representative logic in terms of what the museum exhibits. I'd love to hear from the three of you about what kinds of conversations you want to be having in your practice. What kinds of conceptual conversations do you want to be having, and do you feel like your institution is ready for

those conversations? Or maybe you don't feel ready for those conversations? Or maybe, what is your best-case scenario for how people let you work?

JBB : I don't think I was working at the Baltimore Museum of Art at the time of my interview with you, Kemi, but in thinking about my response to that question about the valid ways of working, I feel the same way as I did when I first gave that answer. I love what Erin Christovale said in her oral history around the kinds of shows and curatorial work she wants to see in the world. She's like, "I want things to get weird." I love that because it's very much about defying an expectation and honoring the differences in the ways that our minds work and in the ways in which we want to see certain art histories map onto each other.

In my interview with you, Kemi, I talked about wanting to see a Betty Blayton-Taylor and Helen Frankenthaler show. That would be incredible. But I also want to see an exhibition of photographs by Baldwin Lee, who is not Black but who made a body of work that was deeply engaged in Black Southern life. I want to see different counterpoints, and I want to be surprised. I think our institutions are ready now more than ever to see that.

I also want to preface this by saying that there are so many folks we have to acknowledge who have come before us who have done that work and continue to do that work. Dr. Lowery Stokes Sims, Thelma Golden, Dr. Kellie Jones, so many others. Part of this work is just



Kemi Adeyemi



Jessica Bell Brown



Jamillah James



Lauren Haynes

taking up the space and not thinking, “Am I doing this right?” Or, “Am I satisfying a kind of canonical understanding of art history that we already expect from museums?” I think the work I want to do is to occupy the most capacious and expansive space that I can and not question it, just do it. Get weird, as Erin would say.

LH : The idea of taking up space is also about being given the space to take chances. To make mistakes and do things that even you are surprised by. I think a lot about how I first got into museums—you know, going to the Allen Memorial Art Museum and seeing artworks and not knowing anything about them, just knowing that I was drawn to them. How can we make shows that have a variety of objects, artworks, and artists, so that when people come to them, they are drawn to different things? How can we make shows that don't tell people there's only one way to experience the artwork, or that there's only one way to walk through a museum?

I don't want an institution to feel that they've hired me for only one thing, and then expect me to only do that. No, they've hired me as a full being, a person who is continuing to learn and grow and be excited by a lot of different things. Institutions must make space for curators to lean into, to see where the work takes them.

JJ : I think keeping people surprised is a really important part of the work. Art history itself is not necessarily a

linear trajectory. It's very discursive, with many parallels, and there are many different types of art history. I want to advocate for artists who are underrepresented, not necessarily because of race, gender, or class but because their practices might not neatly fit into an institutional setting. The artists I've worked with recently definitely fit that paradigm. I think I'm an advocate for the weirdos. I'm a weirdo, so I'd like to see that reflected in the work that I do, and to have the freedom to advocate for artists who have difficult practices that don't sit easily within an institution because I, myself—my person—doesn't necessarily sit easily within an institution. I want the artists that I advocate for to reflect that ethos.

KA : We've been talking about your roles as curators in institutions and have been framing your work as an institutional process. But at the beginning of our conversation, we were talking about how much of curating is about the life of the mind. I would love to hear you talk about how you go about the process of thinking. Do you carve out a few hours a week where you're like, “Let me just watch some TV,” or, “Let me catch up on artists' books”? How do you keep yourself creatively stimulated as a balance to the more administrative parts of curating? And does that translate into shows that you're working on? I'm really interested in the deep mechanics of the conceptual side of curating.

JJ : It's important to me to have space outside of thinking about art all the time. I find it generative to look to other disciplines as a way to inform the work that I do, music and film being chief among them. Looking at other disciplines keeps my practice fresh.

LH : I agree. In my house and in my office I have the piles of books that I get, and sometimes I'll get a book and put it away, then pick it up a year or so later. And maybe the ideas lend themselves to a particular project, but I hadn't made the connection until that moment. Taking breaks from art is also important. Spending time watching TV, or doing things that people wouldn't necessarily think contribute to the work of curating. But it's all part of it. It contributes to how I'm thinking about the contemporary moment we're living in. It's important to make space for those things. Sometimes I realize that I just can't read another art book, I need a break. I need to process everything that I'm thinking about.

JBB : I think rest is so important, in whatever forms we need to practice it. I think we can always get better at it. I was having a conversation with Jennifer Packer a couple of weeks ago. She's a painter friend whom I deeply admire and love. She asked me, "How are you?" And I went through the whole "Oh, great, blah, blah, blah." And then I realized, wait, I'm actually exhausted.

I think we have to acknowledge the creative bankruptcy that we often experience because the pace of this work is so fast. I think the burden can sometimes be heavy.

I'm in a period where I have a few projects that are happening down the line, but in this moment I'm creatively bankrupt, and that's okay. I'm very much interested in input over output right now. And so I'm returning to theorists and thinkers, not for any means but just for personal enrichment and deeper reflection. Right now I'm reading Sylvia Wynter and thinking about what it means to be human. I'm reading Alexander Weheliye as well. I'm also watching *The Crown* and *Small Axe* side by side, and it's been pretty wonderful and illuminating.

As much as curating is about being in studios and collectors' homes, and being in the vault, it's also about being still, and thinking. Or not thinking! Taking a shower, lighting a candle, taking care.

JJ : We have to acknowledge that we're living and working in a really weird time right now where the usual progression of our work has been severely disrupted. We've all had to adapt and change the way that we're doing things. We're not necessarily seeing as much as we can because many of us can't leave our homes right now. So adapting, being extra mindful of the moment, and taking rest and caring for ourselves has been a part of the process. Rest will help us all stay productive.



KA : Lauren had a question that was circulated before the conversation about how this moment where we're at home on Zoom has changed how you think about your work. Are you going about the practice of work differently?

JJ : Yes, certainly. Having to migrate our lives entirely online has definitely changed the way that I approach the work. Working from home has been quite helpful. It has been generative to be amongst my books at home, to look deep in my inbox for all the gallery mail, to see the interesting ways that people are producing content in this moment, which has been really inspirational. We've all had to adapt to this Zoom lifestyle, and people are doing really interesting and thoughtful things. I think a lot of us have also had to take on a lot more work as a result of this moment.

KA : So, I'm teaching on Zoom. It has really impacted what I thought teaching was supposed to do. Jessica, I think I resonate with what you said about trying to shift your attention from output to input. I've been thinking about teaching not as something that should be output-oriented but as a way to provide the input, and whatever my students want to do with the information I kind of don't care, as long as they've sat with me and we've had a conversation. What else can I ask of people in this time when we're having new kinds of work and new kinds of anxiety?

I'm wondering if this moment has changed how you think about what curating can do for you emotionally, or what it can do for the publics you want to be in conversation with.

JBB : As Jamillah said, this is a weird time. This is also a time where the check-in is key, right? We're all on Zoom, we're all working strangely outside of the nine-to-five hours. Admittedly, many of us probably have been doing that anyway. But I think there's a lot more intentionality with which I'm engaging my colleagues and the artists I'm working with. I'm thinking about extending grace to folks, and not expecting immediate responses, and not expecting folks to have it all together. For those of us who are parents, it's so hard. The human side of this line of work has become much more of a currency for us to take seriously. I know that I'm going to carry that much more closely once we're able to gather again in real life. That's the work, too. That kind of radical vulnerability, in this period where we're hyper-visible. I think the check-in is, first and foremost, what we will carry through.

LH : I also think about the idea of phone calls. When you're working with an artist on a particular project, you're talking to them all the time. In this moment, maybe there isn't a project coming up because everything is up in the air. But how can we still have that check-in and have that call? It doesn't necessarily have to be a Zoom studio visit,

so you don't need to show me what you're working on and stress about that. But what are those conversations that we can just have informally? And can we extend that out to our colleagues? As you're saying, Jessica, what is that check-in? Sometimes it's a quick text about nothing, but I really think it's important to make space for those types of check-ins. That is something that I do hope carries over. How can we continue to acknowledge that people have so much going on outside of work, and how do we normalize that and realize that that's always going to be the case, even if we're not in a pandemic?

JJ : I think a spirit of generosity has prevailed in this moment. A lot of us are in touch to mutually support each other. There's a little bit more collaboration across institutions because we're all dealing with this weird situation where shows are getting moved or canceled. Being able to have programs with people that are not in the same city or country is now a lot more possible, which brings about different conversations. We're more in touch with each other than we were before, when we were running to this art fair, or this studio visit, or this gallery. Where are we running now? So things are a little bit slower, which I appreciate, certainly, even if it's difficult at times.

KA : This is a moment to draw in one of the Q&A questions. We've been talking about the care work we can do for ourselves and for one another to endure this moment.

There's also urgency around institutions and curatorial roles being responsive and doing that kind of care work for other people. One of the questions I want to draw on is asking the three of you to think about the conversation around art work as *essential* work. Can you speak to the idea of the museum space as playing a role at the front line, or at the urgent intersection of community work and engagement? How might you be seeing that take shape in the present moment, whether it be through exhibition-making, or programming, or different kinds of collaborations? So the question is asking us to do a bit of a one-eighty. If we've been talking about what makes us feel safe, what might push us to our limits, and how might that urgency inform the work that we're making?

LH : Very early on in the pandemic, when Crystal Bridges was closing, we found ourselves looking to our community and saying, "The main work of the museum has stopped right now. We are not welcoming people in, but what can we still do for the community?" Our education team kicked off a great community engagement department, team, and plan that had a whole theory for what 2020 was going to be. They amazingly shifted and changed and responded to this moment. And very quickly, we went out into the community to say, "Okay, we know that food, housing insecurities, internet—these are the things that people are stressed out about right now. This is what they need. So with the resources of our institution, how can

we help?" What can we do that isn't necessarily tied to presenting exhibitions? Of course, we did make art kits and brought those along when we were distributing food for the students who weren't getting breakfast and lunch because schools were closed. But they still needed food.

So how do you ask your community what they need and what can you do, and how can you pivot? It was also important for us to think about the artists in our community who were suffering from the same housing and food insecurity as everyone else. How can we support in this moment? That continues to be the essential work of our museums, because this moment isn't over. And even if we shift and people are able to come back in large groups and go to the museums as they did before, there still needs to be that engagement with community and consideration of what you can do, especially when you have the resources to do so.

JJ : One thing we were able to do at ICA LA with our closure was to give our space to other artists and organizers for programs or meetings. My colleague Asuka Hisa spearheaded a project called Field Workshop to let people in our community use our space to convene, to organize, to do necessary things that needed doing. We also leveraged our influence and reach to share resources to our community in terms of information for artists in need of support. We shared grant information, and connected people to other sources of support in a real-world kind of

way. People were losing their income and losing opportunities. As an institution, there are limits to what we're able to do, but information sharing is something that we always do. And that became something that was important for us to do in the moment.

JBB : When we closed at the BMA, our contemporary department and our education department thought very deeply about what we could do, especially in thinking about the BMA as part of a local cultural ecosystem and not so much as an institution that is on a national stage. We are beholden to our communities here in Baltimore. So we created a series of virtual programs and gathering spaces to engage with local artists more deeply, and to frankly get folks paid so that they could sustain themselves. The programs were BMA Salon, which became a way for local galleries and art institutions to promote artists they were engaged with and to facilitate sales, with the BMA as the interlocutor. Paying galleries to gather folks to then showcase artists is part of the local ecosystem here in Baltimore.

We had another program called Screening Room in which we licensed video art by dozens of artists and then exhibited it online, and then we did BMA Studio, which provided art kits to thousands of kids here in the city, because we're all stuck at home and need things to do with our little ones. It brought art from the museum right into the home. What I loved about this initiative is that it

really broke down the fourth wall between us as curators and our artists, who are a part of the wider community, and the museum. We have so much more work to do in finessing how we engage different audiences of artists.

I'm new to Baltimore, and to have these programs as my introduction to the city opens a lot of doors and opportunities for us to work differently.

KA : I like that language you used about the museum being part of a local ecosystem rather than some sort of institutional interloper. Jessica, you've recently moved to Baltimore, and Lauren, you're not in the art metropole of New York or Los Angeles. I wonder if there are other regional questions the pandemic might help us think more expansively about, like "where art happens" and "where artists are." One of the questions in the Q&A is sort of getting at that. Has the pandemic helped us think about artists who are not necessarily working in the typical pipelines—like, say, from a Yale MFA to a solo show—and about the arts education that institutions outside the major metropolitan areas might be able to facilitate? I'm wondering how you're thinking about your work as taking place in a hyper-local setting, even if you are, for example, in LA.

JJ : In this first season that we were able to be open, we wanted to foreground LA artists to pay respect to our local community. But the pandemic has also been a great

opportunity for us to do more research on what is happening nationally. Through my work on the New Museum Triennial, we've been all over the country trying to look at art practices that are evolving outside of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and all the major art capitals, because there's always something very interesting and thoughtful that's happening in other cities.

Before I started working at institutions, my coming of age as a curator was in Baltimore and Chicago, two cities that maybe don't always get a fair enough shake. But there are always vital artistic scenes that are emerging in cities across the country that a lot of us need to pay more attention to, especially in this moment where it is easier to connect with artists that are not in our city.

LH : I also think about the fact that some artists are being forced out of different places, moving, and creating different communities. When we were doing the studio visits for *State of the Art 2020* and going across the country to have conversations with artists in different spaces, this was really exciting to think about. But we also realized that being here in Bentonville in almost the middle of the country, you're a five-hour drive from so many different places. On the other hand, when you're in New York City, you have access to fantastic museums, fantastic galleries, fantastic artists, but when you leave New York City and drive for five hours, you're still in New Jersey or Pennsylvania. In Bentonville, you can be in Dallas in five

hours, or Memphis, or St. Louis—all these places that I never really had access to as a curator. So that's been exciting to think about.

It has also been exciting to think about the artists that are here in Northwest Arkansas, even if the conversation isn't leading to a solo show at the museum but is framed around the questions of "What do you need? What infrastructure that we can help bring in? What conversations are important to you in this moment?"

How can we make these conversations feel like a reciprocal relationship and not like there's only one outcome? How can we grow the whole arts ecosystem in this area?

JBB : I want to just underscore everything that Jamillah and Lauren have been saying. I have nothing else to add other than Baltimore is great, everyone please come here. We have an incredible artist community, and the more access we can provide to folks who are eager and hungry for a sophisticated eye, and for criticism, all the better. As much as I love New York and will always miss New York, it's so important to cast your eye any and everywhere, or to undergo a process of rock-turning.

KA : On that topic of criticism, I had a selfish question that I posed to the three of you before we got started. As somebody with a small arts organization dedicated to training people in writing about Black art and carefully attending to contemporary Black practices, I'm wondering

how you in your roles as curators and Black humans think about your work as part of cultivating discourse? As *staging* the conversation that would make the Black artists you're interested in make sense to the institution, or make sense within the larger conceptual questions you have? To what extent are you working with your educational teams to plan programming? To what extent are you thinking about the labor you need to write your wall text? How are you thinking about ways of drawing in people that will help you create the discourse around the show or the objects or the artists that you're working with?

LH : We have an interpretation team at Crystal Bridges and The Momentary, and a fantastic education team. I send them a lot of links, articles, and artist interviews, and they do the same. So much of the work is talking with them about the artists that we are doing projects with, sharing the information we know, but also sharing things the artists have said and things that others have written, and really just aiming for ongoing communication between the curatorial and educational team.

Sometimes we send things that don't specifically relate to an artist. We might share something a colleague has written that is pushing the conversation. I'm always trying to make sure that if I'm taking in information, or if someone's sending me a link, that I'm sharing it out, so that as we are writing wall texts or writing and editing essays we can be sure we are having the same conversation.

Everyone is obviously bringing their knowledge base to these conversations. But if there are resources I know, particularly ones that help us understand a Black artist's practice better, then I can be like, "Here are some people who have said it much better than I could." How can we all learn and grow in that process, and allow for it to feel ongoing?

JJ : I take a similar approach in terms of sharing as much of my research as I can, so that people at the institution feel like they have ownership over the information, and feel empowered to talk about the artists, talk about the show, and bring whatever personal association that they feel is useful to the understanding of the work. I'm pretty free and flexible with how I share my stuff.

JBB : Totally. And when appropriate, bringing our interpretation and education teams into the fold as early as possible, so that there is a more collaborative spirit in mounting shows.

I also think about the acquisition side, and the kind of ownership we need to cultivate across departments to make those acquisitions possible. It's all about breaking down that fourth wall in the curatorial realm to create an institution that's more porous internally and externally.

KA : As we wrap up the conversation, I have a question that will extend far beyond the minutes we have

remaining. It's a question about mentorship, and about who mentored you. Literally, let's shout them out.

But also, this pandemic moment has been both a radical shift in our status quo and an extension of various modes of crisis that will continue to happen in different forms in the future. I'm curious about how you think about the Black curators, Black arts writers, and Black arts workers who are going to be coming up after you, after this pandemic, who you may or may not be directly mentoring. What do you think are some of the challenges that they might face? Will these challenges be similar to the challenges you've faced in terms of solidifying your careers, or will they be different? And how might this pandemic, this moment of social unrest, and this moment when institutions were being asked for greater accountability change Black curators' experiences, how they're trained, how they get their jobs, and how they feel when they're in their jobs, and the kinds of support that they receive in those jobs?

There was somebody in the Q&A who was thinking along a much longer timeline than me. They asked, "What is the future of Black curatorial practice? By that I mean, what would this conversation look like for Black women who are curators a hundred years from now?" I want you to answer that too, but I'm also interested in the immediate sense you have of the next five to ten years.

JJ : There are a lot of opportunities now, which some of us have obviously experienced, and which have allowed us

to become curators at institutions. These opportunities will absolutely benefit the next generation of curators.

I think a lot of the same questions we're asking now will still be asked five, ten, a hundred years from now, but I think our comfort in asking them has definitely changed a lot. The opportunities that people have to be mentored and feel supported make it possible to do the work. There's a long list of people that I want to shout out for supporting and mentoring me along the way. I'm hoping younger curators feel like they can make the connections with people in institutions so that they feel they can be supported enough to stick in this work for the long haul.

Thelma Golden was a huge mentor for me, as well as Larissa Harris, Tom Finkelparl, Naima Keith, Anne Ellegood, Connie Butler, my mom. That's my list of people who have made me want to stick around and do this work long term. I'm hoping that people coming up behind us find their own people, or find us, to help sustain them.

LH : I agree with what Jamillah said about the questions we ask and the problems with institutions continuing. What I hope for young curators coming up is that they feel like they can ask questions and challenge things, that they feel they don't have to just go along with the status quo because they're more junior. And I hope that there are more people they can see as examples in the field.

This is usually framed as a joke, but sometimes a colleague will ask me about another Black curator and

be like, "Oh, do you know them?" I'm like, "Yes, yes I do." [Laughing] I know most of them, but what I love now is that there are so many younger curators coming up, and I may know their name or have a connection to them but don't know them as well. I love that because it just shows that we are continuing to multiply.

JBB : I love it when I don't know someone. [Laughing] It's the best feeling in the world. Like, "Yes, we're not a trend!" I think as far as mentorship is concerned, there are so many shows and articles that I want to create, and just can't. We can't do it all. I think inviting folks to do that work whenever possible is so critical. Passing opportunities along, passing along your recommendation, and holding space for folks as it has been done for the three of us. We stand on really big shoulders. I'm really excited by the expanse of Black women's curatorial presence, or Black curatorial practice at large, because we're here to stay and we're not going anywhere. And we're going to radicalize our institutions, whether they like it or not.

JJ : Yes.

JBB : We're going to make them weirder, as Erin Christovale would say.

KA : I think that's a beautiful place to end—on a threat. It's the kind of threat that will benefit all of us.

I'm so happy that you all had the time for me tonight, and that you had the time to spread your wisdom to all of the people on this Zoom call. I'm really grateful, and I'm sending you the best of health and the most relaxation possible in this next year or so. Thank you again, and let's see each other on the internet.

JJ : Thank you Kemi for bringing us all together. Thanks, Jessica. Thanks, Lauren. Thanks, everyone.

JBB : Thank you. See you all soon, hopefully!

DB : Thank you all so much for this generous discussion and for your work and leadership. And thank you all for attending tonight. Stay tuned for our spring events. Take care.

## KEMI ADEYEMI

Kemi Adeyemi is Assistant Professor of Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. She is currently writing *Making New Grounds: Black Queer Women's Geographies of Neoliberalism*, a book that will explore the sonic, affective, and embodied methods Black queer women have for taking pleasure in the neoliberal city. She is also co-editor of *Queer Nightlife* (University of Michigan Press, 2021), a collection that documents the diverse expressions of queer nightlife worldwide.

Adeyemi's writing has or will appear in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Women & Performance*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*, and *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking*. She has contributed exhibition essays for *Tschabalala Self* (Seattle), *This is Not a Gun* (Los Angeles), *black is a color* (Los Angeles), *Impractical Weaving Suggestions* (Madison), and *Endless Flight* (Chicago); and writings on artists, including taisha paggett, Liz Mputu, Adee Roberson, Brendan Fernandes, Oli Rodriguez, and Indira Allegra. Adeyemi co-curated the group exhibition *unstable objects* at The Alice Gallery in 2017 and curated Amina Ross's 2019 solo show at Ditch Projects. Adeyemi is Director of The Black Embodiments Studio, a writing residency dedicated to developing arts criticism that queries how definitions of Blackness are produced and expressed through visual, aural, and affective realms—engaging



three domains that underwrite the physical and meta-physical dimensions of inhabiting Black skin.

#### JESSICA BELL BROWN

Jessica Bell Brown is the Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Prior to joining the BMA, Brown helmed roles at Gracie Mansion in New York, Creative Time, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). A PhD candidate in Modern and Contemporary Art at Princeton University, her writing has appeared in exhibition catalogues and publications for The Studio Museum in Harlem, MoMA, New Museum, ICA Philadelphia, The Renaissance Society, Lévy Gorvy, *Flash Art*, *Artforum*, *Art Papers*, *Aperture Magazine*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*.

#### LAUREN HAYNES

Lauren Haynes is senior curator of contemporary art at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Previously, she was director of artist initiatives and curator of contemporary art at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and The Momentary in Bentonville, Arkansas. Haynes led the curatorial team of *State of the Art 2020*, the second iteration of *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now* (2014), which opened at both Crystal Bridges and The Momentary in February 2020. She was co-curator of the Crystal Bridges exhibitions *Crystals in Art: Ancient*

*to Today* in 2019 and *The Beyond: Georgia O’Keeffe and Contemporary Art* in 2018.

Prior to joining Crystal Bridges in 2016, Haynes spent nearly a decade at The Studio Museum in Harlem. As a specialist in African American contemporary art, Haynes curated dozens of exhibitions at the Studio Museum and contemporary art institutions in New York. Haynes was a 2018 Center for Curatorial Leadership fellow. She is co-curator of the inaugural Tennessee Triennial for Contemporary Art taking place across Tennessee in 2021.

#### JAMILLAH JAMES

Jamillah James is Senior Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA). Recent exhibitions include the surveys *No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake* (2019) and *This Has No Name*, the first U.S. museum survey of B. Wurtz (2018), as well as solo exhibitions with Harold Mendez, Stanya Kahn, Ann Greene Kelly, Lucas Blalock, Maryam Jafri, and rafa esparza, among others. James is co-curator of the 2021 edition of the New Museum Triennial. She has held curatorial positions at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; the Queens Museum, Flushing, New York; and has independently organized exhibitions and programs throughout the United States since 2004.

## COLOPHON

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Kemi Adeyemi with Jessica Bell Brown, Lauren Haynes, and Jamillah James

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