

The physical and digital and the spaces in-between

I am a Black woman who was born in Kenya and raised in London, I have been living and working in Coventry for the last 5 years. My personal experiences underpin the areas I explore in my work, and themes around race, gender and identity politics are a main focus of my practice and research.

In February 2019, I undertook a 9-week artist residency with Talking Birds, a theatre company based in Coventry. The outcome of my residency was an online exhibition entitled "Space and Place - From Coventry to Volgograd". The choice to have an online exhibition as an outcome rather than a physical exhibition was due to an interest in critically engaging with other ways of presenting artworks, and exploring the online exhibition as a space for different forms of accessibility and engagement with art. I was very much aware of the challenges of accessing physical exhibitions for many people (in my case motherhood had made visiting galleries and museums more complex and I was much more reliant on online engagement). But simultaneously I am also cognizant of the fact that the 'digital divide' means online exhibitions do not always equate to 'easier accessibility'.

Fast forward to summer 2019 when I applied for the curatorial residency at The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. I was very keen to explore the creation of art spaces in which transformation occurs, where challenges to boundaries and limitations can happen, both in the content and the format of an exhibition.

In my application I discussed the whiteness of art institutions – particularly the sense of exclusivity associated with art galleries and museums, which can render them inaccessible to black and brown people who do not feel a sense of comfort or belonging within such spaces. This highlights the political, social and economic contexts affecting gallery and museum audiences and attendance, which partly informed the methodology I wanted follow in relation to the curatorial brief I proposed in my application for the residency. I discussed wanting to challenge the conventional exhibition format at the Herbert Gallery, by moving away from a predominant focus on a physical gallery visiting experience.

I put forward an argument for curating a solely online exhibition, taking initial inspiration from the format of the 'Wrong Biennale' (at that time completely unaware of what was to unfold with the pandemic and it's devastating impact, and the huge shift to digital for many art institutions). The curation of a solely online exhibition, I suggested, would provide a critical opportunity to move the art viewing experience away from a singular focus on the physical museum and gallery building, which is steeped in problematic historical baggage around exclusion and discrimination. Thus, the empty physical space of the gallery, would allow the Herbert to address and bring to the forefront conversations and debates around these themes. In the text *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell writes

'We are faced with the reality that we will never be given the keys to a utopia architected by hegemony. Instead we have been tasked with building the world(s) we want to live in...Online, we magnify our avatars, our vast and varied selves, Through this performative practice we resist an exclusionary canon of visual culture that, unable to decipher our coding, seeks to erase us entirely. (pg. 133/134)

I proposed that the artists I worked with for this exhibition would need to create work that could only be viewed on the gallery website and through social media platforms as the main 'locations' to present artworks and engage with audiences.

It is those initial ideas that lead me to Shama Khanna and Flatness because I was looking for working examples of what I had proposed, a manifestation of the ideas I had initially thought about but with a very important critical lens. Flatness embodied

'...making use of the Internet toward the goal of 'uplifting...communities'...an application of digital material to grapple with the complicated and oft-contradictory nature of the (digital) material itself. Decolonizing through the occupation of a challenging digital space' (Glitch Feminism pg. 135)

As with initial proposals, things change, adapt and develop. I have curated a physical exhibition, with an online presence, which has become even more important given the pandemic. In the transition from initial proposal to final outcome there has been a recognition that – as Russel writes -

'all work cannot be done all the time on the Internet. Completing the online-to-AFK (away from keyboard) loop, we will dare to live away from screens, embodying our ever-slipping selves as an activist action. Empowered by the virtual worlds we traverse; we will reboot and rebuild these worlds when they no longer suit and need to shift' (Glitch Feminism pg. 148/149)

The curation of the physical exhibition included working with 6 emerging artists based in the West Midlands: Hira Butt, Andreana Fatta, Navi Kaur, Shiyi Li, Farwa Moledina and Matías Serra Delmar, who were commissioned to create new work for the show. The challenge of creating new work was further compounded by the pandemic and the first lockdown in the UK. The digital space provided refuge - we had virtual meetings to discuss and provide support. Whilst difficult, the significance of the time in which the artists have created these works cannot be forgotten. This context adds further importance to the digital archive (the presence of the exhibition on the Flatness website being one example), holding the memory of creating during these 'unprecedented times,' whilst keeping an archive of the exhibition that exists outside of an institutional space.

The physical exhibition intentionally begins with the work of Matias Serra Delmar outside the Herbert gallery, in the surrounding green space and existing courtyard. This idea of art existing outside institutional spaces is very much a part of Matías' work. Utilising his experience of growing up in Argentina he has created work that seeks to disrupt and decentre how one would normally encounter or move through an exhibition environment, asking us to question who the gallery space is historically made available to and how we should engage in it and with it. I saw his work as having some parallels with the work of Flatness, which creates a 'digital resistance' to institutions through disruption and decentring.

As I type this, we are days away from entering a second lockdown which will force art institutions to close – leaving the physical gallery inaccessible again – this time to everyone. Does the online access provided then shift in function to 'fill a gap,' and in doing so does one space inadvertently decentre the other? Pre-pandemic the digital spaces may have been an afterthought for galleries, with more focus, time and money given to the physical exhibition. But now 'in the pandemic' the importance of the digital has changed and requires equal focus, time and money invested in it. Can galleries and museums do both and do the resources exist to make it possible for both spaces to exist in tandem? And where do the artists fit within this; how do they create within/for/in opposition to these two spaces?

'A virus breaks, and so we are delivered into the time and space of brokenness. Inevitably, the presence of a virus shakes us into awareness of our bodies and being. The presence of a virus prompts an awakening. This comes through the recognition that the loop between

online and away from keyboard (in real life) is not seamless. Rather through its fissures and faults, the virus makes brokenness a space, placing us within the break itself' (Glitch Feminism pg. 112)

It seems that there is a tension between pre-pandemic times and 'in-pandemic' times, between the physical and the digital spaces, which it can be said mirrors the tension that exists for those that are part of/within the institution versus those who are outside the institution. I see/feel this tension as Shama and I have explored the possibilities for collaboration – me as a Black curator in residence (temporarily) within an art institution and Shama as an independent curator utilising the digital space as a site of resistance to art institutions. This tension speaks of the complexity of spaces and how people can and cannot exist within them. And yet this tension can also be a vehicle that we can travel in as we explore the building of new spaces at this moment of awakening.

References:

Legacy Russell '*Glitch Feminism – A manifesto*', 2020