WHOSE HERITAGE? RESEARCH RESIDENCY PROGRAMME

A Culture& programme offering residencies to new diverse arts professionals at leading arts and heritage organisations.

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'Unless the younger generation has access to...cultural repertoires and can understand and practice them, to some extent at least, from the inside, they will lack the resources – the cultural capital – of their own 'heritage', as a base from which to engage other traditions.'

The Open Call

Sandra Shakespeare

Whose Heritage? Residencies were undertaken by New Museum School graduates at the following National Trust sites: Sutton House, 575 Wandsworth Road in London, Runnymede & Ankwerwyke and Clandon Park in Surrey. Online organisations Art UK and the Collections Trust and Milton’s Cottage Museum in Buckinghamshire. Researchers brought diverse perspectives to specific areas of research at each organisation. Each researcher was mentored by curatorial, research, or interpretation staff in their quest to reveal new narratives behind objects and sites to connect meaningfully with diverse audiences - those communities who might not feel the collections or sites are ‘for them’.

Intersectionality
Decolonisation
Activism

Residencies allowed researchers creative opportunities for the interrogation language and terminology, traditionally used when classifying or describing objects. The reports capture this tension with contemporary forms of decolonisation practice to challenge accepted institutional practice. For example: Sutton House’s intangible history linked to ‘squatter activism’ explored local communities and new insights conveyed through archives, protest banners and posters through a digital zine. This ezine also speaks to Gen Z, the accessibility and consumption of heritage through online digital media expressed through non-conformist DIY art forms.

Or with Art UK and research into Bi-visibility: the importance of bisexual+ representation in UK art collections. At 575 Wandsworth Road research and re-interpretation of the times and life of the owner Khadambi Asalache will help enhance and understand how BAME visitors experience topophilia at this site.

Whose Heritage? Residencies:
- Revealed new narratives behind objects, collections, sites, and monuments in ways that connect meaningfully with diverse audiences
- Brought new research and interpretation to heritage assets
- Illustrated the value of a diverse workforce
- Supported the careers of graduates through an outcome driven residency with leading heritage organisations
- Shared knowledge with the wider sector with work and outcomes on a new online platform this provides the context for the broader debate of diversity issues across the arts and heritage sector.
Bayryam Mustafa Bayryamali is a London based Bulgarian Turkish visual researcher, journalist, facilitator and art activist born in 1997. Through his work, he explores the themes of memory, reconciliation and participation through photography and in gallery context. As a child of Bulgarian Turks who experienced ethnic cleansing during the communist regime in Bulgaria, his practice deals with issues of new world borders, il/legal identities and intergenerational trauma. In his recent practice Bayr(y)am challenges the imperial condition of Western art galleries and museums through advocacy and boycott.
Residencies Report

The aim of this research is to propose a self-reflexive approach to working with marginalised communities in Milton’s Cottage to collate various answers of what paradise represents to migrant communities in the UK. During a future workshop session which will be held in early 2022 depending on COVID-19 reactions and the availability of Milton’s Cottage with participants which will include a live reading and discussion of John Milton’s Paradise Regained, workshop facilitators will pose questions to the public. The core of this research will be informed by Tina Campt’s concept of black futurity - with a future that hasn’t happened yet but it must while accounting a persistent enactment of premature black mortality. After these answers are collated, they will be integrated in my final research output. They will be an integral part of drafting a method of reading Paradise Regained in a diasporic voice, a voice that often has been set aside on the margins. During the half-day workshop, participants from migrant and refugee backgrounds will be encouraged to read collectively the first chapter of “Paradise Regained” by John Milton, subsequently they will be asked follow up questions that will tackle what paradise would look like in the current socio-political and their personal context.

During the suggested workshop which will take place in Milton’s cottage in early 2022, I take the idea of paradise and what is to regain paradise in the current socio-political context of multiple crises that we face. The suggestive title of regaining paradise implies that paradise in itself is not a faraway place that is inaccessible to the individual. Moreover, by centering the voices and experiences of immigrants in the UK, this reading session and the follow up conversation aims to look at the liberation of the margin of society as the liberation of the entire world in a utopian future.

“Paradise Regained”, the title I have been researching for the last 3 months, is a poem by English poet John Milton, published in 1671. When the Restoration of Charles II in May 1660 crushed Milton’s political hopes – pursued for twenty years in polemic tracts and service to the English Republic – he did not, as is sometimes supposed, abandon his Reformist ideals for a purely spiritual or aesthetic ‘paradise within’. Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes are superlative artistic achievements addressed to the ages, but as well, they undertake a strenuous project of educating readers in the virtues, values and attitudes that make a people worthy of liberty, exercising them in rigorous judgment, imaginative apprehension and choice. They also encourage Milton’s countrymen to think again and think better about the ideological and polemic controversies of the English Civil War and its aftermath. Milton’s example of artistic excellence coupled with Reformist political engagement was a profound influence on the Romantic poets – Blake, the young Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley – prompting Wordsworth’s apostrophe, ‘Milton! thou should’st be living at this hour: / England hath need of thee.’

During my research, I was also interested in looking at the life and broader work of the English poet. In John Milton’s biography written by Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, he appears ‘as flawed, self-contradictory, self-serving, arrogant, passionate, ruthless, ambitious, and cunning. He is also among the most accomplished writers of the period, the most eloquent polemicist of the mid-century, and the author of the finest and most influential narrative poem in English, Paradise Lost, which the book examines in detail. What Milton achieved in the face ofcrippling adversity, blindness, bereavement, and political eclipse, remains wondrous. Here is a fascinating biography of this towering literary figure – the first new serious study in forty years – one that profoundly challenges the received wisdom about one of England’s leading poets and thinkers.
Milton poured into his last three poems all that he had learned and thought and experienced about life, love, artistic creativity, religious faith, work, history, politics, man and woman, God and nature, liberty and tyranny, monarchy and republicanism, learning and wisdom. Also, some of the heterodox theological doctrines he worked out in his De Doctrina Christiana brought distinct literary benefits.

During my research, one of the key questions I explored revolved around holding a self-reflexive practice that critically interrogated my position as an art worker engaging with marginalized communities and the power dynamics in this exchange. Moreover, holding a workshop which aims to centre the experiences of migrants in a Western cultural setting built upon oppressive and exploitative practices proved to me to examine my positionality. By recognising that the forces of systemic racism and the legacies and continuation of empire, colonisation and extractive capitalism have created a culture sector characterised by borders, oppression, discrimination, and exploitation for migrant and racialised populations. I aim to reject the instrumentalisation of culture for social power, social cleansing and nationalist agenda and reject the false binary of the good and bad migrants.

Over the last few weeks of my residency, I was interested in the term utopia and in the work of Ashish Nandy’s and especially his book titled “Towards a Third World Utopia”. Nandy argues that any utopia should recognise oppression and liberation from oppression in its widest sense as the central problem in envisioning an alternative human future. Such a vision must recognize the continuity between the oppressed and oppressor and see the institutional and psychological liberation from outer oppression as a matter of self-realization. And if we try to tackle institutionalization of colonialism and imperialism we need to accept that the art and cultural sector in the Western world is the institutionalization of colonialism par excellence. One may ask if utopian possibilities in the art world exist without unlearning imperialism?

Even though art has the potential to help bring change by critically examining the conditions of the society we live in, we needn't forget how art and society were defined by the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. As bell hooks – a leading intersectional feminist – has described the ways in which race, gender, nation and class intersect and how they are functioning simultaneously, she argues that these systems define and shape how we see, imagine and present ourselves to the world which in turn is reflected in art and culture. While for centuries, art has historically functioned as a site of patronage, an asset class, and a marker of social stratification, museums in the Global North were a place for preserving heritage, exercising soft power over the colonized territories and showcasing looted objects of the colonized as a way to showcase cultural significance. Moreover, historically women and people who experienced stigmatization, racism and oppression were not given equal access or equitable opportunities to produce art. In light of the various calls for restitution of cultural power, it is essential to investigate how workers and practitioners in the cultural sector can take on these demands and imagine positive outcomes that dethrone the normative, destructive and exploitative cultural ecosystems.

The values that underpin my drive to advance cultural equity and racial justice are defined by my involvement in protest campaigns and supporting workers unions and strikes. In order to unlearn and re-imagine the ways in which museums and galleries are currently operating, firstly, we need to take a deeper look at the myth about the neutrality of museums and galleries. Laura Raicovich – a museum worker herself - in her book “The Culture Strike Art and Museum in an Age of Protest” interrogates the neutrality problem that is ever-present in the cultural sphere - the belief that museums and galleries are detached from the flawed society we live in and they can present an objective and educational spaces for the general public. Raicovich argues that the space of neutrality as a claim is generally a deterrent for...
any criticism, dissent or alternative history that the museums can present. Furthermore, the former director of the Queen’s Gallery describes how the neutrality myth and ideology are built upon hierarchical operating structures, curatorial choices and unjust treatment of staff, which are mostly unregistered by the general public, creating this imagined space of neutrality. However, as seen above the governance of museums has been defined by the limited access and representation people who experience sexism, classism, racisms and imperialism have.

As mentioned in the beginning of this report, the pinnacle of this proposed workshop would be Tina Campt’s idea of black futurity. When faced with the contested, unsung histories and possibilities for a new future, one is challenged with the question of envisioning ‘what will have had to happen’ as defined by the writings of Campt, as a black feminist, who is continuously exploring the praxis of futurity and the grammar of the future real conditional. In her book “Listening to Images” she grapples with a future that hasn’t happened yet but it must while accounting for a persistent enactment of premature black mortality. In doing so, she develops the method of listening to the sonic frequencies and haptic temporalities of images. Tina Campt begins the book by asking formational questions of how to create a radical visual archive of the African Diaspora and how to constitute it. Inspired by these inquiries and attempts of Campt, my research also looks at the act of collecting testimonials of migrants in the UK as we envisage a future where they are protagonists. Furthermore, following Tina Campt analysis of identification photos of black subjects, my research argues that the participants’ answer to the question of what paradise means to them has a resonance which is just under the threshold of hearing. By facilitating a self-reflexive conversation that accounts for the various power dynamics in play, I will attempt to practice radical listening in relation to the UK government’s Hostile Environment Policy and its impacts on health, education, housing, employment and the creation of culture. Informed by writing of Campt, the reading group and the participants will explore what are not just the contesting temporal and spatial modalities of the paradise as described by John Milton, but also the sonic frequencies of the utterances of possible utopian future. Finally, the output of the workshop will result in a documentation of the live reading we will hold inside the Cottage and the following facilitated conversation.