

Are curators still relevant? Transcript

Theresa Bergne 0:00

Hi everyone, my name is Theresa Bergne. I'm from Field Art Projects and a member of the Public Art Network or PAN UK. PAN UK is an emerging network for contemporary visual arts curators, managers and producers working in the public realm in the UK. And we're delighted to be working with UP Projects on the *Assembly* programme. I'm a white woman with curly short hair, I'm wearing a grey shirt and black jumper and sitting in a room with wallpaper from the 1960s. I identify as she/her. I'm pleased to welcome you to our third *Assembly* event, *Are curators still relevant?* *Assembly* is a series of four, free online learning and development events for curators, producers and public art practitioners that explores issues and good practice in relation to the expanded field of public art. The programme invites you, the public art community, to explore the role that public art can play in raising awareness and effecting change on issues around diversity, community cohesion and the digital realm as a public space. The aim of the programme is to encourage collective knowledge-sharing and peer-to-peer learning and across the four events we have put together a fantastic group of socially engaged curators, artists and practitioners, who will explore questions around: Who has agency? What is collaboration? What is the role of curators in socially engaged practice? And is the future of public art online? The speakers at event have also been invited to contribute a case study and we will be publishing the case studies as a downloadable resource on our website, and we'll also share them by e-mail to everyone who has attended the event. So, look out for those in a few weeks' time. If you haven't already done so, please do sign up for the last event in the series that will be taking place on 17th June. All details can be found on the UP Projects website. This programme has come about through a collaboration between UP Projects and the Public Art Network UK and is generously supported by the Art Fund and Arts Council of England. We are really delighted that this partnership has come to fruition. Both organisations have identified that they are very little development opportunities for public art curators and practitioners, particularly those working in the field of socially engaged practice. So often we're thrown in at the deep end and expected to learn on the job. Performing the many different roles required to develop and deliver this complex work with very little support or guidance, creating opportunities for knowledge-sharing and safe spaces to explore ideas around ethics, and best practice, or simply to ask questions, seems vital as the sector moves forward. Through and out of COVID, in order to continue to positively contribute to the communities and public contexts that we operate in. *Assembly* sits alongside *Constellations*, UP Projects' learning and development programme for artists who have an interest in socially engaged practice. Public Art

Network UK is an emerging organisation set up to develop a sector-specialist network that focuses on professional development as well as external advocacy, connections to artists, commissioners and the public. *Assembly* is the first of our initiatives and we are delighted to be shaping and facilitating this programme with UP Projects, a public art organisation that is committed to supporting artists to make new work, but has social relevance, engages communities and encourages learning. So, today's event explores the question: Are curators still relevant? In a field where activism, community involvement and participation play an increasingly important role in the way projects are developed, do curators need to rethink their roles? If we consider the expanded field of public art, are curators quipped with the tools to do their jobs imaginatively and practically? How is the burgeoning growth of curating course affecting the sector? To help us unpick all of this I'm delighted to introduce, Jes Fernie our chair for today's discussion. Jes is an independent curator and writer with 25 years' experience of working with galleries, architectural practices and public realm organisations on public programmes, commissioning schemes, exhibitions and residency projects across the UK and abroad. Jes is also a member of PAN UK and is interested in an expansive idea of contemporary artistic practice which encompasses dialogue, research and engagement. She already she collaborates with art on texts, conversations and projects and often commissions experimental texts by writers for programmes. Jes will be joined by four fantastic speakers: Laurie Peake, Director of Super Slow Way; Kiera Blakey, Head of Exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary; Bolanle Tajudeen, Independent Curator and art advisory and Rachel Anderson, Caretake with *Idle Women*. In a change to the advertised programme, Cedar Lewisohn will not be joining us today. So, I'm delighted to hand over to Jes to introduce the speakers in more detail.

Jes Fernie 5:13

Thanks so much, thank you Theresa. And hello everyone. Thanks to you all for joining us, we've been pretty overwhelmed to the response of this series of talks, I have to say, it has been really heartening and it shows that there is a real need for discussion around a lot of these topics, considering the many different ways that we now work. And we did originally conceive this programme as a series of in-person events which were going to be based in Bristol and London but now that they are live, it seems so much more expansive and so much more possibilities for national and international conversation. So, please feel free to say hello in the Q&A chat. Nice to see where everyone is coming from. I can see someone from Minneapolis, Missouri, Bath. It's really nice to see where everyone is joining us from today. I'm really happy to be chairing today's event and I have been looking for to this discussion which I think is so timely and very meaty on many different levels. We are really keen to get a broad range of views and responses about contemporary curatorial practice and experiences and, please, as Theresa says, we have speakers from across the UK, who approach their work in very, very different

ways. As you will have seen, when you came into The Hall, there is a Slido poll which poses the question: "Which word or two words best describes your role?" And if you haven't done so it would be great to see what your response is. It is really nice to see what people are saying. I think independent curator and project manager at the moment seem like they are tussling for prominence. But, what did I see - firefighter, I really liked sieve - that was another one. That's great I particularly feel like a sieve on many occasions. So, before I get into the brief introductions of the issues, can I ask each of our speakers to say their name, where they're joining us from and describe their appearance? I will start, my name's Jes Fernie. I am a middle-aged white woman with short grey hair, black glasses and I'm in my garden shed in Colchester in Essex and the sun is shining, miracle! Rachel, can I ask you to describe yourself?

Rachel Anderson 7:44

Hello. I'm a white woman in my 40s. I also have short hair. I'm wearing a black T-shirt and sitting in a room in a big industrial mill in Accrington, which is a small town in Lancashire, situated between the Pennines the Peak District, the Yorkshire Dales, not far from Manchester.

Jes Fernie 8:07

Perfect, thank you. Bolanle? You have turned yourself off mute.

Bolanle Tajudeen 8:15

That would be great. My name is Bolanle Tajudeen. I am a Black dark-skinned woman, my pronouns are she/her, I currently have braids in and I'm wearing a brown-textured top. I am in London. And I'm really excited to be here.

Jes Fernie 8:34

Thanks so much - that's great! And Laurie?

Laurie Peake 8:38

Hi. I'm Laurie. I'm an old, white woman in my 60s, with grey shoulder-length hair and glasses. My pronouns are she/her. And I am sitting in the dining room that has become my office with a plain white, very badly plastered wall behind me.

Jes Fernie 9:07

Thank you, Laurie. And lastly, Kiera.

Kiera Blakey 9:11

Hi, everyone. My name is Kiera Blakey. I'm talking to you from my dining room in London with my books behind me. I have long dark hair and I'm in my mid-30s and I'm wearing a blue shirt.

Jes Fernie 9:24

Thank you. Welcome to you all. So, if we can consider the ways that socially engaged practice and the field of public art has really expanded in recent years, And in that, I have to say over the last two, three years even, it's just kind of exploded to include all sorts of different practice, such as activism, social justice movements, community involvement, a much bigger emphasis on co-production, even rather than collaboration, sort of reducing...levelling out of the hierarchies involved in a lot of these projects. Process, engagement, participation, and then also the introduction of performance, experimental writing and digital projects. And we're really here to consider whether we are equipped, with the tools, to do our job imaginatively and practically, given this extraordinary explosion. And we want to get a sense of how the role of curators, producers and facilitators, firefighters, sieves, whatever we call ourselves, is changing, whether we need to rethink these roles. The education we receive, the way we talk about what we do. Are we in fact fit-for-purpose, or the best people to do our jobs? And it is a genuine question that I personally have grappled with, over recent years. And we're also really interested to find out from our speakers and maybe from you later how the development of artistic practice has influenced our approach to our work. And, of course we would like to hear from you in general, So as I said please feel free to drop us questions throughout the event in the Q&A chat on Slido or you can raise your hand during the Q&A session if you would like to talk to us direct. We have designed this programme of talks to be a peer-to-peer discussion, so please do give us your thoughts and responses and ideas. And just to let you know, I'll be bringing together the threads of each conversation in this series of *Assembly* talks in a document after the last event next month, which will include input from audience members. So, it would be great to get your responses into that document in some way. After the presentations, we will have a chat between us, so that will be around 12.45 and then we can open up for you all until 1.15 and then you can go and get your lunch. So, our first speaker is Rachel Anderson, who is an artist who creates contemporary public art projects outside of and in critical relation to the institution. In 2015, in partnership with Cis O'Boyle she established *Idle Women* as a new artistic collaboration based in the North West of England. Initiated as a one-off project to create and tour a narrow-boat, the project has developed into a complex body of connected work, made in collaboration with a really incredible broad range of women. It's now in its sixth year and has included the part-demolition and reconstructions of a building in St Helens with tradeswomen passing on brick laying, electronics and plumbing skills to local women. Dismantling and reconstructions of a Land Rover defender in mechanics workshop for women and current projects include the transformation of a strip of canal in Lancashire into the UK's first medicinal herb garden for women. And just to give you a sense of the background, before Rachel started that project, all of her practices is informed by her experiences as a youth worker on the Queensbridge estate in east London. She also established the education and outreach programme at South London Gallery

and spent eight years as a producer of collaborative projects at Artangel. Now I have to say that I wouldn't generally go into sort of you know, extended biogs for speakers at an event I'm chairing. But for this event, I think it is really important that everyone gets the sense of the incredible depth and background, knowledge and experience that each speaker has, so bear with me. And it's all just incredible stuff. So over to you, Rachel.

Rachel Anderson 13:48

Hello. Thank you. Thanks for having me. This is the first time I have done a talk to my computer screen. And it is very counter-intuitive. So, bear with me. I'm sure we all feel similar. So I'm going to, I think I want to just talk a little bit about the thinking behind the work that I have done for a long time and particularly how it's applied with *Idle Women*. What I'm going to talk about is a sort of collection of articulation of practice, that has been informed by lots and lots of collaborators over the years and lots of experiences and particularly as articulated, at the moment, through the work that Cis and I do together directly with *Idle Women*. So, I'm going to start by saying, that it's quite heavy. If you are feeling fragile today, you don't have to listen. Right. Look after yourselves, you know. It makes me feel fragile, but I also want to say that even though it is quite heavy and serious and perhaps some would even say negative, I actually think it comes from a position of absolute love and positivity and action for change. So, we can't make those things without looking honestly at the problems that are around us and in our sector. So, it is a collection of problems, I suppose. And I kind of have written it. I wouldn't normally read but I want to do well for you, I will read from my notes. So, I apologise if it's a bit stiff. So I want it start by saying that Cis and I left the London art scene after a culmination of problems and moments, I think we both felt that we could be in it and make change like many others do feel that we can change from within. And there was some breaking points and we said - you know what, we need to exit and do this differently on our own terms. So, I'm going to start by talking about context. The first thing I think we have to name is that context is everything. The first context that we live in, try to work in and survive in is the white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy. And this is a system that profits from division, self-loathing, hierarchy, violence and disaster. So, this is the first context we're in and we're making work. Every aspect of our lives is affected by these power dynamics and values. Whether we resist them or not, they affect our past, present and future. They dictate the global systemic order. So, anything we do to affect or disrupt that order, is in itself seismic, and at the same time, hopelessly inadequate. How does this context play out on a global, national and local level? What are the particular struggles of our places? Whether it's death sentences for homosexuals in Uganda, the criminalisation of pregnancy in the USA, the weaponization of rape in Ethiopia or the Irish border. How do these affect the day-to-day lives of people trying to live? What does ten years of austerity translate to in our towns, neighbourhoods, homes and bodies? How does it affect our

behaviours, our health, our relationships, sense of self, capacity? How do we understand ourselves and each other in this context? Belonging. In the past 20 years, I've been employed under various definitions or trends: Outreach, education, inclusion, community work, diversity. These definitions, on their own, are okay, maybe even helpful at times, but they are born from a system that doesn't want to deconstruct its own role in why they are "needed". And isn't prepared to change. So, their application maintains the hierarchy established by the context. Cis and I, we talk about belonging. Everyone has an equal right to belong. We have a rightful place, as we are, on our own terms. Our experience is valid and is essential. And more than that, these things that we are made to feel less than, and marginalised for, are also our power. Our complex skills, our knowledge, our adaptability, our connections, and the languages that can't be learned by others. Creatively we, and I mean "we", are amazing. Our work is valid, in its own terms, it's relevant. It's essential. It's current and transformative. We don't need institutional validation or plinths, or stiff dinner parties, polished productions and obscene budgets in order to harness our creativity. We are needed. The institution. The institution, instated by and to uphold the context is a coded, hierarchical system. I learned at Artangel, which is a sort of famous public production company that sort of, is well-established for making work outside of the institution. Working there I learned that outside of the institution is another institution and beyond that institution, another institution and so on. There are no sort of ends to the institution. When I left Artangel and the arts in a sort of formal way, I realised that I also carry the institution within me. Its values have shaped and moulded me. When I look for permission and validation, when I fail, when I expect help or justice or change and I am disappointed. When I expect better. When I want to dominate or win or dismiss or control, I summon the institution, the internalised institution. I'm going to share a description about corrosive control. It's actually a women's sector piece of text about leaving violence, exiting violence but actually, if we also apply it to the institution, I wonder how many of us recognise these conditions? So, coercive control: undermines you in small culminating ways which erode your self-confidence. Undermines your independence, not permitted to make decisions or take action on your own. Makes you believe you cannot survive without them. Holds all financial control and power, gives you an allowance, which is just enough to keep you alive but not enough for you to build something on your own. Maintains an authoritative judgemental voice, makes you build up a level of insecurity. So that you fear rejection, violence or punishment. Makes you believe that you will be nothing without them, you won't, can't exist on your own. Withholds positive feedback or encouragement, so that you try harder to earn it. Corrodes confidence to such an extent that you take responsibility for harms done against you and believe yourself at fault. You try harder. The disobedient are mad, bad or dangerous. So instead of trying to fit in or change, we occupy the edges and with other outsiders, with other outsiders we start with boundaries, we push them and work with the tension and the abundance of the freedom and the honesty of

the unnoticed spaces and people and places. I hope I'm doing OK for time; I have no idea.

Jes Fernie 22:24

You have run over time, but you are so good, you can have the rest of the time on the planet.

Rachel Anderson 22:29

I think I'm going to skip. I've actually got a little tiny, I've got one more section. I wanted to talk about attempting horizontally. This is my Pyramid of Power. This is the dominant education system for the last 20 years in the arts. Right at the bottom here is the community or the individual. Above it is the artist or service provider. You can put whatever titles you want here. Here's the commissioner, here's the funder and authority and here's the government or corporate control. These are the dynamics that we work with and look how little say the individual has in this art commissioning model that we work with. I'm interested in putting it on the side. I'm happy for all of those people to have a voice but they should be equal voices. Individuals should have as much say and value in a conversation about what we are creating together as anyone else. As collaborators, we work with third space. We want to share and co-create a value. We can't know what we're going to make, until we begin. It's a process in which every moment and every detail matter. The smallest, invisible detail can undermine the integrity of co-creation. These are two quotes that I want to say that I've always used; this one is by Rumi "Beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing there is a field, I'll meet you there.". The second is by Layla Watson; "If you've come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." Cis and I talk about hijacking resources. There are very little to no money for the things that we need in our communities. There's very little money for education, there's little money for food and nutrition, for social space, for youth work. But there is money for art. So, how do we hijack the resources of the art world and redistribute it and make it useful and meaningful? Art is meant to be a public resource. Why then does it directly benefit and resource the wealthy? For art to be public, it should resource and benefit all people and that will require a reconfiguration of the institution's terms and values which can't be done to people but must be done by us. We don't want superficial moments on streets. Art made of overpriced sparklers. We want a depth and power of art, its longevity. Its embedded presence in our lives, its resources and solutions, its transformation. Okay, I'm going to stop there.

Jes Fernie 25:18

I don't know if you can see us Rachel, but we're all clapping. I'm sure the audience is, too. That was an incredibly powerful opening, thank you. We can go straight to our next speaker now Bolanle Tajudeen. And she is an independent curator and

educator which spent her career to date promoting artists from underrepresented groups, creating opportunities for alternative or expansive narratives to be told. At university in 2015, she launched *Black Blossoms*, a platform designed to increase the visibility of Black women artists, through a programme of exhibitions, talks and screenings. In 2020, she established *Black Blossoms School of Art & Culture* to decolonise and disrupt the euro centric narrative predominant in the UK education system. And the amazing short courses are really worth checking out, they include *Curating Black Art*, *A Taste of Black British Theatre* and *Britain's Caribbean Artist Movements*. Bolanle has recently worked as an independent curator with Kensington and Chelsea Art Week on a mural programme, on projects with Tate and has devised and teaches *Art in the Age of Black Girl Magic*, a course that explores the historical and contemporary practices of Black women artists. Bolanle, welcome.

Bolanle Tajudeen 26:42

Thank you so much. Firstly, I would like really to applaud Rachel so much. Thank you for that opening statement. I actually feel quite tearful listening to that. So, thank you so much for providing a really strong context in the importance of talks like this. So, I have never had a job in the artworld, as some with like put it. I have never actually had a full-time or part-time permanent role in an institution. I have applied for roles. I have never got it. And last year, during the pandemic, when Arts Council said you could apply for the 2,500, many of us applied, artists and curators. I remember putting on the application form that the barriers in the art world mean people who look like me have to always work from outside of the art world, which means that I am not secure in my position and I don't want to have to leave the art world in order to make money. I want to continue working within the arts. And listening to Rachel talk this morning, it strikes me that, even with, outside of the art world, I feel like gaslighted most of the time. I still don't feel always 100% supported on the projects I bring to the table, although I see many institutions copying me, to say - I don't want to be like, yeah, everyone is copying me, but I have seen this trend of let's promote and programme more Black artists from Black/BAME...Black, non-binary or Black women artists and this wasn't the case when I first started my career. So, there's definitely that trend, like, from that there is a lot of stealing from grassroots movements. So, I'm going to - we were send a set of questions and I'm going to answer the question. I feel quite nervous now, after Rachel. I feel a bit emotional as well. So, I'm going to quickly look at my notes again. I'm going to talk about how I describe myself, whether I call myself a curator or a creative producer. I don't actually think it matters, but what I think is really interesting is that this term "curator" has historically been used by white men. And I was doing some research today and what I came across was that, from around 2013, this term "curator" has been called into kind of...There's been, people have been wondering, can everyone be a curator? Why does everything need to be curated and blah, blah, blah. And what I think is really interesting is that around

2013, I started my career in 2015, is that as soon as there's been more women, more Black people taking on the title of curator, it's like all of a sudden, we don't want curators no more, you know, is or what you doing curation, you know, are you doing something else? And like I said to Jes before, literally curation is only 10% of the work. I think it is important it take ownership of the word and take it back from the powers that be that probably wouldn't want to call ourselves curators, even though we are working within the boundaries of other disciplines as well. It's important that I call myself a curator. And it's important that I call myself a curator because of the artists that I work with because I want them to feel confident in calling themselves artists. And I want them to feel confident in the industry and I want people who look like me who are younger or even older to also think - okay, if she's a curator, I can also curate, too. And that's really important. And lastly, I want to pick up on how I like to work. I've always tried to work sideways. I don't really like to network up. And I say this all the time. I think networking sideways, with your peers, and working collaboratively, with your peers on projects are super, super important. Maybe more so important than trying to snag a meeting with the head of Tate?

Jes Fernie 31:30

Thank you Bolanle, and a lot of those issues we discussed in the previous event, if anyone has not attended these events, they're available on the UP Projects' website. There's lots of great input from the audience on that. So, our next speaker is Laurie Peake. Laurie has an incredible track record of working on large-scale projects in public spaces, with a huge range of artists and communities. She's currently the director of Super Slow Way, a long-term project that brings local people together with artists to explore the Leeds & Liverpool Canal corridor in Pennine Lancashire and Laurie came to Super Slow Way after working with Metabolic Studio in Los Angeles to deliver an ambitious project on the LA River. Which sounds really glamorous, I don't know if it was. Before that she was Director of Projects and Programmes at Liverpool Biennial for ten years where she worked on a range of temporary and permanent commissions, including the incredible *2Up2Down* project with Jeanne Van Heeswijk, and Community Land Trust and bakery in Liverpool that is still around today and in the 1980s Laurie was on a small team that set up Tate Liverpool. So, an incredible mix of projects and career, we are very lucky to have your voice in the mix here, especially because I imagine Laurie you've seen a hell of a lot of changes in the last 30 years. Over to you.

Laurie Peake 33:04

Yeh, I think it is 40 years, actually, it feels like a very high mountain, you know that you climb up and you look back at the landscape and it's changed immeasurably. So, I was going to kind of try and answer the questions you have posed but I think Rachel's thrown down the gauntlet in, you know, looking at the much, much bigger issues that shape this conversation. And I suppose the easiest way - sorry, I don't

know if you can see the images that I put up to go on screen? There we are. So, this is an image, I promise not to talk directly about projects, but this is an image from a project that we started good knows when, in Liverpool with Jeanne Van Heeswijk. A Dutch artist. And she would never take full credit for this work. All her work is done in collaboration with the communities that she works with. And this image is Fred Brown is on the right, the tall guy, who is one of the residents in Anfield, whose neighbourhood was being decimated by the housing market renewal initiative. And this was part of, it's still going on, you know it's probably 12 years old now, the project and it has come through several iterations. But I chose this image because, you know, who is the object? Who is the subject? Who is the artist? Who is the curator? And the Anfield Home Tour was basically a performative tour, written, developed and performed by the residents. And Fred lived in a multi-deprived neighbourhood. Fred was just one of the many residents who worked with many complex issues and sadly, actually died a year or two after this picture. But he - but this was during the Biennale, so the art world visitors came to take the tour and it ended with Fred's amazing performance at the end of it and swept everybody off their feet. So, I don't care what I call myself, but I take a very old-fashioned view of the word curator, the meaning of the word "curator" that just simply means "to care for". And I care deeply for the people I work with. And from, you know - and it doesn't matter to me whether it's caring for the artist or caring for the people that the artist is working for. And particularly caring, deeply, for the finished artwork. So, there is that constant tight rope between the ethics and aesthetics, which we all take great care in, in balancing that and giving equal weight to those two things. Fast-forward to 2015-2016 when I came to East Lancashire where I was born and bred, and as part of, to run one Arts Council's Creative People and Places programme and our programme was spans four Local Authorities from Pendle to Blackburn and they are all in the kind of top 10 of the multiple-deprivation indices and all the attendant health problems and social problems that come as symptoms of that poverty. And so we, our programme was a £2 million programme and I was very conscious that there was, you know, we had to use that money very, very wisely. It had to do, it had to work. It had to be able to be transformative, it had to be able to have meaning in people's lives and bring people together who wouldn't normally come together, to find a collective voice to actually make a noise and make a difference and there are several projects, I think that we've done that with, including *Shapes of Water*, *Sounds of Hope* which we did with Suzanne Lacy, who was in the last slide that brought, you know, our very device, but very complex community together. That have, you know, marginalised, you know, multiple marginalised organisations. Including this group that grew and grew and group with Jamie Holman's project, *Live The Dream* which reappropriated the spaces where the grandparents and great grandparents of the people who live here now worked, working in the mills and the warehouses and in the '80s they took over reappropriated those spaces at the, for the scenes of raids, to be producers and creators within those spaces that would give them joy and

agency. I think I need to stop there, sorry. I know I've gone over. But I think just in terms of the questions that I haven't directly answered, but one of them is: Do you feel equipped to do your job? And yeah, I feel entirely equipped because, you know, you just, you stick to your values and your principles and that's for me, all the equipment you need. I think, you know, my career trajectory, I had a very traditional art history education at the Courtauld Institute and went straight into a job at the Tate in the mid-'80s, when there was only Tate at Millbank and the curator's job then was largely to be invisible. The exhibitions curated were things of consumption to be consumed by a certain public. Then when we set up Tate Liverpool, I was the one to do the outreach with the Toxteth community who had rioted in 1981 and had capitalised Michael Heseltine into developing the Mersey Development Fund and that enabled Tate to move up to the Albert Dock and regenerate the dock and the warehouse and the Toxteth community, it rightly felt that it added insult to injury that the money that they'd brought, by virtue of their actions, was being spent on a gallery that obviously, whose collection was built in and acquired by a man who had made his money on the back of sugar and slavery. And I think it was at that point that I realised that the work had to be out in the world and that the world had to challenge that institution. Thank you.

Jes Fernie 42:29

Thank you so much, Laurie. Let me introduce our next speaker, Kiera Blakey. Kiera has recently moved from her role as curator for the Art on the Underground programme in London to become Head of Exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary. In her five years at Art on the Underground she has worked on a huge range of public commissions with very many different publics, community groups, contexts and artists, including Assemble and Matthew Raw on the coffee outlet at Seven Sisters, that include traineeships for local people. Larry Achiampong on a series of new roundels for Westminster tube station And more recently with Linder on performance work on a set of hoardings at Southwark station. The list is very long, and no doubt involved her wearing multiple hats and talking to multiple different people in many different languages and constituents. And before Kiera worked on Art on the Underground Kiera she was Research and Public Programmes Curator at London School of Economics where she also developed her own freelance projects which have included one with Elisabeth Wild at Focal Point Gallery in Southend Karen Cunnigham at the Showroom in London. Over to you Kiera.

Kiera Blakey 43:50

Hi to everyone, thanks to all the speakers, it's great to hear people speaking honestly. I'm going to try to talk succinctly because I think there's probably a lot of crossover, I'm to talk a bit more practically, maybe. I have worked as a curator or organiser across public programmes, exhibitions and the public realm which is where I have my most extensive experience and I really struggled with what

direction to take in my place in the art world and I didn't get a permanent job or a full-time job until I was in my early 30s, I really struggled, I applied many, many times like we've heard before. I'm currently Head of Exhibitions doing maternity cover at Nottingham Contemporary and I previously worked for six years at Art on the Underground as Jes said. I'm going to come on to why this transition to a new job in the middle of a pandemic is relevant, shortly. So, in terms of my experience as a curator, I was specifically interested in commissioning artists, to support the production of new work. And I'm interested in working in a way that's site specific and bears meaning to its location and audience. So, I've had great pleasure recently working on exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary and not least because artists help us see the world, which is really important to me, artists, artists, artists. So, it leads me to Jes' provocation: Are curators still relevant? Absolutely - I think yes. I don't necessarily think or care so much about the title. I think it's perhaps skewed. But I think the work we do is important. And I wanted to reflect on something I read recently, that Rosalie Goldberg, a performance scholar and a curator of performance art said about, Curators in the practice been aching to writing. So, she said something along the lines of "A curator being a mouth piece, a kind of translator of thoughts, a conduit for artists' ideas." And she talked about the huge sense of responsibility to serving the artists in their work, the curator must know the history of each artist, the larger history to provide context and she thinks about curating and writing as being close, the similarities in the research that's involved and the thinking that goes into writing and editing and the thinking around what material makes the cut. So you have to turn that information into something accessible, I suppose, into a story that enthrals and I also want to say something about, you know you get really close to artists, they often tell you things that they might not want it say out loud in public, I think it as a detective work, where you are kind of unravelling all kinds of stories and piecing those bits back together so that the artist's ideas are front and centre. Of course, a curator means different things to different people so I'm purely speaking from my own experience and interests. Which is someone without a curating degree and a pretty crap degree in fine art painting, I didn't necessarily set out to be a curator but really to work with artists and I wanted to refer to something somebody said to me recently - I don't think they're a very good curator. It made me think - what is a curator? And it kind of really pissed me off, really. My experience is incredibly broad, it's incredibly labour intensive, I manage budgets, legal contracts, incessant funding applications, stakeholders, communities, I write, I manage press, registrar duties, press. The list is kind of pretty exhaustive and I had to learn it all on the job. It is pretty minimal time spent researching and I thought a lot recently about my own anxieties around whether that means I'm not a proper curator and I think a lot about when people say things about how that works below them, or they won't do this and that because it is not what curators do. There's a lot of labour in putting together commissions in the public realm and it's exhausting and if I'm really honest, it's why I left Art on the Underground and I wanted to go where somewhere

where I thought we were all working from the same position with the same goal. Perhaps more for me. But I was really tired, to make things happen and to get people on side. I'm not criticising Art on the Underground at all. It was incredible in many ways, it's really one of the last great bastions of public service, transport for London. It's incredibly well unionised and probably the most diverse place I'll ever work and it forced me out of my art bubble for sure. There were budgets, we could work slowly, we could pay artists properly, which feels really quite pertinent following the pandemic. But there wasn't any urgency because there was no competition. It had its own priorities, same funding, same sites. And while the incessant round of funding bids and accountability is exhausting, perhaps it creates drive and ambition? Perhaps a bit controversial. Do I feel equipped? I do, but I have learnt how to ask for help and how to stand up for myself. And it's taken me a long time to gain confidence. There's things I do that I don't feel confident about. I'm senior, I'm currently in a senior position at a museum, and I don't feel equipped to deal with anti-racist pledge work we're doing, for example, although I do feel supported in seeking out that support. I wanted to end this platform by putting artists front and centre, why aren't we paying people more? Why are we spending so much money on shipping, for example? I wanted to talk about accessing and inclusion. I've been reading a really incredible book by George Asegry he's an activist and artist...about protesting the financial system we all operate under and kind of resisting, consuming in public. So, she talks about the queues outside of the shops when the current pandemic starts to lift and our need to fill ourselves to avoid our pain and if we can stop consuming in public space, can we start listening to one another and create inclusive spaces? She said - "to take care of the space is to resist choosing those who know more than others, between those who are already included and those who want to belong, to build the spec for the space, not because it is yours, because it's everyone's and this could create the momentum that would enable skills and interests to emerge and pleasure and joy to appear." Thank you.

Jes Fernie 50:20

Thank you so much Kiera. And thanks so much to all of our speakers. I think I speak for everyone in the audience and in the Q&A that it's been - it has actually taken me, you know, a bit by surprise, as Bolanle said, it's pretty emotional. And I think there are many times where we just kind of, you know, we just trudge along and do our jobs but there are moments when we kind of rise above and consider these issues and actually, you know it can be quite painful and I really want to thank all of you for just being so incredibly honest. It's really, really useful, especially at this moment. So, for the audience, you will see that there's another, there's a question in the poll which we have posed which is: "Which word or words best describes your role?" Sorry, this is the next question: "Do you feel equipped to do your job?" which some of the speakers have addressed. I know it's a bit of a yes/no answer but if you would like to expand on that in the Slido bar, please do. That would be

great. Now I know we have lots of questions from the audience but yeah, let me just kick off with a few and just a sense of what the other speakers have kind of raised so far. There is, what Rachel said about the importance of context, is just, I think, incredibly appealing, something that we so often don't really consider. Honesty, ethics, you know, it is an absolutely fraught mine field, so much of the situations we enter in local community groups, it's something that we really need to consider. And Bolanle, your point about "terms", using the term curator. I think it's so useful at this moment, to just be reminded that the moment we start critiquing these terms is also the minute that other groups of people are coming into the frame and becoming part of the conversation and that has to be discussed. So, thank you so much for raising that and something that I wanted to ask Bolanle, you or Rachel, is: How we grapple with the fact that so much of what we do is unsustainable? I really understood from, I haven't done a huge number of socially engaged projects but so many of them are set at really unrealistic expectations, from outside agencies, from institutions and partners and from ourselves about, you know, what we should be achieving, which results, often, in burnout and exhaustion. And we worry about letting other people down constantly. So, does any of this ring true with you, Bolanle and the work you have been doing, sort of emotional overload and maybe the physical one as well?

Bolanle Tajudeen 53:31

I think definitely, pre-pandemic, however I think, I started the *Black Blossom School of Art & Culture* last year, as a way to make sure that the work I was doing could be sustained outside of institutional or any kind of government funding. I think there are many examples of, like, different movement with people of colour and they're given money and then it gets taken away and then they can't keep on going with their project. So, the school, for me is a way to make sure that I get paid and the teachers and tutors get paid and I'm able to work with artists in a way that, even if someone asks me to do a project, I don't have to think - I can't do this project, it is not enough money, because I have already created an income for myself outside of an institution. When Rachel spoke about institutions earlier, I did think - okay, the *Black Blossom School of Art & Culture* is its own institution, but it is an institution that started from me, as a Black woman, so therefore it is decolonised right from the very beginning, I don't have to battle with structures of white supremacy. So, yeah, I think a lot of the emotional labour comes with admin, if I'm honest, like that is the emotional labour of my work, like people e-mailing me, sending me loads of DMs and stuff like that. So you know, when Laurie earlier spoke about the role of the curator back in the day was to be quite absent, for me, the role, my role as a curator now is to be quite visible. Like I often find that I have to be very, very visible. And I think that's because of the emergence of the social media and how that impacts how, you know, the work is seen and what people are going to and sort of like, not only am I curating art, it's like curating culture as well, so it is far more, it's more labour-intensive that way because I'm trying to curate something

that hasn't necessarily been done - well it has been done because I don't want to forget all the great work that has been done but it always gets forgotten and for me, it's about creating stuff like that hasn't been forgotten and that it is embedded within the arts.

Jes Fernie 56:10

Perfect, a wonderful response, thank you Bolanle. I'm now really conscious of time. And also, really frustrated because, there is so much to discuss and I think this is, really, we shouldn't be looking you know to answer any of these questions, we should really be raising them as a sort of point of departure. So, I am going to jump straight to the Q&A now. Now if you've asked any questions in the chat, please do go on to the Q&A section because that is where we can sift them more realistically. So, there's one that we have to Bolanle and Rachel: What are your strategies for projects created with a horizontal structure? How do you make decisions and share workloads? Rachel, I'm wondering if I can go to you for that one?

Rachel Anderson 57:04

Um...I think it's; I think this is kind of like often a bit misunderstood when I say this. I think the main way I would describe it is that we have to all sit around a table together and equally have a role. That doesn't mean that no-one takes a lead. But it might be mean that leadership moves or changes and there are different times and place for different expertise to come forwards. So, it is a kind of fluidity, I suppose of practice but, absolutely, for me it's about saying - well, if we all sit around a table together, we will create something that is bigger than the sum of our parts and we don't know what that is, because none of us can imagine it on our own, we can only get there by a process together. That's it.

Jes Fernie 57:51

And that came out so much in the last talk with Samra Mayanja and Kerry Campbell, if anyone hasn't watched those, there were just so many lovely instances of kind of collaboration and listening and sort of co-creation, which is really heartening to hear.

Rachel Anderson 58:09

Sorry, I just thought that I also have to say that you can't do that without an analysis of power, so you can't do that without an analysis of inequality and actually how voices are heard in a space. I don't ever mean literally sitting around a table because definitely that's not a place of equality, you know voices have to be heard in different ways and processes have to be versatile and relevant. Yeh, sorry.

Jes Fernie 58:35

Thanks Rachel. Okay, I'm looking at the other questions now: from a curator's perspective, what does an institutional arts education add or not add, to a socially

engaged artist's practice? I think this is quite useful because I was looking at all of your backgrounds and they're all so different, you come from, I mean not extremely different but none of you - I don't think any of you have a "curating course" degree, do you? And I don't either. So we are free from the curating course discourse. But I think it's quite interesting to consider, you know what an arts education or what kind of education we have and how we feel it has equipped us to do our job in socially engaged practice? And maybe if there is anyone listening who is just thinking about sort of becoming involved in this field, you know what would you suggest that they do, in terms of their education? So, Kiera, can I go to you for that one?

Kiera Blakey 59:42

Sure. So, the question is around advice?

Jes Fernie 59:46

Not, well, advice but the question was from a curator's perspective what does an institutional arts education add to a socially engaged artist's practice?

Kiera Blakey 59:59

I mean? How to answer that. Not really interested in having a Curating MA or people that follow a specific path. I think for me I'm much more interested in people that have a kind of authentic sense of self. So, whether that means you have a degree in history or you have worked in social care, I think as long as there is some honesty in how you are approaching things, then you're always going to achieve something that is real and touches with people.

Jes Fernie 1:00:30

That's wonderful, an authentic sense of self. That's definitely worth re quoting. Okay, here is another question: How can we make curating more accessible and inclusive with respect to including disabled curators and therefore hopefully increasing voices of the work we see? Laurie, is there anything you wanted to say, or could I say about that, no worries if you don't? Have you worked with artists who, a disabled artist or disabled curators in the past? Or maybe how to amplify their voices within this strange context?

Laurie Peake 1:01:10

Yes, I have but, you know for me, it's trying to make, give equal weight to all voices in a project and the artist and the curator certainly, you know, do not need to be, nor should they be in my opinion, the loudest voice. So, it's also about expanding and supporting access of everyone involved in the creation and the delivery of a project. And just really going back to what Rachel said, you know that the space that you create, that gives people equal voice.

Jes Fernie 1:02:10

And was there anything, anything that any of the other panellists wanted to respond to that?

Bolanle Tajudeen 1:02:13

Yeh, I would like to add sometimes I actually don't feel like all voices need to be equal. So, on the Black Blossoms team, we have people with various access needs and from different, they have different gender identities as well. And I think I understand my position sometimes, I'm a cis Black woman so I have privileges, and obviously, not all privileges, but within the team I definitely have a privilege and I do like to platform the voices who I know don't necessarily get platformed higher than mine. And I do that by opening my networks to them and by giving them an opportunity that they might not get on working with say, white curators in an institution to expand their understanding of the art world. So, yeah, I think sometimes equality is about all being equal but I think, I don't like to think about equality from that term / point of view, I like to think about it from a view like - who has the privilege and who doesn't and what can we do to make that person more equal in a different scenario if they work within this team? So that's from my point of view anyway.

Jes Fernie 1:03:34

That's really useful - thank you Bolanle. Rachel, did you want it say anything?

Rachel Anderson 1:03:39

I just wanted to say in direct response to the question about sort of disabled curators and opportunity, there are some brilliant networks and projects and organisations and collaborations that are fighting really hard for survival and to do this work and I think one of the ways we can do it is to support them and work with them as well and recognise that the work is being done and enhance it, if we can.

Jes Fernie 1:04:05

Yeah, and we could maybe put some links on the chat, that would be really useful. We'll be able to offer that in some way. Okay, so I'm looking at the questions, we have a few minutes left. What do the panellists think in the growth of numbers in of artists who are also curators? Let me look at another question: Is the curatorial role now emphatically facilitative across roles and about giving advice? Kiera, maybe you can address this one. Do you feel like a facilitator?

Kiera Blakey 1:04:47

Yeah, I mean I think brilliant if artists are working as curators, I don't think that we even need to make that distinction. I think everybody has a stake and we've been thinking about it a lot in our institution, you know the quite historical way you might say "curated by", it infuriates me, so many people are involved by putting an

exhibition together and there is so much incredible labour involved. So, I yeh, think it's a great thing.

Jes Fernie 1:05:17

We have to wrap up really soon but the question I would really like to pose is: What has changed in the last year over this sort of incredibly strange, isolated period? Can I ask you if your view of your role, your sense of urgency, your sense of commitment, your sense of self in the world, you know whether the last year has changed anything and how you see things changing in the future? Laurie can I ask you first?

Laurie Peake 1:05:50

Well, yes. My experience is that it's all got so much more intense. So, the kind of workload seems to have accelerated because we don't have any gaps between meetings, etc. And certainly, in our experience, because there's all this sort of government knee-jerk reaction funding that has to be applied for in a matter of weeks for a lot of money that also has to be spent in a matter of months, that's been, that's been a very peculiar added intensity and pressure because obviously the need has gone so much greater out there. I mean our area here, Blackburn, Burnley, etc, you know we have been on near-permanent lockdown through this year. But you know, what we've had is really great experience with keeping in touch with all our groups on various platforms, mainly Zoom and WhatsApp and we weren't incredibly aware that, of digital exclusion and we've done, we've made great strides actually in being able to bring people along in the digital realm, you know, who had never been in it before. So, yeah but, like you, we launched a live project in real-life yesterday and I have got to say that feels fantastic!

Jes Fernie 1:07:42

I think that is such a nice note to end on. It was so lovely talking to Laurie yesterday, she was like - I have to go and do a launch. And it was a real-life launch with real-life people. So that just felt incredibly positive after this year of strangeness. We have to wrap up now - I'm being sent lots of urgent messages. Thank you so much to all of you for your incredible, I mean I have to say, just really humbling, thought-provoking responses and also to our audience and obviously we can't hope to answer all these questions, but I feel like we have kind of kickstarted a really important process. Sort of just at least pooling our thoughts and recognising what we are all doing and at least identifying some of the issues that we're grappling with. And obviously, it's clear that there is no blueprint for this job and there is a huge amount of just very problematic issues associated with it. And it feels like we are all absolutely relevant - we just have many different ways of delivering and thinking about that relevance. And that maybe what we need is a more kind of structured support system, an acknowledgement of the complexities of these projects and for that to be recognised within an art structure or funding

system. So, thank you all so much to the speakers. It's been a real joy to have this discussion with you and I'm going to hand over, finally to Theresa. Thank you.

Theresa Bergne 1:09:26

So, thank you so much to Jes, Laurie, Kiera, Bolanle and Rachel for this really important conversation and thank you so much for to the audience for participating. You'll see in the Slido bar a questionnaire we would be really grateful if you could complete before you leave. We hope to see you at the last of our *Assembly* events: *Is the future of public art online?* After a year of interacting with the world through our screens is this the point at which public art becomes something that is primarily experienced through the digital world rather than physical world? The event will be chaired by Siddharth Khajuria, Senior Producer at the Barbican. Do look out for the case studies from all of our speakers and for a recording of today's event on UP Project's YouTube channel. Do sign up to the mailing list for more information about *Assembly*, UP Projects and the future plans of the Public Art Network. And finally, another huge thank you to our amazing speakers, to the Art Fund and Arts Council of England for supporting the programme, to UP Projects for collaborating with us, particularly to Jes Fernie from Public Art Network and Emma Underhill and Elisabeth Del Prete from UP Projects. And lastly, I want to thank the fantastic technical team at UP Projects who've worked really hard to make this event possible today. Looking forward to seeing you at the next event, thank you.