

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Museums Are Finally Taking a Stand. But Can They Find Their Footing?

As cultural institutions scramble to declare their support for Black Lives Matter, their gestures have felt both self-aggrandizing and too little too late.



By **Holland Cotter**

June 11, 2020

The protests sparked by the public killing of George Floyd in police custody have added up, day by day, to a history-altering human rights movement, potentially the most consequential of the past 50 years. But they've left some of our history-writing and history-preserving institutions scrambling to find ways to join.

Our big art museums, still in lockdown, have offered the awkward spectacle of suddenly woke institutions competitively jostling to assert their "solidarity" with Black Lives Matter. And the gestures have felt both self-aggrandizing and too little too late.

There have been impassioned we-must-do-more statements on institutional home pages, though very little mention of what, precisely, the more might be. And there have been random postings of work by African-American artists. But, plugged in without commentary or historical context, these seem to have been pulled out of digital storage mostly to demonstrate the inclusiveness of a collection.

Somewhat more ambitiously, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington is helping organize a 24-hour, multi-venue presentation of a single work, Arthur Jafa's 2016 video "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death." The seven-minute piece is scheduled to stream, date still to be determined, simultaneously on the websites of at least 15 museums in the United States and abroad, most of which own editions of the work.



Lauryn Hill in a still from Arthur Jafa's video, which debuted in 2016. Arthur Jafa and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome

The video, a rapid-fire mash-up of images meant to suggest the brutalities and beauties of American, specifically African-American, life, is a powerful thing, on every level a tour de force. It is also has been fervently and unreservedly embraced by the mainstream — meaning predominantly white — art world, a fact that has troubled Mr. Jafa himself. In a 2018 interview with *The Guardian* he said:

“I started to feel like I was giving people this sort of microwave epiphany about blackness and I started feeling very suspect about it. After so many ‘I cried. I cried’, well, is that the measure of having processed it in a constructive way? I’m not sure it is.”

I’m not sure either. “Love Is the Message,” once you see beyond its visceral charge, is tough and prickly, peppered with ambiguities (not least the fact that it’s scored with a song by an avid supporter of the Trump presidency, Kanye West). It’s a work that should be discussed, analyzed, argued with — respected that way. Will streaming it in a continuous loop for a night and a day at a bunch of museums yield constructive readings, or just amount to a star turn of a kind the art world loves? We’ll see.

Another Washington institution, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, is tackling a primary theme of Mr. Jafa’s work, racism, head on with a new web portal, introduced in late May, called “Talking About Race.”

How To Be An Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi



A weave of video lectures, digital animations, instructional exercises and texts of varying density (PowerPoint lists; scholarly papers), the site describes itself as designed with an audience of “educators, parents and caregivers” in mind. The content is topic-driven and the subjects are broad: “Historical Foundations of Race,” “Bias,” “Whiteness,” “Being Antiracist.” The overall tone is TED Talk-smooth. But the ideas, advanced largely without polemics, are stimulating and accessible. By the time you’ve navigated the site, or even sampled parts of it, you know yourself as a racial being a little better.

The driving premise is that racism, with its lethal hostilities and microaggressions, is a foundational part of what we are, “an invisible system,” as the sociologist Peggy McIntosh describes it, “conferring dominance.” If you claim that racism isn’t a problem you have, that’s a problem, because there’s no middle ground. You’re either racist or antiracist, and to be antiracist requires vigilant work. In “Talking About Race,” several wise people — among them Bell Hooks, Ibram X. Kendi, and Bishop Desmond Tutu — say this in different ways, and suggest how you might approach the task.

bell hooks on interlocking systems of domination



Whatever the portal’s limitations — some of the talks sound canned, most of the graphics are bland — it’s the only focused take on the subject of race that I found in a museum since the Black Lives Matter protests erupted in May. Which raises the question of why is it left to a black-identified institution to address the matter? Because

race consciousness is widely assumed to be somehow a black issue, not a white one? Even people who once believed this can see, just from watching police violence and protests on recent the news, that they're wrong.

The leaders of our big art white-identified museums are among those ex-believers, to judge by the recent flood of breast-beating website statements pledging future change. I'd advise those leaders that the time for change is now. It can start with low-cost, no-risk tweaks, like turning those home pages into experimental spaces to showcase artists of color, present and past, known and unknown. And put artists in charge of what goes on there. They know far more about what's going on in art — and about being cool with change — than you do.

Focus instead on restructuring from within, and actually do it. Recruit nonwhite trustees, artists included. Hire nonwhite curators (and pay all your curators well). Strengthen ties with the communities of color around you, and listen to what they tell you they need. (After all, when you reopen, you're going to need new audiences.) Rewrite the stories your collections tell, and plan to rewrite them again, and again. Get familiar with machinery no one wants to touch — cultural restitution, divestment from destructive enterprises — and make it hum. None of this has to wait for the lockdown to end and your doors to reopen. Everything can be proposed, debated, decided and done from anywhere, any time — today — on Zoom.

The state of emergency we're in won't last forever. News cycles roll on; people get distracted. But anyone can see that after these torturous months and weeks, we're in a new place, a new phase of social history. Our museums should be ready to record it and preserve it, and be part of it.