

Soot, Smuts and Other Impurities

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When you work in the arts, or I'd guess any other ostensibly rarefied industry that trades on prestige as much as it does production, there are moments when the value of maintaining links to the outside becomes obvious. One of these was during the furore around Sonia Boyce's retrospective at Manchester Art Gallery in 2018. As part of an exhibition spanning her work from the 1990s and including new commissions, Boyce arranged with the museum to have one painting from their permanent displays temporarily removed, inviting visitors to consider and comment upon its removal. It was a straightforward and impermanent gesture remarking upon, amongst other things, how Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian ideals of beauty that hinge on colonial attitudes are often uncritically reproduced by institutions. This isn't a controversial point to be making now, and it wasn't then, or at least it needn't have been. If you've ever worked in a gallery or a museum, as an assistant, a technician, a curator, or as any member of staff who sees behind the scenes, the idea of taking down a painting and then putting it back up just isn't a big deal. It happens all the time. However, the vitriolic, hysterical media and public reaction to Boyce's intervention revealed the depth and strength of misconceptions around how cultural institutions are run, and what happens in them. These misconceptions haven't necessarily arisen from ignorance alone, but are actively encouraged and sustained by a media cycle whereby only the most dramatic, controversial and easily simplified areas of the arts are widely reported on, and the point is to generate a feedback loop of outrage and attention rather than to promote criticality and introspection. This is unlikely to come as news to anybody, though.

In the case of Boyce's intervention, where the painting removed was John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* accusations of censorship raged, with an academic writing to the Guardian likening the temporary removal of a single painting to the Nazis' treatment of modern art. The drama that played out on the pages of national newspapers is less relevant here than that which took place on personal social media pages, however, whereby people who rarely feel moved to comment about the programming of their local institutions expressed their dismay. This was a pivotal moment in my continually developing understanding of how art, whether historical or contemporary, and institutions, whether publicly funded or commercial relate to culture in general and political consciousness. It was at first surprising to me that people who otherwise prided themselves on being well informed and accurate, who in other circumstances I would turn to for political analysis and sociological insight, were making impassioned but ill-informed and irrelevant pronouncements about Boyce's intervention. I spent some time intervening, if only to be a voice of dissent amongst overwhelming agreement, explaining that the vast majority of art collections are kept in storage, and the choice of what goes on display is always at somebody's whim. Accusations of censorship seemed especially ridiculous at a time when numerous civic art collections were (and still are) being sold off to make up funding shortfalls caused by ideological austerity. Where is the outrage about the privatisation of publicly owned collections if the temporary removal of one painting is so upsetting?



This incident helped to crystallise my thinking around labour in the art world, it became clear that the way cultural organisations depend on an outward sheen of success and security is incompatible with the solidarity we must foment in order to meet our era's challenges. It is necessary to find better ways of conceptualising labour in the art world if we are to claim culture and heritage as part of the education and leisure we are all due, as I believe we should. Artists often express frustration that despite the whole edifice hinging upon their productivity, they are the least compensated, while professionals such as curators can enjoy fat salaries and job security. Meanwhile the other types of work that keep cultural institutions open: the cleaning, the invigilation, the record keeping, the construction of displays, the building management, is all but forgotten. It might be romantic to think of art as existing primarily between the artist and viewer, but it's also ignorant and unethical to pretend that a pleasurable aesthetic experience in Manchester Art Gallery's Victorian rooms could take place without an incredible amount of unglamorous maintenance work by people at every level of the organisation. At present, like every other form of public institution, the UK's museums and galleries are struggling after a decade of funding cuts of which there are likely more to come. This is especially dangerous to an industry that is characterised by a lack of transparency, particularly when we consider the necessity of courting private investment in order to appear resilient, wherein the appearance of wealth attracts the reality of wealth. With Boyce's intervention, a general lack of transparency around how museum collections are administered and how displays are chosen no doubt catalyzed the extreme push-back. A related manoeuvre was recently undertaken by Harry Meadley with 'But What If We Tried' at Touchstones, Rochdale. Here, the artist wasn't seeking to comment on the content of the collection, but was responding to a typical query from visitors as to why more of it was not on display.

For 'But What If We Tried' Meadley arranged for as much of Rochdale's collection as possible to be hung, salon style, in the galleries. Other works were displayed half uncrated or on racks as they would be in storage, the climate controlled facilities of major collections being a far cry from the cramped and makeshift storage facilities used by many contemporary art organisations. Meadley's is a very different project to Boyce's, and understandably engendered a very different response, although the way in which one artist was vilified and the other applauded for drawing attention to how art collections are used is worthy of note and analysis. One way in which these projects converge, however, is that the maintenance labour surrounding the display of art, the putting up and taking down and storing, had to be foregrounded as a performance or artifice in order for it to be made public at all. With this in mind, I wonder whether it's possible to rethink the distribution of credit and attention in cultural institutions and organisations, and then whether this in turn could produce the conditions for better and more equitable labour relations in these contexts, and beyond. Having worked in (and out) of the cultural industries for almost a decade, in roles from ticket assistant and cafe waitress to director and curator, whilst occasionally being designated 'artist' or 'critic', it's clear to me that radical change at a structural level is required, and a foundation in Art History means that today's ossified exhibition formats seem less fundamental than they otherwise might. My proposal for 'A Brick Tunnel with a Concrete Floor' was to test some potential other ways of administering and offering credit. Working within the structures you're attempting to subvert is always doomed to some extent, and the failures and experiments of this process will be documented and recounted here.

