

02/11/2021

and

14/01/2022

“stop wasting our time and energy”

is a sentence that [REDACTED] threw at me in presence of [REDACTED] the artistic director of Coventry Biennial while [REDACTED] was operating as a technician for B.O.O.K. (Building Our Own Knowledge). This sentence was then written by email at my attention the next day.

Beyond the institution ~~i am inviting to redress their practices today~~, are beings that i still care about. Three steps are being taken to resolve the situation. A meeting between B.O.O.K, Coventry Biennial, and Coventry Artspace to renegotiate terms of our collective agreement for October 2021-October 2022; prior to this meeting this letter is shared with all parties; following the meeting the letter will be shared publicly. What happened between myself melissandre varin, B.O.O.K, and Coventry Biennial goes beyond ourselves. Therefore, a public communication is essential from our side and we invite the Biennial to work with their victims before they in turn issue a public communication.

Last week i attended an event which ~~what~~ turned out to be a support group for artists having experienced some sort of abuse from Coventry Biennial. i noted improvements in their way of dealing with artists from one edition to the next. When i use ‘dealing’ instead of caring i mean it. i was surprised to bear witness to multiple personal testimonies - only too late to protect me and the project the Biennial is not ready to handle

i write to share emotions, and feelings of betrayal; to have a document to return to when i am in doubt. **i want** for other artists to have yet another testimony, to support them to move beyond **an** individual sense of abuse to what seems to refer to a culture of abuse, and to the future artists, curators, and cultural workers engaged in/with the Biennial to know what they are walking into. This is in many ways a draft that i hope will inform the strategy of Coventry Biennial.

While visioning, conceptualising and making linoleum dreams- the work Coventry Biennial commissioned me for- i could not imagine i was digging the grave i would need to re-assemble myself **into** after the series of gross mismanagement of the Biennial. linoleum dreams is a community library, art, and rest station. ~~The public library~~ **linoleum dreams** is difficult to access for a series of reasons that will be touched upon in this letter - but **is** open to all - including CB team. i am suggesting that print publications by Black authors **held at linoleum dreams** could ~~partially be the antidote~~ contribute **to addressing** the bad practices of the Biennial.

Lately i reflected on the fact that ‘eating the other’* is eating precarious beings/bodies for breakfast without being preoccupied by their digestion.

i am wondering if the adjacency concept defined in Black gaze by Tina M. Campt could be extended to this affair. Could we engage in ‘the reparative work of transforming proximity into accountability; the labor of positioning oneself in relation to another in ways that revalue and redress complex histories of dispossession.’ Without saying that the Biennial did not move towards this goal with some sort of plan; i am suggesting that having been silent- and by extension having participated in dispossessing me from my dignity as an artist- is not showing the light that such a massive contemporary art event in the 2021 UK City of Culture deserves.

These are not isolated acts, and the silence around other cases are just a reinforcement of the toxicity of bad practices within the arts.

Talking about reparation- with an organisation that used proximity in my case, without seizing moments for accountability- demonstrates the long road that individuals and the Biennial as an institution still need to climb. How did the biennial revalue and redress complex histories of dispossession this year? This question is one we should all think about and act upon when claiming to work in social art interventions. The ‘social, critical, and political’ Biennial has re-distributed money to me and my project and when it came to perform allyship beyond that, there was no one to be found. As i ~~am writing~~ **ing** this- ~~bit~~ parked between vans and trucks on the parking of the Daimler Power House, generously saved by Talking Birds, i can’t **help but wait but to**

wonder why the Biennial team is not visiting, apologising, taking fucking responsibility for this shit show.

~~i may rest in peace in linoleum dreams.~~ i am concerned about what's next, about not getting work as someone who speaks up. i am concerned about all of that and have a little one to care for. But this is our responsibility - all - to practice transparency, solidarity, and to grow.

"A refusal to be anything else than who we are, even at the cost of death." Black gaze by Tina M. Camp

The power and possibility offered by being compassionate, caring, kind, humble, standing in solidarity, working with devoted Black artists, come with certain costs. It forces white practitioners to unmask publicly and to look into their souls every time they commit wrongdoings. It is about collectively restructuring, witnessing, acknowledging, repairing, and nourishing.

Vulnerability is regenerative and i trust that the artist-led Biennial will find its way towards that truth.

~~This letter does not position white readers at the centre although since i am writing about a white dominated team it might be misread.~~

By pretending to be interested in building a relationship with me, i allowed the Biennial into my internal world- a gift they were not ready to receive- nor honour. i am not judging, nor complaining about that, but about their silence when it came to acknowledging that they have not been reliable, nor ensured my safety while working with them. They probably have no idea of what it means for me to trust them with a project that involves Black artists. They have no sense of the precariousness of my situation as a Black genderqueer parent of a toddler. They never asked, but as an open book i told them multiple times. 'We cannot pretend that we did not know' is the feedback i received from a professor at Warwick University after showing a film: out of order please do not use. In Summer 2020, i shared this film of mine on what it felt/meant for me to study in a white institution. i shared it with everyone i was working with at that time including the CB.

Yet by contracting [REDACTED] for whatever reason seemed valid to them at the time, CB actively devalued my installation, our relationship, and the possibilities for the project to grow - well. Yet by not securing a site for the installation to go to, nor by keeping essential information secret from me, CB actively devalued my installation, our relationship, and the possibilities for the project to grow - well. Yet by delaying the conversion of the caravan for months CB actively devalued my installation, our relationship, and the possibilities for the project to grow - well. Yet by not checking on me, while simultaneously complaining about how exhausted they have been, CB actively devalued my installation, our relationship, and the possibilities for the project to grow - well. Yet by not holding themselves accountable and waiting on me to hold their hands through this process CB actively devalued my installation, our relationship, and the possibilities for the project to grow - well.

Can we meditate on the concept of Black disposability for a minute?

Who cares about the fact that B.O.O.K's installation is on a parking lot and not messing with 'heritage land' next to the Herbert Museum? Who cares about the fact that the Herbert Museum accepted to receive an installation made in a caravan and turned its back on it on the day of the installation? Who cares about the fact that Coventry City Council blocked the installation of linoleum dreams 24 hours before Coventry Biennial Grand Opening? Who cares about the fact that none of those actors **stakeholders** have had the decency to schedule a call with me to check how i was? Who cares about the fact that the Biennial is not transparent about the fact that one of their commissioned installations is not on a listed site of the Biennial? Who cares about the fact that the Biennial is feeling comfortable requesting £12,000 from B.O.O.K, for a job they have not been able to perform well while having had a 1 year preparation timeline? Who cares about the voices, stories, and testimonies that are not heard in this open letter? Who fucking cares about that!

So next time any of those **actors parties** have the audacity to mention the word **care** please hold them accountable, if not for themselves or yourselves but for the community of us who might be fooled.

i also need to mention that the information i have collated is the debris of reality that got thrown at me by CB- it might not be accurate- but who knows- not me.

If the CB team thought of me in proximity to the strong Black woman stereotypes, **which would** ~~that~~ explains why they would not check on me, they got hooked by their own biases. i can't carry the loss of work, exposure, friendship, and opportunities with dignity- and i won't. And i won't cover up their gross mismanagement with a performative silence - i refuse to capitulate to these toxic practices.

What would it mean to break patterns of abuse and to be in right relationship with one another?

As i wrote somewhere else in relation to my 1 year work with Coventry Artspace and CB when i was not so heated: 'Truth is that it's Summer 2021, and we are not quite there yet - and because we know that - let us continue preparing the ground to love each other better.'

These beings and organisations need to understand that i have not slept, nor has there been a day since that i have not been thinking about their gross lack of respect and care. They need to understand the cost of ~~it~~ in terms of time, but also of money as they slow down my work pace and ~~that~~ i spend time dissecting their behaviour and their impact on me with a therapist they are not paying for.

i did fear of the implications of speaking up, but could i ever sleep knowing that other artists who have been systematically marginalised might build their trust on thinking that CB cared for a Black artist-led project? - **no.**

i can't believe i have to do this work in Autumn 2021 and that the organisation itself did not come to me first. After the acceleration of their bad practices in the last 2 months and my repetitive requests for transparency and meetings, **i am convinced that they do not (know to) care - yet.**

'stop wasting our time and energy'

i demand that CB hold themselves accountable for their wrongdoings and ultimately the pain they have caused. i demand that CB do this work for their own sake and also to 'repair'* the relationships with artists they have not had the capacity to nurture. i demand that CB step away from the contract with B.O.O.K beyond the reception, holding, and re-distribution of the funding of The National Lottery community fund. i demand that CB investigate and reveal publicly in transparent ways all the steps involved in linoleum dreams being refused access to the Herbert Museum by the city council on the day of the supposed installation, and 24hours before the grand opening of the Biennial. i demand that CB publicly share this communiqué; to publicly share the strategy they intend to follow to redress their wrongdoings, and to issue regular communication on this essential work. i demand that CB do their job not least, not more- but to finally do it.

As they are so prompt at asking how to repair* the situation - now here is how.

The book i read in linoleum dreams while drafting this note is the following: A Black Gaze Artists changing how we see by Tina M.Camp - it is part of B.O.O.K community library that was (supposed to be) part of Coventry Biennial 2021.

* eating the other: desire and resistance bell hooks

i also read Why the exhibit was canceled by artist along the way.