

Galleries, Get It Together – Podcast Transcript, January 2024

Huyen:

Galleries, Get It Together.

Aya:

Hi, I'm Aya.

Eleanor:

I'm Eleanor.

Emma:

I'm Emma.

Alex:

Yo. I'm Alex.

Maryam:

My name is Maryam.

Matilda:

Hi, I am Matilda.

Isator:

Hi, I'm Isator.

Caitlin:

Hi, I'm Caitlin.

Huyen:

I'm Huyen.

Jaxon:

Hi, I'm Jaxon.

Rico:

Hi, I'm Rico.

Eren:

My name is Eren and being an Art Assassin to me, is venturing out from my cosy little corner in South London for an hour to the closest gallery that offers something like this, and it kind of makes me realise how important it is to have free spaces for young artists because you meet people who do kind of the same thing as you, outside of a school environment and you get to work closely with people who are already in the industry. So, to me, it's just about kind of easing myself into the professional industry while also making friends who maybe in 10 years' time, I'll be like, "Hey, let's collab."

Eleanor:

Patria is the senior lecturer at the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College London. She's the author of *The Making of Latin London: Salsa Music, Place and Identity*, and Co-Author of *Narratives of Migration, Relocation and Belonging: Latin Americans in London*. She's the Founding Chair of Latin Elephant, a charity that works with migrant and ethnic groups to increase participation in processes of urban change in London.

Patria:

Yeah, I suppose I've always been interested in issues about social justice around equality, diversity, equity, inclusion, and in particular, with migrant and ethnic groups in London, drawing on my own background.

Eleanor:

The project seeks to understand the role that publicly funded galleries and museums have in creating a more just and equitable cultural space, particularly as many of these cultural institutions are in some of London's most ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

Patria:

And this project, in a way, emerges as part of those wider issues in terms of looking at the role that galleries have in their neighborhoods and whether they should have any, or

they feel they should have any. And it's basically seeing galleries as a civic space and a space whereby they think of themselves as having a role in their communities, in their neighborhoods.

Eleanor:

In this context then...

Isator:

What does an inclusive, equitable, and community-led gallery look like? What stories should be told?

Weyland:

Why should we listen to the Art Assassins on answering this research question?

Patria:

Because they're very much the community and they are the ones who have access to the community as well. Right? They're part of the community, they will look for those answers. But not only part of the community around the gallery, but they're also part of the community in the art sector. A lot of them are aspiring, wanting to be or discovering what the art world is all about, and it's really important that they learn all the good, and not so good as well, in certain ways. So yes, I think that's why you should listen to the Art Assassins.

Jaxon:

Chapter one, exploring the question.

Maryam:

My name is Maryam. I like to take photographs. I like to work in video sometimes. I'm really interested in humanity and kind of deconstructing all of these ideas that we all hold really close to us, like race and gender and stuff. Yeah, that's me.

Do you think that galleries should have a relationship with the community around it? Because we talked about the people who we won't name, but we talked about this space, who exists in this very diverse area, but no one knows about the existence of the art space and stuff. Do you think that kind of galleries and art spaces should be invested in their communities? If so, what way do you think would be cute to?

Isator:

100%. Getting people involved in, like it doesn't have to be their project, but just even if it's like, "Oh, you can come and see this." Especially the place we won't name, the area that they're in, it's like, you could do so well if you genuinely cared about the things around. It's a great community, especially with what they have across the road. They could get access to other things as well, not just yeah, it's such a community, but it can spread even wider than that. You could reach other places too, and they should host things to do, with especially children and stuff, even all ages, to be honest, where they could come in. Like simple things. It does not take that much.

Maryam:

Even cute coloring, like afterschool clubs.

Isator:

Yeah, like something so simple that could be like... Because I never had that and I feel like if I did, I would've progressed very quicker than I would've.

Maryam:

Yeah, facts.

Amelia:

Hi, my name's Amelia. I like to paint and I like to paint people's faces, most of all. When you've gone to an exhibition, have you gone to it and thought this person has *not* got it? Like they've done this exhibition and it's just not been delivered?

Elissa:

I think that sometimes we don't question when we go to a gallery.

Amelia:

We just walk down, and we just accept it?

Leena:

Yeah.

Elissa:

Patchwork. It is like a blanket when you put pieces together.

Amelia:

It all just comes together.

Elissa:

... perhaps maybe his history's untold, narratives that haven't been told yet or that we don't know about. If we haven't heard about it, it doesn't mean that it's not there.

Amelia:

So do you think galleries are telling these stories?

Elissa:

I don't think they are. It depends. Who's curating?

Leena:

Who's curating? Yeah. I think curators need to have a wide understanding and a large grasp of what they're curating and where they're curating it and whose stories they're telling. This is essential.

Amelia:

You think they don't currently?

Leena:

Currently at the moment, the world is lacking in the curation scene because it's really upholding the elites.

Elissa:

We're lacking in representation.

Emma:

In representation of Black people, people of color, queer people, the LGBTQ+ community.

Elissa:

Women.

Hannah:

My name is Hannah and I'm an assistant curator for SLG. Yeah, I really, really want to make these stories so accessible and I really don't want people to come away from an exhibition feeling like they didn't understand what was going on because what was the point? Do you know what I mean? You could have gone to a library, read a book that didn't make sense. You could've done anything else, but you spent your time here, so at least take something from it. So, I always want to make sure that the people who come to the exhibition have taken something from this as well. I personally would consider myself a bit more of a storyteller and I would like to explore themes that I would like to explore, but I would like to be able to spotlight artists. For me personally, as much as working in a gallery and working in a space like SLG, that compared to spaces I have worked in, is a lot more democratic and a lot more community focused in its approach, which I admire.

Jahzel:

Okay. Hi, my name is Jahzel. I work at the South London Gallery. My role is the Residents Programme Coordinator. I work on the Open Plan Programme with children and young people, and we host and facilitate weekly open access workshops for local children and families in the local area of Camberwell and Peckham. Community-led means to me working alongside a community and where I work at Art Block, so my position is a Residents Programme Coordinator and I work on three local estates. So Sceaux Gardens, which is where Lakanal is, where we are based in Art Block. And we also work in Elmington and Pelican, which are two longstanding estates, which we've worked with over a period of 10 years. And we do a lot of community engagement work with them, whether it's supporting their residents' parties or if we have a new commission coming up where we're working on projects, we will consult with the community before going forward with our plans. And we've worked on many projects over the years on Sceaux Gardens, Pelican and Elmington.

Lauren:

My name is Lauren and I work as a schools and young people's programme manager at South London Gallery. Community-led, I think often we say community-led, and I'm not talking about the SLG, but what it really means is doing a project *for* the community, but it's not reflected in who's actually leading the project. And I think community-led has turned into this kind of ambiguous term that it's like a tick box for funders, it's a tick box for gallery programs. It is something that even if I have said in job interviews, I'll always say the phrase "community-led" because it's literally just tick. But actually, I think you really need to interrogate who is leading programs, what are their processes of collaboration? Because how do you work with the community? For example, Jahzel's role, when she speaks about Art Block, actually they'll set out on a project and maybe it looks like one way, but then the kids will be like, "No, I don't like that, or I like that."

And then actually it ends up morphing into something. And that's what community-led is. And I genuinely think that Art Block does that in terms of the programs because of the fact that they shift and change, that's what it should do. It should evolve. If it's community-led, it shouldn't be like from the beginning, "I'm going to do A," and it turns out like 'A'. It should turn out like 'Z' because then that's like you've listened. So I think community-led, it involves a lot of listening and it involves a lot of evolution.

Weyland:

Rianna Jade-Parker is a writer, critic, curator, and researcher from South London. I invited her down to talk to the Art Assassins and get her take on our research question.

Rianna:

I'm not complete, things can and will progress, it just depends on how much patience I have. And as I was speaking with Lauren this morning, the word in particular, tolerance. How much tolerance do I have for different places that are not already like this to stay in there and enforce some change and rule to get it done? It starts with a mentality, the pathology, which takes a time in itself. Then it's a methodology and plan of a change of difference possible. And then you have to apply it. That's you spending years, not six months or 12 months, in a little position. So it always starts with me as, do you feel like sweating for three to five years to be at South London Gallery to commit to this role and do the best you can? Everybody has a different response. So some friends I have are institutional and they make it work. Others, are independent like myself, but it just can't manage. So we all have different burdens to bear.

Isator:

Chapter two, what stories need to be told?

Alex:

I guess we deconstructed the keywords like inclusive, equitable and community-led and what they meant to us.

Huyen:

I think it's important that as representing a lot of minorities through this, we don't want to just have it in one moment just because a certain event is happening that centers the community. But to continue to talk about the struggles even after the supposed trend has died out and fighting against that sort of performative representation and continuing the people's legacy, creating art by the people, for the people, from the people.

Isator:

I think that the stories that should be told are stories of admiration and praising the community and as well as highlighting staples within the community, such as shopkeepers or African aunties or familiar strangers that you always see. And I guess that you are a quiet admirer of the hard work of people that you don't necessarily know, but you always see them, and they become a sort of constant within your life.

Maryam:

The bar is really low, the bar is in hell for art spaces and just any spaces. I've had conversations with staff, and they've said that the SLG is cool and it's doing a lot more than other spaces, but that's the key phrase, it's just doing more than other spots. Obviously, I also don't work at SLG, I'm not staff or whatever, but from the outside it does kind of look like the SLG is open to kind of interrogating itself and to experiencing an internal change. And I guess that's the beginning. That should be the beginning for every space. So it also just seems like the SLG is kind of at the start or in motion.

Jaxon:

Chapter three, what galleries need to do.

Huyen:

I'm Huyen and I'm mostly a visual artist. I used to focus mainly on pencil drawings, but I've been experimenting a lot more with my coursework, and also just personal projects. So, I've expanded more into painting with oils, acrylics, some digital illustration as well, as well as a lot of mono printing.

Do you think that the South London Gallery properly reflects Peckham as an area and properly represents this community?

Barbara:

Wow, you're going right into it!

Rico:

They're joined by artists, Barbara Majek and Josephine Chime to discuss gallery spaces generally and South London Gallery's place in the local community.

Barbara:

Oh, Lord. Okay. Let me sit down for this. Okay. Okay, so no, just simply put no. I feel like there's an effort being made. I don't think they're there yet, but the show that's on now, I think it's a good start. And also, some of the other shows that they've had, like Rita Keegan. I think Rita Keegan, that was the first time I entered South London Gallery and I've lived here for many, many years. Over 20 years I've lived here. I never really felt that I could enter or be a part or anything really. It was just a building that I was like, "Oh, what's going on there?" I didn't really know what was happening or really felt called to come in or welcome to enter.

So yeah, I guess growing up here, living here, born and bred, there was a lot of anger towards gentrification, buzzword, "gentrification" and the changes, and there was a lot of rage to how things were changing and seeing people leave the area and all these things. And I had to come to terms with that and say, "Okay, if I'm not happy with this, what can I do?" So I've personally had a mission of interjecting myself in the area and to these institutions and saying that, "I'm here, I would like to work with you." Or even I emailed Dulwich Picture Gallery, just different galleries, different institutions to sort of put myself and insert myself in the area.

Eren:

I'm Eren and I mainly do theater and film, but the thing is that I make props and do digital art. So it kind of helps with advertising the shows that I do and things that I'm part of and I can add graphics and stuff, which is kind of cool.

Yes, we are recording. Hello. Can you please introduce yourself and what you do here?

Flo:

Yes, I can. I am Flo. I'm the Artistic Director of Zoo Co and Eren and I work together with the Zoo Co Young Company, which is a group of 14 to 18-year-old actors and creatives who co-create with professional artists to make studio-based theater productions every year.

Eren:

How do people that aren't involved already in those spaces find out that they're happening?

Do you think there's anything more we could be doing as creatives to let the everyday person who works a nine to five want to go to a gallery and understand that they're there? Because all these things you mentioned, I personally have never seen advertised, quick Google search, you won't find them. So is there a way to make them accessible for people who aren't actively looking for them, and is that an important thing we should be doing?

Flo:

Well, yeah, I think if we think that we're making art only for our mates or only for the people who look and sound like us, we're making art for a really limited amount of people, especially in Croydon. And if we're saying, "Oh, well, it's on this website that you have to know about in order to find out about it." I think that there's a lot that people my age, so I'm a decade older than the young company, can learn from younger people about how to innovatively and creatively engage audiences online. I think we're all a bit traditionalist with how we do that.

I also think there's a lot of value in public work, like taking work outside of spaces that people maybe haven't historically felt included in, or why do we have a snobbery around visual art having to exist in a gallery in frames and in perfectly lit whitewashed gallery spaces? I think those experiences really matter, so we should really think about how many of those rules of engaging with art are actually necessary and how many of them are actually just kind of posh etiquette that doesn't need to be there. It's a very white, middle class, snobby approach that doesn't actually change whether you can look at art and appreciate it or not.

Huyen:

Following off from what you just mentioned earlier about seeing South London Gallery, but not really feeling like you were able to enter, how do you feel that the gallery felt inaccessible to you exactly?

Barbara:

Yeah. I would walk by and I would just see loads of white people and I'd be like, "Oh, is this a space where there's all kinds of different people here?" And I don't know, it's so weird because the building is here and then it goes in and then, I don't know, it just didn't feel... It might be my own...also not having the confidence to just walk in spaces. I had to grow into that. Even to go into art galleries, like I go to loads of exhibitions and I don't really see myself in these spaces. Very few people go there. So, it's also, I guess, getting people in the area comfortable going into the gallery and making them feel comfortable by going to them, not waiting for them to come to you. So, I feel like outreach is a really important aspect of getting people to engage with the gallery space.

Josephine:

How important is art galleries in...

Rico:

How relevant-

Josephine:

How relevant-

Huyen:

In the 21st century?

Josephine:

I think all spaces to enjoy art is relevant, and galleries happen to be one of them. How they choose to show the art, who they choose to show it to, how they welcome them, what art they show, that's the thing that obviously can be amazing and brilliant or really quite dire and uninspiring. But galleries have a purpose. A gallery isn't something that is evil just because they have loads of money and there could be small galleries that are very disingenuous. I just think it's important to not paint all galleries as out of touch and not for all different types of people when that's not really true because they're not all the same.

Lauren:

I think that the biggest threat is funding, honestly, particularly within the context of the UK. The funding in art is abysmal, and the threat really is that you have people who really want to make a big change, but that they're not somewhere long enough or they're not given the resources to actually make that change. And also, it just strongly makes the kind of demographic of people who take up these short-term roles a really specific demographic. It's people who have family support, it's people who have savings, it's people who have privilege. And actually, there's a whole range of people who would probably do a far better job than lots of people who are employed, but it's particularly because they just don't have the safety net to take the roles. So there's people who, for example, maybe come from very working class backgrounds or people who don't have the same education as everyone who predominantly is in the arts, but they just can't basically even go for these roles because they don't have the security of being like, "Okay, but what will I do after this six months job is done?"

Weyland:

This podcast was recorded and produced by South London Gallery's Art Assassins in collaboration with me, Weyland Mackenzie-Witter

Jaxon:

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