

Light+ Collective Imagining – EP 3

Jamila Prowse [00:00:32] Collective Imaginings is a light plus podcast series from Lighthouse, curated and hosted by me, Jamila Prowse, the roots of the series were planted in January 2020, although the thinking behind them predates even that. In the time that I have planned them, research them began dialogues with the collaborators. His words form them. The world we exist within has changed significantly during the eight months before we came to record the first episode. My thinking and approach as a curator has unravelled entirely due to my own learnings and reflections, as well as harmful experiences I have been through in the sector. I am no longer sure if I wish to curate. I am no longer sure of the value of having conversations in public. As I share these conversations with you, I have unravelled and doubted the meaning of them and their worth so many times as cultural workers, we are routinely bound and compromised and what we can share publicly. Although in this series I was given free creative control, a rare thing. Many of us are still bound by contractual clauses. Even as I make a series about our embodied experiences of harm, I cannot explicitly name the beast I refer to. So where does the value in the series stem from? Throughout the series, I'll be speaking to cultural workers, including artists and curators who have been through and continue to think through their own processes of learning and unlearning resistance and radical imagining, their work and ideas have helped me to better understand the reasons I was originally drawn and connected to art making and cultural organising. The conversations that follow are not complete, exhaustive or final. They are snippets into possibilities and imaginings which have helped me to better understand myself and my positioning in the world. I hope they might help you reach insights and learnings of your own.

[00:02:28] This series was originally intended as an open resource for people interested in or entering into or working within the arts of personal accounts, of navigating the sector and strategies for resistance, self-preservation and survival. In many ways, a series I wish I would have had when starting out in the sector as someone who has continually felt lost, overwhelmed and squashed, and one that would also be invaluable to me today. I have come to realise through these conversations and my wider research that survival is not and will never be enough. We need to be able to do more than survive. Even still, I hope that these personal accounts come together in a collective radical imagining for the art world we hope to bring into fruition.

[00:03:14] Collective Imaginings stems from and is a continuation of thinking which took place in and around Eva Rowson's 2019 curatorial residency at Lighthouse. Who's doing the washing up? Where's the sink? Which included a light plus podcast of the same name.

[00:03:37] In this episode, I'm in conversation with artists and curators Deborah Joyce Holman and Rabz Lansiquot. Deborah is currently the associate director of Auto Italia in London and previously founded and ran Basel base gallery 1.1 from 2015 until its closure in September 2020. Rabz is part of the curatorial and artistic duo Languid Hands with Imani Robinson through which they are the Cubitt Gallery fellows for 2020/21. We will be discussing the intersections between artistic and curatorial practise and how having work commissioned and displayed as artists informs how Deborah and Rabz devise methodologies for caring for the artists they collaborate with.

[00:04:25] I just wanted to start by thinking about the kind of ways that the relationships and like collectivising has kind of come into play in your artistic and curatorial practises. I know that both of you have this really strong sense of like building long term relationships with the artists that you work with, with collaborating with various people. So, I was just

wondering, in your own words, what kind of role those informal support systems, friendships and kind of collectivising has played for you, Rabz's do you want to start.

Rabz Lansiquot [00:05:07] So, I mean, for me. Those relationships are the reason that I do the work that I do, mainly because of my mom, who's an artist and who's also acted as a mentor to me and other young people who are interested in doing this kind of work. And she kind of, she creates opportunities and kind of coaches' people through navigating these systems from her own experience. And so that has meant that the way that I work and the way that Languid Hands works is very resistant to the system of the art world. And we're able to do that because of the knowledge that she's impart into us and also because of the way that she's kind of encouraged us to work within communities, to create communities, to kind of have the community be at the centre of the work rather than the work be using the community, if that makes sense. And when I began doing this work, I began doing it through a project that she initiated, which was sorryyoufeeluncomfortable collective (SYFU) and she initiated that alongside Teresa Cisneros. And there were 16 of us at first. I was 18 at the time. It was like the beginning of it was the first kind of BLM moment and that defined a lot of how I'm able to operate in the art world and those people who made up that collective are still peers. Even if we're not in touch as much anymore. There's still people that influence the work that I do. And we do. And it means that I'm interested in cultivating those relationship going forward and creating different kinds of communities going forward and making sure that working with artists as a curator is not kind of an extract of a parasitic kind of experience. It's a long-term thing where we nurture each other. Our role is to allow the artist to do the best that they can do, which involves long term relationships. It involves friendships and being in the community with each other outside of just the art or outside of just the work.

Jamila Prowse [00:07:40] Yeah, absolutely. How about you, Deborah?

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:07:43] Kind of similar. I mean, it's also very, very important. It's basically at the core of everything to have like a network of, I mean, networks and maybe a functional, community to do this work. I started also like with kind of opening an art space at the same time as I started studying at university. And the idea of that was really to have a space to show friends work to bring in people that we didn't know into, like a community of people and like nurture this exchange amongst all of us, the community that I am part of was really important to just even be able to open the space because it wouldn't have been possible, like to do that alone. Not all of them are artists or like have shown at one point at that space that I ran in Switzerland. But I think there's still like this exchange and nurturing that Rabz mentioned. Is still present in different ways, which is also really nice to have like these exchanges across different industries.

Jamila Prowse [00:08:54] Yeah, definitely. I mean, because what you're both talking about as well isn't necessarily, you know, you're building relationships with people specifically to work with them like it's all feeding into each other. And these are people that, you know, all your friends are your peers who kind of, you know, you're holding kind of commune with and holding dialogue with outside of the specific, you know, quote unquote work that you're doing. And maybe it informs that, but it doesn't have to be like formalised in that way. And I suppose that the reason that I want to think about this as well is because I suppose, like there's an experience and I certainly in my own experience of being trained within kind of institutional settings, that was my introduction to the arts was like any kind of production or managerial roles and like white institutions. And there's this experience of being, like, really isolated when you're going through that and going through this quite like clinical and quite like hostile in many ways, spaces. And then, like, you know, it completely

disconnects you from yourself and from the things that make you who you are. And sometimes the ways that you come back to that core of like why you want to organise with people, to create space, hold space with people, is actually built in this this kind of desire to support each other and have something that's fairly nurturing and nourishing for you as opposed to, you know, instrumentalising your relationships in order to, like, get somewhere or bolster your, practise or CV like that. Neither of you are coming at it from that point, which is actually maybe more common in the arts. I don't know if that's been either of your experiences of kind of navigating these spaces.

Rabz Lansiquot [00:10:58] I think particularly in terms of like curators' relationships to artists, like it tends to be about what working with is can do for you as a curator, which doesn't make sense to me. That's like the opposite of what it should be. You know, we can make work as curators without artists. And obviously it's complicated because I think both of us are artists as well as curators. So, it becomes blurred there. But there's something in kind of creating relationships that don't depend on whether or not there's a show or whether or not there's something to be kind of gleaned from that. And I think a lot of people struggle with being isolated in those spaces and not having the kind of caring communities that can support them in those spaces and those spaces are also intentionally isolating us so that they can exploit us. And I know that in my experience of like mentoring other people or being mentored, transparency is really important. You know, having really honest and frank conversations about where you're at is really important, and seeing each other as people rather than as an artist or a curator or seeing each other as something to be extracted from. I think that's the key thing is relating to each other as people.

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:12:24] Yeah. Relating to artists as people is really the centre of it all, I guess also in just like thinking about what person you want to be yourself and how you treat people and what you want, like why, why are we in the arts and what do we want to be in our life and like beyond I guess. And like for me that's more and more clear that that can't be like just this one part of my life and then I'm another person in my friendships or like somewhere else like that kind of has to go hand in hand and it has to expand beyond the exhibition and beyond, you know, like the work, I guess. So just also thinking about how I wanted to talk to people, how I want to treat people in certain situations where maybe you would get it pass just being an arsehole just because you're part of an institution. But choosing not to do that or trying not to choose that, I guess. So, I think I think that's really important. And then I guess there's also the question around, like, what is the role of the curator and institution? And most of my experience has been as a freelancer. So, working at this space that I run, which is obviously very different than working with institutions as a freelance artist or curator, and I guess as a curator, I often then saw my role as kind of being able to create an environment that is productive for the artist as well, and where they can where they can do their work. And like, I guess my kind of a buffer between the institution and the artist where you can communicate with the artist in a way that hopefully gives them some sense of safety and comfort to explore ideas and make work and then communicate with the institution in a way that the artist doesn't have to. I mean, this is like basically the core of curator's job, I guess. But I think there's just also a lot of space in that to reflect on, like, what role you want to take and, what like intention, being intentional about it.

Jamila Prowse [00:14:45] Definitely. So, I just want to kind of draw on some of those ideas that you're both talking about in relation to because you both, as you said, have artistic as well as curatorial practices, which must give you a sense in a way of the ways that you could be treated as an artist, working with curators, working with institutions or

just with individuals in whatever capacity that is. I'm wondering that, like in the kind of ways that your art has been handled by people and by organisations and institutions, how is that kind of giving you insights into ways to develop your own methodologies around how to organise with artists, how to kind of care for artists and build supportive relationships with them?

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:15:42] I guess it depends on the institution that you're showing work and that you work in and as a curator as well. But I think it definitely gives a sense of like what is helpful for the process because I feel like that there's a lot of different workflows happening at the same time, when you're working in an institution as an artist or working on an exhibition or whatever, where there's like the artistic side and the whole production, logistics, organisational kind of side. As a curator, there's, I think a lot of space to just deal with, like the whole logistical side so that you can protect the artist from having to deal with that kind of thing. And I guess that's also where a lot of maybe sometimes problematic questions come up or, you know, discussions around how are the exhibition text written or does the artist get to proofread the exhibition text, stuff like this? Where I guess my experience as an artist definitely helps, because while you want your work to speak to different people and allow different readings, it's also important to be clear about how you want to present in what in what frame. So, like all these frustrations when that is kind of neglected definitely helps shaping how you want to interact with the curator.

Jamila Prowse [00:17:09] I mean, you spoke before about that idea of kind of being a buffer between the institution and the artist. I guess that's been very similar to my experience as well, like working in a freelance capacity and quite often wanting to ensure that, like the structures that are kind of oppressive or challenging or harmful don't trickle down to the artists that you're working with and that, you know, you can you can build a dialogue and build a relationship where you're treating them in a way where, you know, you're ensuring that they are first and foremost kind of you know, their well-being is prioritised. And their vision for how they want their work to be presented is kind of upheld, which, you know, there's such a kind of culture of mistreatment of work, I think, in the arts. I mean, I was thinking about as well, you give this account and the roundtable discussion you did on curating about like how your work was kind of discussed when you were when you were a student and the ways that you were kind of asked continually to speak to your identity. I just wonder how those kinds of experiences have shaped how you kind of talk to artists about their work and kind of contextualise their work.

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:18:38] Yeah, exactly. That's kind of what I was thinking about in terms of problematic questions, I think. I engage with artists who mostly are not white, male, heterosexual artists. So, I think there's obviously been a trend, but I call it a trend of institutions being interested in speaking about different positions than the white cis-het male artist. But I think at the same time, a real unwillingness to actually think about what that means and what it means to acknowledge that the norm is literally just a position like a position that has been normalised and given this pedestal and whose opinions or whatever have become the norm with like the work as a as a buffer in those institutions and like give space to. First of all, raise these questions of the institution and kind of ask the questions and where I feel like they need to be asked in the process. I can do that because I'm not the artist, because I want to create that space. Like, I want to be sure that all the, you know, like the cultural values that I bring to an institution is handled with accountability and responsibility, and that with being present in the institution, it's not just a one-time event. That there have been questions raised and those discussions have been had so that when I'm not working, that when someone else is not working there, then they can continue kind of building on those discussions and can like they will remember that they had to have a

discussion around them. I brought this the example of exhibition texts, for example, like, just so these kinds of processes that you can raise as a curator and then hopefully they'll stick to some extent.

Jamila Prowse [00:20:46] Absolutely. And perhaps how about you? I mean, in in the work that you're doing with Languid Hands at the moment and kind of in the statement you released at the start of your fellowship at Cubitt you drew out that link of curating in the Latin *Currere*. To care for. So, I'm wondering for you, what way is your kind of artistic practise has informed the ways that you built that care for artists?

Rabz Lansiquot [00:21:15] Yeah, I mean, strangely for me, I didn't go to art school and I was programming before I was making work, I guess, or maybe at a similar time. But programming was kind of at the forefront. I actually learnt the most about how the art world works through my mum partly, but also through and working in kind of low-level jobs in institutions working in front of house or being admitted system or those kinds of jobs. And those are often the jobs that are most likely to black people. I spent a lot of time in those jobs, like looking at processes and working out how things work so that I could work out what I did and didn't want to recreate and reproduce. That's been really useful because I know how it works. I know what is and isn't necessary. I know what is and isn't urgent and that informs the way that I work with artists in a huge way. I think also with mentors and people who've kind of taught me what it is like, what the issues have taught me, kind of told me about the horrible experiences they've had and why they were horrible. And those are the types of things that inform that kind of care and it's an ongoing process because we can't operate as freely as we'd like to because of the structures that that kind of pervade and because of the structures that mean that we can or can't work in certain places or can't do certain work. So, it's an ongoing process and it's a process that's about learning and constantly learning from the artists that we're working with, constantly learning from our own experiences and other people's experiences. I think it's building a way of working that is completely different to the way of working that's been established. And so sometimes you fail and sometimes it's not ideal and sometimes the institutions, you know, violence is so overt that you can't protect the artist from it. But if your intention is to do that, then you know, that's what your intention is to do. And the artists tend to know that, especially if you have, you know, really good working relationships with them. You know, we've done work and been working with white curators who have, you know, their lack of trust of us has. Come very apparent, and the artists have picked up on that, but the artists have also acknowledged that, you know, that's not because of us, that's because of the system that we're working within and they can see, and they know that we're doing the best we can to protect them from that. And if we could entirely protect them from that, not work with these organisations, we would. But, you know, that's just not where we're at the moment. And then I think also on top of that it's not just white institutions that perpetuate these kinds of things. I've had an experience and I know Deborah has too where we like. We've been working with people who share identities with us, and that's been just as bad, if not worse, than working with these kinds of institutions.

[00:24:36] I think those experiences for me have really solidified my political commitment and my understanding of tokenism, my understanding of the ways in which we are used and then use each other within these systems. And, you know, it's not just that I work with black artists because they're black. It's that, you know, I work with black artists because that's my intention and because they're people whose values and politics are aligned with mine. And that doesn't mean that there's no diversity, but it means that, you know, we are united in the fact that we don't want to be exploitative to each other. And that's something that I've learnt recently, and it feels like a really good place to be in to realise that so that

you're not falling into these kinds of situations where you trust institutions, or you trust people just because of the face of them or just because of what they proclaim to be. But you really listen to what people's values are and what your values are and live by those instead.

Jamila Prowse [00:25:53] Yeah, absolutely. I suppose what I learn from both of you and from other kind of peers working with similar intentions in this field, but not just this field, is this idea that your kind of touching on that it is this kind of continual learning process. And I suppose I find a lot of affinity with the ways that you've been in those kinds of administrative front of house positions and those processes. And I suppose that that I've had that experience, but without such an awareness of it initially, like, I suppose the ways that your kind of trained and the ways that you internalise those processes and the ways you internalise the systems that you exist within Deborah as well. You've spoken about it in relation to this, like unlearning of the worldview that your kind of raised within. There where were the aspects of it that I took for granted as being like this is the way we do things, because this is the way I've been told that we do things. And actually, the kind of break in that for me has been my health and like I have long term mental illness that has been exacerbated by the kind of working environments that I've been within and getting to a point where I was like too unwell to work at all.

[00:27:21] I was like completely signed off for like a period of about four months from working, made me realise that those kinds of structures that we internalise and learn and perpetuate are so harmful to so many people and can't be sustained. But I know that, you know, I guess it's why there's always this return or a kind of comfortability I have with curating and the term curator and that being the work that I do, because I think I doubt the work I do all the time and quite often look back on things and go like, OK, so like, yeah, my intention now is to do this, but like it absolutely did not, it did not align with it and it did not achieve that. And actually, I would never, I would never do that again, you know, constantly actually trying to resist the norms that are really, really pervasive and that you're told to mould yourself within.

Rabz Lansiquot [00:28:21] You know, I think I mean, similarly, last year, which appeared to be like one of my most busy and maybe successful years, I was pretty much in bed for eight months and there's kind of this sense that, these systems and the ways that institutions work and the ways the curators work are not humane systems, they're not systems that support our living and are being able to survive and I think that lesson that I feel like I learn from that sad dark period is really important. That's the kind of learning that's not supported in the art world or in educational institutions, but it feels like I learnt more than I did studying for M.A., for example, or working in certain institutions.

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:29:16] Yeah, I think the point that you both raised about continuous learning is really important. And it plays into that idea, as you said Jamila, about unlearning the world view or detaching yourself or try it like continuously detaching yourself, doing the work to move differently than how the system set up so that you can create these spaces. I mean, we're also operating within those spaces. There's always limits, because then the important thing is to take those earnings and be open to also acknowledging and accepting when you might have not acted the best and could have dealt with situations better so that you can obviously do that in the future.

Jamila Prowse [00:30:05] And I suppose as well, I mean, there's this element of kind of maintaining a transparency around those processes and when situations and environments that you're working within actually are really challenging are really hostile

and really difficult to build a meaningful resistance to. And I think, you know, there's always this bind where you know, this is what we all do for work and sometimes you take opportunities because you need to pay the bills or because. Well, quite often there's a there's a complete disconnect with how, you know, an institutional organisation or individuals present themselves publicly compared with, you know, what their core intention actually is, which can be really hard to actually identify and to know until you are in that situation. And I think that, you know, so much of the work I've done, I can't think of work I've done that I'm necessarily really happy with or that I would repeat the environments that I was in and want to enter into them again. And I think, like one of the things that I did during those kinds of experiences was to just be honest with as much as possible with the artists or with the people that I was working with about what was going on and about the difficulties. And I think that, you know, the first time I was in one of those situations where I was kind of facilitating a programme that was kind of for BIPOC people, there was a moment where I was like, oh, do I hide that this is difficult because I'm going to completely, like, maybe put them off. And this is meant to be like a nurturing environment, and it's meant to be really positive. And do I just tell them that actually the programme that we're running is really undervalued and being really mishandled by the organisation that we're working with? And actually, I think there is a responsibility. I don't know if it's a responsibility as such. Maybe that's the wrong way to phrase it. It's very helpful to build transparency around that, even if it's not in a public setting with the people that you're actually kind of collaborating with to ensure that you have that knowledge and you kind of aren't in the dark about what's actually going on.

Rabz Lansiquot [00:32:39] Definitely. I think it's also it's a difficult balance because, I try to be as transparent as possible but there's been times where I haven't been because of difficult situations or because of kind of fear of backlash or something like that. I think it is really important because it's also about the people you're working with, seeing you as a person, too, and also demystifying these spaces that people are so, and a lot of black and brown people are so excited to be accepted by. And, you know, those need to be demystified. Like we need to stop celebrating, working with Tate. We need to stop celebrating, you know, getting certain kinds of a support from certain kinds of institutions or certain kinds of people, because the fact that we aren't transparent about those things are, you know, that contributes to someone else being exploited by that. And that's an experience that I've had. And, you know, I'm now like trying to resist doing that again, it's really hard to reckon with, but it's also hard and a lot of ways I've spoken to some artist friends who've been in situations where the programme by a curator that they don't necessarily have a relationship with a black curator.

[00:34:05] They don't necessarily have a relationship with who is maybe like to transparent about that in the sense of like kind of that then becoming a collective problem and the artist having to deal with that. So, I think it's a balance and it's about being transparent, but not allowing that those things to be kind of absorbed by the artist and be extra stress on the artist back. But being like, look, this is what I'm dealing with I'm doing my best is the best you can do, really. And yeah, like I think particularly in the UK, you know, we have a very, very conservative and ridiculous culture around talking about money, for example, which means that organisations can hire a bunch of people to do the same thing and they're all getting paid a ridiculous range of different fees. You know, it breeds exploitation. And, you know, I think that people don't do that because they want to be celebrated and they want to enjoy, you know, the kind of accolade that that some work can bring them. But also, we have to always be thinking about, you know, who is not in this room or who is not in this space and why and what can I do to make sure that. That the space that I'm

taking up can also be for someone else and transparency, I think, is a really big part of that.

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:35:33] Yeah, I think it's also the work that we do is, so outcome driven. It's the focus on like that. Yeah. That outcome and there's always like very stressful periods before and I think it's also about navigating expectations, like to yourself, to the artist and to the institution. And you're being realistic about things and setting priorities like is it more important that something turns out exactly how you planned it, envisioned it, or is it more important that I don't know, you get that one hour more sleep so that you can actually be bearable to the people around you? Not even just for yourself. You know, like also for the artist.

Jamila Prowse [00:36:15] Yeah. I mean, I suppose it becomes challenging because there are so many structures that we work within which are exploitative, which are incredibly harmful. You know, when we're talking about this work, we're talking about the structures that exist in the arts, but they are part and parcel of wider structures that exist in this country, in this part of the world, even like, you know, the way you talk about things like being outcome driven Deborah and the fact that that is part of, you know, the kind of capitalist system that we exist within and the ways that it places an emphasis and values, mainly productivity and like, you know, our worth to capital. All of these things come into play when you were making work, when you were organising and in a kind of art setting, but also the government that we are under in the UK and the fact that a lot of our money comes from them. And, you know, something that people have been sharing recently was a letter that went out to museums and organisations from the secretary of culture telling them that they weren't allowed to remove, you know, complex or controversial objects from their museums if they were under pressure to do so from activists or from the public. And those are the kind of things that we're working against and it's one thing to be aware of that and it's another thing to actually know how to identify it and know how to explicitly identify where your money is coming from and work outside of that. And I suppose that's not something I have an answer to. But I guess that is a bind that you were continually in as a curator at an artist.

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:38:12] Yeah. I don't know when I'll ever feel entitled to speak on the UK context just because obviously most of my work has been in Switzerland and only started working in the UK, in the arts, maybe like last year. So, my experience around those kind of specific situations is very limited. But obviously I'm starting to learn also the differences in the funding system and how like one thing that I find very alienating is how tight it is to the government in the UK and how, you know, the Arts Council, for example, functions basically as a part of the government and that whoever gets money, through them is kind of an asset to them, if that makes sense, like those kinds of things that I guess are really important to navigate and to recognise. I don't know if there's an alternative, I don't know what the alternative is because I guess there's also this question around, like public money or private money, brand money. There's just different ways in which the work gets corrupted or compromised.

Rabz Lansiquot [00:39:24] Yeah, I feel like there's like not really any clean money in that kind of way. You know, the Arts Council is one avenue and that's linked to the government and like, you know, as is seen in that letter, you know, they're essentially threatened with being defunded as a result of this kind of like contested heritage, I think that's how they describe it. But then also private money just tends to be, you know, capitalists trying to clean the money or trying to look like they're doing something good. And then brand money is like you're just an advert, so it's you know, I mean, I'm an anti-capitalist, so. I

don't know if any of those things are a good alternative for me, it's like, you know, we all survive within capitalism because we have to and because this is how we work, and this is how we operate, and this is how we live. And there's not really an alternative at the moment so I wouldn't separate, you know, the system of the arts from the rest of the world and from the rest of politics. And it's like, my politics and the anti-capitalist one, that doesn't mean that I don't engage with capitalism because it's impossible to. But, you know, my alternative is to create an anti-capitalist system. Like that's a bigger question and a bigger discussion that goes beyond the art world. I always try and see the art as part of the world that we live in. It's not separate, it's not unique. It doesn't have any kind of exceptionalism is exactly the same, if not sometimes worse, because of its assumption of its own greatness. And, you know, it is important to kind of look at it in that way. You know, part of the Cubitt fellowship, like one of the things that we're kind of initiating as Languid Hands is Curatorial Tactics, which is a network of curators.

[00:41:37] And when, you know, this particular uprising happened, you know, we were thinking about that and thinking about what can define that and thinking about the kinds of actions that we can take us curators that are in defence of black life. I think, you know, one of those for us as abolitionists is also about trying to trace where the money that comes from, the carceral system, the prison industrial complex and the military industrial complex, like trying to trace that and work out how to try and avoid accessing that kind of money, like actively boycotting, you know, institutions that that utilise that kind of money. The difficulty is that the way that capitalism works is that it's so cloaked in mystery, so cloaked in like, you know, paperwork and moving from this country to the next in this bank account the next. It's actually hard to find that information. But I think that's an action that we can do, is that we can try to seek out those nuggets of information and try to resist them in a similar way. The photographer, Nan Goldin, has done loads of work and knows of actions around resisting art galleries and institutions that use big pharma money, for example. You know, and that is an ongoing sort of organisational tool and action and that's the kind of thing that I'm thinking about, because not only is that about us as artists, but it's also about us as people and us as black people in the things that affect us beyond our capacity to make work and to be entertaining or to be useful in those kinds of ways.

Jamila Prowse [00:43:28] Absolutely. You know, that is, that is really important just to linger on, I think exploding that idea that the arts is somehow, this kind of like safe, kind of progressive, like really radical political space that is separate from, from the rest of the UK, from the rest of the kind of oppressive structures in the world when in fact. Yeah, it's very much it's very much part of it. And I think knowing that and having that sense really helps to demystify your position and the ways we are complicit in things and what we are complicit in. And yeah, I suppose actually saying, you know, instead of there being that statement that is made that like all money is dirty and how are we ever going to avoid using money that is tainted and comes from kind of nefarious means, but actually to say, you know, what is the roots of the money that we're using and where are the organisations and where are the funding streams that do not, perpetuate those really violent and hostile kind of policies that exist in the UK and kind of across the world. One of the things that I wanted to kind of to think about as well was something that I've kind of had to come through in my own curatorial practise. And I've come through, like learnings that from both of your research and from your practises, which is this kind of this theorising around an action and an organising around representation that exists in the arts and the sense that I suppose it's continually positioned as representation, being a signifier of progress and something to aim towards. And, you know, that's there's that that phrase that is continually used of like having a seat at the table when in actual fact, when you're leveraging people to have a quote unquote seat at that table, you are not dismantling the kind of oppressive

structure that exists. You are just placing more people into a system which seeks to disconnect them from themselves, that seeks to harm them and others.

[00:46:04] And it's something that both of you have kind of talked about in various ways. You know, Deborah, in that roundtable on curating, one of the things you touched on a lot was kind of tokenization and the kind of unlearning of those kind of white supremacist worldviews and Rabz I was watching your Experimenta debate talk from 2018 and one of the things you said there was that representation will not get us free. And I'm trying to figure out what will, I think, like one of the things that I found that I thought summarised some of this thinking quite well was a quote from Angela Davis, which is, "I have a hard time accepting diversity as a synonym for justice, diversity as a corporate strategy, diversity without structural transformation simply brings us those who were previously excluded into a system as racist, misogynist as it was before." So, I wanted to touch on your ideas around the kind of limits of representation and the ways in your own practice you situate a kind of resistance to or dismantling of oppressive structures as opposed to bringing more people into them. I just want to pretext the second part of that question with a notion that I don't think that the responsibility of dismantling these structures should fall on black artists and curators. But I think that it's a question that we come up against as curators in the sense of working within these systems. How do we actually protect ourselves and the artists that we are working with from harm and build kind of nourishing environments for them and each other?

Rabz Lansiquot [00:47:53] So, I mean, a lot of the work that I do in terms of film programming and filmmaking is around a frustration I have with people's focus on representation. Representation is a tool. It's not a goal. It's one of many strategies that we can employ to create change. I don't think that it's irrelevant, I don't think it's not important. But I do think that it's overstated because the idea that we haven't been represented is a myth. The idea that you know that we don't see enough black people here and we don't see enough black people there. You know, I you talk about this in terms of the media and film, like black people have been in films since film, since film has been a thing that people have been in films and, you know. That is not going to create justice, that's not going to create equity, that's not going to change people's minds, because if their minds were, like if people wanted their minds to be changed, they would have been changed by now. It's not radical to be, as you said, like have a seat at the table, the table needs to be destroyed, like that's the issue, and so I talk about in my film work I talk about trying to go beyond representation and towards liberation and I say towards because it's not something that I fully understand myself, it's not something that I know how to do. But it's an intention that I have, and I know that representation will not bring us that. And we should all know that because the evidence is clear. I think, you know, there are just there's so much focus on representation and so much focus on we need more black CEOs, we need more black artists. We need more black this and really what we need is a different world.

[00:50:06] Focussing on representation breeds tokenism. It breeds exploitation because all you're there for is your face, all your there for is the identity that you bring. And that doesn't do anything to deconstruct the system you know, there's this kind of quote going around this like, if all of the cops were black, it would still be a racist institution. It doesn't matter if, you know, we are represented, if the system to its core is racist, you know, it's systematic. It's not about people and individuals. It's about the way that something's been constructed. I think, you know, in relation to mine and Languid Hand's work, the decision that we made to programme, you know, black artists only for Cubitt was not to represent them but was to model a way of working that foregrounds them, a way of working that acknowledges the

breadth and depth of their experience and their work that allows them to focus on the work, not on being the black person in that space. Committing to working only with black artists in this period is it shouldn't be radical and it shouldn't be unexpected because we can have a lifetime of working with only black artist because there's so many and so varied and different and they're not there to just be represented that better to live lives as people, to be supported, to be cared for, to be, you know, even critiqued like these things are important and representation is like a tiny tool in an arsenal of tools that should be used to dismantle the system. Yeah, and I think the representation is also like the easiest way for a capitalist white supremacist system to include us is the bare minimum and that means that we need to problematise it and we need to do something else.

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:52:22] Yeah, it's kind of like the quick fix to all problems. Like it's really the thing of like finding ways to avoid addressing the system's problems in just having a quick fix of like more representation and then the assumption that black people can't be harmful to black people, for example, which is obviously bullshit and Yeah, I learnt recently that there's this quote of, like achieving I think I can't remember the exact number, but I think it was something like 20 percent. For example, if you have, like in a white business, you have 20 percent of black employees and apparently that study says that because that's 20 percent of black people, the black people who are there feel comfortable enough to speak out about issues. So then that is enough representation, which is obviously works in the same way as like any quota of like you need to have this amount of like the same amount of women as men. That's the goal at the like at the minimum, like, we only need five women in the room, so we are not going to get five women in the room and not more. And it's always like kept at that minimum where the system still continues to work in those ways. I mean, I have strong doubt that this 20 percent of black people will actually say the things that need to be said. And also, yeah, it's also like this thing of like assuming that every black person is an anti-racism expert, which a lot of black people are just not interested in as well.

[00:54:03] So I think representation is very dangerous and it doesn't look at the actual structural problems of things. It just puts a plaster on an issue. And I mean, that's the way that we're kind of seeing now, like with more representation, maybe like now it's been pushed more into senior roles. But then in a couple of years, we'll have the same discussions and the same issues as we have now, because obviously that's not the solution. That's just a way of like delaying the conversation to get to the core of it.

Rabz Lansiquot [00:54:36] It also becomes like a performative gesture that benefits the system as well. So, in the arts, for example, it's like having like a diverse audience or a diverse staff, it benefits the institution because it makes them look good. But you know, that then feeds into the very legitimacy of that system to exist, and I think, yeah, that's a real issue and also this idea of diversity in the first place. It is like I remember I was working at an organisation when I was studying for my M.A. I was working part time and they were talking a lot about diversity and they were hiring for my role. And they were like, oh, well, you know, what we don't have is we don't have a straight man here, so we should probably hire a straight man. You know, it's like that's the level that people are at and it's like that doesn't for proportional representation, like, it doesn't mean it's equitable. The reason for what they would call affirmative action in the US is to try and correct or to try and address imbalances. Right. Like a diverse staff doesn't address an imbalance. You know, an overrepresentation would address an imbalance. But that's not what people are striving for and I think that's really key to understand. Also, it assumes that we want to be in space with white people or we want to be in space with different kinds of people that maybe we don't.

[00:56:26] And that also has to kind of be OK because, you know, it's draining to be in those spaces anyway. And, you know, I don't really want to live in a rainbow world where, like, you know, everyone is different and the same. That's not interesting to me. And I don't think it's interesting to most people. But that's the idea and that's the ideal. And that's a real problem because it's an erasure, basically.

Jamila Prowse [00:56:53] Oh. Just like digesting everything you've both said. I mean, it's interesting, isn't it? Because I think the ways that the arts operate in terms of its diversity policies and I mean, this is something that has been really widely critiqued in the sense that it does place people as checkboxes and doesn't look into things like staff retention. You know, how long somebody has actually stayed in that role. It just will put them as a no and be on its way then the ways that we kind of define progress in terms of diversity, it's quite often grouped into really, really wide-ranging groups or like, oh, I don't know, different access needs or whatever it is under one umbrella of diversity. But having those numbers higher than the year before or five years before or whatever is so reductive and really completely discounts lived experience of those people. But also, even like the roles that they're in. You know, one of the places I worked where this was a continual buzzword for them and they set up like a diversity board that they asked us all to be on, which was like a really horrible process all the time. We had to have these like I think they were like biweekly or monthly meetings about how to make things more diverse, where the kind of strategies we were offered were things like quotas, it's like these morsels they offer you to enact change, which really are not, you know, helpful at all. And for that organisation, you know, like their whole finance team was black and so they get to state that on all of their kind of reporting. But, of course, the finance team don't have any kind of decision-making power over anything to do with how that organisation is run. Other than the finances, if even that, you know, they're still answering to a CEO, that's still answering to a board. So, you know, I think it's the sense of actually it's something to both of you have talked about as well, is the sense of actually asking for more that we are continually told that we can only ask for so much and then told that we should be grateful for it and not be disappointed with that when actually the thing we're being given is quite often incredibly harmful.

Deborah Joyce Holman [00:59:25] And I was just going to add, I guess, like it's exactly that with representation in terms of being invited, you know, see we want to make it better and like you should be grateful. You should be like; how dare you turn down like this opportunity. If you turn it down, then that means your part of the people keeping black people out of these roles' kind of thing. Speaking about like diversity boards and stuff like this I mean, the last few months have been intense in that respect for everyone. Yeah, I mean, one situation that kind of jumps out that I guess illustrates quite well what we're speaking about now is that I reached out to an institution that had a horrible, horrible, horrible title of an exhibition that was just completely insensitive to everything and the way they reacted was not in reacting about that complaint but inviting me into the institution to join the diversity board. And obviously that fixes problems for them because then they have the diversity board. They have someone on there who is black and who speaks about these things. But like, there's no logic in that either like, I'm mindful that, how you make that step from being addressed about a problem and then wanting that person to be part of your institution to talk about exactly these problems, but yet you refuse to talk about the problem that like I mean, it doesn't make sense. I guess that's exactly what I feel is the issue of representation, that it's inviting people in to solve something or to distract from like what is actually being spoken about. Like what would I do on a diversity board of an institution that, as it first working relationship, has refused to hear my complaint?

Rabz Lansiquot [01:01:27] Yeah. Also, I feel like there's an aspect of like really what it's about is like fungibility. It's about the fact that we're still as black people seem to be fungible. So, and that is to mean like we can be replaced by another person, we can be replaced by another person who doesn't say the same job. And that, you know, that leads back to slavery. It's like, oh, if one of you dies, whatever, we've got another one, you know, and that is oppressive. It's an oppressive thing to consider. And that that link to representation, it links to these diversity boards and links to like the ways that, you know, you fill out the form and you take the boxes, and you know, and they ask you specifically as a black person who's in the audience to do that. You know, those methods, it's like they just see us as interchangeable. And actually, like Imani and I often talk about, like these moments that happen when you're at some kind of art event and there's a photographer there and then like five or six months later, you see yourself in there like, you know, their newsletter or whatever. And, you know, that's happened that happened to us recently. Like we were we were like the picture of us on the ICA newsletter to advertise something that was like completely relevant to the thing that we were I saw happen also to Zoe Whitley. Who was on the front of the Glasgow International like booklet thing, you know, not quoted as like, you know, these people who are doing this work, but just random black person that you can take a photo and show us, those kinds of things and that to that experience for us, we decided that when we're working with institutions, we're going to add something in the contract that's like you cannot use images unless they're related directly to this, you know, because there's this it's like I now use this word again, It's like a parasitic experience with institutions where it's like they just want to sap everything they can out of you and then, like, leave you to just fend for yourself. And I think that's important to note.

Jamila Prowse [01:03:45] Absolutely. I could just keep talking forever, but I think we're kind of coming to the end of our time now. So, yeah, Deborah and Rabz I just wanted to thank you both so much for joining me as ever. I just I mean, continue to learn so much from you both and kind of understand so much about I don't know myself and the world through your work and through speaking with you. So, thank you. Thank you so much for joining me and for sharing so much over this conversation.

Rabz Lansiquot [01:04:17] Thank you.

Deborah Joyce Holman [01:04:18] Thank you as well.

[01:04:22] This is the final episode of Collective Imaginings. Thank you for joining me over the last three conversations and thank you to Lucy, Rachel, Jemma, Deborah and Rabz for sharing their thoughts and imaginings with us. You can listen back to the series on iTunes or wherever you get your podcast. I hope you will continue moving through and discovering Collective Imaginings of your own.

[01:04:47] Thank you for listening. If we are to leverage real meaningful change within the cultural sector, we need to begin from a place of collectivising in order to dismantle and oppose the hostile and often inhospitable institutional landscape which has long been the norm. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe and rate us on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. It helps other people to find us. You can find out more on Lighthouse's website, Lighthouse dot org dot UK, thanks to Platform B and our producers Elijah Pearts, Nats Spada and Ed Apivor, special thanks to David Richards and WOOM for providing the music.

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