

womenofcolour @ soagallery

Organized by Noor Bhangu

March 15-April 13, 2018

Panel Discussion: March 22, 4-6 PM

Closing Reception: April 12, 4-6:30 PM

In the spring of 2009, Musée National d'Art Moderne, commonly known as the Centre Pompidou, launched its exhibition, *elles@centrepompidou*. The exhibition was curated by Camille Morineau as a belated response to Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" which asked institutions and individual scholars to return to and rewrite the history of art to include the contributions of women artists. Constructed as an "exhibition-collection," *elles@centrepompidou* engaged with levels of exhibition production and collection building to re-center women's art and poignantly point to its continued marginalization in dominant art history. Over the course of almost two years, all exhibited works by male artists, at least on the exhibition floors 4 and 5, were replaced by 500 works by 200 female artists from the museum's collection. Before celebrating what first appears as an organic transference, it is important to note that the new works were not already present in the collection. It took the museum five years and a deliberate 40% increase in the yearly acquisitions budget to arrive at their final goal, which amounted to 17% work by women in the permanent collection.¹

When I took on the internship position of Gallery Program Assistant at the School of Art Gallery, I was asked to curate four thematic exhibitions from the permanent collection to highlight its holdings. When introduced to the collection, of nearly 5128 works of art, a feeble 5.6% were produced by women artists and 0% by women of colour. To be clear, my alertness to this specific gap was not casual – or accidental. As a woman of colour I have moved through this world both keenly aware of people's response to my presence and the ways in which bodies like mine are absented from certain spaces. Thus, my alertness is the result of years of embodying difference. And representation and inclusion matters. Everywhere and at every level.

In the first few weeks of my internship, I began to actively look for work by women artists of colour in the permanent collection. And before you ask, no, mola textiles produced by anonymous Kuna women don't count as work by women of colour artists. No, work produced by white settler women does not count nor does work by male settlers of colour. Work produced by Indigenous women does not count. (Indigeneity assumes a different locality in settler colonial culture than racial difference because it cannot be marginalized or minoritized in dominant culture; Indigenous people are "citizens of sovereign nations" whose principal feature is political and not racial). All of these works have their own place in decolonizing the discourse of contemporary art, but none of them fill in the gap that is presently empty of women of colour.

I stage my response to *elles@centrepompidou*, almost a decade later and in a Canadian university institution, as *womenofcolour@soagallery*. Given the divergences in our institutional powers and local contexts, Morineau and I stand at the opposite ends of these curatorial interventions. Unlike the Pompidou exhibition, there are no hidden female artists (of colour) that can burst out of the packed seams of the collection. There is nothing behind these doors that can be made visible in the space of the gallery. And so, I begin my project where Morineau left hers: the exhibition space. And I work backwards. Since there are currently no works produced by women of colour in the permanent collection, I made the decision to leave the gallery empty. Through materializing this emptiness, I intend to evocate the potentialities of a gap, theorized by Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe and Malin Hedlin Hayden as follows:

"A gap is an unfilled area, the result of a loss (as in mourning), a rupture, or an opening. In any of these meanings, the word could not operate in tandem with putatively objective stories of art since a gap betrays its inadequacy. When a museum examines its function as a site for knowledge production of particular practices and concludes that there are gaps in its account, then the idea of anything like an objective story fails. This is a good thing. When the objectivity of modernism becomes slippery, gaps – as in unattended areas – (hopefully) call for other actions."²

The collection that I've cared for in the last six months has *failed* me, just as it will continue to fail those that cannot see themselves reflected in its seemingly objective history. However, as Skrubbe and Hedlin suggest, this failure can be productive in creating a gap that can, in turn, be filled by the presence of women of colour, and their allied communities. Following the first week of material absence, I will begin to bring artwork into the gallery, submitted by students, faculty, staff, and community members who self-identify as QTBIPOC/BIPOC. By using my own position as a starting point, I look forward to partnering with others to co-create space for ourselves in the future. It is, also, my hope that the project moves beyond its exhibitionary container to effect real change at the level of collection building – that the fervent outpouring of participation coming forth from these communities will push the School of Art to reactivate and reconsider its acquisitions policies in the coming years to include previously under-represented artists. After all, art is not the medium through which change occurs, rather its primary function (according to Boris Groys) is, "to show, to make visible the realities that are generally overlooked."³

1. Musée National D'art Moderne/Centre De Création Industrielle (France), and Centre Georges Pompidou. *Elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National D'art Moderne, Centre De Création Industrielle*. Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009.

2. Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe and Malin Hedlin Hayden. "A Serious Suggestion: Give up the Goat Art Collections and Feminist Critique in Sweden." *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, edited by Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013. p. 67.

3. Boris Groys. "Politics of Installation." *E-flux 02* (January 2009). Accessed March 14, 2018.

featuring:

Jea Mae Besana, Annie Beach,
Daniela Ocaña, Mahlet Cuff, Bria Fernandes,
Etovre Odhigbo, Andrea Ocampo,
Kristin Flattery, Lu Du, Tamiko Kavanagh,
Mariana Muñoz Gomez, Shayani A. Turko,
Michele Melendez, Seema Goel,
Ulziitugs Enkhbold, Christina Hajjar,
Gurpreet Sehra, Vasudhaa Narayanan,
Franchesca Hebert-Spence, Ekene Maduka,
Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, Hassaan Ashraf,
Niamh Dooley, Francesca Carella Arfinengo,
Shaneela Boodoo, Katrina Mendoza,
Quahaila Hewitt, Aruni Dharmakirthi,
Sindhu Thirumalaisamy, PJ Anderson,
Brianna Wentz, Carla Carrillo, Shuaib Ope,
Richelle Baker, Ayodeji Omolere