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Transcript #63 Live from the Aspen Ideas Festival: Says Who? Cultural Value and Validation in the 21st Century



Guests Michael Govan, Roberta Smith, Derrick Adams and host Charlotte Burns at the Aspen Ideas Festival

Published 15 August 2019 in [Podcast Transcripts](#)

Charlotte Burns: Hello and welcome to *In Other Words*, where we cover everything you ever wanted to know about the art world but didn't know who to ask.

I'm your host, Charlotte Burns and today's episode is a special panel that was organized in collaboration with Sotheby's and the [Aspen Ideas Festival](#), taking place in Colorado in late June. The topic was, "Says Who? Cultural Value and Validation in the 21st Century." I was joined by an esteemed panel of guests—each of whom has previously appeared on our podcast, so check out our earlier episodes—[Michael Govan](#), the CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director of the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#)—

Michael Govan: *The museum has the authority to do whatever they want, and they're looking down on you to tell you what's good and what's bad and all of that. And I think there's a new awareness that it's not so simple.*

—by [Roberta Smith](#), arguably the leading critic of our times, is the co-chief art critic of *The New York Times* and has been since 2004. Roberta's been writing criticism since the 1970s.

Roberta Smith: *The thing about the art world is that it's very porous. If you're really determined and really passionate; if you're willing to pretty much sacrifice every other aspect of your life, you can rise.*

We were joined also by [Derrick Adams](#), a multidisciplinary artist who is focusing on the force of pop culture. He was literally flown from sea level, 20 yards from the beach at [Robert Rauschenberg's house](#), where he's doing a residency at the foundation in Florida right now.

Derrick Adams: *I feel like my studio is my space; my space for radical imagination and to really push past the things that are expected of me as an artist, as a black person.*

Before we begin, here's your regular reminder to subscribe to our *In Other Words* newsletter. And now, on to our panel.

We're at a moment where the art world, like most other industries, is experiencing profound change. From museums—who gets to fund them; who get so run them; who gets to show art in them? To the market—how we do business and where we do business. To artists—who is valued, how valued and by whom? To the media, how we receive our information. All of these things are in a moment of extreme change. What do we mean when we talk about value? Do we mean aesthetic values, market value, critical value, historical value—the things we keep for future generations?

I thought I'd start here with Michael, because [he once said](#) that the museum itself is a belief system of a worldview. So, when we talk about value, what do you think?

Michael Govan: Well thanks, it's nice to be here in Aspen with friends and others. I think obviously there are many kinds of values and we value things for many different reasons. A lot of artworks are considered valuable if they last a long time or are valued over many generations or even millennia. But of course, there's a value to conversation in the present: performance, things that might disappear. Every value is negotiated in its time and place, contextually, and there are a lot of layers of value. I had a collector once who had a work in the museum that was very valuable in a dollar sense and was upset that not enough people were going to see it, because of course they should, it's so valuable. But our public at LACMA, they don't know what anything costs. So, in that sense it's such a pleasure to have a broad audience that comes from every walk of life, economic and otherwise, and have a very diverse audience because they're looking at things freshly.

With a museum like ours, which shows art of all time and places, it's really a great pleasure to watch what people gravitate to. And, of course, even the sense of values always changing as time shifts, values shift. What's interesting for a majority shifts.

When you—I think you were commenting on the idea of the museum. I just would say that also there's different levels of value. There's an object, there's how it's arranged with others. And then as I always say, whether a museum likes it or not, how it's organized and arranged speaks to a value system. And if it's a Greco-Roman temple façade, that's one way of seeing something. How you organize what you see when you walk in, that's primary—and what's in the back-left corner. Those are all statements of value and so I think we just need to be aware that there's nothing objective in any of that. It's all statements of value systems that are constantly changing, which actually is kind of great that there is a constantly shifting and reevaluating a system of values.

Charlotte Burns: Derrick, what do you think? As an artist, what do you think of as value? What's valuable to you? The critical response, the market response, the museological response? All of it?

Derrick Adams: For me, I guess it's a combination of all, but I think it has to do with mostly relationship to value and desire and what people feel drawn to for various reasons. Or what's most desired becomes valuable at some point because it becomes more rare. I always look at stuff like the [\[Antique\] Roadshow](#) or [1stdibs](#), and I'm always so surprised when people bring antique things from the 1600s and they're like, "Oh, it's only worth \$2,000." And I'm like, wow, that's the rarest piece of furniture but because you changed the knob it's less.

[Laughter]

For me as an artist, I think value has to do with just creating a sense of, or at least recognizing and fostering this sense of desire to kind of finetune it; to understand certain principles about objects and what they possess, and when they were made and the thing that was happening around it. Those things. I think about context when I think about value.

Charlotte Burns: Roberta?

Roberta Smith: What were those three adjectives you had? Historical, critical, and aesthetic?

Charlotte Burns: Aesthetic, market, commercial, historical, aesthetic.

Roberta Smith: You're changing your adjectives.

Michael Govan: She's going to check them.

Roberta Smith: Whatever her three adjectives were—

Charlotte Burns: Aesthetic, market, critical, and historical.

Roberta Smith: Historical, critical and aesthetic. Let's leave out the market. Those are all one thing for me. Basically, and to pick up on what Derrick said, basically I go pretty much by desire. And by desire, I mean: is it useful in a way? Can I use this now in my life? And is it still useful if I compare it to whatever else I've seen before? Does it seem original? I think we're sort of hardwired for the new in some form. So that's a value. But I'm just down here like looking at things. That's basically my job and my life. And at each turn I'm kind of trying to evaluate it. I don't mean just art, I mean everything—like this building, these chairs. What's their worth? Are they contributing to your life? Are they detracting from your life? What about all the buildings out there?

So, I think value is something we are constantly dealing with consciously or unconsciously in our daily lives. And I think value in the art world is in complete flux all the time. Everybody's thinking and rethinking value. And then at certain points we communicate, we put something on view, we make something, we write a review, we buy something. And I like to say that everybody who's really passionate about art and interested, you have a vote and you're voting early and often. Whatever it is you do—making, buying, writing about, installing, calling your friend on the phone and saying, “you've got to see this”—you're expressing an opinion and it's going to have an effect in some way. And it will just build and build, and then things will change.

A new generation will come along. Something will happen that changes the landscape incredibly. I think [the controversy around](#) the Dana Schutz painting at the previous Whitney Biennial was like this shock to the system. And there's been a lot of rethinking done with things since then, a lot of reevaluating of things.

Charlotte Burns: The [Dana Schutz at the Whitney Biennial](#) in 2017, for people who didn't follow that: a work by artist Dana Schutz was included in an exhibition which was one of the most diverse Whitney Biennial's that had ever been installed. Dana Schutz had a painting called *Open Casket* (2016) which was a depiction of [Emmett Till](#), the 14 year old boy who had been lynched in 1955 in Mississippi. There was immediate and sharp focus, and intense, persistent backlash against this. This idea that a white artist would claim an image that was so painful and produce it and it be in this show. And it was pictured alongside other representations of racial violence, but it was seized upon because of the question of whether she personally had the right to depict that work.

Derrick Adams: That was one of the main triggers for the viewers. But I also think that it was relating to the context in which Dana has kind of built her creative practice on, which is humorous and kind of dark, kind of sarcastic and ironic in a lot of ways. I think that if another white artist who was making works continuously in their career that dealt with it—because there are quite a few white artists who deal with political subject matter through community and different things—I think they would have been received differently than like say, [Cheryl Pope](#), who shows with [Monique Meloche](#), who works in communities. This was so much more of a representation of Dana's style and humor, but the context changed. And I think that was more of the response to the work, because the painting itself with beautiful aesthetically and they went in line with all the other things she had done.

Roberta Smith: It wasn't, or it was?

Derrick Adams: I even think it was.

Roberta Smith: As a painting.

Derrick Adams: Yeah, I think as a painting it was beautiful. The painting itself. I think that what people couldn't really understand... it was almost like people who didn't know who she was. Who is this person who is making this painting versus artists who've made works like this—

Charlotte Burns: It was more jarring

Derrick Adams: Yes. It was more, it was unexpected. Not because of the subject matter. I don't think it was just because of the subject; it was a trigger, but I think it's because the legacy of approach that she's made as an artist with the type of work that she's made.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Derrick Adams: That was shocking, I think. People were trying to figure it out. It was almost like a left turn for her. Like, “Oh, she's making this now?”

Charlotte Burns: Right. I see. There are other instances of this kind of furore around works of art. Another example would be the artist Sam Durant, [who exhibited a work](#) called *Scaffold* (2012) at the Walker Art Center. And there were huge protests from the Dakota tribe that eventually, through discussion between the artist and the community, the work was

removed and then ceremonially burned. And that was another example of this idea of who had the right to comment on which histories and how.

There's real sensitivity around it, and it was actually articulated recently with the current Whitney Biennial in which [the artist Simone Leigh responded](#) to critics' reviews of the shows, which had said that there was nothing very radical about the exhibition. There was nothing in this time of turmoil that seemed particularly reactive to that. And she responded quite fiercely in a Facebook post that went viral, saying essentially that "critics who were saying that are not coming from the place I'm coming from. You don't have the knowledge to recognize what's radical about my work." And that then sparked another conversation about what knowledge you need to bring to a work of art. What do you think about it, Roberta, as a critic? What knowledge do you think you should bring?

Roberta Smith: Well, I'm having lots of reactions to what's been said so far, so I'll just say I don't quite agree with Derrick. I've never heard that take before, that's really interesting. My general opinion about this is that you're not going to stop anybody from doing anything. Nobody does not have a right to do what they're doing. Artists are going to do what they want. They're basically opportunistic. They basically have something they want to express, so they make it first and then they deal with questions later. And you could argue about whether that should have been shown, that's a different argument. But the fact that it—and I'm not sure that, I mean she's painted pictures of other American.

Derrick Adams: *Open Casket. Autopsy of [Michael Jackson]* (2005)...

Roberta Smith: Michael Jackson.

Derrick Adams: Michael Jackson.

Roberta Smith: But also, the American vet, stretched out dead. But that one, I think the Modern has it.

Derrick Adams: Yeah, yeah.

Roberta Smith: So, death has been a thing.

Derrick Adams: Yeah.

Roberta Smith: But...

Derrick Adams: I definitely think artists should be able to do whatever they want to do and to present ideas that are important to them in the context of whatever they want to establish.

Roberta Smith: Yeah.

Derrick Adams: I think there's also a relationship to the curator and the artist, too. In this particular instance, when you have exhibitions where the work is literally framed as being radical or revolutionary, people are going to come there looking for obvious tropes of radicalism—

Roberta Smith: Sure.

Derrick Adams: —or revolutionary structure. So, it actually sets up a structure for viewing that with a certain intention of criticism. Instead, I think that is also an issue with just the wording and structure around exhibitions that will allow viewers to come in with their own understanding or at least broad understanding based on opening up the context of the show.

But a lot of the biennial exhibitions are curated with a very particular lens that forces the viewer to think about things either politically or whatever the idea of the curator is, without thinking about really allowing people to question what is revolutionary.

Roberta Smith: Yeah.

Derrick Adams: Or what is radical.

Michael Govan: Yeah. I think that you're saying the same, that the issue really there is the frame, the lens—in which context. You're not going to stop an artist from making anything. But as soon as you show it with other things, frame it in a certain way, put a description, a label around it, you've re-presented it in a different way. And these are big issues in our time because it's been taken for granted that the museum has the authority to do whatever they want, and they're looking down on you to tell you what's good and what's bad and all of that. And I think there's a new awareness that it's not so simple. We deal with contemporary art where we've had people have discussions, but we're dealing with art of all kinds.

So, when a tribe complains that [Chagall](#) in the 1920s appropriated [kachina](#)—actually, in the 1950s—in the worst way, because now social media images are going out and they don't want their children seeing a profane version of a sacred

image. What do you do about that? So, of course we're going to meet with them, and we often meet with tribal leaders or when we show Native American objects. I've had complaints on wall texts about whether a show about Martin Luther should discuss this and that as well as what we're showing. And so, we've changed a text or two or had a symposium when people have complained, but I think we live in an age where... Listen, the greatest gift of the 20th century in academia and education in philosophy is an awareness of context.

That's the big issue, is that we now understand it's not a thing in itself, everything's about context. And so now the context is being discussed and challenged with equal—or celebrated and scrutinized—with equal focus, which, again, I think is an exciting thing because it makes it more complex and more interesting, and makes for more opportunity, I would say.

Although, there are a lot of people who are just unhappy that they can't do what they've been doing for a long time and assuming that like, "Okay, I can just show that." It's like, you can't just show that. You have to think about the frame in which it's presented and what that means together.

Charlotte Burns: Essentially the way in which consensus is formed is shifting, and I think there's a broader awareness that the way that things have been done has not necessarily been the way that we should continue to do things. *In Other Words*, our publication—

Michael Govan: —definitely.

Charlotte Burns: —did a [big data project](#) last summer with *artnet News*, looking at representation of African American artists in American museums and in the international art market. We're currently in the middle of a second study looking at representation of female artists. We decided to take a data approach to an emotional topic, a fraught topic, simply because as journalists we felt that the way that we would write about this was flawed because what we could do was go and talk to lots of different people about whether they felt there was progress. We would inevitably interview some people who felt there had been a lot. We would inevitably interview people who felt there had not been enough. And then we would probably settle on "we've made some progress but not enough". And it would be a kind of talking head piece like every other thing we'd ever written. So, we decided to take a data approach and then layer that with context, of speaking to people. So, we took data from 30 museums across America—some of the best attended, some smaller leading urban, college and suburban museums—and asked them to give us data on ten years' worth of works to have entered permanent connections and ten years' worth of exhibitions.

And interestingly, none of the museums had the data. They haven't cataloged the data like this, so tracking progress numerically wasn't the thing that museums were really doing.

In the end, it was the case that 2.3% of all works to have entered the permanent collections of those 13 museums had been of work by African American artists. And then in terms of the market, it was 1.2% of the global market. But if you excluded Basquiat, it was 0.26% of the global market.

Derrick Adams: Wow.

Charlotte Burns: It was really interesting to be able to apply some numbers to that and say this. You know, people essentially said "we would have thought the needle has shifted further". Michael, your museum took part in that. Did you find that helpful?

Michael Govan: I don't know that we had the numbers, but we were very aware. I mean, we're aware, and we have active efforts to rethink collections. Again, things have changed in the last decade. There's not a meeting that doesn't consider how diverse and representative our whole program is—acquisitions, exhibitions. That is a measure of value now. If we're not representing living communities, relevant topics, diversity to match the explosive and wonderful diversity—we're in Los Angeles, too, which means living cultures, many languages spoken—then we're not doing a good job. So, we might have not had the numbers, but we had an intuition, and, you know, there's an awareness. And again, we don't have an acquisition budget, so we have to rely on gifts so it's doubly hard in that sense. You have to convince patrons that these are issues, too. You can't just exercise your own power in that case because you have to hustle those values within patron groups.

This year the curators and I all decided all of our affinity groups would only acquire work by women, which is also very diverse group of artists. And I didn't say, that's not going to fix anything in terms of the sort of miserable stats, but it was a kind of celebration. Of course, the work is just as good as any other work. That's pretty clear when you initiate that. If you're operating properly today as an institution, you're thinking about it every minute, and I know your statistics showed some of that and some change in museum attitude.

Charlotte Burns: There had been small change. Yeah, we saw incremental change beginning around 2014 in the museums, and then in the market as sort of rapid increase, although still small. It's still small when you look at the figures and incredibly focused on a handful of artists. I'm not allowed to give away the numbers yet for our female artists, because our collaborator will kill me. But they're essentially low, as well. I would say that they were shockingly low, if it were surprising.

Derrick, I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the power of the artist to put images out in the world that correct some of that. The image behind me is a work from the “Floater” series that you made. And I thought that was really interesting, this idea of how you wanted to represent a different kind of perception.

Derrick Adams: Yes. And narrative.

Charlotte Burns: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Derrick Adams: Well, I think as an artist, and Roberta was saying artists have a desire to respond and they have the freedom to do these things. And my being a black artist, there are many different conversations that are existing within American culture as a black American artist. With my work, you know, you look around and you see what artists are making, what artists are producing. You see how artists are responding to things that are happening topically and also socially, politically.

I only step back to also think about the things that are happening that are not spot lit, and the things that are existing within the culture that people don't see, and people are not exposed to. I mean, I'm exposed to it, but even artists in their most radical practice take part in leisure and take part in things that some don't feel inclined to present that, in their life as a person, as an artist.

But I think that it's impossible to be radical and think radically without having breaks. I mean, you have to refuel, and you have to reflect. And I think that to me is a sign of critical... a position, a political space to occupy, the fact that within this traumatic experience, the oppressive structures, and all these things that are happening, people will still find time to refuel and be with their family.

Charlotte Burns: Have barbecues, to be at swimming pools.

Derrick Adams: Yeah, everyone does it regardless of... People in many different economic levels, regardless of if they're cleaning houses or doing whatever they doing, they still have barbecues with family. They still do these things that are not necessarily positive. These are things that happened, these are normative.

I think for me as an artist, I started to look at my peers and look at what's being shown, and I realized I wanted to go into a different direction. Although I'm really, really engaged with things—political topics and socially engaged with my community—I feel like my studio is my space: my space for radical imagination and to really push past the things that are expected of me as an artist, as a black person. And similar to a quote I always say by [Bell Hooks](#): the artist's role is not to just tell things like it is but also propose the possibilities of what can be.

I think for me that is my motivation in the studio. I want to feel like I'm in my home space that's not necessarily burdened with anyone else from outside sources when I know that as an artist I have the ability to create visual experiences that are beyond what is on the surface of what people are used to seeing. Which sometimes can be a challenge for people because, you know, sometimes people expect images to be at rest and images to be not entertaining or to exist, because normalcy can be boring. But I think that it's okay to be boring sometimes.

Roberta Smith: This isn't boring.

Derrick Adams: Thank you.

[Laughter]

Charlotte Burns: You also brought up there the idea of an audience, so I guess that what I want to ask each of you is—this has to do with validation, in a way—who do you think your audience is? Roberta, when you were writing, who are you writing for? Derrick, beyond yourself, who are you hoping receives art and sees it? Michael, who do you want to come to the museum? Whose opinion matters to you? Whoever wants to go first here. Roberta?

Roberta Smith: First of all, you write for yourself. You want to have pleasure in writing and your writing to give pleasure, and you want to get really, really close to what it is you think. Being honest in anything, including criticism, is really, really hard. There's a lot of stuff you have to work through to find out what you really feel. And I think I'm probably writing for people who are marginally—or from marginally to very—interested in art. In other words, I don't have to explain Minimalism, but I don't have footnotes, I don't use jargon. This is kind of a cliché by now, but I always say that the purpose of my writing is to get people out of the house and in front of the art.

So, I want somebody who might be open to that, obviously, or I hope for somebody who might be open to that. I either want people to say, “What the heck? I have to go see what this,”—you know, they sort of can't believe what I'm saying and want to disagree with me, but they're still curious enough to get in front of the artwork—or I'm talking about something they love, and I love it, too. So, there's a whole range of things, but basically, I want to demonstrate to people looking and forming opinions—and for them to recognize how they do that in themselves already.

We're all opinion machines, and we all have a tremendous apparatus of the senses called our bodies that are always working all the time, and what education ends up with us having is a kind of cutoff. So, we don't pay attention. We don't know what's coming in. We don't know how to articulate what's trying to get to our brains into language. And just show how that happens, that you look at things, you look at things that have a kind of specificity, and then you have associations, and you understand somebody working on this and making it and creating a form that you're experiencing, and then you have your own associations like...

[Phone rings]

Roberta Smith: Uh-oh. Sorry.

[Laughter in the room]

Charlotte Burns: Criticism never sleeps!

Michael Govan: Probably on deadline, right? She's on deadline to get that article then, to do exactly that.

Charlotte Burns: Roberta, has that changed with the shifts in media, the way people consume news? Do you find that the audience is shifting as things have become more digital?

Roberta Smith: One of the undercurrents here is how everything has changed because of the digital, because of the different platforms. We are all on the different little machines we use, so that how consensus is formed is completely visible and fluid. I mean, people are expressing themselves. You know, you write something, you get feedback. And so, there are so many more people talking that it's inevitable that it's many more kinds of people talking. And I think it's just amazing, that the sense of fluxness in thought and in looking is so much greater and moves so much faster now.

Charlotte Burns: And Michael, for you, who is your audience? What's your validation?

Michael Govan: Well, I think the exciting thing about working in a big museum with a big public is that you're very, very aware that you cannot pitch it to any particular... You want a diverse presentation so different people are interested in different things, but you're very aware that you have people walking in who have never been to an art museum before. And then you have people walking in, art critics, who are expecting a level of sophistication and understanding. I think what we... It's actually kind of creative process to try to create, to make something, this arrangement, which is read on different levels, and actually it's very pleasurable.

Like, I could give an hour lecture on [Chris Burden's *Urban Light*](#) (2008) about why it's an important artwork and how he's thinking about civil society, and connectivity, and to history of making public art because there was a civic process to design the lamps, and all of that. And then people are there to take their quinceañera pictures or just be there at midnight to shoot a rogue music video, or they're just kind of looking at it.

So, in a way, we do measure a little bit of our success by whether we can identify and construct and select things that can be looked at from different directions. And we're very aware of that, as Roberta says, the world's opening in that sense. My career has been from the time when pretty much you were pitching everything to New York and certain European centers and a few writers for quality and for validation to now it's... Our audience in the last 10 years has diversified incredibly. The age demographic has gone down. I think last year we had less than half white people coming to the museum. It's incredible, and a lot of first-time visitors. That actually is really exciting, and I think artists are often—and we don't just deal with artists, of course. We're dealing with works made by artists who are no longer around.

But it is communication. It's raw and direct communication. Every work, every action is to communicate in some way. And we're aware that some objects, they're narrowly focused. Others are more broadly pitched.

It makes it harder, but much more exciting to try to construct things that can be read in different ways. I always think like a great, good Bugs Bunny cartoon can be seen by a child or an adult with equal sophistication from different levels. You can construct things, narratives meant to be read in different ways by different people, purposefully. And then there's going to be a whole variety of readings you can't imagine. Again, I think that disruption is exciting.

Charlotte Burns: We don't have too much time to get into it in this panel, but for people who want to know more, I suggest they look at what Michael is doing in Los Angeles in terms of [renovating the museum](#), its culture of display, and—excitingly, I think—opening up satellite campuses in different parts of the city that will be in different communities around Los Angeles.

Derrick, what's your validation? Who's your audience?

Derrick Adams: Well, I was fortunate starting off as a younger artist. I worked at a nonprofit gallery and we showed a lot of mid-career artists at the time, artists like [Frank Bowling](#) and [Ed Clark](#), who weren't necessarily recognized internationally at the time. I was exposed to that experience of hearing them talk about that history and talk about that experience being the

artist. I never really thought about my audience being very broad. I thought those artists were important artists to me, and legendary, and we thought they were masters—but the world didn't know who they were.

I always thought that it was more about being okay with what you're doing regardless of audience and those things. When I was in grad school, and I was making similar work—work I wanted to see in the world and things that I thought were not necessarily radical, at the time—but I had such pushback from some of the professors at school who were like, “How can you do this? There is no response to things that are postcolonial in theory.” And I would mention to them as we started talking, I was like, “We're all living in a postcolonial space. Now what? And what do we make? And what do we think about? And what kind of world we want to create for the future?”

So when I think about audience, I make things that I want to see in the world, but I also think about what is left: what will I leave to anyone after me? I'm hoping that it will somehow position the future generation to look at this imagery in a way that offers a certain level of empowerment and of alternative, of normalcy in a way that is not necessarily compared to something else.

I don't want my work necessarily to be compared opposite from someone who was being more overtly direct about something like that. I mean, I like the idea that we all come to learning and knowing differently. I don't really know what's my audience, but I always say that my audience are nine-year olds, or ten. I like that audience a lot because they just either like it, or they don't like it.

[Laughter]

Derrick Adams: And I like that

Charlotte Burns: Yeah. We're almost at the end, so I think I'll take some questions now. There's a microphone, this gentleman here?

Speaker 1: Hi. So first a statement and then a question. We do, as the public, have a role in what is in museums through, for example, promised gifts, et cetera. So, if you think that something's not sufficiently represented, you can actually influence that into the collection. But, Derrick, I have a question for you. Can you speak to the power of an individual or an organization such as Thelma at the [Studio Museum of Harlem](#), and also on platforms such as Instagram in terms of getting your message to a much broader audience?

Derrick Adams: Well, for those who don't know who Thelma Golden is, she has been very instrumental in supporting a lot of artists of African descent in New York and internationally. But, it's one space and there's very many different forms of creative output, like Studio Museum is a museum, versus a place like [Participant Inc.](#), which is much more experimental. There's no spaces that are primarily for black artists that experimental. It's usually the museum structure, which is a model almost like a pipeline model, versus artists who operate outside of that space. So, there's still a lot to be done when you think about spreading out and doing things that are not all seen from one perspective.

As an artist it's good to be in that space where you have that kind of support, the institutional support, which I think is significant and important for you moving forward as an artist. But I definitely see it has its limitations for what is happening with art moving forward, even with contemporary creatives who are doing things that kind of, but not really working in the museum structure. You know, they're dealing with certain types of materials and things that don't fit really seamlessly in a space that's institutionalized. So, I would like to see more of those things happen outside of the museum to expand on what is contemporary art, and what black artists are capable of doing.

Charlotte Burns: Any other questions? Lady in the front row, then we'll move to the second row.

Speaker 2: A theme in all of what you've said is that there's been a lot of change in the last 10 years and throughout this talk, I've just had in my head [The Devil Wears Prada](#). The speech about the sweater and with the implication, Meryl Streep saying, “You don't even know why you are choosing what you're choosing, because it's really the elites in this room who have done it for you.” I'm wondering, is the change moving away from that? Is that totally not true anymore? Have we really moved away from that? Are we on a path away from that or not?

Charlotte Burns: By elites, do you mean experts, or you mean—

Michael Govan: Taste.

Speaker 3: Experts. She's talking about staff at *Vogue* at that point. I don't know what you call them, if it's elites, or experts, or whatever.

Derrick Adams: Acquisition people, museum directors, collectors et cetera.

Speaker 2: Yes.

Derrick Adams: Those, yeah.

Roberta Smith: There's no area, there's no discipline that doesn't have some kind of an elite. And the thing about the art world is that it's very porous, and that if you're really determined and really passionate and if you're willing to pretty much sacrifice every other aspect of your life, you can rise.

Artists do it, critics do it, museum people do it. I think what is more interesting—you're always going to have people that seem to be at the top, but I'm not sure. I don't know what that means. I also think you have to take into consideration how everything keeps changing, so that what you call the elite now is totally different. It's different because of all sorts of things. Different revolutions. It's different because we now consider pottery an equally fine art to every other art so that every curator of textiles and pottery who used to creep around the Met, is now like, "Okay, I'm here. I've got stuff."

[Laughter]

I don't know, the fluidity of the situation. Like I said, I think the art world is the most open place. I don't have to be able to run a four-minute mile to do what I do. That's what's so great about art. I don't have to have this great instrument of a voice to sing at the Met. You just work at it, and if you're obsessed and that's all you want to do, that will out.

Also, if you're really careful about not limiting yourself. That's again, I just get back to this because I think that everything that happened around 1970—gay rights, civil rights, breakdown of boundaries between different media, introduction of new media like video, all of that has just been getting bigger and bigger.

We're still in the middle of it in ways we don't know. We have artists now thinking, "Well, I can make a painting about politics." More and more artists are convinced of that. I can make abstraction about politics. There's nothing that's ...

When I came into the art world, and I came in via the work of [Donald Judd](#) about which I was completely passionate, and then just got pulled left and right by conceptual art, by [Philip Guston's](#) paintings and then ceramics. I was completely enamored of that, and now I lost my train of thought.

Look at what Michael came in on, minimalism.

Speaker 2: Yeah.

Roberta Smith: The thing I haven't mentioned, which was really radical for me, was outsider art, and just understanding there's a whole other narrative completely outside the so-called canon that's really going to basically lay waste to the canon and is right now.

Michael Govan: Yeah.

Charlotte Burns: The other I would add to that is that in our data study that we did, you could actually—to Roberta's point about individuals being able to affect change. That was the very cheering point about our data, is that you could look at specific institutions and say, "Oh, that's *that* person." And certain people had gone into different museums and they had single handedly cultivated a change. They had more people on board with them and essentially convinced institutions to move in different directions. I think that is very true of the art world.

Michael Govan: Yeah. We've talked about how this is opened up and everything's destabilized. I'm not even sure that statement's true in the fashion media anymore, since that movie was a few years ago. But I just want to say, just pulling it back a little bit in the other direction: artists usually work every day and there's a kind of expertise and this obsession and focus where they're going to do something really well-formed and intense. The same thing is true on the side of those that construct history, who write, you [*gestures to Roberta*] spend your entire life looking at art and there are people who are experts because they've spent so much time thinking.

A lot of people say, "Well, you should just have people from the public curate your exhibitions." I'm thinking [*shrugs to the audience*] ...

[Laughter]

That chaos is... redoing the cannon is one thing, but expertise, which means focus and intensity and commitment, that does not go away. So far that has not been disrupted.

Roberta Smith: That's called passion.

Michael Govan: Yeah.

Roberta Smith: Expertise is sort of educated passion.

Michael Govan: That's right.

Roberta Smith: The thing is that, can I just say one thing about what he just said? The thing about what's happening now is those people with that kind of narrow expertise, is that they now can be set free. You can say, "Yeah, you're not going to just talk to experts, you're going to talk to everybody. And that's incredibly liberating, when you have what you think is this really specialized knowledge that—

Michael Govan: Has a broader audience.

Roberta Smith: Yeah.

Charlotte Burns: Okay. We have just a few minutes left, and I think here at the front.

Speaker 3: Thank you all very much. Very stimulating talk, and in the museums I'm involved with, the value of art is for us—we want everyone to come to the museum for one thing or another. Little children, old people. We want that engagement. There are certain things that we value because we can never take them off the wall. They have to be there when people come. They expect it. We also want to stimulate conversation and make the art relational to the people who are coming in.

Something like *Starry Night* (1889) cannot be taken down, but you see the same volume of people standing in front of [Faith Ringgold's *Die*](#) (1967).

My question is, and this is something that's always bothered me as we've spent so much time filling gaps on women artists and diversity of the artists, with race and so forth. When you mentioned a 16th-century object that's so rare but the knobs can change so it doesn't have value, I was thinking about artists who perhaps lived—who were white—lived steeped in black culture and did marvelous paintings and where the art is not commercially as valuable because they're white.

I grew up, really in an age of abstraction and everybody looked at things and saw what they wanted to see, but I never had as much thought about linking the art with the history or the gender of the artist. It just stood on its own for me, and that I find a little disturbing.

Charlotte Burns: So, the question is ...

Derrick Adams: It's really interesting too, because like I said before, when I was having conversations with artists like Frank Bowling or Ed Clark, a lot of these artists who have been making abstraction for a long time have been working alongside a lot of white male artists who also made abstraction, during a certain time where people did not want to see abstraction from black artists. They wanted to see more figurative, more narrative works, but a lot of the artists where that appears were also, yes, being inspired by going into Harlem, listening to jazz, those things. Those things are not always apparent, even in the curatorial structure of talking about them.

When I was commissioned to do [a piece for the Calder Foundation](#), I started to research a little bit about Calder and his life, and I realized through my research, that he spent a lot of time in Harlem with a lot of jazz musicians. He was really influenced by the movement, and so I wanted to juxtapose some of his sculptural objects with poems from the Harlem Renaissance.

During the time I was looking through the archives at Calder Foundation, there was no direct archival information about him other than images with him and some jazz musicians, and [Josephine Baker](#) and things like that. But I knew that, at that particular time in history from talking to artists—black American artists who were making abstraction—that the white artists who lived in New York had to be listening to jazz or something like that to influence just the way that the work was moving across the canvas, and I think that was more of the issue. It's not that people don't look at these artists, because these artists are all historically known as being relevant in the way that they're making work, but the difference is, the artists who are now coming into recognition have been doing these things alongside these same artists and no one cared.

And now, people are thinking that, okay, these artists actually were making abstraction alongside these other white male artists and their work was also about jazz. How does that look for a black artist to make abstraction, listening to jazz versus a white artist who may be making abstraction, listening to jazz. It's not a thing of difference as being better or worse, but different as being equally relevant.

I think that the audience is changing in museums where people come in looking for difference. Because me as an artist, I've been taught so much from being in the institution, of looking at images and books of a lot of artists that we would see in museums for the past years. That it becomes almost like the enrollment of college is going down in art school, because students, white students too, are not interested in going to college anymore because a lot of things you can just see online.

When you think about certain images, certain artists, that are repeated through just the rotation of looking at art history. I think people are just interested in seeing different types of artists—women, different cultural backgrounds—I think people

are just interested in seeing things that are unfamiliar to them, and I think that's what's happening with museums, where people are feeling like it's being compared. I think it has to do with their framing. It should be added, not substituted.

Roberta Smith: I think one of the things that you think about, because I think everybody thinks about it—I know I think about it—it's like okay, a lot more information is now becoming available because our historians are really interested in this and they want to talk about context and objects, and you're going to find out biographical information, information about the region, about the artist's beliefs and that's just more fodder for considering, for thinking about what it is you think.

All of this stuff is always coming at me and it's like thinking, okay, this is interesting. This is interesting. This illuminates the work. Does that make it better for me? In the end you're going to sort of come back to the object, but now, you have much more to deal with. And that is much more exciting, I think.

Like the [Bill Traylor show in Washington](#). Bill Traylor's been a great artist for at least 30 years. The curator there, whose name I conveniently forget, did an amazing job of research where she just went and put it right into the context of the South, of his being born a slave and then living in a black part of Birmingham. She was looking at businesses on the street where he was making his art. It was just the most amazing thing. It made me like yeah, you start out, all folk, all outside of artists started out kind of with blanks. I always felt like they're just like artists. They're making art from what they know, from what they live, from where they are. To see that happen with Traylor is like, yes! That's it. They're not outside.

Charlotte Burns: I think we're out of time now.

Roberta Smith: They're inside something else.

Charlotte Burns: We are going to have a round table discussion at 12pm, and so everybody who would like to carry on the conversation, please come and join us there. I would like to thank everybody for coming, and to my panelists for taking part.