

Archiving Plurality

A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

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Make a Hole in the Wall to Invite People In: Opening Space through a Plurality of Voices

About five years ago, I was invited to Derry to take part in a workshop with young people for *Knowledge Is Made Here*, a project by curator Sara Greavu and artist Andrea Francke. As I started to write this text, I recalled a distinct memory from that time. After I shared my ways of working in institutions with

the participants, a young person handed me a drawing of a building with one of its walls exploding from the inside out. This was a literal interpretation of a comment I'd made about what I do once I am inside an institution: make a hole in a wall to invite people in.

Why smash the metaphorical wall instead of using the front entrance? For me, using the front entrance is how the institution wishes—and indeed expects—you to behave or practise “institutional life.” To use your own entrance, the one that you have made for yourself and others, is to create another system within the existing system on your own terms. This has the potential to challenge, influence, or change how things are done. Over the next few pages, I will trace my own ways of working on behalf of those actively or inadvertently excluded by institutional normative behaviours and practices established by those who uphold white supremacist structures and ways of doing.

My work in mostly cultural institutions over the past twenty-five years is grounded in my knowledge of colonial administration.¹ I studied arts administration in the United States, which taught me how to think from a “white Western person” perspective. I am a colonial administrator, but one that uses the logic of colonial administration *against itself* to create alternative possibilities within and for institutions. What does this look like? It often appears as a practice looking to redress “bad institutional behaviours” that exclude, discriminate, omit, and create hostile environments. I open space for others on *their* terms, while simultaneously creating the conditions for them to be received by these institutions.

Institutions, organisations, networks, families, and any grouping that is held together by agreed rules, policies, guidelines, or laws—whether known or implicit—are all organised to serve a function. I enter all institutions knowing they are what they are because people make them like this, people like you or me; although usually not like me, in fact usually white, educated middle-class people. My family was the first institution

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I entered into; it is located on the Mexico–Texas border. And it was within my family that I learned the practice of centring others in collaborative ways. We practise a way of being that can be summed up in the following phrases: “If you are not okay then I am not okay,” or “If you are okay then I am okay.” We think with one another and act with one another in mind. This is out of respect to being in collectivity and creating the relational structures to do good by one another. You have to listen, you have to compromise, you have to be humble, you have to care about processes that at times feel like they go against you. We try to centre others with us, unlike the greater (the so-called Western, democratic, liberal, etc.) society where we are individualised. We think with and through others to ensure we can all survive in this world. This practice that my family taught me helped me to survive in my institutional working and is supporting me in creating spaces to act collectively, ensuring we are all treated justly, with care and fairness.

How does a person enter an institution—whether it’s staff, collaborator, or visitor? On whose terms do you enter the institution? An institution is made by a group of people who uphold its rules and practices. These people also decide on the rules of engagement: who can be part of it and who is invited. In recent years, there has been a turn to think more actively about who is not part of the institution—why and how to invite them in or “include them.” In England, for instance, there have been many attempts to include people, but this inclusion has largely been superficial, temporary, and has had little impact on institutional behaviours or practices. Institutions are still managed by the white British middle classes, and the majority of opportunities in the arts also go to this group.² Will there ever be a tipping point where a change will be visible? I do not believe this will happen in my lifetime because the structures of power are still designed to uphold privileging white power in institutional practices.

To give an example of institutions’ flawed thinking around such inclusiveness, while working with the Wellcome Collection, I was employed as Inclusive Practice Lead to address the institution’s lack of engagement with D/deaf, disabled,

² As I further expand in my publication *Document 0* (and publishing, 2018), 9, 20–21.

neurodivergent, and racially minoritised people. No small act! The institution's issue was that these groups didn't want to come to the Collection, and wanted me to consider why this might be and how to "reach out" to them in order to make them feel more welcome. I, though, flipped the logic because I felt that they may not identify with the institution and the programme. Which didn't mean that *they* were at fault, but that the institution was! This means that it's the staff who programme and administrate the institution who are failing to think in more pluralistic and inclusive ways. After doing a listening tour of staff over several weeks, I realised employees lacked knowledge and experience in thinking beyond the way they had always done things. They needed to be challenged, I discovered, to think beyond what they had always centred: in this case "white non-disabled middle-class heterosexual narratives." So what kept them from producing the institution differently?

My aim was to create the conditions so that the staff did not feel judged in this process, as I personally didn't blame them for how they were raised or educated. I took a compassionate view that they may not have been taught how to be anti-racists or anti-ableists, and so forth. I had an upbringing where self-reflection, non-judgement, openness, and acceptance of difference was taught to us, while most people in the UK are educated via systems that teach exclusion rather than inclusion. At the Wellcome Collection I was permitted to lead a deep research journey called "Person Centred Design for Inclusive Practices," with staff centring on the following question: "If we are well-intentioned, well-meaning, mostly university-educated good people, why are we still so exclusively white and non-disabled as a staff?" The staff went on facilitated workshops with external experts and a therapist in the room. It was my duty to also care for the emotional impact of exploring deep-seated ways of being. Through this process, we were able to better understand the needs and barriers staff face in knowing how to be inclusive.

This process was considered "risky" by management. What they meant by risky was that some people might feel discomfort in reflecting and confronting their complicity in systemic oppression. Despite this, my proposal was eventually approved.

As a result of this process, the staff recognised that they needed time to learn, language to speak about race and disability, and leadership to model better behaviours. Based on this, I developed a new framework for a social-justice curriculum addressing anti-racism and anti-ableism. My logic was that if we have a policy to be diverse and inclusive as an institution and to address the lack of D/deaf, disabled, neurodivergent, and racially minoritised communities, it would be unethical for the institution to hold people accountable to their “failings” if the institution has not made the provision to teach them how to put the policy into practice. If we taught people how to be socially just, in making them responsible, we could also then hold them accountable. Designing the framework for the social-justice curriculum was the easy part. The design for learning was based on building knowledge: first was a foundational understanding of history and self-reflection, followed by unlearning bad habits, learning new ways of practising, and applying these new skills by embodying the knowledge through action-learning sets. The content was co-designed with experts in critical race theory and disability studies as well as staff, members of Black Lives Matter UK, and other academics. The main challenge was convincing senior leadership to support the work and ensure that it would be mandatory for all staff to actively participate. I made it clear that if the institution was to change, all members of staff needed to learn how to behave and think differently. This required time, budget, and permission from leadership. After months of lobbying, we were permitted to deliver the learning programme in summer 2021. About 140 staff took up twenty-seven hours of learning.

Since then there have been visible changes in how staff behave, curate, programme, and act within the institution. Staff members are also much more comfortable talking about racism and ableism. Making the learning programme mandatory ensured that it was embedded in how the institution functioned; co-designing it openly gave all staff a sense of co-ownership and responsibility.

My process of coming into the institution was to listen to those who were already working there and hear what they wanted and needed, never presuming I knew best or that I had answers to the problem. I took a position of humility, admitting

that I did not have the answers, which helped to build trust and open space for me to listen, question, and co-create. In doing things with them and for them through collaboration, I laid the groundwork that enabled staff to think and behave differently (as colleagues, as employees, as hosts for collaborators and audiences alike), and in some ways to be better prepared to hold plurality (by way of their thinking, research, programming, and preparedness) in its many manifestations in all that they do.

In the framework of this publication's core theme, the archive's crucial function in documenting plurality: How do we ethically practise inclusion while holding a multitude of diverse experiences?

After the Covid pandemic outbreak, the Wellcome Collection was ready to get back to doing what it had always done. I was deeply concerned that we would pick up from where we left off, that we had not learned anything, and that we didn't have enough time to reflect on how we had previously practised exclusion. Working through this, I decided I wanted to create a new policy that involved asking external collaborators about the terms by which they wanted to work with us. I was aware of the damage done to freelance artists by institutional practices that did not consider them, and I wanted to create something where those who are not employed by the institution still engage with it, have some power, thereby making the institution accountable to them too. In 2021, over six months, I collaborated with twenty-six colleagues working as archivists, librarians, curators, and lawyers, as well as those working in other disciplines, to co-design the "Principles for Working Together" policy agreement. The purpose of this policy was to ask what someone needs in order to have a positive working experience with Wellcome. It is important for the external person to be able to state this, rather than an institution deciding for them beforehand. With conditions stated upfront, the policy agreement mitigates risk and reduces harm for the institution, staff members, and external collaborators. Implementing accessible language in the agreement allowed us to be clear about how the external person could access the institution and outline the conditions they wanted to set. Often people do not know what they need, so we provided

examples such as: “Will you pay for a translator to look over my contract?” or “I am a carer, could you provide a budget to support my being away from my caring duties?” Access is not disability-related, but rather related to how one accesses the institution. Before approving the draft document, we shared it with freelance collaborators and tested it ourselves. The policy agreement was used prior to creating a financial contract agreement. Curators used this to inform how to work with artists and create more open working conditions. The Wellcome collections curator used it to engage artists to find out how they want their artworks to be collected and how they entered the archive; for instance, the type of data to be used to identify their artworks or the search terms used in our online catalogue. I mentioned the “Principles for Working Together” as a process for how people can collaborate on co-creating conditions to receive plurality in a space. It is an important document that can surface what often goes unsaid. It is a clear and accessible way for people to say what they need, want, and/or expect, thus empowering them to be part of an institution on their own terms.

To answer the question about how an institution (i.e., an archive) can best receive and embrace difference, it is key to ask the artist/collaborator what they want upfront and how they want to be included, both in the present moment and for future prosperity. We need to create conditions where presumptions don’t influence our work and where we can co-create possibilities together.

I return to the metaphorical wall that I break to invite others in. I use my access and power to listen and co-create different ways for the institution to practise from a pluralistic perspective. The wall represents the policies and institutional ways of working. Throughout this process, I risked my own position for the sake of supporting others by asking for change and demanding other ways of working. I always go back to the logic that if we are to include different ways of being, then this practice needs to be informed by a plurality of experiences. And if a visual arts archive wants to “include,” then it needs to co-create the conditions with those whose art and design practices are going to be archived.