

# GUGGENHEIM

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June 22, 2020

To Richard Armstrong, Director; Sarah Austrian, Deputy Director and General Counsel; Elizabeth Duggal, Chief Operating Officer; and Nancy Spector, Artistic Director and Chief Curator:

We write to express collective concern regarding our institution, which is in urgent need of reform. Following the museum-wide DEAI Roundtable convened by Human Resources on June 8, the Curatorial Department (excepting Nancy Spector) unanimously chose to compile reflections on our experiences at the museum. We did this anonymously to share and address these issues without fear of retaliation or intimidation.

The responses attest to an inequitable work environment that enables racism, white supremacy, and other discriminatory practices. While this document was originally conceived to prompt internal discussion amongst the curatorial staff, we have together come to the decision to now submit it to you. The comments raise issues that negatively impact our curatorial work; hinder professional development and advancement; and, most importantly, often inflect the institution's program in ways that run counter to our commitment as curators to dismantle racism and demonstrate truly expansive art-historical perspectives.

The museum's present inability to take full responsibility for its history or respond adequately—whether through statements or programming—to the global protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd, has put into glaring relief the need for the self-examination and growth required to move forward as an anti-racist institution. A robust culture of open communication and exchange is necessary to do this work.

We call for the following actions and changes:

- Reform the Curatorial Department to ensure equitable and transparent processes, and put an end to the culture of favoritism, silencing, and retribution;
- Immediately commission an independent investigation and report on the development, implementation, and aftermath of the Basquiat project and the allegations made by Guest Curator Chaédria LaBouvier. Present the findings and recommendations to the Board of Trustees and the staff within 90 days;

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- Given the museum's primarily white curatorial staff, review current recruitment practices and guarantee that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) curators will be hired at every curatorial level, including at least one senior curatorial position as soon as there is an opening or in the next year;
- Redress the museum's primarily white, male exhibition history and collecting practices by devoting significant financial resources to diversify the collection, from both a historical and contemporary standpoint, as well as to support major exhibitions and educational programming that center BIPOC perspectives.

We will continue to work with colleagues across the institution to formulate long-term goals to address systemic racism and other forms of discrimination and abuse. We believe the Guggenheim can be a vibrant, inclusive museum that reflects our city, our country, and the world. We stand ready as a staff to implement change.

We hope senior leadership will embrace these recommendations. We look forward to creating new procedures and strategies that will ensure a more collective, transparent, and accountable process of decision making, and a more equitable and productive Curatorial Department and Museum.

Respectfully submitted,

The Curatorial Department

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The following comments were gathered anonymously between June 8 and 10, 2020 in response to the Roundtable Discussion facilitated by the Guggenheim's Human Resources department on June 8. These comments have not been edited or altered, but they have been sorted according to five recurring areas of concern.

Prompt: *What are some experiences, sentiments, and opinions that you shared or heard about at the HR Roundtable (June 8, 2020) that you would like to bring to the larger curatorial group for reflection?*

### On the museum's responses to issues of systemic racism and statements made by Chaédria LaBouvier

1. We feel silenced by the institution, but we are all complicit. We don't need more conversations to reflect, we need to acknowledge that there is consensus among the majority of staff and make demands starting with apologizing to Chaédria and articulating exactly what the institution is apologizing for.
2. There was a feeling that the museum's most recent, public language about Chaédria LaBouvier (the Essence article, Richard's statement) was opaque and intentionally obfuscating. Why can't we as the Guggenheim Museum apologize directly to Chaédria? Why can't we apologize to our employees who are black and people of color about the pain we have caused, and continue to cause, by the way that we have handled the situation?
3. How can the museum move forward with any kind of statement or commitment without first apologizing to Chaédria? Richard has already admitted that the museum made mistakes, so we are in a position to apologize.
4. The museum cannot be taken seriously as a good faith actor in its commitment to affirming diversity without grappling honestly and humbly with its failure in regards to the treatment of Chaédria LaBouvier. Many in the department were aware of how the situation unfolded and while many of us saw our own experiences reflected in her mistreatment, we did not speak up and were complicit in our silence. We cannot move forward with any credibility until we offer her a sincere, unqualified, public apology.
5. The COO spoke on behalf of the curatorial staff when addressing Chaédria LaBouvier at the Fall 2019 panel discussion, after using her power to shut down the Q&A and effectively silence Chaédria. In addition, the COO minimized her experience when she stated, "We're a museum, we run differently than maybe you're aware of." As nobody stepped up to condemn this action, whether in the moment, or publicly after it happened, we are all complicit in the harm that was done that evening. With regard to the Q&A, which was opened by a panelist in opposition to the museum's instructions, we should examine how we distinguish between programs that will or won't permit audience feedback.

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6. The inability of the museum to take an immediate and public stance against racism and police brutality, and to affirm Black Lives Matter, was a clear sign that it requires prompt, concrete change. That includes publicly acknowledging the institution's prior failings without equivocation
7. The museum has vaguely admitted that they've made mistakes without articulating any details internally or externally. RA is quoted in the NYT as asking for a culture of forgiveness, how can we be forgiven for things we haven't apologized for?
8. The museum's contradictions were brought into public view by Chaédria LaBouvier. Despite a "diverse" exhibition schedule, it became painfully apparent that the museum lacked credibility to comment publicly on the Movement for Black Lives due to the deeper institutional failings that led to LaBouvier's tumultuous tenure.
9. The museum's responses and apologies have been vague and not directed to anyone specific, which has made them ring hollow.

### On inequalities within the Curatorial Department

10. Can we please all self-reflect our privilege?
11. How do we define racism? Would we include ourselves in this definition?
12. What voices are missing from these meetings, and why?
13. The culture of retribution is something we should talk about more.
14. Staff that have been outspoken in the curatorial department have either left or been pushed out. There isn't an abstract fear of criticizing leadership—there is evidence of the consequences.
15. Can we imagine a redistribution of power within the department? If so, how? If not, why?
16. There are double standards applied throughout the department by managers and favoritism shown toward male staff members. Curatorial staff are tokenized by their identity positions.
17. The lack of equitable pay between male and female staff, and the favoritism, have been crippling morale in our department for some time. There is so much talent and hard work that is often undervalued or, worse, diminished. Hand in hand with the diversification of our staff should be a plan to reevaluate compensation across the board, plus provide adequate support staff, in order to bring all in line with our peers in the curatorial field (and within our own department).

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18. Favoritism and sexism! This museum continues to privilege the voices of white men in curatorial decisions, even though they are statistically a minority in our department. Even with the very few white male staff, they, by far, get the most opportunity and get promoted the fastest. This favoritism for white male voices is particularly disheartening, considering the vast over-representation of white male artists in the Guggenheim's programming and acquisitions. If this is not recognized and corrected, it's hard to imagine this can be a safe place for all, especially BIPOC.
19. Structural failures have led to a climate in which microaggressions are pervasive. The chief curator consistently confusing two colleagues of East Asian descent and stumbling over inclusive language staff meetings. The museum's director making hamfisted jokes that smack of racial insensitivity. As this survey shows, everyone on the curatorial staff can point to an episode like this. The social awkwardness of these moments derives from the widespread recognition, underscored in this survey, that the leadership is not serious about undertaking the work necessary to create an internal culture that matches its professed curatorial values.
20. Our department drastically needs a restructure of organization and leadership. We need actual staff support for our exhibitions. We need a department assistant and/or department manager to handle department administration and provide admin support to curators. We need to hire more curatorial assistants. We've lost 5 curators and the Head of the Library (6 in total) over the course of two/three years and only hired 2 new employees, one of whom has been furloughed. We cannot move forward with our projects, acquisitions, programs, affinity groups, etc., without having the proper staff support. We are overworked and overwhelmed without any type of compensation. And fear of not being visible, or seen as not doing enough, and fear of retaliation by exclusion or having projects taken away, causes us to overproduce unnecessarily. This unstable work environment, which applies favoritism and fosters competitiveness among the staff, is due to poor leadership and management. We must enact change.
21. Changes must take place within our department to minimize egregious inequalities employed from the top down. This includes: eliminating favoritism, stopping exclusion and gender bias; applying transparency with the exhibition calendar and protocols; and improving office moral and camaraderie. Our museum needs to establish equal pay for equal work; reduce income inequality; maintain and increase annual raises; hire people of color for high level positions; and allow unions to form.
22. The culture of the curatorial department can be characterized as one of fear. It has become a toxic working environment for many. Any voicing of criticism or dissent is swiftly quashed

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and the dissenting party punished. Thinly veiled threats (or as recently as last week—direct threats to employment) and retribution are commonplace. Profound mistrust of HR limits avenues for reporting. The culture of retaliation is so deep, staff cannot even expect confidentiality in making legitimate claims of harassment, racism, or sexism to HR

23. Actionable change from administration; greater transparency; examination of institution's history and frank assessments; clarification regarding future of those furloughed. Within our department, a more equitable work environment; less favoritism; less secrecy; fair treatment of staff
24. Even the most well-intentioned hiring efforts meant to address the museum's lack of diversity are doomed to fail without leadership committed to an inclusive working environment. How can we ask curatorial staff to offer challenging new perspectives when dissent is often met with retribution? How can we provide an environment that fosters curatorial vision when examples of favoritism, especially toward men on staff, are pervasive and severe pay imbalances dissuade promising talents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds?
25. When department management is offered or required to attend management, diversity or sexism training they should take the opportunity seriously. Ridiculing training in staff meetings is antithetical to the goal of this training. Instead, they might listen, learn and reflect on the culture that has emerged under their leadership.
26. Bullying from exhibition management towards curatorial needs to be addressed and stopped.
27. The workplace bullying from Clare Bell and MaryLouise Napier to curators in regards to our exhibitions is out of control and needs reform. Instead of providing support to the curators across all matters, they cement obstacles and nurture a hostile environment through intimidation, retaliation, and harmful behavior. This needs to stop. Senior level leadership needs to implement a radical shift to how these two departments must behave and support the curators properly and eradicate workplace bullying altogether.

### On Senior Leadership and the Board

28. Fear of Board disapproval is too often invoked as a reason for delayed action on the museum's part, or no action at all, when it comes to issues surrounding BIPOC. When/how are we going to make serious efforts to attract more BIPOC to the museum's Board?

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29. We're embarrassed by the silence and lack of action from our leadership. We're angry and disappointed that all of the recently open senior positions were filled by white people when we were promised diversity.
30. Richard Armstrong's note to staff stated that "change takes time," but that is not true. What is really required for change to happen is not time, but action. Change requires leadership. Change requires a desire for change on the part of those in power. Does the museum want to change? Or does it want this to all blow over so we can go back to business as usual?
31. Guggenheim must build a system to report misconduct by senior staff members. We need to include an annual review for the supervisors. It should be a mutual evaluation process.
32. What's the real action? Are we just wasting our time and emotional labor if the leadership doesn't change?
33. When will there be a seat at the table for BIPOC leadership at SRGM and the other museums in the Guggenheim constellation?

### On the experiences of BIPOC colleagues, DEAI initiatives, and the Human Resources department

34. Listening to staff is important, and creating an institutional culture where voices are heard is essential—but leadership does not need a listening tour to know what actions to take right now. A redistribution of power is urgent, and has been urgent for years. The institution needs to pledge financial resources to proven methods of creating equitable spaces right now to let us know that the sentiment of their statements are genuine. Without that it's just performative.
35. The fear of speaking out, and receiving retaliation for doing so, was prevalent in my group. Even when reports about racist and sexist incidents were reported to HR, there was a general consensus that HR does not represent or protect its employees. HR works for management and as such incidents go unreported and things do not change. This type of behavior from HR, which is overseen and supported by high level management, needs to drastically and urgently improve.
36. The percentage of people of color in the curatorial department has been brought up in several department meetings as a point of pride, typically in the context of conversations addressing areas for improvement. It is important to recognize that the number was used in a conversation about SRGM, but included positions whose salaries were not funded by SRGM. In addition, not all of the positions were permanent. Using this number to distract

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from the larger issue at hand, and reducing our colleagues to a statistic, especially in their presence, is ultimately harmful.

37. Asking our DEAL consultant to give examples of how our leadership has been courageous. No one believes that and it lessens our trust in the initiative overall.
38. HR will need to take clear steps to heal the current mistrust among employees. There have been recent and egregious missteps, such as distributing a DEAL survey that asked for participants' department, ethnicity, and gender, which, given the makeup of certain departments, precludes anonymity. Instead of acknowledging that this was inappropriate, or circulating an update disclosing this information was optional, HR made the announcement to a select few employees who were able to attend an in-person meeting later that week. This lack of transparency and accountability must change.
39. There is no safe way to evaluate managers if they need to sign off on annual reviews before submissions to HR. There should be a 360 evaluation for every manager immediately.
40. We need to address the rampant workplace sexism and gender discrimination that occurs in our museum. The behaviors, actions, and attitudes go unchecked, is allowed, and does not improve because our leadership allows it to happen. There is no support for change. Change happens from the top down, and a 360-degree feedback from a third-party should be implemented on all directors in a position of power. This is a real action that can be taken and can yield a path towards change.
41. Due to the widespread consensus that there isn't a safe space for staff to share concerns, more consideration should be given when seeking the advice of colleagues of color in conversations relating to the DEAL initiative. The burden should not be placed on them to lead the institution through this process, especially given the shared fear of retaliation.
42. There was consensus amongst my group about feeling afraid to speak out for fear of retribution. The lack of management training puts an extra burden on HR, a department which seems to be universally thought of as not providing a safe space for staff.
43. How can we ensure that Black employees and artists can have a safe space to voice discriminations they have experienced at the Guggenheim, if the primarily white staff across the institution have vocalized that HR is not a safe space for them?
44. The all staff email sent ahead of the round table used the word "proud" multiple times and seemed to attempt to strategically influence the tone of the day. Leadership needs to listen before establishing that we are collectively proud of our history and Basquiat in particular.



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45. Was the roundtable just a cathartic exercise? Where did all of the complaints go? How can the collective complaints of staff be seen by leadership? How do we amplify the experiences of our BIPOC peers without putting them on the spot in a roundtable? Can this google forms format be used by the entire institution to create a platform for anonymous sharing that doesn't get lost in a HR black hole?
46. Several managers across the institution never conduct performance reviews with staff. HR either doesn't notice or doesn't care.
47. Several anecdotes were shared that relayed moments where POC staff have been tokenized for PR purposes (e.g., the same POC staff being used in marketing imagery over and over again). People have been afraid to voice their opinion about this, because there is a general feeling that being critical of the institution's choices could risk your job.
48. The conversation about diversity needs to include open, critical discussions about pay, types of employment, and the museum's internship program. Who is paid hourly, and who is salaried? Who suffers when overtime is no longer permitted? Why do we historically rely on inviting guest curators to ensure our exhibition calendar is diverse? Why are the internship applications routed to the curatorial department typically lacking in the diversity we are seeking? If these questions are being addressed, how and by whom?
49. There is a clear racial disparity in the furloughs, which also means most of the museum's non-white employees are not being heard now. How can we address that?
50. It was shocking at the previous all staff meeting when Elizabeth Duggal was asked why were people of color the majority of those furloughed or fired and she responded that's just the way it is.
51. I was very impressed about all the anger existing within other departments in the museum, specially towards HR

### On institutional history, exhibitions, and programming

52. Why do we as curators undergo the rigorous process of exhibition proposals when at the end it doesn't matter? Richard and Nancy place shows in the calendar without the proper vetting process with the curatorial staff. Lack of transparency is a real issue. How are we supposed to feel united as a department when our leadership does what they want with programming? We need diversity in our calendar, too. We need representation of all histories. The museum needs to stop being neutral and take risks.

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53. The vague PR statements on 80 years of institutional history and mistakes are especially confusing to new staff.
54. Our department head often blames the museum's director for why certain projects and initiatives can't be pursued or prioritized, blaming his conservative preferences for our program's lack of inclusivity and diversity. Excuses are made with coded language to undermine acquisition efforts to diversify the collection as well.
55. The museum claims to be a leader, but consistently waits for other institutions to act before making decisions.
56. Some expressed feeling obligated to do work on behalf of the museum that they don't personally agree with (and sometimes are morally opposed to).
57. There needs to be a distinction between addressing institutional racism at the museum and taking steps to diversify the exhibition calendar, programming, and collection.
58. The public face the museum presents through its programming—diverse, inclusive, progressive—masks an internal culture of division, tokenization, and fear. The guest curators the museum has employed have presented work by artists from around the globe, often amplifying marginalized voices. But such temporary initiatives are disconnected from the permanent structure of the institution, where the staff is overwhelmingly white and middle class, especially at the leadership level. This disconnect puts tremendous pressure on the few staff members of color, who are often asked, in ways both subtle and overt, to hold these contradictory realities together.