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The Museum Now
Part II

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This page: **Opening of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 1968.** From left: Eleanor Holmes Norton, Carter Burden, Charles Inniss, Campbell Wylly, Betty Blayton-Taylor, Frank Donnelly. Photo: Jill Krementz.

Opposite page: **Leon Meeks (left) and an unidentified person installing "Harlem Artists '69," Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, July 1969.**

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MUSEUMS

Street, Stoop, Stage, Sanctuary

A STUDIO MUSEUM ROUNDTABLE

AS MUSEUMS AROUND THE WORLD reflect on their role in the reproduction of structures of domination, one instructive example is New York's **STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM**, a modest but pivotal institution created in 1968 to champion Black culture and center artists of African descent. To help delineate the museum's history and significance, *Artforum* organized an intergenerational conversation of Studio Museum leaders and alums—**NAOMI BECKWITH**, **THELMA GOLDEN**, **THOMAS (T.) JEAN LAX**, and **LOWERY STOKES SIMS**—moderated by **DAVID VELASCO**, the magazine's editor in chief.

Beginnings

DAVID VELASCO: The Studio Museum in Harlem opened its doors to the public in 1968. We frequently draw a connection between the protests of that era and the revival of struggles, both in the streets and within institutions, that has come to define the past few years. I often think of the Studio Museum's role in this radiant history, and I'm curious to hear what the museum means to the people who came through it, to those who have led the institution and helped give it new shapes over time. I'll start with Lowery. When did you first encounter the museum? What do you recall from that time?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: When I got my job at [New York's] Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1972, I started going to Harlem on a regular basis. I was working in the community programs department, which had been established as a vehicle for the Met to deal with the fallout from the "Harlem on My Mind" exhibition [1969] and respond to demands that it decentralize its activities. So part of my job was to liaise with museums and community organizations around New York City. I once described the Studio Museum as my antidote to my experiences at the Met. This was a place, like El Museo del Barrio, Basement Workshop in Chinatown, or the American Indian Community House [all in New York], where I could meet my peers involved in the arts, people who were like myself, people of color. It was an expansion of what I was doing and gave focus to my work.

DV: Do you remember the moment you and Thelma met?

THELMA GOLDEN: I knew of Lowery before I met her.

LSS: The way Thelma tells the story, she was interning at the Met, and she knew about me and was too scared to call me. When I found out about it later, I said, "Why didn't you just call me? I mean, no big deal." Later, she was working for Richard Clarke, as I recall, and helping him with his collection, and he sent her down to see me. She walked into my office and we chitchatted about the challenges of being a young Black woman in the arts, and before I knew it, I was being asked to meet her father. Mr. Golden wanted to meet me so he could see that I was able to maintain a lifestyle he would have thought suitable for his daughter.

TG: He wanted me to be a lawyer. I wanted to be a curator. And you, Lowery, were my great example for Arthur Golden to see this was not just a job I wanted now but a whole career. Because he understood and knew, of course, the esteemed Lowery Stokes Sims. Because her career was legendary, and the fact that I could even tell my father that I'd met Lowery, and that he was now going to meet her, went a long way.

This conversation, David, is going to be very circular because the interconnections are deep. Lowery's mom was a librarian at the Queens Borough Public Library. And I credit a lot of my being a curator now to the fact that, like Lowery's parents, my parents took me to museums, music, and deeply encouraged reading. And before I was allowed to travel outside of Queens—Lowery and I are both from Queens—I was allowed to go to the Queens Borough Public Library.

Lowery's mother was a young-adult librarian there. I was the precocious seven-year-old who wanted to move to the young-adult section very quickly, and while some librarians kept saying, "No, you have to go back to the children's section," Lowery's mother was one of those people who would let me stay in the young-adult section and read those books, which of course was along my path.

David, you asked Lowery how she was involved with the Studio Museum, but one of the amazing things about the Studio Museum is that we were not founded by one person. We were founded by a group of people. And we weren't founded at one moment. Our becoming predates our official inauguration in 1968. People were meeting and thinking and planning and strategizing before that.

And I think of Lowery as a founder of the Studio Museum . . .

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Left: **Wifredo Lam, *Goddess with Foliage*, 1942,** gouache on paper, 41½ × 33½". From "Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries 1938–1952," 1992–93, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Above: **View of "Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum: Installations, Performance, and Videos by 13 African-American Artists," 1989,** Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Opposite page, top: **View of "Harlemworld: Metropolis as Metaphor," 2004,** Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Opposite page, bottom: **View of "Frequency," 2005,** Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

LSS: Let's not forget who the real founders were: an intrepid group of people associated with the Museum of Modern Art [New York] who wanted to create a museum in Harlem. I'd like to take a moment to remember Eleanor Holmes Norton, Carter Burden, Charles Innis, Campbell Wylly, Betty Blayton-Taylor, and Frank Donnelly.

TG: Lowery was one of those many people. She was at the Met, and she was this example in the field. She was doing important work as it related to what we now call accessibility, opening up the museum. Lowery was also one of the few people who existed within these intramuseum relationships. We now consider those relationships important, but Lowery modeled that. The Studio Museum has always been about this bigger network.

Lowery organized many shows at the Studio Museum. There was "Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum," which Lowery curated with Leslie King-Hammond in 1989, and the Wifredo Lam exhibition in 1992. If you include essays and catalogues, Lowery was an intellectual force in our publications of that time. And then if you go to public programs, forget it.

So how did I meet Lowery?

I was a high-school intern at the Metropolitan Museum. And yes, sixteen-year-old Thelma was afraid to call Lowery Stokes Sims. And the reason for that is that sixteen-year-old Thelma read the *New York Times* and *New York* magazine and the *New Yorker* religiously and knew who Lowery Stokes Sims was. The first time I saw Lowery in the newspapers was because my father pointed her out to me. My father was a man born in Harlem, during the Depression, who served this country in the armed forces, finished college on the GI bill, went to law school at night, and opened a business in Harlem four doors from where the museum is now.

His understanding of the world was through that lens, and to see someone like Lowery at the Met made him understand this was an achievement for us all. I began to say in high school that I wanted to be a curator, and I wrote that in my college essay. I had already been on a campaign to not be a lawyer, a doctor, a congressperson.

When I became a curator at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York], Lowery modeled for me what it meant to be a Black arts leader. You're speaking not just to the art world. You have a whole community that has expectations and desires, and you represent that. So in my Whitney years—the Whitney being at the time at Seventy-Fifth and Madison, and the Met being at Eighty-Second and Fifth—meant that I was in this amazing geographic proximity to Lowery and could in many ways be engaged with her.

Fast-forward to 1999: I get this call letting me know Dr. Lowery Stokes Sims is going to be the next director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and would I like to have a conversation about being chief curator and deputy director? It was an instantaneous yes, in every way.

All that Lowery represented, that took me through my career, is what I hope I've been able to share with younger people like Naomi and Thomas. That's what I mean by calling Lowery "a founder." The DNA of the institution is in all of you. That's what I feel: There is a legacy that those of us who worked there in this era are stewarding.

NAOMI BECKWITH: I started at the Studio Museum in 2007, but as Thelma so eloquently pointed out, your experiences begin before you start as an employee. The first time I visited the Studio Museum was during the "Freestyle" show [2001], early in my time in New York. But even before then, I had known Thelma's work. I hadn't met Lowery, but, again, I knew

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"What I hope, and I say this to many of the young people on the front lines, is that some of them will start another museum right now." —Thelma Golden

of the long lineage, such that the day I met her I said, "I don't know whether to shake your hand or genuflect on one knee."

But I want to go back to that idea of the first experience with the Studio Museum. It is really important to remember that many of the founders, these ordinary people at the table, were artists, and that it was artists who were putting pressure on museums and trying to think up new models. Let me know when this starts to sound familiar.

There were artists who were saying that we need a new way for thinking about the art of our time—not just new exhibitions, but new institutional models. And so that was how the Studio Museum was really founded. When I saw "Freestyle," my jaw hit the ground. That mixing of the social, the aesthetic, the intellectual, the conceptual—I hadn't seen that anywhere before. But this proposition was also very familiar. So many people talk about the ways in which they could see their life and their world reflected in the exhibitions at the museum.

A few years later, I'm at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] in Philadelphia, I'm doing the Whitney-Lauder Curatorial Fellowship there, and I get an email from Christine Y. Kim saying they're undertaking a search for a new position and if we knew of anyone to let them know. I said, "How funny. I am finishing a fellowship right now."

I'd been in the orbit of the Studio Museum before I came there. I'd been writing for catalogues and had relationships with artists. There's a formal structure of who's there, inside, and then there's the broader network of communities that help make it an institution. I was superexcited, of course, to be a part of that network because for me, the Studio Museum has always been a mecca.

DV: And T., I wonder if you could share a little bit about your early experiences with the museum.

THOMAS (T.) JEAN LAX: I grew up uptown, and my first memories of the Studio Museum were my mother being like, "We need to go see 'Challenge of the Modern: African-American Artists, 1925–1945' [2003]." And, "We need to go see 'Harlemworld.'" I remember walking over to the museum and seeing David Hammons's African American flag flying out front. We were greeted by the security guards and then looked at art, figuring out who we were in this moment with one another. After I started studying Africana studies, I remember going to see "Frequency" in 2005 with a dear friend of mine. We immediately got that the "post-Black" idea the project proposed was a kiki, a polemic, and an impossibility all at once. On the way back to school, we just kept asking each other, "So how do you like being post-Black?"

The Studio Museum has offered a language to describe an emerging sense of self: How do you want to both be in the world and take respite from it, to have a sense of urgency to act in the now and find cover in the resourcefulness of Black creativity? When I graduated from college, I wanted to exist in the public sphere but also be my geeky and specific self, and I knew, intuitively, that the Studio Museum was the space where I could live both. I was very lucky and got an internship, which was paid. And that made it possible to enter the field.

As an intern, I was exposed to so much. At that time, the curatorial offices were one open room, so I would meet residents when they came down to print an article they wanted to read, or I would peer over and see Naomi and Christine meeting with an artist whose show I had just seen. That ongoing sense of activity was deeply formative.

To make art that matters, you stay close to failure and uncertainty. At

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“Being the guardians of Black culture does not mean we’re the gatekeepers.” —Lowery Stokes Sims

Studio, this wasn’t just an idea; it was practiced. I remember being in Thelma’s office, which was below the artist-in-residence studios, when suddenly we started to hear a loud thumping sound coming from above. We realized someone was dropping something very heavy on the floor over and over again. Experimentation was literal; people were just trying stuff out. At other institutions, there isn’t always a willingness to believe in something sight unseen. But at the Studio Museum, the lived reality of the workshop is key: As important as form is, formlessness is equally valued. It’s a repository of people struggling and loving to give names and ideas to ways of working and what they see and perceive without saying, full stop, this is it, but always putting out proposals and allowing ourselves to end sentences in semicolons.

New Models of Care

LSS: I think you made an important point about sound. When I worked at the Met, I had an office with a window, but I was way in the back of the building, and you didn’t have an immediate relationship to your environment like you do at the Studio Museum. From the director’s office, you could hear the noise of the streets in Harlem, people hawking their homemade movie tapes, ointments, books, etc. And there was the noise coming from the studios of the artists-in-residence upstairs, which were right above my office.

The neighborhood itself was a place where the artists-in-residence found themselves and found their materials and responded to their immediate environment. Nari Ward talks about going to vacant lots and finding multiples of things and dragging them back to his studio. Kehinde Wiley would interview his models in the street and bring them up to the studio, and there was Dave McKenzie, doing his performances right out on 125th Street. The walls of the museum were so permeable.

TG: It’s named the Studio Museum in Harlem, but I often think of the space I work in as being the “Harlem Museum Studio”: a speculative space. Around 2004, I said, “I want to reimagine what it means to speak to our audiences. We need a magazine.” We didn’t do a strategic plan. We didn’t write grants. I showed Lowery my little handmade prototype. And we proceeded to create something that now feels deeply institutional.

On one level, we are a very traditional institution. We were not trying to be alternative in our founding. The founders were like, “We’re going to be a museum, even though we are in a loft space above a liquor store.”

I think of Lowery as being someone who was witness to this moment. Right? I feel like we have to take the current moment and look at museums writ large and ask, “What’s necessary?” And what I hope—and I say this to many of the young people on the front lines—is that some of them will start another museum right now. It doesn’t have to be a museum, but I hope this moment is incubating an institution.

LSS: Just before I left the Met to take up the position of director of the Studio Museum in 2000, I had a conversation with one of our interns in the twentieth-century-art department. I don’t remember her name, but I do remember that she was Russian and came from Murmansk, which is a small city on the

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Opposite page, from left: **Cover of *Studio*, Spring 2005.** Chris Ofili, *The Gardener* (detail), 1995–2005. **Cover of *Studio*, Summer 2005.** Chato Hill, *Harlem Week, Father & Son* (detail), 2005. **Cover of *Studio*, Fall/Winter 2005–2006.** Jeff Sonhouse, *Inauguration of the Solicitor* (detail), 2005.

Above: **Kehinde Wiley during his residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, ca. 2000–2001.**

arctic circle, and I was astonished that she knew about the Studio Museum in Harlem. She knew about the programming, the artists, etc. And I thought, *This certainly indicates the centrality of Black culture internationally.* But being the guardians of that culture does not mean we're the gatekeepers.

NB: I think it's really important, this point about the guardian and the gatekeeper, because there has also been this misconception that a culturally specific museum is for an audience that is *of* the culture that it presents.

LSS: What's happening in the art world now is totally fascinating to me. And I have great satisfaction in the recognition of the talents and contributions of Black artists, historians, critics, and collectors, but I have big concerns about this recognition maybe being funneled in a specific way. My new project right now is looking at this way that Black bodies exist in Black art or art by Black artists globally and what the reception has been. It's extraordinary when you see the range of artists whose work is accessible on the internet. But it's a cautionary tale, too.

NB: Because these things become cyclical.

LSS: Exactly.

TG: We're talking about critical reception and we're talking about a market reception. What's become important is we have these institutions that build up this long memory of the ways art and art practice move and flow.

TL: Absolutely. The Studio Museum's approach to its collection marks that historical relationship in a unique way. The collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem is distinct from other museum collections: It did not emerge as a monarchical storehouse, or as a receptacle of plunder like the early public encyclopedic and colonial museums, or even through the largesse of a small group of magnanimous collectors, the way that we might think of early-twentieth-century modern-art institutions. It's also different from some of the postindependence, nationalistic institutions that appeared around the same moment as the Studio Museum in the second half of the twentieth century, which were meant to align with what a new national culture was supposed to be.

Rather, the Studio Museum's model of collecting responded just as a community would respond to the needs of someone whose family member has passed away. This is literal and metaphorical. Some of the earliest works that entered its collection ended up there because someone showed up at the museum's door and said, "Here are some of the things that have been left to me. I want to make sure that these objects are cared for responsibly. Can you help?" And the curators at that time said, "Absolutely. The way that we can do that is through this collection." I think of this model as engaged in a different tradition that exists within Black culture, a tradition of mutual aid. This is a long-standing practice that has existed to respectfully bury the recently departed in the absence of state apparatus, and it has become a widespread social technology that allows us to maintain a relationship to the past as we plan for a future in which they might continue to participate. How do we pool our resources to be able to care for the dead or reanimate the things our ancestors made after they are gone?

At the end of Alex Kitnick's essay on the avant-garde museum that David shared with us, he asked how a collection can propose other modes of caring for things that exist outside of property or possessive relationships. And I think in the early history of the Studio Museum, you already

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Above: **View of "Beads, Body and Soul: Art and Light in the Yoruba Universe," 2000,** Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Photo and exhibition design: GBOYEGA designworks.

Right: **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *Wrist Action*, 2010,** oil on canvas, 98⅜ × 78¾". From "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations," 2010–11, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

have this other blueprint for relating and working together outside of speculation and fixity.

LSS: Thomas, that's a good point. During my time at the Studio Museum, I was struck by the number of people coming in from the community who would have a direct relationship either to a donor or to a subject in a work or to the artists themselves. When I arrived, we had committed to the [2000] show "Beads, Body, and Soul," organized by the Fowler Museum [at UCLA]. Thelma and I sat down and realized we didn't have room for the entire exhibition, so we negotiated sharing it with the Museum for African Art [now the Africa Center], which was then located in SoHo. They took the survey of the history of beads in Africa and the role of trade and exchange on the continent, and at the Studio Museum we featured the installations by contemporary artists that related to specific deities and orishas in African-based practices in the Americas.

After the opening, pennies, loose change, and pieces of candy started appearing on the pedestals and indicated that some of our visitors were serious practitioners of these African-based religions. Carol Martin, our longtime assistant, was knowledgeable about the beliefs and practices. So I asked her, "Carol, what am I supposed to do?" She said, "Let's get some baskets." And people started putting all the offerings in them, and I said, "Carol, talk to your *madrina* [godmother] and tell me what we do with the money." She came back and said, "The *madrina* says, 'If it's left there, the museum can use it.'" I think we got about $1,000 during the run of the show, and I created something I called the orisha fund. In such situations, you simply can't have security telling people, "Don't put candy there." The public indicated to us the appropriate way we were to receive the artwork and how they would relate to it.

Why Do We Need a Studio Museum?

DV: I'm very curious to hear if this sense of permission, this capacity to not know everything you're doing in advance, allows you to be more agile. Thelma, how do you feel the Studio Museum is responding to this moment?

TG: I'd like to split that question in half and revise what you have said. I don't think we feel we don't have to plan. I think the ground from which we plan is different. It involves being able to imagine what's not yet possible because we are not holding a sense of inevitability about who and what we are. It is planning ahead, but often it is making plans in a space that does not yet exist. Though the museum was founded without a collection, it already imagined itself as a collecting institution, but that imagining was done in such a way that, as Thomas said, there was no inevitability to how the collections were formed. It was with intention. We asked, What does this collection need to be?

You know, in terms of this moment, it feels to me that we have to exist in two registers. One is to continue being who we are, because in so many ways what is being discussed and asked for is part of the DNA of our mission. The moment allows us to continue to remind people what our mission actually is. But the moment also requires introspection about what we need to be in the future. I have to channel what our founders were thinking; many of the same people involved with founding the Studio Museum were also protesting the Met, MoMA, and the Whitney. It was not an either/or then, and it's not an either/or now.

We stand for this reimagining of museums but still hold tight to the need

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"How do we begin to invert some of these stories and imagine multiple modernisms? How do we begin to make arguments around what happened across North America, in communities in Detroit and Chicago and Saint Louis and Atlanta?" —Naomi Beckwith

for the cultural specificity the Studio Museum was founded to present. And because that has to do with race, it becomes a complex conversation in the art-museum world. People want me to say, "If all the museums do everything that's on their action plans, and after they've finished all of their DEAI [diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion] trainings and workshops, will we still need the Studio Museum?" That's the kind of question where I become a meme; you know, one of those memes that doesn't say anything, and the person just looks at you. I just think, *Of course, of course, of course we still need the Studio Museum!* It's not to say our existence absolves everyone else, right? I think there's a way it can get convenient to talk about the work we do and then say, "Well, no one else has to do that."

That was the symbolism of Lowery and me coming to the Studio Museum. Lowery was the first Black curator of the Met. I was the first Black curator at the Whitney Museum. When we both left our positions to go to the Studio Museum, it meant those two institutions did not in that moment have a Black curator. What I think we both understood then is we need all of it. We need all of it. The culture deserves that, the artists deserve that, that space of intellectual engagement requires that.

DV: I'm reminded of Huey Copeland's conversation with Frank B. Wilderson III in this magazine a few years back, when he asked point-blank, "How do you build a museum that is not always already part of a colonial project?" Well, the Studio Museum did this, and it has been doing this for decades. I'm curious, Naomi and Thomas, what are the lessons that you brought from the Studio Museum to your current institutions?

NB: There are quite a few. One is a different sense of what it means to do scholarship. This again is where Lowery has been superinstructive. You bone up, you get your chops, you do your research, you know how to make an argument, but you can also wrap that scholarship in your subjective history, in the richness of your experience. Another lesson was an understanding that this work, as Thelma really pointed out to me, is about relationships.

That's fundamentally what we have when we think about, as Thelma very eloquently put it, an institution that exceeds its physical imprint. I'm also really thinking about new models of how to frame art history. How do we begin to invert some of these stories and imagine multiple modernisms? How do we begin to make arguments around what happened outside of downtown New York and across North America, in the communities in Detroit and Chicago and Saint Louis and Atlanta, and how did those disrupt the way that we think about aesthetic categories?

Finally, mentorship is super important—that is, bringing other folks through this process and teaching them to be both subjective and scholarly. This cannot be a field in which you stand as the giant, making the final arguments. It has to be an ongoing set of conversations with other people.

LSS: I think about a question that [Ford Foundation president] Darren Walker posed to those people who consider themselves the elite: *Are you willing to give up your privilege to achieve equity?* And I think that the challenges for Naomi and Thomas are similar to those that I had working at the Met: They are working in institutions that guard their sense of authority, but these days, that authority is being challenged. I'll admit that I did get a great deal of enjoyment out of figuring out how to get the institution to do what I wanted, even though it didn't want to, but I knew it was good for it. I inevitably found out in the process that there were colleagues who would be important allies.

I love the way that the hierarchical tendencies in museums are currently being interrogated. I'm currently working with the Baltimore Museum of Art as a mentor for its security team, which is curating an exhibition there, "Guarding the Art." I was recruited by Asma Naeem, the Chief Curator, who conceived the idea. It has been amazing to get such positive reactions from friends and colleagues in the field, who talked about experiences with the security personnel that were like the one I recently had when I went with friends to Washington, DC, to see the Sonya Clark show at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Our experience was made all the more enjoyable by the way the guards engaged with us. I had my sister on Skype, taking her through the exhibition, and the guards instructed me, saying, "Don't forget that one." Then they'd give me chapter and verse why I should show her that one. Very often, museums don't recognize the resource that they have in their security staff in terms of public interaction and visitor experience.

TL: To answer your question, David, and also just take Thelma's silent meme and give some words to that meme: Faced with the absurdity of the question "Why do we need a Studio Museum in Harlem?," I am aware of my response every day as I walk through the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art. I can't see Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings without thinking about Naomi's first exhibition of her work and her writing, which has continuously shaped how we receive it. I can't look at all of the artists who have come out of the "F" shows that Thelma and Christine began without thinking about how their careers—which is to say their sense of possibility—wouldn't be where they are without the camaraderie, collaboration, and shared belief of that series.

When a new MoMA reopened in 2019, and Wifredo Lam was prominently placed next to Maya Deren's film of Talley Beatty, I thought of Lowery's work in presenting Lam as an experimenter in a specific idiom of internationalism and the avant-garde. And then I think of other folks who come through the Studio Museum, such as Kellie Jones. There's just no way to understand what the new MoMA is without her scholarship and the many works that were in "Now Dig This!" [2011] that are now in MoMA's collection. These are just a few examples.

As we have been called to do over the past year, say their names. Actually say the names of the people and the shows that have narrated this history. That is partially what's animating the "Just Above Midtown" project we're working on at MoMA with Linda Goode Bryant—just naming that project as it was.

And we also know that to say the names is not to put a full stop on the past. We know that those legacies continue to transform, even for the makers of those artworks and for the exhibition makers, who ten, twenty, thirty years on have really different thoughts about the thing that they made.

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Left: **Adjaye Associates, Studio Museum in Harlem, anticipated completion 2022, New York.** Rendering.

Above: **The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, ca. 1968.**

Generations

DV: Thelma, I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the new building.

TG: The building gives us our first purpose-built home in our history. We started in the Fifth Avenue loft and then moved into the Kenwood office building at 144 West 125th Street in 1981. I have a deep nostalgia for this adaptive reuse project. I think this idea lives deeply in Black culture: The *creating* of space is often the *inhabiting* of that space.

The new Studio Museum, designed by Sir David Adjaye, will have its first loading dock in its history. To go deep museum-director, I'm going to say it again: *first loading dock in the museum's history*. But it's also a space rooted in our reality as a gathering place. The Studio Museum was the first culturally specific museum to be accredited. We believe deeply in professionalism as an institution, but there are other qualities that are inherent to us: openness and accessibility, generosity.

I gave David Adjaye a brief that said I wanted the building to reflect four Harlem experiences. The experience of street life. The experience of the stoop, the meeting of interior and exterior life. The experience of the stage and the way we understand the performative in the creation of identity; we are one block east of the Apollo Theater, the cathedral of Black music. And then the experience of sanctuary. Harlem community is defined by the relationship to houses of worship. Churches, yes, in the Black American religious tradition, but also mosques and the practices of our African and Caribbean brothers and sisters, whether voodoo, Yoruba, or the like. So: the street, the stoop, the stage, and the sanctuary. The building is not just about the experience of the museum, it's about putting art and culture in the center of this larger conversation.

DV: Thelma, you spoke of your hope that other people are creating museums or new institutions. What other kinds of entities would you like to see manifest now?

TG: I've been at the museum for twenty-one years; I've been working in this field for more than thirty. And I think if I were the Thelma Golden of the '90s, the Thelma Golden who curated "Black Male" [1994–95], who was deeply taking from Lowery's playbook, thinking deeply about exhibitions, but also collections—actively acquiring at the Whitney, imagining what it meant to bring works in—she would have been, in response to this moment, institution-making. I would be asking, "What doesn't exist?" I would be making that against the models of places like the Whitney, against even the Studio Museum.

I'd be thinking now, *What's next?* That's what I hope is happening. It won't be me. I have been given the job to steward again. The seven directors before me planted the seeds for getting us to the manifestation of our new building. It has taken fifty-two years and the incredible physical work, emotional work, intellectual work, and spiritual work of generations to get us to this place. Today, when we talk about change in our institutions, we often talk about change writ large. But I think we have to get into the subtlety of what museums actually are in order to envision them in different ways.

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“As we have been called to do over the past year, say their names. Actually say the names of the people and the shows that have narrated this history.” —Thomas (T.) Jean Lax

TL: David, you set up a really interesting intergenerational conversation.

TG: Totally.

NB: There’s great work to be done to recast and remake the institutions we’re in, to really imagine new possibilities. But as you opened the conversation, David, asking about the 1960s, I will say, as I’ve said before, the ’60s wasn’t just a moment of pressure on the museums that already existed; it was an eruption of new museums across the country.

This was the high moment of the creation of the museums of contemporary art in the kunsthalle model. We are all at museums that are expanding and growing, and I think people are asking for attention to move away from that operational side of growth and management and back into new stories and new models of artmaking, living, and presentation.

TG: This is where mentoring comes in. Though I don’t like that word. *Mentoring* sounds like a situational assignment as opposed to a way of being. And I think we have to inhabit a way of being that keeps us connected intergenerationally in mutual support, always, for everyone along the way.

That’s what those of us in leadership roles now have to be invested in. We all have to be doing that for this younger generation because among them are the folks who are going to envision new institutions. And they need our help—not for the ideas, but to create the path for them to be able to have what’s necessary to do that.

That’s why, when people ask me to talk about the museum of the future, I say, “No, I’ve got to talk about the museum of now.” We’ve got to be in the space of stewarding legacy and holding history. But we also have to be making the space and creating care for what’s nascent, what’s being developed now and needs to be nurtured for the future.

TL: That’s right. And as you said before, it’s not either/or, it’s both/and, as Lorraine O’Grady has offered.

TG: It’s both/and.

LSS: I think that along with some of my contemporaries, I am sometimes annoyed by the position I’m put in at this point in time. It’s like I’m the village crone carrying the wisdom of the times. The truth is that I’m learning every day from my interactions with my younger colleagues. I’m not a static entity myself. While I came up amid the civil-rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the early women’s movement, I realized that the experience of colleagues emerging and making their mark in the art world is different from mine. I can’t condemn them for it or criticize them for it. I just have to listen and learn. I may not agree with some of their conclusions or approaches to situations, but that is their experience, not mine.

TL: And it’s also something specific to the Studio Museum in Harlem. This model of believing in intergenerational connection and that young people have a thing to teach and also that a draft version—or even a flawed or unrealized version—is worth a whole lot.

TG: Inside the universe of the institution, we can talk about what kind of museum we are, and that can have as much multiplicity, as much diversity, as we can imagine. That is what the culture demands. This is the gift I felt was given to me by my dear friend, my dear brother Okwui Enwezor [1963–2019]. Okwui allowed me to understand that the Studio Museum is not a static project—it’s not about getting to a final conclusion—but that each place we got to led us on the next destination. Okwui was there with me, quite literally, when we drafted our current mission statement—and Lowery was there when we brought him into a meeting to talk about the future of the museum in 2003. Okwui allowed us to stand back and imagine a wider place the museum could exist in, to view it as never-ending, continually expanding.

Affinities

DV: T., you’d mentioned earlier the importance of naming these exhibitions and institutions. Are any of you seeing organizations out there right now that are giving you life? I can think immediately, for instance, of Public Assistants and Summaeverythang.

TG: Personally, I feel a deep kinship with the Underground Museum. What I feel in my experience of the Underground Museum is what it must have been like at the start of the Studio Museum. I have so much respect for Noah Davis’s vision and for the way the institution has been carried on by his amazing family—his brother, Kahlil Joseph, his sister-in-law, Onye Anyanwu, his mom, Faith, and of course his widow, Karon, as well as Helen Molesworth, who is deeply embedded in that.

I also think of all the artist-created projects: Rick Lowe’s Project Row Houses to Carrie Mae Weems’s Social Studies 101 project to Lauren Halsey’s Summaeverythang, Theaster Gates’s Rebuild Foundation, Mark Bradford’s Art + Practice, or what Vanessa German did with her ArtHouse.

Then I take inspiration from those organizations that are not formed in the realm of this presentation-collection model. There are so many of them. I feel privileged to have been involved on the board of Creative Time and Exit Art in the ’90s and into the 2000s. Today, two organizations here in New York I think have a lot to teach all of us, that are deeply important to me and I watch very closely, are the Laundromat Project and Recess.

LSS: I still go back to an experience I had in 2002. I went to Alaska with my mother on a Lindblad trip, and we got to Alert Bay on Cormorant Island in Canada and were taken to the U’mista Cultural Centre, which consisted of a lodge for ceremonies and a museum in which they exhibited objects related to the potlatch traditions that had been confiscated by the British government in the early twentieth century because they found those traditions threatening to the economic system they wanted to impose on those communities.

They had been lobbying the government to get these items back, and the government threw them a challenge, saying, “You have to build a museum to house the objects.” Challenge accepted, and the museum was built. I’ll never forget the sensation of walking into that space: The usual barriers protecting objects from people are gone. There was a sense of sharing and accessibility that’s not only for the community for which these objects are deeply personal, but also a sharing with you as a stranger.

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TL: It's so moving, Lowery, to hear you talk about that. Because I think that we have an opportunity among Black folks to connect in a more meaningful, synthetic way with our Indigenous and Native colleagues. Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, who had a Projects show up this past summer at MoMA, asked for us to work with the American Indian Community House. AICH is here in New York and it brings together Native folks from across multiple sovereign nations. When Gabrielle asked the exhibition's curator, Lucy Gallun, to initiate this relationship, Gabrielle spoke to this idea of a friendship house as a long-standing creative space of assembly as well as an alternative to the ways in which, at times, museums want the art made by people of color but don't want the artists themselves.

And even as there are certainly differences between the poetics that Black and Indigenous people have created in the wake of dispossession, we have this opportunity to forge new kinds of solidarity. I think that is also true for Black folks working outside the US. Traveling to Brazil at the beginning of last year, I met with so many curators and artists who had formed collectives across the country: 01.01 Art Platform, Trovoa, Projeto EhChO, the curators working on the Frestas Triennial, and Aparelha Luzia, among others.

They are all, I think, exploring this alternative form of kinship that can mobilize access to brick-and-mortar spaces and resources but also rehearse and prepare for this other larger project. And they're watching what Black folks here are doing, right? Because we are in the belly of the beast; we're in the imperial metropole. They're drawing inspiration from the models that we're describing, but they're also being teachers to us so that we don't imagine that the US Black experience is the only story. Part of doing this work across the earth and with folks in related traditions is to say, "OK, so what is it to live in a space of translation and sometimes of misunderstanding?"

NB: It's important to remember that the Studio Museum has been doing that work of establishing broader connections. I'm thinking about "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s," [1990] right? And one of the projects that I really enjoyed participating in was "Caribbean: Crossroads of the World" [2012], which was done with [New York institutions] the Queens Museum and El Museo del Barrio. Which takes me back to your question, David, about affinity organizations. One of the organizations that I came across in the work on "Caribbean" was TEOR/éTica, which was founded by this brilliant curator and activist, Virginia Pérez-Ratton [1950–2010], in Costa Rica.

I saw a real kindred spirit to the Studio Museum in Virginia: She initially wanted to create a space to present art but realized other infrastructures had to be built up around that, in the same way Thelma talked about having to think about other modes of presenting the Studio Museum's work, by, for instance, creating a magazine. *First, we're going to do publications. Then we're going to have a symposium. Then we're going to advocate for artists from the Latin American regions for big biennials and shows.*

I'm also thinking a lot lately about the Black School, founded by Shani Peters and Joseph Cuillier III. That was incubated at the Laundromat Project as well. Really leaving an imprint in culture has to happen on multiple

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Opposite page: **Volunteers boxing produce at Summaeverythang Community Center, Los Angeles, July 2020.** Photo: Allen Chen/ SLH Studio.

Left: **Yeni y Nan (Jennifer Hackshaw and Maria Luisa González), *Simbolismo de la cristalización–Araya* (Symbolism of Crystallization–Araya), 1984–86,** C-print, 13 ¼ × 19 ½". From "Caribbean: Crossroads of the World," 2012, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

levels—in the space of galleries, in the space of public art practice, through radical education projects. All that happened inside the Studio Museum, and now it is happening in this beautiful swirl out in the world.

In Full Voice and in Life

TG: I'm trying hard to not have our history—both the linear history, but also these other histories—be always *in reaction to*. Quite often, we need to write our history because we're in a position to create correctives. People say things about certain Black artists like, "This is their first major museum show." And I have to say, "Wait a minute!" Which is not about institutional competition. It's about writing these histories. There were curators at the Studio Museum who were laying the framework. There's so much that exists now that wouldn't be possible without what they did, but it's unnamed. And it doesn't live on the internet. It's not part of received history.

I hope to engage younger people who are going to want to dig in and do the essential research. You see, so much of it Lowery has in her head; I have to get that out. Linda Goode Bryant has it in her head. Thomas, you said something important, which is that the Studio Museum is the evidence of projects that don't exist anymore. I can't talk about the Studio Museum, about my adult era in it, without talking about Just Above Midtown.

A lot of my essential fact-checking about the Studio Museum I used to do with David Driskell [1931–2020]. "David," I'd say, "did so-and-so ever have a show at the Studio Museum? I can't find anything." We didn't always have catalogues. And he'd say, "Let me look," and he could come back with, "Yes, this is when it happened. I don't have a checklist, but here's some photographs." Kynaston McShine [1935–2018] was someone else who was around at our beginning.

TL: I have a memory that came back to me and that goes recursively back to Lowery's statement earlier about noise, about the sounds from the street seeping into the space of the museum and just how loud the curatorial offices were. I remember one time, Thelma, at the beginning of the Studio Museum's Target partnership, they sent you this paisley bike with pink ribbons, and you rode it down the hallway, ringing the bell, riding into curatorial. And I remember Naomi laughing—I can still summon that laughter in me when I need to. There's a sense of life and joy in what it was to work there. Plus talking about all kinds of culture outside of the art world, which can be so rarefied. Especially when we caught feelings—for example, I remember so much said around the TV show *Girls* and the kind of mourning that took place after Michael Jackson passed.

TG: That sense of noise is also cultural. When I'm walking on the Upper East Side, I'm like, *OK, why is everyone so quiet?* Because walking on the street in Harlem means you're not just having your conversation, you're jumping into somebody else's. There's a soundtrack. Every car will have music. Every vendor has music. Every store has music.

There's a collective embrace of the sonic space you're in.

I think about so many of the thinkers around us who have spoken about imagining the full scope of Blackness. And one aspect of that is the idea that in the museum—in the museum space as well in our offices—we exist in full voice and in life. That is evidence of not just joy but humanity. There have been many moments where people have had their first week somewhere else after leaving the Studio Museum, and I'm checking in—"How are you? How is it?" And nine times out of ten, somewhere in there: "It's so quiet!"

NB: It's so quiet. That's number one. I have learned now, every new job, to ask, "What's the sonic culture like? Are you loud? Are you expressive?" And the answer, usually, is, "Not really, people like it quiet." Like, OK, I had to ask.

TG: It was such a joy to work for Lowery. Lowery could be anywhere in the building, and when she needed me, I would hear "Thels!" and I knew, whatever I was doing, if I was on the phone, I'd say, "Got to go," right? We just existed within this space of our engagement with each other. And the bike is just . . . I mean, one day David's going to do a whole issue on museum directing. [*Laughter*] I know it means something that the first museum director that I got up close to was Mary Schmidt Campbell [the Studio Museum's director from 1977 to 1988]. I know that has so much to do with my own sense of being able to walk with authenticity. So yes, the bike, which I still have and rode up until we left the building, and which now exists in our current office. The bike has never been on the street. ☐

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