

DAVID & GOLIATH

If the traditional white-wall gallery is Goliath, then we, David, have killed it.

The manipulation of social media into a 24-hour news cycle (backed by sponsored advertising) has altered our need for brick and mortar art institutions. Walls shape-shift to square tiles, and work inevitably becomes content.

As calls for diversity and representation grow louder, traditional galleries are falling victim to their own ignorance. Institutions that fail to see "inclusive" as its *own* kind of exclusivity will be left behind when curators produce their own creative platforms with great 'cause' and intent.

Despite social media's seemingly positive effect on art practices, digital media is not without its criticisms. Creative offerings are often tailored to unpredictable algorithms, as are corresponding critical observations. The nature of reward-based apps (i.e. retweets and likes) calls for an over-production of recycled work in the pursuit of infinite praise. Art, and artists alike, are lauded for their virtue signals/amassed following, with little value to the work itself other than recognition.

As such, digital media has also fallen victim to its own hype machine. Little is said of style, technique, or even the originators, pioneers and advocates of particular art practices. Moreover, increased accessibility has overruled credibility, namely, the researchers and curators behind viral works and Twitter topics. The 'cause' is effectively nothing more than hot air.

A question then arises: what *is* the role of the curator? If social media works to recognise art and the gallery seeks to legitimise it, who is then certified to bridge and critique the gap between old and new.

SLINGING THE STONE

In June 2019, Chaédria LaBouvier became the first black woman (and first black curator) to curate an exhibition at the Guggenheim. Her presentation, *Basquiat's Defacement: The Untold Story* centered on Jean Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) and his 1983 painting "Defacement," (formally known as "The Death of Michael Stewart").

The painting responded to the questionable passing of African-American artist, Michael Stewart, following his arrest by New York City Transit Police. Given that the final piece was never intended for public viewing, *Defacement* is equally about about loss and mourning as it is pure artistic expression.

What is most compelling about *Defacement* is LaBouvier's insistence on bypassing traditional artist-viewer relations. Instead, she asks us to consider the artist as a cultural commentator: what failed to plague Basquiat as an artist, attacked him as a black man.

The exhibition not only pays homage to his influence, creative style, and technique, but explores his own inquiries into instances that are largely commonplace today: police brutality, racial profiling, black-led communities, and challenges to white-dominated art spaces.

The deficit between black artists and art galleries must be bridged by those who live in both margins. LaBouvier not only highlights Basquiat's fears and doubts as a black-American artist but quietly asserts her own through her concerns as a black curator.

Without LaBouvier's 10-plus years of research, would viewers consider race and racial oppressions central to 'Defacement' at all? Would fellow curators and art directors even conceive that a non-white curator is the prime candidate to bring about such ideas? Perhaps not.

SLINGING THE STONE

Continued

Here, Basquiat's work has been re-purposed from stationary Instagram-ready artifact, into a discussion point; a trending topic if you will. She marries brushstrokes with hashtags, and installations with carousel galleries. She reminds us that oppressive systems do not change but customs around archiving and collective memory ought to.

LaBouvier made these concerns public when she accused the Guggenheim's Chief Curator, Nancy Spector, of "weaponizing bodies of colour to do [her] filth."

LaBouvier, who was notably left out of the closing night panel at the Guggenheim, argued that her contributions had been conveniently silenced.

"You have a panel that is hoisted on that intellectual labour, that intellectual credibility, [and] on the penultimate day of the exhibition say that it's not about the Basquiat show?" Adding, "of course this is an institution, but an institution is only as strong as the people who lead it." **

Like David, slinging the stone and then decapitating Goliath with his own sword, LaBouvier bravely (and rightly) challenged the very institution that facilitated her research and practice.

If we are to see critical and effective change among art spaces, practitioners must not overlook their blind spots by working with those trained to see them.

** <https://twitter.com/badnewswomen/status/1191892273694461952?s=20>

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January 20, 2020

Correction: An earlier version of this essay stated that Chaédria LaBouvier was the first black woman to organise a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim. LaBouvier is the first black curator and first black woman to curate an exhibition at the Guggenheim. It has been corrected.