

## Dis-Othering Diversity

### Troubling Differences in a Berlin-Brussels Afropolitan Curatorial Collaboration

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Curatorial practices that address Europe's colonial legacies through contemporary art frequently engage with constructions of alterity, difference, and otherness. Many target the ways in which institutions of artistic and cultural production reproduce ethnic and geographic forms of othering. The practices on which I focus in this chapter build on a range of critiques articulated in anti-racist, feminist, and intersectional approaches to curating and artistic production (Bayer, Kazeem-Kaminski and Sternfeld 2017, Oswald and Tinius 2020). At the heart of those practices is a 'double presence of difference', that is to say, difference as both a subject of positive identity-formation and an object of critique, an obstacle to social justice and a political strategy for its attainment (Ndikung and Römhild 2013).<sup>1</sup> Markers of identity such as race, gender, class, and regional and cultural belonging can indicate symptoms of structural discrimination and exclusion, yet they also allow for the formulation of subject positions that can challenge hegemonic, normative, and canonical structures.

In recent decades, and across a variety of transnational contexts, the notion of diversity has captured many of the tensions implicit in earlier debates on class, nation, race, identity politics, and difference. Damani Partridge and Matthew Chin suggest that we may indeed 'use the current discourse on diversity as a lens to think about question of economic disparity and social justice' (2019: 202; see also Appadurai 2013). By asking, 'Who benefits from diversity, and who might be forgotten?', they argue that we can 'productively engage with the different kinds of work [that] are being done under "diversity"' (2019: 202; 206). Drawing on Sara Ahmed's analyses of the ways in which diversity works in 'institutional life' (2012), my research has sought to understand the practices of curators working in Berlin, and the complex means by which they strategically operationalise an anti-racist diversity agenda in identifying larger issues of exclusion in public cultural institutions. I describe these practices as a form of 'curatorial troubling' in which curators seek to 'stir up potent responses' (Haraway 2016: 1) to structural forms of exclusion.

For this contribution, I draw on fieldwork conducted between mid-2016 and late-2019 with the Berlin art space SAVVY Contemporary, the BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts in Brus-

sels (Belgium), and Kulturen in Bewegung, a smaller cultural institution in Vienna (Austria) engaged in anti-racist cultural production.<sup>2</sup> The collaboration was initially meant to focus on Afropolitanism, and much of the programming across the three countries focused on African diasporic life in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Due to a number of conflicts arising over the representation of Africa in predominantly white cultural institutions, especially between SAVVY Contemporary and its director Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and BOZAR's director Paul Dujardin, the project inadvertently became itself an example of the work and effects of diversity agendas in European cultural institutions.

This chapter describes how Ndikung and his colleagues reframed a large EU-funded project, initially focusing on Afropolitanism and Afropean identity by turning it around, suggesting it look instead at the ideas of Africanness in institutions that conduct projects on Africa.<sup>4</sup> The project eventually was renamed to indicate the shift: *Dis-Othering: Beyond Afropolitan & Other Labels*.

*Dis-othering* is a term coined by Ndikung for institutions to analyse their own practices of othering. I was invited as an ethnographer to join the advisory committee of Mapping Diversity, a quantitative data-gathering effort within the Dis-Othering project managed by the BOZAR 'Africa desk'. The aim of Mapping Diversity was to investigate conceptions and policies of diversity in public culture and art organisations in Austria, Germany and Belgium. Specifically, its task was to examine the extent to which curatorial projects focusing on diversity (i.e. the presence of persons of African descent in shows about Africa curated by European cultural institutions) are themselves lacking the diversity they purport to exhibit. As such, the survey was entangled in the problem it sought to address, namely, the reification of markers of difference such as race, nationality, ethnicity and gender. How can a survey designed to challenge geographically-bound categories of otherness operate without reproducing them?

This chapter traces the paradoxes of curatorial practices that hope to trouble the reification of diversity. It shows how efforts to expose a lack of diversity at cultural institutions can reinforce the markers it seeks to undo. Focusing on this double presence of difference as both the subject and the outcome of the diversity survey, I argue that the querying of diversity is always implicated in the unresolved and ongoing reproduction of difference. The curatorial probing of diversity for tackling social injustice can also shed light on the complexity of similar problematisations of difference in the fields of contemporary art, exhibition-making and museum practice.

## Curatorial troubling

By late 2017, I had conducted fieldwork for nearly a year on three galleries and project spaces in Berlin focused on German colonial legacies, migration, and constructions of difference (Tinius 2018, 2020, 2021). I was planning to conclude the official research phase when I received a text message from Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Antonia Alampi, the founder and one of the then co-directors, respectively, of one of my principal fieldwork partners, SAVVY Contemporary. They wanted to talk. We arranged a meeting at SAVVY Contemporary, located in the Wedding district of Berlin. At the meeting, which took place among the many books and magazines of SAVVY

Contemporary's archive, Ndikung and Alampi told me about their collaboration with BOZAR and expressed regret about the way the project had developed: the inclusion of people of colour in major European cultural institutions was lagging behind the demographic realities of the cities in which these institutions were located, Brussels and Berlin in particular.<sup>5</sup> Their concerns echoed what Damani Partridge and Matthew Chin describe as the way in which 'diversity has come to mean a sprinkling of color or the contingent presence of the "disadvantaged" in otherwise majoritarian "White" or upper-class/high-caste institutions' (2019: 198). In Ndikung's view, BOZAR's project on the African diaspora was merely symbolic and risked reducing Africa to a mere theme or project, which Ndikung found particularly inappropriate for a major cultural institution in a former colonial metropolis with ongoing ties to the African continent. As Antonia Alampi noted, 'for them "Africa" is just a show', while 'for us', an engagement with practices of othering 'is why we exist'. The problem for the two curators was not their partnership with a large institution on an EU-funded project about Africa, but what the consequences of such an engagement would be. The two curators were worried that the project on Europeans of African descent would end up being another project in which an institution 'cloaks itself with a thin veil of recognising the diversity of its cities' without drawing any consequences in terms of its programming or hiring policies. The two curators criticised the institutional appropriation of difference—in this case, the label 'African' and 'Afropolitan'—for the purposes of appearing inclusive.

Ndikung and Alampi wanted to know how an institution like BOZAR could conduct a small albeit significant project on Africa and Afropolitanism without instrumentalising people of colour as temporary tokens to make the project appear inclusive. They also wondered how SAVVY, an organisation doing critical, mostly independent and, by extension, financially precarious work with artists from Africa and the African diaspora, could collaborate with BOZAR without falling prey to the same logic of appropriation. When, they wondered, does collaboration signal approval and complicity? Alampi and Ndikung thought a mapping survey of the actual employment statistics of large state-funded institutions could provide some 'hard facts'.

Alampi and Ndikung did not describe the mapping survey as a form of strategic essentialism whose purpose was to identify people of colour working in art and cultural institutions. Rather, its purpose was, in keeping with their Dis-Othering concept, to provoke reflection on whiteness and diversity in an organisation like BOZAR that aimed to carry out a large project on its institutional ties to Africa. The survey was part of a complex attempt to address a practice that Alampi and Ndikung believed was especially strong in the areas of art and culture: the promotion of diversity in certain types of temporary projects while keeping the institutional landscape largely unchanged. They were grappling with how they could trouble the tokenism of 'diversity' while still partnering with major institutions.

After our conversation, I agreed to join the mapping survey project. I was curious how the curators would negotiate the shift from identifying the 'African' ties of public cultural organisations in Belgium, Germany, and Austria to analysing these institutions 'policies on and reckoning with diversity'. For the curators, conducting a quantitative survey with markers of difference was a political and moral challenge that ran counter to the ways in which they sought to *problematise* statistical science. They were already wor-

ried about the double presence of difference and were reluctant to develop a survey that would promote diversity while reaffirming markers of difference (race, ethnicity, gender) that they sought to undo in most of their curatorial work. They thus suggested that my role could be to document their efforts to deal with the basic conundrum. They believed that the inclusion of an ethnographer like me who was outside the project yet implicated in its work could be productive. Moreover, the additional perspective could provoke or illuminate the negotiations of the categories used by the organisations in question. The outside observation, they hoped, might add a layer of observation on the production of conventional notions of diversity in cultural organisations and in the survey project itself. In Alampì's words, the survey's point was to pose the question, 'Who is talking about whom when it comes to diversity and difference?'

## The origins of Dis-Othering

During the months after our meeting, I became acquainted with the Dis-Othering project and its partner staff from *Kulturen in Bewegung* in Vienna and from the Africa desk at BOZAR, including its director, Kathleen Louw. It seemed curious to me that a project could so abruptly shift gears. What started as a study focused on Afropolitanism in Europe swerved to an interrogation of its own premises and of diversity in Europe's cultural institutions. How did this come about?

Ndikung's official curatorial statement of the Dis-Othering project begins with an observation that hints at the need to use and reformulate received notions of difference.

Just in the nick of time when we, by repetition and reiteration, start believing our own concepts that we have postulated and disseminated...we seem to be experiencing a quake that pushes us ...to reconsider who and how one bears historical Othering, reconsider the mechanisms of rendering Other, as well as reconsidering who represents whom or who tries to shape whose future in contemporary societies and discourses (2019: 3).<sup>6</sup>

SAVVY's curatorial troubling is marked by self-aware political positioning.<sup>7</sup> The 'quake' that made them reconsider forms of othering was triggered in part by 'geographical specification-ing' (2019: 3): the museum practice of highlighting specific regions of the world for a temporary period of time. As Ndikung puts it:

What does it mean to put together an 'Africa exhibition' or an 'Arab exhibition' today, as we see in the New Museum, MMK Frankfurt, BOZAR Brussels, Fondation LV and many other museums in the West? (...) [H]ow would one represent the 54 African countries, thousands of African languages, and communities within such an exhibition? These issues necessitate re-questioning and reconsidering (2019: 4).

Ndikung identifies seven ways that Dis-Othering responds to a 'geographical specification-ing' often promoted under the heading of soft-power diplomacy and inclusion. Most importantly from my perspective, Ndikung writes that 'Dis-Othering starts with the recognition of the acts and processes of othering' (2019: 5). In this sense, the concept of Dis-Othering is already a Dis-Othering practice insofar as it positions the curator in a

conscious and critical relation to host institutions. As Ndikung elaborates, Dis-Othering considers how

social identity building is not made by projecting on the so-called 'Other,' but rather a projection towards the self. A self-reflection. A boomerang. ... It is about acknowledging and embodying the plethora of variables that make us be (2019: 5).

Ndikung describes a position in which institutional introspection and subjective self-analysis can be mobilised for the purposes of anti-discrimination. It is a position that reshuffles the genealogies of Othering—in line with the efforts of Seloua Luste Boulbina (2007), Arjun Appadurai (1986), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003)—using new postcolonial language that is at once poetic and political. The project statement is a gesture of 'theoretical accounting' (Smith 2015: 15) that situates and affirms Ndikung's epistemological jurisdiction vis-à-vis other institutions while shifting the discussion of othering to one of institutional self-critique. As Ndikung wrote in an earlier version of the text, the curatorial statement is 'a reaction to the invitation to exercise Afropolitanness'.<sup>8</sup>

The SAVVY's curatorial concept bears the imprint of this critique in its subtitle: *Beyond Afropolitan & Other Labels*. The subtitle pokes fun at the tokenistic usage of the prefix 'Afro-' in cultural institutions. But the criticism voiced by Ndikung and the Berlin team went further. As later became evident during the project's final conference in May 2019, their criticism was not a response merely to BOZAR's engagement with minorities, particularly of African descent.<sup>9</sup> It also targeted the way that institutions, which work on 'Africans', or those of 'African descent' (or 'afro-descendant'), do not include those people among its permanent staff; instead they invite them to contribute to programming temporarily on an unpaid or low-paid basis. BOZAR is a 'differentiating institution' in the sense that it produces geographically-bounded, tokenistic, and even racialised images of Africa. As Ndikung writes, SAVVY was concerned that their project might serve a similar function for BOZAR, leading to a 'parasitical incorporation' of critical work in an otherwise 'white' institution that, in their eyes, did little to further more substantial engagement with African scholars, artists, personnel, publics, and programming (2017). Ndikung and Alampi's Dis-Othering project was meant as a critique of institutional 'othering' practices and well-intended 'conceptual labels' such as Afropolitan, which ignore the broader context and fail to look at 'what they actually do and what processes of identity construction they encourage'.<sup>10</sup>

The critical reorientation, which I observed unfold during fieldwork in Brussels at BOZAR and at SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin, brought a level of critical reflection to the ways in which institutions and projects can produce difference. Dis-Othering

is not about the 'Other'—which is just the 'product'. The project is a deliberation on the amoebic and morphed methodologies employed by institutions and societies at large in constructing and cultivating 'Otherness' in our contemporaneity. It is about the commodification and the cooption of the 'Other', strategies of paternalization used in the cultural field.<sup>11</sup>

Ndikung, Alampi, and their expanded team are part of Berlin's ecology of cultural institutions. Their organisation is diverse in terms of its inclusion of women and people of colour, and other directors of cultural institutions in Berlin and beyond regard them as

the vanguard of a progressive post-colonial agenda. In a conversation with me, Ndikung and Alampi said that their position was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they were pleased with the recognition they received for issues regarding contemporary art from African perspectives; on the other, they worked with larger institutions whose desire for ‘representation’ relied on a merely temporary inclusion of African perspectives. Ndikung and Alampi’s curatorial troubling led them, therefore, to a sub-project: interrogating policies on diversity.

## The mapping diversity survey

The SAVVY mapping survey was designed to assess diversity at major cultural institutions in Germany, Belgium, and Austria. Initially, it focused on the distribution of class, race, and gender among curatorial and executive personnel. In view of the difficulty of attaining such sensitive data and several SAVVY team members’ ‘discomfort with the simple positing of such markers of identity as “facts”’, Ndikung and Alampi decided that the survey should also examine the ways in which cultural organisations understand diversity. The survey concentrated on directorial staff because the SAVVY curators and other members of the mapping survey team felt that it was on this level that decisions about personnel, programming, and public outreach—the three p’s—would be made.

In the first few months, the partners discussed the scope of the survey via email and in online meetings. Due to the limited funding for research (the Berlin team relied on external funding from small grants and private research scholarships), they restricted the survey to institutions mainly involved in arts or culture production and kept the number to five institutions per country from its three largest cities. Moreover, they decided to use institutions in which at least 70 percent of the funding comes from public sources. Publicly funded institutions, they argued, could reasonably be expected to take into account the demographics of the city and country that finance them.

## Selection, data and privacy

Choosing which institutions to survey proved contentious. Team members were uncertain whether it would be a good idea to identify institutions based on ‘best practice’, ‘worst practice’, or name recognition. Some wondered whether the project should focus on different types of institutions (universities, museums, performance venues) or on different organisations within a broad institutional category (cultural sector, public sphere, programming)? The framing would affect the ultimate selection. For instance, programming staff at a museum are different from programming staff at a small-scale art space. In a similar vein, SAVVY Contemporary would feature as a ‘best-practice’ type of organisation given the high percentage of women and persons of colour working there, while BOZAR would be seen a ‘bad practice’ institution, with its white middle-class director and its predominantly white executive staff. Long debates ensued about whether the aim would be to expose the assumed lack of diversity in one institution or to provide statistical facts about the diversity in another. For example, the SAVVY team identified

the Humboldt Forum as a case to be ‘exposed’, but the idea was abandoned due to the institution’s complicated organisational structure (Häntzschel 2017; Macdonald, Gerbich, and Oswald 2018).

The Mapping Diversity advisory committee found that while the data gathered might not be on the scale of larger regional or national surveys, the project stood to provide meaningful data on the diversity of staff in decision-making positions along with their particular understanding of diversity. But the committee suggested that it would be helpful not only to approach institutions via formal email inquiries but also to interview ‘gatekeepers’, i.e. directors or head curators most likely to decide whether or not to send the surveys to their core staff. Hence, the team invited gatekeepers from the institutions selected for the survey to meetings in the hope of convincing them to participate.

After consultations with the BOZAR legal department and the legal team of the Creative Europe programme, the Mapping Diversity teams formulated short ethical and legal statements.<sup>12</sup> But the country teams remained unclear about how to transmit the survey data to the participating institutions. Although they broadly agreed on the use of anonymous data, some wondered whether this would miss the point of the project, which was to determine how major public cultural institutions deal with diversity. Would producing general statistics for each country be meaningful? Might it be necessary to specify and differentiate the data? How would the data help identify particular kinds of diversity. Would not the project’s ethical and political commitment to anonymity make it impossible to make meaningful statements about diversity? The conundrum here was the tension between ‘private’ and ‘political’ data. Some participants might refuse to share ‘private’ data to conceal sensitive information. Yet the ‘private’ data seemed likely to provide the most relevant insight into the politics of diversity.

## Gatekeeper interviews

The issues regarding data use continued in the gatekeeper interviews. For instance, a representative from a well-known German cultural institution expressed discomfort about the project’s results and how the data would be put to use. The team members believed that the collaborative nature of the project— all of the partners involved were cultural institutions, after all—would help establish trust and encourage participation. But some gatekeepers were not convinced. ‘We don’t want our data to be used in some form of artistic project where the outcome and form is unclear to us’, one respondent said. Other interviewees expressed scepticism on other, altogether opposite grounds. The links of the project to universities—including my presence in the interviews as a white male anthropologist—raised concerns that the data would be used in academia and therefore detached from a shared artistic context.

On a whole, the gatekeepers made clear to the team that, while they were sympathetic to the general aims of the project and were happy to participate in the interviews, we could not distribute the results of our survey. For it was not ‘sufficiently clear’ what would happen with the survey, whether public authorities could access the data or whether the project would reframe the data in ways beyond the institutions’ control. Participating institutions from Austria were worried that the information might be used against them

by the government, which at the time was composed of a right-wing coalition between the ÖVP (Austrian People's Party) and FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria). Tonica Hunter, the then research lead for Kulturen in Bewegung, commented on the situation during a talk at the final BOZAR symposium:

Several institutions that participated in our 'let's talk about Dis-Othering' symposiums who then agreed to be included in the mapping, later declined for various reasons...We found the pattern pertinent given the tense political situation in Austria in view of its black-blue government and the threatened (and real) cuts to the cultural sector. The diversity of cultural institutions is not an easy topic for institutions, who seem to believe that the exercise will lead to critique rather than to the kind of insight that could help bring about improvements and address shortcomings.

The issue, therefore, was not only about managing data but also about the mapping itself. As the project team noted during the final conference in Brussels, the term mapping is associated with colonial practices such as systemic governmental control, geographic information systems, and other forms of knowledge acquisition, which have often targeted marginalised peoples (Rose 2007).

7.1 Olani Owunnet, Naomi Ntakiyica, and Jonas Tinius during panel on the Mapping Survey at Dis-Othering Symposium, BOZAR, May 2019. Photograph by Lyse Ishimwe.



As the process unfolded and interviews were coordinated, the project's advisory committee (of which I was a member in my capacity as research coordinator and ethnographer) decided that it would be helpful to document the survey deliberations. It had become evident to most participants that almost every step of the survey—from design

and implementation to analysis—involving a fundamental questioning of the survey categories and the purpose they were meant to achieve. The team members recorded the deliberations in several kinds of documents, regularly contributed new documents, and reviewed the contents. The process was also discussed with team members during the final *Dis-Othering* Symposium at BOZAR in Brussels in 2019.

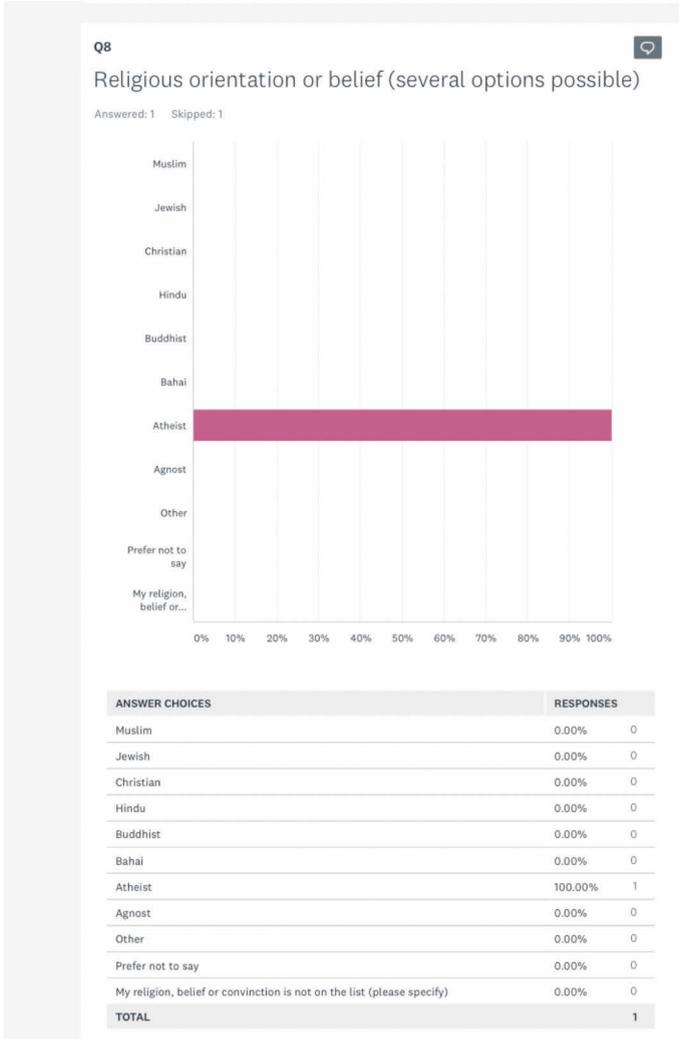
## Survey design

The mapping coordination team at SAVVY Contemporary discussed at length the precise organisation of the survey. Each of the research teams had access to the survey software SurveyMonkey, which provides a fairly straightforward interface for designing surveys (similar to website design software like Weebly or WordPress) and for sharing surveys and exploring data sets in visualised form.

The teams decided on a 40-question survey, beginning with drop-down optional questions on economic issues and general questions covering age, nationality, location, gender, sexual orientation, religious orientation or belief, immigration history, and education. These included an ‘other’ category and several open boxes. Next was a set of broader questions about the diversity of staff, diversity policies, job criteria, and general assessments such as ‘How important is diversity to your institution?’ and ‘Do you think you contribute to the diversity of a) the public/audience, b) the programmes/curatorship or c) the personnel?’ For many of the questions, the survey requested elucidation, including prompts such as ‘If yes, why and how?’ or ‘If yes, please elaborate’. These allowed for critique and disagreement to avoid implicit bias.

The research team members held intense discussions about which markers of identity were considered ‘sensitive’, including ones liable to discrimination such as gender, country of birth, nationality, ethnic background, and sexuality. They collected several of the categories from existing surveys in Germany such as online discrimination questionnaires conducted by the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The teams included ‘current nationality’ and ‘nationality at birth’ to account for migration and changes of nationality over time. A particular contentious category was ‘ethnic background’. Some team members disputed the relevance or existence of ‘ethnicity’; and everyone rejected the category of race, which, despite its frequent use in the Anglophone world, was not considered appropriate in Continental Europe. Instead, the team decided to specify the difficult notion of ‘ethnos’ by asking respondents whether they belong ‘to an ethnic minority which is not linked to recent migration’. All questions related to ethnicity came with the option ‘Prefer not to say’. Team members agreed that the survey categories could not be assumed to be ‘exhaustive’. Furthermore, though questions about nationality had a long list of drop-down options, they included the box ‘Add your current nationality / nationality at birth, if it is not on the list’. Participants were also given the choice to choose multiple nationalities, with options ranging from pre-defined countries to open boxes.

7.2 Screenshot of a survey question in the SurveyMonkey app during the test phase.



The team members discussions revealed a broader problem when it came to diversity: the multiplication of differences extended the problem of difference by ‘maximising’ differentiation. Yet, it also became evident that the categories that were most contentious were also the ones that mattered most to team members. This suggested that the core of the ‘diversity’ problem in the survey involved categories of identity that themselves created discomfort. These included the concepts of race, sexuality, sexual orientation, and their translatability (or *untranslatability*, as with *race* and the German *Rasse*, which immediately recalls Nazi racial ideology). In our online video conferences several members self-identified as persons of colour or of African descent. It was noticeable that the positionality of the team members across categories of whiteness, sexual orientation,

and institutional affiliation played a role in the discussion, and many were reluctant to fix a category that they experienced as discriminatory. Their response revealed the non-neutrality of the categories, and how the meaning of the categories change depending on who is using them (e.g. me as a white German male versus a person of colour). The challenge here lay not in maximising the number of diversity markers, but in crafting a survey that overcomes discrimination without reifying difference.

## Conclusion

Curatorial practices seeking to create infrastructures for ‘greater diversity’ within cultural institutions often essentialise difference for strategic purposes. The process is as paradoxical as it is unavoidable. Yet some institutions adopt elements of strategic essentialism without reflecting on the difficulties of diversity. BOZAR and the Dis-Othering project are a case in point: a well-intended project ended up causing such a stir within its own team that the project turned on itself and became a study of failure and critical self-reflexivity. This is not an isolated problem. The language of wokeness and strategic criticality pervades capitalist and cultural institutions alike (Ahmed 2021, Boltanski and Chiapello 2007 [1999], Bose 2017, Leary 2018). The risk here is that ‘diversity’ becomes a technocratic issue, packaged in ‘proposals’ and handled by short-term ‘diversity managers’ who serve to conceal underlying structural inequalities instead of addressing them.

In this chapter, I focused on two dimensions of difference-making for two different ends. First, I considered the criticisms of BOZAR and the reformulation of the SAVVY Contemporary project on Dis-Othering in response. The revised SAVVY project shaped the terms used in the mapping diversity project, which speaks not of ‘difference’, but of ‘Othering’ and ‘Dis-Othering’. These depart from a particular genealogy of postcolonial theory and thought. These include Afropeanism, in which the practices of SAVVY Contemporary are situated, and more recent institutional discussions on diversity management, which echo through the Humboldt Forum exhibition addressed by Sharon Macdonald.

Dis-Othering is a curatorial neologism that has an ethnographic function insofar as it describes a particular problem and situation. It is a form of curatorial troubling coined by Ndikung and Alampi to facilitate critical thinking about the way in which public cultural institutions produce geographically-bounded ideas of cultural otherness. The questions that led to the mapping diversity survey in the Dis-Othering project centred on representation and infrastructure: who can represent whom? In whose interest is diversity work done? How can projects critically reflect on the *undoing* of Othering practices, and turn their gaze onto themselves?

A second dimension of difference-making that I addressed is how ‘diversity’ became the central problem of the Mapping Diversity survey. The attempt to interrogate what diversity and diversity-work means for cultural institutions led to an ambivalent and often contradictory discussion of how to define diversity without recreating the categories that the project as a whole sought to question. The group discussions—and the references to similar surveys (Marguin and Losekandt 2017)—illustrates the primacy of ‘diversity’ in the project.

The core analytical contribution of this chapter is to draw out the tensions of difference: on the one hand, difference can be a problem (producing geographical, cultural, and even racialised distinctions between ‘Europeans’ and ‘Africans’) and an obstacle (preventing non- or post-racial forms of artistic expression). At the same time, difference and diversity are part of the performative consequences of the survey, which risked reproducing the very essentialism of diversity work that the project as a whole wanted to overcome.

Perhaps, as a participant mentioned at the final BOZAR conference, the significance of the project lies in sparking a conversation about diversity agendas within and among cultural institutions. Due to the reasons I outlined above, the mapping survey did not produce the scale and scope of quantitative results that the curators initially hoped for, and the reasons for this failure are themselves testament to the broader problem the survey sought to address. Too little money, time, and human resources were allocated to the mapping project, which, as the BOZAR manager of the project commented, could have been the subject of an entire EU-project itself—as could failure itself (Appadurai and Alexander 2019). Yet, within the boundaries and limitations of the project, the survey helped sensitise the participating institutions to the complexity and multiple forms of difference at play. And it began a conversation about the need to reflect on, refine, and dis-other strategic mobilisations of diversity in the cultural field and beyond.

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## Notes

- 1 At the time of writing, one of the discussions involving members of SAVVY Contemporary coalesced around the debate on the overwhelming presence of white men. See the open letter by the organisers (<https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/open-letter-regarding-lack-of-diversity-in-nrw-forum-exhibition/8345>) and a video recording of an event at the Red Salon of the Berlin Volksbühne (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2zejVlrAdI>), which included several of the interlocutors mentioned in this chapter. All links were last accessed on 8 February 2022.
- 2 Further project partners include the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren), Afropean London, and Obieg Magazine (Poland). The Dis-Othering project website at BOZAR can be found here: <https://www.bozar.be/en/calendar/dis->

- othering#event-page\_\_description (last accessed, 8 February 2022). The Dis-Othering project was funded by the EU's Creative Europe programme, which possesses a budget of 1.46 billion euros.
- 3 The concept of Afropolitanism has its roots in pan-African theoretical texts, but now includes a broader set of reflections on the relationship of urban space to African cultural production and to diasporic citizenship practice (Weheliye 2005). The concept has thus moved from Africa's post-independence era to the postcolonial theorisation of transnational forms of belonging.
  - 4 *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* (2019), by Johnny Pitts, an affiliated member of the project discussed in this chapter, engages with the notion in order to overcome the 'hyphenated identities of Afro-and' (personal communication).
  - 5 Ahead of the 2019 European elections, a *Guardian* newspaper op-ed with the heading 'Why is Brussels so White? The EU's Race Problem That No One Talks About' (2019) states that 'Migrants, minorities and people of colour are almost absent from tomorrow's list of prospective MEPs.' As the author, Sarah Chander, writes, the representation of people of colour in the European parliament is 'less than 3%, and Italy's Cécile Kyenge is the sole black woman.'
  - 6 The concept was written in response to BOZAR's interest in collaborating with SAVVY Contemporary. It was subsequently revised and updated by the curator to reflect the ongoing processes and experiences in this collaboration. The project statement can be found on the SAVVY Contemporary website: [www.savvy-contemporary.com/site/assets/files/4038/geographiesofimagination\\_concept.pdf](http://www.savvy-contemporary.com/site/assets/files/4038/geographiesofimagination_concept.pdf) (last accessed 8 February 2022).
  - 7 In a chapter co-authored with Sharon Macdonald, I reflect on the recursivity of such concepts in curatorial discourse (Tinius and Macdonald 2019). Marcus Morgan and Patrick Baert's book *Conflict in the Academy* (2015), on positioning theory and the role of discursive statements in the creation of intellectual spheres, is a relevant point of comparison.
  - 8 In June 2019, when I finished a first draft of this piece, the shortened earlier statement could still be found on the BOZAR website here [https://www.bozar.be/en/calendar/dis-othering#event-page\\_\\_description](https://www.bozar.be/en/calendar/dis-othering#event-page__description). It had since been removed.
  - 9 The conference Race, Power and Culture: A Critical Look at Belgian Cultural Institutions (22–24 May 2019) stirred up a heated discussion and even a boycott of BOZAR. Various attendees, among them members of the original advisory committee, felt that they had been lured to participate on false promises, only to appear as tokens of a thinly veiled diversity agenda.
  - 10 The quote appears in the shorter version of Ndikung's curatorial concept on the BOZAR website.
  - 11 Ibid.
  - 12 Excerpts of the invitation email include these passages: 'The survey is anonymous. It has been reviewed by the legal department of the Centre of Fine Arts (Brussels) (project leader), and assessed compliant with the new EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The collected survey data: is collected for scientific research only; will be accessible only to a scientific committee comprising a total of 6 researchers from the three partner countries, who will perform a qualitative

analysis of interview material and quantitative results, and direct the graphic and digital visualisation of survey results; will not be shared with any other research or projects (3<sup>rd</sup> parties); will be destroyed after 2 years’.

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