Brand-New-Life
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www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org



To all art spaces in Switzerland

Black artists and cultural workers in Switzerland

One year after the publication of an open letter [b-n-l/open-letter/] addressed to Swiss art spaces, Black art and cultural workers across Switzerland, are sharing a second collectively penned letter, signed by over 100 Black art and cultural workers in Switzerland.

TO ALL ART SPACES
IN SWITZERLAND

On 9. June 2020, we, more than 60 Black art and cultural workers across Switzerland, collectively penned an open letter. At the time, there was a massive global wave of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Our open letter was specifically addressed to the over 76 Swiss art spaces that had participated in what is now known as #BlackOutTuesday.[1] [/b-n-l/to-all-art-spaces-in-switzerland/pdf#note1]

In our letter, we expressed that while we appreciate the signaling of support, we are aware that what is now defined as «social media activism»[2] [/b-n-l/to-all-art-spaces-in-switzerland/pdf#note2] does not usually translate beyond distanced, inactive PR statements. We noted that structural racism—which can surface as microaggressions, explicit racism, gaslighting, exclusionary institutional attitudes and policies, centering whiteness, police brutality, hate crimes, demand for free labour, exotisation and (hyper)sexualisation etc.—is very alive and well, here in Switzerland. As a result, in our daily lives many of us have experienced racism in our professional engagements and interactions as artists and cultural workers.

The addressed art spaces were encouraged to invest more actively in the necessary process to become more anti-racist. As a tool, we included a set of questions created to support the necessary work of identifying biases within one's own structures. We demanded that our addressees share the answers to these questions publicly through their own channels in an effort to encourage other art spaces to practice transparency and accountability.

Since 9. June 2020, out of the 76 addressed art spaces, each of whom had previously declared their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, only 3 have shared their answers publicly. The other 73 institutions provided a panorama of frustrating reactions. This included expecting our free labor in the form of informal meetings instead of soliciting paid consultants on deconstructing racist structures. The most common response by far was simply no response at all.

Unfortunately, this came as no surprise. We have long been familiar with the structural racism and the ongoing silence surrounding white supremacy and anti-Black racism in Switzerland. It is nonetheless very disheartening. In addition, we notice that many artist-run spaces often feel exempt from these conversations as they operate very informally. We are exhausted by the persistent lack of accountability.

Our society in its current form relies on anti-Blackness that has seeped into its structures and culture in a way that cannot be compared to the racism experienced by non-Black People of Color or xenophobia faced by many people of non-Swiss heritages. Oppressions are multifaceted and complex. They need a precise vocabulary. This is why we insist on specificity in our vocabulary by distinguishing anti-Black racism and other forms of discrimination. We do this in an effort to shed light on both the necessary solidarity between Black people and non-Black communities of colour, as well as on the true depth of ever-pervading anti-Blackness. We deploy our understanding of anti-Blackness in order to acknowledge and address intersections of Blackness as experienced in Switzerland. This includes intersecting experiences of Black people, those being colorism, ableism, xenophobia, misogynoir, misgendering, cisheterosexism, classism, transphobia and legal status to name some. Blackness is not a monolith.

This letter was written and signed by individual Black artists and cultural practitioners coming together out of the necessity to address the varying experiences of anti-Black racism in the arts in Switzerland. We are not a collective. Furthermore, we refer to Black artists living or working in Switzerland. The notion that anti-Black racism only affects the livelihood

of people with migratory backgrounds and non-Swiss Black practitioners is false. Black Swiss people also exist, and anti-Black racism is a Swiss problem. There is no productive discussion that begins by questioning whether or not racism exists in Switzerland.

Since June 2020, many art spaces have shown their willingness to engage with race as a topic, which can be observed by the significant increase in panel talks and similar public events. We would like to highlight that harmful decisions have been made at several events at the expense of Black art workers. We have encountered a general reluctance to address structural anti-Blackness, which we experience as violent. Individuals among us have had to justify their signatures on our previous letter and have faced defamation. This emphasises and reiterates the need for a deeper confrontation with structural blindspots rooted in white supremacy and resulting in anti-Blackness. We won't accept anti-racism to be co-opted in an attempt to raise the value of one's public profile.

Genuine and profound work can only be done if we, as individuals and constituents of institutions and societies, move beyond defensiveness and guilt. It remains an urgent, necessary process that starts with the commitment by each one of us to unlearn our internalised anti-Blackness, which includes behaviours and actions that are informed by a socialised perception of whiteness as the default. This is because we are born into an inherently racist, anti-Black society. Unlearning this is our most urgent and crucial demand. It is the necessary foundation to all following demands towards material change, as it applies:

– Include Black practitioners in programmes. Include them in programmes beyond those that address identity politics, white supremacy, or racism. Commit to an in-depth and nuanced engagement with their artistic work. Commit to making decisions that are nourishing to the practitioners careers, including fostering relationships with institutions, collectors and writers relevant to the artists and their work.

– Properly archive the works by Black artists across collections. This should be done equally to white cis-male counterparts in collections.

– Implementation of a standardized anti-racism clause[3] [/b-n-l/to-all-art-spaces-in-switzerland/pdf#note3] across all contracts, which aims to hold employers, employees, commissioners or otherwise contractually bound collaborators accountable.

– Professional settings that facilitate environments in which conversations about experienced racism or biases can be held productively, where defensiveness is recognised as harmful, and asking for accountability is understood as a mutually beneficial act. It is crucial that voicing these experiences is taken seriously and does not result in precarity, pigeonholing or defamation.

– Implementation of regular assessment sessions across all levels. Subsequent implementation of necessary measures to improve areas of poor performance with defined goals.

– Recognition of the need for equity over equality[4] [/b-n-l/to-all-art-spaces-in-switzerland/pdf#note4] and tangible working steps towards this.

– Semi-annual anti-racism training by paid Black expert consultants.

– Publicly accessible anti-racism strategies in all art spaces including a plan of action and requirement of an Equality/Equity, Diversity and Inclusion policy, which are assessed and updated regularly.

– Requirement of an anti-racism strategy as a part of recruitment processes for all art professionals, including mediation, PR and HR positions.

– Employment of Black art professionals in senior positions and for those professionals to be included in juries for prizes, admissions, open calls, etc.

In our focus on anti-Blackness, it is imperative to pay particular attention to colorism. Dark-skinned Black people with less proximity to whiteness need to be centered in all anti-racist intentions. This includes active assessment of who is given access and platform.

We demand that similar steps are put into place to address bias against all those who suffer under white supremacy and its intersecting oppressions, which include ableism, classism, fatphobia, homophobia, cisheterosexism, ageism, xenophobia, religious discrimination and transphobia.

The work ahead of us remains clear: practices and visions are either oriented towards antiracism or they are not. One can be complacent with the current colonialist system or one can engage in the active process of challenging racist structures and the injustices they perpetuate. There is no in between and it remains an emergency.

In closing, we are artists and cultural practitioners looking to pursue our work in the careers we have chosen. This letter comes from a need for safer professional settings that are free from discrimination. This letter is not a part of our artistic practices.

Best,

A. Schmidt
Adji Dieye
Akosua Viktoria Adu-Sanyah
Alfatih
Alina Amuri
Amaka Madumere
Amissah Joshua
Angelina Yerly
Angélique Tahé
Angie Addo
Anita Maïmouna Neuhaus
Ann Kern
Ben Pauli
Bettina Aremu
Brandy Abrahams
Brandy Butler
Burni Aman
Caribbean Gyal
Cécile Nduhirahe
Cédric Djedje
Chienne De Garde
Daniska Tampise Klebo
David Barlow
Debbie Alagen
Deborah Joyce Holman
Deborah Macauley
Diane Keumo

Edwin Ramirez
Élie Autin
Elisabeth Reich
EmmaTheGreat
Esengo
Fork Burke
fupaMagic
Gemma Ushengewe
Ivy Monteiro
Iyo Bisseck
J.A Santschi
James Bantone
Jasmine Gregory
Jeremy Nedd
Jessy Navalona Razafimandimby
JOBB3000
Joël Vacheron
Josh Johnson
Jovita Pinto
Juline Michel
Kaira Adward
Kapo Kapinga Grab
Katerine Omole (KA-RABA)
Kay
Kim Coussée
L. Erin
Larissa Tiki Mbassi
Legion Seven
Leslie
Luisa Wolf
Lynn Aineomugisha
Maïté Chénière
Mandy Abou Shoak
Manutcher Milani
Marc Asekhame
Mark Damon Harvey
Mathias Pfund
Mbene Mwambene
Meloe Gennai
Michelle Akanji
Mirco Joao-Pedro
Mirjam Buergin
Naomi
Nayansaku Mufwankolo
Nebiyah
Nina Emge
Noemi Michel
Ntando Cele
Olamiju Fajemisin
Pascale Gähler
Patrick Gusset
Rabea Lüthi

Rahel El-Maawi
Ramaya Tegegne
Sasha Huber
Sawsane Aysha Hema
Serafina Ndlovu
Serena Dankwa
Sherian Mohammed Forster
Sign Zainab
Songhay Toldon
Soraya Lutangu Bonaventure
Steven Schoch
Suhyene Iddrisu
Tapiwa Svosve
Tara Mabiala
Tayeb Kendouci
Thaïs Diarra
Thelma Buabeng
Tina O. Reden
Tisalie Mombu
Titilayo Adebayo
Tracy September
Tshu-Li
Yann Stephane Biscaut
Yara Dulac Gisler
Yasmina Diallo
Yvonne Apiyo Brändle-Amolo

Black artists and cultural workers based in Switzerland who would like to add their signatures shall contact us: blackartistsinswitzerland@gmail.com [mailto:blackartistsinswitzerland@gmail.com]

[1] [/b-n-l/to-all-art-spaces-in-switzerland/pdf#note1ref]#BlackoutTuesday was a collective action to protest racism and police brutality, staged on social media. «What began as an attempt by two music insiders to pause business as usual across the industry on a Tuesday, in response to the protests sweeping the nation, broadened and morphed overnight on social media into a less focused action, resulting in a sea of black boxes across Instagram and other platforms.» https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/arts/music/what-blackout-tuesday.html [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/arts/music/what-blackout-tuesday.html]

[2] [/b-n-l/to-all-art-spaces-in-switzerland/pdf#note2ref] https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-second-act-of-social-media-activism [https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-second-act-of-social-media-activism]

[3] [/b-n-l/to-all-art-spaces-in-switzerland/pdf#note3ref] Julia Wissert, Sonja Laaser, Banafshe Hourmazdi, Golschan Ahmad Haschemi have developed a draft anti-racism clause tailored specifically for theatre context under German jurisdiction: https://www.antirassismusklausel.de [https://www.antirassismusklausel.de/]. This can be used as a model and adapted to the contemporary arts context in Switzerland easily.

[4] [/b-n-l/to-all-art-spaces-in-switzerland/pdf#note4ref] Equity encourages the use of custom tools that identify, address and correct inequality and resulting access barriers whereas an approach of equality, though based on the belief that everyone should be treated equally, disregards structural barriers and therefore often perpetuates existing inequality.

BLACK ARTISTS AND CULTURAL WORKERS IN SWITZERLAND

https://blackartistsinswitzerland.noblogs.org/ [https://blackartistsinswitzerland.noblogs.org/]

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