

Letter

Underlands

I immensely enjoyed Sophie J Williamson's article 'Underlands' in the April issue of *Art Monthly*. The breadth of her references and the exciting layering of connections did what I love best when encountering a text: sent me on multiple quests to discover and revisit artists and writers.

And yet I can't help thinking that its insistence on the under-worlds was, in a way, misleading. Yes, echoing the quoted words by Bruno Latour, I am convinced that we do need a new distribution of metaphors and sensitivities, just as we do need a reorientation of political affects. But I would say that it is sideways we should be looking rather than downwards; that it is the superficial that needs our urgent attention more than geological strata. I feel that the priority should be to stop digging, whether for meaning or for coal. That we should, literally and metaphorically, embrace as a civilisational paradigm Friedrich Nietzsche's injunction to artists: 'To stop bravely at the surface.'

Of course there is nothing new in that, the *flâneur* was already 'botanising on the asphalt', and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of 'smooth space' has inspired new materialisms that have made the haptic an aesthetic model. The superficial is taking on a renewed relevance, with strategies of rewilding, interest in permaculture and alternative forms of urban tactics that move away from the tabula rasa of traditional urbanism all gathering momentum. At the same time, we take seriously, at last, indigenous modes of practice that modernity had little time for. To be superficial at all costs, staying with the surface, just as Donna Haraway stays with the trouble, to refuse to dig, seems to me the urgent existential and aesthetic challenge of this century.

Michaële Cutaya

Artnotes

Lack of Trustee

Culture secretary Oliver Dowden has escalated his culture war on public institutions by blocking the reappointment of Aminul Hoque to the board of trustees at the Royal Museum Greenwich in London – a decision which left Hoque 'shocked, disappointed and baffled'. Hoque had served on the board since 2016, and the Bangladeshi-British lecturer in education at Goldsmiths college was awarded an MBE in 2008 for services to youth justice in east London, but presumably his interest in decolonising the curriculum raised a red flag at the DCMS.

'All reappointments are considered in line with the government code for public appointments,' a government spokesperson told the *Financial Times*. 'There is no automatic presumption of reappointment, and indeed in the vast majority of cases, fresh talent is added with new appointments made.' The chair of the RMG board, billionaire founder of Carphone Warehouse Sir Charles Dunstone, clearly didn't feel the RMG needed 'fresh talent' but that it should instead retain its existing expertise; he resigned from the board in protest at Dowden's political interference. The *FT* reported a leading Tory as saying that there is 'an expectation that members of a board should have a similar attitude to that of the government', which explains Dowden's nakedly political placement of Jacob Rees-Mogg on the board of the National Portrait Gallery in November 2019.

'It is concerning that when museums are striving to be more inclusive in terms of governance, workforce and audiences,' said Sharon Heal, director of the Museums Association, 'it appears that some people are being deliberately excluded from boards because they don't comply with certain opinions.' An unnamed source, described by the *FT* only as the 'chair of a big institution', was more direct, likening the Johnson government approach to 'cultural cleansing'.

Half Cut

The Public Campaign for the Arts has launched an online petition calling for education secretary Gavin Williamson to reverse his ill-considered decision to impose a devastating 50% funding cut to arts subjects at higher education level in England (Editorial p14). The petition, which is backed by high-profile artists and major arts organisations across the land, has garnered more than 160,000 signatures at the time of going to press. www.campaignforthearts.org

MOCA Mockery

Troubled times continue at LA MOCA, the institution having recently lost a senior curator as well as its HR director in acrimonious circumstances, as reported by *Artforum*. Mia Locks, the co-curator of the 2017 Whitney Biennial, who joined LA MOCA in July 2019 from New York's MoMA PS1, resigned at the end of March because she felt a lack of support from the institution's top brass. Lock oversaw the IDEA programme (inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility) but, when she emailed co-workers with news of her resignation, the senior curator concluded that 'MOCA's leadership is not yet ready to embrace IDEA'.

This damaging claim came soon after the museum's HR director, Carlos Viramontes, who joined the institution in November 2019, resigned in February after telling co-workers that he could not continue to work in a 'hostile environment' – quite a statement from the head of human resources. Viramontes claimed that, having relayed negative comments to deputy director Amy Shapiro from her co-workers during a performance review, she had engaged in retaliatory behaviour against him.

All this, of course, comes in the wake of the recent controversy concerning the sacking of chief curator Helen Molesworth (Artnotes *AM415*) over her support for artist Mark Grotjahn; he had declined the museum's gala award, citing lack of diversity, a situation which led to the cancellation of the high-profile fundraising event (Artnotes *AM414*) and the damaging resignations of artist trustees Catherine Opie and Lari Pittman (Artnotes *AM415*). This spiralling controversy ultimately led to the resignation of the museum's director, Philippe Vergne, who had been responsible for sacking Molesworth (Artnotes *AM418*).