



## Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

### Work With and Not For

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**Abstract:** A conversation between Faheem Majeed and Abigail Satinsky about Faheem Majeed's studio and administrative, collective, and curatorial practice.

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### Dialogue

**Abigail Satinsky:** Faheem, it's such a pleasure to be in dialogue with you and to talk about engagement since you and I have been working together on various projects for over ten years. Let's begin by talking about this idea of "engagement curating," the subject of this issue and what we think it is and how it operates. The way I am interpreting the term is that it expands curatorial frameworks in which the concern of the curator extends past the artworks themselves to include attention and intention paid to audience, participants, and/or stakeholders as fundamental to an exhibition's potential. This may be new to the traditionally compartmentalized divisions in the museum field, where interpretation, education and public programming can be siloed from curatorial, however for smaller-scaled institutions, artist-run spaces, and socially-engaged artists who organize in community, there aren't resources to be siloed and engagement is everyone's work. Without an engaged community, there is no reason to be there doing the work. It is the feedback mechanism that drives accountability.

You have for a longtime operated in this terrain as an artist as curator, administrator and educator, and your work has relied on integrating these skill sets into an expansive community-based practice that happens in artworks, in organizations, in public space. This is evident in your former work as former Executive Director of the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, the oldest African American Art Center in the United States, which has resulted in your ongoing commitment to that space and its histories through your art practice, and now with Floating Museum, your art collective that creates new models between art, community, architecture, and public institutions. You work in engagement curation but through being an artist and organizer. Do you have an ethos of engagement that

you have defined for your work that keeps you grounded, whether you're working in community-based settings or large-scale museums and institutions?

**Faheem Majeed:** To be frank, much of my education and knowledge about community engaged practices comes out of necessity. When I came to Chicago in 2003, I fell in love with the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC). It opened its doors to me in a time when I didn't have many networks or access to resources or community to engage with. Over the next several years I would move from coming to them as an artist in need, to then Curator and Executive Director, learning about each of these positions based on the needs and history of the center and the communities it served. My education really is the fruit of so many stakeholders and gatekeepers that have come before me, that sat with me, teaching me how to hold together a building, honor its history, and support its communities with little to no money. Towards the end of my tenure at the SSCAC I began to merge my artistic practice with my passion for running the center and it became my laboratory for exploring and thinking about the challenges of small cultural institutions. I began to realize that I could address larger systemic issues by honing in on the history of this small, historic Black art center on the South Side of Chicago.

We had a building that, thanks to predecessors and the founders, was paid for, and we had an amazing art collection dating back to the 1930s. Out of necessity, I began to look outside of the walls to other institutions and individuals that were looking to access these cultural assets and figure out ways of leveraging the SSCAC's interests to get the resources we needed. But I did this in a way that was mutually beneficial to collaborators around the city and world.

This is one of the things I took with me when I co-founded the Floating Museum and in many ways is at the core of a lot of our philosophy. Our ethos is to "Work with and not for." Floating Museum's mission is to think of the city as the museum, the neighborhoods as the galleries, and the citizens as the cultural producers. We work in communities assuming that there's already arts and culture in the space created by the citizens who live there. We partner with and make accessible our resources with the cultural workers that have already been invested in the neighborhoods. When we collectively make exhibitions, projects and art installations, we figure out how everyone involved can contribute to the project so that when the project is completed everyone sees themselves represented in the outcome. Like my predecessors at the SSCAC, much of our work comes out of getting people together. We call this breaking bread. As metaphor, it's creating a dinner party where everyone participates in producing the meal and everyone eats. We don't believe in charitable exchanges.

Oftentimes working with larger museums or municipal authorities, they think of themselves as the dinner table but we challenge them to understand the city as the table where they sit alongside its citizens. With that in mind, we focus on the potential of mutually beneficial exchange through understanding the needs of everyone involved, from community

stakeholders to institutions. We feel that building these types of relationships create more solidarity and resource sharing for when times get rough.

In practice we do actually break bread together. We love to get the family together, eat, drink, laugh, listen to music, spout poetry, tell stories, have parties, and conceive of cool and meaningful projects that we can support together. If we are not having fun...what is the point?

**Abigail Satinsky:** I want you to talk about this idea of mutually beneficial exchange and the redistribution of resources through your recent Floating Museum exhibition, *A Lion for Every House* at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2022. I know one of the original ideas for that project was to pay the folks that were already activating the front steps of the museum, through being street performers or people just hanging out. You identified that as already a cultural space with stakeholders and proposed a way of relooking and valuing that cultural activity. Even though that part of the project didn't end up happening, it says a lot about how you are conceptualizing cultural value inside and outside the institution and pushing for a kind of reorientation. Can you talk a little bit about Floating Museum's approach with that idea?

**Faheem Majeed:** We had a lot of fun with that project. It was both exhilarating and frustrating at the same time, but that's how you know that the work is meaningful. When we founded Floating Museum in 2015, we always said that one of our goals would be to do an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, to think of a better way of leveraging their collections in public space in ways that didn't feel like pandering or placating to communities. When we were approached by curator Matthew Witkovski to have an exhibition exploring the photography collections there, we were less interested in being troublemakers and more thinking about an institutional critique that could be loving and plant seeds for a different approach to the museum. Initially we wanted to create sculptures that could be brought out onto the steps of the Art Institute at various times as a stage to host things that were already happening there.

The steps of the Art Institute are iconic, people say meet me between the lions and you know exactly where that is. It is a plaza for people to rest, to listen to the city, play chess, watch performances by the bucket boys, or get a three second Chicago history lesson as you walk across the street. Oftentimes these talents have the necessity of asking for change or contributions. We posited the question, what if we just give stipends to these performers and just prop up those things that make sitting on the steps of the Art Institute so special. In order to do this you have to acknowledge their value, and see the potential. Whether people come through the doors and pay their admission or sit right outside the doors, it's still the Art Institute so why not foster cultural exchange in a way that actually gets recorded as attendance. For many of our projects we come in with big ambitions but oftentimes the budgets aren't comparable to our vision, so unfortunately, we had to edit that portion of our proposal. Maybe next time.

**Abigail Satinsky:** Can you talk more about what ended up happening in the exhibition galleries? How do you feel like this pushed your collaborators within the institution to think about what it meant to have the public engage with their collections?

**Faheem Majeed:** Although we weren't able to activate the front steps of the museum, we were still very happy about the exhibition's process. Similar to many of our projects, we took a deep look at the history of the Art Institute and its initiatives that no longer exist, one of which was that their Woman's Board used to rent and sell artwork. We have had a longstanding interest in the housing of collections and one of the things we've always wanted to do is convince a museum to give away its holdings. And so this program sparked our interest, because it essentially allowed artists to show their work in the museum and people could then rent it for a period of time and then make a decision if they were going to buy it or not. Almost like a library book you could check it out and if you really liked it, you could buy it. I recall artist Richard Hunt talking about taking part in this program and how it was a great way to sell some work and make some cash, but also a way of getting exposure. But one of the critiques of the program was that it only benefited the wealthy. So, we thought we'd retool it and think more broadly about expanding on the concept of a community collection by reverse-engineering the exhibition process.

Usually, the way a museum exhibition works is that the artist makes an artwork, the curator sees the artwork, decides on which piece goes in the gallery, after that the education department and the programming department produce interpretation, then the community comes in to digest it, then you get reviews, and then you close the show. And of course all that is great but we wanted to play around with the formula. What if we started with our community conversations first? How would that impact the flow of the museum exhibition process and its various departments?

Ten lunchtime conversations were facilitated over zoom over the course of two months. At these conversations, Floating Museum invited "hosts," stakeholders or contributors to previous Floating Museum projects and the embodiment of what we think of as Chicago. They were joined by emerging photographers who would be working with them; the AIC curators, specifically Grace Deveney, Liz Siegel, and Matt Witkovsky; and a member of the Floating Museum as facilitator. The hosts would talk about their relationships to the city, their hopes, dreams, and journeys, as well as the organizations they represented. The photographers would introduce their work and their personal stories. The curators would listen and ask questions and also share their experiences as well.

After the conversations, the curators went into the photography collection and chose a small selection of works that embodied the spirit of the dialogue, which they then presented to the hosts in a subsequent call. The curators had to explain why they selected the works, as well as the artwork's background, and why it was collected. The host then selected their favorite. At this point the real work started. The curators then had to negotiate how to make

a copy of that work as a gift to that host. Now, for most people who don't work in museums, that doesn't sound like a big deal. When we told the hosts the process they were like, "I make copies of pictures all the time." But in most cases artwork comes to a museum through purchase or donation with very specific rules in regards to the acquisition and doesn't include calling the artist, estate or gallery representative back and saying "Hey, you remember that thing we negotiated and I bought from you? Is it okay if I make copies and then give them away for free?" This is generally frowned upon in the museum world.

As artists, we have a much easier time navigating such a request amongst ourselves but to ask the curators and museum to navigate this process was really important for the success of the show. I can't say enough about the curatorial team and how invested they were in this process, all the way down to literally driving the work to people's homes throughout Chicago and sitting and talking with hosts at their residence. Once the works were gifted, the photographers met with the hosts to get to know them in their homes, and then planned photoshoots in which the "gifted" photographs would be placed somewhere in the background and not be the primary focus of the shot. The photoshoot photographs were then installed in the museum as a part of light sculptures that the Floating Museum created.

The idea once again is about mutual exchange. The assumption is that the Art Institute giving a artwork from the collection to someone is this miraculous huge deal, but it is equally generous for someone to allow an institution to come into their home, photograph their private spaces and then put that on display for the world to see. We wanted to honor the host's generosity of not only allowing us into their home but also their commitment to the city and their communities.

I feel like we planted some seeds in the institution and because large institutions move very slow, sometimes it takes a long time for things to actually have impact. What's interesting is *A Lion for Every House* was the most attended exhibition in the history of the photography galleries and the second most attended exhibition during its run at the museum (behind the *Cezanne* retrospective). And that's with little to no marketing about the exhibition, it was solely about word of mouth. That was a really wild show and one day I hope to return to that model and completely do the full idea with a much bigger budget.

**Abigail Satinsky:** Right now I know you are in the thick of working on the Chicago Architecture Biennial's fifth iteration, which the Floating Museum is curating under the theme "This is a rehearsal." A rehearsal is a necessarily future-thinking endeavor, and allows for collaborative iterations that bring a community of practice together. As the Floating Museum, you're making events and activations but you're also institution-builders, establishing a non-profit and acquiring your own building in the Grand Crossing neighborhood as a base of operations. How do these things intersect and interlock in your work? Who are the artists and institution-builders you look towards in your practice?

**Faheem Majeed:** “This is a rehearsal” is an idea that constantly shows up in our collective practice. It's the idea of constantly evolving and growing, adapting and planning for the next phase. It's also about vulnerability, humility and understanding that you are oftentimes not the expert in community spaces. This concept of rehearsal is something that we bring to the Chicago Architecture Biennial to benefit the citywide sites that exchange and installation will happen. Many of the sites are long-term partners that Floating Museum has worked with and we have been very specific to make sure that the work suggested would benefit the missions of the spaces and the people who are the stakeholders and advocates. We like to think of the Floating Museum as a family spread out across the city and now the world, made up of people who want to have a positive impact on the communities they advocate for. It's really about the spirit of the family members.

Much of the philosophies that we've created come from what I call the “Burroughs Algorithm.” The legacy of Dr. Margaret Burroughs is very important to the Floating Museum’s practice. Because although she founded the first museum of African American history in her home on the South Side of Chicago [the Dusable Black History Museum), that was not her original intention. Originally, she was frustrated that there was a lack of diverse curriculum in regards to the contributions of diasporic people. And as a Chicago public school teacher in the 50’s and 60’s, she wanted to change the art curriculum to be more inclusive of Black people’s contributions. She was obviously denied, so she and a group of others took it upon themselves to start a collection from their private holdings and educate their students in her home. Eventually the surrounding community started to call it a museum and she realized that in order to better serve the community she needed to learn about museum-making and how a Black museum could respond to the needs of the Black community.

So, if the goal is to serve the community which we are located in, we need to be willing to adjust ideas and adapt space to address the needs and knowledge of the people we work with, even if that means starting over at the beginning. Eventually Dr. Burroughs and her crew would negotiate with the city to obtain the site that the DuSable museum is now located on.

I recall having conversations with her in her last years and asking what she would have done if she was still at the helm. She said she wanted to open a cafeteria in the museum because the babies needed to be able to eat. What was truly amazing about her museum practice was that she valued people over the collections. She thought the museum, its collections, and spaces should always be in service of people. Collections were about educating the public on Black history so it didn’t matter if it was an expensive and rare Aaron Douglas painting or the black clown ceramic sculpture that was first prize winner in the Lake Meadows art fair, they were both equally valuable and were both equally accepted and cared for. Her style of museum making was closer to South Side Community Art Center than Art Institute or Field Museum.

Currently in addition to curating Chicago Architecture Biennale 5<sup>th</sup> edition, and our floating monuments programing, we are currently renovating our home base in the Grand Crossing neighborhood. This will be a future site of our residency program, fabrication,

rehearsal site for our artists and community partners. We are having a lot of fun and are very excited about what's next.

## AI Acknowledgment

The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete essential authoring tasks in this manuscript.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Faheem Majeed** is an artist, educator, curator, and community facilitator. He blends his unique experience as an artist, non-profit administrator, and curator to create works that focus on institutional critique and exhibitions that leverage collaboration to engage his immediate, and the broader community, in meaningful dialogue. Majeed received his BFA from Howard University and his MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). From 2005-2011 Majeed served as executive director and curator for the South Side Community Art Center and is currently Co-Director and Founder of the Floating Museum, who are the artistic team for the Chicago Architecture Biennial, which opens September 2023. Majeed is a recipient of the The Field and MacArthur Foundation's Leaders for a New Chicago Award (2020), Joyce Foundation Award (2020), the Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Grant (2015), and the Harpo Foundation Awardee (2016). Majeed's solo exhibitions include MCA Chicago, Tufts University Art Galleries, and the Hyde Park Art Center.

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**Abigail Satinsky** is the Program Officer & Curator, Arts & Culture, at the Wagner Foundation based in Cambridge, MA. Previously, she was the Curator and Head of Public Engagement at Tufts University Art Galleries, where she curated solo and public art projects with Faheem Majeed, Sofía Córdova, Museum of Capitalism, Press Press, Erin Genia, General Sisters, Josh MacPhee, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, and others. Previously to that she has held positions at Mural Arts in Philadelphia and Threewalls in Chicago and was co-founder of the artist group InCUBATE and the international micro-granting project Sunday Soup. She is editor of the books *Support Networks* (SAIC/University of Chicago Press) on socially-engaged art in Chicago; *PHONEBOOK* (Threewalls) a national resource guide on artist-run culture; and co-Editor (with Erina Duganne) for *Art for the Future: Artists Call and Central American Solidarities* (Tufts University Art Galleries and Inventory Press), their exhibition catalogue for the nationally traveling exhibition on the 1984 artist-activist campaign Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America.

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