

Art **Reviews**

## Opening Up the White Cube

By asking what is and is not allowed, for whom, and who is writing the rules *Curriculum* at EFA Project Space offers tangible opportunities to challenge viewers' thinking.



Alexis Clements February 18, 2019



Installation view of *CURRICULUM: spaces of learning and unlearning* at EFA Project Space, 2019 (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Art galleries, particularly those of the white cube variety, are rife with unspoken norms, most of which are highly restrictive. Be quiet. Don't touch the art. Don't cross the lines on the floor. Don't carry big bags. If you're going to talk, keep it hushed. And then there are the persistent associations in wider culture with these spaces: snobbery, privilege, insider knowledge that excludes newcomers. What such galleries are not normally considered is sites of learning. Which is a bummer, really, because so often learning is a significant part of what drives many of us to engage with art, despite its frequent shortcomings.

This is all the more reason I was excited to see EFA Project Space's ***CURRICULUM: spaces of learning and unlearning***, curated by **Stamatina Gregory** and **Jeanne Vaccaro**. Most people learn best **through experience**, and the art world's white cubes typically offer little more than a passive experience of witnessing. This show asks how the white cube can open us up to more active states of learning. The contradictions and complications in asking this question are both rich and provocative.



Detail of installation, Christen Clifford, *Interiors: We Are All Pink Inside* (2018), EFA Project Space, 2019

One of the most provocative moments came for me when I encountered the work *Interiors: We Are All Pink Inside* (2018) by **Christen Clifford**. Tucked into a kind of room of its own in the back of the gallery, Clifford's work consists of large projection screen tilted down toward the floor, with pink mirrored Plexiglas below and on the sides creating a rose-hued enclosure that shines and undulates with the movement on the screen. Approaching this area of the gallery, small pieces of tape on the floor request that visitors take off their shoes and remove any sharp objects (from where is not noted). I stood there for a minute trying to figure it out — was I supposed to take off my shoes in order to walk around the enclosure? Was this supposed to be a space for reverence or ritual? After chatting with the attendant, I learned that Clifford intended that visitors take off their shoes, enter the pink enclosure, and lay down on that mirrored Plexiglas itself.

The transgressive feeling of actually entering the artwork added to the conversation the work seemed to be having with me. Clifford's projection shows videos of cameras entering the vaginas and anuses of artists who agreed to participate. It's a hazy and enveloping pink world that your body gets to float within.



Author's feet inside installation, Christen Clifford, *Interiors: We Are All Pink Inside* (2018), EFA Project Space, 2019

In an age in which the need to better understand the nature and meaning of consent is clearer than ever, being invited to experience the insides of strangers' intimate anatomy is both humorous and potent. Art galleries are spaces where the powerful do-not-touch rule is more often observed than spoken and unspoken rules not to touch women's bodies, or anyone's anything, for that matter, without permission.

Quite the opposite experience characterizes OlaRonke Akinmowo's latest iteration of the *Free Black Women's Library*, an ongoing project Akinmowo began in 2015. The installation is comprised of bright lights, padded benches, photographic portraits of Black female writers, a flatscreen TV with headphones to see and hear the artist speak about the project, a vitrine holding hallowed volumes such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, and two large bookshelves laden with books and lush red flowers. It offers an invitation to the viewer very different from Clifford's. Still, I made sure interaction in this space was welcome before looking through the books on the shelves.



Installation view, OlaRonke Akinmowo, *Free Black Women's Library* (2018-ongoing), EFA Project Space, 2019

This project's call for learning is much more overt, and equally powerful. It is simultaneously a call to our society to know and appreciate the writings of Black women, and invitation to indulge in the enormous breadth and diversity of these authors' literary production. Following in a **long but recently growing history** of free libraries in the US, Akinmowo's creates a temporary communal space of sharing, learning, and experience that is mediated entirely by Black women, demonstrating, as many **caucus** or **affinity** spaces do, that alternatives to white- and male-dominated spaces exist, revealing the lie that patriarchal and white supremacist spaces are not only necessary but inevitable.

A third piece, "Hormonal Fog" (2016-2018), by **Candice Lin** and **Patrick Staff**, offers an intriguing counter to questions of permission, consent, and participation. Using a fog machine to infuse the space with botanicals known to suppress the hormone testosterone, the artists alter the chemical composition of the air throughout the gallery space. For me, this begged questions of how much of what we experience in the world, particularly in crowded cities, is non-consensual. Who controls such banal details as air-conditioning, or the aural and visual atmosphere of a world saturated in manipulative media and advertising? Who interrupts our movement through the world and has the power to infuse the very air we breathe and the food we eat? As this piece suggests, even the hormones that our own bodies produce can impact those around us.



Installation view, Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, "Storyteller" and "The Storyteller of the Future Altar" (2017), EFA Project Space, 2019



Installation view, Carolyn Lazard, "Crip Time" (2017), EFA Project Space, 2019

Not all of the works on display invite interaction, so be sure to check in those staffing the gallery — but even having to negotiate the space with help is part of a curriculum. The curators have also pushed against audience passivity by programming numerous events, from talks to performances. By confronting some of the most basic questions we encounter throughout our lives—what is and is not allowed, for whom, and who is writing the rules — this exhibition offers tangible opportunities to challenge viewers' thinking, while the artists focus on particularly salient spaces where our society has significant room for improvement.

**CURRICULUM: spaces of learning and unlearning**, *curated by Stamatina Gregory and Jeanne Vaquero, is on exhibit at the EFA Project Space (323 W 39th St, Manhattan) through March 16, 2019, with numerous live events*

*planned throughout.*

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