

## **Last Gasp Attempts: Don't Believe the Hype, Don't Drink the Kool-Aid**

**Justin Randolph Thompson**

Wallowing in the echoes of Malcolm's words  
There must be black unity,  
there must be black unity  
For in the end unity will be thrust upon us  
And we upon it and each other  
Locked in cages, penned,  
hemmed in, shoulder-to-shoulder, arms outstretched  
For just a crust of bread, watermelon mirages and oasis that does not exist  
Conjured up by the bubbling stench of  
Unwashed bodies and unsanitary quarters  
Concrete and barbed wire, babies screaming  
Stumbling around in a mental circle  
Because you never cared enough to be black  
In the end unity will be thrust upon us

Gil Scott-Heron  
*The King Alfred Plan, 1972*

“When Europe today thinks of unification, it is without a doubt to safeguard her prestige and vocation, but, above all, it is to secure her last chances of remaining a leading and controlling power among the rising nations.”

*The Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, Rome September 1958:  
“The Unity and Responsibility of Negro-African Culture”*

### **Preface**

I admit, to all who read this, that this text was written as a vent. Gil Scott-Heron's enraged call to arms, with its percussive insistence, often pops into my head in moments when I feel most betrayed by the cultural sphere. The sense of betrayal is typically short lived as I remind myself what I already know, like Scott-Heron said, “ain't no new thing,” and I restate my gratefulness for being surrounded by community and for an approach to this world that refuses to play by the rules. Those same rules that, for those working in the arts in Italy, especially those of us of African descent, have produced those cages of forced unity, grounded in a common enemy much more frequently than in any notion of solidarity. The struggle with antagonisms that, in Scott-Heron's words, are thrust upon you and you upon it, is almost as taxing as the struggle with the gatekeeping, canon-affirming protagonism that is offered up as the reward for a willingness to play the game and held up as a symbol of success.

If all this seems abstract it may be because a desire to look at case studies and specific examples too often denies us the opportunity to critically affirm how diffused and rampant these elements are in the systems of artistic production across an Italian cultural panorama, bursting with

energy and imagination, but trapped by a lack of investment and with heavily patrolled gates of entry. To conjure the details of endless exchanges that may be grouped into micro-aggressions or categorized as defense mechanisms would be to diagnose the symptoms while offering little consideration for the cure. I believe that much of what Toni Morrison addresses in stating that the role of racism is to distract us from the work that we could be doing suits my own reflections on why an anecdotal approach to this is not useful. In a culture that is increasingly willing to simply remove individuals who don't conform to the façade-like semblance of ethics and morality, citing examples would simply underscore an exemplary nature that is anything but unique. Perhaps to call out specific players or institutions is easier; it provides relief in the form of a scapegoat onto which we can pour our discontent and continue with our lives. This approach does little to unsettle the bigger system itself, and the cracks in the façade, while providing a glimpse of what lies beyond, are yet again emblematic at best.

What I hope to achieve with this text is to speak directly to those systems of power, in order to underscore what they too often fail to recognize, but also to address those of us that are a part of the community of cultural workers employed by or working in dialogue with them. The messages that will surely emerge will bare different meanings according to which of these dynamics you find yourself involved or affiliated with, as well as how you, the reader, may position yourself. Artists are said to be the early warning system for society, and much of society is not interested in being forewarned. This writing is an invitation and a critique. The invitation is to reflect upon the relationships that we build as cultural workers and their sustainability, in terms of energy, mental health, and a capacity for life-shaping meaning. It is to interrogate our roles in keeping closed—or in opening—the door to those who come after us, but also to those that work alongside of us. The critique instead is of structural forms of cultural empowerment that can be hacked from within, but not if, in order to enter into them, we must shed our own skin.

It is written from the perspective of an artist and cultural worker based for a quarter of a century in Italy, actively engaged in contributing to the cultural sector through the building of communities, institutions and methodologies that are scalable, sharable and anchored in trial implementations. It is a perspective framed by the privileges afforded me, as an artist from the U.S. operating within the Italian space, and with the insight of more than a decade of cultural organization within and around numerous institutions and cultural environments in Italy. It is a sharing of a desire for a setting that is more caring for the long-term work that so desperately needs to be carried out here, but I write fully aware of the structures that predetermine value and shape what is deemed diplomacy in those Italian spaces dedicated to culture. In imagining art's role in shaping Italian culture and its spilling over into the social environment that frames it, I ask you to understand the frustrations voiced here and to read them not with generosity but with seriousness. When asked to contribute to a conversation about contemporary culture in Italy, I am determined to bite at the hand that feeds, not just as a gesture of defiance but more so as a reminder that all of us are fed in different ways by this system but there are those of us who have been cultivating the land, producing the content and facilitating its recovery; as in most systems of capital, it is work that is often deemed of little value without the activation of the dinosaur-like structures that revalue it.

## **Benevolence**

What are the risks of falling prey to protagonisms within the realm of cultural organization and curation? How might we reflect upon the work that we engage in as not aligned with the modes

and motivations of cultural institutions around us? What does it mean for the objectives of shifting culture and society not to be aligned with those divisive factors that keep us focused on obtaining those few resources available, in exchange for notions of integration into a system that has done little to demonstrate any care for what we represent? I have often reflected upon the notion of collectivity within curatorial practice and the ways in which the shifting away from the individual, as well as the opacity provided by collective gestures, force institutions to have to dismantle those assignments of value that leave space for only those “chosen” to enter. These modes of divide and conquer presume that we are all playing at the same game, and are all hungry for power, as understood through the lens of capital, which is in turn framed through cultural exceptionalism. This is why it can be so easy to abduct any outlier with the bait of wealth and access. An integration into cultural programming within the Italian panorama of museums and institutions is often perceived by those who formulate the invitation as a gesture of benevolence. This notion of generosity is anchored in coloniality and aristocratic control of artistic production (after all, this is Florence, home to the “Renaissance”). It should not be missed that this is also tied to maintenance of the rights to engage directly in the historicization of art in the process.

Undoing the centuries that have reinforced these dynamics, and which continue to place power in the hands of those few at the head of larger institutions, is a trying task, to say the least. It is the same insistence on benevolence that strips us of our understanding of power and agency. As each individual is coerced into a system built to destroy any real sense of individual agency, the system tightens its reins of control, celebrating this very work as a gesture towards *their* openness to being reflective of social engagement. Our projects become the shields behind which they hide whenever someone addresses the obvious, namely that long-term commitments and investments in change, in unlearning, in shifting paradigms are kept out of reach, masked by loopholes and bureaucracies that (as they will often tell you directly) leave little room for meaningful structural change. What is so often lacking in these equations is imagination. In an attempt to garner credibility in a world where money is not enough to get those truly anchored in social realities on board, myopic and shallow statements are not only not enough to hide behind, but actually demonstrate the fragility of the structures themselves. Indeed, such statements put in bold relief the bankruptcy of the visions and canons that they attempt to uphold, while conveying a sense of overall indifference that shrouds any true demonstration of commitment to undoing what is too often perceived as “the master’s house.”

We might pause here to ask ourselves: whose master do these powerful few understand themselves to be? Museums, cultural institutions, academies of higher learning: whose masters are they? They surely are constructed on the backs of the exploited, while supporting epistemicide and extractive economies. Yet in a world in which any sense of the relevance of these structures is waning, what is the potential outcome of even simply voicing these concerns into the echo chamber of social media? Or of shouting into the deafening silence or calling out the lack of accountability of the institutions themselves? Perhaps even more rarely, of sharing directly with our communities, which may be prompted in turn to organize in collective efforts? Ever more pressing and evident is the connection between the frail cultural backdrop and global consciousness in relation to the lack of ethics and commitment towards society of political leaders. Although continually demonstrating that they view themselves, in a war-torn world, as firmly gripping onto power, theirs may actually be a last gasp attempt to bring the whole world down together with their crumbling systems.

## Shifting our Alignment

Amidst this frenetic display of energy in which the performance of “civility” keeps many from speaking up, the pitfalls and hypocrisies of the very notion that we are to behave as guests when invited inside is part and parcel with the extinguishing of agency and criticality. The conditions that we are meant to deal with are not only untenable and unsustainable for us in relation to economic imbalance as well as the psychological toll and the knowledge drain that is requested in exchange for what is deemed precious access, but there is often only room for one of us. Many of us can understand the utter agony of our positions, holding tight our connections to systems of power that, in turn, keep us from the very communities we are determined to support, to uplift, to celebrate. What often begins as solidarities of necessity amongst us, with a potential to lead to collective power, disintegrates into factions determined to climb whatever ladder might be available without reflecting upon the nature of what rests at the top, to say nothing of the slippery, filthy climb itself. Hence we disconnect from our commitments to each other and are left on our own, surrounded by people who continue to applaud our efforts for aspects completely unattached to our objectives, our narrative, our very being. They applaud the image that they have created of us for them to hide behind. They are actually applauding themselves for the generosity that they have demonstrated in creating this image of us in the first place. The cycle continues because within the flattened and stereotyped image, there is not only no room for any notion of individuality, complexity, or movement beyond the space that we occupy as guests who must follow unwritten yet explicit rules: there is actually no room for us at all. The image of us constructed by the institutional framework is one that is inherently replaceable and, moreover, extinguishable. What does this say then about our solidarities with each other? Our commitment to our social environment? Our capacity to build for future generations? Our ability to invite leadership formats that don’t simply replicate the very violence that marginalizes and displaces us from the cultural sphere?

## Concluding Thoughts

When we begin to see the work of our peers in the same way that we see that of those in charge of those spaces that so many of us feel enticed to enter and to interface with, what does it say about our own visions and objectives? What does it tell others about what we stand for? There is an assumption that the rules to the game have long been established and either you play along and reap the benefits from a society that historically has done little to benefit you or your community, but that on the contrary has benefitted from unbridled appropriation of the slogans, sounds, and aesthetics of our revolutions, or otherwise you step aside to make way for another figure that may, in these institutional contexts, represent exactly what you represent for them. I refuse to use the word *token* here. To do so would be to actually believe that these forms of weaponization carry a symbolic valence in the first place, one that is disconnected from the shielding mechanisms of defense put in place to uphold our very isolation and inscription beyond the margins and outside of any picture of true change. This is precisely because any such change would signify the dismantling of what has been laboriously preserved and canonized. When this is not used to display a façade of forward thinking, it is used to demonize our work in order to advance ever more dominant hegemonic canons, standards and xenophobic undertakings. I am led here to think of the lines from legendary urban griot and poet Gil Scott-Heron’s *The King Alfred Plan*: “There must be black unity,/ there must be black unity,/ For in the end unity will be thrust upon us/And we upon it and each other/ Locked in cages, penned,/ hemmed in, shoulder-to-shoulder.”

Don't believe the hype, resist, push back, there's something in the water, get out, don't drink the Kool-Aid and, above all, take a look around at your immediate environment outside of our egos and ensure that there is not only an exit strategy but, more importantly, be sure to break the hinges of the door on your way out.