

Written evidence submitted by Museum of Colour

Evidence for Department of Culture, Media and Sport - Impact of Covid -19

From Museum of Colour, written by founder Samenua Seshar OBE

The Museum of Colour is building a digital museum to explore the contribution made by People of Colour to the nation's culture, specifically in film, television and the arts from 1766 – 2016. It will do this by:

1. Building exhibitions with new content, portraits, filmed interviews and digital artefacts.
2. Creating an explicit learning space, MoC Academy, that will include a literature review that brings the most relevant and compelling writing on the subject in one place and also offer learning opportunities and creative and heritage sector support.
3. Working in partnership with others to build response galleries that commission contemporary creatives of colour to engage and reinterpret existing British heritage and weave performance, debate and participation into the fabric of the museum.

The immediate impact of Covid-19

All activity has ceased. Museum of Colour (MoC) is currently being incubated as a project of People's Palace Projects at Queen Mary University London, and is in the process of becoming a CIC. The pilot exhibition of the museum was called *People of Letters* and a memorandum of understanding was established with the Oxford University Museum Group to deliver the project events. It launched at the Pitt Rivers Museum in September 2019 with a performance by the writers of the Response Gallery, who were commissioned to interpret objects that they chose from the Pitt Rivers collection. The director of the Pitt Rivers described it as the best event at the museum since she has been there, and it was described as the gig of the year by the Arts Council relationship officer in attendance. The writers were, in order of exhibition:

[Naomi Sumner Chan](#)

[Tayo Aluko](#)

[Daljit Nagra](#)

[Colin Grant](#)

[Grace Nichols](#)

[Will Harris](#)

[Degna Stone](#)

[Kei Miller](#)

[Jay Bernard](#)

[Bernardine Evaristo](#)

The full exhibition can be found at www.museumofcolour.org.uk

It took five years to raise the money to do the first exhibition. This is despite early conversations at the highest levels with the BFI, Arts Council England, British Library and the BBC. Everyone agreed the idea was excellent and much needed - and yet it struggled. The concept needed to be tested to bring on board future partners and the funding was eventually secured from National Lottery Heritage Fund. It took three applications because this digital project to restore hidden, immaterial heritage did not fit neatly into existing funding categories.

The momentum and quality of the pilot has allowed MoC to secure partnerships for two future exhibitions: *A Very British Rhythm*, exploring dance, and *My Words*, celebrating poets. These will be delivered in partnership with People's Palace Projects, Sadlers Wells and the Science Museum, Manchester Poetry Library, the British Library and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter. On the very eve of submitting the National Lottery Heritage Fund application after Arts Council funded rigorous research and development, the fund was suspended due to Covid-19. There has been no announcement yet about when the fund will reopen to new proposals.

Funders such as National Lottery Heritage Fund have taken the decision to prioritise the stabilisation of existing heritage and cultural infrastructure over investment in new work. The effect is to reinforce the inequities that are already acknowledged within the UK's heritage sector (cf. 'Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case: A Data Report', Arts Council England, published February 2020).

Companies whose area of focus has historically received under-investment are the most likely to be developing their work with sequential project grants, rather than being in receipt of regular core funding. Whatever continuity they have in their organisational structure is delivered by a resourceful matching of a series of project funds over time.

For a core funded company which has presented a three-year business plan to its funder, a project planned to begin September 2020 is "existing work" and the organisational structure that enables this work to be delivered will be eligible for funding support. For a company with no core funding, their proposal to a project funding stream for the same project planned to begin September 2020 is "new work" that will not be considered. This leaves their staffing unfunded (or, if they are lucky, on furlough under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: paid, but not permitted to undertake any fundraising activity). This is the position that the Museum of Colour is in.

The impact and challenges for all emerging companies will be significant:

- No income
- No reserves
- No resilience
- Recreating ways to make content with none of the above.

The potential negative impact for this black led emerging company is greater. Why?

Fear. It appears that Covid-19 is disproportionately affecting people from African, Caribbean and South Asian communities and the over 70s. This means the heritage that MoC is aiming to capture is now even more at risk. These are the voices of the elders of our communities that have never been captured in this way before or as extensively and methodically as is planned.

There is the fear that the need to save organisations of national standing and those already known, will crowd out any potential for relatively new projects at a time when the public

purse is bearing considerable strain. It has historically been the case that projects to support people of African, Caribbean and Asian descent can be seen as “extras” to be done in times of plenty. The creative industries, especially the arts are improving in this area but there was still work to do in this area before Covid-19 and now they have to grapple with survival.

The current Black Lives Matter moment is also impacting on this organisation now and while it is important to be honest about the realities of racism, it is equally important to show how people overcome it and succeed. The intergenerational disconnect that leads younger artists of colour to wrongly believe themselves to be doing things for the first time, is one of the many issues this museum was founded to address. The reflection of MoC is not victimhood, but hard work, ambition, vision, courage and empowerment. However it is being delivered without a building, with limited opportunity to generate income and is therefore dependent on existing funding structures and private donations.

The flexibility and understanding from funders appear to be there for Covid-19. The efficacy of the support that has been put in place will be evaluated in the future. For the MoC there are few funds that it is eligible for and the capacity is no longer there to undertake significant bid writing. There has been one unsuccessful bid and another is in preparation at the time of this submission and a small Just Giving campaign is underway.

How might the sector and arms-length bodies evolve after COVID-19 and how can DCMS support this?

Covid-19 has shown us that we can make lasting, sweeping changes at pace, when we choose to. With this in mind, MoC would like to make the following recommendations for consideration:

1. Ask and answer the question – what will *look and be* different one, five and ten years from now?
2. Consider bringing a black led producing agency on as an additional arms-length body, allowing resources, advice, support and connectivity to be provided to creatives of colour. The producing agency model has been tried and understood, Arts Admin, Fuel and People’s Palace Projects to name three and it reduces the need for stand-alone companies and gets resources directly to artists. It would also provide regular employment for many precariously contracted and employed creative workers of colour, while providing another source of match funding for projects
3. Fully grasp the potential for creatives of colour to make a profound difference, foster greater understanding, all while delivering work of excellent quality
4. Support the Museum of Colour to deliver to its full potential now, when heritage partners are asking for it
5. Recognise the understanding of anti-blackness at this time is ground breaking and encourages us to understand that specificity is important: consider not using the term BAME
6. Create a national day of unity as a public holiday that gives us all one day every year to focus and reflect on what we have in common over what divides us.

Thank you for reading this submission.