



Zoë Gray on the Curatorial Evolution of WIELS

Vanessa Peterson speaks to the curator about the institution's history and developing ambitious programming in Brussels

BY VANESSA PETERSON AND ZOË GRAY IN INTERVIEWS | 24 FEB 23



Vanessa Peterson You have worked at WIELS, Brussels, for just over eight years, curating shows with artists including Kasper Bosmans, Simon Denny and Erik van Lieshout. How has the institution evolved during your time there?

Zoë Gray While WIELS has become a well-established and slightly more financially stable institution over the time I have worked here, it has retained its youthful exuberance as it approaches adulthood. (We turned 15 last year.) Together with artistic director Dirk Snauwaert, I try to steer a course that puts social engagement at the heart of the programme but always translated through aesthetic experience. I'm thinking, for example, of our 2019 exhibition of Ellen Gallagher, or our show the following year of Thao Nguyen Phan, both of whom employ beauty and visual poetry to examine painful histories and pressing social questions. A recent evolution is the inclusion of more performative programming, under the guidance of my fellow curator, Helena Kritis. In April this year, we will present a performance by Nikima Jagudajev and, for September, we have commissioned a piece that is the first collaboration between James Richards and Billy Bultheel, which I am really looking forward to.



'Ellen Gallagher with Edgar Cleyne: Liquid Intelligence', 2019, exhibition view. Courtesy: WIELS, Brussels; photo: Kristien Daein

VP Prior to WIELS, you were at Kunstinstituut Melly (then known as Witte de With) in Rotterdam. What drew you to working in the Netherlands and Belgium?

ZG I left the UK 20 years ago, motivated by a desire to get off the island and see what was happening elsewhere. Initially, I moved to France, where I worked as a freelance curator and art writer. At the time, the French scene was more hermetic than it is today and there was little exchange between contemporary artists and curators in the UK and France. By serendipity, I soon found my first institutional 'home' at Witte de With and dived into the Dutch art scene in the company of a dynamic team that included director Nicolaus Schafhaussen (who went on to run Kunsthalle Wien), Anne-Claire Schmitz (now at M HKA in Antwerp), Monika Szewczyk (later part of the documenta 14 team) and Amira Gad (who went to the Serpentine Galleries in London), among several others. Our programme brought many original voices – from Saâdane Afif to Brian Jungen – to the Netherlands for the first time. A personal favourite was our 2010 Cosima von Bonin exhibition, which looked at fatigue and exhaustion.

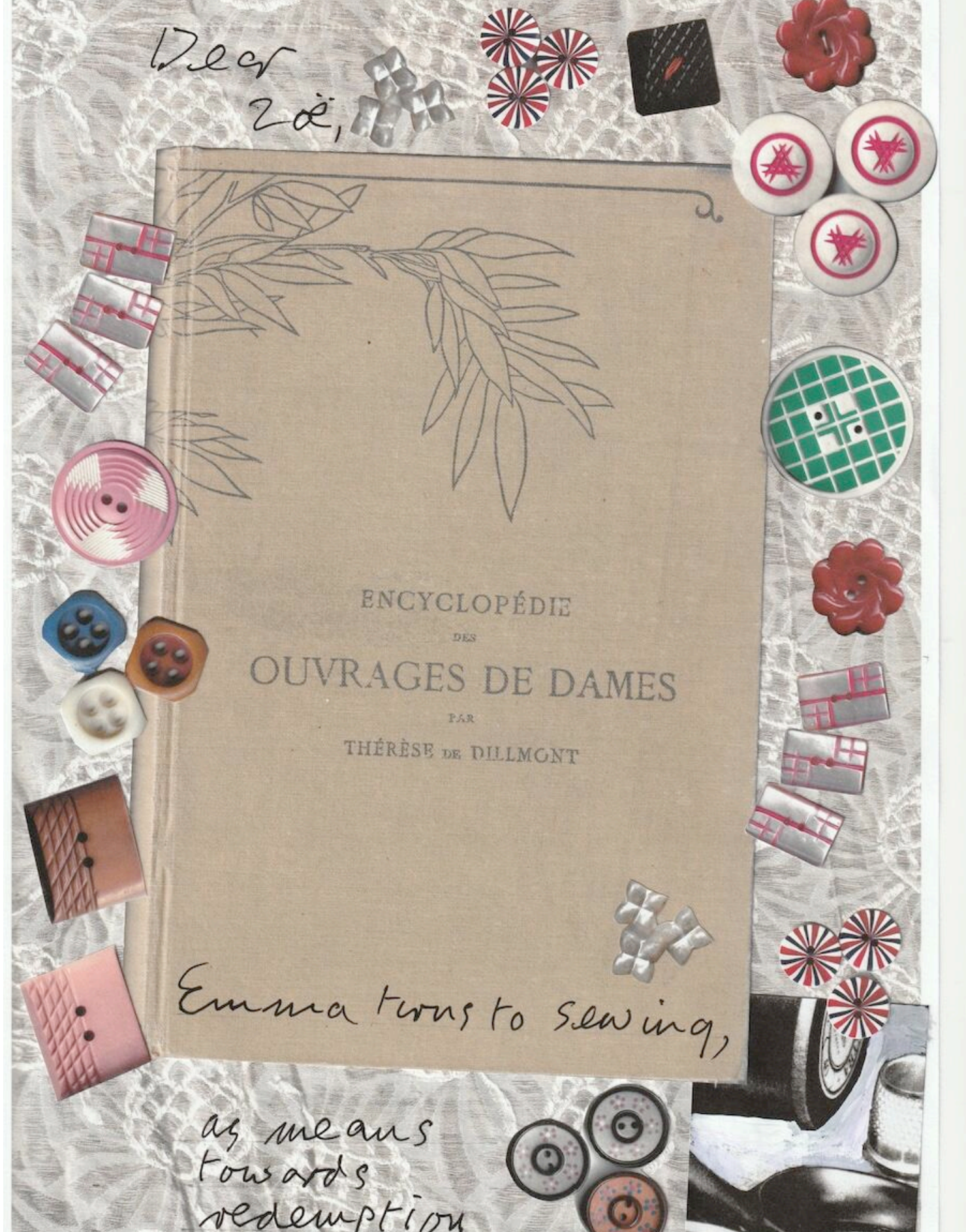
After leaving Rotterdam, I returned to freelancing in France, working for the LUMA Foundation in Arles and then as artistic director of the Rennes Biennale. I had been following WIELS since its early days, so I was delighted to become part of the team in 2015, with Klara Lidén's show as my first solo curatorial project. What I love about Brussels is the mixture of cultures, ideas and people condensed into a relatively small city: it has a rich artistic history and eco-system that are seldom pretentious. WIELS is an institution that is shaped by this context, but which has succeeded in shaping its environment in return and – if I am allowed an institutional boast – setting the standard for internationally ambitious, locally rooted programming.



Marc Camille Chaimowicz, *The Hayes Court String Room*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Cabinet, London; photo: Mark Bowler

VP WIELS currently runs a residency programme that supports both Belgian-based artists and those working outside of the country, enabling them to engage with the Brussels art scene. How did this come about and what impact has it had?

ZG When WIELS was initiated by a group of individuals, including the visionary collector Herman Daled, Brussels was not the international art hub it has since become. It was clear that this fledgling institution would have to grow its audience and create the international connections that the local art scene needed. Dirk developed the residency programme together with artists Lucy McKenzie, Willem Oorebeek and Simon Thompson, who were its first mentors. Thompson remains with us today – alongside fellow artists Michael van den Abeele, Manon de Boer and Sylvie Eyberg – to provide the residents with weekly guidance and discussion as part of a peer-led approach. The programme counts participants from almost every continent and has now welcomed more than 200 residents, many of whom stay in Brussels. There are studios on each of the three exhibition floors – although discreetly out of view – and having the residents within the building means that artistic practice remains central to our daily activities and thinking.



Marc Camille Chaimowicz, *Dear Zoë (Emma Bovary collages)* (17th March 2022), 2022, paper, 21 x 29.7cm. Courtesy: the artist and WIELS, Brussels

VP Your current exhibition is Marc Camille Chaimowicz, which opened earlier this month. Could you tell me more about the show?

ZG The exhibition's title, 'Nuit américaine', is the French term for the cinematic technique of filming day-for-night. Here, it becomes a metaphor for presenting real life through the filter of art, as Chaimowicz has been doing since the start of his practice. Uniting past and present, the exhibition brings together one of his earliest installations, *Celebration? Realife Revisited* [1972–2000], a re-creation of his sitting room of the past 40 years, and a series of collages inspired by Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* [1856]. All three examine intimacy, domesticity and the desire, or need, to create one own's context. Coming back to the title, light plays a central role in the show, which transitions from a dark space of festivity to the half-light of a domestic interior designed for daydreaming and, finally, the filtered daylight of a reading room.



Marc Camille Chaimowicz, *Dear Zoë (Emma Bovary collages)* (15th October 2021), 2021, paper, 21 x 29.7cm. Courtesy: the artist and WIELS, Brussels

VP One work included in the show is *Dear Zoë (Emma Bovary Collages)* [2020–23], a series of collages the artist sent to you during the pandemic, inspired by Flaubert's novel.

ZG Chaimowicz has long been drawn to the character of Emma Bovary, who is trapped in a narrow existence by the conventions of her era. In Flaubert's novel, which shocked readers at the time of its publication, she seeks liberation (and excitement) through romance and adultery, but meets a tragic end of betrayal, bankruptcy and suicide. In this new series of collages, Chaimowicz connects Emma's longings to recent experiences of containment, social isolation and the desire to escape. 'If only!' appears as an expression of yearning in more than one collage. As his source material, he used fragments from magazines, literary prints and reproductions of works by other artists focused on the domestic domain, woven together with his own drawings and patterns.

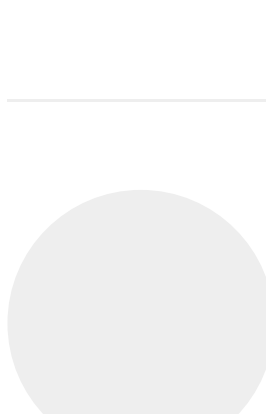
Letters have often played an important role in Chaimowicz's work and life, with postal correspondence better suited to the speed at which he likes to reflect and exchange than the immediacy of emails. Chaimowicz would work on several collages simultaneously and it is possible to see conceptual links and formal repetitions between them. As the pandemic stretched out from the initial estimations of a few weeks to months and, ultimately, years, the scope and emotional charge of the collages changed. A greater sense of connection developed between their author and Emma, due perhaps to their shared social isolation. This lends an urgency to the body of work, although it remains an undercurrent beneath the beautiful colours, exotic landscapes, decorative patterns, seductive bodies and luxury consumer items.

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Marc Camille Chaimowicz's **'Nuit américaine'** is on view at WIELS, Brussels, until 13 August

Main image: Marc Camille Chaimowicz, *Celebration? Realife Revisited*, 1972–2000, installation view. © the artist. Courtesy: WIELS, Brussels; photo: Stefan Altenburger

Thumbnail image: Portrait of Zoë Gray, 2023. Courtesy: WIELS, Brussels; photo: Alexandra Betsels



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Zoë Gray is senior curator at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels, Belgium.

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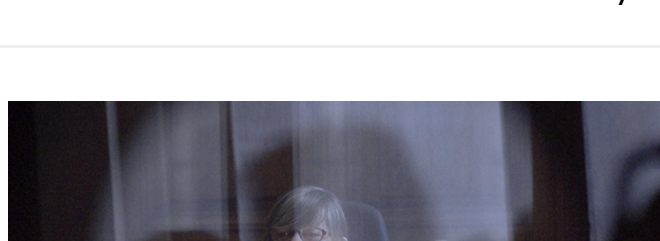
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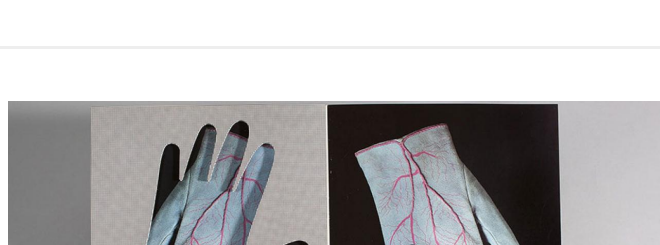
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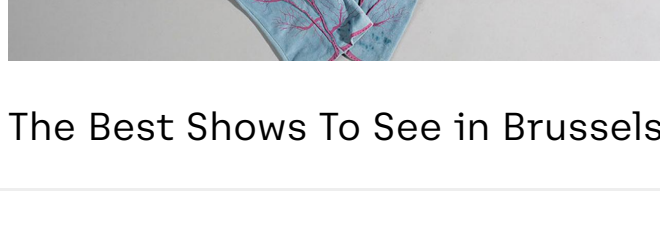
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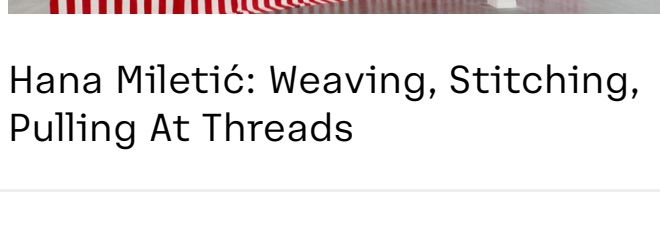
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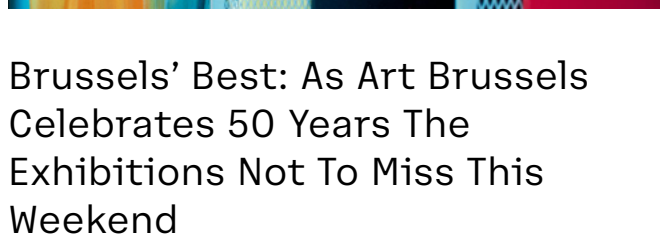
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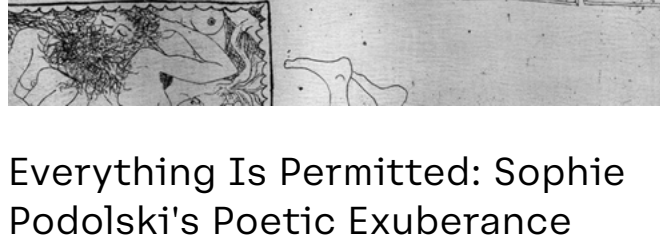
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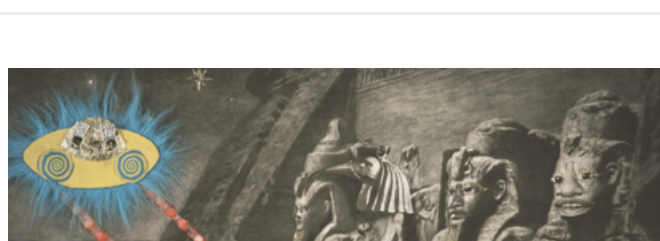
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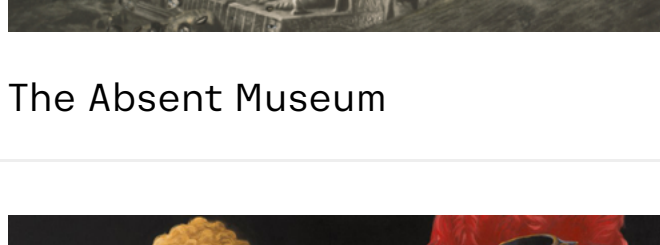
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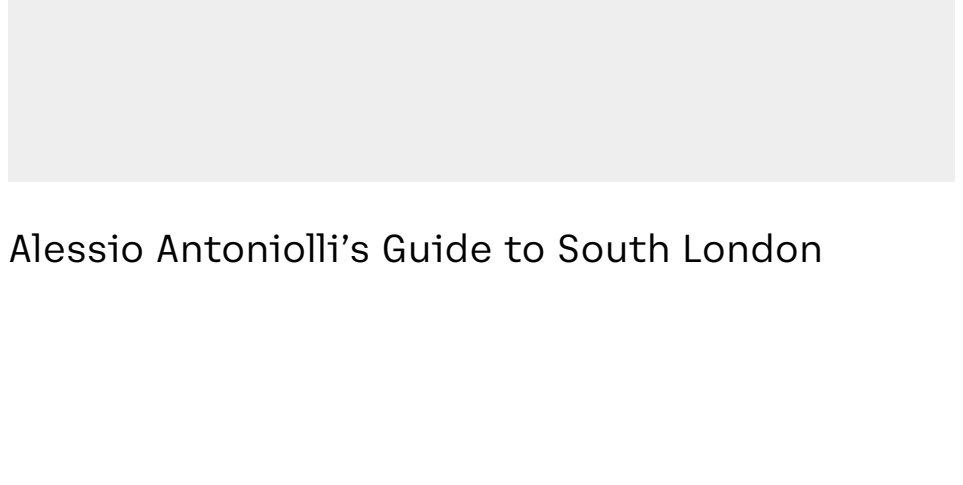


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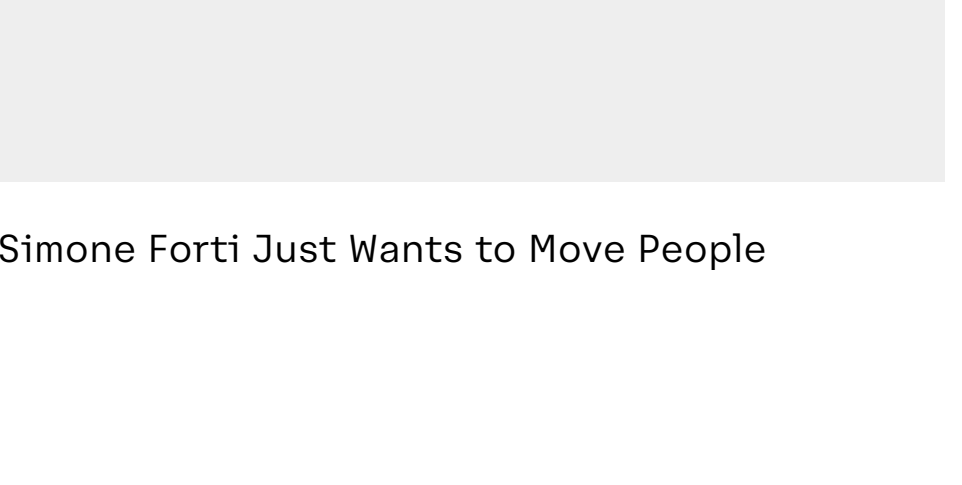
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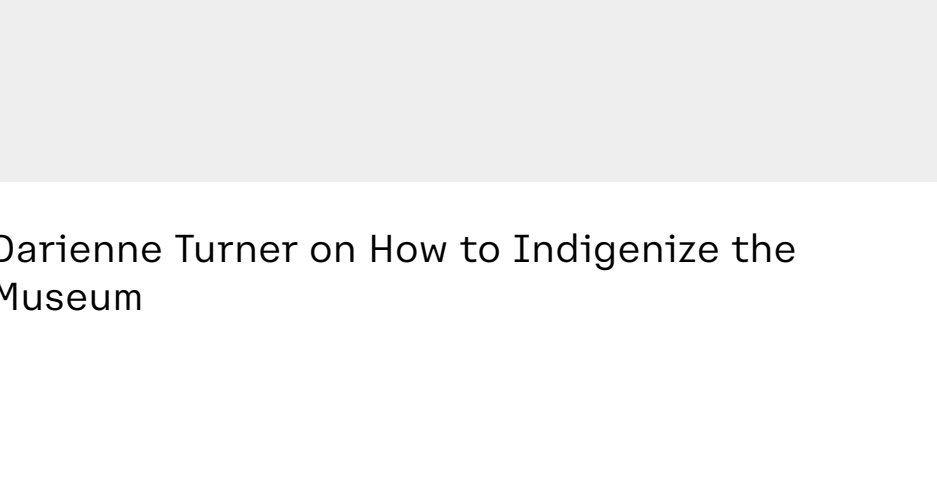
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