

November 1, 2016 - Kimberly Drew is a curator, writer, lecturer, and thinker. By day, she's the Social Media Manager at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She founded the Tumblr blog, Black Contemporary Art, has a popular Instagram account, was the recipient of AIR Gallery's first Feminist Curator Award, and was selected as one of the YBCA1000 by the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2851 words.

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Kimberly Drew on being accountable to yourself and to others

You have a day job, and a ton of other projects. From the outside, it seems like those projects are becoming what you do full-time. As your personal projects grow, how do you navigate these different kinds of work?

I appreciate that question. I really am engaging with so many different kinds of projects at all times. It's an interesting thing to work through because, especially where I'm at right now, a lot of the things that I'm doing are highly public before I have an opportunity to see if it'll be a success. For me, what's most important is understanding that within any practice of multi-tasking, I have to have a seat at the table. In saying that, I mean that I've been focused on creating systems that privilege my wellness through all of it.

A lot of the things I'm doing are within the creative field. There aren't a ton of variables, but I've realized that in any kind of pursuit of multi-tasking, or any pursuit of trying to balance many different things that even might be under the same umbrella, you have to first check in with yourself. If there's a key to any of the success, that's been one of them. Understanding that if I'm going to be accountable to other parties, whether it be executing a project or doing an interview, that I have to equally be accountable to myself and whether or not I have the capacity to take on something new. It's really hard to say no. I find that I have to think critically about how much I can take on at any given moment. Sometimes I fail. When that failure happens, it's really important that foundationally I'm in a good place.

Is the Met understanding of your various projects? Or do you have to work constantly, and after hours, to squeeze everything in?

It's a mix. I'm a total workaholic, which is no surprise. But also, one of the things that was really attractive to me about working at the Met, specifically, is that I'm on a staff of people who are experts. I'm on a staff of people who understand how critical the work is that we do here every day. It's also a very project-based environment. I am really cognizant of what I need to get done in a day. Then, also, I can add on these other things. There's a baseline of things I have to do. I have to write the tweets. I have to do the Facebook posts. I have to do these certain things within this scope of my work, but there's this institution-wide understanding that there's always more to be done. It's just a matter of knowing what your foundational things are, making sure those things are done at a level that it's really exemplary, and then you can add on other things.

That's been through a process of gaining trust within the institution, which has been really lovely. When I got here, there was nothing that I could say that was unprecedented. Recently, I went to the White House to do South by South Lawn. Everyone's like "Ok, cool, great, I've been to the White House 10 times this year." I feel lucky to be in an environment where people are at the top of their game. I'm in a community of people who are just killing it constantly. It's just a matter of keeping up and prioritizing the baseline kind of project base thing within each of our roles here at the museum.

Your title at the museum is Social Media Manager. Do you find that, really, you're more of a curator? You're someone who curates art and selects what to highlight and present to people both via social media and on your site, Black Contemporary Art. Do you see any parallels between curating for the web and working in a museum?

It's interesting because there's a lot of conversation within pop culture about what curation really means and who gets to be a curator. I think part of it is kind of a waste of time because I think that the selection process and being a person who is brave enough to share the things that they think are important is one thing. It shouldn't have to deal within the parameters of how one defines a particular term.

Specifically with relationship to the actual definition of curation, I've come to warm up to it as a title that I could consider myself. It comes from the root of care. For me, I think especially about the person existing in social media in this time, and as a black woman, I think about the things I'm sending out in

the world because there are so many silences within the web and in the truth of our particular moment. I try to think about the things that I send out, can create, or can share, and how I could share positive images and also real images and also be able to articulate history in a way that feels inclusive.

That's a lot of what I'm doing at the Met, too. It's an encyclopedic collection. There are so many cultures represented within the things that we have here. I want people to understand that this is a place for them. Even if they don't actually make it through the doors of the museum, that this is an institution that is in service and not necessarily a folder of things. I think a lot of people, when they're conceptualizing museums, they think of it as a space where things are dead.

For me and my peers working in social, it's really about being able to illustrate how interactive museum spaces can be. It's like a double dance of, "Hey, here's this really cool thing going on. The conservators are working on this thing. The curators are planning this major retrospective of this artist who's been under-recognized." Then also that you can come see it. You can take part in this. Whether it's from your desk in Bangladesh, or you're making your way down 5th Avenue and have an hour to kill.

The internet's a useful tool. As a social media expert, has it been helpful for you to get your various projects off the ground? To know the strategies and to know how to be smart about these various social media, Twitter, Instagram, etc. having that kind of knowledge has been helpful for you to further what you're doing?

I feel that very strongly. For me, it's weird because I started my blog in 2011 while in college. It was this very private thing. It felt very private until I graduated and came to New York and already had visibility and a voice in a way that I didn't have time to make a lot of mistakes online. My strategic mind online has been high-functioning for the last five years. When I think about the messages that I'm putting out, the ways in which anything that I'm bouncing is always working backwards from the knowledge that I'm already gained in terms of how the things I build can impact others.

Everything that I'm doing, every place that I choose to show up, every post that I post, every email that I send, I think so much about others because, of course, I think a lot of times people misunderstand social media and especially the influence of their culture as it's very: You publish, you're the leader, and everyone else is the follower. That's just not true. Anyone who's good at social understands that you have to be a follower first. That's kind of been where I'm at.

With the internet, there are more spaces for people to find a voice. Conversely, outside of the internet, it's become trickier for people to have a real voice, in many ways, because of what's happening right now with contemporary politics and society. Like, Black Contemporary Art feels essential to me. And I imagine other people tell you that, too. It's great that these voices are out there and needed, but part of the reason they're needed is because culture's very fucked up in 2016.

I'm thinking a lot about that because I have been having conversations with folks who are like, "What does it mean to work in a predominantly white institution and within a predominantly white world?" I always push back on that because I there's so much more work to be done outside of comparing. I think so much about all the projects that I'm doing are founded in this deep respect for black culture. Every time I learn something, I want to share it. It's my hope that in these times when people are looking for an understanding of why black lives matter, my work can help illustrate those things or help find spaces for beauty that are still filled with revolution. I hope that my work can in some way be a resource to them.

I think that a lot of times, especially to people who are really present in the media, at the end of the day, you're just a medium for what people are trying to say. That's something that's as old as academia, where people are looking to be able to illustrate what their points are. We want to be able to read ourselves into these kinds of spaces and into these worlds that can help us to better understand what we're contesting with.

I think a lot about those things. Thinking about Facebook, where it's a space that you can find out so many things. You can find out about Hurricane Matthew. You can find out about your Aunt's cookout next weekend. When you're adding to this noise, in what ways are you improving upon silence? That's something that I'm always thinking through. I want the information that I'm sharing to be able to do that. To be able to help people in their pursuit of something else.

Especially in the world of art-curators and art professionals are trying to mount exhibitions that can better respond to the time. The discourse has gotten faster, and so I want to be able to share images so that there's so many different people to choose from and you don't have to keep going to these particular narratives. Narratives can continue to grow and evolve, and really keep up with these major cultural shifts. It's an urgency that I think a lot of people feel to be able to cope in feeling some sort of... "Safety" isn't the world, but people are looking for some sort of solace in themselves or what they understand about history and culture. And so I want to be able to provide a resource for those who are able to build exhibitions or start conversations that can help and reach farther than I could ever reach.

There's a power that comes with so many people paying attention. If you have a voice, people are going to listen. Do you feel a responsibility there? You've been saying you're careful about what you put out there, and think about everything to make sure it's contributing and building upon silence and not just making more noise. Do you ever get any anxiety about that? "Is this something I want to share? Is this too much? Is this the right thing?" Realizing that people are paying attention, has that ever become a stressful, more of a burden than kind of an exciting thing?

I am a person who is very, very public about their anxiety. It's something that I felt really strongly about communicating to others because I think especially as a person who is seen, I want people to understand that all of my wellness is worked for. I don't wake up like this. I have a huge support system of people who keep me regular and are an ear when I need one. I would be nothing without the people who are doing that work for me, too. I don't necessarily see it as a burden. I love it. It's also kind of fun too being on social media, specifically because it's quantifiable. It's like, of course, there are the bare numbers of impression or rates. But then I find myself, going to communities and meeting with actual people, and understanding that, yes, it's a high stakes game.

Kimberly Drew recommends:

Chani Nicholas' horoscopes

One Giant Repost

The Well-Read Black Girl newsletter

Bomb Magazine's oral history project

@merriamwebster on Twitter

There's a lot of anxiety that goes into it, but there's so much potential. The potential is a viable gesture. I wouldn't want to change at all. I appreciate the attention that people pay and I try to pay it forward myself with everything that I'm doing.

Right now, it's really exciting for me to meet with students. When I was a student, I needed someone like me. If I can be that for someone else... Yeah, I'm getting anxiety. Yeah, I'm a total workaholic and I don't sleep as much as I probably should, but it's worth it... I wouldn't change it for the world.

Do you find it helpful having a day job, and these other things you do outside of it? Or do you see yourself eventually working into your own project full-time?

You know, I encourage everyone, especially if they're working in the non-profit sector, to have something else outside of work. My something else outside of work just so happens to be why I have my job. That's a very unique marriage. Your work, the work that you do, even if you are lucky enough to be a person with a "career," there has to be something else that's meaningful to you.

I think the private life, and understanding the things that can make you feel whole, and constantly interrogating that... especially if you are younger, it's really important. You're going to wake up one day and be like, "Okay. Did I just waste my life in service of someone else's vision?" It's really important to have your own thing.

With respect to having a day job, for me, I love the institution, which is something that I think people don't understand. Not like there's people waiting for me to talk about it, but I believe so much in the power of power. I'm constantly trying to push myself closer to it just to figure out both how to learn from it, learn the choreography, and then to be able to report back to other communities. It's something that I've been thinking a lot about. A lot of people want this dismantled system, but if you don't actually learn how those systems operate, you're kind of stuck out of luck.

I respect people who are doing grassroots work—so deeply—but there needs to also be someone who can be the interloper. I try to be that person in the way that I can be and be really true and honest to both parties about what that means. I learned so much from institutional structures. I want to be able to take that knowledge to build new structures, ones that are better for traditionally underserved people.

It's great, too, because I have benefits. Just the logistics. If my tooth aches, I can go to the dentist, and that's important to me. Also, I work at the Met, where I work with experts in their field. There's such a wealth of knowledge here. There would be a kind of quiet if I wasn't in this space. I love that part of it, too, not even on the radical tip. I love coming to work everyday. It's a magical place.

Name

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Vocation

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Fact

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