

**Cite this article:** Kelli Morgan, "Ironic Pandemic Relief," in "American Art History in the Time of Crises" Colloquium, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021), doi.org/10.24926/24716839.11924.

## ***Ironic Pandemic Relief***

**Kelli Morgan, Independent Scholar**

The coronavirus pandemic brought the world to an unexpected halt last spring, yet I was surprisingly thankful, as it simultaneously ended my battle in museums with what I believe to be one of the longest and most severe epidemics in modern American history—systemic racism.

Yes, you read that correctly. I consider systemic racism, specifically white supremacy, to be both a public crisis and a mental health crisis of epic proportions. They are running rampant within art museums throughout the United States.

This reality has negatively affected my curatorial work much more than the current pandemic. In fact, the lockdown has offered me much more freedom and flexibility in my work. Once I resigned from my post as associate curator of American art at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields last July, the pandemic pushed both my curatorial and consultant work exclusively online, allowing me the freedom to work with individuals and institutions that are genuinely dedicated to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) work and anti-racist object interpretation. For instance, I currently serve as the project evaluator for Making Place Matter, the inaugural exhibition for the Clay Studio's new site in northeast Philadelphia. Within this project, members of various Black, Latinx, Arab, and LGBTQ communities throughout northeast Philly work in close conjunction with the curator, educator, artists, and the organization director to build the exhibition, name the various studio spaces and galleries, and develop the overall direction of the organization. It is a project that centers and considers people first. In our past two exhibition council meetings, we participated in a collective art activity over Zoom, making pinch pots together with clay and ceramic tools sent out to everyone from the Clay Studio.

Our conversations begin with participants sharing their moments of joy from the week. Since the calls take place over Zoom, we are introduced to each other within our homes and in the midst of our day-to-day home lives. Therefore, we meet each other's spouses and



Fig. 1. Kelli Morgan, Clay Kit from The Clay Studio, March 2020, photograph, Atlanta GA

children and even pets. We see how similarly we live, which allows us to cultivate and nurture bilingual conversations. My participation in this exhibition process brings me so much joy, and the project as a whole is one that I am so honored to be a part of. Working virtually in this way has eliminated the struggles I have often had with museum leaders who in the past have actively undermined or erased my work because it centered social justice, anti-racism, and equity in similar ways, which the institution found discomfiting or disruptive.

With this relief and my work with the Clay Studio, my commitment to critical race art history and interpretation has strengthened, but my interest in working in art museums has drastically waned. After only six years of working as a museum curator, I am exhausted. The extra and all-too-often unpaid work of maneuvering over, under, around, and through the constrictions of institutional racism has taken a toll, which interestingly enough the pandemic has relieved. Specifically, pandemic conditions allow me to be much more selective in the types of projects that I take on and with whom I work. This in turn has made me a lot happier and a lot less stressed in my professional career, but it has also shown me that I can do anti-racist/social justice/equity work in the arts in a variety of ways. It has shown me that I do not have to remain in abusive and toxic work environments.

I think the inept early response to the pandemic and the untimely murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor coalesced and illuminated how pervasive white supremacy is in American culture, and just how imperative systemic racism is to maintaining that reality throughout the United States, even in art museums. But I hope that this reality check, coupled with the possibilities of the virtual space, will bring about some kind of significant anti-racist change within institutions and the field as a whole.