



This talk between Nasheeka Nedsreal [NN] and Yvon Chabrowski [YC] took place in April 2021 and is part of a series of conversation pieces.

YC Nasheeka Nedsreal, you performed for the video sculpture *Level*, one of a series of works that focuses on the screen, or the glass surface of the monitor, as an integral part of the sculpture. The performances in the four video sculptures *Screen*, *Swaying*, *Level* and *Horizontal* make the surface of the screen visible as part of the image itself.

For *Level* I spoke with you about traditional representations of Black female bodies—about media narratives and images deriving from colonialism and Nazism. We decided to counter that repertoire and produce a performative moving image with a new perspective and narrative.

Early this year you told me that the way German society conceptualizes and discusses the representation of Black bodies strikes you as a one-way street—that Black bodies are being talked about again, but conversations with Black people are not being sought. Is that how you experience it? How would you approach this topic?

NN I feel that Black artists are often invited into white spaces to speak on an essential Black identity or experience, when true inclusion has not been addressed in the institutions or their practices. We are invited in without any interest in sustainably transforming institutions towards long-term inclusion and systemic balance. Institutions and individuals working with QTIBPOC¹ artists must be more than “woke-washed”. Fighting for equity and educating others about structural racism and everyday isms should not fall solely on the shoulders of those most affected.

I think if white people want to have a conversation about race they have to do more than ask their one Black friend or colleague to speak about their experiences. A powerful way for white people to disrupt racism is to engage in conversations with their peers and with other white people. It is to engage with their employers, universities, fellowships, etc.

Often times we leave these institutions feeling used, underpaid and having experienced some sort of violence. Too often, I wonder if artists and institutions responding to Black Lives Matter are doing so because they truly are concerned or if they simply recognize the benefits that go along with creating work around this subject. It is important to remember that the communities we are a part of are not monolithic. It is equally important to understand the differences in speaking about racism and speaking about Black identity.

YC Nasheeka, I totally agree with you. It is very important to differentiate between racism and identity. Likewise, it is incumbent upon a white community to reflect on its own racisms, which are determined by racist social continuities. And everyone, regardless of skin color, origin or gender, can reflect on the racism and sexism that have arisen from historical contexts. Racism and sexism have evolved over centuries and it is up to all of us to break down encrusted patriarchal and colonialism-based structures. A white gaze is a concept, a perspective that has grown out of these structures; we need to transform it because we are all part of it.

My work as an artist is based on researching media images. My performative video sculptures start with social processes and media-specific questions. I am interested in which body images are in circulation and define us, and how we relate to society through the representation of our bodies. Visual representations show us what roles bodies are expected to play in a society.

Before inviting you to develop *Level*, I researched narratives, language and bodily representations in German colonialism and in 19th and 20th-century anthropological studies in Berlin. Large ethnographical exhibitions were held starting in the mid-1890s, and a colonial museum was built at Lehrter Stadtbahnhof. In 1927 the “Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenetik”, a center for racial hygiene research, was founded in Berlin-Dahlem. What bothers me is how knowledge was produced in these institutions. For example, how photos of bodies were used to illustrate arguments for an ideology that devalues and excludes bodies. Bodies were photographed in ways that turned them into strangers and objects. A perspective arose that reproduced the already dominant white gaze.

I am struck and shocked by how these iconographies continue to be produced today. Recently I saw an underwear ad on Instagram which reminded me of a racist and sexist ad from 1913 for a colonial ethnological exhibition.

When researching for *Level* I was wondering which Black female bodies shaped my own perceptions. Since I lived in East Germany as a child, it was Angela Yvonne Davis. She was represented as a very strong, militant and iconic Black fighter for human rights. To learn more about the struggle of Black women in America I read her *Woman, Race and Class*, and Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred*. Butler writes “of time warps that bring a modern US Black woman into slavery.”² By the way, *Kindred* was published around the time I was born in the GDR in the late 1970s. Butler’s great voice has been with us for several decades but has not yet received the attention it deserves. *Kindred* makes the racist heritage of US-American society impressively clear, including the contradictions and conflicts arising from slavery that a US American Black woman has to deal with today.

In the video sculpture *Level* beholders see you from an entirely unique perspective.³ A new autonomous iconic image to counter colonial image patterns.

Where did you grow up?

Can you think of current or historical media representations of bodies in which you find yourself reflected?

NN From the start, Black people have been at the center of American pop culture, essentially because white people placed them there through imitation, mockery and fascination. We’ve had to take control of our own culture, recreate ourselves over and over again and still strive to show our complexities while representing one another.

I grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and lived there until moving to New Orleans in 2008. I am lucky enough to have grown up in a strong, close-knit family and in a community that empowered me. I’ve always had fierce, female role models from my mother, sister, grandmothers and aunts to my teachers, doctors or the local candy lady. Having always had the spirit and energy of a mover, I especially looked up to Black women on TV and in the arts. I remember learning a lot about the Harlem Renaissance while growing up which really inspired me to sing, dance, write and find ways to express myself. I especially looked up to dancers like Debbie Allen, Maya Angelou, Katherine Dunham, Judith Jamison and Josephine Baker. These days I’m inspired by writers like Michaela Cole, Issa Rae, Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler. Being in Berlin for 8 years, I’ve also been inspired and empowered by local writers and artists like Emilia Zenzile Roig, Peggy Piesche, Karina Griffith, Grada Kilomba and Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro.

YC I’ve started reading a novel by Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. *The Dragonfly Sea* is a fairy tale with many references to reality. I appreciate how Owuor develops a specifically Kenyan narrative and perspective. As far as a narrative reflecting my own biography goes, I’m very grateful for the conversation about migration analogies in Germany by Jana Hensel and Naika Foroutan in the book *Die Gesellschaft der Anderen*.

When I met you I was impressed that you founded Soul Sisters Berlin, a collective dedicated to connecting Black women. I see the Soul Sisters as a way to gain autonomous visibility and narratives. Recently you have been working on a dance and performance piece that develops your own views of an African American identity. Which forms, perspectives, narratives and voices are important to you? What strategies for developing your own voice have proven useful?

NN In 2014 I helped found Soul Sisters Berlin. I was able to establish and connect to a new strong network of Black women just as I had growing up.

My work as an artist is not limited to the African American experience or identity. Of course it informs me, but living in Berlin, I can see the myriad of intersections between the experiences of Black people across the diaspora. Racism is global.

In my most recent solo performance *New Growth*, I speak about the intricacies, futures and politics of Black hair. Here, I think outside of the white gaze and give room for the re-imaginings of hair for Black people.

In my work, I try to deconstruct dance and its western hierarchies. It’s important to recognize the clear links between racist and colonialist structures and the appropriation of dance from around the world. I grew up learning dance first from my family and community, so I try to integrate social and diasporic dances into my work; especially work in spaces and institutions that were not meant for people like me.

I want to continue to make work that de-centers whiteness. I want to make work that doesn’t rely upon imperialism, white supremacy or hetero-patriarchy to exist. I want to interrogate notions of what dance is/can be; as well as its hierarchies and historical contexts. I want to create spaces that have no boundaries other than my own imagination.

YC With regard to global racism, the European and all other governments that advanced their countries as colonial powers need to take responsibility immediately. For example, compensation demanded by the descendants of the Herero and Nama killed in the genocide under the German colonial administration is long overdue. And all cultural assets and objects in European museums must be returned to their proper owners. We Europeans must now take responsibility for the colonial legacy of our ancestors.