INTERVIEW

Tracey Rose By Jessica Lanay

Art that confronts complacency with ferocity and absurdity.

AUGUST 23, 2023

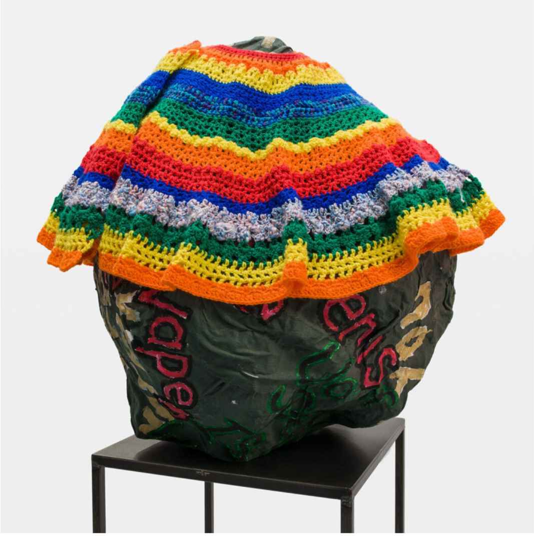
What happens when someone releases a lion in a doorless, windowless room? Sure, as humans we can push others forward to satiate the lion, but eventually it will eat everyone. One of the direst dilemmas of our contemporary moment is accepting the life-shortening material effects of the interconnected maelstrom of racism, anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment, and labor exploitation. As our crisis deepens, hateful ideology only hastens collective destruction. Mobilizing around our common needs—clean water, housing, free and effective healthcare, racial and gender liberation, and access to food—will make the difference. Few artists are capable of conceptualizing works of art that can adequately net our continued challenges together in a direct and unapologetic way; few artists are capable of conceptualizing works that appeal to our human vulnerabilities with sarcasm, sophisticated absurdity, and sincerity. Except for Tracey Rose. Whether performance, photography, media, dance, writing, painting, sketching, Rose's work exhibits a clarity that throughout her career has been more punished than lauded, more intentionally misconstrued than honestly regarded, because it cuts to the marrow of how modern excess destroys empathy and bypasses the opportunity for radical expression and acceptance.

—Jessica Lanay

Jessica Lanay
How do you feel your current survey at the Queens Museum may be curated differently or received differently in the United States than it was at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) in Cape Town when it first opened, especially with the conservative environment right now?

Tracey Rose
I mean, it's a lot tamer. There is a set of work we decided not to include, also because of the context of the museum and the community. We spoke quite in depth about the impact of the work on children because there's such a big presence of kids coming for workshops and visits. Adults don't really talk about it. They make up stupid rules and say stupid shit all the fucking time. (*laughter*) Like, I am a mom, thank you very much.

We're going through this imbalance now. It's so much fucking work. Like, really, people, we don't have another place to go; we've got nowhere to run. You can go and live somewhere else in another part of the planet, and it is the same. The problem is that doing the internal work takes a long time, and you have no real control over the external chaos world because it's a mega system that controls everything and everyone. It's really fucking exhausting.



JL

Are there any pieces that were in the Zeitz MOCAA iteration of your survey that you're frustrated aren't being shown here in the United States?

TR

Frustrated is probably too strong a term. But one is a photograph of Sue Williamson in blackface entitled *PICKAMINNIE*; another one was called *Floating Cloud Reigning Deer*. It's an image of my dad dressed as a Native American chief, holding a wine bottle. Those works were done in 2005 for a series entitled *Plantation Lullabies*. The problem around Williamson's work is that she's never spoken to white people about their whiteness directly. A lot of white South African artists did that in the '90s, especially where they felt they had the right, without self-criticality and criticism, to narrate the stories of Black lives because they had access. I feel it was a genuine sense of wanting to make a difference. But we are always occupying a space of convincing whiteness and doing the work for whiteness instead of whiteness doing the work for itself. I want to have conversations around that. Not to crucify people, but just to go there.

JL

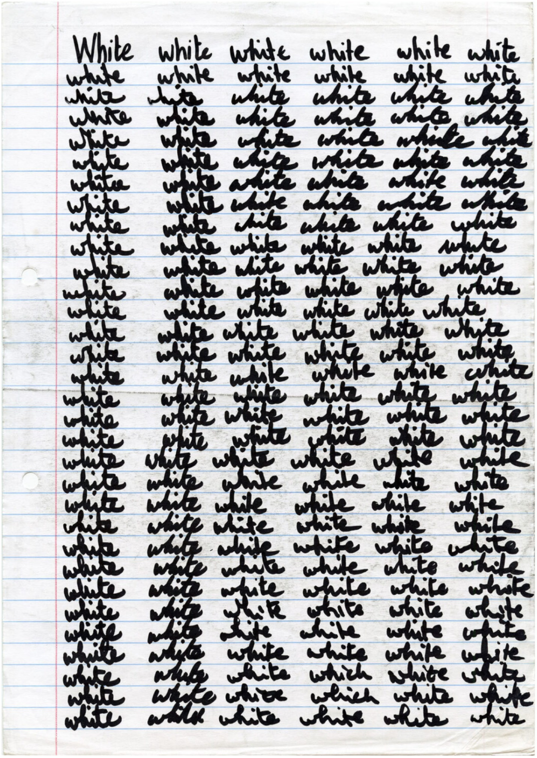
You often talk about shamanism, doing healing work, being full sangoma. One facet of your work is this play with the one-dimensional identities that people hold sacred. How does the transgression of the sacred in your work relate to your practice?

TR

I am still making sense of all my various theories. Nothing's finished;

everything's still in process. But a person has two lineages: you have your grandparents, your human ancestral bloodline; and then you go into another space that includes trees, sand, rocks, mountains, how your spirit evolves through nature. Your spirit should evolve through all these aspects so you can fully appreciate them and be connected to them. But we have mass extinction, and we have overpopulation, which means that spirits are graduating faster—and without going through these different stages—right into the human form.

But when you look closely, everybody's spiritual practices have an innate common denominator. I'm still refining that space of thinking. I want to go into the heart of a situation where no one else will and try to adjust the energy in that space. I use shock value or whatever the tactics are. It's a shakeup. It's a fucking wake-up. But also (*laughter*) there is a necessity to get it out. By any means necessary, right? Because if you don't do it, and if you don't make that statement, you don't create any kind of relevant shift in that space for change to happen.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JL

I want to read you something you said in a performance at the Brooklyn Museum twelve years ago. The excerpt of the performance goes, "Adrian Piper is here. No, she is not. Yes, she is. No, she's dead. She is dead? Yes. Barbara Kruger killed her." Say more. (*laughter*)

TR

That line came to me when I was doing my master's at Goldsmiths, and I got this invitation to be in the *Global Feminisms* exhibition, which was fucking awful. I was really furious. It was basically an all-white curatorial crew. In the script, I said they invited me to validate that they were somehow progressive. I was doing research. I was like, Who is this Elizabeth Sackler woman? Why the fuck is this person important? I couldn't get much information then. I think there were sixty-two artists; honestly, I can't remember the exact number. And it was a really small space in the Brooklyn Museum, and they did things like install several video installation works on a single DVD. That line was the first thing I wrote as the first part of the script while in London, and Christian Haye was my gallerist at the time; I performed those initial lines for him, telling him it was the artist's talk, and he was like, Great! Do it. So I built up the rest of the script around it. I just had that line.

And this is so funny. I saw Barbara Kruger at Performa in 2017. She was in Roselee Goldberg's office. Roselee says, "Tracey come inside"; she's like, "Do you know Barbara Kruger?" I almost shat myself. (*laughter*) I say, "I really love your work"; and Kruger was like, "I'm the one who killed Adrian Piper." And I was like, "Yeah, it's a really great line." And she says, "Anyway, Adrian and I are really good friends." The critique was not against Kruger, but against these people—the curatorial team of the *Global Feminisms* exhibition who have a platform but are controlling and disrespectful toward artists. That's the bottom-line; it's fucking disrespectful.

JL

In one interview you say, but don't elaborate on, "Tracey Rose is a construct." And I found that to be interesting, and I also am thinking about your interest in Marcel Duchamp's work and wondering if they are connected.

TR

It's not a Duchampian construct; it's a different one. It's based on social survival in a particular way within our context. Duchamp kept the indulgence of being a white man with his practice and being able to play in that way. I don't feel like I have the luxury of having that degree of indulgence because everything is loaded with the social politics of race, culture, and all that shit. Part of the survival tactic for my work was that it had to fulfill these criteria that people who thought themselves as critics put onto art. Art is not about you. The artist universe is supposed to speak beyond these parameters. Having a persona within art was a coping mechanism. Also, I had multiple breakdowns: crazy, hungry, starving; all the clichés of being an artist and not fully understanding these practices. Especially in this turn-of-the-century kind of space where nobody before had ever practiced art in this manner. And we were globe-trotting, exhibiting, and beating down museum walls. Most of the time I've never been compensated, whether it was artist's fees or just for basic survival. There's also an element of trauma and horror from the disrespect that comes with being treated in a particular way. It was useful to have a persona that can survive that.

THE RAPIST IS DEAD LONG LIVE THE RAPIST

JL
What does art do, and what does it not do?

TR
We need to go back to the cave so we can start answering those questions because we forgot why it is we're doing what we're doing. In the cave we were painting on the walls, singing, and dancing with no museums, no record deals, no theaters, none of this stuff. Why would we do that? Why were we there? A friend told me that the images are made from menstrual blood; another friend in archaeology said it was deer blood; then I learned that other human blood was a possibility. I think it is because this stuff is magical, the most magical. Art is another way to get everyone involved. It's amazing. I have been thinking about this new piece called *Parallel Universe: A Celestial Circus*, which is a sci-fi musical, because everyone is happy in a musical. And musicians will be employed and choreographers. And everyone involved in the work gets shares, like a socialist franchise. And it is asking, What alternative narratives could there be? A friend of mine and I were talking during lockdown about the Trump drone strike in Iraq and various other crises, and she told me the "Intergalactic Council" got together and decided Earth was not going to go to war again. I realized the truth: Mars is not an option; we do not have anywhere else to go. You think you are going to be able to live in a bunker forever? We will all have to come outside eventually.

Tracey Rose: Shooting Down Babylon *is on view at the Queens Museum in New York City until September 10.*

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Jessica Lanay is an art writer, poet, librettist, and short fiction writer. She is a frequent contributor to BOMB, where she has interviewed artists such as Howardena Pindell, El Anatsui, Shikeith, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and others. Her debut poetry collection, *am●phib●ian*, won the 2020 Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Prize from Broadside Lotus Press. Lanay is the co-writer of the catalogue for the Andy Warhol Museum's exhibition *Fantasy America*. She is also the current Literary Curator for the August Wilson African American Cultural Center and the host of the digital program *LIT Friday,* where she has interviewed artists such as Dr. Fahamou Pecou, Vanessa German, and others. For more information visit lanay.me.

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