

CRACKING THE LENS: DEFINING YOUR OWN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

My thesis discusses scopophilia and the white gaze projected on to African-Americans, their relation to social constructs, and how they structure the mask that African –Americans wear to present themselves to the world. I will address how this shaping contributes to how African-Americans are treated within that social construction. I intend to destroy the socially acceptable “male gaze” and white gaze” and examine ways in which one can reject that gaze and reclaim power that has been lost through misrepresentation. Using motion sensors, manipulated audio, a surveillance camera, thermochromic paper, microcontrollers, and acoustic sheets/blankets; I construct an interactive installation that creates the illusion of the viewer giving up a small part of themselves (data) to see what sort of information will be generated from them.

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Introduction

Art has been a part of my life since the first PC virus (Trojan) was distributed unknowingly among people who shared through a certain program that carried it on floppy disks.

"Crys have you lost your mind? What are you doing?"

I glare back with a look of confusion and slight annoyance. Annoyed not at the fact that my mother was yelling at me but because she was interrupting the great moment my 8 year old self was having.

"Have your ears ceased to function; what is this?"

"I'm fixing it..." I replied.

I had completely taken apart the radio she kept in her bedroom.

"Crys, it wasn't broken."

"But it didn't come on anymore!"

"The batteries died," she stared blankly.

I am compelled to figure out how things function, the need to tinker, and disassemble/break things. My mother has always expressed the importance of education and its power and the power of self-defined expression. She would make little note cards with her "words of the day" and encouraging messages and place them in my lunch box. This was done so that I could practice the word while at school and pronounce it later for her when I returned home. As I got older she would ask what these words meant and have me use them in context to prove to her I understood their meaning. She always provided positive reinforcement while teaching as well as constructive criticism in the areas I was lacking.

My mother put her schooling on hold when she had me but continued (age 9) once I was old enough to do things on my own without much guidance. She received her Bachelors of

Finance from Loyola University when she turned 40 years of age. I always admired my mother for this; she never let life stop her from doing what *she* wanted. No matter what life threw at her she managed to work full-time, care for a child, a home, and still obtain her degree. She always told me that, "You are never too old or too young to learn, so never stop."

I was given an infinite amount of freedom to explore my interests. If I wanted to learn something like calligraphy, tap dancing, how to properly construct bird houses, etc., she would find a school or facility that taught these things. She never questioned why I wanted to do something only "when" and "how often." She would often tell me, "You will not know what you like until you experiment and learn how to do different things. You must find a way that best helps you define yourself." She refused to let me believe it was okay to go through life not being able to comprehend the basics of language and to communicate properly as well as express myself how I wanted through these and other outlets.

Since moving to Philadelphia from Chicago, for the UArts Low-Residency Studio Art Program, I have been figuring out where to place myself in art history, who were my influences, and how to properly define my work.

David Dempewolf, a UArts instructor, said, "The more you understand how you feel and how your work unravels in the mind of others the more control you have over your work." My earlier work seemed to be read by the viewer quickly. The imagery I used was sourced from the internet, magazines, or newspapers. The pieces themselves were crafted well but the content was blatant and did not allow the viewers mind to linger to enough to personally interpret what they were seeing. I want to change this.

In *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthe, he discusses studium and punctum as the two crucial aspects in an image (specifically a photographic one). Barthe describes studium as a “kind of education that allows discovery of the operator” (Barthe 28). Studium creates the curiosity in what the viewer is seeing. What the artist is trying to communicate is seen, but the viewer has to interpret the image to figure out the artist’s intent. He defines punctum as “the accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (Barthe 27). Even though punctum breaks/punctures the studium it also co-exist with it. Punctum is the sporadic aspect that attracts the viewer to a piece of work. It is the point of impact that creates meaning for the viewer but was not necessarily a part of the original meaning by the artist. Punctum retains an uncharacteristic value.

Barthe influences my focus on perception; the idea of putting the viewer in the past/future that forces them to confront the present. He says, “What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance” (Barthe 51). Being blatant with the intent of my work was not effective in starting a conversation with my audience. It came across as just something being created for shock value. People would often become defensive and felt as though I was being accusatory.

I wanted to move away from creating work that was read too quickly but did not want to create something that didn’t provide enough information. I wanted to be confrontational with my work not offensive. I began focusing on the nuances between the two extremes. I figured out the best way to convey a message through imagery that was *not* identifiable or symbolic was to create my own images.

I use my body images (body prints), sourced images from my surveillance and captured footage, and mixing materials/media. Using my new trove of source material, I am able to create

work that evokes an uncomfortable/uneasy feeling. The feeling is created because the viewer is not immediately aware of what they are viewing and the intent of the work is slowly revealed. I do not allow the viewer to hastily feel an emotion and move on. I want to force them to stew in their evolving emotions created from viewing my work and converse with that emotional state.

Artistic Influences

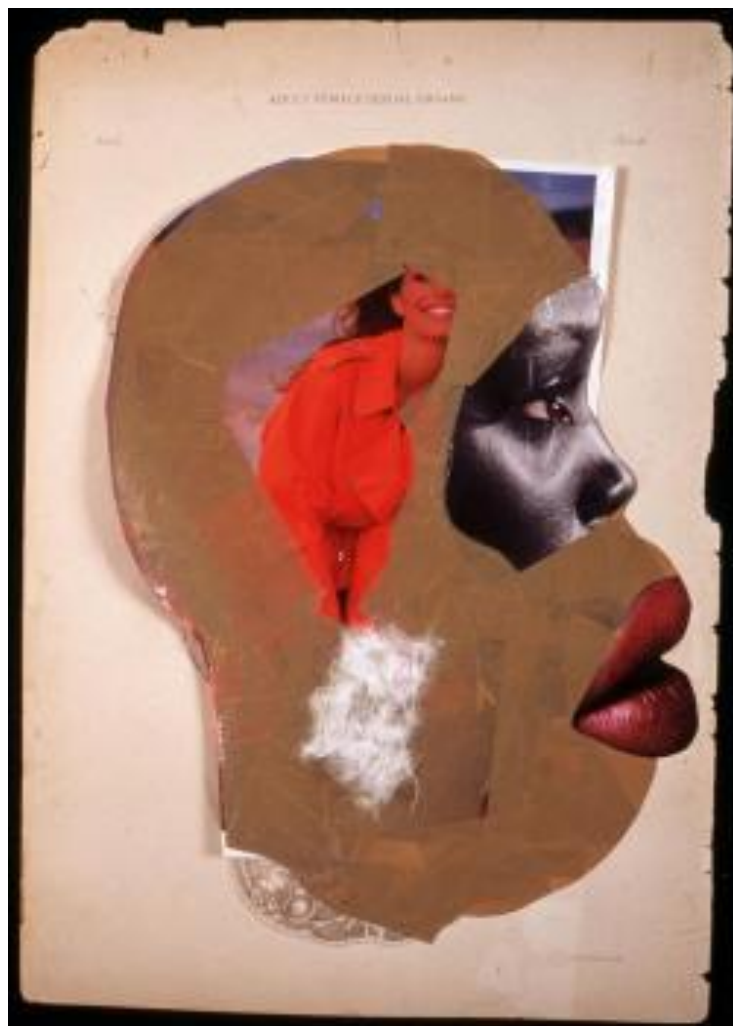


Figure 1. *Adult Female Sexual Organs*

There are five artist that have heavily influenced my practice. Wangechi Mutu, David Hammons, Shinique Smith, Jennie C. Jones, and Robert Rauschenburg.

Mutu's work often explores how the gaze on the female body, by males, marks and pierces. I was drawn to her piece *Adult Female Sexual Organs* (Figure 1) because she uses packing tape, fur, and collaged images from magazines that cover western lifestyles on medical illustration paper to examine the ideas of self (internal/external). The subject is a woman of African descent whose thoughts appear to be about something she is not – a white woman. The packing tape acts as bandages as well as a mask that covers all of the other images that define her face.



Figure 2. *Death by America*

Hammons work reflects the civil rights/black power movements in the States. He does not have one signature style. As I began to transition from creating only paintings and to try other mediums and modes of creation I was particularly influenced by Hammons' early work using body prints because he used his actual body as tool for creating a mark as opposed to a traditional tool (brush, pencil, pen, etc.). In a 1986 interview he says, "Let me be the bad guy...or attempt to be a bad guy, or play with the bad area and see what happens" (Krasinski). This sentiment is what helped my work progress. It inspired me to not worry about hurting the viewer's feelings or worry about how they may perceive my work. Exploring some of the tools Hammons used to create his body prints, I created *Death by America* (Figure 2).

Smith's work captures the power of human resilience and expression through the use of paint and textile fashioned into sculptures that mimic large dimensional paintings. In Figure 3, I tried to move beyond staying within the traditional confines of fine art (the rectangular plane). I used my body to make all the marks on the drywall surface while attempting to create something that had dimension. While I did extend the image beyond the plane I want to push it further.



Figure 3. *Untitled A*

Jones, is a conceptual artist whose work comprises of an array of media (painting, drawing, sculpture, and sound). “By manipulating and layering bits of old recordings - creating what she calls digital audio collage - she could fill a space without taking up much space at all, save for speakers” (Glentzer). Inspired by Jones’ use of found audio to create new and unique recordings, I was encouraged to figure out a way to distinctly create my own audio “painting.”

Rauschenburg was quoted as saying that he wanted to work “in the gap between art and life,” and he questioned those distinctions in his work. This notion made me return to Barthe’s sentiment mentioned earlier of putting the viewer in a position of straddling the past and future to confront the present. I continued to explore the gradations between the extremes that my work focuses on.

Scopophilia

Painting will always be what I love to do; it is not the *only* thing I had to do. Tinkering with electronics, video/audio editing, fixing and building things is something I enjoyed doing as a hobby. As I started to incorporate these new disciplines into my art a whole new realm opened up for me. I am more able to use my own source material to create my work instead of using visual information sourced from the internet, magazines, newspapers, etc. These tools and techniques help me to create a visual language that I author and control.

I began researching various things and artists that would aide in this marriage of technology and art; like technology education for women, art and in relation to electronics, micro sampling, sound dissonance, types of domestic electronics, technology and security, D-I-Y technology, surveillance and its uses, rhythm science, sonic reverberations, Stephen Vitiello (visual/sound artist), and Kevin Beasley (sound/sculpture artist) to name a few.

My research led me down the path of exploring the implications of being surveilled and/or watched (knowingly/unknowingly). How that surveillance jeopardizes our notions of

safety and privacy, as well as, how the surveilled/watched body (as an object) is altered and affected in that context. Surveillance is a big part of our existence and even bigger part of mine.

For safety reasons, I installed my own multiple camera surveillance system that I can operate and view remotely from my phone or computer. I installed it because I am a woman that lives alone and have had previous encounters with men who have violated my personal space/home. I chose to explore the personal impact of constantly being watched/recorded. I began viewing my surveillance footage at the end of each week. As I began watching myself I felt unnerved. I felt like a stranger watching someone else's private moments, like a voyeur, even though it was me.

After regularly reviewing my footage I started to feel uncomfortable in my own intimate space, my apartment. Before my cameras were just a part of the décor of my apartment. Now, I am constantly aware of them. I lost some of the control I once felt I had over my self-proclaimed intimate space. Internal questions arose: Whose gaze am I *really* feeling when am I uncomfortable because of the surveillance; is it mine or the one that has been force fed to me masking itself as my own?

Being surveilled/gazed upon in a space personally defined as intimate, even non-intimate alters how we view/look at/see ourselves and others. That invasion can be jarring and feel violent. Surveillance alters/jars our perception of ourselves and how we internalize that actual image of ourselves. Surveillance is an essential part of the modern western culture. Surveillance is readily accepted as something that helps prevent, reduce, and solve crime. "As the years go by, more and more cameras are popping up in cities, in neighborhoods, and along highways. This is another measure that we're told has been implemented for our safety, but we don't know if they're actually effective to that end," (Coats). The balance of power between the watcher (government,

employer, the state, etc.,) and the surveilled is unbalanced; power is transferred from the observed to the watcher. This form of incessant surveillance is another form of domination/control. As an African-American the gaze is somewhat different for me. That surveilled gaze represents the white gaze for me. Instead of the physical it is automated and electronically powered.

Laura Mulvey suggests that there is pleasure derived in the act of gazing and the act of being gazed upon. The concept of this pleasure is known as scopophilia. Her interpretations of the pleasure of looking come from Sigmund Freud. Freud associates scopophilia “with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 17). Freud equates this to sexual dominance. The act of watching someone and turning them into an object is to have a certain mastery over them.

The Male Gaze

Some years ago, I was walking to the store when a man almost ran me over with his car, trying to get my attention. It is unbelievable how many times I walk out the house, down the street, in the store, etc., and receive a “psst psst, ay shawty, psst psst, ay damn lil mama,” “What’s your name, can I have your number, can I take you out, oh wee you thick shawty, look at that ass. You know what I could do with an ass like that?” I have been followed and inappropriately grabbed by random men. In these situations, my responses vary, but all boil down to a “Hey, f*ck you!” Some men will simply shrug it off and go about their business but, the majority seem to feel slighted because I did not acknowledge them. Now, I’m a “bitch”, “tease”, “conceited”, “a hoe,” etc. But those same men, prior to their ego being bruised, want my

number and practically try to have intercourse with me on the spot. Why do they feel I am obligated to respond to them; obligated to feel exalted by their gaze?

Mulvey created the term *male gaze*. She created the concept in her essay from 1975 titled, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” She states that,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 19)

The male is the looker and the woman is the object that is seen. In this essay she also discusses how film, which is a system of depiction, plays a major role in the way we see and reinforce the acceptance of the male gaze. Images of the passive female induces both pleasure and anxiety in the male gazer (Mulvey 18).

What is the white gaze and its effects?

Alexander G. Weheliye states, that the gaze of the white subject proclaims the black subject as inferior, “which, in turn, bars the black subject from seeing him/herself without the internalization of the white gaze (42). I have been attempting to break down and critique the effects of the *white gaze*. As an African-American woman, I often experience my body indirectly

through images that have been created by others. Franz Fanon, an influential writer and psychoanalyst states, “I existed triply; I occupied space” (Pile 252). I struggle to create terms through which I can define myself and my relationship to society as well as have my self-defined terms recognized. With that loss of power a sense of invisibility is created. When I define my own existence I reclaim that power. A feeling of shame is experienced when subjected to the *white gaze*. In this sense, “shame is a psychological and physical effect of repeated acts of misrecognition” (Harris-Perry 107).

As an African-American, that shame felt when subjected to this gaze, “transforms our identity. We experience ourselves as being small and worthless and as being exposed” (Lindsay-Hartz 696). I have realized that sense of shame that is felt is not that of the black body but is a regurgitation of the shame projected onto it by the gazer. That projection creates a double awareness of being made a “black body” by the subject of the gaze as well as of the gazer that captures their reaction to that same body.

Jean-Paul Sartre analyzed and theorized about the gaze. He basically explains that one sees the “other” as a subject by being made an object through the other’s gaze at oneself. In becoming an object, one loses touch with the self-government of one’s existence. So by Sartre’s theory, a person of color questions subjectivity through the white gaze and the effects on them (which is the relation of putting oneself in an object position) but often there is no mutuality in that gaze. Sartre believed that a person could make the other an object for themselves by looking back at the other. Franz Fanon counters that notion that racism at its core is the prevention of such a reciprocated gaze, because it strips a person of color of their subjectivity beforehand. The

black body is *always* only that, for white consumption and thus no equalization procedures available to it.

In America, Blackness is stained with shame. This collective “racial shaming” imbues a sense of distortion. The white gaze is hegemonic and generally substantiated in material relations of white power. It was seen as insolence “for a black person to violate the white gaze by looking directly into the eyes of someone who was white” (Yancy). Black bodies continue to be reduced to their surface and to typecasts that are inhibiting and untrue, that often compel those bodies to navigate through social spaces in ways that put white people at ease. We move in ways to help us survive the gaze. Brent Staples states, “I began to take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care...I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms...and on late-evening constitutionals...I employ what has been proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistles melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi” (Staples 2).

Being black in an anti-black America means constantly being subjected to the gaze of whiteness and under surveillance. We live in a space of social control and body policing. “I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me” (Ellison). In 2012, in Florida, Trayvon Martin, an African –American teen was invisible to a neighborhood watch member George Zimmerman. His humanity was invisible. Zimmerman created a narrative in his head to justify his biased gaze upon Trayvon. Trayvon was a child on his way home from the store after buying some skittles candy and an ice tea. Because he was black, his humanity and youthfulness was automatically criminalized. George Zimmerman made a non-emergency call to the police, a call that was already racially assaultive in its dialogue. He described Trayvon as “a real suspicious guy”, that “he looked like he was up to no good,” and that “he looks black.” Zimmerman was the *gazer*. He

was in no real danger. It was Trayvon, the object/subject of Zimmerman's suspicious gaze that was in the real danger. Zimmerman's danger was perceived while Trayvon's was very real. Zimmerman shot Trayvon in "self-defense," but before Trayvon's actual death, he was made socially dead under Zimmerman's gaze. His warped gaze of whiteness and fear of black bodies endorsed his hostility. Trayvon Martin was walking while black and murdered by George Zimmerman for it. Being black in an anti-black America means constantly being subjected to the gaze of whiteness and under surveillance. We live in a space of social control and body policing. "I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison).

As an African-American, one begins to believe that the shame felt is justified or blameless. But that is incorrect. Being indoctrinated or told something constantly by so many or treated a certain way on a daily basis, one starts to believe the false information. Our very existence in America has been a problem. "The social and political realities of American racial inequality make black people themselves into a constant problem that has to be observed, analyzed, and solved" (Harris-Perry 110). As an African-American we represent the deep racial scars/shame of America. We wear that guilt and shame of America as a mask every day. This mask starts to become a part of our being and in turn we begin to wear that mask as if were our own and something we were forced to parade around in. In a way, by doing this, we help strengthen the notions associated with why the shameful gaze is projected onto us. We strengthen the adhesion of that mask by allowing it (unknowingly) to define who we are/construct our identities.

George Yancy is a Professor of Philosophy who is "interested in the formation of African-American philosophical thought as articulated within the social context and historical space of anti-Black racism, African-American agency, and identity formation" (Duquesne

University). He understands identity as an existential blueprint formed by history and society and that race, even though it is a social construct, has an effect on one's lived experiences. One cannot ignore the forming control race has over our own identities. Yancy asserts that whiteness is the unconfined norm that has already made the Black body into a threat. He states, "Whiteness is not a metaphysical substantive. Rather whiteness is a relationally lived phenomenon" (Yancy 34).

Because of this perception projected through racialized lenses, bigoted acts can be viewed as permissible. American slavery was used as a way to keep black people in a fatuous state as well as a way of physically and monetarily controlling our body. The fear of the black body, publicized for generations as something to be frightened of, unconsciously comes prior to contact, creating an exaggerated sense of defense before anything ever occurs. Judith Baker explains in her chapter *Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia* that, when in contact with the black body, white fear will not come to an end until the perceived threat (black body) ceases to be existent.

Internalized Racism

I attended a predominately Caucasian grammar school, Alexander Graham Elementary. While in the second grade, my teacher, Ms. Claybaugh, chose me to read aloud to the class. When I finished a fellow classmate of mine leaned over and whispered, "Ugh, why do you sound like a white girl?" That was the first time I had been asked that question. That was also the first time I started to question myself. When she asked me that question I thought I was doing something wrong. I was extremely bothered, because clearly I was not trying to "sound" like anyone else, but myself. I was still upset when I returned home that evening. I asked, "Mom, do I

sound like a white girl?" "What does a white girl sound like, Crystal?" she asked. "I guess like me?" I stated and questioned. She inquired why I asked that question. I informed her of the girl in class who whispered the question to me after reading aloud. I told her how my classmate seemed really annoyed that I sounded like a "white girl." She told me I sounded like Crystal and no one else. She told me that was the girls uneducated way of saying that I spoke clearly and enunciated my words. She explained that some people get upset when "black children, do not fit the common mold or stereotype of what it means to be and act black." I was still bothered because I did not want people to think I "acted white" or did anything like a "white person."

As I progressed later in life, I was constantly inundated with teasing and questions regarding the way I spoke. I received the bulk of my teasing in grammar school. There is when I started to feel bad for being "smart." I wanted to be liked by my peers and accepted. I started slacking when it came to school work because I did not want to be teased and labeled, a "nerd" or "the smart girl," because even though being intelligent was a good thing, it was not viewed that way. Klotman says, "whether one learns acceptability from the formal educational experience or from cultural symbols, the effect is the same: self-hatred" (124).

Although I did not like being labeled the "smart girl" I started to realize that I also did not like my grades lower than what I knew I was capable of. At that moment I had an internal battle ensuing. To be labeled and teased because of my ability to do well in school or to be that "smart girl" and excel and make myself as well as my mother proud of my efforts. I chose the latter, to ignore what others thought about my intelligence. I would be that "smart girl" and be proud of it.

The strength to choose myself and education over peer opinion comes from the concept my mother instilled in me with the importance of an education and being proud of who you are no matter what. Because of my negative experiences as a child regarding education in my

community, I started to wonder what the big deal was. I recall one of my grammar school (second grade) teachers, Ms. Travis, who was an African-American, always treated me different than other students. I was one of two African-American children in her class. Whenever I would raise my hand to answer or ask a question, I was silenced and told not to be such a "smarty pants." I was graded lower on my assignments when it was clear I was one of the few who comprehended what was being taught. She constantly screamed at me and had me sit in the closet for the majority of my classes. I finally told my mother. I could not understand why I was being treated this way. I was a well-mannered child who enjoyed going to school. Ms. Travis would coddle and cater to other students (Caucasian) who did not do as well and clearly did not care about listening to her or learning anything. I was extremely bored and felt unchallenged in this classroom. My mother requested a meeting with the principal of the school, Mr. Clair. She informed him about my treatment in class as well as the grades I was receiving from this teacher. I was pulled from the classroom and put in a second grade class that was considered "advanced" for children of my age.

Here, I felt like I was challenged and encouraged to excel. My teacher was a Caucasian female. I was the only African-American in this class. Even though the teacher for this class, Ms. Claybaugh, really encouraged me she still had biases. She would say things like, "You are very smart for someone of your background," "I am surprised you know how to do that," or a comment that really hurt my feelings, "Most kids from your hood, don't know that." With these statements, I started to wonder if she was really trying to push me towards excelling or trying to see how much could she throw at me until I failed.

The school was located in an area called, "Bridgeport." Bridgeport is an area in Chicago, known for its racial wars, tension and attacks. I know for a fact that the people in this area were

racist. I was beat up in the area visiting a friend, by some of the very kids I went to grammar school with. People came out onto their porches to watch but not help. When the police did arrive, I was told by the officer, "You know better than to be in this neighborhood. This is what happens when you people go where you're not supposed to be." I started to think that Ms. Claybaugh did not like me because she held the same biases towards me as the people in the neighborhood did. I went from a care-free child excited to learn and discuss what I learned to an angry student who felt like nothing I did would ever be good enough simply because of the color of my skin.

I gathered that African-American children used the term "acting white" not because they actually believe I was trying to be something I was not; but used to as a way of coping with a sense of self-hatred. They did not see the value in intelligence or striving to be your authentic self. Since, Caucasian students are usually seen as smart or the people to emulate, because they define intelligence, when an African-American is considered smart they are sometimes equated with trying to be "white" by cultural peers. Harpalani explains that,

"If Black youth perceive a classroom, school, or any other setting as a context where they are devalued, they may cope reactively by defining the expectations of this context where they are devalued, they may cope reactively by defining the expectations of this context as 'acting white,' particularly as they explore their own racial identities...this is reflective of identity development processes rather than cultural devaluation of education...proactive Afrocentrism, Black youth do well academically and socially and also embrace their own heritage...Accusations of 'acting white' are manifestations of reactive Afrocentric identity, not fundamental component of Black culture. The 'acting white' phenomena, as it

occurs are not responsible for Black academic achievement, nor is it reflective of a broad cultural frame of reference. It is simply possible coping responses to feelings of devaluation that Black youth encounter,” (3).

Defying the Gaze

As I mentioned previously power is claimed or reclaimed when one can define their own existence and/or project their view of themselves through their own lens. “To be white in America is to be always already implicated in structures of power” (Yancy 235). Tackling such a heavy and emotional subject has been therapeutic and strengthening. My goal is to challenge/return the gaze and reevaluate my identity. There are ways as blacks that we have resisted oppressive normative of whiteness. Yancy argues that “Black resistance, as a mode of decoding, is simultaneously a process of recoding Black embodies existence through processes of opposition and affirmation” (112). He believes it is unwise to view these actions of self-control as distinct from each other. Rather black resistance is *also* an act of affirmation that refuses to allow the black identity to be seen solely through the white gaze. “To recognize the historical reality of Black resistance is to affirm dynamic forms of Black embodiment that belie the historical legacy of white lies and the Black imago in the white imaginary” (Yancy 133).

Contrary to Mulvey, who focused on the way in which women were viewed, under the white male gaze; social activist and author, bell hooks scrutinizes how we regard ourselves and the power we have to reject the gaze (oppositional gaze). hooks’ notion of opposing the gaze gives black women the ability to scrutinize and contest the white male gaze; ideas of racial supremacy and gender disparity imposed by that same gaze. She says, “That all attempts to

repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze" (hooks 116). Power is asserted by our contact with other black women who we share a "mirrored recognition." That recognition enables us to define our own realities absent from the realities/identities usually imposed on our bodies. How we define ourselves is important not how others will see us.

Current & Thesis Work

With my current work and research, I have been attempting to dismantle the effects of the *white gaze*, confronting the blurring/masking/erasure of identities and how we create false narratives of ourselves due to internalization of how someone else defines us.

One aspect that I have chosen to include in my work is sonic/audio elements. I choose sound because I want to be able to "paint" an image with audio by creating the same visceral reaction one might experience with visual stimulation. I use Audacity, an audio editing software, to extract raw data from a visual image and re-encode it as an audio file. I then use Adobe Premiere, a video and audio editing program to layer it with sourced media (audio or visual).

The type (i.e., .psd, .jpg, tiff, .png, etc.) of file that I extract raw data from is important. Each file saves data differently, which in turn creates an assortment of unique sounds to select from. Next, I narrow down what sort of sourced media I will incorporate. Once, the necessary audio has been extracted I begin to carefully layer and splice sounds together to create an auditory narrative. The imagery I used for my work "Scopic Interactions" was a self-portrait that was manipulated in Photoshop. There are five total images on five 12x12 acrylic boxes. The 1st box has a complete image the 5th box has only an eye remaining.

The images are arranged from right to left. This was purposefully done to challenge the viewers' instinct to read the imagery left to right (as English speakers we are conditioned to read and compute things left to right). I created five acrylic boxes containing various circuit boards/electronic components, and motion sensors that triggered audio. The audio (triggered by a motion sensor as someone passes in front of it) that comes from each box is created by extracting the raw data from the actual images which appear to be screen printed onto each box translated into a sound.

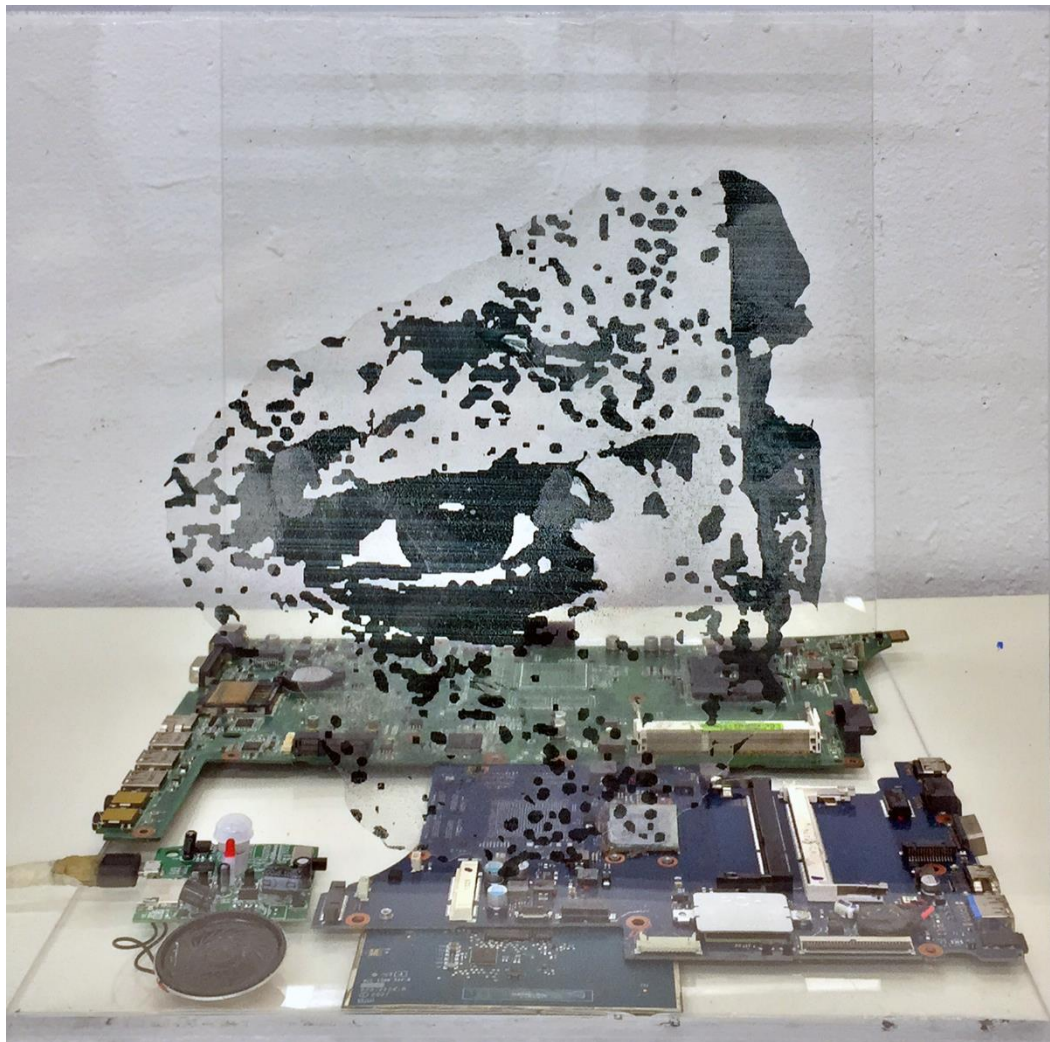


Figure 4. *Scopic Interactions 5, detail*

Each progressive image loses more detail to correlate to the extraction of each image's raw data and conversion into audio. As the details in the visuals dissipates so does its auditory equivalent. The boxes represent the notion of remaining transparent/stripping away layers of oneself to reveal what lies behind the mask we wear & interchange on a daily basis. They also act as a vessel for my body through which I try to force the viewer to come face-to-face with me (my portrait) and look through/past to see what makes the box "function." I use the raw data, images, sensors, and microcontrollers to address certain aspects of the African-American loss of identity. Specifically, how we are disproportionately stripped of our lives and our consciousness and fed into a system transforms us into commodities/raw data.

I had an original idea during the summer 2016 semester to turn a small space into an interactive sound proof room. Upon entering the room, the viewer would choose one of three cards (3 varying colors) that contained a barcode and something that "recorded" (thermochromic paper) the card holder's thumb print. After choosing a card, the viewer would go to the corresponding wall that matched their card. They would then scan the card. Upon scanning the card the results would prompt an audio response. Each card would initiate a different auditory experience and depending on how many people were viewing the installation at one time it would create a new sound from the combination of all three scanners being used. The sound filling the room is the audio created from negative words associated with black people, white people, and others (Asian, Latino, etc.) The viewer may select a card that may or may not apply to them. The room would have hidden pinhole cameras that recorded the viewer's reaction to the audio heard.

However, I did not have the space, time, or funds to bring that idea to fruition. I modified it for a smaller space and smaller budget. I am constructing a smaller enclosure using a

reinforced D-shaped wall rod (54"x27") and two soundproofing sheets (95"x54"). Upon entering the enclosure there will be three boxes that the viewer interacts with by inserting their corresponding card (like a chip card reader) into a small slit on each mounted box, This action that trips the sensors inside and triggers the audio associated with their card of choice. The audience is not initially aware of what their picking up of the card (Figure 4) symbolizes and "recording" of their thumb print means. The enclosure will contain a small surveillance camera so the viewer will believe they are being surveilled while inside. I am creating an interactive installation that initiates the illusion of the viewer (willingly) giving up (input) a small part of themselves (data) to see what sort of information is generated by their "choice" (in choosing one of three cards).



Figure 5. *Construction Card: Other*

Conclusion

“There’s something about the body that confines us, that disables us, and that prevents us from being immaterial, being invisible, being all of these things that maybe you want to be, because maybe you don’t want to stand out. I don’t stand out in Kenya. I’m just another Kenyan woman. But here, depending on where I am, I’m that girl, that Kenyan, black...whatever. So I realized what this body meant [it] was so important.” (Willis BOMB Magazine)

I want to be able to start conversations with the viewers of my work that makes them question or contemplate things they never would have previously due to lack of knowledge, denial, misinformation, etc.

I do feel there is a danger of alienation when communicating with and portraying a particular social group. As an African-American, whose history and ancestry has been defined and affected by others, I feel the possible alienation is worth the risk and not something I ever plan on worrying about. Because I choose to engage with a specific social group, my work will possibly alienate others who may not be able to identify with my point-of-view. Adam Gopnik states, “An elephant, lost in the city, does not trumpet with rage but rides a department-store elevator up and down, until gently discouraged by the elevator boy.” This statement is similar to an experience of W.E.B. Dubois, when he was made aware that he was “different” by a school girl who glanced at him and refused to exchange visiting-cards due to his race. Because of my identification, I may be categorized as a “black” artist and not just an artist. I will be defined first by race and not by the work I produce. This is one of the many lenses in which I will be viewed.

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Biography

C.A.Nelson (b. 1984, Chicago, IL), lives and works in Philadelphia, PA. She creates visual and interactive installations that take a critical view of cultural, social, and political issues. In 2012, she had multiple pieces published in the “Seeds Literary Art Journal.” C.A.Nelson is one of four founding members of a women of color artist collective T.I.T.S (Transcending Individual Thoughts of Self). She received a BA in Studio Art from Northeastern Illinois University and is a recent graduate from The University of the Arts’ Low Residency MFA Program in Philadelphia.

Artist Statement

As an African-American woman, I often experience my body indirectly through images that have been created by others. I struggle to create terms through which I can define myself and my relationship to society as well as have my self-defined terms recognized. With that loss of power a sense of invisibility is created. When I define my own existence I reclaim that power.

Using motion sensors, manipulated audio, a surveillance camera, thermochromic paper/pigment, microcontrollers, D-shaped wall rods, and acoustic sound absorption sheets/blankets; I am creating an interactive installation that initiates the illusion of the viewer giving up a small part of themselves (data) to see what sort of information is generated by their “choice.” To create sonic pieces I translate images to audio form by extracting the raw data from them to create a new translation of the original “image.”

In my work I explore the idea of masking oneself and double identities. As well as usage of our bodies as data in systems that manipulate, control and commodify that data. I reproduce familiar visual symbols arranging them into new conceptually layered pieces that bolster my aim of evoking strong, uncomfortable emotions

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Education

- 2016 MFA (in Studio Art, The University of the Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 2013 BFA in Studio Art, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL
- 2002 Diploma, Orchestra, Curie Metropolitan IB World & Performance Arts High School, Chicago, IL

Grants/Awards

- 2016 Graduate Merit Scholarship
- 2015 Graduate Grant
- 2014 Graduate Grant

Solo Exhibition

- 2013 *Despondency*, Salme Harju Steinburg Fine Arts Center, Chicago, IL

Group Exhibition

- 2016 MFA Studio Art 2016 Thesis Exhibition, Arronson Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2016 *2016 Works in Progress*, Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2015 *2015 Works in Progress*, Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2015 *Site Specific*, Gallery 224, Philadelphia, PA
- 2015 *Points of Obstruction*, Gallery 224, Philadelphia, PA
- 2014 *2014 Works in Progress*, Arronson Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2014 *Indirect Portraits*, Gallery 224, Philadelphia, PA
- 2013 *Ammunition: A Visual Response to Gun Violence in America*, NEIU Student Union, Chicago, IL
- 2013 *Chicago Black Artist Exhibition: The Black Experience*, Liz Long Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2012 *Variations*, Ronald Williams Library, Chicago, IL
- 2012 *Black & White Photography 2012*, Filter Unfiltered, Chicago, IL
- 2001 *Dye Painting on Silk*, Centerspace, Chicago, IL
- 2000 *Black & White Photographs*, Centerspace, Chicago, IL

Curatorial Projects

- 2015 *Points of Obstruction*, Gallery 224, Philadelphia, PA

Published Works

- Nelson, Crystal A. "Baba," Seeds Literary Journal, March 2012, p.43
- Nelson, Crystal A. "So-Low," Seeds Literary Journal, March 2012, p.50

Website Publications

Tia Williams, "InspiHERed By: C.A.Nelson," ElixHer, January 15, 2016
<http://elixher.com/inspihered-by-c-a-nelson/>

Teaching Experience

2015-16 Teaching Assistant, The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA

Related Experience

2014-current Custom Fabricator, Hackman Dental Lab, Philadelphia, PA

2009-current Freelance Artist, rootsofjoy.com, Chicago, IL

2013-14 Art teacher, Chicago Urban Art Retreat Center, Chicago, IL

2003-06 Textile/Ceramics Instructor, University of Illinois, Chicago, IL

2002-05 Photographic Assistant, University of Illinois: Chicago, Chicago, IL