Four Notes on Black Art
On Authority, Criticality, Subjectivity, and Separability

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Introduction

There is not a single central message. This uses language as a means among many, but its meaning cannot be compressed into language or exhausted by language. You have to go in, walk around, look, listen, read and smell. If you are patient, willing to receive in various channels and keep thinking about it later, eventually everything will come together. [1]

What if, instead of approaching the work in search of its intrinsic, unique or deeper meaning, the public came to it the way Adrien Piper instructs? What if the visitor or the viewer approached the work of art as something that exists, something to be heard, looked at, read and smelled? And instead of trying to apprehend, understand or explain it, after taking it in, one just gave in and waited for/with it, waited for its meaning to arrive or not, eventually? What if … Whatever it is called, if a name is needed, the approach does not fit very well into conventional

[1]This is said in an interview, as a comment on the exhibition related to Adrian Piper's awarding of the Kathe Kollwitz Prize in 2018 (https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/adrian-piper-kathe-kollwitz-prize-2018/).https://www.frieze.com/article/i-still-do-believe-they-want-me-dead-interview-adrian-piper

descriptions of (aesthetic/art) criticism and (theoretical) critique; it does not immediately mobilize or easily recall any critical theoretical orientation. As such, it does not fit very well with/in other common and relevant uses of the term critical. For if the critical – critique or criticism – refers to the task of identifying and exposing the foundations, the rational principle guiding a particular apparatus and deployment of knowledge, and if criticism is the task of evaluating creative works according to a rational principle, combining the two becomes a simple exercise, if one ignores that both are based on the assumption that the terms "rational," as used in both, means or refers to the same procedure.[2]

Now this departs from these other senses of the task precisely because it challenges what holds them together, which is the type of mental gesture said proper to aesthetic, analytical, and theoretical statements. This mental gesture, evaluation or judgment, both presumes and institutes meaning, as well as a context and something like its production and tools for its presentation, apprehension, and understanding. More explicitly, this gesture – which constitutes the context, target, and material for the works that inspire this proposition -- presupposes the figure of the I think, that is, the *transparent* I (in its many guises, as human, humanity, subject, and subjectivity), as an object of aesthetic, scientific (analytical or theoretical), or ethical (moral)

[2]Incidentally, the same applies to the many versions of critical theory and supports its confidence in its own ability to explain and intervene in "social life." This footnote is important because my proposal is relevant to critique, art criticism, and critical social theory.

judgment and, together with it, the ontoepistemological regime that has prevailed over the last two hundred years or so.[3]

Four Notes on Black Art gathers musings inspired by artworks, in which I identify formal interventions, against this presumed authority, as their work explicitly or implicitly refuse to signify blackness in the prescribed ways. Here I am interested in how these moves, their rebellious formal gestures confront the notion that organizes post-Enlightenment representation, namely cultural difference, in its historic and scientific rendering. For this notion – everywhere cultivated prevails in the sensibility that, like the subject-position to which it corresponds, the appreciator, cannot accommodate work that confront the colonial, racial, cisheteropatriarchal matrix of the transparent I as properly aesthetic, that is, it consistently reads them as ethnographic specimen.

Each of these notes also consists in an experiment with rehearsing a mode of approaching art, I call it a reading of art, which does no more than to register a thinking with artists and their work, which here I exemplify in three different ways. The first set of notes, my annotation on the Simone Leigh's work, *Sovereignty*, featured in the US Pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennial, simply maps the terrain and describes the artist's engagement with the appreciators. In the second, I report on a conversation and comment on aspects of black British feminist dancer, filmmaker, and performer, Zinzi Minott's work. Here, I focus on her treatment of the first-person singular statement, through themes such as history and memory, disturbs subjectivity, that is, the figure at the core of the aesthetic field. The third, my reading of the Brazilian artist Paulo

[3] Here I am obviously referencing to the Kantian notion of judgement as presented in Immanuel Kant. *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Nazareth's work identifies a formal gesture, literality, a mode of figuring that results from transforming critical tools into raw material. Finally, the fourth set of notes, speculates with the Brazilian dancer, sculptor, and writer, Iagor Peres' experiments with materials and concepts. From reading the work I derive a term, uncategorical, which is a possible descriptor under which one can study such interventions collectively as well as the form of my engagement with Peres' proposition. Another way of describing what I do in this essay is a call and response structure as my engagement with each artist moves with and takes from what they invite me to think.

I

I've seen some preliminary thoughts on the Biennial and concerns about radicality. I need to say that if you haven't read, not a single thing written by Saidiya Hartman or Hortense Spillers. And if you have no knowledge, never heard of Negritude or how it's related to surrealism. If you don't know who Senghor is or why he would have anything to do with art. If you never spent anytime figuring out who was and wasn't at FESTAC 77. If you have no idea what critical fabulation is. If you didn't know what I meant when I said In The Wake. If you never studied Independence architecture. If you don't know why Pauline Lumumba walked through the streets of Kinshasha bare breasted. If you have no idea who Katherine Dunham is or her scholarship, but yet you consider yourself well versed in the work and contributions of the woman she hired as a secretary, Maya Deren. If the words Black Feminist Thought bring absolutely zero concepts to mind. If the words "Dave the Potter" mean nothing to you. If you didn't ponder the significance of Sharifa's unruly kitchen when she embodied Uhura in my video and you don't even know what a kitchen is. If the words "Dogon statuary" conjures nothing. If the only thing you know about Benin bronzes is that Europe stole them. If you casually use words like ethnic, exotic and tribal and you still think those are useful words. If you don't know what story I'm referring to when I talk about A Question of Power. If you thought I was being weird when I told you I was too busy sharpening my oyster knife. If you've never heard of the Herero Genocide. Then you lack the knowledge to recognize the radical

gestures in my work. And that is why, instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience"[4]



(This is a screenshot of Leigh's Venice Biennale page at https://simoneleighvenice2022.org)

Reading Simone Leigh's artwork against her critical statement on the contemporary art appreciator reproduced above, I find a formal rendering of refusal both in the artist's statement (the art critical lacks the critical-intellectual tool for understanding her work) and in that which (black feminist critical tools) she brings into the contemporary art scene, as her aesthetical forms doing in the "sensible" (in that corner shared by the senses and the imagination) what the theoretical tools deployed by black feminist thinkers inspiring her, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe perform in the "intelligible" (the corner shared by the imagination and the understanding). That much was already evident to me the first time I considered Leigh's work, the first time I stopped to think about what to say about her exquisite

[4]This is a post on Simone Leigh's Instragam @simoneyvetteleigh.

forms, the only word that seemed an appropriate guide was *how*.[5] How not, however, as a question but as the beginning of a description for something that seemed to refuse, that aptly sidestepped and undermined anything that would suggest an answer for a question of what or why, any questions that would render the work datum, that is, an unmediated, *natural* expression of black women's experience, histories, or identity. [6]

"If you don't know …", artist tells critics, who insist on ignoring interventions both theoretical and aesthetical, "do not even bother because the work, my work, this work does not address you." Not because of any distinctive, unique feature of the work itself, but because of the knowledge apparatus shared by critics and the public (and questioned by the artist and the intellectual tradition of which she is part) does not comprehend her work and its conceptual reference among that which is properly and immediately taken as artistic. "if you don't … you can't" is as much about *a* not-knowing as it is about a kind of knowing. What Simone Leigh's statement, as well as her work and those of the two other artists with whom I think here, does, is to challenge precisely the presupposition of authority, that accounts for both the presumption (of knowing already, that is, without having to study) and the arrogance (to then move onto a critical

[5] Denise Ferreira da Silvas. "How." *E-Flux*, Issue #105, December 2019.

[6] This statement needs to be read considering Tina Campt's comment on Leigh's work "capacity to actively create our own gaze—a Black gaze that demands active forms of engagement, rather than passive acts of watching or consumption—that requires the work of witnessing from its viewer. It is the work of enduring discomfort and facing it head on" (Tina Campt, *Black Gaze*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2021: 153).

commentary that is nothing more than the recounting of anthropological common places about black or African cultural forms). Though it may be called upon explicitly, for the most part that authority operates within the terms and statements deployed in descriptive or reflective (critical) commentaries. This is so because it rests on two components of the context set up by the commentary itself: on the one hand, it is housed in the lexicon, the vocabulary available for critique is constituted as such that it cannot but yield a black subjectivity (of the black artist and of a postulated black public) within the confines of the anthropological and sociological knowledge that have produced it; on the other hand, it is housed in the institutions, which do not count the black artist as a typical presence in their domain. [7] It is as if the black artist is a special guest, one whose interest in dismantling black subjugation is an exotic addition, which may add (ethical) value, but it is not supposed to have an impact, it does not or I should say, it cannot not reconstitute the aesthetic field and its institutional arrangement because it does not really belong to it.

In Simone Leigh's artwork, I find a formal rendering of refusal both in the artist's statement and in that which she brings into the contemporary art scene. However, I am not proposing that Leigh's artworks are formal in the sense of being conceptual tools. To use the typical distinction, it can be said that her aesthetical forms do in the "sensible" (in that corner shared by the senses and the imagination) what the theoretical tools deployed by black feminist thinkers inspiring her perform in the "intelligible" (the corner shared by the imagination and the understanding).

[7]See Fred Moten. *In the Break.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 233-254.

Let me elaborate this statement by commenting on some of the pieces included in *Sovereignty*, that is, her commission in the U.S. Pavilion for the 2022 Venice Biennale.[8] My focus here is on her expressed intention that her artwork contributes to the creation of an audience for black feminist thought. I highlight how, in her attempting to do so, the work unsettles, because of how it exposes, the presumed position of the appreciator, that is, that of the transparent I as it performs in the aesthetic field. Hers is a demand — an imperative interpellation ("if you haven't … you don't") — that the appreciator (public, critic, curator, and other artist) reflects on what is a basic tenet in the field of aesthetics. Put differently, hers is a refusal of the critic's and the public's lack of interest in considering black forms (theoretic, aesthetic, historic), one which recalls the presumedly *transparent* position of the appreciator. In doing so, she invites us to consider how the subject of disinterested (aesthetical) judgement, — the one which is available to the critic, the artist, the viewer, the curator or gallery or museum director — is thoroughly mediated by distorted 'meanings' of Blackness and Africanity found in the anthropological, historical, and aesthetical archives.

Leigh's confrontational borrowings from the archives combines both a refusal to simplistic attribution of identity and representability to her work and the effort of making visible of black women's history, labor (including intellectual), and aesthetics. How she does so, formally, can be grasped from her own comments on her work. For instance, in "Super Nature," a short text published in 2008, Simone Leigh provides us a key for reading her intervention in contemporary art. When describing her installations, she says, that "[m]aterials are collected,

[8]The images mentioned here can be found at Leigh's website titled Sovereignty at https://simoneleighvenice2022.org/sovereignty/. Last accessed on March 1, 2024.

decorated, scarred to amplify or designify the ethnographic object of its Orientalist markings."[9] Key here is obviously the verb to "designify" the object, to strip it off the scientific ("ethnographic") signature. How this happen is something the viewer is compelled to attend to precisely because of how the works gather and recomposes *materials* (clay, cowrie shells, and raffia) and (architectural [African] and physical [Black]) *forms*, which is something most critics and mainstream media commentators miss consistently. For instance, "Leighs' 7m-tall bronze sculpture based on D'mba headdresses in the shape of a female bust," says a critic about Sentinel, towers over visitors as they arrive' and it continues to say that "Leigh's work explores the Black female body and imagery from the African diaspora — how it has been portrayed and used by other people. But while here the object takes on that *familiar imagery*, Leigh gives it her own spin, blowing them up in scale."[10] Nothing in the remainder of the text returns to Leigh's description of the task, which is to designify these images. All the reader can conclude is that Leigh's "own spin" is given in the making of the "familiar" object (like the black female bust) bigger!!

Leigh's artistic intervention consists in expressions of a black feminist sensibility (inseparability of the sensible + intelligible) can be grasped if one attends to how her work (the actual work of creating and the creations) is not only the undoing but a re-doing "meanings" that are in fact determinative (anthropological) products. It is an intervention in the archives of art

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[9] Simone Leigh. "Super Nature," Small Axe, 25 (12:1), February 2008, p. 121.

[10]Venice Biennale 2022-The Must See Pavilions in the Giardini. *The Art Newspaper*, April 19, 2022 at https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/04/19/venice-biennale-2022-the-must-see-pavilions-in-the-giardini. Last accessed on July 1, 2022. My emphasis.

(African art), of knowledge (anthropological knowledge), and of history (colonial and postcolonial references): as she said at the opening of the 59th Venice Biennale, "to invent what might be missing from the archive, to collapse time...to formally move things around in a way that reveals something more true than fact." For precisely these familiar "meanings" constitute the materials onto which she applies a designifying technique, these anthropological (the cultural ones) and sociohistorical (the stereotypes) are altered in the creative work which, Leigh tells us, is inspired Saidiya Hartman's notion of critical fabulation. [11] In her version of critical fabulation, Leigh's work on the archives of knowledge and of history combines material and mental forms, in a gesture that also requires that the viewer do some (critical, reflective) work on her own sensibility, when confronted with the stereotypical representations of Blackness and Africanity, with *familiar* "meanings" that lie deep in her or his imagination.

What is her move? That which happens in the artwork, as the artwork, transformation that occurs not through discourse, not through recasting (changing form) but by changing them into raw material, through the use of media, materials, and form. For instance, it happens in *Façade* (the pavilion itself is rematerialized, with the use of with wood, raffia, etc.) as it does *The Last Garment* (rematerializes a racist image of Jamaica that was in postcards — the washing woman) as a bronze sculpture. The other sculptures perform further re-materializations that occur inside the rematerialized US Pavilion, acquire the meanings conveyed by sovereignty, which in this

[11] Simone Leigh in "Zendaya and Simone Leigh are Going Beyond Beauty."" Interview by Thelma Golden. *Garage Magazine* Issue 17, September 7, 2019 at https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/9kebk3/zendaya-garage-simone-leigh-style. Last accessed on July 1, 2022.

context is about control at the level of meaning creation, signification. Take the watermelon, for instance, which is part of the repertoire of symbolic violence (stereotypes) against black people, in Leigh's sculpture, it is transformed into a mold for oversized cowrie shells, which are part of the repertories of economic violence (slavery) against black people. [12]

To be sure, in the case of the inside sculptures, the formal gesture is the similar obverse of *Façade,* which is the first necessary transformation of the master's house into the sovereign domains of black feminist thought, which enables the others. It is as if when the figure of the woman washing clothes is cast in bronze this is an expression of *Sovereignty*, which is exercised as a critical (formal intellectual) treatment of the historical or personal archive in which that postcard is or could be found. Furthermore, Leigh's sculptures comment on the limits of that very context's (the Venice Biennale) definition of what belongs, what is art (sculpture in bronze) and what does not, that is Leigh's materials: ceramic, raffia, cowrie shells, clay, and the forms of black feminism and the black femme. As she puts it, in 2019 interview, "I would describe the cowrie shell as a stand-in for the female body, or a body in general, or a representation of an

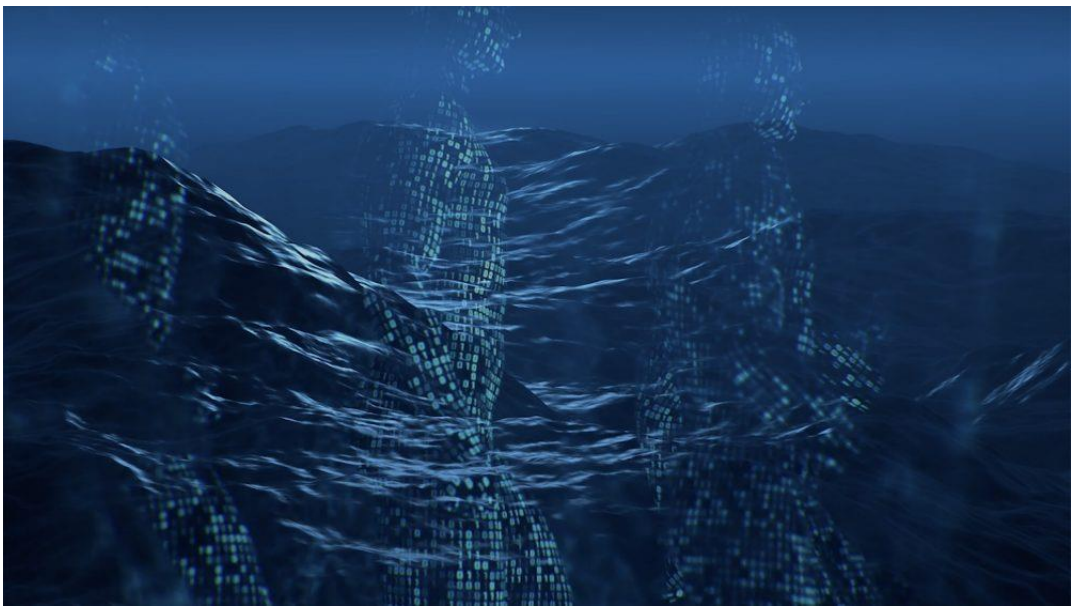
[12] As Nicole J. Caruth, says, in sculpting and building up the shapes, instilling in each her own views and aesthetics, they are totally transformed and offer up new frames of reference. Quoted in Alex Greenberger." How Simone Leigh Sculptures Centering Black Women Brought Her to the Venice Biennale." *Artnews*, October 19, 19/10/2020 at https://www.artnews.com/feature/simone-leigh-who-is-she-why-is-she-famous-1234574361/. Last accessed on May 25, 2022.

absence as well as a presence." [13] This absence, I find, not so much of content; this is not about exclusion of African and Black forms from the art scene. For, as Leigh comments, Western (mostly white, European, cisman) artists have drawn inspiration (as well as content and forms) from African art for over a century now. Hence, the *absence* here is not really material (content) but formal, both conceptual (lack of ac*knowledge*ment of black feminist critical tools) and aesthetical (the African forms and materials are not considered properly artistic). That is, as the commentary reviewed above shows, when before "familiar" Black or African forms today's 'politically educated' appreciators (critics, artists, publics, or gallery and museum directors), that is, the ones that have a sense of interventions that confront the colonial, racial cisheteropatriarchal matrix, are not yet ready to see the forms as something other than *datum* (anthropological or historical specimen), the inclusion (or repatriation) of which would attend to and correct a colonial or racial wrong, whether theft or mis-representation.

[13]"Simone Leigh, Now on the Spotlight, Contemplates the Theme of Invisibility." *The Art Newspaper*, April 29, 2019.

II.

Ancestral interference is the feeling of rage or anger bigger than your own rage, pain bigger than your own pain, it is the feeling of being tired of a fight you have only just begun. It is the feeling of being on the march forever, of screaming from a place deep inside that does not belong to you. It is the feeling of being frightened for your life, fighting for your life. It is standing on the edge of the sea and hearing screams, it is being begged by them not to give up. It is being on your portion of a walk that has been ablaze for centuries, and feeling the weight of every foot that has walked. It is being strengthened by the ability for your ancestors to lose everything, and build something, again, and again and again.[14]



(The image is a screenshot of Fi Dem III-Ancestral Interference.)

[14]Zinzi Minott, Fi Dem III, Ancestral Interference, Spike Island at https://www.spikeisland.org.uk/programme/digital-commission/zinzi-minott/. Last Accessed February 2, 2024.

A constant feature of the work of contemporary black artists, one which has been generative in my point of view, and which resonates with Rizvana Bradley's thesis on black aesthetics, has been how it is a speculative opening driven by a sometimes explicitly but most time only implicitly staged direct confronts modern representation.[15] Along with, and inseparably from its aesthetical characteristics, as I highlight in my comments on Simone Leigh's work, the work also contains disruptive theoretical elements, which refers immediately to the metaphysical and ontoepistemological context in which art itself, as we know it, comes to be. Let me expand this observation by commenting on Zinzi Minott's work; in particular on the ways in which the work engages with concepts such as subjectivity, temporality, history, and memory.

When Zinzi Minot asks "What kind of Slave would I be? ", blackness (in its categorial and historical modes) sustains the speculative exercise, despite the presumed irreality of time reversal. In a conversation we had back in 2020, she highlighted how this im/possibility, time travel, however, is available to the artist for speculation, precisely because of how blackness functions as an historical referent.[16] As many have indicated, the person (in the juridic-ethic sense) to which blackness refers historically, that is the slave, is a mode of existing as human

[15]See generally Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023.

[16] In Conversation: Zinzi Minott, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Joan Anim-Addo, November 10, 2020. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-nr1JrDfmw. Last Accessed January 2, 2024.

which is not contemplatable as subjectivity.[17] The "I" in Minott's question is in the archives and – as Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman have reminded us -- it is always already occupied because pre-positioned by (the actuality and threat of) total violence. Historically, the Slave in so far as she is a Negro, a commodity, is an economic thing; as chattel (property), she is a juridic thing; it is as such that she is present in the records — newspapers, title documents, wills. That, of course, extends to her poems and novels, memoirs and essays, as well, because whether she is an enslaved or a freed writer these do document the political (juridic-economic) conditions under which they were written. For this reason, subjectivity, is not to be demanded from or imposed on them. Nor is its unavailability, it is important to add, to be lamented, which is something Minott's speculation gifts us. Would I be a slave or had I been a slave, as a speculative first-person statement, does not differ from *had I not been one*, both indicate what has not happened, in one case because the *I* is positioned ahead in the line of time and in the second case because the *I* is positioned without the condition of enslavement. In both, it is the violation of sequentiality, which is key to any representation of consciousness or self-consciousness, Descartes, Kant's, Hegel's, and even Deleuze's -- that delimits the work.

When, in our conversation we talked about "What kind of Slave would I be?," Zinzi Minott highlighted precisely a connection between these two possibilities when referring to wonderings about those called 'jumpers' — the captured persons who managed to jump off the

[17]For this argument see generally Denise Ferreira da Silva. Unpayable Debt. Berlin: Stenberg, 2022.

slave ships and died in the Atlantic Ocean. Those whose remains (as particles), Christina Sharpe recalls, are still part of the planet's waterscapes.[18]

What becomes thinkable if one pursues a line of inquiry suggested by Minott's work and intention? What happens when the jumpers are claimed by those of us who descended from those who completed the crossing, and were enslaved? When blackness recalls the captive as dead, as ghost and as a molecule, as/in one of the atoms that composed the body or in the elementary particle that composes everything? Whatever else becomes thinkable, and as such takes part (at the level of the symbolic) of this, our now, will certainly exceed what is made available by the archive of violence, the one which supports the claim to transparency, in which silence is the only answer to Zinzi Minott's question, that is, when the question hails a person who would reply from the position of enunciation the artist occupies, as a black first person singular. Fortunately, as Minott's artworks offer, the artist is not detained by the archive's holdings: the historical and the anthropological archives and their records are also but raw materials available for re/de/compositional intervention.

The *Fi Dem* series give a sense of the kind of re/orientation being invited, which would be at the core a mental (ethical and analytical) shift, in regard to temporality. In *Fi Dem*, *Fi Dem II, Fi Dem III,* and *Fi Dem IV,* figured as material movement – as the references to the dead captive and blood recalls re/de/composition – I find a reference to ancestrality that invites the image of reversibility and not the unfolding sequentiality given by linear time. If as an historical referent, blackness cannot yield that which is the condition of possibility for the aesthetic experience, subjectivity, precisely because of how it presents the Slave -- who, as a first person

[18]Christina Sharpe. *In the Wake.* Durham: Duke University Press, p.19

singular is pre-positioned, juridically and economically – as a material referent of that particular juridic-economic entity; blackness as an attribute of a body (not of a type of body, which it does categorially) but of a solid organic composite, recalls the long dead, the ancestors of such a person, both the ones who? would not become, who could not have been (jumpers) and those who would and did (ghosts).

Foregrounding pre-position, in particular, how because Subjectivity can only emerge if protected with/in the arche-form (that is, the figure of the patriarch, as the husband, father, owner, settler) of the juridic-economic subject, in Zinzi Minott's artwork I read blackness as? reclaiming what for the transparent I is immediately given as/in memory and history. Recalling, claimed and claiming an ancestrality that does not rely on kinship — bloodline or cultural heritage, no DNA, no organic/biological inheritance — in Minott's work it refers to and inheres the body itself/her body, the ancestrality of its raw material (many of which are 13 billion years old) and also as always already a re/de/composition of other raw materials, that is, existents, that both constitute and sustain it, the body that would have been that of a slave does this work, as a still or moving image that distorts the historical record.

III.

All immigrants are political exiles. [19]



(The image is from Nazareth's series Noticias de America)

When Paulo Nazareth said that, in a 2014 interview to *Keen On Magazine*, he was addressing directly what was then, before, and remains unquestionably one of the most

[19]This section was previously published as part of the essay: Denise Ferreira da Silva, "After It's All Said" In Alex Ganterfeld and Gean Moreno (eds) Paulo Nazareth: Melee, Munich: Hirmer Verlag GmbH, 2021.

significant global issue of our times.[20] While here he directly speaks about this situation in his artwork the same theme is presented in such a way that it renders bits and pieces of critical statements and formulations, that is, criticality itself, into raw materials. For instance, when commenting on this displacement of populations – black and brown people – from their homes in the former colonies of Europe, in Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the island-countries of the Pacific and the Caribbean. He recalls its juridic-economic – and not simply ethical, humanitarian – significance when he says that "if these countries [the USA and Europe] do not want to let in illegal immigrants and refugees, please do not promote political instability and oppressive economic policies in the peripheral countries."[21] Straightforward, and yet far from simple, however, is how Nazareth's artwork (US-Mexican border) comments on this (including today's refugee crisis) while at the same time recalling its historical precedents and global reverberations.

Here I am interested in the work's direct confrontation with a critical sensibility, which is held by cultural difference (a tool of raciality) – that of the transparent I – , the prevailing one, the one that cannot accommodate anti-colonial and anti-racist expressions as properly aesthetic, that is, which consistently read them as ethnographic specimen. His

[20]Paulo Nazareth, "To Represent and to Serve," interview by Lumi Tan, *keen on* 2 (2014). Available at https://www.pipaprize.com/2020/05/read-the-interview-with-paulo-nazareth-from-mendes-wood-dm/. Last Accessed on March 1, 2024.

[21]Paulo Nazareth, "To Represent and to Serve," interview by Lumi Tan, *keen on* 2 (2014). Available at https://www.pipaprize.com/2020/05/read-the-interview-with-paulo-nazareth-from-mendes-wood-dm/. Last Accessed on March 1, 2024.

mode of presentation, compositional strategy comments on these currently political circumstances by confronting and undermining attempts at reading both his work and its intention as just another operation of cultural difference. Through repetition, humor, and healthy dosages of the weirdness and urgency, Paulo Nazareth's performances, photographs, sculptures, and installations request a sensibility that presumes and anticipates what lies beyond all that has been said and done about colonial and racial violence and the works they perform for global capital.

Each one of his artworks is a composition of elements that registered total and symbolic violence against black and indigenous populations **and** their strategies of refusal and survivance. Through pieces collected (in international and trans-continental walks) or created (sculptures, videos, or drawings), Nazareth's performances and installations collapse the distinction between the ephemeral/casual and the monumental/formal, in a way that renders the use of explicit elements of critical racial, anti-colonial, or anti-capitalist discourse unnecessary and, even, I dare say, unhelpful. An exemplary work is his piece for the Latin American pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, *Indigenous Voices*, led by the curator Alfon's Hug.[22] With a focus on the regions' endangered indigenous languages the exhibition displayed the work of artists from 16 countries, including Nazareth's Sound installation, in which he and Guarani-Kaiowa children repeat words in Portuguese and Kaiowa. Reading Nazareth's description of this particular piece (quoted above) in the context of his comments on his artwork in general I wondered how the critics and audience

[22]Sound and text available at https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2015/tour/latin-america/paulo-nazareth-text. Last Accessed on December 10, 2024.

at the biennale responded to these straightforward but apparently disconnected pieces, both in form and content: On the one hand, the sound piece, in which one hears his and other voices repeating words in two different languages, without any commentary or indication of how it relates to the larger theme of the pavilion. Mere presentation, juxtaposition, without any maker of a hierarchy or dominance between the two languages, the indigenous children and Nazareth speak in both languages. On the other hand, the description retells recent, past, ongoing colonial (total) violence against indigenous persons and populations.

Pure denunciation without any analytical or interpretive device, Nazareth writes about the ongoing attempt at obliteration of indigenous peoples, of his people, throughout the continent. There is no reason to think that the audience did not connect the dots. However, I am not sure if it did more than to read in it a culturally (Latin American, Brazilian, indigenous, black) determined mode of expression. That the very mode of presentation of the Venice Biennale, with its national pavilions, invites such reading is and is not besides my point here, incidentally. What I find in this work (and also others) by Nazareth is precisely a response to such likely (because overdetermined by the form of the Venice biennale itself) reading. Juxtaposing two languages, an image of the children posing like the members of the Bro MC, a popular indigenous rap group,[23] and the recounting of the ongoing total violence against indigenous populations and person in the Americas, without analytical or interpretive operators to signal a critical stance, the parts of

[23]See Isi de Paula, "Brazilian Indigenous Brô MC's Use Rap as a Tool to Break Issues," Stocktown, September 30, 2015, http://stocktown.com/brazilian-indigenous-bro-mcs-use-rap-as-a-tool-to-break-issues/.

Nazareth's sound piece stand for what they are, each presenting an aspect of indigenous existence, of survivance in the face of ongoing colonial violence: languages (Kaiowa and Portuguese), musical forms (hip hop), and state (perpetrated or authorized) violence.

What I read here is a refusal to deploy the available signifiers of the ruling critical racial discourse in the presentation of colonial and racial violence. How it is rendered, how the work tries and resists the comprehension of the artist's intention as an expression of his/her/their cultural difference? It does so, I find, because, in his work, both his body (in the films and performances) and objects (collected and created) do not stand for anything other than themselves, that is, neither of the usual descriptors for the artwork's mode of signifying, metaphor nor metonymy, captures how his material (his body and objects) refigure colonial and racial subjugation and possible tools, methods, and strategies for its destruction.

Literality, I find, is a more suitable descriptor for a mode of figuring that is self-referential, that is, one that does not recall something else in form (metaphor) or as content (metonymy). I use the term to name a compositional strategy – and as such a highly formal procedure – that creates a lapse in the movement of signification (the refusal to mean beyond what it is said because it [the said] is already the meaning) through which the artwork is released from the demands of any specimen of the modern discourse. This occurs because literality (counterintuitively, I must add) allows Nazareth to present anti-colonial and anti-racist statements that escape the grips of representation precisely because they do not rely on its modalities of figuration (namely, metonymy and metaphor) or deploy analytical or interpretive devices or terms that appeal to (and please) the audience's (for its) critical literacy. Literality works, I find, because the artwork takes the form of a

fractal assemblage that indexes simultaneous operations of colonial and racial violence as well as of survivance at the many scales: language, juridical violence, the person's body, and, in this case of this particular piece, including collective modes of expression shared with other (black) populations subjected to total violence, such as rap music.

IV.

"*From the invisible to the unspeakable, the moments when attention to what is not seen blossoms the perception of other densities that permeate us. That is, looking at the invisible helps critical reflection on how other layers also act in our everyday. Densities that reformulate and emphasize the environmental spheres in which are (or were displaced?). Relations with the invisible much more complex than any logical organization of the order of the world. An exercise that forces comprehension of these bodies as also life agent and modifiers of our relations."* [24]

"There is something that has always caught me in this process, which is the continuity of the gesture in space. For a long time, I immersed myself in dance and performance and it would lead me to a movement in which I would trigger my body, and it would do certain things that seemed to end there."

[24] *"Ali Entre Nos Um Invisivel Obliterante",* which is available at the Platform EhChoO.org (https://ehcho.org/conteudo/ali-entre-nos-um-invisvel-obliterante). Last Accessed on September 20, 2023(?).

" (...) To think about the continuity of something that I position in space in a certain way and it ceases to be only what I positioned when it repositions itself. When it exerts this transformation, it is itself in the world and re-situates itself with another place, other than the space I placed. Maybe they are not even my extension anymore. There is no formulate between what it is, when, when it ends, or when it becomes something. We are always in a relational field. Depending on the perspective, this object, or this living thing, changes in relation to me." [25]

[25] Entrevista Iagor Peres, "É preciso que voce seja um corpo frequentador de um outro corpo," Monica Coster, Revista Desvio, Octover 4, 2022. Avaliable at https://issuu.com/iagorperes/docs/_preciso_que_voc_seja_um_corpo_frequentador_de_o. Last Accessed on November 30, 2024. My translation.



Image 1. Structure for dense fields: topography for a terrain of ditches. Railroads organized in gaps. gaps to contain bodies. superposed skin. habitat in the open sky.

(screenshot of pelematerial from https://ehcho.org/en/content/there-among-us-something-invisible-and-obliterating-iagor-peres)

When I first encountered Iagor Peres work, when I saw the photos of *Pelematerial*, included in his online exhibition, Ali Entre Nos Um Invisible Obliterante (There between us an obliterating invisible), at the EhChO.org platform and then, many months later, when I saw and touched one of the pieces that is part of the series, I had the sense that the things before me did

not invite a what, why, what for, or by which means kind of consideration.[26] Instead, once again I encountered artwork that unapologetically requested that the critical appreciator — that is, the public, curator, the critic, who may praise themselves for being attuned to the questionings presented by an apparatus of critique that address the colonial, racial cisheteropatriarchal matrix of the subject — set aside their critical certainties and attended to the experiment before their eyes. A first unsettling moment in it is that the work refuses — and the artist, even more explicitly, obviously — to be caught as a matter for knowing, something with which to become familiar, as an object for the understanding, or one to learn how to appreciate.

At the same time, when attending to the work, I am arrested by the same wonderings, musings inspired by how the work renders blackness. To that *how*, by which I mean the manner in which the work does what it does, the procedure, that is, I will give here the name of uncategorically: the work renders blackness experimentally, and as such without attributing it definition or definiteness. How this manner does what it does — and as I say that I am aware of the fact that that saying, Peres would say, has become not part but the work — has to do with how it treats what we understand under terms such as body, object, and thing. Having been hailed as an accomplice by the artist, I find it important to have Iagor Peres be part of this commentary on the work. As it may be obvious by now, I do so not to use the commentary as evidence but as itself an aspect of the Iagor Peres' artwork. As for me, I write this in movement,

[26] A longer version of this piece was published in the PIPA Prize Catalogue 2023, which is available at https://www.pipafoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/catalogo_2023_para-web_compressed.pdf. Last Accessed on January 24, 2024.

that is, on the fly, as they say. Trusted into the position of appreciator by the gallery, museum, biennale or the art publication, I find relief accepting the work's invitation to speculate.

Looking at images of Iagor Peres' work over the past nine years, it is not difficult to find the resonances between the performances and the sculptures. What does not come about, at least not to me, is a term that would comprehend either or both. That neither the performances nor the sculptures lend themselves to naming, to categorization, however, indicates something that Peres has commented on recently. Nonetheless, the fact that blackness suffuses the work both as a form (a term) that captures the context of its reception and as its material also renders the performances and sculptures commentaries on the very context of colonial, racial, and cisheteropatriarchal in which we encounter them. Precisely this tension, I find, works through the work as each piece transfigures body, object and thing precisely as it invites the public to attend to how it exists, to how its conditions of existence — which was the phrase used as a synonym for life in the 19th century — are constitutive of it as an existent. And those include the artist, as Peres insists on reminding us. The "continuity of the gesture in the space" might as well be another name for existence when considered in the register of movement.

What if these "relations with the invisible" were to become that by which we understand existence? The artist tells us that much when commenting on the work itself, on the relation between the artist and the work but also on how that "continuity" that occurs in space renders the work also and always unfinished, in existence — as it is modified by temperature, air pressure, humidity, noise, light, neutrinos and dark matter, and so on — or to use Iagor Peres' word, alive. Body, object, and thing are nothing more than the continuity of a gesture, both of the artist who first per-formed/pre-formed it and of the later per-formance/formation of everything else visible and non-visible with which it shares space. How to write about the work when

knowing that the artist has already claimed anything anyone has to say about it? The continuity of a gesture in space is a call for attention to inseparability also in regard to the mind, the subject, and the person. In Iagor Peres' work, implicancy does not come as a message to the appreciator (public, curator, interviewer, critic) in the first-person. Instead, it comes out of the manner through which the artist turns us into accomplices in what happens to the materials that compose the object of art. It is the artistic object, as it gives continuity to a gesture in space, as affected by its condition of existence — that is, as it shifts and changes in space/in time — that establishes how the appreciator becomes part of it.

Two thoughts become unavoidable to me once I start to think of continuity in this manner, in Iagor Peres' manner: On the one hand, one cannot but wonder about whether or not when looking at/touching something, even if not consciously so, one (the human thing) is also touched by that which has been part of the thing-in-existence. On the other hand, and consequently, one must wonder if her sensing (seeing, touching, smelling, hearing, tasting) of the thing-in-existence, the artistic object, commits the thing to the continuity of a gesture in the space in which it exists. Both questions, of course, also then request a consideration of how then the thing-in-existence, in so far as it comments on the workings of the colonial, racial, cisheteropatriarchal matrix, also affects the latter continuity, as also a gesture in space.

Slowly but surely, I hope, I have moved this commentary on Iagor Peres's work, which now is another component of its in-existence, towards that which it unsettles which is precisely the two defining relations in the aesthetic field, the one between the artist and the work and the one between the appreciator and the work. How that is done, the manner that obtains the singularity of Peres' experimental art, that is, art that intervenes by confronting (and in doing so exposing) the colonial, racial, cisheteropatriarchal matrix, I find, exemplifies something that,

perhaps because of the protected place it has enjoyed throughout its 200 years old trajectory, the aesthetic alone seems able to afford. That how, as the work itself, does not allow for categorization, it insists and persists in its refusal of a name. And, it is precisely because it does so by dismantling that which is a the core of categorization — body, object, and thing — , by rendering it without form, without solidity, within extension, that is, as movement, or, in Iagor Peres's words quoted above, a continuity of the gesture in space.

Conclusion

How to inhabit the exhibition space, walk through the corridors of the exhibition without immediately finding yourself in the position of the connoisseur? However, when this position is exposed, when its reservoir of meanings, its grammar, lexicon and significators, are evident, something else occurs, a dis/orientation, which resonates, reverberates, the artist's intervention of [missing word?] because it halts any immediate grasping of the meanings of the work; resolution in/as representation.

For it is precisely because coloniality and raciality consolidate the position *of the* aesthetic subject, the position of enunciation available to the artist, curator, appreciator, critic, aggregates a categorial and historical reservoir (terms, formulations, meanings — as well as images and sounds) of racial meanings that enter into the composition of the aesthetic text, in the twentieth century. A complex and complicated position because, in addition to the Kantian subject of aesthetic judgment, which has the same basis as the scientific subject of experience, it also houses the subject of social critique, who may or may not be Marxist, and who may or may not be literate in the critical social text, that is to say the critical arsenal that targets coloniality, raciality, and the cis-hetero-patriarchal matrix. Much complexity and many complications result from this co-inhabitation. For example, the subject of criticality can - and I'm pretty sure - does present itself as a non-Kantian or even anti-Kantian appreciator. However, at the same time, his/her/their inclusive/decolonial/diversity-wise statements about works or artists bears a Kantian orientation, even when not as explicitly as when she rests her claims on his notion of cosmopolitanism. Regardless of its manifestation, this presentation indicates one of the ways in which raciality operates in the intrastructure of subjectivity, which is on the one hand, the writing of the *transparent* subject of reflection who cannot objectify itself because it engage the world as its own and of *affectable* subjects to whom reflection is always already pre-occupied by a *world* that is constituted by representations build according to the tools of racial knowledge and the workings and configuration of political architecture they helped to build.

My focus here is in the gestures of refusal– of authority, subjectivity, criticality, and separability – that confront this construction. Thinking with Simone Leigh's exposing and challenging a presumed authority, when she states that the majority of those occupying the position of the appreciator in the contemporary scene do not have the conceptual tools for

grasping her work, has inspired questions about the aesthetic which, I hope, help outlining without apprehending or in any other way limiting or confining what lies beyond the challenge brought by the artworks that confront the colonial, racial, cisheteropatriarchal matrix. Though it seems unavoidable not to approach these artistic interventions without assuming that they express or actualize particular histories, experiences and subjectivities, it is not impossible to read them as such, that is, as artistic statements that not so much seek the inclusion of formerly absent perspectives but which in their very existence already threaten a shift at the core the field of aesthetics.

Another way of saying the same thing is that Minott's and Peres' artworks intervene at the metaphysical and ontoepistemological level – through two crucial notions subjectivity and separability – in ways that refuse the very grounds of our thinking through gestures that unsettle the space of their occurrence. That gesture is precisely to trust the work to that which composes it and to that which is already in play, where it will exist. My wonderings with their artwork were only possible because I could not resist the artist's invitation to try, to experiment. Once there, where the artist and the appreciator become just another existent that is also part of the artwork's conditions of existence, is where it may be possible to speculate about thinking of existence without violence. Here, at the threshold, which is also the surroundings, the outskirts of modern representation and the authority that manifests onto-epistemologically, it is possible to contemplate a sensibility, that is not nourished by the I think, the proper (transparent, presumably a-cultural because universal and transcendental) subject of disinterested appreciation, and everything else modelled after him.