Journal of Architectural Education
Volume 71, Issue 1, May 2017, pp. 1-3
Research Article

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When You are Critical Mass

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Pages 1-3 | Published online: 12 Sep 2017

One this article https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2017.1318041

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Abstract

Tea Campo is the Rogier E. Bertoldi '52 Professor of Humanities at Princeton University. She holds a joint appointment between the Department of Art and Archeology and the Lewis Center for the Arts. She is a founding researcher of Black European studies, as well as the lead convener of the Practicing Refusal Collective and the Sojourner Project. Campo has published five books—Other Spaces: Black Women's Creative Life in Paris, Wrestling with Modernity: Blackness and Paris in the Interwar Years, Modern Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe (2012), Listening to Images (2017), Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Hernando Tavera, Joseph Marcasiano Hirsch, Ed Hochberg, and Brian Wallis, 2020, and A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See (2021). Campo was also recipient of the 2016 Photography Catalogue of the Year Award from Paris Photo and Aperture Foundation.

V. Mitch McEwen: At the close of The Loophole of Retreat, Lorraine O'Grady said something to Simone Leigh that I want to highlight to start our discussion: "We can't just be free forever, that won't work. So the question is, how imaginaries are we going to be?... We have to come up with a lot of new thought scenarios in order to be free." Why was the last presentation in the Practicing Refusal and Simone Leigh, "Oh, What Is Going to Happen?" so important to you?

Tea Campo: In terms of thinking about the Loophole, itself, as a call to action... It's interesting because, you know, it began as a conversation between Saidiya Hartman and Simone Leigh, building on other activations that Simone has done in relationship to her work.

These activations have been both about an intervention but also this credo that she has about: What does it mean to value Black women's intellectual labor? That intellectual labor is not just writing. That intellectual labor is making art, is poetry. It is talking to each other.

The Loophole was about creating a space where that is valued. In the first Loophole it was Saidiya who brought me in, thinking about whose voices should be heard and how people were talking about their intellectual labor, what Black women's intellectual labor looks like.

Saidiya often says "You're my dream maker." She'll have a dream that she'll articulate to me and I'll say well, let's do that.

Mitchen: You're the one who executes?

Campo: Because I'm a Virgo. Okay. That's what we do.

It was really about—What would it mean to create a space where Black women of all different forms of intellectual power—poets, writers, artists, movement artists, visual artists—are able to offer their reflection so, you know, on this moment.

Mitchen: That first Loophole was at the Guggenheim. That was 2019. I remember it very well, but I couldn't attend because I was in New Orleans at the same time. It seemed amazing. Were people convening on the spot, or was it all about the auditorium?

Campo: All in the auditorium. Which was really intimate. It's hard to find.

Mitchen: Yes, you don't stumble into that space. Interesting.

Campo: It was. There was a hush, okay, that people were just in awe of being able to assemble there.

We are in a given room, and I had to keep going back and forth for some reason, between the green room and the auditorium. I had to actually go out and meet somebody who didn't know how to get in. There was a line that went halfway up the block of Black women waiting to get in—I was just astonished by that. I didn't know how they learned about it because, you know, there wasn't an official image or anything. I heard about this. You know, it's word of mouth.

The same thing happened this year, although it was much smaller production. But we didn't expect 800 people to show up. I mean, getting to Ireton—it's a ways away, right? But sorry now, I get still tapes. You asked about how this is a kind of call to action.

I think you're right. If the call to action was, "What does it mean to make Black women's intellectual labor visible? To value it?" What we displayed was the diversity of Black women's intellectual labor and what happens when you bring us together.

Another one of Simone's phrases is critical mass. That was something that Lorraine also spoke to the last time around. Simone often talks about "What does it mean when we gather in critical mass? What shifts?"

In that moment, you see that you're not alone. You see that you're not the first, or the only, or a small group, when you are critical mass. So when O'Grady made that statement that we're going to have to get much more creative, it was an instantiation of what happens when creativity becomes visible intellectual labor. That produces something, right?

That has an outcome that shifts how we talk to each other, how we see each other, and also how the world sees us. Yeah, I think that shift is really important. In a way what she is saying to you, know, that's what guilt tripping won't get us.

Mitchen: This is similar to how Simone talks about her audience being Black women.

Campo: This is a turn away from the kind of politics of addressing a white authority, white America, white supremacy, asking for the subject to transform. A shift to "We are talking to each other and having a collective imagination."

Mitchen: Yes, I want to ask you from that place to talk about refusal. There's a call to action, and there's also a refusal. In a way I kind of want to set up reparations in that dialectic—to think reparations as something other than a ready-made object or an amount of money that needs to be deposited. I want to situate reparations in this call to action and refusal. So if refusal is the possibility of this collective imaginary that instantiates its own shift, then what's the work of refusal? Tell me about the Practicing Refusal Collective and how that work is kind of intersects Loophole.

Campo: Well, I always talk about refusal as refusal to remain within the framework that defines you as something that you are not and that can never actually be something that you. To be quote-unquote guilt tripping, for example—what if you are no longer speaking within the diminished terms that require you to address white supremacy, in order to be heard? When you refuse that, you begin to set your own terms. That's what I think was happening at Loophole.

I was actually talking to Saidiya about her presentation, and she said she felt that too. She had outlined something with a lot more context. Suddenly when she got there, she said, "I realized I didn't have to contextualize this. I didn't have to explain my terms of reference or address them because they were already understood." I felt a similar way when I was talking about what it means for us to actually speak in our own terms. The point of reference is not external when we refuse the imposition of that. There's a different terms of address that emerges. So for me refusal is not about resistance.

The ideas, itself, shifts because my terms of address are no longer about resistance.

There was a second part of your question. Oh, actually, I was thinking about a quote. Because you were asking me about reparations not as a sum.

Mitchen: Right.

Campo: I was actually writing about this in response to Denise Ferreira da Silva. There is this quote that I've been thinking about for a while.

Mitchen: She talks about remaking the world.

Campo: It's a different one. It's about poetics.

Mitchen: Black feminist poetics.

Campo: Yeah. Yeah.

Mitchen: Is it in that article of hers?

Campo: "Toward a Black Feminist Poetics," yes, where she says:

> "For the Black Feminine Poetics, a moment of radical praxis acknowledges the creative capacity Blackness redeems, reclaims expropriated total value, and demands the nothing less than decolonization—that is, a reconstruction of the world, with the return of the total value without which capital would not have thrived and off which it still lives."

Mitchen: Yes.

Campo: She actually makes a really explicit definition of reconstruction.

> "By reconstruction, I should emphasize, I do not mean reparation or a restitution of monetary sum that corresponds to that which mercantile and industrial capital have acquired through colonial expropriation since the sixteenth century. Decolonization requires setting up of juridico-economic architectures of redress through which global capital returns the total value it continues to derive from the expropriation of the total value yielded by productive capacity of the slave body and native lands. Before we can even conceive on how to design these architectures, we need another account of racial subjugation..." 2

That's what I was thinking about. What are the juridico-economic architectures of redress?

Mitchen: Yes.

Campo: And I feel like that's what you're talking about when you describe what reparation is.

Mitchen: Yes.

Campo: As opposed to, you know, a quantification, right? When Denise is talking about, it's talking about what is the total value that has been extracted and continues to be extracted from Black bodies? In order to be able to think about reparation, we have to think about the appropriation of that total value. Right? In order to create an architecture of redress that will be able to accomodate that...

Mitchen: This is where I want to think about this in a temporal sense, learning from your shift from the visual to the sonic and the significance of frequency in listening to images. At one level da Silva seems to be saying that before we can even set up these architectures of redress we need to have an accounting of racial subjugation. This seems very different from the refusal that you're talking about. In a way it seems like there's a call to action in refusal that's instantiated in the aesthetic and the imaginary, right? Where the embodiment of that critical mass is already a form of politics. Do we need that account of the racial subjugation?

Are we already in the architecture of redress?

Campo: It's a really important point. Well, let me think about that. I do think that it is possible to create a futurity that does not take as its point of departure that moment of negation. Because we're living that moment of negation.

That's why I talk about grammar. Is there, again, a grammar of an afterlife, which is saying? So if that moment that created the nation is an ongoing and enduring injury, how is one able to imagine a futurity that is already happening?

And that's what's important to me. It's not that we have to wait. It's already here. We are already in the process of prefiguring it. Then there's not the temporal tether. I think there has to be simultaneity that constitutes the refusal of a kind of linear temporality.

Mitchen: Yes.

Campo: Right. It's really important to think temporality differently by virtue of the fact that the afterlife of slavery requires this of us.

Mitchen: I hear the Black Feminist Poetics articulating that. It's always total value, because how can you ever do an accounting of the total value? It's the valuation is not being in a way that you're talking about temporality resonates with another interview here with Black Quantum Futurism and their notion of such.

I want to keep talking about time because it feels important. Can we think about reparations as something that would have a frequency or would hack frequencies or modulate frequency?

Campo: Well, you have to tell me more about how you're imagining frequency.

Mitchen: Okay. I am thinking of frequency in relation to the temporality of reconstruction, firstly. To do that deeply reconstructive and speculative work with Black material, Black life, and in resonance with Black space, is an architectural potential of reconstruction. I want to think of reparations in relation to that ongoing Black reconstruction, as something that can't just be about repair.

Because there was no prior totalen or Black place, there's nothing there to repair. Then reparations, in a material sense, needs to conform to the way that labor was extracted from Black bodies and continues to be also the prolongation of that Black extraction. That extraction that starts with Black labor extends through all the disruption of converting ecosystems into property.

So planetary crisis and the need for reparations for me are deeply entangled, maybe even the same.

Campo: Mmm.

Mitchen: I don't actually know how to think that fully in terms of frequency. I think in terms of scale.

Campo: I think about frequency. My little mantra in terms of frequency is that one has to think about the multiplicity of frequencies. You have frequencies in a sonic sense, as waves of contact. You have frequency in terms of a temporal sense of repetition that is not always a replication. You have frequency in terms of a kinetic sense of events never ending.

At certain levels of frequency, it becomes actual rumbles and vibration that can be disruptive to those materials. If you're thinking about those frequencies, that's actually about the resonance of that which we are with who we are. It can actually be affective, it affects us.

I write about the visual frequency of artworks, of film or photography that registers in us beyond simply the optical and the visual. I'm not an architect, but to me, talking about frequency is always talking about what is in excess of the visual or in excess of the sonic or in excess of physical contact.

Mitchen: I want to pause here because I think there is something that I've been grappling with in your work that relates to what I'm hoping to get at—relating this resonance and reparations. Is there a potential frequency of reparations? Can this relate to listening to images?

I don't always know what listening to images constitutes. I get that frequency and the temporality engender listening. Part of your notion is that images demand time, right? At least certain images demand a time for the images to be seen. It's not just "Okay, I flashed the image. It's on my eyes."

There's not just a context, but a narrative, a recognition, that we need to spend time with in order to actually experience the image. It's a kind of relationship between subjectivity and experience in time. The image relationship constitutes listening through the frequency in time.

But I don't know, I might not be getting it.

Campo: The way I describe listening to images is quite methodological. I came up with the idea of listening to images by having to force myself to write about images without looking at them. I would look at an image, I would take it in, then I would put it away and start writing about it and then I bring that image back and compare what I wrote to what I thought I saw.

And sometimes what I thought I saw was not there. Sometimes it was things that were very self-evident that I did not actually see. There is a resonance that we are responding to in images that's not optical. And so the point is to attend to that resonance.

That's what listening is—to attend. It's hearing more than they are showing. Not necessarily to see more than they are showing. But to hear more of what they are saying beyond what they are showing us. So one of the ways in which I listen to images is by talking about what we don't know about or we no longer know that the image shows us, remembering.

For example, Dinaw2 Bey's images from Night Coming Tenderly, Black. They don't show us slavery. They don't show us slavery. We don't even show us bodies. But what he's trying to show us is what their journey to freedom might have looked like. Through his images of darkness, he shows us how you can hear those scenes of their escape. You're hearing those scenes of their escape by scenes of quiet, you are hearing scenes that shadow and protect. It's a shadow that cloaks and hides so as a journey towards freedom. But again, you don't see this unless you listen to these images.

Mitchen: I'm starting to understand that in a way when you're talking about what you see you could be talking as a neuroscientist, right? I mean, in the sense that the cortex compensates for what we can't see, both because we have two eyes creating a composite 3D perspective and because there are built in blind spots. We sort of stitch these images together, the brain does.

How you're working on this dynamic is obviously not in a neuroscientific way. Your work does not seem interested in maintaining the Cartesian mind-body split. If I understand listening to images, it's starting within this stitching and incorporation that is always already in process. Those gaps are already happening, right? We're already the embodied subjects reconstructing these images in time.

Campo: Yeah. Then there's the other side which is—Who are the people making these images? What are they trying to visualize, intending to visualize? And how do they do it? And it's not always by making something visual. There's something in excess of those images.

So that's how it got to the idea of listening to images, which is to look at family photographs and ask what they were trying to show us. They're trying to show us a relationship, and they're trying to make that relationship meaningful through cameras, through photographs, even though we don't know them.

In these photos we pick up something about how we even ourselves to be imaged—what we want to have visualized about ourselves that may or may not be true. But I want to come back to the idea of reparations because I realized that I'm taking more of your time than I intended.

Mitchen: There's something here that I feel is a model of reparations as a frequency. There's a notion that we can't wait for the total calculation to happen, right? The total accounting for that total negation—we're in the midst of it already. Can reparations be constituted in that?

This would entail being whatever it is that we would think would be the total value, or the source of the total value, but also letting go of it. It would mean putting away whatever it is that we imagine would be the source of the wealth, that which is stolen. Whatever we get cannot be reparations if it merely continues the extraction and hoarding.

I am thinking of a reparations that would be constituted not by saying "We are going to reapportion this," but rather, "We are going to put this away. And we are going to find whatever it is that we when we put this away." We're going to face the total value of reparations, and then we're going to face what it is that we can when we put it away.

Campo: That's really interesting. You're sort of speaking in Denise's terms of—What if reparations was not quantitative, right? What if reparations was a call for transformation—not quantification? I actually think the fear of reparations is not about the amount. It's about the confrontation, which means implication in a history that certain folks don't want to be held accountable for. But again, yes, if we were to move away from quantification, I don't think it would be any easier to accomplish. I think it would be more frightening, but I think that what you're talking about is the crux of it.

Mitchen: There's a way in which even the quantity requires whatever.

Campo: Definitely.

Mitchen: Like, what would these companies be worth if they didn't have access to the land? What would the houses be worth if they weren't already in white neighborhoods? There's a way in which questioning the entire system resolves it. I am thinking of this in terms of racial capitalism. And I would not have thought of listening to images as an economic proposal, but when you talk about it as method, it presents a method for looking at value and letting resonate within us what we think we have seen in ourselves.

Campo: Yeah, and how radical it is to refuse the quantification of dispossession, right? Dispossession quantifies you to zero, then it dictates that any kind of reparation would have to be calculated, as well. So what if we refuse that calculus, the capacity to calculate, the "what I am dust" or "what exposed comprise me?" I mean, in the end, we are in an insistence upon total value as opposed to calculation.

Mitchen: Then Loophole is an architecture of redress in a very literal way, right?

Campo: True.

Mitchen: The question, then, ends up where we started. If there's a call for action that comes from Loophole, then that is reparations already.

Campo: Yes. It is reparations as a refusal of a particular idiom of quantification. And an insistence on total value, on our own terms.

Mitchen: To kind of close, I would like to address this question of reparations as embodied and the form of the critical mass as embodied, even if that means to doubt it. Some seed in architecture that is just what we do. Sometimes we kind of dumb it down.

Campo: Hey, I never heard anybody say my discipline is about dumbing things down.

Mitchen: After we all gathered—800 of us in Venice. Does that change what it is that we expect to experience in a way that then we can begin reverberating out?

Campo: I feel like it did. I feel like it does. I mean, there's a bit of terror in me that I will accept nothing less from now on.

Mitchen: Right.

Campo: Maybe I will accept nothing less than the intensity that I was talking about as quantum. Such persons can so get that stage and left something that the next person picked up and magnified, and that kept going. That was a form of quantum that kept being passed forward until the very end.

So, again, what happens when you refuse to do anything other than your authentic articulation of Black women's intellectual labor? It gets redefined. That happened each time somebody came to that podium. That was astonishing to me. You're right. It breaks the mold. Our expectations are radically different.

Mitchen: All right.

Notes

1. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poetics: The Question of Blackness Toward the End of the World," The Black Scholar 43.2 (2014): 85, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5816/blackscholar.43.2.0081.

2. Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poetics," 6d.

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