REVEALING BLACK SPOTS IN THE RADIANT WHITE CUBE

Rosa te Veide

Patricia Kaersenhout is an artist and activist who, through her work and her performances, disrupts white art institutions and their Eurocentric aesthetics. Rather than conform to the Western art historical canon, her work deals with the colonial past and its deep implications for the present. Kaersenhout continuously explores ways in which to confront what she and others have called “the colonial wound.”¹ The project of modernity has taken control, not only of politics and knowledge, but also of the way we experience and judge art. This has established “a normativity that enabled the disadain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, [...] of sensing and perceiving.”² Kaersenhout’s performances are an affront to this normativity. Within them she re-stages the violence of the colonial past in order to engender a process of healing. Generally speaking, her work does not conform to established codes of contemporary art. As such, it “delivers a radical critique to modern, postmodern, and altermodern aesthetics”, and can instead be identified as “decolonial aesthetics” [sic].³

In recent years, Kaersenhout has gained recognition from the Dutch and international art field. A solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, however, remains unthinkable. Yet does she want to be included in this white cube? Her performance The Clean Up Woman at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 2016, forcefully called out the institution for its own color blindness. Rather than a commission from the Stedelijk Museum itself, it was part of BELL Invites, initiated by SMBA.⁴ To this day, very few artists of color are presented by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, nor do they form a part of the curatorial staff.⁵ In order to be part of this institution as a person of color, one may obtain a service job there either as a security guard or as a cleaner, a role Kaersenhout enacts in her performance. Still, as the performance highlights, such service workers remain invisible; friends and colleagues that were present simply failed to recognize her. Or better put, they looked right through her. One who cleans is part of the interior. Kaersenhout’s performance reminds us that if institutions do give room to artists of color in museums — often in an attempt to address a perceived ‘lack of diversity’ — often they are treated as guests. As feminist scholar Sara Ahmed has noted, this kind of hospitality is conditional and creates a power relation of a different kind. “When diversity becomes a form of hospitality,” she argues, “perhaps the organization is the host who receives as guests those who embody diversity. Whiteness is produced as host, as that which is already in place or at home. To be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home. Conditional hospitality is when you are welcomed on condition that you give something back in return.”⁶

Guests are expected to be grateful — in this case, for the opportunity to present their work. Institutions put themselves on their backs for ‘being inclusive’ in their efforts to engage with diverse populations, but this practice of ‘hospitality’ only reproduces hierarchies of power. And let us not forget that however warmly welcomed, ultimately a guest is expected to return home again. After all, how many works by artists of color are included in the museum’s permanent collection?

In a more recent performance at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, Kaersenhout painted the white walls of this institution — named after Witte Cornelisoon de Wijt, a high-ranking VOC naval - black. She also signed an open letter, confronting the institute with its name and its superficial dedication in reflecting on its own position. “The bodies and artistic productions of Black and non-Black people of colour are de rigueur on institutional menus, the sought after flavour in these times of lip-service ‘intersectionality’. White art institutions, whether they carry the name of a colonizer or not, are ‘excited’ to engage with feminist, queer, Black, intersectional and decolonial perspectives as long as these critical interventions are framed as discourses and stripped of their radical potential and praxes.”⁷

Kaersenhout has found a multitude of other places and platforms to reach out to a broad audience. She does not aim to be included in the canon of, for example, the Stedelijk. However, she feels a responsibility to penetrate those white spaces with her black body — to reclaim that space, to remind them of their (our) own whiteness.

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ When invited by SMBA (Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam) to do an exhibition, Australian artist Richard Bell forwarded the invitation. BELL Invites was initiated by SMBA, guest-curated by Vivian Zihler, co-curated by Aruna Vermeulen and enacted in collaboration with University of Colour. It ran between 30 January and 19 March 2016. See: http://smba.nl/nl/ Tentoonstellingen/bell-invites/. Until June 2016, SMBA functioned as a downtown ‘satellite’ to the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Particularly in the final years of its existence, it aimed to counter and supplement the institutionalized practice of the Stedelijk Museum and therefore was invested in discussing postcolonial subject matters and presenting non-white and non-western art. Given its relationship to the Stedelijk as its mother institution, SMBA in its own way reproduced segregation, keeping these different worlds, and different artists, apart from one another.
⁵ There are of course exceptions. Recently, given the growth of discourse regarding the need for increased inclusion of artists that hail from outside the western centers of the art world, there has been an upswing in exhibitions that feature artists of color. Still, these are rarely solo-exhibitions and are often within short-term, thematic series—such as those that highlight migration, including Nadim Makani: Transgressions (March – June 2017), Solutions or Utopia? Designs for Refugees (May – September 2017); Carlos Motta — The Crossing (September 2017); and I am a Native Foreigner (2017). South-African photographer Zanele Muholi will have a solo exhibition from July - October 2017.

The Clean Up Woman
Patricia Kaersenhout, February 6, 2016

My color works really well in white spaces.

It is essential to me to investigate the twilight area between words, feelings, and intuition; to sense the unnamable. I am fascinated by the complexity of what it means to be Black in a Western European society. When Foucault says that the soul is the prison of the body, I strongly feel that being looked upon as black female, being and feeling black as a social and cultural sign, is not enough for me. My body is the prison of my soul. It is a limitation of who I truly consider myself to be, namely in a constant state of becoming.

But what if black skin is not merely a substance? A variable boundary, a surface of which its impenetrability is politically regulated and is signified within the cultural domain of race and hierarchy? Which language remains to give meaning to a physical determination of race in relation to the soul?

For me that would be the language of my imagination: Black aesthetics.

Why are Western aesthetics still dominating categories like beauty and representation, and any discussion about art and its value? I am curious to what extent these categories determine how we think about ourselves; white or black, high or low, strong or weak, good or bad. And how these categories make the contradictions of a colonial past visible. The goal of my work is not to evoke feelings of beauty and sublimity but of sadness, resentment, remorse, hope, and the determination to change the future and to create an ethical life.

The occasional black spots in this museum represented by security staff, catering personnel, cleaners remind me of a passage in Ralph Ellison’s book *Invisible Man*. The protagonist works in a paint factory where the white paint for the White House is manufactured. His job is to mix it with one drop of black paint in order to make the white look more radiant—a metaphor for the black spots who work here, emphasizing the power of radiant whiteness.

This museum created a world of their own without making it magic or giving love to they forgot to dream

The clean up woman is a woman who
Gets all the love you white folks leave behind
The reason I know so much about her
Is because she cleaned up some shit of mine
I found out all I was doin’
Was makin’ it easy for the clean up woman
Just makin’ it easy for the clean up woman
I wanna make it easy for the clean up woman
The clean up woman will wipe them blues away
She’ll give them plenty lovin’, twenty-four hours a day
The clean up woman, she’ll sweep them of their feet
She’s the one who’ll take them in when you dump them in the street
So take a tip, you better get hip
To the clean up woman, ‘cause she’s tough
I mean, she really cleans up

Patricia Kaersenhout & Betty Wright
The year 2017 marks Finland’s one hundred years of national independence. The celebrations of ‘Suomi100’ are currently ongoing. While an unapologetic demonstration of nationalism is generally accepted within the borders of a country, in the international art scene, nationalism is a delicate topic — particularly in a time of extreme social and political polarization. Aware of the delicacy with which the topic must be treated, the Finnish Cultural Institutes in Paris, London, Berlin, and Brussels have framed the celebration of Finland’s independence through the theme, ‘Mobile Home 2017’. Supported by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Arts Promotion Centre Finland, the project explores and interprets different meanings of home through experiences, architecture, art, science, and sociology during the year of 2017. In this way, the institutes connect notions of feeling at ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ to Finland’s independence from Russia. ‘Mobile Home 2017’ thus seems to be an attempt to diplomatically address the national celebration while — through the means of art — simultaneously engaging with an audience beyond the country’s borders. How to go about making this celebration relevant to non-Finns is a key concern for its planners.

In the framework of ‘Mobile Home 2017’, the Finnish Cultural Institute for the Benelux in Brussels distributed an open call to invite artists from the Benelux and Finland to propose projects focused on (the question of being) ‘home(less)’. Anssi Pulkkinen’s Street View (Reassembled) was chosen by an ‘international’ jury that included art professionals from Finland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. With Street View (Reassembled), Pulkkinen proposed to install a destroyed house from Syria on the flatbed of a large truck to tour through the countries of the Benelux and Northern Europe. The work’s title, which makes reference to Google Street View, invokes the contrast between digital and material encounters with the reality of war in Syria. In an interview, Pulkkinen also mentions that he wants to address feelings of belonging and challenge romanticized fantasies of a ‘nomadic lifestyle’. The jury found that the work brings “the burning global reality to our doorstep”, and ranked it favorably for its capacity to “provoke questions and discussion”.

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† Wit heeft zwart nodig, performance by Patricia Kaersenhout during ‘Cinema Olanda: Platform’, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art Rotterdam, 17 June 2017 (Photos: Aad Hoogendoorn).