

Denise Ferreira da Silva
How

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Without time or space, a when or a where, without references to moment or place, the various versions of the question of *how* that inspire this conversation alleviate the task; they gather us under the assertion that we – and, I mean, black women – *do*, or rather *create*. Without asking for a program or a method, it is a statement.¹ As such, it is a proposition for which Hortense Spillers’s female flesh ungendered ($\setminus X \Rightarrow -Y + 0$) is the operator; it rings infinity ($\& - \&$): the world image of blackness, that is, radical immanence, pure unboundedness.²

Thinking of Harriet Jacobs, whose feat inspired the title for this gathering; thinking of Margaret Garner’s refusal to transmit the burden of servitude to her children; thinking of Alice H. Parker whose deed, the invention of a kind of furnace, made safe central heating possible in houses and buildings; and most of all, in this moment, thinking about and with Simone Leigh’s *Brick House*, these questions have inspired me to consider what is involved in the appreciation of black women’s doings.³

Because *how* refers to what has and has not already been done, to what takes place at this exact moment and in that other unimagined place, because *how* recalls infinity, all I do here is share with you another possible *how*, another black feminist doing, inspired by the kind of sensibility announced when one attends to doings that are always and simultaneously feats, deeds, burdens, artifacts. When contemplating such sensibility, I have in mind the works of many black female thinkers and artists, but it has been inspired particularly by the speculative/science-fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, the poet Ai Ogawa, and the artists Otobong Nkanga and Simone Leigh. More particularly, I am moved by the many presentations of matter that I find in their work. All of them are highly sophisticated and carefully composed texts or objects, whose raw materials (what is used as material content in their composition) refer to the past and present configurations of the global (juridic, economic, and symbolic) context, which they make available to the critical gaze through beautiful visual or written compositions.⁴

More specifically I comment on the approach to aesthetics that they prefigure. For, instead of presupposing a formal position for appreciation (as in Heidegger’s condition of “being in the world”), it presupposes a description of existence as a condition, a material expression “of the world” (in both the quantic sense of being part of it and in Leibniz’s sense of expressing it).⁵ Put differently, these creations hail a sensibility that is not a variation of the figuring of the human as subjectivity, which the prevailing formulation of the aesthetic (ontologically) presupposes and (its

phenomenological core) instantiates.⁶ A thinking that refigures the doings of black women approaches the intellectual and the creative (or the critical + creative, as I have been thinking about it for a while now) always in reference to a mode of existing (as a condition of the world and not as the condition of being in the world, I repeat) that yields that which is at once a feat, a deed, a burden, and artifact.⁷

From this perspective, it is possible to approach the *how* in a more general, even abstract way, without rendering it formal. Inversely, the *how* acquires a materiality unparalleled precisely because the doing resonates (refracts, diffracts, and reflects) the given arrangement of the social context, within which that doing vibrates as a feat, a deed, a burden, or an artifact – even though for the black female that does it, it will more likely be all four at once.⁸

What becomes then of the lexicon and grammar of contemporary art discourse and of classic themes such as aesthetics, intention, appreciation, and the artwork when the figure at its center – namely subjectivity – is not the one doing the organizing? Here I mean that this figure, which as Saidiya Hartman reminds us, is not available to enslaved black women, is therefore only very problematically retrievable by the black female scholar researching the archives of colonial and racial violence. Obviously, I am not delineating an easy task here. But I am not about to undertake the work – the feat! This is a sketchy presentation of the problematic.

All I have to offer are bits and pieces.⁹

Let me say a little more about the shift in thinking that would welcome such figuring of sensibility. Here I have in mind *how* black women exist; *how* we do intellectual, artistic, and life work; *how we do* teaching and mentoring, traveling, loving, caring, visiting, nesting, healing. Notionally, in light of the prevalence of a formal approach to the aesthetic, many of these other doings would not receive immediate attention in a piece that addresses an art audience (however we want to define it here). Fortunately, however, I have evidence to the contrary, such as, for instance, both Simone Leigh's *The Waiting Room* and other similar works, which have a place in contemporary art spaces. This is significant because this work as well as others try and recuperate and restore healing as an art, and bring the whole body (and not only the five senses) as well as sensing and the sensuous back to where they belong, that is, considerations that aesthetics refers to anyway.¹⁰ When doing so, as practices and performance, Leigh's work and others collapse the fundamental separation of body and mind,

which is the condition of possibility for Kantian, as well as Adorno's and others' versions of, aesthetics. Now it is precisely because aesthetics (in a post-Enlightenment rendering) requests the formal subject that it needs to be the first site of excavation before one moves into considerations of themes such as the artist's intention, public appreciation, and the artwork. Though of course, considering all three is crucial for a conversation about the work art does – of art's own doings, so to speak.¹¹

Most generally, the task proposed here has to deal with the very notion of the aesthetic and with whether or not it is possible to rescue it from its conditions of emergence. More particularly, it involves, or should involve, a consideration of whether it is possible to extricate the formal in the Kantian sense (which has to do with the a priori as well as the rules and laws for knowing) from the form in the Aristotelian sense (which has to do with the shape of a given composition or thing). My view, as you might already anticipate, is that this extrication is not only possible, but urgently needed.¹²

What would this involve? For one thing, as mentioned earlier, it call for another description of the world and of the human's position in it. For instance, whether or not the thing (which is always a composition) under consideration comes into existence through working out a certain intention, an engagement with it should take the steps necessary for the dissolution of the subject presupposed in Kantian and later formulations of aesthetics. It must be critical, in the sense that it must consider the texts and discourses which have already apprehended it; it must do the necessary groundwork, the excavations and exposures of its various significations and their effects. It must also, at the same time, be creative; that is, poethical, in the sense that when attending to the thing, as a singular existent, it also attends to the various dimensions of the social (juridic, economic, and ethical) context with an explicit orientation towards decolonization (or the return of the total value expropriated [violently extracted] from native lands and slave labor).¹³

When the aesthetic is approached with this image of the world it is possible to image a kind of sensibility that can sit before and with black women's creations, both our intellectual and artistic doings, and be able to appreciate that, as singular expressions from a certain condition of this world, they immediately and instantaneously already arrest the viewer's (or reader's or listener's) yearning to remain in/different to it. For they participate in a fractal image of the world: one in which the artist's intention, the appreciator, and the material worked, for

instance, are deeply implicated in quantic, organic, historic, and cosmic moments and, as such, participate in the burden, feat, deed, and artifact.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, such a sensibility requests the kind of sociality I have in mind when I consider a description of the world that attends to difference but does not presume separability – the kind of sociality that does not foreground violence. To reiterate, this sensibility is not that of the Kantian subject of the sublime, which Spivak misreads so aptly in her account of the workings of cultural difference in Kantian philosophy. For one thing, this sensibility does not prefigure the subject of the decision, which is the one predicated when Kant describes aesthetic judgment as being within the perimeters of the understanding.¹⁵ Instead of a formal position of address, this kind of sensibility appreciates the given material (quantic) condition of deep implicancy. That is, it takes into account – without rendering it as discourse – how the fact that all that exists is also and only a re/de/composition of basic material constituents, which, through uncountable transitions and transmissions, enter in the formation of the world through processes such as *calor* (heat) and *labor* (work).¹⁶

After, and only after, the aesthetic is unconfined by the subject of the understanding and fully offered to the imagination is it possible to contemplate the artist's intention (and not only the black artist, but every artist) released from the grips of determination. Here, however, I echo – if refractly, if you allow me the creation of a word – Simone Leigh's statements that her "primary audience is black women," and that black artists must eventually be able to gaze inwardly. When the infinite, undetermined possibilities which are our creations are not ignored in favor of an anthropological take, when these are approached aesthetically, the black artist's intentions, each singular expression of blackness ([& - &]), or that which cannot but seep into, burden, the feat, and the deed, and the artifact) can be appreciated. When conceived materially, inwardness refers the doing to everything else from which it has inherited its basic constituents – that is: its quarks, leptons, and bosons, as well as every other particle with which these are deeply implicated at any given moment, during which time it is already and not yet part of that singular composition that is the black artist's creation.

Taking the very questions that organize this conversation as a frame for my contribution allowed me, I hope, to circumscribe, to limit what I had to say to what it could/can only be: not an answer but a copy, something which is both a replica and singular. This is obviously an

incomplete assemblage of scattered meditations that came to me when I first looked at the *New York Times* photo of Simone Leigh working on her magnificent piece *Brick House*.¹⁷ These are wanderings that I am honored to share with you as we gather on the occasion of Simone's marvelous achievement, her award of the 2018 Hugo Boss Prize.

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1
Perhaps the most significant aspect of this assertion is the fact that it does not demand a response for questions such as: “Why do black women create?” or “For whom do black women create?” As important as they have been, as generative as they became in the moment when the project was one of articulating black or women (or any subaltern) subjectivity, these questions seem to be caught in the ungodly task of responding to a negation. For this reason, because the question of “how” is not a reaction to a questioning but an invitation to comment, to share, it suggests that the conversation about black women’s creativity (broadly defined) is to be undertaken without being preoccupied by the demand to prove its very possibility.

2
The significance of this shift regarding the task is that, instead of being caught in the presupposed formula *Black Women ≠ White Women* (how many times do we have to state what has from the beginning been the construction that has sustained capital’s expropriative enterprise?), the assertion that black women do/create and the invitation to comment on how leaves undetermined whatever is then named a creation by black women. Meaning, this is not a formula, but an altogether different statement, *Black Women are non-white Women*, one that does not need a solution, that is, proof. I formally present her as $X \Rightarrow -Y + 0$ – in “Hacking the Subject: Black Feminist and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique,” *philoSOPHIA* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 19–41. This figuring of black women is inspired by Hortense Spillers’s “female flesh ungendered” as presented in her classic article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987).

3
Expectedly, this shift also releases considerations of black women and creativity from the endless task modern thought imposes on itself: to deal with the question of Being while at the same time disavowing any gesturing to metaphysics. That is, precisely because blackness is a tool of racial knowledge, a political-symbolic construct that has been inscribed in the global context, as a presupposition and a product of its juridic, economic, and ethic architectures, it is possible to rewrite the infinite judgement as an existential, instead of an ontological, proposition: *Black Women exist as non-white Women*.

4
Released from ontology (and, consequently, from phenomenology, which is but a way to solve modern philosophy’s qualms with metaphysics), black women’s

creations become something other than *objects* to be (or not to be) appreciated, critiqued, or consumed. Note that I am not saying that they will/should not be appreciated, critiqued, or consumed. What I am proposing is that the creations always already placed outside the scenes of (economic and ethic) value host more than a different version of these scenes; they also gift a whole different context.

5
What distinguishes *black women’s* creations is precisely how they refigure the creative itself. Instead of actualizations or effects of a separate and self-determined entity who draws from a given (presented as particular or universal) interior (essential) or exterior (causal) condition, they can (and perhaps should) be approached as everything else that is of the world; that is, as *re/de/compositions* of the elementary constituents of all that happens and exists. Put differently, they are approached as singular expressions of the world imaged as the play of infinity and not conceived of as a universe of the theater of determinacy. Different versions of this proposition appear in recent texts, including my essay “In the Raw,” *e-flux journal*, no. 93 (September 2018) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/>.

6
Spelling out how this breaks away from modern “metaphysics” – with the theme of the transcendental – is beyond the scope of this commentary. Let me just elaborate on the distinction between sensibility and subjectivity. The target here is, obviously, Immanuel Kant’s move, one which happens very early in his *Critique of the Pure Judgment*, but which is also already announced in *Critique of Pure Reason*. The move can be described as the distinction between sensibility and subjectivity; on the one hand, sensibility refers to the moment of engagement with the things of the world, which affect the human in the moment of knowledge, as appearances, that is, as already apprehended by the pure (transcendental) intuitions of time and space. On the other hand, subjectivity refers to the moment of engagement with impressions or representations of the things of the world (including the human itself), but here through the most fundamental mediation, which is that of the pure intuition of time – as the determinant of the inner sense and of the unification of appearances and their representations under concepts – which supports the Kantian statement that knowing is but determinacy. Undermining this distinction, that is, both the terms and the separation of sensibility and subjectivity, is, in

my view, a crucial move towards dissipating the effects of the power of raciality and the juridic, economic, and ethical architectures it supports.

7
An important step in this task, I find, is to retrieve *existence* from its phenomenological and sociological apprehensions, to release her from the grid of the archives of slavery – where Saidiya Hartman finds her seemingly only available for appropriation or occupation and the grips of the mind and its scientific tools – and release it back to the world where it cannot but support accounts of the human as being part of it along with everything else. Saidiya Harman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14. Now, this is not just a call for replacing the prevailing image of the world with another. Modern thought’s ambition of “discovering” the secondary causes of the things of the world has been effective in terms of enabling the building of a world that operates through and generates violence, both total and symbolic. Any creation that refers to existence in this world, insofar as it is not intended as a celebration of it, is also hopelessly a commentary on its architectures, processes, and procedures of violence.

8
When considering a sensibility that attends to the world as it has become while at the same time imaging the world without the grip of the subject of transcendental reason, I am not proposing that there is a choice – either sensibility or subjectivity – but rather that the latter be subsumed and collapsed in the former. For when the figuration of interiority is rendered another *re/composition* of the “matter” that constitutes the world, the critical task itself becomes open to refashioning, to other procedures, tools, terms.

9
Among other things, I find that this collapsing of subjectivity in/as sensibility allows for considerations of the artistic or the creative in general that take the Kantian lexicon as an object of critical analysis rather than a (usually unacknowledged) point of departure. Such a self-critical exercise in/of contemporary art is, given the current situation of the planet – which is another effect of the “discovery” motif in modern thought and the scientific projects it has promoted – already a belated gesture.

10
If the critical self-engagement seems to be lagging (mostly but not only because the available tools for critique share in the image of the world that needs to come to an end), contemporary art institutions seem (probably because they cannot help it; because it is a survival strategy)

to remain open to invitations and opportunities to respond/attend to whatever captures the imagination at a given global juncture.

11
What would it take for a critical self-engagement to emerge that does not merely reproduce – even if under racial names (black, white, Asian, Latinx) – the formal figuring of subjectivity that organizes the Kantian program for aesthetics?

12
This would have to be a shift at the level of the imagination, rather than the mining of the understanding for old or renewed concepts that describe the world anew without violating the rules of modern signification. Meaning, to do so without rendering nonsense (and outright unacceptable) those things which we take for granted as they have been and will always be. Put differently, it would take nothing less than a crisis of sense (not one of meaning, which might still hold on to the theme of the transcendental) in all its moments – physical, emotional, intellectual, and metaphysical.

13
For it is not only a matter of rethinking using the same procedures and tools for knowing. What is urgently needed is a new approach to thinking itself, one that begins by dissolving the dichotomies (the separations) modern thought has produced to support itself. For this reason, as mentioned before, in addition to new procedures for thinking and their descriptors, movements, and propositions, thinking itself should become and beckon existing, in all its instances.

14
A thinking that is not set above existing is thinking in, with, and about complexity. As such, it must operate with generalities that do not presuppose or presume either identity or equality. Thinking before infinity, without a ground or a horizon, requires, among other things, a close and committed attention to what happens and exists in all that is actual and virtual, possible and potential in it.

15
Regarding the outline of the kind of critical self-engagement that must unfold in parallel and in pace with this shift of thinking, I can think of two crucial contributions to postcolonial theory that deal directly with the Kantian rendering of aesthetics: Gayatri C. Spivak’s “misreading” of modern philosophy, in which she locates the figure of the subaltern in the folds of the Kantian (but also the Hegelian and Marxian) program, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard University Press, 1999), and David Lloyd’s analysis of the Kantian subject

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of representation as a racial figuring and the conditions of possibility for the modern political subject itself, in *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (Fordham University Press, 2018). By locating the colonial and the racial in descriptions of the supposedly all-encompassing (universal realm), Spivak's and Lloyd's texts are helpful guides and resources for assembling the program for critique that addresses the world as it exists, that is, a global context in which state/capital's programs for extraction and expropriation are facilitated by the colonial (juridic) and racial (symbolic) architectures of violence.

16

Thinking beyond the limits of the understanding and in aid of (not against) the imagination does not require a flight as far away from the world as possible – something akin to Kant's solution to Hume's questioning of the universal. Instead, it demands the opposite move: an attention to the world, to its existents and their elementary constituents. For after all, they are also the basic constituents of everything that is known to exist from here/now to the outer edges of the cosmos, that is, since its inception.

17

Michelle Gustafson's photograph of Simone Leigh appears in Robin Pogrebin and Hilarie M. Sheets, "An Artist Ascendant: Simone Leigh Moves into the Mainstream," *New York Times*, August 29, 2018
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/29/arts/design/simone-leigh-sculpture-high-line.html>.

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