IN CONVERSATION WITH

FRIDA ORUPABO

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Arthur Jafa, *Abeokuta, Nigeria*, 2012

ARTHUR JAFA: **I guess the first thing I want to ask, is if you could just share some thoughts regarding your sense of yourself as an 'artist'?**
FRIDA ORUPABO: I don't think I even regard myself as an artist. I think that term is very difficult to use on myself. On the one hand, I think, having no education whatsoever, I feel it's a bit strange to define myself as an artist when there are so many people who have had many years of schooling, practicing, and struggling. But also, it is strange because I feel like what I am doing is not art.

How would you define art?
My own stuff wasn't called art until it was in a gallery where it could be sold and where people could view it. Intuitively I link the concept of art to something institutionalized, though it obviously doesn't have to be. For me, the things that I have been doing are not linked to art at all, it's just a part of life, it's the things you do, to manage, it's my way of speaking and communicating. Though sometimes I do use the term because people understand it, but I would rather say that I'm a sociologist or a social worker, these terms are easier to apply to myself.

Because of your training?
Yeah, you're working with it, you have an education in it, but also there's just something about the term 'artist.' It's a very Western term, as well, the understanding of being an artist, as something linked to an institution and everything that is attached to it: selling, the capitalist part of it. There are many things about it that I don't like.

How would you describe what you do, in your best sense?
I'm puzzling with things. I could have been writing, but I'm not good at it, and I'm not confident when it comes to writing or speaking, so instead of doing that I am puzzling, going through books and the Internet, finding things I like, playing around with it.

It's something I have done since I was very young, so it's very much a part of my daily routine, like eating, going to the toilet, going to work, going home, then I do these things, then I go to bed. Then it repeats itself. I don't have a focus or goal in terms of showing, or getting an opinion on what I'm doing, or having to explain it. It wasn't until 2017, that I showed my work, in your show, and before that it was just lying around on Instagram for the people who cared.

I feel that if you call something 'art' it's then a thing that you should say something about.

What do you mean?
You should have an opinion about it, like whether you can define it as art or not. I think I'm more interested in things that are not called or defined as art. The places I go and look for inspiration are, of course, linked to other artists, but for the most part they are people that are unknown or things that would not be defined as art or given value.

You smiled when you said that. Why do you like those things, as opposed to art? What is it about these things that you think art doesn't do, or can't do, or isn't interested in doing? How would you distinguish the things that you are attracted to and the things that you make, from art?
I think you reduce it when you start to name things. When you name things as 'art' you already reduce the thing, for me. The feeling it can give me is already defined. I think when you go out to look, it's like going to a second-hand store where there is a lot of shit but you can find gold, and then you have second-hand stores where they already picked nice things, special things that you should like, and that's not so much fun. I think when you go to look at things that are not art that's the way you create things, that's where the process starts.

I like it dirty, I like it unclean, undefined, so I can also define it and use it for my own self.

You talked about finding things so that you can define them, what does that entail? In your mind, how does that feel when you define them? You say you like things dirty, you like things not clean, what is that about?
[laughs] You use it, like you can use it for your own self. It has not been played with, it's fresh, so you take it and you use it for the things that you want to make.

You have two primary modes that I'm familiar with in your expressive practice, whether it's an art practice, or whatever. I'm not saying those are the only two you have, but you have these two primary modes: one is your collages, which are sometimes framed, sometimes not, but they are pictures that you compose.

And then there is your Instagram feed which sometimes contains some of those collages, but I think it is a distinct thing unto itself. How would you describe those two things?
They are not separated. Do you mean the collages, also like the physical collages versus the Instagram, or do you mean the collages on Instagram?

I'm saying, you make these physical collages, you make actual pictures, like a material object, that is generally contained, has a frame, or dimensions, borders. And then you do this whole other thing on Instagram that is a stream or selection in a sense, which sometimes can include some of your collages, or it can really include anything.
It's the lazy me. Instagram is the lazy Frida. For the collages, then you actually need to stand up, and you need to fetch materials, using your legs, and you need to cut, and you need to print.

It was you that made me make my collages physical. I had been making collages for a long time, but they were just living on my computer. I never tried to print them out, or to cut them, or anything.

But you had your books? You showed me the books you'd done.
Yes, it was still on the Internet, everything was still digital. I made a book digitally, and then I got someone to print it out. That is the way I've been working for a long time. In many ways it's related, but to work with something physical is also lovely, and when I started to do that I saw that I actually missed doing something physical, with my hands.

So they are related but it's not the same because it's a different expression. Even though it's the same collage, once you take it out and start to work on it, it becomes something totally different.

I have enjoyed that very much—first at Serpentine, and then at Berlin—to see how something that I thought was a finished product can change when you start to print it out and when you use certain materials. And now I'm starting to think about whether I can use other types of materials.
I think it has been a good process because it pushes me to think differently, so that I don't only have to work on the computer with digital art, I can also do something else with it.

It sounded like you were saying that your Instagram feed, in a sense,

preceded this other new mode that you're using which is actually making physical artifacts; you were doing the Instagram thing, which has its own life, and this other thing sort of grew out of it?

It grew out of it because I was going to exhibit something, in your exhibition. After you said, 'Make something big in scale,' I got very nervous, and I was thinking, 'What can I do?' It made me think, 'Let me try this thing.'

So, one thing led to another, but there were still the collages, like you say, they have been part of my Instagram since the beginning.

Those are things you are composing, as opposed to just sequencing other people's materials. I had a conversation—which is also going to be in *Cahiers d'Art*—with Mark Leckey, and it's interesting how he talks about many of his things in a similar way: they just exist in the computer. Then part of his process has been, not so much how you get them out of the computer, but how the process of transposing them from the computer into the real world is a big part of what he's doing. A lot of things about these artifacts are inextricably tethered to having been immaterial in the beginning.

It's very interesting, his history was similar to mine in the sense that his career, such as it was, began with a video. He was an artist, he went to art school, actually, and he was included in a show with Damien Hirst, early in his career, but he didn't really have a career, he just had this one piece that got included in this big show and he had a total meltdown. He basically didn't make any work for ten years, not anything finished or shown.

Then, Gavin intervened and he made this videotape called *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*. That's similar to my trajectory too, from making a video, and even though I've always imagined making things, all these other things are now sort of coming out of the video.

But what's curious to me, and that made me think of you when he said it, was what he was saying about *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*, which is made from archival footage. He was saying that at a certain point he started wondering if he was doing anything more than just pointing to things that are cool. Like, what am I doing? Am I just pointing to things that I think are great?

There's nothing wrong with that, and this is a lot of what I think I do too, on a certain level. Yes, I do think I have some skills which determine how to put things together, but to a certain degree, largely all I'm doing is taking shit that I think is cool and just stringing it all together. You know what I mean? At base, that's what it is; I think these things are cool independent of whether I sequence them or not, they're just cool in and of themselves.

It's almost like you have a vehicle and you're trying to take a trip, but you can only fit so many people in one vehicle, so the question becomes what do you put in and what do you leave out? It's like your school is going to the debate club and you have to select which students are going to represent the whole student body, you can't take everybody so you have to be very selective about who you take.

Like I said, you came to mind when I thought about it. I was like, wow, I hadn't really thought before that a real similarity between me, you, and Mark is how this essentially immaterial structuring of visual phenomenon—most of which is 'archival' or found—is very central, or has been very central, to our process, or what it is that we're doing. That's something I'm super curious about, because like you said earlier, you've been doing this since you were a kid, in some form or fashion. I know the same thing happened with me. I was making the physical books first, and then once I got my computer, YouTube, the Internet, and all these things became easily available, and accessible in a sense. I wouldn't have used the word lazy, when you said, 'I'm lazy,' [laughs] but it is so much quicker, it's fluid. It's like fishing in a goldfish bowl, on a certain level. A downside of it is that it's contained, but it's such a large goldfish bowl.

But anyway, I'm just curious in terms of your thinking about the relationship, tension, or complementary nature between your Instagram process, the process of your feed, and making objects or artifacts.

I'm not sure if I agree that if you collect things, that you're just pointing to things that you like or you find cool, like, 'Check it out.' I think you are still creating. Even if I were only to use other people's images, I will still create something new.

Describe that. How does that work, in your mind? What you're doing with your Instagram, when you select things and you put them in an order, how would you articulate that this creates something new?

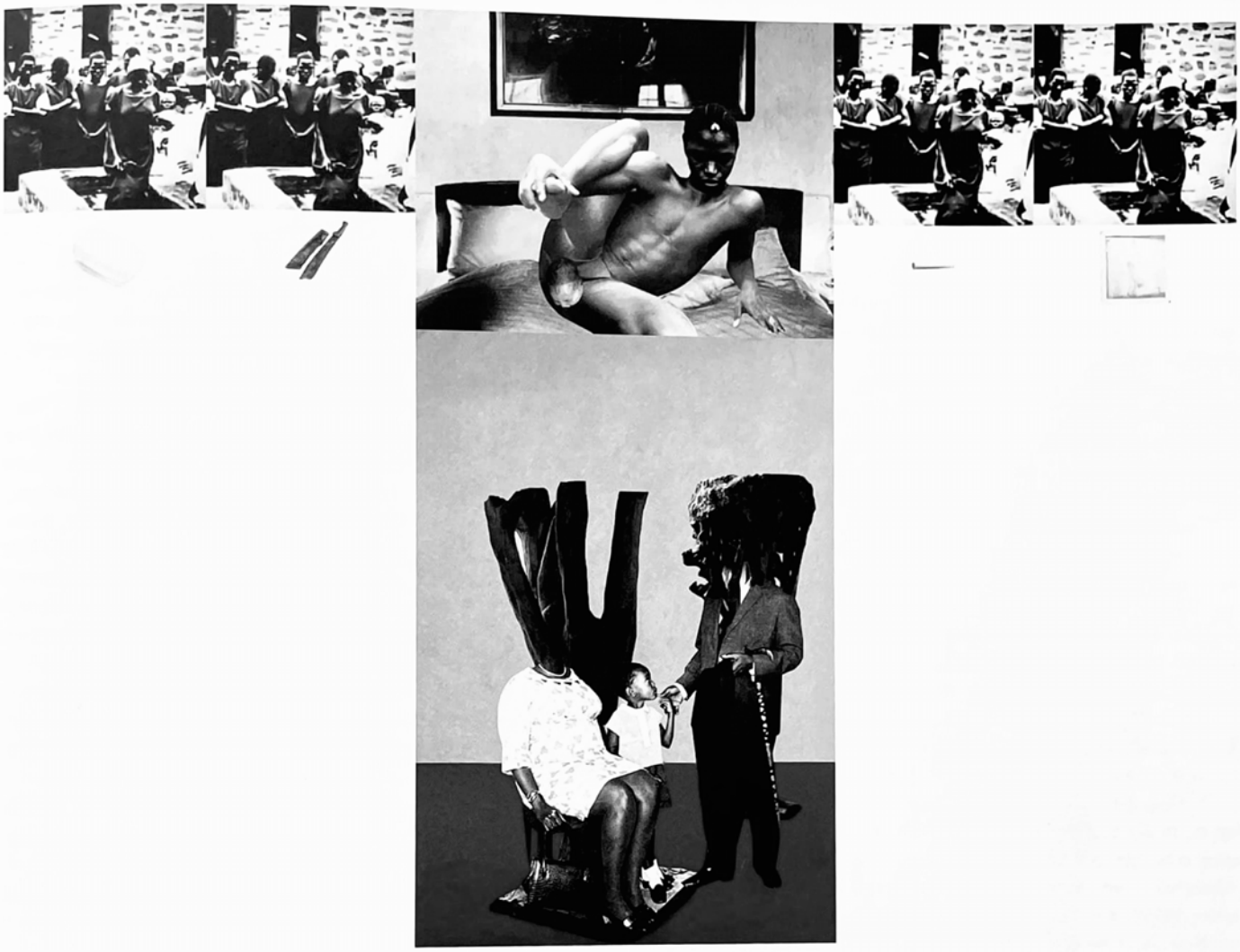
Because it's my own interpretation. If you take one photo from one place, and you mix it with another photo, video, or text from another place, you create something new, you give it a new meaning. It comes from you; you want to say something that that artist originally didn't attempt to say. Then, the people who look at this will in turn create yet another meaning, or opinion about it, so in that sense you constantly create something new.

Also, sometimes you will cut things, you will change the color a bit. Maybe that is disrespectful, I don't know how I would be feeling if someone did it to my stuff, but you manipulate it. So that's what I mean, it's not just to point out like, 'Hey watch this video,' or 'This artist is great.' You make it yours, for better or for worse. Probably there are many artists that would say, 'I don't like it, why did she change the color or cut out the head?' But you do what you have to do, and you make it yours.

When it comes to the relationship between my collages and my Instagram—not only my collages but the things that I do that are physical—I don't know how I can explain it, but it's like you just go further with an idea. On Instagram, maybe it's not lazy, but there's a bigger freedom to Instagram, because when you are making things physically then you need materials, you need to find out what to work with. Like, right now I want to do something, like installation, sculpture, something technical. I don't have the skills, so it might take me ten years before I manage to do so, or maybe never, you know.

It won't take ten years because the thing about it is that in the art world there are so many technical skills that most people... Even Richard Serra is not pouring any metal, or anything, even though he's making these super large sculptures that are very distinguishably a Richard Serra piece, he's not physically making any of those things, and that's just part of the process now. You see the Sistine Chapel, on a certain level I don't know if it's that different from that, fundamentally, because at the end of the day one person can't paint the Sistine Chapel, it's just impossible in terms of man-hours, right? So, it means ultimately you've got to mobilize other people's skill sets, to execute what it is that you have in mind.

I know from my own recent experience, you have ideas and then a big part of it is just having somebody, and for me it was



Frida Orupabo, *Untitled*, 2017
Digital collage

Gabriella; they assigned Gabriella to my tire projects. For her, she wasn't really thinking about it creatively at all, she was just thinking in purely mechanical terms, 'You say you need a tire, where do we find the tires?' And then once you locate the tires, the question becomes, why this tire versus another tire? And then those are the things that, to a certain extent, only I can say. So then they would fly me there, I would look at the tires, 'Yo, I thought I wanted 12-foot tires but those look too big.' Or 'I prefer these tires better,' you know what I mean? And then you just have the tire, but the tire itself is not the piece, there are all these other things that have to independently—

It's really not completely different from creating a compilation, like your Instagram feed or my books or anything like that. You are selecting things, but you actually have to move around and physically select the different components and then you bring them together.

But what about money? Money will also be an issue, right?

It's always money. For example, with the tires it strictly came down to: you have to pay somebody's salary to go find these things, you've got to buy a ticket to fly out there and look at them in person, and then you've got to have a truck to deliver to X, Y, and Z, and then you've got to hire a crane to get them in the space. Do you go up the elevator or if they're too big, do you take the wall out? And then when you get them on the top floor there's a certain weight that they have that means you can only put them in certain places because the floor can't support the weight. So you have pre-designated spots where you can put them or not put them.

I initially wanted the things the wheels hung on on the wall. That wasn't even remotely possible! Because the walls couldn't bear the weight, you know? So, you're constantly... It really is about mobilizing resources, money, other people's time, whatever you want to call it. It's about mobilizing resources and then, in some ways, calibrating what you end up with.

Which I don't think is fundamentally that different to the Instagram feed. You have to locate things, and you may tweak them a little bit, but you put those things in relationship to the other things.

I'm trying not to impose my own thinking on it too much, but it seems to me that the most powerful ready term is a term that I've used a couple of times, which I appropriated from my friend, John Akomfrah, when he says that fundamentally what you're doing is taking things and putting them in some affected proximity to one another. You take a thing that has a vibe or a feeling, and you put it next to another thing that has a vibe or a feeling, and then you introduce another thing that has a vibe or a feeling, and at a certain point those things do create an accumulative art.

Your Instagram feed has a distinct tone, to me. I've gone from the very first ones which are still online, right up to the present, and I was curious to see whether it has changed. Has it evolved at all? It certainly has evolved, but the biggest evolution we see is kind of early. What you can see in the beginning is a little bit like a photo album, almost like, 'OK, I made this photo album so I can put pictures of my friends and family in here.'

Then there's a point at which you can tell it becomes less about the friends and family, than the effect of putting the friends and family in this structure. And then you start thinking about, well I'm going to put things in here of people I don't know, or people I don't know as intimately. So, early on you can really see the bigger shift, but after you make that initial move from the purely personal, into something that's, in a way, *more* personal, it's more social in a way. In the end it becomes more subjective, or it seems to move into a more subjective space. Then it's harder to tell how it's evolving.

What is subjective, what do you mean by that?

By subjective, I mean it's really in your head. It's less to do with, 'I said a word and Frida heard that word and reacted, and then I reacted to her reaction.' That's social, to me. But there's a point at which you said a word and it's just in my head, it's not necessarily coming back out, it's not in the exchange, I'm just having an internal engagement with it.

So, you put one image down which has a certain meaning, but that meaning is deflected, necessarily, by the image that preceded it. I mean, it's a chain of things, it's not just one thing. Even when you had your show at Gavin's, you did have pictures on the wall, it was arranged on that floor, and of course they inform each other because you can see it's the same person's hand, but it's still not quite the same thing as an Instagram feed, or a film, where the things are fixed. Such as, this touches this there, and then the next thing touches this there, in terms of time or space. So those things end up deflecting the meaning of the thing that preceded it and the thing that follows it.

You have some images that I would call, 'empty images.' There are no figures in the image, sometimes it could just be the side of a wall, or some frame from a film where there's nothing in it. It's almost like white noise; they're like white noise images, it doesn't have any content, per se. And to see that thing by itself is one thing, but to see that thing in the context of having looked at your feed before, is a completely other experience, because it's the difference between silence and no noise. To me no noise is the place where there is no silence, and there is no sound, but silence is a place where we expect sound, but the sound is not now present. The potential of sound is always there but it's not present. It's like, if you go to a party and everyone stops talking, then that's silence. Everybody got silenced. But if it's a space where nobody is there, that's not silence, it's different.

So, I guess what I'm saying is that you have these empty images, but they're in the context of all these other images that are not empty, as opposed to just a series of empty images.

I'm really curious to know, when you're composing your Instagram feed, are you just thinking about what's right in front of you? Are you thinking, let's say, 'I'm going to put this image out, I like this image, I'm going to put it up, but I'm not thinking about it in relationship to what I put up last week'?

No, no, no. Not at all. I wish! It's not a coincidence, what I put out in relationship to one another. Also, with the color. That's why I'm trying to do better, because many times the aesthetic trumps the message. Yeah. I think that is an illness I have.

An illness?

Yes. Even if it's a strong statement, or it's really speaking to what I feel, if the composition or the colors don't work, I cannot put it out. I need to take it away. For me that is a bad thing, in a sense, that is something I work with.

Bad in what way?

Politically. [laughs] If I want to say something, I need to say it. You

Frida Orupabo, *Untitled*, 2017
Digital collage

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Figure 19. MELANCHOLY. 1894–95.

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cannot think about what color your dress is; for me, this is linked to being... How do you say, when you are very fond of how you look, or it's more important?

Narcissism?

Yeah, maybe a bit. But what are you thinking? [laughs]

Well no, I was just confused because you were saying it's not good, or it's bad. Again, I'm trying not to put words in your mouth, and I don't want to collapse what you're saying into what I think, but I know that a lot of times when I choose a certain thing, it has very little to do with any conscious political or thematic intent. It has very little to do with meaning. Sometimes it's just vibe. I like the way one thing vibrates, and that vibration is based on form, color, all these kinds of things, but not the semiotic content of the image, you know?

If it's an image of Black people, yes, I'm attracted to images of Black people, period. But you could give me a thousand images of Black people and I would not feel compelled to use them at all, because they don't dance, they don't have any musicality, and I'm just appropriating terms, these aren't the right terms. I mean, I'll probably just say they don't have a vibe, they don't have a vibration I want.

Your thing is really specific, so when I see it, I can see the vibration or vibe that you like. What I'm calling the empty images, which are a large part of your thread, I would say they are the equivalent of what they call the 'pillow shots,' of Yasujiro Ozu, the Japanese master and filmmaker. When the Western cinema studies people first looked at and analyzed his work, they realized he has these shots that they termed 'pillow shots,' and there's really not a direct equivalent of them in Hollywood or Western films.

His films are narrative films, they're generally about people, Japanese families, dealing with whatever they're dealing with. He would have a scene where something happens, you know, a daughter tells her father, 'I'm not going to move back home.' That might be the scene. Then you have these shots of the interiors of these homes. But that's all they are, shots of the interiors of their homes, nothing happens in them, you don't return to them. In Hollywood, if you show the inside of a house, one then expects something is going to happen in that space, or when you see the outside of the house that something is going to happen either outside or inside of that house. But Ozu would have these scenes, and nothing ever happens in those houses, you would never see those houses again. It's just almost as if he's saying, 'I'm showing you these interiors where there's social interaction going on, and I'm going to show you another interior where there's some more social interaction going on, and now I'm going to show you an interior where there's no social interaction.' And it just seems to be part of a pattern or cadence, or his sense of flow.

I feel like there's a part of your thread, where it is in the sequencing where your fingerprints are, or where your voice is—and that's why it's fascinating to me. Despite the fact that on a certain level it is a compilation of things, some of which you made yourself but most of which you didn't make.

I think it's connected to Duchamp and the readymade and all this kind of stuff: how can you make a thing without making a thing? By putting a urinal in the middle of an art space, what did he do? What did he make? He didn't actually affect the material dimension of the thing at all, he just took this thing and moved it from here to there. And so, I'm very curious about that, because I do think everybody—I'm going to cut this out, I'm definitely not going to use it in the interview, this part I'm saying—is definitely on the other side of the urinal. Everyone's trying to figure out what's on the other side of whatever Duchamp was able to do with that piece, and I think it's completely bound up with how Black people operate in a certain kind of way. This is just my sense of it. There's something about taking a thing, particularly a thing that you didn't necessarily materially create, and putting it in—as John would say—some proximity to another thing, and how that creates something new. Just by putting this thing there, a new thing got created.

You said something very much earlier in the conversation, when I asked you about art and being an artist, you said it's easier to see yourself as a sociologist, or 'I'm more comfortable with that because I was trained.'

As soon as you said that, I personally flinched a little bit, not because I don't think it's true, but in the same way, I don't like now the way people say, 'Oh, AJ does these books, or he did these books, and super central to all his stuff is just basically a variation of doing the books.' I'm very resistant to that because I think it's a simplification. I made the books because I had ideas in my head. The books are not my ideas, they're not generated ideas, they are a way of trying to register the ideas, but the ideas preceded the books, just like the ideas preceded the files on my computer.

I get what people are saying, but I'm resistant, so when you said the sociology thing, I was like... Because I know the way people try to impose some sort of, 'Oh, she's a sociologist, so that must be a deep structure for what she's doing.' But I think your work would resist that, because there's nothing I would term sociological about your work at all, except for the fact that you're using things taken from different places.

But I'm curious now, having said this, to know what you think the relationship is between your daily practice and profession as a sociologist and this other practice that you have? How do those things relate to one another, or how *don't* they relate. How do they inflect one another, if at all? It seems like they would have to, in some respect.

Yeah. It has to some extent. I don't use much of what I studied at the university, but my work is still very sociological. Part of sociology is about how society, institutions, culture, impact us as human beings, but also how we impact culture and society, how we shape and are shaped, from societal structures, to family relationships etc.

Just to take the book I made in 2016, this was very much linked to my family history, using personal archives and putting it into a bigger context. Take depression or anger—it's personal but it's also linked to something bigger. Why am I so angry? Or how do we become who we are? Why do I think the things I think? What kind of relationship do I have with my mom, my dad, my sister, my partner? I think that is sociology right there. I find the link between the private and the political very interesting.

In your artistic work or in your sociological work?

I think also in my artistic work. For example, take the family I come from, to not just see my family members as mom, dad, and sister, but to see that we are two mixed kids, with one white and one Black parent. How is that interpreted from the outside? How do people understand it in a social, historical, and cultural context? And how does that impact me and the way I understand my family, you know? And also, how are

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Black people talked about and understood, how are they constructed and how does that affect us?

You want to do your work, but when you work with Black bodies it's made into something political right away. If you work with white bodies it's neutral, it's like a person, it's not a group or doesn't represent a culture or something political. There's no other way around it. Or what do you think?

Yeah, I think it's kind of impossible. I mean, it's hard to imagine how people will read 'Black work' 400 years from now. I don't know how people will read it. But if you're in Italy and you see some Greek or Roman sculpture, I think there were aspects to it in the time, in the context, that were real and concrete and present that we don't even get now. We just see it as a human being, a male figure, just some basic kinds of things that are retained hundreds of years later. For example, one thing that comes up for me, in *Love Is the Message* in particular, there has been a tendency to frame it as almost like a Black Lives Matter kind of art. [laughs] You know what I mean? Just on a socio-political dimension of Black people getting killed, or something like that.

Which clearly is a part of it, I'm not in denial about that, but it just seems to me people couldn't as readily access how so much of it had to do with how I feel when I stand in front of a Bernini sculpture, or something. Like *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*.

To me, a big part of *Love Is the Message*, in particular, is very much bound up with the kind of expression that I see in Michelangelo or Bernini, with the bodies twisted and taut—all this kind of stuff in Renaissance paintings, and especially pre-Renaissance paintings. When you see human figures that are functioning under a certain kind of pressure: the pressure of existence, the pressure of being in the world but being ungodlike, not being in control of the world, operating in a world that acts on you, and then you are constantly trying to manage how that world is acting on you. Which is human. But I would say, for Black people in particular, it's something that's overdetermined, this whole idea that the world acting on you seems to have something extra: it's got extra gravity, or extra weight, or extra intentionality. It doesn't seem as arbitrary, let's say. And that seemingly extra dimension of non-arbitrariness is a big part of what I feel it means to be Black.

Since I've known you, you've talked about your family, and it's a known thing that your mom is white and your dad is from Nigeria. So I know that, that's been pretty on the surface, but I've very seldom heard you say, 'I am the product of a white mother and a Black father,' or 'I am bi-racial,' not that you use that term.

I know a lot of 'bi-racial' people, people who have one white parent and one Black parent, and sometimes they read as that and sometimes they don't.

Being a Southerner, meaning I'm from the south in the United States, from Mississippi, I can't say I can *always* tell—I'm not saying that—but I'm super sensitive to the identity thing, like, where it sits. You always read me as Black, as nothing but Black. You could have told me you had two white parents, and I still would have been like, 'But you're Black!' [laughs] You know what I mean? But to me it's fascinating how in the context of somewhere like Oslo, you're raised by a white mom, primarily, your dad really didn't seem to raise you at all, but at the same time—and I guess that goes into the space of the epigenetic—clearly you have some level of saturation with that Blackness theme, to me.

I have a really, really close friend named Melinda whose parents are white, both of them are white, but she just reads as Black to me. She's in some ways the only person that I've ever met who has two white parents, who absolutely reads as Black to me. When I met her, it short-circuited ideas I had about this stuff. I could say something very flippant about it, like she's just cool like Black people are cool, but I know some cool white people, but they're white people, you know what I mean? But my friend Melinda completely short-circuited every preconception I had. I'm looking at pictures of her parents, trying to find some secret presence of Blackness, I know there's something in here! Because this cannot just be arbitrary. It doesn't hurt that she always, as far as I can tell, dated Black men, and she has a Black son, but it's just really weird, like sometimes I do have to remind myself that Melinda is 'white.' It's very strange.

I was really curious to meet your mom, your sister, even to meet Martin, because I was wondering, how did Frida happen? You just seem like some weird kind of anomaly. When I first saw your Instagram feed, of course I saw your friends and your sister. I didn't know whether your friend who had the baby was you. I didn't know if that was Frida, or if Frida was this other person. I couldn't tell whose thread this was. I didn't really know, because your friend seemed 'unambiguously Black.' I'm assuming she has two Black parents, right?

Yes.

OK. But she doesn't seem any more Black than you, to me, she just doesn't. I'm not articulating it super well, but it's one of the more curious things to me. There's a lot of overt stuff, like, you can look at your Instagram feed and it's just full of Black people, so that's one giveaway. But I think even if I hadn't seen that, I would be like, 'oh where is this sister from?' You're just like a sister to me, I don't understand... And I know a lot of 'bi-racial' people who grew up in New York or who grew up in a lot of places, and sometimes there's a dissonance in their identity, that you don't seem to have, or I don't feel it, at least. I'm not saying you don't have any dissonance in your identity, but it doesn't seem to be particularly present.

I'm wondering if you have a sense of that, or is that just how I'm reading you but you don't feel like that?

What you say fits my experiences of growing up in Norway, in a culture where I never was allowed to be fully Norwegian. Experiences with racism and with people always asking me 'where are you *really* from.' I never felt a hundred percent at home here. As a result I ended up rejecting what was denied me. So my identity has been kind of a slow construction, starting with my father not being in the picture and growing up in a very white environment.

What do you mean, you started off as a construction?

Construction in the sense that I didn't have access to my father's culture, so when I say constructed, I mean that I went to look for different bits and pieces to create something that resembled a wholeness.

So, you think you built your identity as a Black person? Is that what you said?

I think we all build our identity, in some ways. [laughs]

Sometimes, I don't know about that. [laughs] I don't know if we build our identity, I think a lot of times that shit is built for us... [laughs] Maybe we try to unbuild or deconstruct our identities. I

don't know about most people, but I know a lot of people are not building their identities, their identities are kind of built for them.

But you understand what I mean, I didn't have this source, I didn't get it in with the mother's milk. My mother represents a white culture, a Norwegian culture, this is the woman who raised me. So, from early on, before I met people who influenced me, I found influence in magazines, music, and movies etc. I had to gather things up because my identity as Norwegian was rejected, as I said, I was not allowed to be Norwegian. Every time people asked me, 'Where do you come from?' and I said Sarpsborg, which is my home city, the city I was born in, people said, 'No, you are not! You have to be adopted.' That forces you, in a way, to look elsewhere.

I had to create a sense of self from within this whiteness. My father was never spoken of. People would look at my sister and say, 'You look like your mom.' And then they looked at me and they were like, no comment. He was not even mentioned. It was like, 'Am I adopted, really? This is crazy.' So, when you don't have anything to hold onto, or build on, you just need to start from the bottom and try to build something.

See, that's really fascinating what you're saying to me. Again, this is me interjecting my own shit into your shit, so I apologize for that. But it's very similar to me, like in a way when I think about what makes Obama Black? Why is he Black? The most straightforward answer would be because of Michelle. [laughs] I think Michelle Obama sort of verifies him as a Black man, but beyond that I think, in a really more serious and complicated sense, what is it about Obama, how did he arrive at his Blackness? Because again, his father wasn't around, he was raised by a white mom, and he was raised in a very white social space. There are not very many Black people in Hawaii. It's not like he had a white mom and was raised in Chicago, where there are a lot of Black people around. No, he was in Hawaii. So, I'm very curious about that.

It seems to me, what I'm thinking as you're describing your process of constructing an identity, that in some ways what makes you Black is less the fact that you have an African dad, than the constructed-ness of it, which is what makes it Black. It's why Black people are not necessarily the same thing as African people. Even though Black people tend to be, in almost 99.9 % of examples, of African descent, but the Blackness is a slightly different thing. So when you say, 'There was nothing, in the absence of being designated as Norwegian, I ended up constructing this other thing, in which I would be termed Black.' It seems to me that you experienced something like this, that you had to orient yourself in the air, in freefall.

I've increasingly begun to think that that is a fundamental component of Blackness. Not just being of African descent, but how do you manage being of African descent in these contexts in which there is no firm grounding to be that thing. Does that make sense? In other words, it's defined less by where you land, than by the fact that you had to land. The fact that you had to land, and you had to manage the process of landing somewhere, seems to have as much to do with Blackness as the fact that you landed somewhere. I'm super curious about that.

I wanted to ask you, when you were describing arriving at this identity in the absence of people identifying you as that Other, do you think that has any bearing on the construction that's happening in your Instagram feed? How you're making a thing, composed of **all these other bits and pieces?**

Yes, because I'm still very angry, and I think that anger is linked to my childhood and the silence I met both in society and in my family.

This silence made me unable to speak or express myself, and still today, even though there are things I can now speak about which were impossible for me before, it's through the visuals that I manage to articulate myself.

The things that are going on on my Instagram make perfect sense but it's difficult to articulate it. It's very much linked to experiences. My mom is following me. I think she understands many things, I think this is also a way for her and I to communicate through the visuals without having to communicate.

So, she always follows your thread and she likes things?

She likes many things, yes.

That's sweet. So, you know that whenever you put something out, your mom is always going to see it, right? [laughs]

Yeah! [laughs] But I like it. She sees things that she also finds difficult. There are many things that the two of us find hard to speak about, even today, especially linked to racism. Instagram has been a good experience for both of us, because sometimes she questions things and she asks me about my collages, what they mean and what I was thinking about making them.

Yeah, I can imagine. It would seem to be super affirmative, or affirming, that your mom follows your Instagram feed, yeah or no?

Yeah, affirming in the sense that she sees me, she wants to understand, she's trying to... Yeah, most definitely.

I mean, not even so much her judgment of it, as good or bad, or liking or not liking it, but just the fact that she's attentive to it, would seem to me to be super affirmative. I like your mom, I only met her a few times but I always introduce myself to her. [laughs]

[laughs] She likes you, too. Too much!

Too much? What does that mean, she likes me too much? What's too much? It's not too much, I like her. I like her a lot. I recognized you in her when I met her, which is very different from saying... It's funny how that works because even in my family, with my brothers, as we've gotten older, we've dovetailed, our complexions and everything have gotten closer. But when I was younger in particular I was much darker than my brothers, they all were very fair-skinned and I wasn't, even though, relatively speaking some people would say I'm fair-skinned, I'm always shocked when people say I'm fair-skinned, because I think of myself as dark, you know what I mean? But I'm not dark by comparison with my grandfather, who's Miles Davis dark, but then my grandmother's like Prince. So, it was funny growing up with my mom having a complexion like yours, and then my brothers and my dad are fairer than you, they're actually closer to your sister, or even your mom's complexion! When we were kids in particular. And being the eldest, because I wasn't in-between two siblings, I grew up with these negative fantasies that I had been adopted or something. It contributed to my sense of alienation.

It wasn't so much I looked at my parents and I didn't see myself physically, as much as I looked at my parents and my brothers and I saw their physical relationship just seemed more obvious and more apparent than mine. They seemed like a set, and I seemed like not

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veronicalili_roldan Frida, I learned of your work through AJ, Arthur Jafa, whom I claim a soul-mystic. And I know understand how two geniuses "found each other." I am most grateful I am alive at this moment in time to experience your bombastic art and creativity -- your "quantum intention." Love,

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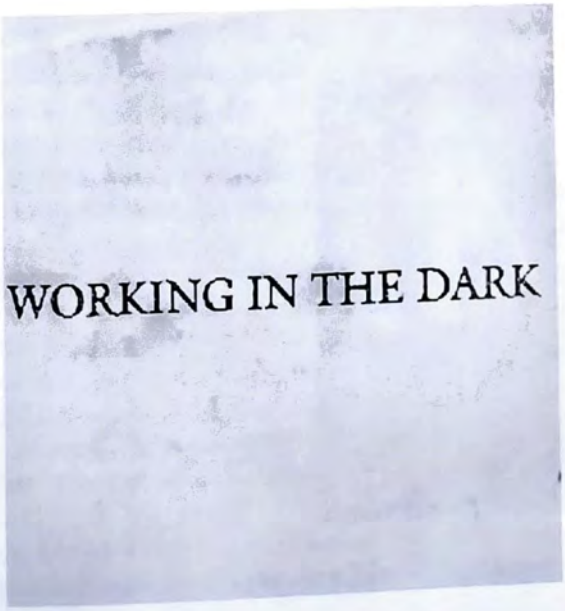

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quite part of the set. An anomaly.

Was it made explicit? When you are very young, you don't see it. I thought I was white Norwegian, and then it came to a point where someone was saying, 'No, you are not.' So, was it pointed out in your family, or outside of your family, that someone was darker or lighter?

No, I couldn't remember a moment where that was the case. My extended family is all over the map in terms of complexion, as I say, my grandfather was very dark-skinned and my grandmother and all her brothers and sisters are very fair-skinned. My grandmother's father was bi-racial, meaning one of his parents was white and one of his parents was Black. So, I have a great-great-grandfather who was white, on my grandmother's side. Now, my grandfather, it didn't seem like that was the case, even though his mom was fair-skinned, he was not at all. On my dad's side of the family, his mom died when he was 13, so obviously I didn't know her, and then my dad's dad died when I was 4 years old, so I don't even remember what he looked like, I just remembered his vibe.

So, nobody ever told me that, I just always had, growing up, a sense of alienation. I felt slightly alienated growing up. It's not either/or, I felt alienated *and* obviously very close and connected to my family. So, it was kind of defined by that.

Inside of my extended family, my cousins and that, it wasn't that I didn't have cousins with the exact same complexion as me, but just in terms of my immediate family, they all seemed fairer or lighter than me, so I grew up with a sense of myself as being dark, darker. Even though, growing up in Mississippi there were a lot of really, really dark people (many in my family). Maybe not as dark as folk in the Sea islands (off the coast of South Carolina) where they weren't intermixed at all, but in the Delta there were Black people who looked like they were as uncut as the Geechee, so that made me very self-conscious of how I read physically.

But do you link that feeling of alienation to your work?

Oh yeah, for sure, but as you get older, or at least as you mature, as you come into a certain stage in your life and your understanding of yourself, you can have explanations for certain things around how you feel that shift. You may feel the same way, but you can have a different explanation that will supplant it.

A lot of what I felt was just intuited. In my family, I could look around and see that my brothers were much fairer than me, my cousins were fairer than me. My uncles' kids, my first cousins, are Sam, Angela, and Harriet. Sam and Angela are my age and they are much fairer than me. But then Harriet was born, and Harriet is brown-skinned, much browner than them; she got her mom's complexion. My Aunt Helen was very brown-skinned, but my mom's brother, my uncle, was very, very fair-skinned. The first two kids got his complexion, which of course he got from my grandmother who was very fair-skinned, but then their third child, Harriet, when she was born, she was strikingly darker than anybody in her family and closer to my complexion.

I remember being very close to her when we were little, when she was a baby I used to hold her; I was really a little fixated on her, when she was 4 or 5 and I was maybe 12 or something. I held her a lot, and I think it was just that I identified with her—we were close like that.

These questions of identity... And not identity in the sociological sense of, 'we designate you as Black, and you as white, or whatever categories.' But how it feels on the inside is bound up with feeling in relationship to: do you feel included? Do you feel excluded? Do you feel accepted? Do you not feel accepted? When you walk into a store do people look at you as if you're going to steal something, instead of looking at you to help you?

In the context of Oslo, have you ever had experiences like that? There was a drugstore in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where I grew up called Rexalls, and they had a comic-book rack. I was obsessed with comic books, so, growing up, I would constantly be in that drugstore looking at the comic books, and I don't think there was a single instance in which I went in there, that I didn't feel eyes on me as if I was going to steal something. I felt that from being a baby probably, that I was being looked at.

I don't want to say that it warped, but it shaped my sense of all these kinds of things. My sense of entitlement. Even now, when I'm having a show at Gavin's, I have a very particular awareness of my presence in the space. It's not just, I'm AJ in this space trying to make space for AJ, I'm also AJ in the space operating as a 'not white' being. I'm very conscious of that.

When you had your show, I was very conscious that, 'Frida is a Black person who is a friend of mine, someone I feel close with.' It wasn't just, 'Frida, my friend, is in the show.' It's like, 'Frida, my friend, who is Black, who is a woman, is in the show.' These things are very on the surface for me; it's not incidental data. They're very much on the surface and on a certain level you're trying to open up that space, like with this whole *Cahiers d'Art* thing, one of the things that's really interesting to me is I've been thinking about who I'm including in the issue.

The other day, when I was talking to Anya, I said, 'In some ways I could see this whole issue could have just been me, Dana, and Torkwase. Dana is white. Torkwase is not.' And I was like, what is that tension for me? I definitely wanted to include you, but I was like, I've just done these big things with Frida, there's no missionary agenda, it's not like... I want to have her have a show, I want her in the catalogue... You know, like this. Also because we have other things coming up.

I said to them, 'If we had to strip it down, I don't think Frida would care one way or another about being in it or not.' That's correct, right? [FO laughs] Exactly! But it was very interesting to me, trying to get to grips with how I felt the need to have an internal justification for who I included or didn't include.

Dana is white, but I'm just interested in Dana's work. My interest in Dana's work is very similar to my interest in your work: I just find it interesting. You see what I mean? I just find it interesting. It's not that I find it interesting because she's white or Black, I'm interested in Black stuff and everything else that's not Black, it's either Black or it's not. That would be white shit, right? Even though there's Asian, and all those other kinds of things, that doesn't register to me. It's either Black, or all the other shit, which generally happens to be white but on occasion can be something other than white. You know? [laughs] So I'm interested in it, and I can check off a list in my mind. I can check something off, 'yeah, I'm interested in this,' and by including this I'm also insisting on the presence of Blackness in the thing that I'm doing.

Whereas with Dana, because I can't check it as Black, I can only check it as I'm interested in it, it's a strange feeling when I feel like I want to put twenty of her pictures in *Cahiers d'Art*, as opposed to ten of her pictures and ten from a Black artist. I'm having a little bit

of... I wouldn't call it a struggle, but it's not something I don't think about. I actually think about it.

I would never include somebody just because they are Black. Never. Because it's like when you said about which images you select, you can't just include them because you agree with it politically, first and foremost it has to express something for you, it has to evoke something for you in order to even be considered.

I tend to pool the things that evoke things for me and then everything else I don't pool. But even once I've narrowed it down to what evokes something for me, then I have to see if it fits. Like, if I need a shot of an apple, and I find a shot of an apple but don't like the shot, then I would never include that, even though I need a shot of an apple! [laughs]

Do you think you have to justify it?

I feel that, in the final sense, I don't have to justify it. Because in the final sense, I've worked at allowing myself to be self-determining. At the end of the day, I am going to choose what I want to choose, but that is something I've had to construct. In the same way you say you've had to construct your identity as a Black person, I've had to construct my self-determinacy, my ability to self-authorize. In other words, me being authorized to go into a store and not be looked at like I'm going to steal something is not a given. I've had to tell myself, 'You have the right to go into a store.' But, as a consequence, I'm always thinking about it, too. I can't go into a store and not think about it. Which is sometimes a drag, but you just come to accept it at a certain point; that's just how it is, that defines who you are. It makes you self-conscious of your presence in a space. It's not a given.

But that works both ways, once you say, 'I'm going to be self-authorized' that means, 'OK, I want to include Dana because I love her work, and I love what she's doing on Instagram.'

In the very beginning when you said, 'I like things that are dirty,' I was very struck by that. Because I don't think you literally mean dirty, but there's something about things not being—

Polished.

It's like fishing, versus going to a fish market, and getting a fish that has already been filleted and cooked. You know what I mean? It's something about the thing coming out of the water; you've got to get the scales off of it, get the eyes, it's not been pre-packaged, or preauthorized, to even be in the space. This is why I love Missylanyus, because I think it's as interesting as anything out there, but it's completely unauthorized. I've been super struck since the Serpentine show, by how little feedback there has been around Missylanyus' stuff. I just would have always thought there would be more resistance and problems with it, especially around the sexism and stuff. It's been strange how little...

Yes, it's interesting in relation to what was taken down at Serpentine. There are so many clips that are very problematic, at least for me. [laughs]

Totally! [laughs] Completely.

It seems as if images of slavery, genocide etc. are seen as more problematic to show than porn, even child pornography. Of course the latter is seen as problematic but it's not closed down, it's not removed.

Oh yeah, that's borderline child pornography, in his work, I mean, they're not children, but there are some very young girls in that stuff.

Do you think it's also about the importance of having an artist present to talk about his or her work?

Yeah, I think so. Because, you know Ming's work got talked about, your work got talked about, there was real feedback. Obviously in my little essay, for what it is, I talk about all your guys' work; I don't talk about his work any less. In some ways, I would say his work is more abrasive and more shocking than anything in your work, or my work, or Ming's work for sure. So, it was kind of amazing to me that there was so little pushback around the work.

My brother said what I thought was the most striking thing about the removal of my piece, *Unbalanced Diptych* from the Serpentine show, which was: 'You've got all this violence happening to Black people, it's all over your work. *Love Is the Message* is just full of Black people getting killed, literally, if not being beat up, and there's been very little pushback on that level. You've got a lot of violence happening to Black bodies. But why that particular picture met with resistance is simply because right next to it you have Black people with guns. That's the only difference. Even the implication that that might be a legitimate response to the fact is what made that piece problematic, nothing more than that.

It's hard to argue with that on a certain level, because it is the one thing that distinguishes it from all my other work that has Black bodies under duress, let's say. It's the one thing that is different. I've thought about that a lot, and even when I redid that piece for my current show, Gavin was like, 'Nobody will buy this. There's no way you're going to sell these.' We had a bet.

I told him, 'Somebody's going to buy that.' And sure enough, it sold. I mean, a couple of them sold.

I always like to say there's a difference between having a taste for something and the stomach for it. Your tongue can want something that your stomach can't handle. You want that taste, but you can't digest it. And I'm always super curious about the discrepancy between what a thing looks like and what a thing, not so much *is* like, or not even so much what it *feels* like, but how one experiences that thing. In other words, in the most explicit example, a woman that you consider very, very beautiful, optically that's your perfect object of desire, you think that person is beautiful, she's got a beautiful body, beautiful hair, whatever. But, you have sex with her, and maybe it's not so great. Maybe it might be a person who doesn't fulfill all your aesthetic ideals that is actually better in a sexual interaction with you. Like the discrepancy between those two things.

Or, to make it less blunt, someone who looks super beautiful, but you could never be in a relationship with them; you can't process who they actually are. Even though you might still be attracted to that look, it doesn't coincide with the personality that you need in order to manage the actual relationship with them. I'm interested in that discrepancy. You know, a skinny, beautiful woman with long hair is who you want to take the picture with, but big-ass, fat, dark, Black woman is who you want to be with, you know what I mean? Those are two extremes obviously, but to have to contend with that is something that's central to my practice.

I just want to ask one or two more things. I'm curious about what you do as a sociologist, day to day. You work with sex workers, is that right? Is that your primary...?

Yes.

How does that, if in any way, inform your expressive impulses?

I don't think it directly informs the subject or theme, but I think it keeps me very much grounded. And I think it's healthy to be with people that have different lives from yourself.

OK, I guess maybe a final thing to ask is, are you envisioning anything in terms of your work that's beyond where you are now?

What does that mean, what's next?

Yeah, what's next?

No, I lack a vision. I just move from day to day, hour by hour. Things change, but I think I have been steady in relation to the content and my voice. Or, I don't know, maybe I haven't. The most important thing for me is to keep on doing what I do, but with joy. I don't want the art thing to ruin that, because to exhibit is tiresome, everything that goes with it, kills the joy, a bit. You have to start worrying about stuff like how to get your work from one place to another, if you'll sell, taxes etc. You know, all these things take away the focus of producing.

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