

August 31, 2020

INTERVIEWS

## JEREMY TOUSSAINT-BAPTISTE

Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste on Malevich's *Black Square* and the limits of visibility



Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, *9 a.m. (Eternal 1): Intro*, 2020, video, color, sound, 40 minutes 42 seconds.

*This spring, Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste filmed two static, forty-minute takes outside his apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Commissioned by Issue Project Room for their “Isolated Field Recordings” series, the videos documented a soundscape subtly inflected by the pandemic; the wails of ambulances can be heard, as can boomboxes played from the balconies of those sheltering in place; as can ominous silence. Toussaint-Baptiste made the work after the indefinite postponement of “Get Low (Black Square),” a performance at Abron Arts Center that considers Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square, 1915*, as an entry point for abstraction and visibility. As part of “A Language for Intimacy,” an online exhibition organized by Amanda Contrada and Terence Trouillot, the artist installed a landline at his home and spoke with anyone who called between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. from Sunday through Tuesday. Below, Toussaint-Baptiste discusses these three projects, united in their layered approach to meaning and engagement with the sonic*

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*capacities of blackness and Black spaces.*

**SITTING ON A LANDLINE PHONE** is an interesting type of listening; a re-attunement occurs when you're holding this apparatus up to your ear as opposed to receiving sound in a full physical or even in a stereophonic way. I got calls from people I haven't seen in twenty years, and I got calls from people I've never met. Somebody called with the wrong number—that was the highlight of my day. The performance, which I'm titling *The Phone Piece*, relates to the field recordings because they were made at the same window. Over the summer, the sonic landscape in New York has shifted and intensified—often traumatically—on so many levels, from the sirens to the uprisings to the curfew to the fireworks. I think there is going to be a lot of work to undo the sonic intensity that we've experienced.

With my art, I'm asking or inviting myself and others to consider an imaginary that we can exist in, in which identity isn't predicated on being seen or seeing another person. It's important to separate the imaginary from the "future." Opening ourselves to questions of nonrepresentational identity and the imaginary as a set of exercises can help us build a set of tools for a fundamentally different world. The future is not an object; it's something that we work toward.

What sorts of things can happen when movements and institutions exist outside of a dominant listening ear? What can we pull off when the voices are too low or presumed to be too low? That's why I keep going back to Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* and its troublesome if not fucked-up inscription\* and saying, So what? What might be possible if negroes were able to battle it out in a dark cellar and have some difficult conversations internally, ones that often get twisted and weaponized against Black folks? This could be expanded to other marginalized populations, and everyone else capitalism has taken and sold their representation back to.

I think that the uprisings are incredibly important and that we saw some of the limits of visibility and political spectacularity. The protests captured the attention rightfully, but within that, there are questions of image. Surveillance technology is sophisticated and omnipresent, especially in New York—we have police helicopters; we have drones; we have cameras everywhere; we have people posting images and videos on their public accounts that can be used to identify people. It was crucial for people to get out and do what they did in June and July, but I also think that there's some critical work that needs to happen where those drones can't fly,

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where those cops can't look.

The black square moment on social media got really weird, because it became a performance of self-silencing. It's an interesting form of disengagement because it's an active "opting out" that stymied the flow of necessary information. The real black square or the real-life abject-thing is unfathomable. Malevich is said to have intended to be after a zero form, and I think he was working with such a specific type of visual vernacular where this manifested in a black square. From a purely coloristic standpoint, black is full of other pigments and other hues. So the zero is not empty. The zero is not necessarily a void; it's not a nothing. There's a type of fullness to a zero, or the black thing, and Malevich's painting abstracts over the entire racist image and text. There's an argument to be made that a zero form is not a wiping away of everything, but an including of everything to the point where it becomes flat.

I'm stuck on imagination beyond a sonic and imagistic sense, on putting ourselves in a precarious and difficult state of unknowing. A new world can't look like what we've seen; it can't sound like what we've heard, and it can't feel like what we've felt before. But at the same time, there is no way of denying that the ground is still the ground. This is a scary contradiction that I don't have an answer for yet, but I'm excited to continue wrestling with it.

— *As told to Samantha Ozer*

*\*Editors' note: In 2015, Russian historians discovered the words "Battle of negroes in a dark cave" underneath the topcoat of Black Square, 1915. The handwritten text likely referenced French humorist Alphonse Allais's *Combat de Nègrès dans une cave, pendant la nuit (Negroes fighting in a cellar at night)*, 1886, considered by some to be the first modern monochrome.*