

Curatorial Account

Precarious Art: How an Intersectional Approach to Exhibiting Led to Multi-Dimensional Performances of Identity

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Abstract: *Precarious Art* was a three-part exhibition and event series that took place between 2015 and 2018 in Berlin, London and Bayreuth. The first installment, *Precarious Art: Protest and Resistance*, took place at alpha nova & galerie futura (Berlin) in 2015. It included an exhibition, film and spoken-word evenings as well as a two-day symposium. The subjects of racism and sexism within the Berlin art establishment as experienced by Black women artists and women artists of color were addressed. Participants included artists, academics and activists, who identified and discussed discriminatory structures and representation practices. The goal was to flesh out courses of action toward breaking open oppressive mechanisms as well as to build networks and alliances in order to initiate a sustainable collaborative process. The second, *Precarious Art: Artificial Boundaries*, took place at alpha nova & galerie futura as well as 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning (London) in 2017. The exhibition and interactive workshops confronted the possibilities, realities and strategies toward realizing long-term change in the struggle of daily and structural racist and sexist conditions in general, as well as within the art establishments of Berlin and London. The final installment, *Precarious Art: From Reflections to Mandate*, took place at the Iwalewahaus (Bayreuth) in 2018. With art and video installations as well as a panel discussion, the artists and curators reflected on the cultural shift that is taking place across Europe and to what extent this shift, on the one hand, can be resisted through art and, on the other hand, worsens the precarity of the personal lives of the artists. The unexpected thread that tied these three installments most closely together was the—both intentional and unintentional—performance of identities. In this article, we use different works from the three installments to exemplify the specificity of the precarity of intersecting identities by illustrating the importance of performing those identities as a survival strategy.

1. Introduction

Precarious Art was a three-part exhibition and event series that took place between 2015 and 2018 in Berlin, London and Bayreuth. It was organized in close collaboration between Stacie CC Graham, Katharina Koch, Marie-Anne Kohl, and the Berlin-based art space alpha nova & galerie futura. The overarching purpose of the series was to center Black women artists and women artists of color, their work and their experiences within the art establishment. The fact that this group was intentionally ‘centered’ points to their status in society, in that groups that encompass the greatest positions of power must not be intentionally centered because their centering is by default. While the purpose of the series was to normalize the existences and experiences of Black women artists and women artists of color, their marginalized positions in their profession and in society at large required space to unpack. This was not only true for the artists and their personal identities; their choices in work and their positioning of that work continuously highlighted to what extent identities—however intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly—are performed through artistic and creative practices.

In this article, we use different works from the three installments of *Precarious Art* to exemplify the specificity of the precarity of intersecting identities by illustrating the importance of performing those identities as a survival strategy.

In the following, we define some of the terms that we use throughout the chapter. These are terms that have, to a certain extent, become ubiquitous in mainstream publications. We believe it is important to define them here, so that we share a point of departure with our readers.

1.1. *White Supremacy*

The discussion of defining white supremacy has again become relevant over the last three years with the US presidential election of 2016 as well as the rise of populism across all of Europe and beyond. The origins of race and white supremacist ideology are rooted in colonial America (Olusoga 2017). Current discourse in the West focuses on how wide and/or flat to cast the net of calling a person, institution or party white supremacist as well as how that effects vital distinctions among them. European discourse excludes itself from consideration, firmly claiming all expressions of racism to be a US-American issue. For the purposes of this chapter, we offer a framework of white supremacist ideology through the following definition of racism.

Racism, as delineated by Grada Kilomba, is attended by three simultaneous features: first, the construction of difference. An individual is described as different on account of categories that contribute to their identity in society. In that description, a group of people becomes the norm, the reference point from which all others ‘differ’. So, the question is then asked “who is different from whom?” (Kilomba 2010).

Secondly, these 'differing' groups are then arranged hierarchically, and difference becomes identifiable using tools such as scarcity, shame, stigma and others. Finally, these differences are assigned positions of power or lack thereof. Power must be evaluated from economical, historical, political and social perspectives for the entire group, not simply individual members of the group. According to Kilomba, this is the defining point. Non-white racial groups can neither be racist nor perform racism, because economically, historically, politically and socially, they do not possess the power that whites do (Kilomba 2010). Other terms, such as prejudice, must be found and used to convey their actions against other races. This definition can be used for other -isms as well: sexism in a patriarchal society; homophobia in a heteronormative society; and classism in a capitalist society.

With the above understanding of racism, the dangerous consequences of statements by white supremacists, such as David Lane, become clearer. He is quoted as saying, "we must secure the existence of our people and the future of White children". With the understanding of economic, historical, political and social power, this statement becomes a threat rather than one of evolutionary survival.

1.2. Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw set out to re-analyze the justice system due to a realization that the tendency was to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis. She examined how this single-axis framework was dominant in US antidiscrimination law and also reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics. In race discrimination cases, discrimination tended to be viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus was on race- and class-privileged women. This focus on the most privileged group members marginalized those who are multiply burdened (Crenshaw 1989).

Today the term intersectionality is an often misused, contentious placeholder for saying something is complicated and thus cannot be further processed. Instead intersectionality should be treated as a lens through which it becomes possible to locate where power lies, collides and interlocks. Without an intersectional framework, an erasure of the experiences of those outside of the above-defined norm is the result.

1.3. Performance of Identity

Identity takes on many forms, such as ethnicity/race, gender, nationality, profession, religion/faith, sex and much more. There are indeed many who have argued that all of the previously named forms of identity can be reduced to (social) constructs originating from societal and/or cultural norms. In alignment with the spaces created for the artists who actively contributed to the exhibitions and events, we do not force philosophical, cultural or societal boundaries upon their identities. The artists whose work is examined below personally identified—at the

time of their contributions—as Black women artists or women artists of color. The performances that we examine are not their artistic contributions but rather their approach, positioning and explication of their artistic contributions.

According to Judith Butler, there is no gender without language (Butler 1990). That means that there is no gender that precedes language. It follows that there is no ‘I’ outside language, since identity is a signifying practice. Just as one performs identity in their choice of speech, clothing, hair and other cultural and socio-economically identifiable markers as (pre-)determined by the collective norm (the norm here being defined as fit for the relevant collectively shared context), it is, from our point of departure, so that the artists also performed their artistic identities through their selection, presentation and positioning of their works set within a context of exhibitions and events directly addressing their socially constructed identities of race and gender within the establishment of their culturally constructed identity of profession.

2. Multi-Dimensional Performances of Identity within the Project *Precarious Art*

2.1. Precarious Art: Protest and Resistance

The first installment, *Precarious Art: Protest and Resistance* (2015), took place at alpha nova & galerie futura in Berlin. It confronted the subject of structural and everyday racism within the Berlin art establishment. At the center of this inquiry was the concept intersectionality.

It is necessary to effectively recognize these social constructs, in their entirety, as forms of discrimination. For this purpose, we used an approach cemented by bell hooks, the US American feminist academic and activist, that consistently connects the structures of capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy and white supremacy in their entanglement and interaction (hooks 1996).

In her theoretical approach, hooks illustrates how the named structures in their entanglement lead to multiple forms of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion. In particular, she validates Black women and women of color as those most affected. At the same time, however, by developing a critical awareness of the interaction of these power structures, she points toward the possibility of resistance and the adoption of a strategic stance against all fronts in the process of self-determined social transformation.

We used this approach as our point of departure in order to subject the Berlin art establishment as a white, non-migrant, mostly male-dominated domain to a critical review and survey. At the same time, we wanted to explore together with the invited artists and theoreticians resistant possibilities of undermining the *white* art establishment—deconstructing and creating alternative counter spaces for art.

Even a cursory glance reveals that the actors involved in both established art spaces as well as so-called off spaces are almost always white and (re-)produce networks that are also predominantly white. A violent colonial past underlies this visible dominance of white actors which bred racist knowledge, structures and imaginations, the consequences of which persist into the present and continue to form the basis of the discrimination, exploitation, stereotyping, and exclusion of Black people and people of color. For example, Black artists and artists of color often still experience myriad forms of othering in the contemporary Western art scene, including outright exclusion or being marked as 'special' or even 'exotic' within it. They are stereotyped and marginalized and, as cultural producers, are reduced to their identity as a Black person or are invited for this very reason: to participate in an exhibition explicitly oriented towards the art of Black people and people of color (Micossé-Aikins 2011).

It becomes clear that, with few exceptions, Black women artists and women artists of color are not the decision makers in this sector. Further, there are few spaces in which they can present their work or in which they feel represented. They experience these structures not only as racist but also as sexist and therefore encounter their field of work—art—in many respects as exclusionary and precarious.

This statement is not based on statistical surveys, which simply do not exist within the German context. Instead, we consciously refer to the statements of Black artists and artists of color, to which we have access as members of the Black community or as allies to the community for years. In the lectures and discussions that took place within the framework of *Precarious Art: Protest and Resistance*, these experiences were also repeatedly described, and both individual and collective strategies of confronting it discussed.

We regard the articulation, recognition and analysis of subjective and collective experiences as a method of research and knowledge production equivalent to classical research approaches—especially those that make the voices and perspectives of marginalized people in hegemonic discourses audible and visible. In doing so, we reject the notion that the experiences of Black people and people of color are not enough and must always be backed up with quantitative research. We believe that demanding 'data and research' to back up statements that Black people and people of color make about their lived experiences is another way to invalidate, discredit and ultimately ignore them.

On the basis of the question of possibilities to adopt, infiltrate or produce alternative contexts, a dialogue on the different strategies emerged during the project, how Black women and women of color, as creative artists, can counteract structural racism, everyday racism, sexism as well as—more generally—their experiences of marginalization and non-representation in a white art establishment.

Strategies can be practiced as an expression of protest; they can also be implemented in the form of resistance through creating new structures and spaces.

Furthermore, discussions developed on the extent to which (art) spaces can provide true inclusion and what solidarity practices are imperative to do so. These discussions included a critical self-analysis and reflection of actual perspectives on the part of white actors in the art scene in order to put their spaces and thereby their privilege at disposal.

The project sought to highlight, break down and introduce long-term changes in discriminating structures and representation practices. With an examination of racism and sexism, an enduring discussion could be strengthened around possibilities for more inclusive and joint practices as well as the formation of networks and alliances. In the following, one example of work that illustrates such themes is examined.

2.1.1. The Company We Keep

The Company We Keep was commissioned by the three exhibition curators and became a collaborative work by the artists Melody LaVerne Bettencourt, Karina Griffith and Lerato Shadi. Initially, the curators suggested that the three artists might consider allowing an open studio for the new work that they would create for the exhibition, so that visitors could be present and observe the process. However, one of the artists felt strongly against this idea, as it might, in her opinion, perpetuate the European pastime of human zoos so often enacted and forced upon the Black female body. While that was not the intention of the curators, and there would have been enforceable boundaries to prevent such a context, the open studio became inconceivable after the utterance of such a possibility.

Instead, the artists decided to transform the white gallery space into a black space both literally and figuratively. Transforming the white into a black cube is a practice of appropriation and deconstruction of space and, simultaneously, a symbolic act. Below, their collective artists' statement is directly quoted:

“As Black women living in white spaces that are not open to us, we wanted to thematize what it would be like or look like to live in a Black-friendly world, with the understanding that pro-Black does not mean anti-white, even though historically pro-white has meant anti anybody else. As Black women, as artists, as sisters, as mothers, we are cultural producers. As such we must deal with the fact that our perspectives are neither represented nor heard. The expectation when walking into a gallery space is to find white walls, just as it is expected to walk into spaces of power and privilege and find that those spaces are white spaces. In Germany, Europe, whiteness equals ‘neutral’. We are questioning that.

Wir definieren uns selbst und lassen uns nicht definieren. We locate tomorrow by becoming our own storytellers. We listen to the pain in Black knowledge. It is present in our growing consciousness. Our interconnectedness is our history and our strength. We invite the Black Atlantic to the table. Whether the Black women on the wall are famous or not is irrelevant. They reflect our complexity and our diversity. We are all of them and they are all of us. This is the company we keep" (artists statement in the frame of *Precarious Art: Protest and Resistance*, alpha nova & galerie futura, 2015).

The artists painted the walls black and used one of the longside walls for writing the names of Black women and women of color on it over the course of several days. The writing itself became a performative act. They spoke the names of the women aloud before writing them on the wall. They told the stories behind the names. The names were those of women from the past and present whom they admire, who inspired them in their careers as artists or who have other significant meanings for their personal and/or professional biographies. More than one hundred names were written, ranging from the very well-known Angela Davis and Toni Morrison to the names of family members, aunties, friends and colleagues. The named women received a personal appreciation with the exhibition that many of them have never received in their everyday existences.

The work showed and interlinked different layers of interventions into hegemonic, unequal socio-political structures by highlighting and performing identities: On the one hand, hegemonic historiography, which is based on exclusions and identity-political attributions, was countered by the visualization of largely marginalized female biographies. The names of the women on the wall demanded an audience. At the same time, they represented another form of narration: The oral history practices, as practiced in the performative act of writing and mutual narration of the artists on the individual biographies, undermined prevailing productions of history and knowledge and contrasted them with decolonial narratives and modes of narration.

On the other hand, one could consider this way of collaborative writing and storytelling an act of empowerment in order to allow an invisibilized collective as well as individual histories and knowledge to be experienced. Moreover, the artistic practices intervened into the *white* structures of a self-defined feminist art space. By doing so, they highlighted and confronted the privileges of the *white* actors of and in the space.

Within the framework and discussions during the project *Precarious Art: Protest and Resistance* it became clear that a central question was continually posed and needed to be attended to: Who gives whom space to speak, how and under what conditions are representation practices shaped? Even though the performance of identities, as such, was not an intended or direct subject of the exhibition and event

series, the notion of performing identities was broached in the art works as well as discussions.

2.2. *Precarious Art: Artificial Boundaries*

The second installment of the series, *Precarious Art: Artificial Boundaries*, took place at alpha nova & galerie futura as well as 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning (London) in 2017. The exhibition and workshop series confronted the possibilities, realities and strategies toward realizing long-term change in the struggle of daily and structural racist and sexist conditions in general, as well as within the art establishments of Berlin and London.

With *Precarious Art: Artificial Boundaries* the curators strived to meet their responsibility and duty to not only continue the discussion but also further the creation of art as well as subject-, medium-, and cross-regional exchange and collaboration among artists. bell hooks wrote: “[...] so what we see is that the mass media, film, TV, all of these things, are powerful vehicles for maintaining the kinds of systems of domination we live under, imperialism, racism, sexism etc. Often there’s a denial of this and art is presented as politically neutral, as though it is not shaped by a reality of domination” (hooks 1996, p. 221).

The focus of this installment was on reimagining history and its documentation. It was structured around the question of who is telling whose story. It included an exhibition featuring artworks by Helen Cammock (London) and Rajkamal Kahlon (Berlin) as well as workshops in creative writing and theater. The works by the two artists indicated an examination of the Self set in a historical context as well as a confrontation with the type of hegemonic history writing that categorically marginalizes Black women artists and women artists of color and orders them according to niches corresponding to assigned identity. The artists challenged these exclusionary practices with self-empowering representations and in their own storytelling. Through performance, video, painting, and installation these themes were illustrated through a selection of existing as well as new works that the artists chose to present in the exhibition.

Alongside the exhibition in Berlin, workshops in the areas of theater/performance and creative writing were delivered. The workshops’ content, aesthetics and media served as input for further development and creative expression, which included a reflection on the workshop process as a whole. Moreover, collective experimentation and production using different artistic genres while questioning practices of representation, community and public spaces, exchange and network building among the participants remained a priority.

The workshops were an important addition to this iteration of *Precarious Art* in that they responded to some of the feedback the curators received in 2015 that artists

and participants want to do more than intellectualize the subject matter. They wanted to become active in this space and explore the possibilities of protest and resistance via creative expression. Such practices foster not only moments of empowerment and solidarity but create and strengthen other narratives.

This project as such aimed to generate and disseminate knowledge in such a way that members of the underserved and underrepresented communities were not put in a position of educating those from socio-politically privileged points of departure. The intention was to raise the visibility of these artists and those they represent within a context of the 'norm' rather than from the gaze of a deviant political object. The artists presented their work and themselves as a part of the 'norm' and simultaneously as specific political subjects. In the following the works of the two exhibiting artists are detailed.

2.2.1. Helen Cammock Artworks

Helen Cammock works with photography, video, poetry, writing, printmaking and installation. Her practice considers how individual and collective experiences embody the consequences of structural inequality by exploring differing societal experiences within systems of representation. She weaves different contexts and forms together, and her fragmented narratives cross boundaries of time and place.

In the exhibition she presented two new video works. In her piece *There's a Hole in the Sky Part I*, Cammock took up questions regarding cultural and human values. She interacted with workers of one of the last sugar refineries in Barbados, as well as a sugar and rum plantation geared towards tourism in the island nation. The soundtrack that accompanied the film contained fragments of dialogue about work and cultural transfers created through the use of prose and song lyrics—the artist's own texts, excerpts from newspapers, as well as texts from writers like Maya Angelou, among others—in a separation between what is seen and what is heard.

The piece *There's a Hole in the Sky Part II: Listening to James Baldwin* is an imagined conversation with the American writer James Baldwin. In this video, Cammock dealt with the voluntary and involuntary migration history of Black writers and dancers from America to Europe, where they hoped to find more recognition and work opportunities. The film explored the dynamic between appropriation and power on multiple levels. The levels of image and sound were also formally separated and, in their artistic recombination, created a distinct language and aesthetic. Cammock described putting herself into the video as "having a stake" in the work. In her opinion all work is political, because humans are political beings. Through this conversation, she found a route into her work that gave room to explore different themes. She saw it as a way to connect her personal experiences with greater social, economic and global concerns.

Cammock's selection of works was especially poignant in respect to the theme of artificial boundaries. As a Black British artist, she explored themes of Caribbean-British (post-)colonial history, culture and the still unresolved and far-reaching economic and structural consequences on societies in the UK as well as on the islands today. This was, perhaps unintentionally, juxtaposed with an imagined conversation with a Black American writer, who was best known for continuously broaching the subject of the effects of racism across all parts of American society in his written and spoken works. After escaping to Europe, he eventually returned to the US yet never fully admitted that Europe was also no refuge from anti-Black racism.

Cammock crossed many geographical borders in her works to illustrate just how intertwined, and thus artificial, these borders are. This became apparent in the differences in responses to her works between the cities of Berlin and London. What those responses shared was the fact that viewers were forced to call into question their assumptions of Blackness and Black Britishness, the shared histories of those lineages and the continued denial of the connectedness and entirety of those identities. Intersectionality was a term the artist used to explain her works: the intersections of forced industries, forced migration and, hence, forced identities.

2.2.2. Rajkamal Kahlon Artworks

Rajkamal Kahlon's works are primarily interdisciplinary and question the formal and conceptual limits of painting, photography and sculpture. She uses images of colonialism—multiple materials from anthropological research from the late 19th and early 20th century—in order to juxtapose them with powerful, contemporary racist representational and behavioral practices in the wake of the 'war on terror.' She explores the visual legacy of ruling systems and makes continuities in hegemonic visual language visible.

In her selection of artworks for this exhibition, Kahlon showed the video work *Peoples of Afghanistan* (2016), a collage from found footage from the internet of an American bomber attack on Afghan territory and a slide projection with photographs of Afghan men. The photos were created in the 1960s during anthropological fieldwork led by Russian researchers and were published under the title *Physical Anthropology of Afghanistan*. In this installation connections are established between colonial representational practices in the form of anthropological images and modern political violence, which runs under the label of terrorism. Through the transformation, fragmentation, and recombination of images, particularly of such colonized subjects, Kahlon frees them of their original connotation and gives them, their bodies and histories, back their dignity. Bodies in Kahlon's works are, therefore, not only objects of political and intimate violence but also become an (experiential) space for transformation and resistance.

Two related canvas works from Kahlon's series *Blowback* (2013) were also shown. In her choice of the paintings, she exhibited two people, two faces who were first anonymized by German researchers cataloguing 'natives.' With these paintings she seeks to restore lost and forgotten identities as well as the dignity that was stolen from them. She goes a step further in dressing them in camouflage shirts in order to question who and what bodies get pathologized and criminalized. At the same time, the camouflage posed a representation of weapons and of arming the figures, so that they may protect themselves. Asking the question how to give former 'objects of study' a voice, she positioned the works as a response to the brutalized representation that certain bodies experienced during colonization as well as a reminder of how these histories and their present-day iterations accompany us every day. In contrast to earlier works where the artist often highlighted the violence enacted upon Black and brown (female) bodies, these works focused much more on the agency of the subjects by conjuring their own voice.

2.2.3. Similarities in Research Methodologies and Approaches

A convergence of research methodologies could be witnessed in the works of Cammock and Kahlon. The artists worked with state archives in order to develop the direction of their work. The archives that the artists sourced functioned as a catalogue of identities, yet the individuality of those identities was lessened through the act of archiving, if not completely overwritten. With their works the artists found a way to activate the archives and recreate the viewers' understanding of these forgotten identities.

Furthermore, similarities in their approaches to re-defining the 'subjects of study' could be witnessed in their videos and video installations, respectively. At first glance, the artists' works appear to study the 'native' through othering—identifying the differences of the native to the 'norm' as defined by the colonizer. In time it becomes clear that the works position the native as othering the colonizer. The artists achieved this through a multi-layered approach. Natives are centered as political subjects, and their stories unfold from their own perspective. They are offered the opportunity to tell their stories through interviews, imagined conversations and reconstructed faces as well as dignity. Moreover, their culture and society are contextualized in order to identify and illustrate the long-term and far-reaching economic and political consequences of being stripped of their humanity through centuries of colonialization. Lastly, the artists offer their subjects agency over their own destiny, in spite of intergenerational trauma and injustice, and leave the viewers with an overwhelming feeling of hope, in that a self-determined transformation of identity feels possible.

2.3. *Precarious Art: From Reflections to Mandate*

After journeying through Berlin and London, the exhibition and event series made its way to Bayreuth's Iwalewahaus under the title *From Reflections to Mandate*. The focus was on finding routes to implement the previously developed anti-racist and pro-womanist vision and strategies. Further, the curators felt it important to give artists who had participated in previous installments, as well as artists who had connected to the work of previous installments an opportunity to come together, exchange and somehow find a type of closure to what began three years earlier. Alongside an installation piece, video and poetry reading, the curators (both authors of this chapter) and artists presented work and insights of the preceding installments and debated to what extent change is possible and what steps must be taken to enact what had been discussed. In the following, an installation piece presented for the final exhibition is described.

Chair Nr. 38: *Steering Identities, Heartbeats, Gun Shots in This Ch/Br_est*

Of German-Jamaican parentage and brought up in England, China and Cyprus, Sonia Elizabeth Barrett has an international range of cultural influences. With a first degree in the subjects of philosophy, literature and international relations and a second degree in studio practice, her approach to work is distinct in that her purpose is intentional yet she explicitly allows a great deal of room for the viewer to explore and discover elements that were undisclosed and perhaps even unintended.

The artwork *Chair Nr. 38: Steering Identities, Heartbeats, Gun Shots in This Ch/Br_est* is made of a leatherette executive swivel chair with a footstool and massage function. It is part of a series of works with furniture Barrett has been dealing with for the past four years. In choosing this particular work for the event, the artist incisively refers to the subject of identity.

Barrett only works with used furniture. The used chair was a significant aspect of the piece. The executive swivel chair itself is made of black leather and is quite large. As she explained to the audience, the chair is viewed anthropomorphically and creates an impression in the imagination of an important person, a manager, or in German 'der Chef.' Without being directed, most people will think of a man using the chair. The next layer is the foot of the chair which—turned upside down—looks similar to the steering wheel of a car. Barrett uses that association to profoundly demonstrate driving or steering one's own identity by placing the wheel in an area that could be considered a face. However, in a twist, the central part of that face has a barrel. Yet another layer makes this feature especially stark: the chair has 14 massage functions, which in some cases sound like a weapon being fired and, in others, a heartbeat sometimes rapid and sometimes slow.

Barrett discerningly positions the contrasting elements: a used black leather executive swivel chair with soothing massage functions most likely used by a white

middle-class man holding a powerful position is transformed into an androgynous black figure that is beating its chest, or simply just trying to be as you listen to its heartbeat, or perhaps even an 'imposing' black figure completely powerless while being gunned down. At the viewing, she asked audience members to consider who is allowed to steer their own identity and who is allowed to be vulnerable. She also illustrated the ease with which identity can be manipulated. The artist states:

[. . .] Whilst it was not a conscious decision I feel sure that the car based shootings of Black individuals in the USA are being worked out in this piece. The footstool which forms the hood of the figure has the text 'footstool do not sit here' written on it. As sitting on Black individuals has constituted some of the most shocking images of police brutality on Black people I think this is apt. [. . .] What is it that people see when they see a black figure and shoot could it be this animal, object, figure thing? (Sonia E. Barrett, artist statement)

Black identity undergoes a form of empowerment and emancipation in Barrett's work. Even parts of the title—*steering identities*—show a self-determined path. The steering wheel as a steering and thinking head is a clear sign; heartbeats and gunfire, however, are ambivalent. They suggest vitality and activity, but also anxiety (palpitations) and (passive) bodies, which are always in danger of becoming the target of racist repression and aggression. Thus, Barrett makes it clear that Black identity within a system subjected to white supremacy remains fragile, but also has powerful potential through community-building, alliances and solidarity to counter this system bit by bit.

3. Conclusion

Precarious Art, as a series, sought to create a space for Black women artists and women artists of color to exhibit, perform and simply be without their contributions being limited by or focused on their racial and gender identities. In some ways that stated purpose may appear to be an oxymoron. In that pursuit, it became clear from the first exhibition but also in every performance, installation, talk and discussion that performativity and the performance of identity had somehow become an innate consideration. This revelation is written as an observation rather than a judgment.

The Company We Keep is visionary and empowering by evoking possible decolonized futures and narrations where Black identity has become part of the 'norm' without losing a specific political significance. The works by Cammock and Kahlon function as tools to not only make visible marginalized bodies and identities but also to restore them with dignity and allow their stories to be re-written undermining hegemonic historiography. With *Chair Nr. 38: Steering Identities, Heartbeats, Gun Shots*

in *This Ch/Br_est* discussions of expectations, stereotyping and survival are invoked while simultaneously sparking notions of community building and solidarity.

Each of these examples creates a sense of urgency to forging a decolonized future through tangible acts and experiences that facilitate an unlearning of (internalized) oppressive behavior.

If indeed a central question is to explore who is telling whose story, then it means, on the one hand, to show how hegemonic historiography and representations are constructed and which roles in particular race and gender (and also other socially constructed categories) play in visibility. On the other hand, it is important to take a self-empowering position in order to reject discriminatory provisions, to fill gaps in history, and to strengthen and normalize other narratives without removing them from their political significance.

Artists' Statements

Melody LaVerne Bettencourt; Karina Griffith; Lerato Shadi. Artists statement in the frame of *Precarious Art: Protest & Resistance*, alpha nova & galerie futura, 2015. Available online: <http://www.alpha-nova-kulturwerkstatt.de/galerie/> (accessed on 12 March 2019).

Sonia E. Barrett. Artist statement. Available online: https://www.artworkarchive.com/profile/sonia-e-barrett/artwork/chair-nr-38-steering-identities-heartbeats-gunshots-in-this-ch-br_est (accessed on 12 March 2019).

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