



Who Intervenes? Thoughts from the Perspective of Arts and Culture Activism

Rahel El-Maawi and Sarah Owens

The following text is a transcription and translation¹ of a conversation between Rahel El-Maawi and Sarah Owens, which took place as part of the 2018 lecture series “The Art of Intervention”. Their dialogue touches upon topics such as Blackness, in/visibility, community, culture, art and criticism. Using their own voluntary work and Black-/queer-feminist literature as a starting point, El-Maawi and Owens talk about their motivations for, as well as the possibilities and consequences of, intersectional activism in arts and culture. Through this, the point of view shifts from the art of intervention to the question of who intervenes and how this intervention is supported or restricted by sociopolitical conditions.

Rahel El-Maawi: We met at Bla*Sh, a network for Black womxn. Here, we will, however, not talk as Bla*Sh specifically, but from a personal perspective. Still, Bla*Sh was essential for us to meet. This is why I will quickly introduce the network.

Bla*Sh presents itself as follows: “Bla*Sh is a network of Black womxn in the German speaking part of Switzerland. We live straight or queer, with or without children. Some of us have grown up in Europe, others have lived on several continents. We are connected through our experience of being perceived as Black, and through the Afro-hyphen. We are ‘of African descent’ in the widest sense and aim at social, cultural and political empowerment.”

Bla*Sh exists because of the desire we had to come together as a group and to exchange and generate other forms of knowledge.

One of the first activities bringing us together was to talk about female authors: Black female authors, writers, also Western ones, who enabled us to learn with them. Bla*Sh also refers back to an intervention by Audre Lorde, who repeatedly asked: Where are the Black women? She did not want to speak only to white feminists in the audience. She also asked this question in Zurich, at the end of the 1980s. Following this, different initiatives were formed by Black women, such as the network “Women

¹ The conversation was deliberately held in German in order to bring the discourse they participate in to the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

of Black Heritage” and later the “Treffpunkt Schwarze Frauen”. Later, a book was published highlighting the work of the initiatives, and a few young Black women were invited to contribute.

In the same year, Audre Lorde’s legacy was celebrated with a podium, to which several Black women were invited. At this podium, we decided that we needed a new network for us Black womxn. Our first meeting was a brunch at a kitchen table, which I find quite telling. We brought along books, learnt together and from each other, and were able to contribute different realities. Since 2013, a few of us have been meeting, and since 2016, many more have joined. Today, we are very active and repeatedly intervene—culturally, socially, and politically—with the latter based on the notion that “the private is also political”.

Sarah Owens: For this conversation, we defined a few topics in advance we wanted to address. These are community, role-making, having to justify one’s presence, visibility, and self-care. We chose quotes by Black female authors or journalists as points of departure, and, in the following, we use them as support for explaining our stance toward these topics, why they are important to us, and how we negotiate them within our work.

Rahel El-Maawi: In a world structured according to white, male, and capitalist principles, it is essential for survival to hear voices other than those continuously (re)cited and taught. For us, engaging with thinkers who name our realities and speak them out loud is *care*. Words can help when you need strength (see Ahmed (2017, p. 240)). This is why we chose to structure our conversation with quotes by Black womxn and Womxn of Color.

Without community, there is no liberation [. . .]. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. Lorde (2007, p. 112)

Rahel El-Maawi: Community allows me to find a language for what happens to me; it is a way of carrying each other. It allows me to name and relocate experiences we make as Black womxn, and to promote mutual learning. This is something I had been looking for and found in Bla*Sh. My goal was to not be alone with these experiences, which I could not make sense of by myself, since I did not know: am I the only one experiencing this or are these situations created by society? Through our exchange, I can place my situation in a societal context and therefore de-individualize it.

Sarah Owens: I feel similar about this. I grew up in a predominantly white society and did speak to others about some of the experiences I had had but could not reflect on these experiences because I could not make sense of them. Now, upon looking

back, my aim is not to put a label on them and declare: “This was clearly racist.” It is more about speaking with others who might have had similar experiences, or to enter into a dialog with those who have not had these experiences but who wants to listen. Most importantly, my goal is to listen more carefully to others. These types of conversations require a trust in each other and a “safe space”.

Rahel El-Maawi: Yes, I also appreciate the way that we treat each other and that there is this place that lets us care for one another, know about each other, and develop a practice together to be active and to be able to intervene: A collective self-empowerment. Community, for me, also became a space for the transformation of grief and anger. It lets me transition from experience into action, into practice.

Sarah Owens: I agree—there is, on the one hand, the discovery of a mutual language that lets us contextualize these experiences and speak about them. On the other hand, we find support for action in everyday life: “Next time, if something like this happens, how can I or how do I want to act? When do I want to spring into action and possibly be regarded as difficult, when do I want to be silent?” I think Bla*Sh reflects this in a twofold way: One is a gaze that is directed towards the inside, the way in which we care for each other. The other one is directed outwards in the form of interventions or statements.

Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. Hill Collins (2000, p. vii)

So institutionalized is the ignorance of our history, our culture, our everyday existence that, often, we do not even know ourselves. Njeri (1991, p. 7)

Sarah Owens: Role-making is an issue that concerns mainly our efforts directed outwards, since through these we often are confronted with expectations or find ourselves in roles we have not intended for ourselves.

Rahel El-Maawi: What I find interesting is how the topic of community links to the question of how we became addressable all of a sudden. Also, the questions arising therefrom: how do I want to be addressed, how do I want to appear in public? In short, actively taking matters into one’s hands. I find this very important, in order to make myself aware of the way in which I want to frame myself to avoid getting into stigmatizing spheres, where I have the feeling that a twist might happen easily.

This connects to the question of the norm—where and when am I addressed as a Black woman? Is it only when I fulfil a certain normative expectation that is legible to mainstream society? Even though I have been socialized in a very Swiss way, I do stand out and get ascribed a specific role. I am also often invited as a “token”. This is why active self-framing is central to me. I view it as my contribution to participate in order to shift the norm and to expose such demands.

Sarah Owens: Bla*Sh defines itself as a network and thereby emphasizes that we are all Black womxn but that we are also different. This is to avoid the misunderstanding that Bla*Sh has a single, homogenous perspective and opinion. It is understandable that in the context of today’s society, which likes issues to be as quickly and easily digestible as possible, we are expected to demonstrate a certain uniformity. Thus, I find it even more important not to hastily try to meet this expectation, but instead to consciously show difference and divergence—all in the sense of the aforementioned quote by Audre Lorde.

Rahel El-Maawi: Because difference is also fed by our direct realities, by our being confronted with being womxn in this society, mothers, aunts, who also suffer from this unjust system. For me, this is an important incentive to counter these circumstances with something exciting. Still, there exists a sadness when we deal with certain topics in small groups, for it is often very moving and devastating at the same time. Speaking with others helps me gather my forces, so that I can articulate myself towards the outside and define and claim my position and role. I want to do something that empowers us, something that empowers women, People of Color, Womxn of Color, Black womxn and all of society.

Sarah Owens: We recently organized a reading session for children’s books, as some of us are mothers, aunts, or godmothers. I very much enjoy reading to my daughter but was always a bit dissatisfied with German children’s books that are available in stores, as the children in these stories are usually blond, with a blond mother and brunette father. The mother is at home, the father works. Usually there are two children, a girl and a boy, and their grandparents are often still alive and physically active. We once spoke about this at a Bla*Sh meeting: “Do you know any books I can read or give as a gift that diverts from this norm? Where there are other types of family, and different experiences, and in which the protagonists are of color?” We then began to look for such stories, a search with quite a steep learning curve! The idea for a reading session emerged out of our inquiry—it was to give children of color the opportunity to encounter stories in which they can recognize themselves. Also, we wanted to share the knowledge we had acquired during our research with the adults who came to the session.

To continue our commitment even after the event, we thought ahead: “Let’s write a children’s book, let’s translate non-German books into German, let’s write to publishers.” Surely, such an endeavor also requires that we think about how to manage it once it gets going: on the one hand, it is fantastic if projects continue, on the other hand, they require a significant amount of time and resources.

Rahel El-Maarwi: Yes indeed, this means hundreds of hours of volunteer work! The example of the children’s books also illustrates that we have not been able to intervene very deeply on a structural level. The project took effect on an individual level—those who participated are now likely more attentive. It is also an example for how we are addressed: Many people approach us, are interested in our activities, but have not thought about these issues before. And it means that we have to go further. A friend of mine wanted to order the children’s books we had selected for a school library, but only two of the twelve books were available in the library catalogue. This small example already shows how many obstacles there are. I find this telling also in that it illustrates how white our knowledge is. I also grew up with white knowledge. With the children’s book project, we aim to make Black knowledge accessible here in Europe, in Switzerland, which requires a lot of commitment and effort. I always find it surprising how much this depends on private initiative, how little support there is, and how much community is needed for us to be able to do this together.

Whiteness—or, you know, white people—exists as the basic template. And that template covers all human experience, by the way: the ability to be special or ordinary, handsome or ugly, tall or short, interesting or dull as ditchwater. On the other hand, our presence in popular culture (as well as in non-stereotypical ‘issue’ roles) must always be justified. [. . .] Does that black woman deserve to be on that show? Give the exact reason that Chinese-British man is in this scene.
Adewunmi (2016, p. 209)

Sarah Owens: This quote is from an essay in which Bim Adewunmi questions whether certain forms of popular culture, such as film and television, are as diverse as they claim to be. A point well made by Bim Adewunmi is that whenever the wish for representation is fulfilled, this is in turn tied to certain demands. Casting a Black actress for the leading role in a film is therefore not a matter of course, but needs to be explained: “But she is a wonderful actress, she has what it takes, and she has even worked with producer xyz . . . ” The main assumption apparently is that the decision to give the role to a Black actress rather than a white actress is based on

extraordinary circumstances and reasons. I often have the feeling that we need to explain our presence in a predominantly white society. This starts with the question: “Where are you from?” and continues into other areas. We are granted that we can talk about our experiences as Black womxn. But when we speak about experiences or topics others do not ascribe to us, there is an implicit expectation of an explanation or justification.

Rahel El-Maawi: I experience this in a similar way. There is a continuous stigmatization and thereby exclusion, a “making of non-belonging”. Black citizens being wiped away from history. To have to justify ourselves over and over again costs a lot of energy. I think it is also a kind of wariness: I hope I am not promoting a certain stereotype, nor cliché, as a woman or Black woman. Where is the line? When do I have to be careful, in order to not be pigeonholed? How can I talk about experiences I consider discriminatory, without having them denied? How can I ask people not to use certain words (actually not use them at all but surely not in my presence)? And yet I am thereby regularly called into question and discredited as being whiny, not important, not conducive to a conversation, although the conversation could be heading into a different direction because the issue of racism is in the room. I find it difficult to explain this, over and over again. Also, I realize that I depend on having people who support me, who are advocates, as I do not feel like explaining myself all the time.

Sarah Owens: I notice that the continuous expectation that we explain ourselves unfolds not only in volunteer work or job-related spaces, but also in daily routine. It reacts to implicit questions posed towards us, such as: “Why are you standing here, why are you claiming space, why do you think you may contradict me?” For us, this permeates all spheres of life.

Rahel El-Maawi: This reminds me of Adrian Piper, who did an intervention with business cards. She handed them to people sitting next to her on a bench: “Please do not approach me, I am just sitting here and would like to eat my sandwich.” These types of everyday situations rapidly show experiences of sexualized discrimination. I experience this over and over again; it is something in between sexualization and exoticization that requires me to continuously explain: “No, I am just here, I am just moving.” The same thing counts for the need for explaining myself, I also see this at work. There is lack of awareness that there are Black Swiss womxn, that we live in a post-migrant Switzerland. This seems to have not been incorporated in education. So many people in Switzerland are not being seen, their story is not being perceived. It always requires double or multiple times the effort.

In white supremacist society, white people can ‘safely’ imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze. [. . .] Since most white people do not have to ‘see’ black people (constantly appearing on billboards, television, movies, in magazines, etc.) and they do not need to be ever on guard nor to observe black people to be safe, they can live as though black people are invisible, and they can imagine that they are also invisible to blacks. [. . .] They think they are seen by black folks only as they want to appear. hooks (2015, pp. 168–69)

Sarah Owens: bell hooks describes American society in view of the history of slavery. Fundamentally, she also reminds us that a gaze may be returned and that we cannot assume that a gaze works only in one direction.

We could take an example from visual arts. We could imagine an exhibition taking place in Switzerland with photographic portraits of non-white individuals. However, whereas the white (i.e., dominant) gaze is considered in the exhibition planning and is publicly addressed in the media, less consideration is given to the fact that there are also non-white people in Switzerland who will visit this exhibition and whose gaze differs from the white (i.e., dominant) gaze. With regard to Bla*Sh, I am especially interested in the conditions and consequences of visibility. Our work makes us more visible and adds new voices to the public discourse. But it also makes us “hyper-visible” in that we are always already visible, albeit in a certain way: We are perceived as foreign, exotic, just “different”, or even as dangerous, as in airport security checks (see Browne (2015)).

I realize that in the course of time I have developed a certain protection mechanism in order to push away the implications of this visibility. I feel invisible, even though I am not. At the same time, it is important to me that Black womxn are seen and their voices are respected.

Rahel El-Maawi: This visibility, or perceived visibility, is also part of my experience. But then, again comes a rejection or the experience of not being perceived. Though now is a time in which Black womxn are increasingly heard and sought out, in which they become addressable, also because of the network we have founded, the fact that we have a name and the way in which we are increasingly asked for advice and opinion. And still, there remains the question of tokenism: Nowadays, we just need a Black woman on the podium, a Black lecturer at the academic institution . . . but apart from that, we are usually not wanted, except in the group I co-organize myself. And even as Bla*Sh, we are on the one hand welcomed into a feminist scene,

where there is a lot of resonance, but on the other side, I feel, we are not really seen. Possibly because we culturally match, which makes it easier to overlook various racialized positions. I allow myself to speak of a “we” here in this space—maybe this “we” exists, maybe not. But there is a certain activist group attitude and most fit in quite well into its DNA. This attitude, however, largely excludes experiences of racism, which harbors the risk that our topics are again nonexistent in the discourse.

In/visibility is quite ambivalent. The aim is to be seen in a non-limiting way. To be seen with all one’s facets. One of our Bla*Sh formats is called “polyphonic reading”, and I think this is very fitting. It must be polyphonic rather than aiming to create a new mainstream.

Sarah Owens: We share common interests that of course influence Bla*Sh. Many of us are interested in dance, literature, film, art, music, or work in these fields. Therefore, it makes sense for us to intervene in cultural formats alongside socio-political discussions. We are, however, also aware of whom we exclude or fail to reach through such interventions.

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. (Lorde 2017, p. 1)

With self-care, we don’t mean self-indulgence [. . .] when we’re talking about self-care, we’re talking about actively pushing against systems that try to break us down, and against institutional ways of not being cared for. Jenna Wortham (Wortham and Morris 2017)

Rahel El-Maawi: In our preliminary discussion, you said something really beautiful, Sarah, that our activism is not just art, it is struggle.

Sarah Owens: Yes, with this I tried to express that our commitment involves many different areas: from everyday life to work life, from individual relationships to the Bla*Sh network and a larger community. It is important and very rewarding to do cultural events in order to reach others, and, for me, the boundaries between this work and my job and private life are permeable. A children’s book reading, for example, is primarily a cultural event, but the books we present there are books I read to my daughter that affect my relationship with her and, in turn, affect my daughter in how she comes to perceive herself. Topics of exclusion, in/visibility, or the need for explaining oneself are not only topics we encounter in one sphere, they are always present. It is hard work to put yourself out there every day and say: “I don’t think this is okay, I don’t agree with this.” Whether on the bus, when you hear a dumb comment, or at work, when you are ignored or patronized. It takes a

lot of courage and effort to counteract and be “difficult”. This makes self-care so important. As Wortham says, the idea of “self-care” in this sense does not indicate a spa treatment, but that we attend to ourselves and do not lose sight of our self-respect.

Rahel El-Maawi: I once heard Patricia Hill Collins introduce Kimberlé Crenshaw, saying that she was deeply impressed that Kimberlé had been meditating regularly since the seventies, which for a long time she found funny, but now understands. This resonated with me: I may and must look after myself in order to be able to stay active, as an agentive Black woman. I do not want to position this within a neoliberal discourse of performance, but rather find a connection with myself, in order not to harden in response to the everyday racism that you mentioned and Philomena Essed writes about (Essed 2013). Racist experiences let my shell grow and harden; it becomes metallic. I need something to create an antipole. And there again we have a link to community as a space for mutual strengthening and nourishing. It might also be a more sensual way of doing politics than I have done previously. And that is exactly what I feel is the revolutionary thing: Not to spend too much energy on something, and instead concentrate on what empowers me and, at the same time, others. For instance, through making Black literature accessible through polyphonic readings, and therefore being able to contribute to a history of female thought leaders. Not being alone. This is a big part of self-care which I find important.

Sarah Owens: That we are so involved in the arts is also connected to the fact that these are spaces of reflection, for which we can assume that other forms of knowing and reflecting—or of pausing—are possible, in contrast to a dominant academic or political enterprise. Artistic formats allow alternative perspectives to become visible. Here, these perspectives are welcomed and are seen.

Rahel El-Maawi: And that which inscribes itself into our bodies can be expressed and find a language.

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