

Burning Issues

Hannah Black interviewed
by Larne Abse Gogarty

Manchester-born, Brooklyn-based artist and writer Hannah Black discusses the importance to her of meticulousness in writing and carelessness in art, the power of collectivism, the need for revolution, tackling racism and setting fire to police stations.



Ramey Raymond, 2019

Larne Abse Gogarty: I wanted to start by asking about what you're making or writing during your residency at Boffo on Fire Island.

Hannah Black: Fire Island is a pretty social place, so I have been walking, doing shrooms and going to look at the beautiful forest and beach. There's no actual studio space to work in at Boffo, so I'm working on a book, which is a fictionalised retelling of the first six months of 2020. I'm trying to write characters and dialogue, which is incredibly hard – it's embarrassing and vulnerable to make things up, much more difficult than telling the truth. Even though this project is semi-novelistic, the context is reflected in the fact that it won't be submitted to an editing process.

Obviously, there are problems that come with this level of freedom. When I look back at other writing, there are moments when I think the work might have benefited from someone else's editing. But I am horrible at having my writing edited. For all its failings and for all the things that feel bad about art as a job, you also have a crazy amount of freedom, so it's really hard to adjust to anything different. But I edit my writing hard anyway. My superego does a lot of that work.

Can you tell me about the relationship between writing and making art for you, and how these practices intersect or correspond? Do you feel as though there are companion pieces? For instance, are there texts where the ideas within them have also found form in a sculpture or video? Or do you think about these different media as working for different feelings or different subjects? I was thinking about your recent essay on tenant-organising for *Dissent*, which is less art writing and more reportage – could something like this ever find its way into an artwork?

I find there is something pointless about trying to put ideas of 'organising' in an exhibition space. For instance, the Los Angeles Tenant Union – one of the most radical and interesting tenant unions in the US – was originally part of a project called School of Echoes, which involved people from Ultra Red. They did a bunch of workshops across the US, but Los Angeles was the only place they couldn't find an art institution to host, so they just did it somewhere else. But that was the only workshop which turned into a long-term organising project that was collective in any meaningful way. I'm sure there are further examples of projects migrating from art spaces, but it doesn't seem that common.

I think what moving into art-making meant to me was the freedom to do things carelessly. I notice that now, working on this longer piece of writing at Boffo, I care to the point where I have to deal with that as a problem.

I wrote the article over three months while being stuck in London early in the pandemic and then back home in New York. Talking to people at length over the phone who were brave, engaged and working on revolutionary social activity was a way to get through this depressing period. There are a few videos that came out of doing long interviews, which I really like because people say crazy stuff. Everyone is interesting if you talk to them for long enough. In *Raymond Ramey* and *Ramey Raymond* I interviewed a Broadway performer and the daughter of a famous film editor. For *Aeter (Jack)* I interviewed a friend about his nail-biting habit.

When I began making work, I would say sometimes I think something's going to be an essay, but then it's a video or vice versa. I don't think this is as true anymore. I was using a type of collage in my videos, which reflected the visual language of the internet, so it was perhaps easier to move between these two forms, but the recent videos could never have been essays - they are very much installations. As a series of works, they are not proposing an argument so much as a structure of relation to one another.

The recent videos I showed at Kunstverein Braunschweig are good examples of this. In *Raymond Ramey* and *Ramey Raymond*, Ramey stands in for the principle of making a cut, so she talks about her family's history with surgery, and how her mother's work organised time. Raymond talks in this kind of cloudy way about performance, about how a concept repeats itself over time through people's reenactments of it. There is also a long interview with the artist Clemens von Wedemeyer (Interview *AM437*), who talks about a show he made there five or six years

before, which was based on the history of the building. So, there's the cut, the performance and the frame.

The show also included drawings which form a minimal type of contract which I have signed, and these very simple grid sculptures that I named *Moviola*, *Majestic* or *Kunstverein Braunschweig*, after the names of the editing machine Ramey's mother used, the theatre Raymond performed in and the gallery where the work is being shown. I hope viewers of the videos wouldn't know exactly what they're talking about - I'm not trying to make a substantive claim.

Even though I don't feel like an expert at making or presenting objects, I still have the desire to have them in a room - it is a tension which I'm still working out. The only thing in my life I'm meticulous about is writing. But objects can do whatever they like, from my point of view. I don't want to exert intense control over them. I just want them to be there.

I wrote a series of texts about Nicole Eisenman's work and her sculpture *Witch Head*, which expresses how laborious it is to move through the material world: 'Through the head's ruin, I glimpse what material can do that writing can't: make changes that leave a trace in the finished thing. All the torn up heads I have produced in writing this are submerged under its smooth non-surface, or its absence of surface means that nothing in its making can either drown or appear.'

Are these differences in meticulousness primarily to do with your attachment to language or is it something about audience and how you imagine people receive a written text as opposed to how people experience something in a gallery?



Clemens, 2019, video

It is partly the sense that people might return to something written. And so writing has to be able to withstand multiple readings over time and in unknowable circumstances. With art, you have a room and you know how the room feels, so a lot of the work of reception has already been done for you.

I also think there's a way I don't care with art and it has kind of been helpful – a sort of generative carelessness that I'm capable of. You could even call it play, or sometimes even contempt. I started making art kind of late in life. This was partly because I spent several years trying to write a novel which was a really difficult experience. I think what moving into art-making meant to me was the freedom to do things carelessly. I notice that now, working on this longer piece of writing at Boffo, I care to the point where I have to deal with that as a problem.

I still like my first show with Arcadia Missa in London back in 2015 but, in general, I would say I only figured out a process or system of how to make an exhibition over the past two years or so. It made me realise how attached I was to the idea of being incompetent. I had almost a kind of melancholy moment with the show that I did in Braunschweig, where I was like, Oh, I suppose anything that you spent most of your 30s doing, you would eventually become good at. How weird that I've spent it on exhibition-making, which I'm not really sure what I think about. But my feeling about my work fluctuates, which is probably good. Because if I felt like I had actually figured it out there wouldn't be that much impulse to keep trying.

What has stuck with me in all your exhibitions is your attention to colour. It often seems to me that your use of colour is doing a lot of work, but in ways that can be quite elusive. In your show at Eden Eden, there was a striking contrast between the neons of the films and the organic colours of the sculptures. Or, I'm thinking about the staid, almost office-like colours of the Chisenhale show in 2017. How do these specific colour palettes develop in relation to the ideas you are pursuing in making a work or a show?

I wish I had some joyful playfulness with colour, but I think it is more often what is bearable because my experience of it can be so intense. If you could somehow have things be colourless, I would probably try. But you can't – it would just be another thing. It is similar to choosing a font for a video, which can be completely maddening. How can these all have such wildly different significances and still be choices you're making about one specific thing?

Being intimidated by colour, I end up with these exaggerated, 'too-much' colours. I admit that I have a gross palette of primary colours or colours that reference the body in some way. The show at Braunschweig was an exception because it was pretty muted – the strongest colour was probably the backdrop of *Clemens*, a video where I'm sitting on a bench, speaking to von Wedemeyer over the phone while there are these beautiful California trees behind me. The video recurs throughout the exhibition, projected over numerous walls and over windows.

Apparently brown paintings are the worst selling. I love random examples of racism that just float around in the world, not even attached to human bodies. That's one reason why work which focuses on the body has to be ironic and cerebral – which I hope mine is. I remember having these thoughts five years ago, around the



'Dede, Eberhard, Phantom', installation view, Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2019

time of my first Arcadia Missa show. It is funny to think about this now, because it would appear that we have just invented art about race again. But that was the *other* first time that apparently anyone had thought of making art about race, back in 2015 during the Ferguson riots that followed Michael Brown being shot by police – and so on. It is interesting to consider the frequency of these debates, and everyone has different timelines or estimates.

For that show, I visited a paint store, B&Q or somewhere like that, to use their colour-match device but using my arm under the colour sensor, which obviously does not successfully produce a real colour match. The staff suggested that I could instead take a picture of my arm for a more accurate likeness, and I said no, we have to do it like this. So that was my probably incomprehensible joke about identity art.

Recently we were having a conversation and you said something along the lines of how it sometimes seems as if the current wave of protest, radicalisation and art-world efforts to engage with race already has an amnesia for the post-Ferguson moment, rather than seeing the lines of continuity between this short period of history. What do you think is different in this current moment than five years ago?

Maybe it didn't necessarily percolate to the wider culture, but I feel that in terms of art, it was pretty clear that there was already a quite significant curatorial return to thinking about black art post Ferguson. I thought that changed a lot of people's understanding, but now in 2020 I'm having conversations with people where they seem to be encountering these thoughts for the first time. I now feel convinced that if there was another uprising in, say, 2024, we would go through the exact same process of astonishment. For some people it obviously has produced a serious change in their worldview but that's a minority, I now think.

I assumed that art had lost its social vanguard function because there is such a massive proliferation of visual culture and it's not like contemporary art really pioneers visual culture anymore, or any form of culture. But, actually, the way that what we are calling the Ferguson era percolated through the art world, and the way that art institutions tried to respond, I think weirdly presage what is happening now on a wider scale. Art is still a profession which includes a lot of people who are politically curious and engaged, despite all its drawbacks.



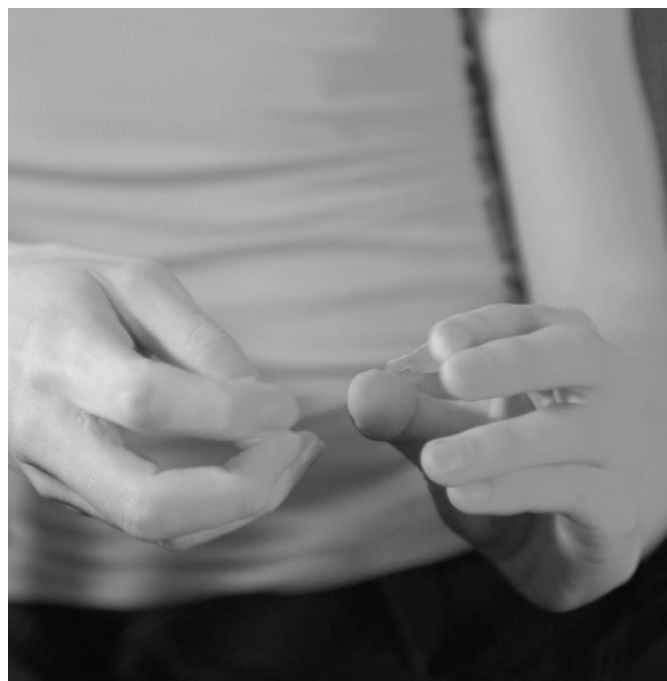
Hannah Black, Bonaventure & Ebba Fransen Waldhör, *NXIETIN*, 2018, performance

In my personal development, Ferguson was really important, because it was at the end of the first year I lived in the US. Sometimes I imagine that it happened during the beginning of my first year in America, because it deeply influenced how I think, but it actually happened at the end.

There are massive differences between now and five years ago. This year I think the scale is different. I don't even know if saying Minneapolis would be adequate as a metonym, as the riots became so widespread. But Minneapolis showed what could be done. It became clear that the police could be directly defeated by the people. That didn't become clear in 2014 and 2015. In New York, the police were on their knees, exhausted, unable to enforce the curfew. It is not clear exactly why things turned in their favour. It's hard not to blame the nonprofits and liberal activists who started to dominate the protests with nonsense about safety and non-violence. The only reason they had any power at that moment was because of the young people who had rioted and burned and looted, and not only did these organisers express no gratitude to the rioters, they drove them away from organising spaces by saying they were behaving unsafely or being tiresome. It is unforgivable what the nonprofits and their supporters did. They colluded with the state because they were afraid of change.

Despite this, there are lots of things that feel similar between now and 2014-15. Michael Brown's murder led to a re-visioning and redistribution of attention. And there was Eric Garner's murder, which sequentially happened before Brown was murdered but which also became an object of collective grief and anger later on. There are these clusters of extreme attention.

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is about information – political education is building collectivity.



Aeter (Sam), 2018, video

Something similar has happened now, where you get this interweaving of present and past, where new information comes to light about things that previously happened. This often gives the impression that there has suddenly been a spate of police murders. No, it's much weirder. There is a huge archive of the dead and it gets activated every few years across time. It's like some massive activation. The wide circulation of these really distressing last words of people being murdered by police, for example Elijah McClain. I don't like to listen, but I read the transcripts. So, the dead literally speak. The dead speak and people riot as a kind of revolutionary mourning practice, and this happens unpredictably.

I think the other thing that is maybe different is that around 2014-15, under Barack Obama, outrageous claims on what the state should be doing could be made. I mean, people were pessimistic about Obama, but he kind of paid lip service to the idea of progress. And it is possible that, had Donald Trump not happened, they might have done slightly better than bringing in body cameras, which has just produced this kind of new, really fucked-up cinematography of murder, but probably not. It's just that under Obama people could have fantasies of the state correcting itself. Now at least they have to come out and say, directly, I don't want you to burn cop cars because I think the cops are people who we can talk to. That is a complete misunderstanding about what the cops are. It is a failure to learn from history.

I'm one of the people who is annoyingly still 15% ultra-left. So, I have an annoying scepticism towards some of the ways that the idea of defunding the police has been approached. In New York after the NYPD had almost been defeated and a ton of people had been beaten or jailed, including my friends, there was so much live, incandescent rage that somehow became watered down to, 'Let's reduce the NYPD budget by \$1bn, to \$5bn'.

That was from the worst of the nonprofits. The most radical claim put forward, by the Democrat Socialists of America, was that the NYPD budget should be cut by 50% to \$3bn. It turned out that, actually, the NYPD had an \$11bn operating budget if you took everything into account. It is hard not to be sceptical about this stuff.

In many ways the defund campaign is good because it has a real political seriousness. That probably is good. There's a lot of interest in non-reformist reforms and transitional demands, and those are important. I accept I'm being a communist insurrectionist grouch. I just want to burn down a police station, like in the olden days of June 2020.

This draws out something about political education, I think, in terms of what you describe about a politics of insurrection versus a political process which tries to organise through existing mechanisms. As in, does political education happen through the percolation of discourse through certain scenes, as you identify within the art world's engagement with politics over the past five years, or is consciousness shifted most fruitfully at the level of the immediacy of burning down a police station?

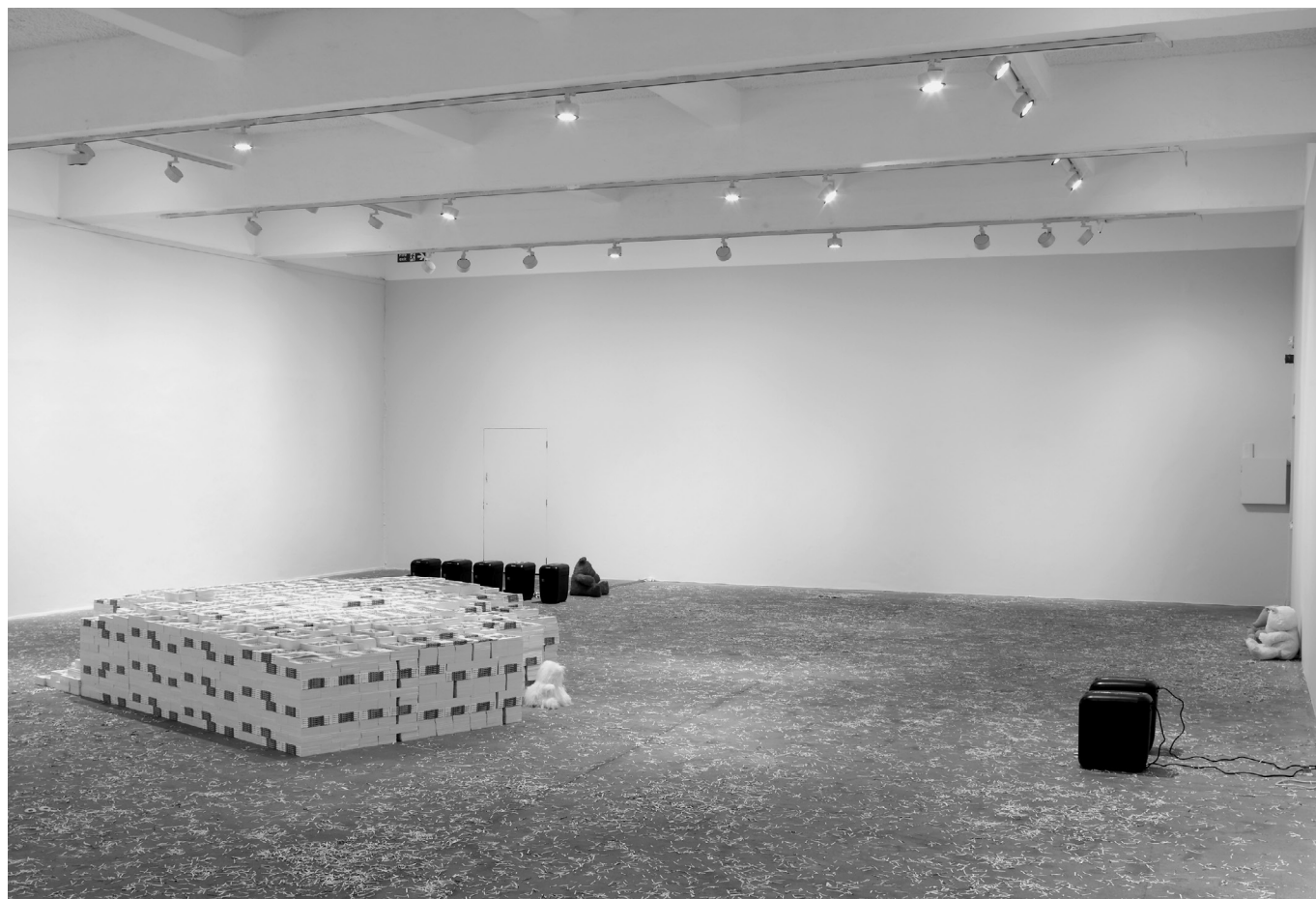
I think you need to burn things down then talk about it. It would be good to move away from the idea that political education is about information – political education is building collectivity. That probably shouldn't immediately look like institution-building or brand-building.

There is a lot of very real discussion of this because people are so accustomed to individuation and competition that they hear 'burn it down' and they immediately move to, 'I can't personally burn it down', as if

reimagining the revolution has to include the idea of myself in it – I don't think it's good to get hung up on your individual contribution. You don't know yet what your individual contribution might be in the next intense revolutionary moment. Not that I think revolution is necessarily continuous, there are moments of opportunity, like what happened in June. A lot of the ways revolution is discussed in this cultural context are confusing and apolitical.

There is an argument that social change is gradual, but it is not clear to me if non-revolutionary social change is a direct product of social movements. I want to leave some room for the undeniable reality of seismic social shifts brought about by organising or protests or struggle, but these changes are also determined by shifts in capitalist accumulation. For example, white feminism is a political struggle that has had some success. That has been a deliberate political and social effort, but the change in white women's social standing also reflects a general shift in the relationship between capital and labour and the family. So, I think sometimes people can be a little optimistic about the extent to which social change is only because of struggle. I'm not saying it's not because of struggle, but it's not only because of it.

I think the idea of gradual social change tends to force people into basically bureaucratic ways of relating to politics. It's not even just art – you have Ruth Wilson Gilmore saying that the new theory is policy. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's thinking regarding policy in *The Undercommons* is really good and helpful: 'The act of making policy for others, of pronouncing others as incorrect, is at the same time an audition for a post-Fordist economy that deputies believe rewards those who embrace change but which, in reality, arrests them in ... administered precarity.'



'Some Context', 2017, installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London



'Not You', 2015, installation view, Arcadia Missa, London

In relation to thinking about collective struggle, I wanted to ask about how you work collaboratively. For *The Situation*, this involved a process of conversations with friends, similar to the films you showed at Eden Eden, *Aeter (Jack)* and *Aeter (Sam)*. In the more recent films you showed at Kunstverein Braunschweig, you were in conversation with people, in a more interview-like manner, where you have sought them out for their experiences. For example, the film *Ramey Raymond* splices the voice of the daughter of Dede Allen, the celebrated Hollywood film editor, with the voice of Raymond Pinto, a performer in the Broadway show of *Phantom of the Opera*. Again, though in a different vein, the performance *Anxietina* involved bringing together your friends the musician Bonaventure (Soraya Lutangu) and the designer Ebba Fransén Waldhör to create something together, where the media of music, design and text formed the central components. It seems like there are different practices of collaboration going on here, but what is common among them throughout is the way that your work is not only practically but also conceptually oriented towards exploring the dynamics of relationships. It would be interesting to hear how these different methods work, for the exploration of relationships and relationality, which seems to be a central preoccupation for you.

My learning style is talking and conversation. I don't know anything solely because I read it, I know things because I read it and also I talked about it with someone. Initially, some of the collaborations were part of this angst about improperly doing art, so I felt like I had to include more people to deflect that. I had guilt about money because I wasn't used to having any. When I saw the budget for the first museum show I thought it was such an enormous amount. I thought I had to find a way to scam the museum and give the money to my family. I hadn't realised that figure included everything - production, shipping, invigilation etc.

In terms of the transcripts in *The Situation* and the works which rely on conversation, I wanted other people's spontaneous, improvised language, it is just so nice and cute and funny. One of the pleasures of writing dialogue is to try to capture that, which you can never really achieve because it is always affectation on the page. Only transcripts can fully convey the luxurious weirdness of how people talk.

Part of working with other people is to do with the problem of choice, like colour choice or font choices. The presence of others somewhat reduces the horrible freedom of choice. You have someone else's desires to contend with.

Hannah Black is an artist and writer based in New York. Her work is currently on display at Manifesta 13 Marseille (see Reviews p33) and the Busan Biennale.

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