



Vanessa German

ASSEMBLING A RADICAL GENEROSITY

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One of Vanessa German's power figures lives with me, in the main living space of my home. She has been with me since 2012, when Vanessa brought her to my apartment in Pittsburgh, the day that two packers were there, getting my seven-years-of-stuff ready to move back across the Atlantic. They watched wide-eyed as Vanessa unwrapped her. The next day the movers brought a special crate for the sculpture. They rewrapped her carefully and put her in the back of the truck. She

arrived in England safely, adorned with electrical sockets for power, a fish for the ocean she and I were to cross, and keys to unlock the way forward. Her big toes are lifted. A bird flies from her chest for joy; and the pedestal on which she stands shows a photograph of my Barbadian Great Aunt Bird, Marcia Reid. She has a halo with the words painted on it: "I see you Hilary." She watches over me.

Vanessa German's exhibition *21st Century Juju* opened at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts (PCA)

Figure 1.

Imagine then, seeing your own face, outside of your own face, for the very first time, 2018

Mixed-media assemblage

68 x 48 x 37 inches

in August 2012. This major solo exhibition filled four galleries of the PCA and celebrated her being named “Emerging Artist of the Year.” As the person who nominated her for the award, it was my honor to introduce the artist to the people gathered that night. My opening observation was that “anyone who has spent even a minute in Vanessa’s company would recognize that there is nothing emerging about her: she is all there.” I was not suggesting that the artist is always already-formed, beyond social, cultural, and political context, but rather that German engages fully with her social, cultural, and political context: A product of that context, she is also a producer of change. Vanessa identifies as a “citizen artist.”

I went on in my short comments that night to situate some of her assemblage work (fig 1.) as part of an aesthetic tradition that has a strong thread within art by African American artists. Assemblage has been employed by African American artists, such as

Dindga McCannon, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar (fig. 2), and Renée Stout, to name but a few. White American artists such as Joseph Cornell or Robert Rauschenberg employed this method, and white European artists have too, including some of the best known working in two-dimensional collage (Hanna Hoch, Max Ernst, or John Heartfield, for example). Notably, many of those best known for using assemblage or collage make work that speaks of resistance; they have marginalized cultural and political identities, or from sexualities that have been regarded as deviant and criminalized. Following from this observation, the strength of assemblage as a mode of art-making amongst African American artists is striking. While the styles, concerns, and intentions of the artists named above are distinct, their impulse to work in this way demands our attention and adds further meaning and legibility to German’s work.

In his essay “Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge—

Figure 2. Betye Saar
American, b. 1926
Gris-Gris Box, 1972
Mixed-media assemblage
29 x 8½ x 2¾ inches

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Purchased with
Funds provided by the Acquisition and Collection Committee
Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California

and After” the late Stuart Hall warns us against assuming easy similarities between antiracism in the African American context and the Black British context.¹ He also, however, outlines some ways in which we can understand diasporic culture. Born in Jamaica in 1932, Hall moved to England at age nineteen, just three years after the first invited of the “Windrush generation.”² Thus, he experienced both an established majority-Black diasporic community and a young minority Black one. In his essay, Hall develops an understanding of the Black Arts Movement of the 1980s UK as “driven by the struggles of peoples, marginalized in relation to the world system, to resist exclusion, reverse the historical gaze, come into visibility,” part of a global struggle to transform culture that is “lateral, diasporic, transnational.”³ To do this, he both treats his subject (1980s Britain) “as a conjuncture [...] a fusion of contradictory forces that nevertheless cohere enough to constitute a definite



Figure 3.
Prototype for *Miracles and Glory Abound*, 2018
Mixed-media installation
dimensions variable
Photo: Heather Mull

configuration” and treats his method (writing the essay) as an assembling of elements “not as a unity, but in all their contradictory dispersion.” This allows the artwork to appear “not in its fullness as an aesthetic object, but as a constitutive element in the fabric of the wider world of ideas, movements, and events, while at the same time offering us a privileged vantage point on that world.”⁴ Here, assembly is offered as a method of observation that becomes a map of diverse elements allowing interconnections to be made and a particular point of view to be offered.

In *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, Paul C. Taylor picks this up. Assembly, he says, “refuses the quest for definitive interpretation ... makes it easier to credit the complexity of historically emergent social phenomena” and “allows us to see and account for the coherence of the configuration without glossing over the respects in which it remains, in a sense, incoherent.”⁵ Assembly, not birth, Taylor

argues, is what we need to attend to, in order to understand diasporic Black cultures. Artists, of course, are undertaking this charge visually, materially, and performatively. Taylor’s exploration of music, film, hair, advertising, and art suggest how Black diasporic artists are following a similar path in making their analyses and reconfigurations of their reality and experience. This is how I think we can come closer to Vanessa German’s way of working: her work is a coherent configuration of diasporic culture as an assembly of peoples and cultures into something always-becoming—an act of assemblage.

Vanessa German spent her childhood in the Mid-City area of Los Angeles, and finally settled in Pittsburgh at age twenty-four in 2000. The deep “situatedness” of her work in Pittsburgh also positions her as a consciously American artist. In *Miracles and Glory Abound* (fig. 3), she takes on an iconic representation of a foundational story about the birth



of America. Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851; fig. 4) offers an apparently coherent narrative of a turning point and triumph of the American Revolution: a birth, not assembly (to reverse Paul C. Taylor's phrase). The tight, triangular composition speaks to a unified sense of purpose. The only thing higher than the general is the flag, while his profile directs attention out of the shadows to the bright new dawn. Although this depiction is offered as fact, the painting is an assemblage—a mythic representation. The stars and stripes shown on the flag here were not used until 1777; the hats were different from the tricorns that would have been current; this is a crew as diasporic as America. Robert Colescott's take on the painting, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1975; fig. 5) insists on recognition of W. E. B. du Bois's much-quoted identification of double consciousness.⁶ Colescott removes the Black man and the man wearing Native American clothing

from the boat; General Washington is transformed into the agricultural scientist and former slave, George Washington Carver; and the crew are caricatures of racist stereotypes of Black people. Colescott exposes the single consciousness—or white supremacy—of the original used to confirm the mythic representation in the painting as a form of reality.

Vanessa German, however, assembles at least a triple consciousness in her work, or what Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith identified as bravery and Kimberlé Crenshaw first named as intersectional identity.⁷ Her work elicits not only the double consciousness of being Black and being American, but also the third consciousness of being sexed and gendered.

Pittsburgh is where German has matured as an artist (fig. 6), in the neighborhood of Homewood, described by Rachel Maddow in 2011 as “America's most dangerous neighborhood.”⁸ It is also one of the only neighborhoods in Pittsburgh that is affordable



Figure 4.
Emanuel Leutze
American, Schwäbisch Gmünd, 1816–1868
Washington Crossing the Delaware, 1851
Oil on canvas
149 x 255 inches
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
Gift of John Steward Kennedy, 1897

This image has been redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 5.
Robert Colescott
American, 1925–2009
George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware:
Page from an American History Textbook, 1975
Acrylic on canvas
84 x 108 inches
● 2018 Estate of Robert Colescott / Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York



Out Beyond
and Right
CU

Bluebell

LOVE

1940's 1940

Spring Spring Spring Spring Spring Spring Spring Spring Spring Spring



Figure 6. Vanessa German at ARThouse, Homewood, Pittsburgh
Photo: Brian Cohen

for single African American mothers. Here is one of the most shocking and obscene of the “conjunctures”: from 2010 to today, Pittsburgh has been repeatedly ranked as the most livable city in the United States by The Economist Group and by Forbes. Yet the question remains: most livable for whom? African American women in Pittsburgh have the lowest life expectancy of all women in the top twenty-five metro areas in the U.S.: just seventy-five years, which is 6.1 years fewer than white women in the city, and on a level with life expectancy in Honduras.⁹ This is a situation that the city’s leadership apparently finds impossible to see, much less to address. But the streets of Homewood are a constituent part of what drives German to produce her work. They are the catalyst for what the largely white, institutional art establishment might categorize as her “social practice” work, but which we can better understand

as what Felicity Allen calls, after a discussion of the work of Samella Lewis, the “disoeuvre.” This is Allen’s term for artwork women artists produce in institutions and communities that is beyond their “oeuvre,” their bodies of work for which they will be recognized by those who determine the canon of great art. Lewis, says Allen, “never stopped negotiating a practice which necessarily crossed between the studio, the social and the institutional. Lacking privilege and being the object of prejudice, an artist needs to transform the infrastructure while also needing to earn an income, so the totality of her artistic work is considerably more complex than the objects produced from her studio.”¹⁰ German decided to stay in Pittsburgh, in Homewood, to produce work that is in and of Homewood, and Love Front Porch and ARThouse are consequences of her studio work and practice there. Through these works, she allows children to imagine different futures and to

process their present experiences. I would name her local Pittsburgh work, her wish to argue with the purportedly unarguable in American culture, her “disoeuvre,” and her practice of assemblage, as an artwork of radical generosity.¹¹

NOTES

1. Stuart Hall, "Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge—and After," in David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce, eds., *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 1–19, p. 3. Hall was the first editor of the influential socialist academic journal *New Left Review* (1960–62) and the second director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1968–79), establishing cultural studies as a major academic field.
2. 802 workers from the Caribbean invited to help rebuild war-damaged Britain, named for the ship they sailed in. The *Guardian* has been particularly assiduous in reporting the mistreatment of them and their families by the UK Home Office. See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/15/why-the-children-of-windrush-demand-an-immigration-amnesty-and-other-related-stories>.
3. Hall, "Assembling the 1980s," p. 2.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 4; p. 1.
5. Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), p. 3.
6. "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. [...] He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face." W. E. B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1903), pp. 2–3.
7. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982). Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989: issue 1, article 8.
8. *The Rachel Maddow Show*, May 26, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTbDvAL51HI>
9. The Measure of America report *Women's Well-Being: Ranking America's Top 25 Metro Areas* (2013); Black women's health and rights charity New Voices Pittsburgh (<https://causes.benevity.org/causes/840-270570462>).
10. Felicity Allen, "Erasure, Transformation and the Politics of Pedagogy as Feminist Artistic/Curatorial Practice," in Maria Buszek and Hilary Robinson, eds., *A Companion to Feminist Art* (Chichester: WileyBlackwell, forthcoming 2019).
11. For Vanessa German's account of how Love Front Porch and ARthouse came into being and her vision that informed them, see her TEDx Talk, Pittsburgh State Prison (2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMTqKQPd7Yk>