

“IF YOU CAN SURRENDER TO THE AIR, YOU CAN RIDE IT:”

THE ALCHEMY OF VANESSA GERMAN

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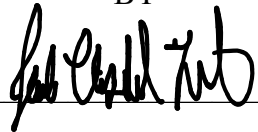
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To vanessa german, your dedication to vulnerability and love continuously inspires me to remain unjaded by this world.

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INTRODUCTION

“I find that the truest love and the truest healing in the act of making art. And being with art. And seeing. And being inspired. I believe in the power of art, and I believe in the power of love, and I do not necessarily have to distinguish between the two.”¹

-vanessa german

In the early 2000’s, vanessa german, a self-taught black queer woman artist, felt resigned to a grave feeling of hopelessness and depression that led her to attempt suicide several times.² Each time after an attempt, german, more than anything else, experienced a harrowing embarrassment for being unsuccessful. The last time she tried to end her life and lived, she recalls a shift in her spirit; conversations with friends and Lauryn Hill’s newly released album, *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0* led her to consider ways to add spiritual intention into her life and death. Increasingly, she recalls seeing bumper stickers proclaiming the power of love and art. These flowery slogans, nostalgic of 1970’s hippies, distilled a complex notion studied by many scholars such as Melanie Klein and John Dewey, seeking to understand experiencing art through making and visually analyzing could provoke the inner transformation of pain and sorrow into joy.

With this inspiration, german gave herself six months to create every day to test if the power of art and love could truly serve as healing mechanisms for herself.³ This period led her to produce one of the first “power figures” of her adulthood, entitled *Power Figure to Keep Me*

¹ Stern, Melissa. “An Army of Female Power Figures Stands against Injustice.” *Hyperallergic*, November 16, 2016. <https://hyperallergic.com/338529/an-army-of-female-power-figures-stands-against-injustice/>.

² Dzialo, Louis. “vanessa german: Citizen Artist, Standing in the Gap between Art and Life - Wellin Museum.” Wellin: Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College. Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://www.hamilton.edu/wellin/wellinformed/vanessa-german-citizen-artist-standing-in-the-gap-between-art-and-life>.

³ *Why I Believe in The Healing Power of Art. #ConnectionPGH*. Youth Collaboratory, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U6KkT6MioQ&t=493s>.

Alive.” she incorporated antiques and a myriad of discarded objects she found from her neighborhood of Homewood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania into the culminating work, imbuing the figure with love and spiritual power as she worked through her own trauma. Not only did she successfully pull herself out of a state of despair, but she also rediscovered how to access the technology of her soul.

Although this intuitive process of artmaking sounds rather isolated initially, german’s practice relies heavily on intangible ancestral knowledge and connecting spiritually to higher powers and the tangible encouragement and instruction provided by her self-taught artist mother and her grandmother as a child growing up in Los Angeles, California. Her mother, a fiber artist, saw the inherent value in her daughters learning resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness by creating artworks from materials found around their house and yard.⁴ Today, when sourcing objects for her works, german insists that the act requires her to “function on a frequency of instinct and soul, some of which has language, some of which does not;” a process she started as a child.⁵ Museum professionals and art scholars both attempted to dissuade german from referring to art as intuitive or spiritual because of the negative perception often associated with self-taught artists as deifying themselves.⁶ The sentiment seems to permeate the current scholarship surrounding german’s practice. Bill O’Driscoll, an arts and culture journalist who has covered her practice from as early as 2008 in the Pittsburgh City Paper and the Pittsburgh NPR News Station, successfully illuminates integrates some of the basic formal qualities of german’s

⁴ Adams, Amanda Dalla Villa. "What Remains in a Person's Soul: A Conversation with vanessa german." *Sculpture*, Sep, 2020, 54-63, <http://libproxy.tulane.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/what-remains-persons-soul-conversation-with/docview/2431033088/se-2?accountid=14437>.

⁵ Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021.

⁶ *HBCU SMITAH Keynote Conversation. YouTube*. Yale University Art Gallery, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYqA-2_4Xg&t=1111s.

work with the community-engaged aspects. However, he strays away from delving too deeply into the spiritual aspects of her practice. Editors and art historians, such as Jenny Gropp and Amanda Dalla Villa Adams, perfectly focus on the materials and drawing the viewers' attention to each detailed found object german employs but avoid contextualizing german's artworks within the larger ecosystem of Art History and its various subfields outside of the often-repeated connection between german's power figures and Kongolese minkisi figures. Although the connotation of the simplistic mystic could veer towards fetishism, it dually poses a threat to Black woman artists as they already face discrimination and risk their careers suffering due to unsubscribing from preferred modes of art production in conversation with the canon of art history. However, german prevails in her quest to create art that expresses the vast possibilities of personal healing and care. This thesis wrestles with the tensions present in german's work as avoiding the embodiment of the fetish while simultaneously experimenting with appropriate modes to share with various types of spirituality with different audiences.

Today, vanessa german expounds on the healing potential of her work and describes herself as a "citizen artist," "interweaving the creation of her art and her interaction with her immediate community and beyond."⁷ Her practice from the early 2000's to now evolved into understanding how art could change the self into how art could change her community and, eventually, the world; scaling sacred personal power into a collective shared energy of care. german activates communal healing through her museum and gallery installations as well as community projects. For example, german's *ARThouse*, an experimental community engaged project that serves as a house where children in the Homewood have a safe space to produce their own artworks. The project started as she simply creating art on her porch which attracted

⁷ german, vanessa, and J.G. "I Take My Soul with Me Everywhere i Go." *The Georgia Review* 70, no. 2 (2016): 335–52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44076263>.

the curious questions of the neighborhood children. The figures for self-love and resistance against the perpetual violent death seen around her inspired the youth to want to participate in creating.⁸ Having personally encountered extremely violent circumstances while growing up in Los Angeles and living in Homewood as an adult, German profoundly understood the trauma one may internalize because of such a turbulent environment. She refers to the phrase “misery resistance” when speaking about the practical function of the *ARThouse* as a way of “resisting the sadness and being generative in your own joy.”⁹ Through grants and awards from various museums and art foundations, the multi-disciplinary artist expanded the *ARThouse*’s workshops to continue providing a refuge for the neighborhood’s kids, painted it an electric blue, and decorated the porch with the works of her young students until the house tragically caught on fire in February 2021. Fortunately, German started a GoFundMe campaign to raise capital to rebuild the house which exceeded its financial goal substantially.¹⁰ Current plans to rebuild remain unclear.

The structure of this thesis seeks to contemplate Vanessa German’s oeuvre similarly to how it manifested in her own life: from the micro to the macro. Chapter one considers how her childhood and early adulthood formed her deep intuitive sense in relation to her contemporary artistic practice through the work, *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive*. Also, it contends with the existing scholarship around the femme artist’s work as deeply influenced by West African

⁸ Uhlig, Sue. “‘I Believe in the Power Art’: Vanessa German, Citizen Artist.” *Art Education* (Reston) 74, no. 3 (2021): 50.

⁹ Adams, Amanda Dalla Villa. “What Remains in a Person’s Soul: A Conversation with Vanessa German.” *Sculpture*, Sep, 2020, 63, <http://libproxy.tulane.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/what-remains-persons-soul-conversation-with/docview/2431033088/se-2?accountid=14437>.

¹⁰ O’Driscoll, Bill. “Artist Vanessa German’s Homewood ‘Arthouse’ Looks to Rebuild after Fire.” 90.5 WESA, February 22, 2021. <https://www.wesa.fm/arts-sports-culture/2021-02-19/artist-vanessa-germans-homewood-arthouse-looks-to-rebuild-after-fire>.

retentions. The way African American artists should engage with Africa remains contested due to the cultural, social, and spiritual schism created by the brutal Middle Passage and American enslavement thus some could negatively perceive her appropriation of West African spiritual frameworks as problematic. However, although german's art objects references aesthetic and mystical properties of objects like the Kongolesse minksi figures, she maintains that she created these power figures independently of conscious knowledge of these African objects and suggests that they manifested through her own connection to ancestral knowledge and teachings from her immediate family. Whether conscious or unconscious, the artist ultimately employs these West African allusions as a curative solution to her own personal dilemmas and the oppressive social problems faced by African Americans in the United States in a manner that reconfigures their purpose as well as adding to the ongoing conversation about how African American artists should engage with continental Africa. By examining the personal, german's artwork shines as a beacon of individual healing and representative of the possibilities for others.

The second chapter considers how we can best utilize the transformative power of art in the premier place to experience art: the museum. The museum's complex history creates a range of ways their caretakers find appropriate to engage the artwork. Some museum professionals deem it necessary to allow the artwork to metaphorically speak for itself without heavy interpretation which translates to less didactic labeling and educational public programming while others maintain that museums have the resources and space to facilitate increased social services to the community. This chapter uses german's installation of *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies* at the Fralin Museum of Art and the subsequent public programming to acknowledge this attempt as a stake in the argument. In the United States, minorities increasingly experience violence directed towards them due to their race, sexuality,

gender, religion, and any intersectionality between those categories. Aside from the obvious violation of human's moral code, this phenomenon grows yearly in prominence. The affected communities mobilized movements such as Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate. Additionally, artists respond and therefore museums should as well. Additionally, the stakeholders like *Museums Are Not Neutral* movement, La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski, suggest museums consider infusing their institutions with care. Fralin Museum of Art museum director, Matthew McClendon, responds with this installation of *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies*, one of german's most known installation works with the inclusion of a public talk between the artist and McClendon and a series of personal workshops that attempted to mimic the intimate safe space of self-expression as found in the *ARThouse*. It ultimately serves to wrestle with what the idea of what museums should be and considers how museums can positively provide social care to their visitors and program participants.

The final chapter distills vanessa german's complex visual lexicon by examining the use of color in her work. Primarily, the artist relies on gold, black, red, white, and blue to create her striking figures and installations. To her, each color has a specific meaning that she continuously references in the same fashion.¹¹ The decision to focus on blue seemed fitting to close in on as the artist employs the color most often and most poignantly in her work as "blue is a gift."¹² This chapter examines three electric blue altarpieces of various glass bottles and gilded gold ornamentation german created in 2021 through a collaboration with the Pittsburgh Glass Center, *nothing can separate you from the language you cry in*. The Frick Art Museum debuted the

¹¹ Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021.

¹² Heath, Jonathan. "vanessa german and the Gift, the Glory, and the Power of Blue." Behind the Glass, June 22, 2021. <https://blog.cmog.org/2021/06/22/vanessa-german-and-the-gift-the-glory-and-the-power-of-blue/>.

elaborate work dedicated to the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, and all of the other Black lives lost due to the white supremacist-tendencies of our law enforcement agencies as well as unfortunate violence in our own communities.¹³ As part of a larger installation entitled, *Reckoning: Grief and Light*, the Frick sponsored a digital video featuring her gracefully dancing in front of the devotional works as well as the *Blue Walk*. The group performance characteristic of the artist's practice featured several Black dancers, including herself, wearing flowing cobalt blue garments dramatically processing as they grieve through the streets. As demonstrated by this chapter, german's passionate offerings work in tandem with artworks from prehistory to the contemporary that harness the visual power of blue to unpack the human condition.

In tracing the use of found objects, color, site-specificity, and community engagement, this thesis seeks to demonstrate this multi-disciplinary artist's practice actively expands the definition of art by reconsidering art as a transformative experience and a healing mechanism seen in vanessa german's work. By embracing german's concept of human technology, this thesis connects her practice with the short list of art historians and anthropologists evaluating the artists and intellectuals of the Black Atlantic and their interactions with ancestral knowledge present in their work as well as accesses a deeper potential to create a healing methodology for the future in german's work. This thesis also considers how by recalibrating museums, we can increase their intended services for their audience with this methodology. In conclusion, this thesis contends with the grinding nature of white supremacy as it routinely harnesses Black people and their talents for ultimately misuse, diluting german's spiritual protection in the name

¹³ "Reckoning: Grief and Light." The Frick Pittsburgh. Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://www.thefrickpittsburgh.org/Exhibition-vanessa-german>.

of the universal as well as unknowingly subjecting her to racially motivated violence in the form of micro-aggressions or worse. In other words, "... social reproduction with the potential to also reproduce inequality and oppression."¹⁴ Through engaging with these demands, this thesis illuminates german's artistic practice like never before.

¹⁴ Gelsthorpe, Loraine, Perveez Mody, and Brian Sloan. "Spaces of Care: Concepts, Configurations, and Challenges." Introduction. In *Spaces of Care*, 1–13. Oxford, UK: Hart Publishing, 5. 2020.

CHAPTER 1: POWER FIGURE TO KEEP ME ALIVE: ART AS AN ESSENTIAL
FOR LIFE

“Make up a story... For our sake and yours, forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don’t tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief’s wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear’s caul.”¹⁵

-Toni Morrison’s 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature

“Choose this and then you can change it.”¹⁶

-Sandra Keat German, vanessa german’s mother

vanessa german seeks to become whole in her humanity and engenders healing within herself and all that encounter her work. She activates her practice through performance, installation, mixed media, and sculptures, including her renowned “power figures,” sculptures intended to embody defensive power and protect a community.¹⁷ In her first sculptures, *Power to Keep Me Alive*, german directly references Kongolese minkisi figures and American children’s dolls in form and function as a mechanism to facilitate individual healing to, as the title suggests, literally keep herself alive and present in this world, but the sculpture also highlights some of german’s early attempts to enact healing specifically for little Black girls. german frequently references Hindu, Native American, and West African spiritual modalities as well as American consumer culture, both in this specific art object and in her work more generally. However, this specific art object and her oeuvre present uniquely African American sacred objects created for Black womanist spiritual protection West African retentions influence

¹⁵ Healix, Jahunyah. “Artist vanessa german Celebrates Black Resilience in Her Mixed Media 'Power Figures'.” *Observer*. *Observer*, December 9, 2019.

¹⁶ Adams, Amanda Dalla Villa. “What Remains in a Person’s Soul: A Conversation with vanessa german.” *Sculpture*, Sep, 2020, 57, <http://libproxy.tulane.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/what-remains-persons-soul-conversation-with/docview/2431033088/se-2?accountid=14437>.

¹⁷ “Power Figure (NKISI Nkondi).” Brooklyn Museum. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/2957>.

these objects, but German specifically conceptualizes them as a curative solution to social problems faced by people of African descent living in the United States as well as directly considering appropriate modes for African American artists to employ while engaging continental Africa.

Through *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive*, Vanessa German creates a Black doll that references the life-size realistic toddler dolls popularized in the 20th century. German uses cowrie shells as eyes and black beads for skin. A spiked halo and bantu knots surround her head while a wise owl perches at the peak. A myriad of keys, used bottle caps, aluminum cans, and locks adorn her small body. The artist inserts a photograph of an unknown Black woman in her heart center. German sacrifices the polished and commercial packaging of a typical plastic doll to introduce a figure with the materials imperfections and charged energy of found objects exclusively found in her studio and neighborhood of Homewood, Pittsburgh. This spiritual object aims to insert complex dreams of protection, hope, and healing into this familiar effigy. The found objects the artist strategically arranged reflect formal elements that would later become signature to her artistic practice such as the use of the colors blue, red, white, black, and gold, cowrie shells, and birds. She sources many individual objects, like the many keys of this work, in her terribly violent neighborhood of Homewood, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The artist also calls upon a diasporic sense of consciousness when alluding to Kongolesse power figures also known as Minkisi (plural form.) Prominent Black Atlantic scholar, Robert Farris Thompson, defines the nkisi (singular form) as “the medicine of the Gods.”¹⁸ More specifically, Thompson describes “a nkisi as a strategic object in Black Atlantic art, and said to effect healing and other phenomena.” Nsemi Isaki, a Mu-Kongo (the practitioner that activates

¹⁸ Thompson, Robert Farris. *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music*. 1st ed. Pittsburgh: Periscope Pub., 2011. 93

the nkisi) illuminatingly describes the intricate spiritual purpose of minkisi: “a nkisi is also a chosen companion, in whom all people find confidence. It is a hiding place for people’s souls, to keep and compose to preserve life.”¹⁹ In traditional minkisi figures, nails, glasses, and a variety of other materials are thrust into the figure to symbolize “the tying or nailing of various arguments, lawsuits, vows, and other serious dealings” in an unbreakable oath. Through the ancestral allusion to the nkisi figure’s power, german harnesses these complex histories to produce a new form that heals herself through the process of making and transmutes the effigy into the manifestation of spiritual protection specific for American children of African descent.

However, much of the scholarship currently engaging with vanessa german’s seems to rely too heavily on the obvious Kongolesse references. Certainly, merit exists in drawing out visual and functional retentions from an African past and bridging what has been lost with an imaginative touch. german indeed continues the perhaps necessary tradition many other African American artists, such as Akili Ron Anderson, James Phillips, Betye Saar, and Renee Stout, by implementing Africanisms into her work and combating centuries-long misconceptions about African Americans’ connection to Africa. Throughout the duration of American enslavement, the general body of thought contended that African Americans no longer shared any cultural, religious, or social remembrances of their stolen lives in Africa. Additionally, much of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois struggled to combat the negative and racist stereotypes employed to delegitimize the cultural and social impact of Black Americans. One of the methods used to resist these derogatory points of view lied in producing scholarship and creative works that looked to Africa, specifically Ethiopia and Egypt, as

¹⁹ Thompson, Robert Farris. “Kongo Civilization and Kongo Art.” in Thompson and Cornet, Joseph. *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*. Washington, D.C. National Gallery of Art. 1981. 37-38

evidence of Black Americans sharing cultural heritage with their continental African brethren. The fruits of their labors resulted in an increased interest in Black Americans, other members of the Diaspora, and those positively invested in their culture to gather more evidence about this connection and the continent at large. This curiosity led to the work of Melville Herskovits who coined the term, *Africanisms*, which essentially proved that the African Diaspora had in fact retained cultural similarities to continental Africans in his 1928 book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. However, Herskovits maintained that Black people retained spiritual and cultural ideologies of their ancestors, but they lost knowledge of the material culture they produced while on the continent. The work of both Robert Farris Thompson and John Micheal Vlach greatly advanced and modernized the idea of Melville Herskovits' *Africanisms*. Both greatly disagreed with Herskovits' theory on the topic of lost cultural knowledge for material production. However, the work of the two differ significantly in their methodological approach to furthering the idea of "African retentions" in the African Diaspora.

In Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* (1983), Farris Thompson intends to "[illuminate] art and philosophy connecting the Black Atlantic worlds... provide a measure of the achievement of African civilizations in transition to the West, for theirs is one of the great migration styles in the history of the planet." (Farris Thompson xvii). To accomplish this, the author separates the book into various chapters about significant civilizations in West Africa such as the Mande of Mali and the Yoruba of Nigeria. Each chapter delves into the historical timeline, the creative practices, and the ideologies that inform all these things to each civilization, providing religious and cultural similarities in urban spots of the African Diaspora. However, the book grounds these similarities in the discussion of art objects used for ceremonial and everyday purposes in the urban areas like Havana, Cuba, Bahia, Brazil, and New York City,

USA in the Diaspora, and their African counterparts. For example, in *The Black Saints Go Marching In*, Farris Thompson introduces the numerous orisha that exist in the Yoruba tradition. The author presents the orisha, Eshu/Elegba, through objects created in Yorubaland that visually resemble those created in Brazil and Cuba. He points out the common use of clay, concrete, and cowrie shells in the creation of these three very distant locations. In this book, Farris Thompson successfully disproves Herskovits' theory.

In *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive*, cowrie shells adorn the power figure's face and head. German places a slightly larger cowrie shell for the right eye and a smaller version for the left eye as well as another shell for the figure's lips. The visual arrangement of the cowrie shells resembles that of Brazilian art object, *Eshu Boi*. Both art objects gaze back at the viewer with cowrie shell eyes. They also share a cowrie shell mouth to allude to words spoken. In West Africa, cowrie shells long held value as financial currency to facilitate trade. However, their importance rapidly increased as Europeans traded guns, slaves, and other "commodities" for cowrie shells with West African traders.

Despite the ivory shell's monetary significance during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, their importance saw a transition from financial capital to a cultural capital of "symbol-making and spiritual expression" as outlined by Akinwumi Ogundiran.²⁰ The co-author of *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic* contends that ritualistic encounters with cowrie shells held a fluid but powerful purpose of actualizing self-realization mechanisms during the rapidly shifting political, social, and cultural forces at play during the seventeenth and eighteenth

²⁰Ogundiran, Akinwumi. "Cowries and Rituals of Self-Realization in the Yoruba Region, ca. 1600–1860." In *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic*, edited by Akinwumi Ogundiran and Paula Saunders, 68–86. Indiana University Press, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gh620.7>. 72

century.²¹ Yoruba people employed these shells daily in their rituals as a form of protection, divination, ancestral communication, and religious ceremonies to enhance their individual lives and the lives of the collective. The shells also communicated social and cultural status in a manner that amplified the wearer and/or owner. *german* seems to allude to similar wide-ranging ritualistic healing purposes by including cowrie shells for the facial features of this power figure as well as adorning the bantu knots, neck, and knees with cowrie shells. Archeological digs found cowrie shells buried on plantations in Virginia, North Carolina, and Louisiana, the last of which *german* still has strong familial ties to where her family helped to build a one-room church called Sweetwater in Mer Rouge.²²

Speculation exists about the functional use of these cowrie shells in the United States during antebellum times. However, scholars postulate these powerful tools served a similar spiritual and protective purpose for enslaved Africans and worn as jewelry and adornments for clothing.²³ This fact reflects in *german*'s additive use of the cowrie shells in the figure's hair and as amulets for a necklace and anklets while the unknown artist of *Eshu Boi* similarly dresses the male figure with cowrie shell buttons along the chest as underarms. Specifically supplanting traditional methods of representing these features implies inherent value and protection activated. Perhaps, by abstracting their appearance, *german* suggests that this power figure sees, speaks, and *is* prosperity and divinity personified. Their existence in America in older figures like *Eshu*

²¹ Ogundiran, Akinwumi. "Cowries and Rituals of Self-Realization in the Yoruba Region, ca. 1600–1860." In *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic*, edited by Akinwumi Ogundiran and Paula Saunders, 68–86. Indiana University Press, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gh620.7>. 85

²² Russell, Charles, and Maude Southwell Wahlman. "African Charm Traditions: Remembered in the Arts of America." Essay. In *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art*, 146–82. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 157.

²³ "Cowrie Shells and Trade Power." National Museum of African American History and Culture, September 30, 2016. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/cowrie-shells-and-trade-power>.

Boi and more contemporary works like *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive* intimates a diasporic retention from Africa passed down from generation to generation.²⁴

Another Black woman artist from Pittsburgh but based in Washington, DC, Renee Stout, similarly creates Kongo-influenced works that seek to embody the spiritual tradition of West Africa through the *minkisi* power figures. Like German, Stout demonstrates a fondness for the previous history of found objects and intuitive modes of making directly in connection with their Black femininity. In contrast, Stout intentionally looks to the visual lexicon and spiritual modalities of Kongo culture as well as their diasporic children, Haitian Vodun and American Voodoo through committed scholarly research as well as inserting herself into these spiritualities in her real life. In her 1988 *Fetish #2*, Stout casts her body with plaster into a life-size *nkisi* figure.²⁵ She adorns her modeled body with a Black wig and *nkisi* charm bags while inserting a box into her stomach with an identical purpose of German's photograph of a Black woman found in the heart. In the creation and literal embodiment of this traditionally African spiritual practice, Stout fills the role of *Mu-Kongo* and *nkisi* as she symbolically obtains her personal autonomy.

While both Stout and German's practice utilize similar ancestral knowledge, their deployment drastically differs as Stout aligns more closely with Farris Thompson's idea of "African retentions." Stout operates within a mode of idealized authenticity more commonly seen in the Black Arts Movement generation that believed integrating West African forms and the spirituality into their visual lexicons and lived practices required a disciplined approach of studying. German's current practice better aligns with an updated method for the Black Atlantic to interacting with continental Africa presented by John Michael Vlach in 1991. In his book, *By*

²⁴ Flint, Jade E. Interview with Vanessa German. Personal, June 30, 2021. 30 min mark

²⁵ Dallas Museum of Art, "Renée Stout, interview about *Fetish #2*," in *Smarthistory*, May 24, 2021, accessed October 22, 2021, <https://smarthistory.org/renee-stout-interview-fetish-2/>.

the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife. Vlach certainly agreed with Robert Farris Thompson regarding the preservation of ancestral ways, but their philosophy departed in their methodology. Vlach asserts that “we soon come to realize that black creativity is marked by constant, individuating change.” Robert Farris Thompson subscribed to a rather static view whereas Vlach welcomed the idea of change in the production and display of “African retentions.” Vlach goes on to maintain that “when we look for African influences in Afro-American material culture, we should be mindful not only of the content of an artifact but the process of its design and creation. In other words, we must develop a sense of style and performance in addition to a competence for judging form and content.”²⁶ Vlach’s insertion remarkably resembles the artist’s mother’s method of raising her children as innovative and encouraged to explore their curiosities through artistic expression formulated by their own imaginations. This shift from Farris Thompson’s approach of finding visual similarities to Vlach’s method of finding similarities in process profoundly open new modes of understanding how people of the African Diaspora engage with continental Africa. Vlach continues to prove this throughout his book by examining the functionality and creative process of primarily African Americans of the United States.

Vlach’s approach creates the opportunity to examine the methodology behind *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive* as African influenced through familial teaching and perhaps intuitive knowledge instead of the more obvious visual similarities of Thompson’s era. Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin but raised in Los Angeles, California, Vanessa German’s (b. 1976) childhood unfolded during the harsh gang violence, raging AIDS epidemic, and sense of

²⁶ Vlach, John Michael. *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991. 5

ceaseless death that plagued Los Angeles. The artist vividly recalls, “the way that the world talked about that person really shortened their existence to the moment of their death or to actions that led to their death and removed wholeness from them.”²⁷ This sentiment shines through in german’s present life as she attempts to take the violent shootings of Black women at the hands of law enforcement as personally as possible.²⁸ From a young age to now, german deeply feels a sense of injustice by the lack of care these largely Black and Brown people receive and continues to seek new ways to connect and engage with this grief. The adolescent artist decided to act by conducting her own ceremonies and rituals to “uplift the wholeness of the human lives that were lost around [her].”²⁹ Contemporarily, german demonstrates an urging to highlight and understand the injustices Black and brown people indiscriminately face and transmute the pain felt by herself and those experiencing this violence and into power figures intended as “protectors for Black Americans.”³⁰

The artist’s mother, Sandra Keat german, keenly recognized the harsh nature of their surrounding and sought to teach her children how to create their own safe refuge, a practice german continues into her life today as exhibited by her social practice work with the ARThouse as a safe space for Black children in the Homewood neighborhood to experiment with their creativity through artmaking.³¹ german struggles to recall a time that her artist mother did not

²⁷ *HBCU SMITAH Keynote Conversation*. YouTube. Yale University Art Gallery, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYqA-2__4Xg&t=1111s.

²⁸ Swift, Jaimee. “vanessa german: ‘Power Figures’ Armed with a Mantra for Justice.” *Of Note Magazine*, 2017. <http://ofnotemagazine.org/2017/06/19/vanessa-german-countering-gun-violence-and-celebrating-the-power-of-black-women-and-girls/>.

²⁹ *HBCU SMITAH Keynote Conversation*. 2021

³⁰ Healis, Jahunya. “Artist vanessa german Celebrates Black Resilience in Her Mixed Media ‘Power Figures.’” *Observer*. Observer, December 9, 2019. <https://observer.com/2019/12/vanessa-german-sculptures-celebrate-black-resilience-at-fort-gansevoort/>.

³¹ german, vanessa, and J.G. “I Take My Soul with Me Everywhere i Go.” *The Georgia Review* 70, no. 2 (2016): 335–336. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44076263>.

insist on her children using their hands and materials around their home to create art. Her mother practiced as a fiber artist, utilizing colorful, tactile found objects. german specifically remembers the strategic intention her mother employed when scouring flea markets and antique shops for unique fabrics. german’s mother sensibly used art making to keep her children safe from harm. However, as german recognizes herself, her mother’s emphasis on this sort of creativity did more than teach her children to act resourcefully or keep them off the street. They conveyed larger lessons beyond artmaking, encouraging german to think about creativity as a metaphor for self-making and inner healing. Reflecting on the words of her mother, german remembers, “You’re going to have to take that pattern and I’ll show you how to read and understand a pattern.’ My mother made us make our own lives.”³² Through this shared creative practice, german’s mother instilled in her children that they had full autonomy over their lives and should thus treat that responsibility with an utmost care.

german also frequently spent entire summer days exploring the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Certainly, german and her siblings soaked up the forms and styles of the LACMA’s various galleries as additional training for their budding visual lexicons. However, even more so, her artist mother pushed german and her siblings to heartily listen and trust their own congenital abilities as a first instinct to be trusted. Her mother’s actions modeled a deep sense of intuition individual to german but universal in nature that she now recognizes as “human technology.” The artist describes “human technology” as a central mode of her practice which can be best summarized as the ritual of a wordless ancestral calling for relational

³² Healis, Jahunya. “Artist vanessa german Celebrates Black Resilience in Her Mixed Media 'Power Figures'.” *Observer*. Observer, December 9, 2019. <https://observer.com/2019/12/vanessa-german-sculptures-celebrate-black-resilience-at-fort-gansevoort/>.

connections that seeks to elevate herself and the audience into higher levels of consciousness.³³ The ritual of gathering found materials and interacting with their previous energies as well as actively engaging with the peoples in her community allows german to meditatively connect to her higher self while art making and thus healing.

The intuitive nature of german's upbringing and the sculpture, *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive*, seems to reflect the Yoruba concept of *ashé*. Scholar Arturo Lindsay attests that Yoruba divinity grounds itself in the stance that "all things—animate and inanimate—are vested with a life force with the power to make things happen."³⁴ He further outlines *ashé* as directly associated with the Yoruba orisha, Eshu, who embodies "the wielding power that makes things happen and challenges us to think/rethink, imagine/reimagine, envision/re-envision, create/recreate works of art in order to achieve the life force *ashé* that delivers aesthetic excellence." The idea of reimagining connects to the transformative power of the cowrie shells as an African influence that Thomson would certainly highlight in german's practice. However, german's use of keys may directly connect to Vlach's argument thus validating new pathways to engage and unearth connections for African American artists. german includes keys diverse in color, size, and physical condition; perhaps signaling to the human condition or conditions specific to Black children who grew on in neighborhoods like her own. The actions and the feelings that compelled a young german to conduct memorials for the fallen in Los Angeles still move german to take the initiative today in her adulthood, especially given the similar violent aspects of her current neighborhood. Statistically, Homewood, a Black neighborhood in

³³ *HBCU SMITAH Keynote Conversation. YouTube*. Yale University Art Gallery, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYqA-2_4Xg&t=1111s.

³⁴ Arturo Lindsay. "Ashé at the Intersection of Art & Spirituality: An Artist in the First Person Statement." *Fire* (Washington, D.C.) 6, no. 2 (2020): 128–140.

Pittsburgh, is classified as the “city’s poorest, least-diverse, most dangerous neighborhood, with the highest amount of violence and economic distress.”³⁵ Experiencing such chronic loss unfortunately remains a factor in german’s life as well as many other Black people living across the United States. The dilapidated vacancies of these neighborhoods the abject poverty, and purposeful siphoning of resources from these areas naturally foster strife, violence, and decay. Shrewdly constructed social and political conditions zap these areas of resources leaving the marginalized with few practical options to thrive. These circumstances often force people into survival mode while simultaneously criminalized for the behaviors that follow.

In terms of real function, keys grant people access whether it be to physical spaces like houses or items like diaries. Metaphorically, people often refer to phrases like, “the key to my heart” or “keys to the kingdom” to convey the worth of something intangible. Keys carry the ability protect our tangible and intangible assets from harm as german demonstrates with her use of this tool and seemingly implements the use of ashé to activate this as a protective method for Black people, but specifically little Black girls. In the right ear of the figure, german inserts a key that evokes the playful nostalgia of twisting the key found on a wound-up doll to activate the toy to perform whatever routine it was programmed to do thus the strategic placement indicates to the viewer that the object requires a symbolic activation. Several other sets of keys hang from key rings on each arm of the figure. Their presence harkens to the plethora of keys often seen dangling from the wrists of office managers and maintenance workers to access their places of employment.

³⁵ “What Homewood Could Be.” Gazette, September 21, 2015. <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/2015/09/23/What-Homewood-could-be/stories/201509230017>.

The keys appear again in combination with miscellaneous locks of varying colors and size protrude from the neck of the figure. To further elaborate, keys symbolize protection in a rather implicit way as they are the instrument used to disarm protection while locks explicitly convey protection as the agent that enforces said protection but also the act of unlocking opens people up to unlimited experiences. By placing these various keys through the art object, perhaps the artist wants to pass on the legacy of artmaking symbolically and energetically as a partial healing solution to the conditions of these violent, resourceless neighborhoods. She boldly calls her Black neighbors, physically and metaphorically, and other marginalized people to not allow themselves to only see their current environment but will an alternative reality to fruition. This view may seem overly optimistic and fail to practically help people suffering. Some people may urge for more attention and resources be diverted to those that work systemically to enact change through running for office and conducting voter drives like Stacey Abrams or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. These women have engaged in a noble fight for justice, and the community certainly needs people like them advocating and creating initiatives to change their living conditions and access to well-paying jobs. However, german's approach also has an equal amount of validity in terms of hoping to change the lives of those around us. german's *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive* and her socially engaged practice invoke the life-affirming concept of ashé to activate positive power to make better circumstances come to fruition.

In vanessa german's adult life, art also became the necessary lifeline between life and death. She thankfully lived through several suicide attempts, but the last time she faced death, she decided to totally immerse herself into artmaking. She encountered numerous bumper stickers and ads that promoted this notion of "art as healing" which prompted german to test it

out as an experiment for her own survival every day for six months.³⁶ The artist created the sculpture *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive* during this period of her life. german superimposes a red plastic jewel encrusted with gold and a royal blue material into the third eye which indicates the figure's channel to the higher consciousness in Hindu culture.³⁷ Hindu women wear a red dot, known as a bindi, in this exact same spot to reaffirm this and often symbolize marriage. Through this Indian allusion, german signals to the audience her wide array of spiritual references and methods utilized to maximize the mediative effect.

Round black plastic beads, typically attached to the ends of a little Black girls' braids, comprise the figure's facial skin in an undulating pattern as well as larger black beads for the nose (See image of *Black Girls with Braids*). german's use of materials recalls a specific Black girl memory of the cathartic cackling of beads while playing on the childhood playground. german again cites Black hairstyling methods by adorning the power figure's hair into Bantu knots. When german refers to her childhood and how it informed her creative life, she asserts that, "I learned, and I gather [materials] by trusting my instincts and trusting my heart and moving towards materials and moving towards alignment with a sense of deep rightness inside of myself which is radical on the land that we're living in."³⁸ The various adornments directly reflect german's thoughts as harkening back to her materials in connection to her life's experiences in multi-cultural Los Angeles. However, german dismisses calling herself a mystic and does not research global spiritualities with the purpose of including them in her artwork.³⁹

³⁶ *Why I Believe in The Healing Power of Art. #ConnectionPGH*. Youth Collaboratory, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U6KkT6MioQ&t=493s>.

³⁷ Hindu American Foundation. "The Purpose of the Bindi." Hindu American Foundation, October 8, 2021. <https://www.hinduamerican.org/blog/the-purpose-of-the-bindi/>.

³⁸ *HBCU SMITAH Keynote Conversation. YouTube*. Yale University Art Gallery, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYqA-2__4Xg&t=1111s.

³⁹ Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021.

She instead “works instinctively, really pulling from the center of [her] heart and moving forward from that place.”⁴⁰ In regards to other self-taught artists, such as Sister Gertrude Morgan and John B. “J.B” Murry, folk art curator Sharon Koota contends that “there is an unconscious memory about the protective nature of certain motifs and designs that have been passed on from Africa through generations of African Americans in North America.”⁴¹ However, scholar Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz warns against the potential harmful effects of African descent alone as the only prerequisite to engagement with West African spiritualities through his critiques of Renee Stout’s work claiming that Stout’s practice fails to “operate within a complex system of exchange with other objects, space, and humans” and instead relies on “shorthand references” validated by art history’s tendency to encounter African Art with an overly simplistic tone.⁴² Martínez-Ruiz insists on closer scrutiny because by,

“using certain images recognized and accepted as ‘representative of’ Kongo art such as the *minkisi*, nails, and packages, these artists risk unwittingly glossing over the true complexities and contextual meanings of the Kongo visual traditions, and the art world can point to their critical and commercial success as evidence that such issues have been addressed and are not in need of further exploration.... their work is largely produced largely for consumption by an elite, Western-nized class, little of the discussion it engenders-- or the cultural and financial rewards it earns- makes its way back to the communities most actively engaged in the practice of Kongo-based traditions.”⁴³

His rather searing comments highlight that although Stout’s artistic intentions and creative productions intend to connect her to her ancestral roots through education with some aspects of an improvisational, intuitive approach often employed by African Americans to

⁴⁰ Flint, Interview.

⁴¹ Russell, Charles, and Sharon Patton. “Spiritual Visions and Allegory in Contemporary African American Folk Painting.” Essay. In *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art*. 129-145. Cf Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 135

⁴² Martínez-Ruiz, Bárbaro. "WHITHER ART HISTORY? Kongo Ins-(ex)piration in Contemporary Art." <i>The Art Bulletin</i> 98, no. 3 (2016): 291-96. Accessed August 6, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43947929>. 294

⁴³ Martínez-Ruiz, Bárbaro. "WHITHER ART HISTORY? Kongo Ins-(ex)piration in Contemporary Art." <i>The Art Bulletin</i> 98, no. 3 (2016): 291-96. Accessed August 6, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43947929>. 295

comprehend what was lost in the Transatlantic slave trade and reconnect her to her own humanity, Stout risks playing into the fetishization of the entire system of colonization she seeks to avoid. The reality of her work owes a responsibility to the sanctity of Kongo spiritualities as well as german's.

Although the scholar directs his criticism towards the work of Stout, Martínez-Ruiz could reasonably apply the same logic to the work of vanessa german. He could perceive the power figures created by the artist as similarly benefitting from the increasing surface-level, aesthetically focused support of African art by the Western art world which Martínez-Ruiz maintains still shuns complex spiritual aspects of the belief systems supporting these art objects.⁴⁴ However, Martínez-Ruiz fails to fully consider the real possibility of ancestral artistic connection through documented and undocumented generational retention as outlined by Robert Farris Thompson and John Michael Vlach. In an interview with the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, german shares a story from her childhood when she presented a clay work of art, she created with nails found outside of her house as hair.⁴⁵ A professor from Carnegie Mellon instantly recognized the similarities between german's early iteration of her power figures and the Kongolesé minkisi figures.⁴⁶ This shift from Farris Thompson's approach of finding visual similarities to Vlach's method of finding similarities in process profoundly opens new modes of understanding how people of the African Diaspora engage with continental Africa. Vlach challenges Martínez-Ruiz's critiques that stifle methods Black American may use to reconnect

⁴⁴ Martínez-Ruiz. "WHITHER ART HISTORY? Kongo Ins-(ex)piration in Contemporary Art." 296

⁴⁵ german, vanessa, and J.G. "I Take My Soul with Me Everywhere i Go." *The Georgia Review* 70, no. 2 (2016): 336. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44076263>.

⁴⁶ Adams, Amanda Dalla Villa. "What Remains in a Person's Soul: A Conversation with vanessa german." *Sculpture* (Washington, D.C.) 39, no. 5 (2020): 60.

with their ancestral heritage. Also, Martínez-Ruiz's work fails to consider West African traditions as welcome to change and imaginative touch especially for Black Americans.

Black Atlantic anthropologist, J. Lorand Matory, perhaps agrees with Martínez-Ruiz's position that white supremacy dictates the modes Black Americans chose to connect with their ancestral heritage.⁴⁷ Similar to Farris Thompson and Vlach, Matory decries Herskovits' *Africanisms* but instead illuminates the long distance, multi-generational dialogues created between colonial Africans and people of African descent located in various locations in the Americas where both actively sought to exchange ideas about religion and cultural traditions in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century through the Lagosian Cultural Renaissance of the 1890s.⁴⁸ Matory suggests that, within these discussions, people of African descent began constructing communal and individuals rituals in relation to their cultural heritage as well as the possibilities of process-driven retentions of their African past. In this, Matory's insistence on nonlinear perspective that allows room for multiple relationships between Africa and the Black Americas connects directly to the work of German.

The transferability of skills across disciplines comes to mind at this juncture. Just as the Black cinematographer Bradford Young's family funeral parlor shaped his understanding of care by Black People for Black people in times often marked with sorrow which he transferred into his visual practice to treat Black people with unflinching integrity on the big screen, certainly the influence of Vanessa German's mother and other past generations that helped shape her instincts and artistic fruit of today. To use terms more specific to the US, it is not farfetched given the

⁴⁷ Matory, J. Lorand. *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 15. 2009.

⁴⁸ Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*. 32 and 40.

dispersal of West African spiritual healers, politicians, farmers, etc. from their ancestral communities and homeland to consider how artmaking may have persisted with german's family with some semblance of continuity but responding and adjusting to their environment entirely, as proven by Matory, Thompson and Vlach. However, the specific adaptations needed to thrive in America inherently changes their identity from simply being "African retentions." The unpredictable violence of many Black neighborhoods and cities like Homewood and Los Angeles run rampant at unprecedented levels due to the lack of resources that lead people to join gangs as opportunities for misguided connection and relying on drugs as coping mechanisms. Black children in these situations present an especially vulnerable population subjected to domestic violence as well as the social woes outside. The state of these communities drastically differs from the environments our West African ancestors inhabited thus, even if Black Americans could have retained all the spiritual knowledge of our forebearers, those ritualistic frameworks required some evolutionary agency and radical imagination to deal with the violent landscape of the United States. german operates in conversation with the ancestral connections and recognizes a necessity for love and transformation as signaled in the making of her power figures where german metamorphoses discarded items into beautiful objects of healing that shield from harm. Through the skills learned and passed down, german's *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive* intently answers the constant need for spiritual and physical protection needed for survival in America as an individual, her neighbors, and for her audience.

CHAPTER 2: CONSIDERING NEW POSSIBILITIES OF CARE IN MUSEUMS THROUGH
VANESSA GERMAN'S INSTALLATION,
SOMETIMES.WE.CANNOT.BE.WITH.OUR.BODIES

Introduction

In 2017, vanessa german creates an immersive experience for viewers in the mixed-media installation, *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies*. In the first installation, a “~~museum~~ laboratory, Mattress Factory, created space for german’s procession of power figures in flight, contrived found objects, and text which the artist describes as, “a dimensional living reckoning. the living reckoning is bold,erruptive,disruptive work against systems & pathologies that oppress & subvert overt & covert violence onto & into the lives & humanity of marginalized people on this land.”⁴⁹

The second installation happened at the Fralin Museum of Art in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2019. Following the fatal Charlottesville rally in 2017, the community questioned its identity and faced challenges coming to terms with the tragic event. Normally considered a liberal college town, Charlottesville, Virginia faced an unprecedented level of racially motivated violence on August 11th, 2017, over the removal and renaming of Confederate statues and sites. White, primarily male, Alt-Right protestors armed with torches marched on the University of Virginia campus to show their support for keeping Confederate statues while a diverse group, largely from the University of Virginia community, counter-protested the controversial move.

⁴⁹ “Sometimes. We. Cannot. Be. with. Our. Bodies.” Mattress Factory, September 25, 2020. <https://mattress.org/works/sometimes-we-cannot-be-with-our-bodies/>.

The police forced the two crowds to disperse due to violent encounters involving mace and pepper spray, but unfortunately an Alt-Right supporter named James Fields, Jr. still plowed his Dodge Charger through the crowd of counter-protesters, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring nineteen more people.⁵⁰ One of only two art museums in the college town, the director of the Fralin Museum of Art, Matthew McClendon, positioned the Fralin as “committed to providing a mediated space to explore the issues that the artist has been devoted to throughout her versatile and inspiring career” in response to Charlottesville rally as well as the larger volatile political and social landscapes amplified following President Trump’s election.⁵¹

McClendon, appointed just months before the volatile confrontation, demonstrate a knowledge of German’s citizen’s art practice as aligned with ideals of caring for the community. The statement additionally indicates the Fralin Museum of Art’s understanding of the ideological shifts happening across America, dividing Americans between the extreme opposites of self-identified liberals and the Alt-Right communities. This polarization barely allows room for listening, learning, or reconciliation in differing opinions. In this role, McClendon suggests that the Fralin Museum of Art has a duty to responsibly acknowledge these cultural rifts and respond to these issues with the intention of providing a safe space for the audience to understand and unpack tragic events like Charlottesville. This museum director’s initiative to curate this exhibition directly comments on contemporary debate about the responsibility museums uphold to their audiences and affirms the methodological framework of the ethics of care as a duty for museums to utilize.

⁵⁰ Loeffler, James. “Charlottesville Was Only a Preview.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, December 23, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/12/why-charlottesville-matters/621096/>.

⁵¹ “vanessa german and *sometimes we cannot be with our bodies*.” UVA Arts, University of Virginia

This chapter considers how museums, institutions formed with the initial purpose of codifying culture in an educational but hierarchal manner, may task themselves with the directive of caring for people with the same consideration and effort as art objects. This responsibility, as perceived by McClendon and the staff at the Fralin, reflects in the access and resources afforded to german as their artist-in-residence to carry out her self-identified mode of social practice art, citizen art (art that seeks to directly impact and serve the community), to her fullest imagination. By studying this exhibition and its subsequent public programming, this chapter aims to wrestle with competing ideas of how museums should function in the cultural landscape, more specifically considering how different ways that museums have responded to the contemporary debate of museums as spaces for social care. Through vanessa german's collaboration with the Fralin Museum of Art, the installation, *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies*, asserts an argument positing care as essential to the museum spaces of the future and positioning social practice art as a tool museums may engage to achieve this goal.

vanessa german's *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies* at the Fralin Museum of Art

The artist, vanessa german, believes that, despite the wickedness of the world, rebels and pure hearted people must continue to fight, "have the capacity to love, move with mercy, and with grace" as she demonstrates with this sprawling installation.⁵² Inspired by Black womanist texts, german incorporates her own writings as well as two quotations from Yaa Gyasi's *Homecoming* (2016) and five from Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) into the welcoming

⁵² Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021

banners found on the exterior of the museum and inside the entrance hall.⁵³ Rather than approaching with a distinctly narrative style, german's text reads like a diary peppered with unorthodox punctuation and phrases such as, "did you think that we would make it through without blood?there will be blood.there has always been blood.all of this" and "here.sometimes.we. cannot be with our bodies.they fall or, they are made to fall & we are out in the world or.sittin up in our houses," which the viewer reads and experiences german's words in a manner that emphasizes a stream of consciousness rather than a more contrived work. Gyasi's book tells the explosive story of two half-sisters, living in eighteenth century Ghana, who lives drastically depart as one is sold into slavery in a castle on the Gold Coast while the other lives comfortably as the wife of an Englishman in the same castle. The fictional book by Morrison, tells the coming-of-age story of Macon "Milkman" Dead III, an African American man raised in Michigan during the early 20th century. german pulls quotes that specifically referring to moments where death, love, and hate collide through the two magnificent stories. For example, one of Morrison's quotes reads, "perhaps that's what all human relationships boils down to: Would you save my life? Or would you take it?"⁵⁴ Despite the dismal tenor of this probing quote out of context, within Morrison's renowned novel, this dialogue comes toward the end of the story when the protagonist, Milkman, has finally released the generational trauma he inherited and claims his redemption as his own. In this way, german cleverly creates a moment for Morrison enthusiasts to have a deeper understanding of the text while suggesting that outsiders may have an opportunity to discover something new.

german encourage visitors' curiosities again by implementing a black curtain to conceal the next section of the installation. Once stepping through the fabric barrier, the visitor

⁵³ McClendon, Matthew. Letter to Jade Flint. *vanessa german*, January 7, 2022.

⁵⁴ Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York, NY, NY: Signet, 1977. 334-335

encounters dimensionless black painted walls enclosing on a group of five bulbous pasty white busts. german casts the face of each sculpture as in a pasty white with exaggerated features phenotypically associated with Black people. One includes the slitted eyes, full lips, and enlarged ears of the Punu peoples of South Gabon's Mukudj mask resting on top. Another two feature two types of birds: 1.) a rooster 2.) a seagull. The final sculpture refers to racist American visual culture with four mammy cookie jars of various sizes positioned in the hair of the white sculptural base. This set of sculptures align with the purpose of Yaa Gyasi's book, *Homecoming*, by suggesting to the viewer to examine about how the Middle Passage and slavery displaced familial lines throughout African and the Americas and considering how to piece together these disparate legacies. In these sculptures by german, the artist attempts to communicate her understanding as an intuitive spiritual connection through her artmaking.

Behind the final black curtain, the explosion of color, pattern, and texture overwhelms the viewer in comparison to muted tones and textures of the previous gallery. Long black and white geometric outlines wrap the entire room from floor to ceiling. A singular disco ball floats above the eight power figures triumphantly processing to a destination unknown on a glittering gold backdrop and path adorned with bouquets of flowers. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these art objects operate similarly to the power figures of the Kongolesse minkisi tradition where the Mukongo creates a sculpture of organic materials empowered through a ritual process of creation. german separates her selection process for the found objects in her work in two ways: some specificity in sourcing a particular type of item like a model of scissor-tailed flycatcher or a more intuitive act of gathering. When asked to describe this deeply personal method, she explains that it "requires functioning on a frequency of instinct and soul and by soul, meaning this cumulative, visceral, dimensional wisdom; some of which has language, some of which does

not have language.”⁵⁵ This statement illuminates german’s practice as an intuitive act for the personal. Additionally, she creates a sense of personal care for herself through the mediative act of sourcing, ordering, and refiguring objects into the final body of these power figures.

german primarily employs the colors red, white, blue, black, and gold in the power figures. german typically avoids multicolored works instead opting for the monochromatic power figures of those colors. german cites her interest in the colors beginning with a childhood memory. Her white schoolteacher, in Carson, California, taught german and the other young minds about Betsy Ross, the creator of the American flag, and the flag’s history and significance to this country. “The blue stands for glory, the white for peace, and red for the blood of those we have lost,” explained her teacher. A precocious german asked, “who’s blood?” She vividly recalls pressing her teacher for answers and facing disdain from the line of questioning. german felt befuddled about the supposed glory and peace given the injustices she encountered in her everyday life in 1980’s California, rife with drugs and violence of all kinds. When the young artist expressed her thoughts and the reaction her teacher, her mother validated her and insisted that she decline to say the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag if german felt compelled to do so. The result of this interaction left a lasting impression on german and resulted in her continued use of red, white, and blue as a critique of people like her former teacher and the country; both parties live willfully ignorant to the catastrophic ways whiteness operates and has operated in this world, according to german.⁵⁶

The strategic use of these colors harkens back to german’s artist statement for the work as a “deep acknowledgement of an ongoing reckoning between past,present,future & striations of the political, cultural & spiritual impact of systemic racism & its attendant brutalities on the

⁵⁵ Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021.

⁵⁶ Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021.

physical & spiritual bodies of Black, Brown & Native peoples on this land.”⁵⁷ The complex amalgamation of found objects inserted into the various figures, such as cotton, tar baby figures, porcelain teapots, and empty tins of hair grease, also reflect those sentiments through materials referencing the not-so-long-ago past of enslavement and Jim Crow. By incorporating these artifacts, german emphasizes that the past remains with us in the present and must not be forgotten.

german presents this installation with endless layers that lead to two different perceptions as outlined by journalist, Raennah Lorne, “someone whose loved one has been murdered in the street and she cannot go to her because the body is cordoned off by police tape and the interiority of trauma itself and the dissociation a person may experience from her own body in order to survive the experience.”⁵⁸ However, through the bright colors, glittering textures, hand gestures and implied forward movement of the figures, german propels the viewer into imagination of the future. german configures the three foremost figures into a triangular formation. The two base figures, one tall dressed in white, while holding an abstracted white baby, and the another, much shorter, white figure point their left hands towards the future. The apex of this triangle wears an all-black hoodie largely created with a variety of black bracelets for the sleeves. The hoodie became a visual icon to represent anti-respectability politics, issues with the Stand Your Ground laws, and how Blackness is treated as a target for misconduct after the tragic vigilant murder of hoodie-wearing Trayvon Martin. The untimely death of the seventeen-year-old in 2012 could be considered the first of several racial reckonings leading up to the uproar caused by both the 2017

⁵⁷ “Sometimes. We. Cannot. Be. with. Our. Bodies.” Mattress Factory, September 25, 2020. <https://mattress.org/works/sometimes-we-cannot-be-with-our-bodies/>.

⁵⁸ Lorne, Raennah. “Restorative Justice: vanessa german's Art Celebrates Black Lives.” C-Ville, February 20, 2019. <https://www.c-ville.com/restorative-justice-vanessa-germans-art-celebrates-black-lives/>.

Charlottesville rally and the more contemporary 2021 murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Following Martin's death, the hoodie became an iconic symbol representing social injustice which german incorporates as a way of acknowledging and mourning all the Black, Brown, and indigenous people murdered at the hands of police and vigilante violence. Through the inclusion of this popular and highly recognizable icon, german calls the emotional losses collectively felt into the room for a communal ritual of rage, grief, healing, and resurrection. The trauma of these tragic events never leaves any person who encountered the killing, pictures, videos, and commentary, but Black, Brown, and indigenous people struggle every day to avoid the same fate. In this vein, german summons the lives of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and the unfortunate countless others to not only remember but transmute our collective trauma into something beautiful and cared for.

By displaying these spiritually significant and protective figures in the museum, german demonstrate to the University of Virginia and Greater Charlottesville community that pain can be transmuted into something physically beautiful. Despite the aesthetic beauty and deeply intentional method of german's artmaking, the Fralin and german keenly recognized that the audience needed additional context with multiple accessible entry points to maximize meaningful engagement. With german leading the charge, the museum placed a deep significance on facilitating care for the audience.⁵⁹ german, nor the Fralin, pioneered these recently developing theoretical framework as necessitating care within the museum space. In 2011, Cuban-born woman artist, Tania Bruguera, began working on *Immigrant Movement International*, initially where the artist ran a community space in Queens, NY that practically addressed immigration issues in collaboration with Creative Time and the Queens Museum of

⁵⁹ McClendon, Matthew. Letter to Jade Flint. *vanessa german*, January 7, 2022.

Art.⁶⁰ In 2016, Simone Leigh's *Waiting Room* centered self-care as a radical act by engaging with different types of healing environments in the New Museum and providing workshops and healing sessions for the community with various practitioners.⁶¹ These artistic interventions conducted inside and outside of the physical museum galleries present a highly contested debate on the purpose of museums.

History of the Museum

Museums Studies scholar, Lois Silverman, highlights five different evolutions of museums as “1) mouseions; 2) cabinets of curiosities; 3) public museums and settlement house museums; 4) traveling exhibits; and 5) integrated museums, ecomuseums, and neighborhood museums.”⁶² Mouseions, often considered the origin of museums, became sites of transformation; these sacred temples for the artistically inducing Muses, Grecian goddesses of “human thought, creativity, and action.”⁶³ The most famous mouseion in Alexandria, Egypt, founded in the third century BCE, more closely resembled a site for scholarship rather than directly referencing a temple as the reigning nobility invited scholars from all over the world to live and commune in this sacred space dedicated to the Muses.⁶⁴ Cabinets of curiosities became a global phenomenon at the helm of the seventh century. Due to European colonization of Africa, the Americas, and Asia, wealthy white patrons sought to empirically understand the rapidly expanding view of the world and their place in it by hoarding and displaying objects from around

⁶⁰ “Immigrant Movement International.” Creative Time. <https://creativetime.org/projects/immigrant-movement-international/>.

⁶¹ “Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room.” Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room: New Museum. <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/simone-leigh-the-waiting-room>.

⁶² Silverman, Lois H. “In the Service of Society.” In *The Social Work of Museums*. 5. London: Routledge, 2010.

⁶³ Silverman, Lois H. “In the Service of Society.” In *The Social Work of Museums*. 6. London: Routledge, 2010.

⁶⁴ “Mouseion and Library of Alexandria.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. Oxford University Press, 1991.

the globe in their homes.⁶⁵ The intellectual thought of the time valued “linear, didactic layouts dedicated to narrative of development or progress” with Europeans at the top of the hierarchy thus legitimizing their colonial expansion as well as understanding the influx of information about these other foreign culture.”⁶⁶ Through their swift collecting, the Europeans collectors also communicated a sense of worldliness and prestige to their peers as well as presented opportunities for social connections.⁶⁷ Public museums and settlement house museums emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century as newly industrialized nations started seeing a dismal rise in poverty levels in growing cities. With this reality, collectors opened public museums expose the working class to art that they were previously denied access. Additionally, artists, religious leaders, and people we would know called social workers began creating settlement house museums with a similar purpose but with the targeted purpose of eradicating the social ills commonly associated with the poor. Interestingly, several founders of these types of institutions saw the museum space as a “powerful tool for social service.”⁶⁸ In the late nineteenth century, museum scholars created traveling temporary exhibitions to allow diverse populations to encounter new information and imagery without regard to geography. This early attempt to facilitate accessibility for all types of demographics proved successful for educating new audiences in examples such as the *Tenement -House Exhibition of 1899* and the science exhibits conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural in the 1950’s and 1960’s.⁶⁹ Lastly, Silverman categorizes integrated museums, ecomuseums, and neighborhood museums as a trio focused on the museum immersing itself into their surrounding community as “tools of the

⁶⁵ Mueller, William. “Mathematical Wunderkammern.” *The American mathematical monthly* 108, no. 9 (2001): 785

⁶⁶ Findlen, Paula. “The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy.” *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 1, issue 1 (January 1989), pp. 59-78.

⁶⁷ Silverman, Lois H. “In the Service of Society.” In *The Social Work of Museums*. 8. London: Routledge, 2010.

⁶⁸ Silverman, Lois H. “In the Service of Society.” In *The Social Work of Museums*. 9. London: Routledge, 2010.

⁶⁹ Silverman, Lois H. “In the Service of Society.” In *The Social Work of Museums*. 11. London: Routledge, 2010.

people” for ecologically friendly social change.⁷⁰ The first director of International Council of Museums (ICOM), Georges Henri Rivière, and his successor, Hughes de Varine-Bohan led this new movement in Europe that later gained the title, “New Museology movement” in the early 1960’s and 1970’s. They proposed a model that involved “the participation of man himself as an actor rather than as a visitor.”⁷¹ Through this framework, the movement required museums to examine how relationships with their audience members could function collaboratively.

In every model, one can notice some range of influence on any currently operating museum. In this manner, as Silverman outlines, the namesake for our modern-day museums existed as places “human transformation, universal work, and political work through collections and social interactions” similar to the educational and public engagement aspects of most museums.⁷² The cabinets of curiosities model transformed these complex ideas that arose from colonization by beginning to hegemonize Europeans into a white identity while simultaneously educating on foreign cultures and defining them as exotic others outside of the burgeoning majority white culture. Travel exhibitions created a precedent for how to create accessibility for those outside of the geographic proximity to urban areas and the working class. Settlement house museums and public museums also introduced those outside of the wealthy elite to artwork with an infusion of social services. Lastly, the New Museology movement and its contemporaries sought to share the reins of the museum’s authority with its surrounding community as a form of service and development for the community, creating a two-way relationship for information and

⁷⁰ Silverman, Lois H. “In the Service of Society.” In *The Social Work of Museums*. 12. London: Routledge, 2010.

⁷¹ de Varine-Bohan, Hugues. “The Modern Museum: Requirements and Problems of a New Approach.” *Museum international* 66, no. 1-4 (2014): 81.

⁷² Silverman, Lois H. “In the Service of Society.” In *The Social Work of Museums*. 7. London: Routledge, 2010.

interactions to flow. For all the various design flaws and successes, museums “have always been institutions of social service,” according to Silverman.⁷³

What are the Purpose and Responsibilities of Museums in the 21st century?

As largely non-profit organizations in the United States, museums are obligated to serve the public per our tax code.⁷⁴ The Association of Art Museum Directors also indicates that “Outreach and Community Service,” defined as “committed to providing the broadest possible audience with accessible and engaging artistic experiences and to being responsive to the needs of their respective communities,” as one of the values the organization and their members must carry out in their respective institutions.⁷⁵ However, the question of the type of service remains extremely ambiguous.

For the last five decades, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has defined a museum as, “a nonprofit institution” that “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment.”⁷⁶ This outdated definition attempts to define the type of service expected of museums but noticeably avoided the notion of social service as outlined by Silverman. Deliberation over the definition sparked recent debate where several museum scholars urged the council to examine incorporating the phrases, “human dignity and social

⁷³ Silverman, Lois H. “In the Service of Society.” In *The Social Work of Museums*. 13. London: Routledge, 2010.

⁷⁴ McCarthy, Kevin F., Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Arthur Brooks, and András Szántó. “Visual Arts Organizations.” In *A Portrait of the Visual Arts: Meeting the Challenges of a New Era*, 1st ed., 82. RAND Corporation, 2005. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg290pct.13>.

⁷⁵ “Code of Ethics.” Association of Art Museum Directors. Accessed March 9, 2022. <https://aamd.org/about/code-of-ethics>.

⁷⁶ Small, Zachary. “A New Definition of ‘Museum’ Sparks International Debate.” *Hyperallergic*, August 19, 2019. <https://hyperallergic.com/513858/icom-museum-definition/>.

justice,” into the definition.⁷⁷ Scholars such as Samuel J. Redman, a Public History professor, fear that by museums pivoting to a more political stance, they risk losing their relevance and trust rather than continuing to maintain their status as cultural leaders.⁷⁸ Cultural critic, Josie Appleton, contends that museums now rely on the “language of marketing and self-help gurus because they no longer believe in their own language,” similar to Redman, suggests museums only hold relevance when using a top-down model to educate visitors rather than engage with them.⁷⁹

These debates cropped up as a response to the increasing momentum of the “Museums Are Not Neutral” Movement, led by Black woman curatorial fellow at the Cleveland Museum of Art, LaTanya S. Autry and white male former Director of Education and Public Programs at the Portland Art Museum, Mike Murawski. The movement seeks to, “expose the myth of museum neutrality and demand ethics-based transformation across institutions.”⁸⁰ The social media hashtag and corresponding t-shirts seeks to create community amongst museum professionals aligned with the mission of revealing this false claim of neutrality and the inequitable power dynamics perpetuated throughout museums. Jette Sandahl, Dutch curator, leader of the ICOM, seems to directly speak to Autry and Murawski’s call by establishing a need to address “cultural democracy.”⁸¹ The resulting statement reads as the following:

“Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse

⁷⁷ Small. “A New Definition of ‘Museum’ Sparks International Debate.” 2019.

⁷⁸ Araujo, Ana Lucia, Alice L Conklin, Steven Conn, Denise Y Ho, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Samuel J Redman. “AHR Conversation: Museums, History, and the Public in a Global Age.” *The American historical review* 124, no. 5 (2019): 1631–1672.

⁷⁹ Appleton, Josie. “Had a Rough Night? Josie Appleton Deplores the Use of Advertising Gimmicks to Promote Museums and Galleries.” *The Spectator* (London. 1828) 300, no. 9268 (2006): 49–51

⁸⁰ Autry, La Tanya S., and Mike Murawski. “Museums Are Not Neutral.” *Museums Are Not Neutral*. <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/>.

⁸¹ Small, Zachary. “A New Definition of ‘Museum’ Sparks International Debate.” *Hyperallergic*, August 19, 2019. <https://hyperallergic.com/513858/icom-museum-definition/>.

memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.”⁸²

The new definition reflects this sense of the “cultural democracy” insisted on by Sandahl through the incorporation of buzz words and phrases such as, “inclusive, participatory, diverse communities, and social justice” that suggests a greater knowledge of the shifting political and social landscape bursting with ideals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Some museum professionals and scholars criticized the statement as “Orwellian newspeak” as well as expressing shock due to the “over inflated verbiage of an ideological preamble” failing to separate museums from other types of educational institutions.⁸³ One may expect these types of critical sentiments any time someone challenges the status quo. However, these statements indicate exactly why *Museums Are Not Neutral* a necessary movement; inserting diversity, equity, and inclusion into museum pedagogy, collections, and staffs threatens to disrupt the comfortable normative which only benefits the detractors of the new definition.

However, the new definition fails to fully engage with one of the main calls made by Autry and Murawski’s initiative: “an ethics-based transformation.” Although the phrase seems ambiguous, both Autry and Murawski’s individual practices point to an ethics of care, defined as “a combination of feelings and actions that "provide responsively for an individual's personal needs or well-being, in a face-to-face relationship,” as applicable and necessary to the curatorial

⁸² Small. “A New Definition of ‘Museum’ Sparks International Debate.” 2019.

⁸³ Noce, Vincent. “What Exactly Is a Museum? Icom Comes to Blows over New Definition.” *The Art Newspaper - International art news and events*. The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, September 28, 2021. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/08/19/what-exactly-is-a-museum-icom-comes-to-blows-over-new-definition>.

practice and the museum space.⁸⁴ Autry shapes the need for care through the personal lens of experiencing different forms of Black womanist frameworks in practice by her relationship with her grandmother and in theory through the texts she encountered outside of her art history classes in college in contrast with the othering visiting museums typically subjects her to and learning the traditional object-based art historical methodology.⁸⁵ In order to accomplish this “cultural democracy,” museum professionals need to understand and recognize the systemic conditions of white supremacy that inherently politicizes and often problematizes the mere existence of people of color, and by deciding to deal with these complex issues, they must rely on caring for people rather than simply caring for objects.⁸⁶

Before the founding of *Museums Are Not Neutral*, Murawski used his Medium blog to celebrate museums with exhibitions and programming that employed empathy as a tool for human connection in 2016, such as The International Museum of Folk Art’s Gallery of Conscience, which employs “history, dialogue, and personal reflection around issues of social justice and human rights” by exhibiting shows that seek to illuminate how artists communicate healing through their art.⁸⁷ Mike Murawski released his first book, *Museums as Agents of Change: A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker*, in 2021, which expounds on similar sentiments as Autry in regard to museums finding a balance between caring for objects and people, but he also specifically positions museums as spaces for “care, healing, and repair.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Cancian, Francesca M., and Stacey J. Oliker. *Caring and Gender*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000.

⁸⁵ Autry, La Tanya S., and Andrew Cappetta. “Desktop Dialogue: Care and Curatorial Practice: A Conversation with La Tanya S. Autry” Youtube. Cleveland Museum of Art, August 19, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orlmgErRLXI>.

⁸⁶ Autry, La Tanya S. “Beholding and Curating with Care.” Hyperallergic, February 17, 2022. <https://hyperallergic.com/706626/beholding-and-curating-with-care/>.

⁸⁷ Murawski, Mike. “The Urgency of Empathy & Social Impact in Museums.” Medium. Medium, February 26, 2022. <https://murawski27.medium.com/the-urgency-of-empathy-social-impact-in-museums-f38a331fcb71>.

⁸⁸ Murawski, Michael. *Museums as Agents of Change: A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker*. S.l.: American Alliance of Museums, 2022. 16.

What is an Ethics of Care?

Art historian and former J. Paul Getty Trust President and CEO, James Cuno, may argue that, by caring for art objects as a museum professional and simply experiencing the beauty of a work of art as a museum visitor, both parties manifest higher levels of care for humanity.⁸⁹ However, this notion romanticizes the art experience as devoid of people's personal biases thus needs a theoretical framework to guide its successful implementation. This chapter aligns with scholars like Lois Silverman that argue for the application of psychology's ethics of care. Carol Gilligan birthed the term in her groundbreaking 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*. The foundational feminist text developed as a response to the equally renowned psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, which categorized how people respond to moral dilemmas. However, the actual study only used boys to test the theory and relied on sexist presumptions of interpersonal connections, commonly associated with the behaviors of women, as a moral weakness.⁹⁰ Gilligan argues that "an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach."⁹¹ The term activates care as a practice where one must hold themselves responsible to emphasize fostering the personal connections in their lives. In contrast, her predecessor, Kohlberg's, ethics of justice model prefers emotionless deliberation where moral principles only

⁸⁹ Cuno, James, James Cuno, Philippe de Montebello, Gleen D. Lowry, Neil MacGregor, John Walsh, and James N. Wood. "The Object of Art Museums." In *Whose Muse?: Art Museums and the Public Trust*, edited by James Cuno and James Cuno, 50. Princeton University Press, 2004. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv39x630.6>.

⁹⁰ Harper, Alison, and Sarah Chave. "Deep Materialism and Care-Taking: A Study of Material Relationships for the 21st Century.", March 28, 2019. <https://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/deepmaterialism/2019/03/28/feminist-ethics-of-care-a-starting-point-ideas-from-carol-gilligan/>.

⁹¹ Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 73. 2003.

register as right or wrong whereas an ethic of care insists on engaging empathic emotion.⁹²

Gilligan's detractors cite the lack of clarity on the definition of care as the theory's fatal flaw.⁹³

Ethics specialist, Peter Allmark, highlights the multiple different uses of the word care. For example, care as a noun represents a worry while one could also say "put someone into care," indicating placing someone in the hospital.⁹⁴ However, despite the conceptual flaws, the ethics of care still creates language to facilitate difficult conversations around social injustice and inequality as well as illuminate methods for mobilizing empathy in the world.

As institutions of service and education, museums have a responsibility to utilize the conceptual framework of care to improve the lives of their visitors especially giving the current volatile climate of the world. Human beings always witnessed and experienced the natural process of death and categorized themselves based on phenotypical features but never quite at this rate due to the advent of social media. Never could a person in Louisiana see Michael Brown's lifeless body in real time laid across a street in Ferguson, Missouri at the same time as someone in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Despite the seemingly endless cycle of hyper visible death, this country seems to be facing a deeply painful dissonance splitting us into those who see ourselves in these countless deaths and those who don't. Due to this, German's *sometimes we cannot be with our bodies* becomes a great experiment for museums to consider how to deal with these issues.

⁹² Edwards, Steven D. "Three Versions of an Ethics of Care." *Nursing philosophy* 10, no. 4 (2009): 232.

⁹³ Flanagan, Owen, and Kathryn Jackson. "Justice, Care, and Gender: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Debate Revisited." *Ethics* 97, no. 3 (1987): 623. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381183>.

⁹⁴ Allmark, Peter. "Can There Be an Ethics of Care?" *Journal of Medical Ethics* 21, no. 1 (1995): 19-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27717502>.

Considering Care in the Museum Through vanessa german's
sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies

Museums Studies expert, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, contests that as museum administrations' priorities started to shift from caring solely for objects to caring for people as well, efforts to implement meaningful public programming and community engagement increased.⁹⁵ However, many of these attempts by museums to connect with their audience relied solely on museum educators rather than the curators who created the exhibition. Museum scholars, such as David Peacock, have written extensively about the problematic hierarchical structure of most museums that discourages high levels of collaboration across departments, especially between museum educators and curators, in favor of segregated power and production.⁹⁶ The separation creates exhibitions where care of the audience becomes an afterthought rather than the heart of the curatorial concept.

In this manner, the Fralin Museum's installation of vanessa german's *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies* succeeds because the staff and artist made care and accessibility a priority from the inception of the project. The artist completely controlled the exhibition design and worked in tandem with the museum's preparator, Christopher Minot, during the exhibition's installation. This step, although not entirely revolutionary, still represents a sense of trust and creative agency bestowed upon the artist by the institution. Prior to the opening of the exhibition, a local LGBTQ+ organization trained the museum docents and staff on appropriate and respectful language to use when talking to visitors about the exhibition.⁹⁷ The

⁹⁵ Munro, Ealasaid. "People Just Need to Feel Important, Like Someone Is Listening": Recognising Museums' Community Engagement Programmes as Spaces of Care." *Geoforum* 48 (2013): 54

⁹⁶ Peacock, David. "Commentaries from the Field: Complexity, Conversation, and Change: Learning How Museums Organizations Change". In *Museums and the Paradox of Change: A Case Study in Urgent Adaptation*, 235–245. London, 2013.

⁹⁷ McClendon, Matthew. Letter to Jade Flint. *vanessa german*, January 7, 2022.

museum invited vanessa german for a week-long artist-in-residence in Charlottesville. Also, the museum director, Matthew McClendon, engaged the artist in a public talk to further illuminate her practice for their audience. Munro highlights how this mode of care may “cast the ‘recipient’ of care in a passive role.”⁹⁸ Perhaps although well intended, the exercise may have enacted the very rigid, didactic role museums already play as premier educators and dictators of culture. One must also examine “what does *good enough* care look?”⁹⁹ For example, some individuals may experience a public talk between a museum director and a visiting artist as a form of care while others respond more negatively. Multiple points of access for audience members must be prioritized which the Fralin attempts to demonstrate in their programming of this exhibition. During the opening reception, german sat directly across from individual attendees and recited improvisation poems of love tailored to that particular person. german also conducted two “Power and Creativity Workshops:” one for students of color and another for LGBTQ+ students. The artist hosted another workshop as well to work “one-on-one” with participants and help them create their own power figures.”¹⁰⁰

Despite McClendon’s assertion that the feedback was overwhelmingly positive with all the museum’s demographics, especially their older crowd surprisingly, little evidence remains of people’s thoughts on the exhibition itself and the public programming outside of short Instagram and Facebook captions. Users like artist, Laura Lee Gulledge, posted a picture seated with german for a love poem during the opening of the exhibition and captioned the photo, “what an unexpected gift to receive a live transmission from visionary citizen artist, vanessa l. german.”

⁹⁸ Munro. “‘People Just Need to Feel Important, Like Someone Is Listening’: Recognising Museums’ Community Engagement Programmes as Spaces of Care.” 56

⁹⁹ Gelsthorpe, Loraine, Pervez Mody, and Brian Sloan. “Spaces of Care: Concepts, Configurations, and Challenges.” Introduction. In *Spaces of Care*, 1–13. Oxford, UK: Hart Publishing, 6. 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Fralin Museum of Art, *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies*, 2019. Instagram flyer.

Another user, gallerist Patricia Sweetow, commented on the Mattress Factory iteration of the installation as, “intimate and charged.” Strangely, little feedback seems to exist to demonstrate how the installation and public programming resonated with one of the Fralin’s key audiences: their students. Coupled with the proposed visually healing aspects of the installation, the workshops intended to facilitate a safe space for students and community members to explore their creativity through a guided process of artmaking. The workshops notably allowed participants to engage with the artist at their own pace in an interpersonal exchange that allows space for safe emotional processing and positively connecting with another human being. While the feedback from museumgoers may heavily lean towards positive remarks, without that knowledge available to the public, one can only speculate the effectiveness of the public programming specifically. In future models, museums should diligently collect feedback from their audiences to better understand their needs and receptions of exhibitions and tailor the museum’s output for maximum retention.

In 1993, freelance museum consultant, David A. Tucker, exclaimed that the idea of a museum providing transformative social services is “a delusion, and moreover, an insult to real social workers, police officers, teachers and housing officers who strive to make a material contribution to the quality of people’s lives.”¹⁰¹ However, as exhibited by the momentum of the “Museums are Not Neutral” Movement, museum professionals believe that museums should transform into institutions that address societal issues and foster care and empathy in their communities. Additionally, as previously stated, according to McClendon, the museum received feedback that overwhelmingly affirmed the curatorial and programmatic choices across all demographics. Several elderly museum visitors noted learning new information that led them to

¹⁰¹ Silverman, Lois H. *The Social Work of Museums*. London: Routledge, 3. 2010.

do further research. The lack of concrete, publicly available evidence to corroborate this claim causes some concern, but for a small university museum like the Fralin, it does not seem far-fetched that droves of students and journalists would not flock to the museum. The messages received and personal interactions shared by the museum director and as seen on social media seemed to resonate greatly with those who encountered it. By critically engaging with German's work and public programming, participants experienced how museums can positively care for their audience in such grave times of political and social unrest. Through near-perfect alignment with Vanessa German's *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies*, the Fralin Museum of Art affirmed the methodological framework of the ethics of care as a duty for museums to facilitate healing.

CHAPTER 3: “BLUE AS INCANTATION”

In vanessa german’s oeuvre, one quickly realizes the power of a limited palette. The artist sometimes employs the multi-colored wax fabric typically associated with West Africa and other colors such as pink, orange, and green, but german mainly relies on gold, black, red, white, and blue to create her spiritually charged objects. For german, gold represents a complicated ancestral connection to Africa as exemplified lived experiences by the artist in Johannesburg, South Africa. When visiting the city, she was stuck by the proximity of the gold mines to the freeway but the lack of profitability for the locals. She highlights the healing nature of gold in the way that it beautifully reflects light while grappling with the troubling parallel seen in in the African Diaspora such as Black Americans struggling to monetize their own culture and Black South Africans finding themselves standing on land inherently theirs but legally owned by outsiders.¹⁰² The color black also alludes to an ancestral connection as well as the organic matter of the Earth. Like African American artmakers that came before her, red, white, and blue resonate deeply in her life as an interrogation of the American flag that began as a small child. Works like Robert Colescott’s *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American Textbook* (1975) and Benny Andrews’ *Flag Day* (1966) riffed the nation’s colors in distinct ways to acknowledge the true history of this country and consider how that history affects our perceptions of each other and ourselves. While Colescott bastardizes the foundational American painting, *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*, by Emmanuel Leutze to parody the white people’s perceptions of Black people, Andrews’ approach traps a Black man between the bars of a prison cell reimagined as the stripes of the American flag. However, for german, engaging these colors in works like *Miracles and Glory Abound*, where she also appropriates the

¹⁰² Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021.

form of Leutze's classic, becomes a mechanism to actively incite healing rather than simply emoting the woes of the past and present.

For this queer woman artist, color is deeply intentional. german never simply picks a color with any sense of the choice as arbitrary but with a distinct purpose in spirit. The colors previously mentioned all illustrate exacting inquiries in german's work. However, for the artist, blue specifically works in her life and practice as a "gift." german employs blue to narrate a new American imagination, the healing potential of blue in connection to water, and the cathartic use of the musical genre, the blues.¹⁰³ She reverently engages "blue as an incantation" to enact transformative healing for herself and the viewer.¹⁰⁴ Despite her already limited color palette, blue performs most prominently and potently, not simply as a mere color, but as a ritualistic change agent the artist harnesses as seen in her ongoing community-engaged site in the Homewood Neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, *ARTHouse*, ritualistic healing performances known as *Blue Walks*, and museum installations such as *nothing can separate you from the language you cry in* (2021). This chapter reviews german's transformative use of blue as a strategic tool primarily through the lens of one of her most recent museum installations, *Reckoning: Grief and Light* (2021), at the Frick Collection in Pittsburgh, and the accompanying *Blue Walk*, as it relates to global Art History and color theory. The various shades of blue used by german sound a magnetic call vibrationally connected to a long-standing probe by humans of all races to employ this transformative color as a method of exploring and transcending the human condition.

¹⁰³ Heath, Jonathan. "vanessa german and the Gift, the Glory, and the Power of Blue." *Behind the Glass*, June 22, 2021. <https://blog.cmog.org/2021/06/22/vanessa-german-and-the-gift-the-glory-and-the-power-of-blue/>.

¹⁰⁴ *HBCU SMITAH Keynote Conversation*. *YouTube*. Yale University Art Gallery, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYqA-2__4Xg&t=1111s.

Reckoning: Grief and Light

In one of her latest installations, *Reckoning: Grief and Light*, the work entitled *nothing can separate you from the language you cry in* (2021), German amalgamates dozens of golden found objects including birds and clocks into the three altars to honor the lives of Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, and George Floyd as well as the countless others lost to systematic violence inflicted upon people of African descent in the United States. The artisans of the Pittsburgh Glass Center blew clear and translucent green but mostly a mix of electric blue and cobalt blues bottles that cascade from the bottom of the figures.¹⁰⁵ In a performance complementing the installation in 2021, the artist wears her cobalt blue “grief hoodie” with a matching flowing “reckoning” skirt as she allows herself the freedom to move through grief and healing surrounded by Renaissance devotional paintings at the Frick Collection in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.¹⁰⁶ As part of the installation, the artist enlisted local Black performers and specifically invited any Black person who wanted to participate in a “ritual reckoning,” characteristic of German’s practice as she has conducted one in most cities she exhibits her work in. German provided the necessary blue garments and taught all willing contributors the songs and movement. The electric-toned lapis lazuli color in this installation at the Frick represents an opportunity for transcendence that German strategically applies to all areas of her artistic practice and connects her to converging conversations across the globe and throughout human history.

¹⁰⁵ “News: vanessa german's ‘Reckoning: Grief and Light.’” Kasmin Gallery. Kasmin Gallery. <https://www.kasmingallery.com/news/vanessa-german-the-frick-pittsburgh>.

¹⁰⁶ “Reckoning: Grief and Light.” The Frick Pittsburgh. <https://www.thefrickpittsburgh.org/Exhibition-vanessa-german>.

History of blue in a global context from the Ancient to the Industrial Era

In 1947, Yves Klein decided to abandon representational art by creating monochromatic paintings. The French artist trademarked his characteristically intense blue as International Klein Blue (IKB) in 1957. Throughout his lifetime, Klein made 194 of these works and experimented with texture in his signature color. One of the paintings, *IKB 79*, mixed a highly volatile fixative to create a rich surface with an illusionistic depth uncanny for a flat surface that pulls the viewers for a closer look.¹⁰⁷ One of the most important color theorists, Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, hypothesizes that three different kinds of colors exist. He categorized them as physiological colors, physical colors, and chemical colors.¹⁰⁸ Physiological colors, most relevant to this chapter, represent colors found in nature and thus held an important role in most ancient cultures. Despite the seemingly abundant presence of blue in nature such as the cherished bodies of water for survival and the never ceasing span of the sky, blue is surprising difficult to make into a usable pigment.¹⁰⁹ However, humans figured out how to create this color as early as the sixth century A.D. when artisans in Afghanistan began extracting ultramarine by grinding lapis lazuli to create spiritually charged Buddhist wall paintings.¹¹⁰ In the Buddhist tradition, this color called *Nīla* represents “the spirit of universal compassion.”¹¹¹ The Egyptians used the same

¹⁰⁷ Howarth, Sophie, “‘IKB 79’, Yves Klein, 1959.” Tate Modern, April 2000
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/klein-ikb-79-t01513>.

¹⁰⁸ Ratliff, Jonathan. “The Exploration of Color Theory in Museum Education Using Works Found in the J.B. Speed Museum’s Collection.” Thesis, ThinkIR: The University of Louisville’s Institutional Repository, 2009. 13

¹⁰⁹ Fellman, Megan. “Who Knew There Was so Much to Blue?” Who Knew There Was so Much to Blue?, November 2014. <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2014/11/who-knew-there-was-so-much-to-blue>.

¹¹⁰ Fellman, Megan. “Who Knew There Was so Much to Blue?” Who Knew There Was so Much to Blue?, November 2014. <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2014/11/who-knew-there-was-so-much-to-blue>.

¹¹¹ Batagoda, Muditha. “Understanding Color Psychology Though Culture, Symbolism, and Emotion.” Medium. UX Planet, November 27, 2018. <https://uxplanet.org/understanding-color-psychology-though-culture-symbolism-and-emotion-215102347276>.

method of grinding malachite and/or azurite in their religious text, *Egyptian Book of the Dead* to materialize a talisman for infinite power. Art history named this tone of blue, Egyptian Blue, as seen in *Nebamun hunting in the marshes, fragment of a scene from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun* from the late eighteenth dynasty (c. 1350 BC).¹¹² Due to the lengthy process for sourcing and grinding the gemstones, blue in much of the ancient cultures held a sacred status reserved for primarily religious and spiritual purposes. Allegedly, Cleopatra also used crushed lapis lazuli as an eyeshadow.¹¹³ Egyptian customs believed that their pharaohs and queens were walking Gods on Earth thus her use of blue as an adornment on her body pairs perfectly with associated ideas of divinity. In the tenth century AD, the Buddhist process for extracting ultramarine from lapis lazuli arrived in Venice. Due to the other colors usually found in lapis lazuli such as white and yellow, they underwent a complex extraction process to obtain a perfect hue of blue ultramarine.¹¹⁴ Due to the difficulty of the lengthy method, Medieval and Renaissance artists only used the expensive color on the garments of the most precious of subjects such as holy figures like the Virgin Mary.

One of blue's most famous uses in art history lies in Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665). Research proves that Vermeer typically sourced most of this art materials locally. However, the less intense pigment found in this painting fail to match any of the pigments available on these shops' inventory.¹¹⁵ This seventeenth century masterpiece relied on the complicated extraction method previously mentioned which Vermeer or someone working

¹¹² Mangla, Ravi. "True Blue." *The Paris Review*, June 9, 2015.

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/06/08/true-blue/>.

¹¹³ Roskin, Gary. "Lapis Lazuli: Its Royal Blue Color Was a Perfect Contrast to the Pure Gold in King Tutankhamen's Burial Mask. (Jewel of the Month)." *Jewelers' circular-keystone* (1990) 173, no. 2 (2002): 95.

¹¹⁴ Fellman, Megan. "Who Knew There Was so Much to Blue?" *Who Knew There Was so Much to Blue?*, November 2014. <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2014/11/who-knew-there-was-so-much-to-blue>.

¹¹⁵ Vandivere, Abbie, Jørgen Wadum, and Emilien Leonhardt. "The Girl in the Spotlight: Vermeer at Work, His Materials and Techniques in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*." *Heritage science* 8, no. 1 (2020): 3

in his studio likely performed themselves due to the discovery of muller and stone table for grinding pigments following Vermeer's death in 1679.¹¹⁶ Vermeer's Dutch contemporaries, such as Gabriel Metsu and Gerard ter Borch, also painted with the intense hue as collectors may attribute higher value to paintings that incorporated the color.¹¹⁷ The effort taken to source the necessary materials to create this hue, the actual process of producing the paintable pigment, and the preference art collectors displayed for the color in paintings that they purchase suggests the value placed on the color. Perhaps residual understandings of blue as divinity transmuted across cultural and religious lines as the pigment and technology necessary to extract were exchanged from Afghanistan or even through the Medieval and Renaissance paintings, but more probably, through the labor extensiveness and wealth required to create the pigment, these Dutch artists communicate value authentically for their time because the scarcity created by the blue immediately signaled luxury. Although the use of the color in seventeenth century Europe fails to directly speak to the clearly spiritual uses of the color as a marker of divinity known in the Ancient World and seen in early Christian works, their uses all connect through a sense of collective significance attributed solely to blue. The elevated value of this intense ultramarine continued for more than a century despite Johann Jacob Diesbach's accidental discovery of the cheaper, but less pigmented alternative, Prussian Blue around 1706 and the increased importation of indigo blue, another cheaper but much deeper option, from the Americas.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Vandivere, Abbie, Jørgen Wadum, and Emilien Leonhardt. "The Girl in the Spotlight: Vermeer at Work, His Materials and Techniques in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*." *Heritage science* 8, no. 1 (2020): 4

¹¹⁷ See Gabriel Metsu's *Woman Reading a Letter* and Gerard ter Borch's *The Suitor's Visit*

¹¹⁸ Kraft, Alexander. "On the Discovery and History of Prussian Blue." Gesimat GmbH, 2008.

http://acshist.scs.illinois.edu/bulletin_open_access/v33-2/v33-2%20p61-67.pdf; Gottesman, Sarah. "A Brief History of Blue." *Artsy*, November 29, 2016. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-a-brief-history-of-blue>.

Complementary to German's strategic use of blue as a meditation on humanity's triumphs and pitfalls in this installation, artists across the globe and many millennia seem to share a similar intuitive pull to employ this color for various reasons. Despite the brief departure from the specific use of blue as a spiritual conduit, blue reemerges as a method of universal and personal introspection in the face of the increasing industrialization that changed the physical and cultural landscapes of Europe and the Americas between the late eighteenth and early twentieth century forever as seen in the artistic work and art theory of Wassily Kandinsky.

The Russian-born Kandinsky left his budding law career at the age of 30 to pursue the study of art at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1896.¹¹⁹ Regarded as one of the founders of Abstract art, Kandinsky's early surviving paintings rarely included any representations of humans instead opting to push the boundaries of form and color in some animal forms and landscapes. Influenced by the Theosophy movement, a spiritual ideology that believed one could tap into a universal truth through meditation, the artist wrote *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in 1910. In this text, Kandinsky condemns the lustful materialism created by the Industrialists that encourages artists to solely seek approval for their adherence to perfectly naturalistic form and color and tasks his peers to allow their art to become spiritual reflections of themselves.¹²⁰ The abstractionist urges artists to experiment with color and line in an intuitively driven matter to transcend the avaricious nature of the physical world in favor of a purer cosmic plane of personal freedom. Kandinsky demonstrating this in his own practice with *Squares with Concentric Circles* (1913); by using watercolor, gouache, and crayon on paper, the artist separates this color study

¹¹⁹ "Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944)." Tate Modern. Tate Modern. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/wassily-kandinsky-1382>.

¹²⁰ Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Translated by Michael Sadler. New York, NY: Dover, 1977. 36.

into twelve squares with various numbers of concentric circles. The use of circles seems to unify the otherwise juxtaposing color combinations and urges the viewer to immerse themselves beyond the surface into this composition by Kandinsky. For Wassily Kandinsky and vanessa german, color provides a universal portal to spiritual experiences when one allows themselves to surrender. Blue specifically represents a “call to the infinity, a desire for purity and transcendence” for the Russian-born artist.¹²¹ german similarly threads blue into her artwork to operate as a “massive torrent of energetic power speaking to, awakening, and clarifying the human technology already present in the world” intending to make the viewer aware of their ability to transcend.¹²² In the installation, *Reckoning: Grief and Light* poignantly creates a space for visitors to mourn the loss of George Floyd, Elijah McClain, and Breonna Taylor and uses the color blue as a tool to meditate through grief and reflect on possibilities for the future.

“If you can’t imagine it, you can’t have it.”

The complex arrangement of the three altarpieces in the installation, *Reckoning: Grief and Light*, utilizes the visual lexicon known of german such as mirrors, clocks, and a seemingly infinite number of variously sized birds. german organizes all the altars similarly with a combination of metallic found objects at the top, a transitional section of clear and green-tinted bottles, and finally, a series of undulating, blue-tinted bottles. In the first and third altarpiece, german incorporates mirrors as “the medicine of adornment” and “ritual of endowment.”¹²³ This sentiment reflects the proposed literally and figuratively reflective capacity of a mirrors as

¹²¹ Kandinsky, Wassily. “Cubist and Post-Impressionists.” Translated by Arthur Jerome Eddy. *Der Sturm*, 1913. 58.

¹²² Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021

¹²³ german, vanessa. “Connected by Glass: vanessa german.” YouTube. Corning Museum of Glass, June 9, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnVMFlvcLws&t=1042s>.

german supplants an antique, gold framed mirror in the place of the first face and as an additive feature to the third. By allowing the viewer to see their own visage within this spiritual altar, german forces museum visitors of all demographics to consider themselves in the racial reckoning german proposes. The reflective surface drives the viewer to look intensely at themselves and contemplate the place they want to occupy in this transformation. After the disruptive protests of 2020, many individuals, families, and institutions actively saw the death and destruction caused by the continuing acceptance of white supremacy. Most people responded with statements and actions detesting the racial motivated killings by the police that resulted in Floyd, McClain, Taylor, and many others losing their lives. However, the rage subsided as time passed. With this spiritual installation, german seeks to create space where these sentiments can crystalize as a reminder of where we, as a society, should avoid going back to.

Behind the first mirror, german adds vegetal and floral structures while also attaching clear crystals to the front. Interestingly, this first altarpiece wears a few large gold bamboo hoop earrings commonly wore by and associated with Black women. These earrings, also known as doorknockers, became popular in the late 1980's as a bold fashion statement that one could find at a local beauty supply store for a thrifty price. The incorporation of the earrings only occurs in the first altarpiece which seems to signal the work as an effigy to Breonna Taylor and other women like her. Taylor, born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, worked as an Emergency Medical Technician in Louisville, Kentucky, at the time that police performed a plainclothes, no-knock drug search on Taylor's apartment on March 13th, 2021. Her boyfriend and registered gun owner, Kenneth Walker, assumed this group of people were robbers rather than policer officers and

fired one shot.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, the police responded with over twenty-five shots, eight hitting and killing Taylor on the scene.

The second altarpiece honors the life of George Floyd, father of five. The face of the figure grows flowers from its eyes with a cowrie shell lip, perhaps referencing Floyd's full lips. Stacks of gold Cuban linked chains adorn the figure's neck. These two factors also allude to Floyd's untimely death. On May 25th, 2020, a convenience store clerk called the police alleging that the forty-six-year-old Floyd used counterfeit money to buy a pack of cigarettes. Within seventeen minutes of the initial call, George Floyd showed no signs of life after Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, pinned Floyd to the ground with his knee for more than eight minutes. George Floyd died on the scene.¹²⁵ Rather than overtly recreating the violence of the scene that many already saw on the news or social media, German references to the lethal hold Chauvin placed Floyd in by positioning a small male figure, standing at attention, on top of Floyd's figurative head and stacking Cuban link chains on the figure's neck.

In the final altarpiece, German recalls Elijah McClain's young spirit who tragically died in August 2019 after police falsely detained the twenty-three-year-old Black massage therapist in Aurora, Colorado. Police believed his description matched that of a suspect and restrained him with an illegal chokehold; McClain went into cardiac arrest and died in the hospital days later.¹²⁶ The femme artist again utilizes the mirror to invoke a reflective emotion in the viewer. German shared a progress shot on her Instagram of this work that includes the unpainted side profile

¹²⁴ Carrega, Christina, and Sabina Ghebremedhin. "Timeline: Inside the Investigation of Breonna Taylor's Killing and Its Aftermath." ABC News. ABC News Network, November 17, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/timeline-inside-investigation-breonna-taylors-killing-aftermath/story?id=71217247>.

¹²⁵ Hill, Evan, Aina Tiefert, Christiaan Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis, and Robin Stein. "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody." The New York Times. The New York Times, June 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

¹²⁶ Tompkins, Lucy. "Here's What You Need to Know about Elijah McClain's Death." The New York Times. The New York Times, June 25, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/who-was-elijah-mcclain.html>.

sculpture which seems to echo some of the circulated images of McClain, a violinist, while playing.¹²⁷ The caption reads, “In Studio. In progress. A Reckoning for Elijah McClain... I send a bright arc of love out to alla the homies & artists & poets & light-bringers! ... I LIFT YOU UP.”¹²⁸ Below the representative interpretation of McClain’s face, german adds a majestic eagle with spread wings and a clock. The eagle alludes to American nationalism and typically features a banner reciting the country’s motto, “E Pluribus Unum,” meaning “out of many, one” to symbolize the unity and strength of American citizens. However, german removes this adage to highlight this often-spewed untruth in the material form of McClain’s altar. The artist also intentionally fixes the clock to depict 12:05 to indicate “it is past time” begin telling the truth about our country’s treatment of Black people and implementing lasting solutions.¹²⁹

german’s use of birds imbues her figures with the new possibilities for freedom available when we create our imagination as limitless. In each altarpiece, german inserts several blue and gold birds throughout to guide viewers to confront the immense grief felt by the consistent sense of targeted violence in the United States and dream of healing that no longer requires such unnecessary heartache. german reflects the clock and mirror motifs to a lesser extent in these altarpieces than previous works, relegating the use of the clock only to the third altarpiece while the mirror appears in the first and third altarpiece. Though german activates a specific invocation of George Floyd, Elijah McClain, and Breonna Taylor’s spirits by visual references to each lost

¹²⁷ “Elijah McClain's Family to File Civil Lawsuit over His Death.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, May 26, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/now/video/elijah-mcclain-s-family-to-file-civil-lawsuit-over-his-death-86379589871>.

¹²⁸ german, vanessa [@vanessalgerman], “In Studio. In Progress. A Reckoning for Elijah McClain.” *Instagram*, December 10, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIn8DdfFvV/>

¹²⁹ Dague, Tyler. “vanessa german's Grief over Black Deaths the Subject of a Powerful Museum Show.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 11, 2021. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2021/04/11/vanessa-german-The-Frick-Pittsburgh-art-Reckoning-Grief-Light-George-Floyd-Breonna-Taylor-Elijah-McClain/stories/202104050084?cid=search>.

individual, the use of her common motifs signals a universal call to grief, meditate, and reflect on the injustice of Black people facing death at the hands of those tasked to protect citizens were never meant to protect Black faces and the injustice of that.

“The *Blue Walk* is a Spectacle of Love”¹³⁰

In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (2015), bell hooks illuminates how the residual effects of slavery prioritized financial stability and racial upliftment over emotional needs and continues to negatively impact our capacities to experience or even acknowledge desire for love. bell hooks quotes American psychologist, M. Scott Peck’s poignant definition of love reading, “the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s personal growth.”¹³¹ The writer contextualizes this quote as an absolute necessity to adopt as Black people, but especially Black women, in our efforts to decolonize their perceptions of love and care towards each other. german answers the hook’s call in her *Blue Walks*.

In 2019, german and seven local performers memorialized the life of Will Brown and marked his murder in a ritualistic performance known as the *Blue Walk*. One hundred years before, a white woman accused Brown of raping her, and a violent mob of white men took direct vigilante actions to execute Brown at the Douglas County Courthouse before Brown could see his day in court.¹³² Brown’s demise does not represent an anomaly clearly, and it demonstrates again this compounding source of power to white supremacy and a continuously draining fear for

¹³⁰ german, vanessa. “The Blue Walk, vanessa german vanessa german.” Art & About, September 2021. <https://artandaboutpdx.com/calendar/the-blue-walk>.

¹³¹ hooks, bell. “Living to Love.” Chapter. In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, 141. New York: Routledge, 2015.

¹³² Menard, Orville D. “Lest We Forget: The Lynching of Will Brown, Omaha’s 1919 Race Riot” 91 (2010): 152–65.

Black people. german's intervention with this “ritual reckoning” gives access points to social healing through the performers process through the streets of Omaha in flowing gowns and one glittery suit billowing with various shades of blue fabric. Some swelling with tulle and blue-tinted roses as they contort their bodies in moments of dance and procession that at any given time can emote expressions of rage, joy, laughter, sorrow, and/or love. The group of eight processed through the streets of Omaha in their bright blue garments as they revealed the emotional stages of grief consistently experienced by Black people in Brown’s time and ours’ and made space for these feelings.

german has brought the experiences of the *Blue Walk* to other areas of the country including Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Seattle, Washington. As part of the opening of *Reckoning: Grief and Light*, german and her troupe of performers enacted the ritual again on the one-year anniversary of George Floyd’s death in 2021.¹³³ Each iteration includes the same original performers and invites community members to quickly learn the two songs, “Ritual is the Goodbye Song and The Lifting Up Song” as that method seems to guide people into intuitively acting within the improvisational nature of the performance.¹³⁴ In this way, the ritual reckoning evokes the tradition of the blues. The musical genre, inspired by Negro spirituals, similarly gave language and rhythm to the mixture of grief and joy experienced by Black people in the rural South following Emancipation. Typically, musicians called out a commonly known refrain to which their audiences responded in unison. The participatory element connects the musician, the audience, and the message in a powerful unifying manner and reflected their lived

¹³³ Dague, Tyler. “George Floyd among Those Honored in vanessa german's 'Blue Walk' to the Frick Pittsburgh.” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, May 28, 2021. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2021/05/28/blue-walk-pittsburgh-vanessa-german-the-frick-arthouse-george-floyd-teaira-whitehead/stories/202105270202?cid=search>.

¹³⁴ Lea K. Green Artist Talk | vanessa german. YouTube. Studio Museum of Harlem, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5Lbtots9HI>.

experiences. Both the Blues and the *Blue Walk* work within the framework of the cliché: “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade;” creating beauty and motivation to overcome the experience of pain and discrimination. Through the double allusion to blue through the themes of the musical genre and the color of the garments, german strengthens the conceptual idea that blue can and does have a social function of cathartic healing as a demonstration of love for Black lives.

Ancestral Knowledge

To amplify the declaration that Black lives matter, german alludes to the seemingly endless names of Black people lost to violence through the undulating wave of blue bottles cascading down from the base of each altarpiece in *Reckoning: Grief and Light’s nothing can separate you from the language you cry in*. Each row of these translucent vessels crafted by the artisans at the Pittsburgh Glass Center commemorates the lives of the similarly heaving flow of Black people killed due to the color of the skin since we arrived on this soil against our will in 1619. german connects to the Kongolesse ancestral knowledge genetically by shared of over forty percent of all the African people kidnapped during the Transatlantic Slave Trade through the strategic use of material as similarly seen in the bottle trees made by Black people in the Southern part of the United States and the Caribbean.¹³⁵ In continental Africa, elders attached plates of the recently deceased to trees which allowed the larger community to continue benefitting from the positive attributes of the ancestors. In the Americas, the tradition transmuted to one solely for protection. By attaching bottles to trees, the glimmer of their glass intended to

¹³⁵ Thompson, Robert Farris. “Face of the Gods: The Artists and Their Altars.” *African Arts* 28, no. 1 (1995): 54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337250>.

attract malevolent spirits and trap them inside. However, for german, the altarpieces convey a more direct sense of inherited activation of space that she calls “grandmother's living room realness meets street corner memorial.”¹³⁶ When people die in particularly tragic ways like car accidents or murders, the community responds by creating their own memorials. Loved ones and strangers celebrate the person’s life by lighting candles and leaving items such as decorated posters, teddy bears and photos of the deceased. Although the sea of white teddy bears and blue flags in Homewood’s “Killing Fields” directly influenced german’s altars to Breonna, Elijah, and George, this commemorative phenomenon appears in many different cultures such as the lighting of white votive candles in Catholic Churches represents a continued prayer.¹³⁷ These communally adorned altars sustain the spiritual connection with the deceased person. They help to unburden visitors of their grief and allow them to exchange energy in a reciprocal nature with others. The physical nature of these memorials provides a space for the isolating feelings of loss to connect an individual to an entire community as well. You receive something as well as share something with the collective in a unifying manner by participating in the ritual of caring for the street corner memorial. german encourages visitors to meditate over their individual pain and the collective pain shared due to the constant cycle of grieving Black people find themselves in.

The phrase also refers to her grandmother curating her living room with a collection of carefully arranged porcelain figurines and crystalware. german combines the lessons of many of our grandmothers with “the street corner memorial.” To some, the act of decorating one’s home may seem normal and not radical in any sense, but as the daughter of formerly enslaved Black

¹³⁶ german, vanessa. “Connected by Glass: vanessa german.” YouTube. Corning Museum of Glass, June 9, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnVMFlvcLws&t=1042s>.; Also see *Photo of german’s grandmother’s living room*

¹³⁷ german, vanessa. “Connected by Glass: vanessa german.” YouTube. Corning Museum of Glass, June 9, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnVMFlvcLws&t=1042s>.;

people who later worked as sharecroppers in Southern Louisiana, german's grandmother's decision to infuse her space with beauty dually becomes representative of her self-determination. The ninety-four-year-old asserts her autonomy in direct opposition to the restrictively hegemonic forces of white supremacy that question whether Black lives even matter nonetheless if they should be pleasant. Black Feminist scholar, bell hooks, observed the same valuable lesson about the power of space-making through her grandmother where her elder "cultivated and celebrated an aesthetic of existence rooted in the idea that no degree of material lack could keep one from learning how to look at the world with a critical eye, how to recognize beauty, or how to use it as a force to enhance your inner well-being."¹³⁸ Everything hooks outlines relevantly illuminates the knowledge that informs german's artistic practice, but the last point concerning the transformative nature of curating a space especially highlights how german transmutes the painful losses of Black lives into these visually-compelling effigies that commemorate their lives. Just as hooks' and german's grandmothers creatively and beautifully found ways to assert their own power in their homes' interiors, german too brings this tradition to the Frick Collection and to the world.

ARTHouse: "Where you realize, you had wings, the whole time"

With the *ARTHouse* project, vanessa german transformed her grandma's lessons of cultivating beauty in the interior into an outward-facing mechanism to enact social healing. In 2001, german moved to a small house on Hamilton Avenue in one of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's

¹³⁸ hooks, bell. "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional." *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interacts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 66. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203888018-11>.

most notorious neighborhoods, Homewood.¹³⁹ Despite the residential area's former glory, the mass exodus of white homeowners in the 1950's and 60's, a phenomenon known commonly as "white flight" and neglect by city officials created the Homewood of today; a shell of a neighborhood with over 60% of the homes abandoned and some of the highest crime rates in the country.¹⁴⁰ Similar to her childhood spent making artwork as one form of shelter from a tumultuous Los Angeles reeling from the increased violence and hopelessness of the crack and AIDS epidemics, german spent her first few years in Homewood mainly creating sculptures in her basement studio. Despite the ever-present risk of the streets suddenly exploding with gunfire, german freely acquainted herself with her neighbors and sourced found materials for her sculptures from the sea of abandoned homes around her.¹⁴¹ Eventually the artist inundated her basement studio with her burgeoning collection of her power figures and began working outside on her front porch. Initially, the simple need for more space attracted neighborhood children to curiously watch german from her front gate and ask all the pestering questions typical of inquisitive minds as she brought these magical sculptures to fruition. In these first encounters, german likely saw herself in the curious eyes of her young admirers and initially just answered their questions from a distance before eventually welcoming them to watch and engage.¹⁴² However, after a particular killing rocked the morale of the neighborhood, german decided to take a more active role against the plaguing violence, began giving the kids art supplies to make

¹³⁹ Thomas, Lillian. "vanessa german Launches Community Art Project." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 20, 2013. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2013/01/20/vanessa-german-launches-community-art-project/stories/201301200175?cid=search>.

¹⁴⁰ Blackley, Katie. "Homewood Bound: How a Neighborhood Was Transformed by Disinvestment and the War on Drugs." 90.5 WESA: Pittsburgh's NPR News Station. National Public Radio, July 15, 2019. <https://www.wesa.fm/identity-justice/2019-07-15/homewood-bound-how-a-neighborhood-was-transformed-by-disinvestment-and-the-war-on-drugs>.

¹⁴¹ Flint, Jade E. Interview with vanessa german. Personal, June 30, 2021.

¹⁴² *Love Front Porch | vanessa german | TEDxPittsburghStatePrison. TedxTalk*. YouTube, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMTqKQPd7Yk>.

alongside her, and renamed the space *Love Front Porch*.¹⁴³ In this way, the artist passes on the power of artmaking from her mother to these kids and engenders a sense of resourcefulness in them as it was done for her. Also like her mother, german realizes that artmaking alone cannot completely eradicate the violence or change the deep-rooted social inequities of Homewood. Unruly violence continues to plague the neighborhood, and several people lost their lives in front of the building as well as in the field behind known as “Killing Fields.”¹⁴⁴ However by instilling the power of creative expression in the minds of young children and creating at least one safe space for them to just be children, they benefit immensely by developing some effective coping mechanisms and dream of the endless possibilities for their futures. The power of the space speaks for itself as the number of children eager to participate rapidly increased and quickly outpaced the available space. german found a solution when she partnered with a local low-income housing organization, Allegheny Housing Rehabilitation Corp to buy another building known as *ARTHouse*.¹⁴⁵

With a new edifice, german channeled her grandmother’s powerful knowledge about the autonomy encapsulated in the interior and exposed it to the world in the exterior. Her youthful friends declared the floor of the house should be a turquoise blue.¹⁴⁶ With the help of the artistic children, neighbors, community members, and donations from the growing online audience german cultivated on Facebook, by the end of August 2015, the entire house became a bright

¹⁴³ Willoughby, Sally. “ARTHouse.” Edited by Jo Farb Hernández. Spaces Archives, March 8, 2021. <http://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/vanessa-german-ARTHouse/>.

¹⁴⁴ Kane, Karen. “Man Fatally Shot Outside Art House in Homewood.” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, May 12, 2014. <https://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2014/05/11/Man-fatally-shot-in-Homewood-3/stories/201405110201?cid=search>.; “The Sad Toys of Homewood’s ‘Killing Fields.’” Pittsburgh Orbit, April 30, 2017. <https://pittsburghorbit.com/2017/04/30/the-sad-toys-of-homewoods-killing-fields/>.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas, Lillian. “vanessa german Launches Community Art Project.” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, January 20, 2013. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2013/01/20/vanessa-german-launches-community-art-project/stories/201301200175?cid=search>.

¹⁴⁶ Donaldson, Zoe. “A Sculptor Creates a Bright Spot in a Struggling Community.” Oprah.com, August 17, 2015. <https://www.oprah.com/inspiration/vanessa-german-ARTHouse>.

electric blue glittering with a constellations of glass mosaics of positive motifs like stars, flowers, and eyes and glowed with inspirational inscriptions like, “*Being at the ARTHouse, where you realize, you had wings the whole time.*” Admirers on Facebook responded joyfully to the new additions in general. Most wanted to know how they could help or donate in any way. However, a few specifically commented on the color of the house. On August 26th, 2015, a user named Naomi Auth posted, “I love the color of the house! It’s that perfect magical blue to keep everything safe.”¹⁴⁷ Another user, Mo Copeland, responded to photos of the house with “drove by this today, and it made me smile! such a beautiful color!” Kaylin Horgan simply commented, “God Blue.” These remarks reflect the ancient and contemporary understanding of the power of blue seen globally in examples from Art History and throughout german’s practice. The Russian-born artist, Wassily Kandinsky echos Horgan’s comment pronouncing, “blue is the typical heavenly color, the ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest.”¹⁴⁸ An undercurrent threads the perceptions of blue as a color of transforming refuge from the Ancient to modern artists to german, her kids, and her community of supporters. The color becomes a magnetic force to draw people in the safe space of the ARTHouse and a conduit for all the uplifting activities, such as poetry nights, artmaking workshops, and gardening, german and the community created to engage the enthusiast children.

¹⁴⁷ german, vanessa. “Would You like to Sponsor an ARThouse Star?” Facebook. Love Front Porch, August 26, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/LoveFrontPorch/posts/824758854304634>.

¹⁴⁸Kandinsky, Wassily. “Cubist and Post-Impressionists.” Translated by Arthur Jerome Eddy. *Der Sturm*, 1913. 58.

Conclusion

Far too often, we are forced to mourn the loss of another life not only gone far too soon but willfully taken. The raging anger felt learning of Louisville police officers entering an innocent Breonna Taylor's apartment in the dead of night to investigate questionable evidence about drug possession. Many of us fought through hot tears when social media and the twenty-four-hour news cycle bombarded us with a video of George Floyd crying out for his deceased mother, Larcenia Floyd, as Derek Chauvin pressed against his knee against Floyd's neck until George's spirit left his body to join his mother. We collectively felt sheer outrage hearing the story of frantic pleading of Elijah McClain as police apprehended him simply because they deemed him suspicious, a suspicion that cost McClain's young life.

Although each fatal death represents a unique individual and circumstance, the loss of life remains all too commonplace and normalized. Black death largely elicits little outrage outside of the Black community with a few outliers such as the explosive attention paid to figures such as Emmett Till in 1955 and Trayvon Martin in 2012. However, due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus-19 in 2020 and the resulting lockdowns forcing people to slow their lives down, the entire nation felt the seismic reverberations of the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. To say we banded together to mourn their unlawful deaths and imagine a world where police protected Black people in a moment of national unity would be an egregious lie. Some exclaimed support of the police using full force in the guise of protecting the greater society regardless of the so-called collateral damage (i.e. the lives of Floyd and Taylor). Others flagrantly expressed the unfairness of their lost lives to perform the grief deemed politically correct and fashionable without finding ways to weaponize their individual and institutional privilege in support of the cause. The final group painfully felt the seemingly endless violence enacted against Black people

for no sensical reason beyond their Blackness and responded in a variety of ways such as advocating for and donating to appropriate grassroots initiatives and protesting in the streets. However, the one thing no one seemed able to do was simply ignore the tragedy all together. Without the constant noise of celebrity gossip and congressional drama, the entire country had little choice but to consider their thoughts and feelings on the reckless impunity given to our law enforcement agencies. This lack of accountability and the inherent biases commonly directed toward Black people finally struck as a lethal combination to many Americans with a desperate search for a comforting solution. In this spirit, German responds to the overwhelming attention and shock of these specific losses with three blue altars as a vital crossroads for this country. At the site of German's cascading wall of blue bottles, *we remember*. In the performance of the ritual reckoning, *we grieve*, and in the space of *ARThouse*, *we reimagine*.

Kandinsky once said, "colors are not used because they are true to nature but because they are necessary to the particular picture. The artist is not only justified in using, but is under moral obligation to use, only those forms which fulfill his own need."¹⁴⁹ German recognizes blue as a universal tool, not for her own need per se, but for the need of the people, to heal the wounds of time with a deep sense of love and transformation.

¹⁴⁹ Kandinsky, Wassily. "Cubist and Post-Impressionists." Translated by Arthur Jerome Eddy. *Der Sturm*, 1913.

CONCLUSION

On the one-year anniversary of George Floyd’s unlawful murder, this group of women embellished with blue dresses, jewelry, and parasols danced and twirled their flowing skirts through the streets of Pittsburgh. german led the group to several landmarks with profound intention before ultimately stopping at the Frick Museum. Most significantly, they lamented at the site where 16-year-old Teaira Whitehead was last seen alive before a jogger found the young girl’s body covered in bleach after having allegedly suffered from a heroin overdose blocks away in 2014.¹⁵⁰ The suspicious circumstances and lack of answers in this one case represents the general neglect and contempt Black women can expect as we have historically received. As they continue, lamenting in agony at times and laughing with joy at others, an onlooker asked what was going on? Some held shiny blue balloons and cried as they embraced. Others joyfully passed out flowers to elderly Black women in a moment of tender connection and reverence. Certainly, the sight of Black people taking up space to feel and express their emotions in such a theatrical way that german calls “radical empathy” would intrigue anyone they passed.¹⁵¹ One member of the troupe responded to the prompt by declaring, “loving ourselves.”¹⁵² bell hooks encourages us to “understand love as a life-force that urges us to move against death and enables us to see clearly that, where love is, there can be no disabling, disempowering, or life-destroying

¹⁵⁰ Dague, Tyler. “George Floyd among Those Honored in vanessa german's 'Blue Walk' to the Frick Pittsburgh.” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, May 28, 2021. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2021/05/28/blue-walk-pittsburgh-vanessa-german-the-frick-arthouse-george-floyd-teaira-whitehead/stories/202105270202?cid=search>.

¹⁵¹ Dague, Tyler. “vanessa german's Grief over Black Deaths the Subject of a Powerful Museum Show.” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, April 11, 2021. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2021/04/11/vanessa-german-The-Frick-Pittsburgh-art-Reckoning-Grief-Light-George-Floyd-Breonna-Taylor-Elijah-McClain/stories/202104050084?cid=search>.

¹⁵² Dague, Tyler. “George Floyd among Those Honored in vanessa german's 'Blue Walk' to the Frick Pittsburgh.” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, May 28, 2021. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/art-architecture/2021/05/28/blue-walk-pittsburgh-vanessa-german-the-frick-arthouse-george-floyd-teaira-whitehead/stories/202105270202?cid=search>.

abuse.”¹⁵³ The type of healing love imagined by hooks materializes in the life’s work of Black femme queer artist, vanessa german. Her artistic practice recognizes the damaging effects of social violence enacted from every direction onto Black people and activates cathartic healing through each performance, installation, and site. By insisting on tapping into the human technology that connects us all in her artwork, german uniquely provides different access points of entry for engagement and transformation.

In remembrance of young Teaira Whitehead and the countless others like her, german contends that she no longer has full faith for any type of radical future without accessing from a place of soul.¹⁵⁴ As demonstrated in the first chapter, the artist first recognized how necessary this type of spiritual awakening through creating her own artworks. german often cites art as transformative and lifesaving as she experienced in her own life. Through creation and sharing, german creates spiritual protection for herself and aims to allow her viewers similar access in doing so. She often alludes to West African cosmology and spirituality and its creolized representations of the Americas as seen in her power figures such as *Power Figure to Keep Me Alive*, and, later, the bottles used for the altars in *nothing can separate you from the language you cry in*. However, these offerings must be contextualized specific to her experience as an African American queer woman in the United States in the present and the reverberations of knowledge passed down by her immediate family members.

german taps into the power of art and its receptivity to human technology in her installation of *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies*. at the Fralin Museum of Art in Charlottesville, Virginia. By expanding her participatory offerings from object to public programming, german

¹⁵³ hooks, bell. “Living to Love.” Chapter. In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, 141. New York: Routledge, 2015.

¹⁵⁴ Lea K. Green Artist Talk | vanessa german. YouTube. Studio Museum of Harlem, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5Lbtots9HI>.

and the Fralin's museum director, Matthew McClendon, reconsider the museum space as an active site for societal change and healing. As many museum professionals contend with the necessity for museums to exhibit care by providing different social services to their audiences, german and McClendon not only agree that museums should situate themselves as places where care is facilitated but also provide an earlier model for the future. As this field of study continues to grow, future scholarship should continue to consider ways to improve upon this model.

The final chapter considers how conceptions of the color blue in other artists' work and philosophy and popular perception in the United States specifically connects with german's own understanding of the pigment as a magical spell for transformation. In her community-engaged project, *ARThouse*, the color performs as a signaling of the place's power to create new levels of consciousness for all of those who visit. german's *Blue Walk* creates space for grief and joy to take shape. The performers release the spiritual weight of generational fear and discrimination and create anew as they are spiritually transformed in their blue garments and accessories. Lastly, german's recent installation, *nothing can separate you from the language you cry in*, creates rooms to remember the harsh past and realities and reflect on new possibilities.

german's thoughtful intentions take form with her swift action reminiscent of the Combahee River Collective's wisdom that, "from the personal, the striving toward wholeness individually and within the community, comes the political, the struggle against those forces that render individuals and communities unwhole. The personal is political, especially for Black women."¹⁵⁵ german's work actively works within the frameworks of transformative justice. Pleasure activist, adrienne maree brown, defines transformative justice as finding the roots of harm and undoing them in perpetuity to prevent harm from reoccurring. She believes that transformative justice "is

¹⁵⁵ Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith, New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983, 264-74

a way we can begin to believe that the harm that has come to us won't keep happening, that we can uproot it, and that we can seed some new ways of being with each other."¹⁵⁶ brown's insistence for transformative justice reveals a need for reimagining and working at the systemic roots of the problem in the process that german's work directly responds to with earnest. In the art and practice of vanessa german, Octavia Butler's foundational Afro-Futuristic novel, *Parable of the Sower*, becomes realized. In the 1993 dystopian novel set in the rapidly approaching year of 2024 in California, Butler's main character, Lauren Olamina, struggles to survive as climate change ruins the environment and exacerbates social ills. Despite constantly fighting for a better life, Olamina journals extensively as a retreat to reflect on possibilities for the future and creates her own religion called *Earthseed*. The religion relies on change as a welcoming force rather than something dreadful. Notably, Olamina proclaims that, "the destiny of Earthseed is to take root with the stars."¹⁵⁷ In the face of risking disease and famine in the desert of California, the wisdom to look within and imagine anew powerfully reflects german's persistence to create models for enlightenment for herself, her audience, and all those she encounters in Pittsburgh, Omaha, and across the world through her intentional art practice.

¹⁵⁶ brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism*. Detroit, MI: AK Press, 2019. 9.

¹⁵⁷ Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of The Sower*. New York, NY: Four Wall Eight Windows, 1993.



Figure 1: vanessa german, Power Figure to Keep Me Alive

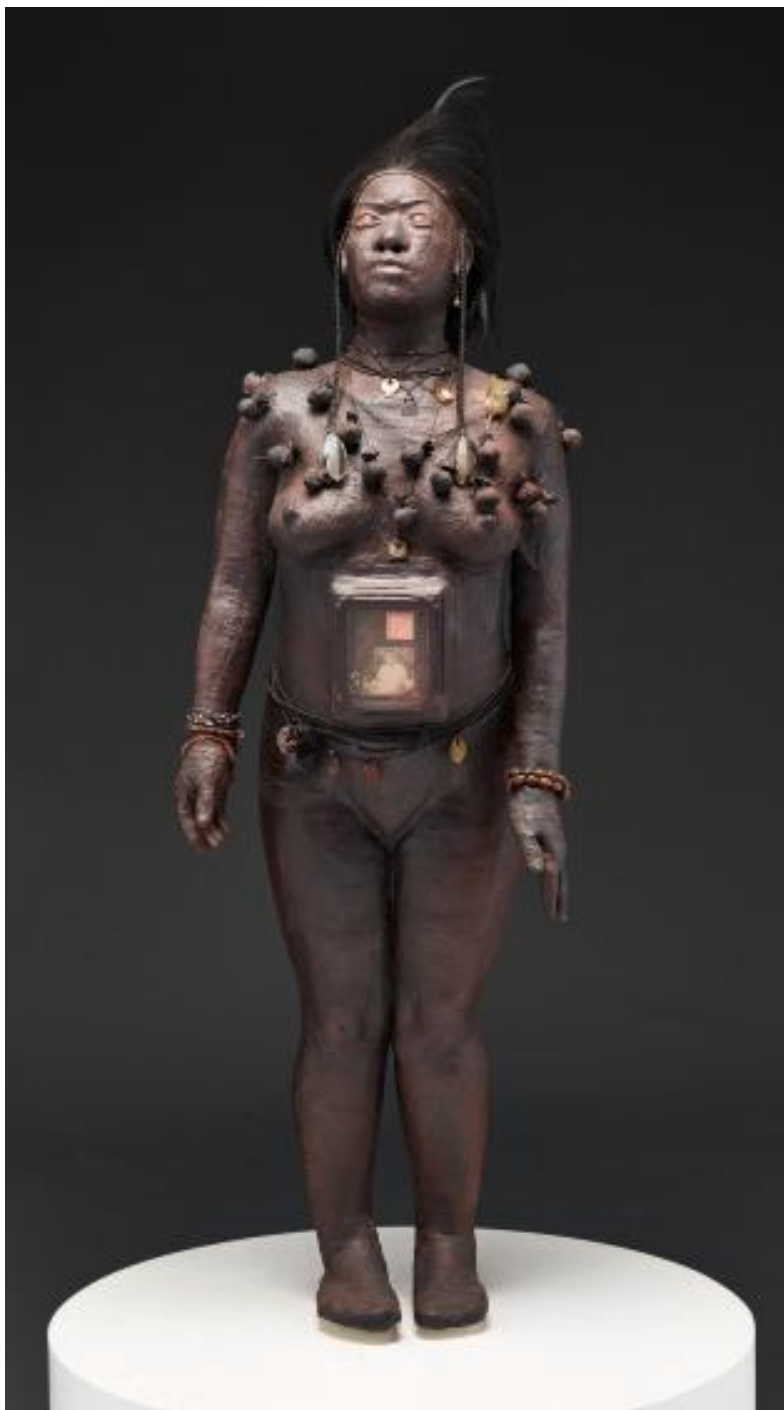


PLATE 13

Figure 2: Unknown Brazilian artist, Eshu Boi, Museu de Policia, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil



Figure 3: Black Girl with Braids, courtesy of Pinterest



*Figure 4: Renee Stout, *Fetish #2*, mixed media, 1988*

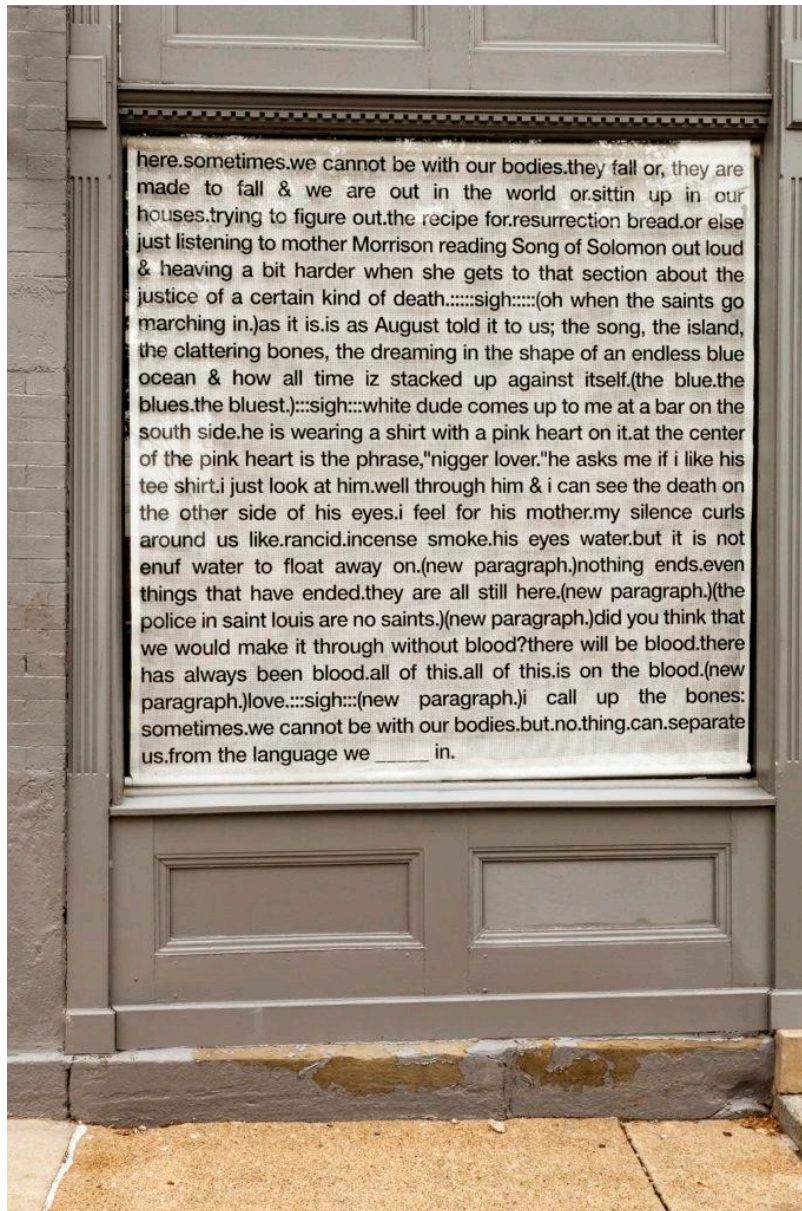


Figure 5: sometimes. we cannot be with our bodies, vanessa german, Exterior left installation at the Mattress Factory, 2017



Figure 6: sometimes we cannot be with our bodies, vanessa german, Interior Room #1, installation at the Mattress Factory, 2017



Figure 7: sometimes we cannot be with our bodies, vanessa german, Room #2 (Processional), installation at the Mattress Factory, 2017



Figure 8: *sometimes we cannot be with our bodies*, vanessa german, Detail of Power Figure, installation at the Mattress Factory, 2017



Figure 9: sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies public programming (german participating in a student workshop in the museum), Fralin Museum of Art, 2019



Figure 10: vanessa german standing in front of "nothing can separate you from the language you cry in" wearing her grief hoodie, the Frick Pittsburgh, 2021



Figure 11: Yves Klein, *IKB 179*, 1947, acrylic on canvas



Figure 12: Nebamun hunting in the marshes, fragment of a scene from the tomb-chapel of Nebamu, c. 1350 BCE



Figure 13: Johannes Vermeer, Girl with the Pearl Earring, c. 1665, oil on canvas

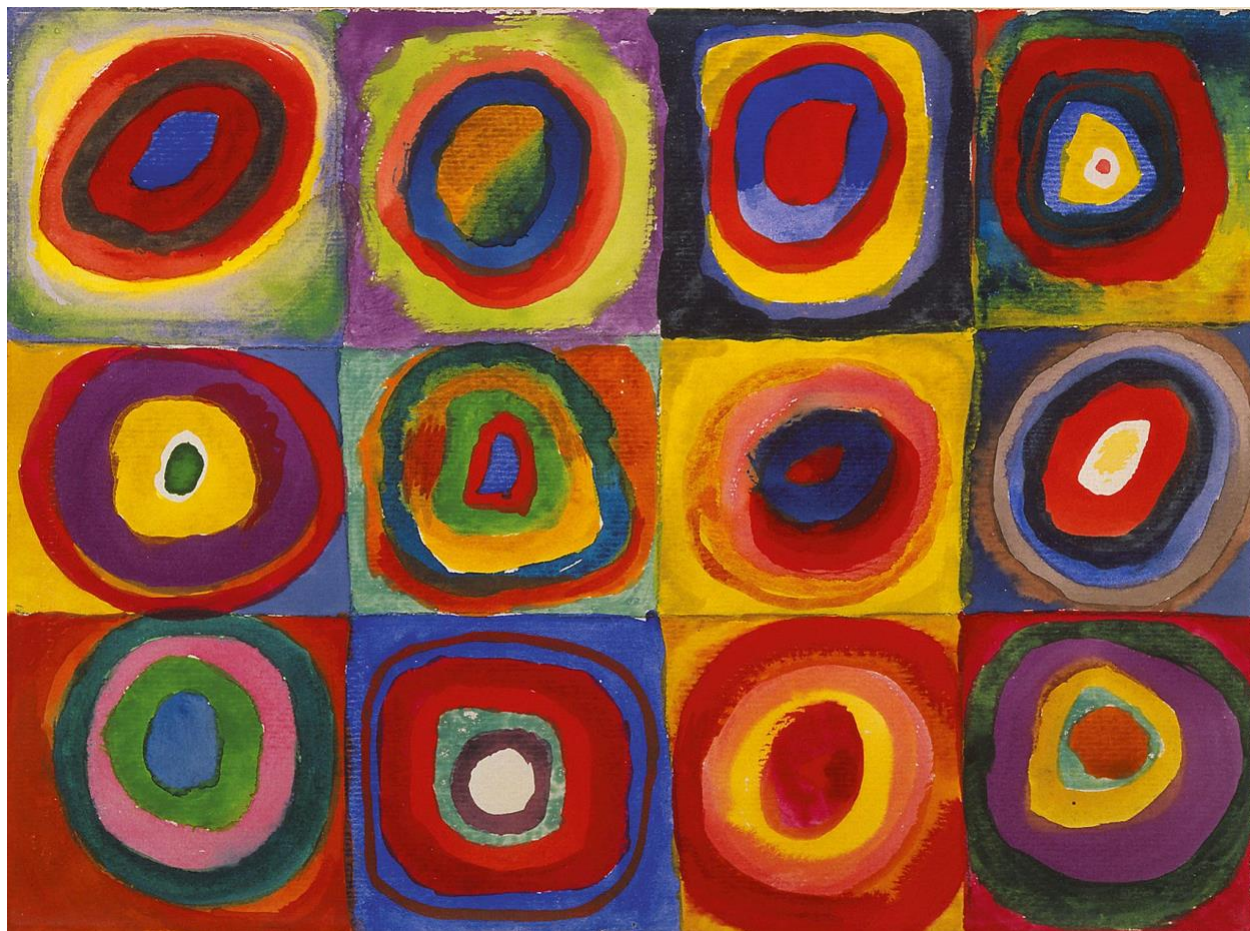


Figure 14: Kandinsky, *Concentric Circles*, 1913, watercolor, gouache, and crayon on paper.



Figure 15: Image of ARThouse under construction. Courtesy of Love Front Porch, 2015



Figure 16: ARThouse, 2017, Image taken by Erika Beras

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