Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

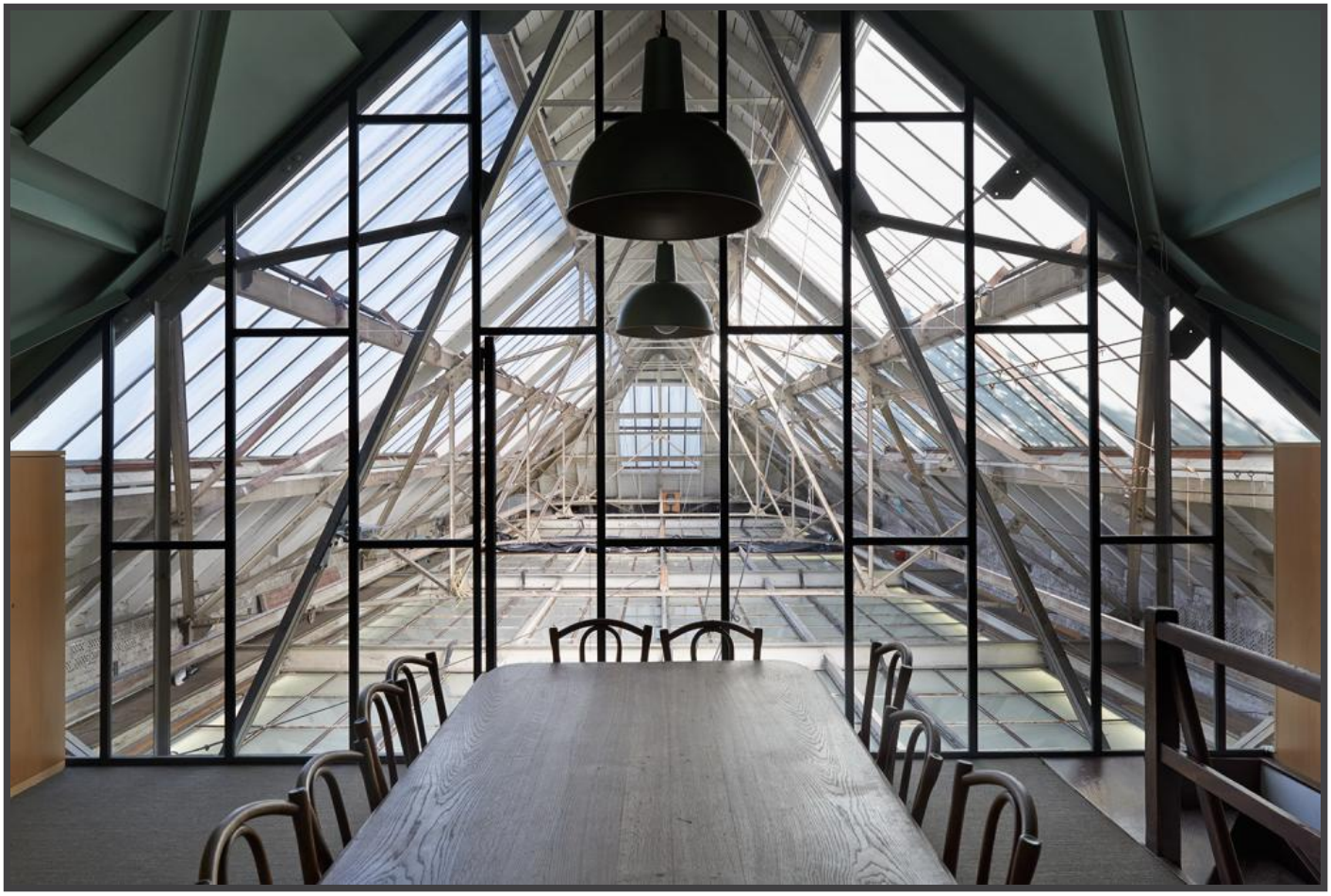
www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

# Learning to Speak? Part 2

## A discussion about ‹black›ness in Switzerland and why art institutions should burn their fingers on this issue.

Barbara Preisig, Elena Filipovic, Sarah Owens

On January 30, 2017 we published a review [b-n-l/painting-for-the-purpose-of-prestige/] of an exhibition by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye at Kunsthalle Basel on Brand-New-Life. One of the questions the article raises is why the debate accompanying the exhibition doesn’t touch on the implications of the fact that the paintings of the British artist with Ghanaian roots depict exclusively dark-skinned figures. In response to the article, Elena Filipovic, the curator of the exhibition and Director of Kunsthalle Basel sought a dialog with us. We thereupon invited Elena and a few other individuals whose opinions on the topic we were curious about to a private discussion. Finding a date proved difficult, though. As a result, we ended up sitting in the Kunsthalle library twice with groups of, in each case, slightly different composition. Although the initial question was the same, the two discussions unfolded in different directions with different thematic priorities. Still, both discussions are an attempt to reflect on the ways in which issues of *black*ness may be discussed in Switzerland—in art and with art. In passages, we even demonstrated such a way of speaking.




Kunshalle Basel, library

August 25, 2017, library of Kunsthalle Basel: Elena Filipovic, Sarah Owens, Barbara Preisig

Barbara Preisig: I am happy that we finally got together for this discussion. The starting point for our discussion today is the article published on Brand-New-Life last winter about Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's solo exhibition held here at Kunsthalle Basel. The article pointed out that, although the show was very popular, no one was talking about the implications of the fact that the paintings exclusively depict dark-skinned figures. This question is still on my mind and remains to a certain extent unanswered. At the same time, I would like to have a more general discussion with you about how a Swiss art institution should or could specifically engage, in terms of programming, representation, and education, with latent racism, especially when presenting «*black*» art practices?

Elena Filipovic: I have a few answers. The first one is that it is simply incorrect that *black*ness was not addressed.

Barbara: It's not that *black*ness was not addressed. The institution and the reviews about the show failed to discuss the implications of the fact that the paintings exclusively depict dark-skinned figures. For example, what does it mean to do this exhibition here in Switzerland in the year 2016? I think that is an important question.

Elena: The best way to answer your question is by pointing to instances where the issue was, in fact, addressed. Let's start with the press release, which is the same as the exhibition text, available to every visitor. Allow me to quote a few sentences from it: «Her paintings make clear: our museums and our histories of art, like power structures of all sorts, are full of representations of and by *white* people. Depictions of *black* people by *black* artists are astoundingly few. Hers, then, is a social portraiture, picturing a whole segment of the population—a reality—that remains still so little accounted for in either art history or politics. Yiadom-Boakye's insertions of (fictive) *black* figures into the canon, into discourse, into our exhibition spaces, are quietly subversive, not combatively arguing for anything, but simply

rendering *black* lives visible—literally giving them matter and thus showing that they matter—always with quiet grace.»[1]

And I could go on, but this passage alone shows that we touched on nothing less than representation in the canon, politics, exhibitions, and museum collections, and pointed to the ways in which Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's depictions attempt to respond to this. And yet, even though Lynette is hyper-aware of the politics of her choices and of their implications, she wants—and deserves—to be seen first and foremost as a great artist and painter, rather than being reduced to the color of her skin. The public conversation Brand-New-Life mentioned in its article was a discussion held between the director of the Kunstmuseum, Josef Helfenstein, who is a painting specialist, and Lynette. It primarily revolved around her as a painter. And there was a point to that. Yet to paraphrase your critique, you asked «Why didn't we talk more about race or, more specifically, make the subject of the whole talk about race?» My answer to that is simple: «Why don't we always talk about it? Why should we talk about it more, just because we have a *black* artist painting *black* figures, but not when we have a *white* artist painting (as is usually the case) all-*white* figures?» The latter is just as much about «race», as what Lynette is doing. At Kunsthalle Basel we wanted to provide a context where we treat this artist no differently than we do any other (*white*) artist in an exhibition. And the fact is that Lynette is an incredible painter who was speaking to a rapt audience about her process of painting and refusing to treat the skin color of her figures as anything but normal. And that, I insist, IS political, it IS a commentary on race. An artist like Kerry James Marshall is articulate and militant about his aims. Lynette inserts *black* figures into the canon just as powerfully, but speaks about her aims a bit differently, saying something along the lines of, «I'm painting what I know, what I imagine, what I admire, and it is *black* and you—whoever you are, whatever color your skin—should be able to handle that, because the whole history of representation is filled with *white* figures and no one treats that as anything but normal.»

Barbara: That's an interesting point. What is the role of the artist and what is the role of the curator? If the artist is not talking about her paintings in a specific way, this might be a political strategy, as it obviously is in the case of Yiadom-Boakye. To behave as if it is normal to paint exclusively *black* people is one of the things that make her art powerful. But it's another thing if an art institution adopts the artist's position in mediating it to the public. Of course I can see your point of not wanting to reduce her painting to any racial issues. But on the other hand, it's so not normal for paintings to show *black* figures in Switzerland. So this «not-being-normal» should somehow be a subject. And I think we should be able to find a way to articulate such questions without limiting an artistic position to its ethnical background. Another question is, how and by whom should this be articulated? By the museums and galleries or by art criticism?

Sarah Owens: I'd like to add a few brief comments on the idea of normalcy. In an ideal world it would be normal to be a successful *black* painter and to depict *black* people in paintings and say, «I'm an artist like everybody else.» That would be an ideal situation, but we are not there yet. If you exhibit Yiadom-Boakye's works in London or New York, such a position may seem a little bit more normal. But here in Switzerland, exhibiting her work cannot claim normalcy, since there is so little discussion here about race. Like Elena, I am American. So maybe for us it's a bit more normal to bring up this subject than for someone who is Swiss or German. Swiss people of color have not yet been given the possibility of finding such normalcy. If you do not talk about race and, by extension, racism when considering a *black* painter painting *black* figures, then it might seem to the audience that it's no longer an important topic. And that they are being excused from talking about race. It's the illusion of the so-called "post-racial" era. This is one way in which the exhibition and discussion that followed it could be read, even though it may not have been intended that way.

Elena: Structural racism and the profoundly nefarious legacy of colonialism are present here, too. I, for instance, was very self-consciously thinking of the situation in Switzerland when I made this show. It's a different history than in the US, but I nevertheless felt it was a valid place to stage such an exhibition, so that it could inspire reflection on these issues. In the press there was an interesting discussion in relation to race and the exhibition. The press really got it.

Barbara: You think so?

Elena: I do think so. They very specifically discussed what it means for a *black* artist to paint *black* figures and, more precisely, *black* fictitious figures. And what it means at this very moment in history.

Barbara: Exactly what it means? That's the part I was missing in the discussion and in the media coverage of the exhibition.

Elena: We had more people visiting this show than we had for any show in years. And it wasn't just because Lynette makes beautiful paintings, although she undeniably does, but also because of what is being painted and how that reflects—or doesn't reflect—our society and the institutions representing it. There was so much discussion among my staff members, the guards, and the public about this. That's why I was surprised to read the critique of Brand-New-Life, and surprised by what I understand as a form of latent racism in the guise of a well-meaning attempt at politics. At Kunsthalle Basel we did discuss race: I already referred to the exhibition text, but I could also point to the catalogue we made and the guided tours we offered. But if we had turned the exhibition into little more than a prop for further race discussions that, to me, would have been wrong. And racist, in fact. It would be treating this show entirely differently, and this painter entirely differently, than we do a *white*, European, male painter. Why should we have done that? My position was to adopt the normalcy that Lynette Yiadom-Boakye insists upon in her own work as a model. To see *black* figures presented with dignity in museums is not yet the norm, but it should be. And the only way to make it normal is to present it that way. Lynette would be the first to say, «This is what I painted because when I was born, the first thing I saw was a *black* mother, the first thing I saw was a *black* family, the thing I grew up with was a *black* community. That's what I paint.» Organizing a symposium about racial profiling in Switzerland on the occasion of her exhibition would have been wrong-headed in my eyes, and yet that is basically what your critique of the show held against us for not doing. Why do we talk about Lynette Yiadom-Boakye differently than we do about John Currin, for instance, or Lisa Yuskavage—both painters of predominantly *white* figures? Why does no one talk about their *white*ness but expect Lynette or us to speak only about her *black*ness?

Barbara: But we should do this. I mean, we should definitely talk about *white*ness and *black* ness, instead of avoiding the issue of race altogether.

Sarah: Completely avoiding to talk about race and organizing a symposium about racial profiling to accompany the exhibition are, in a sense, two extremes. I think it is possible to talk about Yiadom-Boakye only as a painter, but there is a danger in omitting most of the social context. If Yiadom-Boakye refers to the first person she saw when she was born, that already serves as a context. I grew up in a predominately *white* community, but I'm considered *black*. And therefore I find it strange when people say, «You are just like everyone else.» Because in everyday life, I notice that's not the case. I can't be the same, because people are seeing me as someone who is different. These different experiences come into play when viewing the art work. Because most people will not assume that Yiadom-Boakye's paintings were made by a *white* artist.

The situation depends also on the current social and political discourse. In our current moment, I think it is fair to wonder why if one of the main lenses through which we are viewing things right now is race (next to, say, globalization and migration=) – what fuels the decision to talk mainly about form? Why render the social secondary? The other question is how to deal with issues of *white*ness in this context.

Elena: I don't know if the answer is to include *white*ness in every discussion. But it has been interesting for me to look at the language that the critics use in speaking about an artist such as Mike Kelly, who was a contemporary of David Hammons, who also grew up in the Mid-West, also went to school in LA, also used everyday detritus in his work. Whenever Mike Kelly's work is talked about, it's talked about in relation to popular culture or the American vernacular. When David Hammons's work is talked about, it is almost uniquely seen in relation to his *black*ness and African-American culture. Why does only one of the two get the hyphen and the color of their skin mentioned?

Sarah: As in many areas, *white*ness is seen as normal, while *black*ness needs to be specified and explained.

Barbara: I keep asking myself, would it be possible to relate an exhibition like Yiadom-Boakye's to the discussion about racial profiling that we're currently having in Switzerland or would this kill the art works?

Elena: I think it would reduce them in dangerous ways.

Barbara: Really?

Elena: I do.

Barbara: Let me rephrase my question. Do you think your function as a curator is to make social or political connections to local discussions? Or do you see your role instead in picking an artist and giving him/her a public platform through an exhibition?

Elena: I would not describe my role as uniquely one or the other. I do pick the artists, and that involves some sort of politics. But there's a way in which my staff and I will contextualize and mediate the show, which involves politics as well. My role is to think about the local situation, and I do so all the time, although the evidence of it is not where you might think it is. I did not organize a symposium on the questionable methods of the pharmaceutical industry when Marina Pinsky held her show at Kunsthalle Basel, although her work did investigate that legacy; I did not organize a symposium about the perniciousness of corporate culture when Anne Imhof had her show with us, although her performances do address those questions. Instead, I feel my role is to select artistic positions that are relevant to public debate and then allow the art to speak and provoke thought. I actually trust art and I trust its audience to gain something from it without needing to have any message spoon-fed to them. In the same way, I would not have organized a discussion around racial profiling linked to Lynette's show. I come from an understanding that the audience is smarter, more sophisticated, more curious than such a proposition would suggest. I think you don't need a symposium about racism in Switzerland to understand that you have never before seen what Lynette presented in her exhibition. If you are a museum visitor, no matter your background, you will start to ask yourselves the question, «Why it is that when we go to the museum all the figures are *white*?», and then indeed: «Why are politicians that represent us, the faces on our bank notes, and the positive role models in the films we see all *white*?» I trusted this would happen and it did, and a number of guided tours included such discussions. But my priority was to let the work live and breathe and say the thing it says all by itself.

Barbara: So your answer to my question of how to link an exhibition to local political debates is by doing guided tours, for example?

Elena: It's one of the ways. The exhibition text brought up representation, politics, the question of who gets presented, who decides, and what figures are present. It was quite explicit.

Sarah: One thing I think plays a role here are the kinds of visual tropes and stereotypes one encounters in Swiss media. Yes, it might be that the average Sunday museum visitor asks herself: «Why have I never seen paintings of *black* people in a museum before?» But she or he could also think: «This is completely foreign to me – but it's nice to look at.» This view connects to the question of race, but is more subtle. I don't think we can get anywhere in this discussion if we stick with the racial profiling symposium as an example of making race an issue. What about asking visitors what they associate with the pictures? Do they see the figures as foreigners? Do they think about their everyday encounters with people of color? The people they see in the exhibition are gorgeously painted, but at the same time politicians depict *black* people as drug dealers.

Elena: I think this is a debate we need to have more often throughout the Western world. I just don't believe it should, or has to, happen on the occasion of a *black* artist's exhibition, just because she is *black* and depicts figures that look like her. One of the reasons why Lynette's paintings are so powerful is because she's not painting victims or superheroes. She's painting people who simply look at ease in the space of the canvas—as they should in the world. They don't conform to clichés, either positive or negative, nor do they exoticize. So let's not exoticize her either.

Sarah: I did not mean to imply that Yiadom-Boakye is exoticizing *black* people. I'm trying to say that many of the everyday images of *black* people tend to exoticize. On advertising billboards, *black* women have Afros, dance, and are perpetually happy. Viewers may unconsciously carry these images with them when encountering Yiadom-Boakye's paintings and may be at a loss when thinking about how to deal with this. School education provides little resources if it doesn't discuss Afro-European or *Black* British history. Maybe it's too obvious to say this, but I do think it needs some kind of push to get people to overcome their hesitation, and to actually talk about these things.

Elena: You may be right that more is needed in Swiss society. But I do not feel that, as a Kunsthalle, it is our role to burden an artist's work in order to account for what Swiss education does or does not do. It is our job to mediate an exhibition, and I believe we do it exceedingly well.

Barbara: When surveying the reception of Yiadom-Boakye's oeuvre I became aware how much its interpretation differs depending on the geographical context. In the US, there's already a discourse history of identity politics and racism. The discussion is brought up all the time and I can, in a way, understand when an art critic there finds it more accurate to talk about Yiadom-Boakye's work as painting only. In Switzerland, maybe because the history of *black* people is so different and the minority of people of color so much smaller, we tend to avoid talking about racism, but that's what we should do.

Sarah: In many institutions and public places in Switzerland, the majority of people of color you see are working in the kitchen or they are cleaners.

Elena: But that's also very much the case in the US. It has only begun to change relatively recently. All too often they are reduced to the role of kitchen hands. They are washing dishes,

not necessarily serving. And they are not the chefs, nor the directors of an institution.

Sarah: The difference is that in the US, there is an awareness of this. It is seen as something that needs to be continuously addressed.

Elena: The critique in Brand-New-Life pointed out what it thought Kunsthalle Basel should have done. But now in the discussion it becomes clear to me that this response came about because of your feeling that there is not enough discussion in general in Switzerland about race issues, and certainly not at an academic level with regard to the canon. But both of you teach, so given your position I guess you must have already organized symposiums about the issue and can say what have been the responses to your symposiums, classes, and efforts?

Barbara: Yes, of course I'm bringing up this subject. I'm teaching first semester Fine Arts students. They are at the very beginning of their careers and just start to actually think about what it means to be an artist and to make art. I think we can, by not teaching them an exclusively *white* Art History (as I was taught when I was a student), help them be mindful of issues of race, gender, diversity in our culture.
I completely agree that this discussion is not just about Yiadom-Boakye's art but very much in general about how to find ways of relating art to social and political issues such as race.

Sarah: I think art has a special ability to bring up such debates.

Elena: The reason I am a curator and the reason that I am in the art world is that I fundamentally believe in the power of art to encourage knowledge production and an understanding of the world. It supersedes language. It supersedes rationality through its immediacy. I am saying this without espousing a romantic idea of the artwork. Still, I believe that sometimes it speaks to us in ways we are not even aware of, while nonetheless making a lasting impact on us. I believe that by exhibiting artists who work with images in a critical way we are helping the public to become better and more critical readers of images. That is art's power. And it's my role to give it a platform, the space, the conditions to do so in the best and most powerful way. I also think it is the responsibility of critics, historians, teachers, and people in institutions in Switzerland to accompany this process. In what ways do you address the issue of race? What classes do you teach that specifically address this issue?

Sarah: I'm part of a network of *black* women working in the social and cultural sectors. We do readings, film screenings, lectures and workshops, and directly address issues of *black*ness and race. At university, I teach a class on identity and we read Stuart Hall. He says that the first time he noticed he was *black* was not when he was in Jamaica, but when he first came to the UK. This strikes a chord with the students – they realize how identity doesn't just emerge out of the self, but is also attributed to us by others. The difficult part comes when trying to connect these issues with design projects. The canon consists mainly of work by *white*, male designers, and the focus is on formal aspects of their work. For me, it's therefore important that the students take a closer look and think about how to engage with the images that surround us. It's not about the form or the font. You have to actually think about what images carry with them.

Barbara: This sounds like the perfect closing statement for our discussion today. Do you want to add something?

Sarah: Nothing that has not been said before already.

Elena: No, I probably have spoken too much.

Sarah: One second thought, one thing – for me, this discussion was not primarily about the exhibition. It was only the starting point for a larger discussion about the role of the cultural institution and criticism, and how they can spark a debate.

Barbara: The exhibition really brought up many important questions.

Elena: And yet, you accused the show of not having raised these questions.

Barbara: But that's okay, no? I mean, Brand-New-Life adds a little pressure to the debate, so we get a response.

Elena: Actually, I reached out to you, because I found your article inaccurate in places and unfair in its accusations, and I asked for a discussion.

Barbara: Yes, but that's how art criticism sometimes works. Throwing something out into the world and waiting for other voices to speak up.

[1] Exhibition Text Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Kunsthalle Basel, 2016, http://www.kunsthallebasel.ch/wp-content/uploads/Exhibition_text_Lynette_Yiadom-Boakye_EN.pdf.

ELENA FILIPOVIC

Elena Filipovic has led Kunsthalle Basel as its director and curator since November 2014. She previously served as senior curator of WIELS from 2009-2014, and co-curator of the 5th Berlin Biennial in 2008 with Adam Szymczyk. She has curated numerous solo exhibitions of emerging artists in addition to organizing several traveling retrospectives. She is author, most recently, of *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp* (MIT Press, 2016) and David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (Afterall Books, 2017).

SARAH OWENS

Sarah Owens is a member of Bla*Sh, a network for Women of Color in Switzerland that aims to support a social, cultural and political empowerment. She teaches at Zurich University of the Arts, focusing on Visual Communication and Visual Cultures.

Sarah Owens ist Mitglied von Bla*Sh, einem Netzwerk für Schwarze Frauen in der Deutschschweiz, welches sich für ein soziales, kulturelles und politisches Empowerment engagiert. Sie lehrt im Bereich Visuelle Kommunikation und Visuelle Kulturen an der Zürcher Hochschule der Künste.

BARBARA PREISIG

Barbara Preisig is an art historian and art critic whose research focuses on contemporary artistic practices and their social and political contexts. In exploring translocal, transdisciplinary, and nonacademic ways of writing and thinking, she addresses a range of subjects including artistic research, feminism, institutional studies, and the politics of authorship. Barbara Preisig is co-editor of Brand-New-Life.



doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930290