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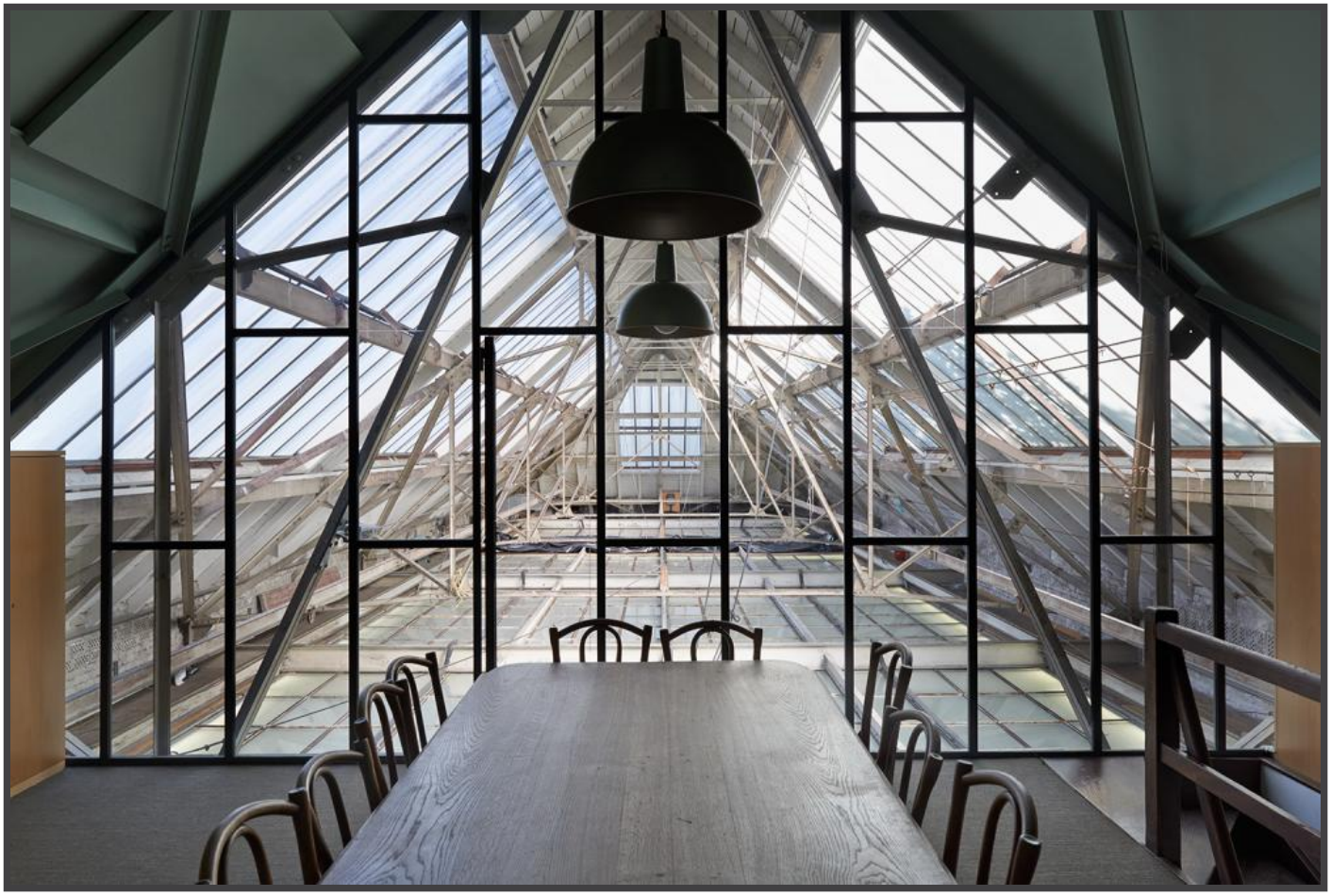


Learning to Speak? Part 1

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

Barbara Preisig, Hinrich Sachs, 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.




Kunsthalle Basel, library

June 23, 2017, library of Kunsthalle Basel: Sarah Owens, Barbara Preisig, Hinrich Sachs

Barbara Preisig: I would like to talk about how the demand articulated in the review of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's exhibition could, in fact, be implemented—that is, the demand that exhibiting institutions reflect on socio-political issues, such as racism or the current debate about racial profiling in Switzerland in relation to themselves. The problem I see is that the museum continues to have this invisible boundary towards the realm of the everyday. It creates a context in which art is purified of everything related to the living environment and all things trivial, in order to preserve its sublime nature. How then could a museum take up and communicate political issues? Is it up to the exhibiting institutions to establish such a connection, or would this rather be the task of art criticism? However, if Elena cannot be here today, I do not want to expand on the exhibition of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

Sarah Owens: In many situations I notice this hesitation to talk about racism and I ask myself whether the discourse here in Switzerland has simply not existed long enough yet to have recourse to the appropriate vocabulary. In the U.S., by comparison, it already has been a subject of intense debate for a very long time. But you cannot just adopt such a discourse, because conditions are too different. It may also be that there is a fear of opening a box and then having to realize to what extent institutions are pervaded by structural racism. You notice this especially in all those debates on diversity. Many institutions attach great importance to being diverse and international. But they don't want to talk about whether there is exclusion or discrimination within the institutions themselves.

Barbara: What kind of debate or dialog would you wish for?

Sarah: Just starting the discussion is already a good thing. And talking, for example, about where exclusions happen and why particular issues are avoided. But my experience is that a direct demand for dialog may also cause people to be all the less willing to engage. In that case it may be better to look for ways such as networks or alliances to reach a critical mass, in

order for those previously unwilling to be forced to engage in a dialog.

Hinrich Sachs: In art institutions with three to ten staff members, as is common in Switzerland, it is quite possible that such debates do not take place, because the staff is likely exclusively *white* and not really directly affected by these issues and because the flow of information occurs largely verbally and informally. In the U.S., by contrast, you currently have emotionally charged public debates about who is allowed to speak for whom, particularly by means of art. I am thinking specifically of the Dana Schutz scandal. Schutz contributed a painting to the 2017 Whitney Biennale that shows the dead body of Emmett Till. In 1955, this 14-year-old Afro-American was murdered by two *white* men in Mississippi. The photograph of his body that was published back then went on to become one of the icons of the civil rights movement. The fact that a *white* artist now appropriated this image for her art was heavily criticized. In an open letter co-signed exclusively by fellow African-Americans, the activist artist Hannah Black even demanded that the work be destroyed. Sarah, how do you see these debates in the U.S.?

Sarah: The current situation in the U.S. is particularly tense. Before Trump was elected, there was a sense among *black* women that things are gradually getting better, that their voices are being heard. And now everything is in limbo again. It had finally become normal for universities to offer African-American Studies, and now it turns out that there are, in fact, many people in the U.S. who do not want that at all.

Hinrich: It also appears that, in the U.S., polarization has deepened over the years. There are topics that I as a *white* person cannot easily speak about or comment on humorously. I have experienced this in discussions in the U.S. where I, as a visitor from Europe, was simply unfamiliar with the connotations or subtexts locally agreed upon. I also find it problematic that the debate about discrimination in the U.S. is so extremely focused on the role of *white* ness and *black*ness. This completely eclipses the issue of the dominant relationship of mainstream American self-understanding, including rap and hip-hop culture, towards indigenous populations, i.e. Native Americans. I am currently working on a project with partners from the Inuit community, in Canada. There, the voting public is comprised of immigrants from all over the world, however the majority are *white*. In the Canadian context a highly fraught public debate remains in response to colonial impulses and actions taken by the state in jurisdiction towards First Nations people.

Barbara: What is the situation in Switzerland like?

Hinrich: My experience here is often that there is no urgent need to critically reflect on history. Perhaps because there is this perception that Swiss history has been very peaceful, without war, without destruction. Of course, this is why more subtle forms of exclusion have become institutionalized within this framework, imperceptibly, over generations. Most people seem to be happy on this ‹island› and that makes it difficult to challenge the status quo.

Barbara: In Switzerland we have an odd relationship with the hegemony of the *white* Western world. On the one hand, Swiss colonial history was, until recently, all but ignored. On the other hand, we have adopted from the U.S. a mode of speaking as well as an awareness of how to properly deal with issues of ethnicity. While this political correctness[1] in the U.S. was preceded by the civil rights movement and a decades-long discourse about identity politics, we have to date barely entered into a direct dialog with the non-*white* people in Switzerland. I think this is what makes us feel uneasy. I notice this uncertainty in my own way of speaking. For instance, I am asking myself whether I should address you, Sarah, as a *black* or as a dark-skinned woman. Or whether it is perhaps better not to refer to the color of your skin at all, as this might mean ethnicizing you. Here in Switzerland, we know in theory,

but not from everyday experience, what kind of gaffes we could make.

Sarah: I find the basic concept of political correctness very important: it is important to continually rethink your points of view and your language use. But it's a problem if people think that, with political correctness, everything has been done that needed to be done. For instance, it's strange when a country claims it is multi-cultural, yet you'll find racist figures on TV («Frau Nogumi», for example). This will gave you a false sense of certitude that really creates uncertainty. Seen in a positive light, the gaffes at least offer the opportunity to get into a conversation.

Hinrich: To what extent would it be possible to replace the term ‹racism› which is so closely tied to appearance? After all, discrimination happens not just on the basis of physical characteristics. That, to me, would be an approach to addressing the situation differently in Switzerland. In my opinion, racist forms of exercising power are at the same time invariably linked to the dynamics of capital. In everyday life, it may be possible to separate one from the other, but not on a structural level and especially not in Switzerland. We cannot talk about latent racism without taking into account the role Switzerland and companies based here play globally in, say, the commodity trade and what realities of life this creates. I have an example of how such economic conditions here in Basel lead to an interesting shift. The playground I often go to with my daughter is also frequented by English-speaking children of well-paid employees of Novartis and Roche who come from the Indian subcontinent. Their babysitters, however, speak lower-middle or working-class British English. Is this perhaps an example of a reversal of historical colonial relations? In this case *white*s definitely are the lower-paid workers. I think appreciating micro-perspectives is extremely important.

Barbara: Could we talk once more about how we can arrive at a productive way of dealing with issues of *black*ness or otherness in conjunction with art? Or are there examples of this in the field of design?

Sarah: In the field of design this debate is all but non-existent. People pretend that it's about pure form, that works and objects fall from the sky, without distinction as to who made them. There is also barely any historical awareness of *black* designers. Nor has anyone called for it to date. Slowly, initiatives develop, such as the Decolonising Design group which aims at a change in perspective in the design discourse.

Hinrich: I would pass the ball straight to the artists and cultural workers. This may be provocative or dialogic.

Sarah: I think it is important also for art criticism to keep initiating this dialog. Institutions and people can only avoid it up to a certain point. You just need enough people to want such a debate.

Barbara: Perhaps we (and the art institutions) must more keenly bear in mind how art speaks differently to different people. It would be fascinating to have people of different social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds interpret aloud and in this way enter into a dialog.

Hinrich: You're bringing up art education and one question in this regard would be how to address views that are outside the scope of the educator's experiences. Who could take on this task?

Sarah: I can easily see this very quickly result in unexpected shifts. For instance, you may think that to me, as a *black* woman, the paintings of Yadom-Boakye would instantly appear as ‹normality›. But I grew up in an almost exclusively *white* environment. After all, the issue is surely whether I, when looking at a picture, see two people jumping across a creek or two

black people jumping across a creek? I suspect that most typical visitors to the exhibition saw the latter, because they do not encounter people of color in this way in their everyday world. That is something a cultural institution must be aware of.

Hinrich: Geneva has long been home to Omar Ba, an artist who originally is from Senegal. When I was still on the Swiss Federal Art Commission, Ba made it to the final round with his painterly work. I still remember how difficult the discussion about his art was in the commission. Ethnic stereotypes were rashly resorted to and there was much uncertainty as to how to deal with his ‹African› references. I would love to hear from someone like him how he sees the current patterns and attitudes within the Swiss art institutions and art scene. His perspective is likely to be much more incisive than those of artists such as Theaster Gates or Lynette Yiadom-Boakye who do not live in Switzerland and are showing their works here by institutional invitation.

[1] In its original meaning, the term «political correctness» referred to a norm developed in the twentieth century with the purpose of avoiding discrimination in language use. Since the 1990s, the concept has also increasingly come under fire from members of the political right who point to the ways in which its language rules restrict freedom of speech. In the above text I use the term in its original meaning. For the history of «political correctness» see, for example, «Philosophischer Stammtisch: Das Ende der Political Correctness?,» in: *Sternstunde Philosophie*, SRF, May 14, 2017, https://www.srf.ch/sendungen/sternstunde-philosophie/philosophischer-stammtisch-das-ende-der-political-correctness, and Christian Staas: «Political Correctness. Vom Medienphantom zum rechten Totschlagargument. Die sonderbare Geschichte der Political Correctness,» in: *Die Zeit*, February 1, 2017, http://www.zeit.de/2017/04/politicial-correctness-populismus-afd-zensur.

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.

HINRICH SACHS

Hinrich Sachs ist Künstler und lebt in Basel. Er arbeitet zur Zeit an *Fog Friend Font*, einer Gruppe von Publikationen, die informelle, durch digitales Kommunizieren ausgelöste Veränderungsprozesse im Bereich des alltäglichen Schreibens und Sprechens vorstellt.