

Audio Transcript: Pindell's Legacy: Artists/Activists/Educators

March 5, 2021

Emma Enderby:

I'm Emma Enderby, chief curator at The Shed, and welcome to our series of talks that look to the legacy in the ideas of artist Howardena Pindell and her exhibition at The Shed, *Rope/Fire/Water*, curated by Adeze Wilford. We are so grateful to be able to be open and continue our work supporting artist at this time. Our mission at The Shed is to produce and welcome innovative art and ideas across all forms of creativity to build a shared understanding of our rapidly changing and a more equitable society. I'd like to thank the Ford Foundation and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs for their generous support of this exhibition and our public programs. I would also like to thank the Howard Gilman Foundation for providing the Zoom platform that we will all be using for this evening's conversation.

Adeze Wilford:

My name is Adeze Wilford, and I'm an assistant curator at the Shed and organizer of the exhibition *Howardena Pindell: Rope/Fire/Water*, now on view at the Shed through the spring. Over her nearly 60-year career, Howardena Pindell has been a trailblazing artist, curator, and activist. The exhibition features her well-known, richly textured abstract paintings that critically engage with the politics and social issues of her time, while also demonstrating the healing of her art.

The exhibition is centered on Pindell's new film, *Rope/Fire/Water*, the artist's first video work in 25 years. The conversation is part of an ongoing series of programs that contextualize and celebrate the way that artists, curators, educators, policymakers, and so many more, have felt the deep impact of Pindell's inspiring career. Experts from a wide range of fields come together to explore the intersections of art and policy, culture and community.

Thank you again for joining us this evening. If it's safe for you to do so, we invite you to attend *Howardena Pindell: Rope/Fire/Water* in person, at the Shed, open until the spring of 2021. Thank you, and I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Adeze Wilford:

Hi, good evening everyone. I'm so thankful and honored to have all of our panelists together in this Zoom room to talk through what it means to be both an artist practitioner and educator and activist and all of the different roles that they occupy. I'm going to give everyone a brief introduction, and then we'll start our conversation. The bios I'm going to read are an adjusted one, and a longer bio will be in the chat for you to see.

First, Howardena Pindell. Howardena Pindell was born in Philadelphia in 1943 and studied painting at Boston University and Yale University. She then worked for 12 years at the Museum of Modern Art as an exhibition assistant, an assistant curator in the Department of National and International Traveling Exhibitions, and finally as an associate curator and acting director in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. Most recently, Pindell's work was a subject of the retrospective *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to be Seen* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

Heather Hart, based in Brooklyn, is an interdisciplinary artist exploring the power in thresholds, questioning dominant narratives, and creating

alternatives to them through viewer activation. She was awarded grants from Anonymous Was A Woman, the Grand Foundation, Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, NYFA, and Harpo Foundation. Hart won a Creative Capital Award, Wikimedia Foundation grants, and an Andy Warhol Foundation art grant with the Black Lunch Table, which she co-founded. Hart is a lecturer at Mason Gross School for Art + Design and a trustee at Storm King Art Center.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden is a visual artist, filmmaker, and curator whose work often employs a citational practice, exploring and critiquing issues at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and social commentary. Her interdisciplinary approach traverses documentary film, experimental video, sculpture, and sound installations. She lives and works in North Philadelphia.

Finally, Shani Peters. Shani Peters is a multidisciplinary artist based in New York City. She holds a BA from Michigan State University and an MFA from the City College of New York. Her work has been supported by the Mellon Foundation, Creative Capital, the Rauschenberg Foundation, Rema Hort Mann Foundation, and the Joan Mitchell Foundation. She is a co-director of The Black School, an artist initiated experimental art school that aligns Black radical histories with community-focused art making.

Thank you again, all of you, for joining us this evening. I'm really excited to have the public learn more about your practice, as well as have this really engaging conversation that involves all of you. I want to start the conversation, before we jump into individual introductions, with a more broad discussion of space and how creating physical spaces, but also holding space within an institution, has value and what creating spaces... How each of you felt those actions were imperative to making change within the industry and how it's impacted your practice. And Howardena, if you want to start us off.

Howardena Pindell:

Well first I want to say, for those who are visually impaired, I am wearing a sort of baby blue jacket with a navy sweater, a white turtleneck, and a crocheted blue and beige hat. Intro, when I think of space, I think of my studio as a lab. I have lived and lost for 18 years. I have lived in New York about 50 years. I have had a studio space in Chelsea, SoHo, the West Village, at Westbeth, and am now living in a five bedroom apartment. I disliked living in SoHo, as it was very prejudiced. They did not want non-whites to walk into their galleries, let alone non-white artists asking them to look at their work.

I hear that some people are finding space in Queens and Long Island City. There is Westbeth Artists Housing in the City. If you live outside of New York City, see if there is a cultural office that is part of the local government, and ask about their local artist housing. There is one... Actually, it's quite nice. There is one in Peekskill, New York. The commute for some is manageable by train to come into the city. It is both living and working. Fortunately, at 78 next month, I still am able to do large work. I want to engage the artists of younger generations. I want to encourage you that you do not need a loft. The lofts that are affordable are not in the New York area. I feel these days are over in terms of New York City.

Each space presented a different environment. In one space, I made the portable soft grid and sprayed layers of acrylic dots on raw canvas and worked large. Very large. In another space, I started cutting and sewing my paintings back together. In that same space, I started my "Video Drawing" series. In my current space, and in a loft space in SoHo, I started my Autobiography series.

In the past, having a loft space was considered a badge of honor. People would brag about the size of their space. They are also now too pricey, thousands of dollars a month. The only ones left were grandfathered in, mostly white artists who moved in in the 1960s. One of the loft buildings I lived in was recently torn down. In my current apartment, I still have been working large but cannot spread out as much and working on four abstract paintings with several other projects that require research.

Working in the space of the museum, I worked at the Museum of Modern Art, gave me another experience of the art world and its limitations. I learned a lot about the underbelly of the art world working there. The starting salary in 1967 was \$5,000 a year with a \$5 raise in two years, and a Christmas card from Nelson Rockefeller. It was a space for white male European and American artists.

I remembered they hung Romare Bearden in the from the main collection. There was a committee set up temporarily to investigate the lack of diversity in the museum. It was called the Byars Committee, named after a very wealthy, young white man who was the head of the committee. He was assisted by an older, knowledgeable African American gentlemen whose name was Green. I don't remember his first name. Mr. Green knew about African American art, and Byars knew very little, or nothing. It was the classic white overseer setup. Betty Blayton-Taylor, an African American artist, since deceased, who was on the committee, was head of the Children's Art Carnival in Harlem which was sponsored by the Modern. I do not remember the other members of the committee. I had to practically fight to get onto the committee. They approved a one-person exhibition for Romare Bearden and one for Richard Hunt. After their exhibitions were held, everything went back to normal. Byers, who was head of the committee, committed suicide. We do not know if he received heavy criticism from the head of the committee, or if he had his own troubles.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you Howardena. So I wanted to pose this to the group before we move onto introductions of your work and your practices. I've been thinking about space a lot, especially coming from a more traditional museum space into a space that is a commissioning house and also isn't just visually arts focused, and what does it mean to make exhibitions in spaces that are no longer traditional. And so that's been something that I've been thinking through, and I'm very curious about the ways that you each are engaging with space. So before we jump into the introductions of your practice, which I'm excited to get into, I'd love if you have a few words just to talk about spaces.

Heather, did you want to start us off?

Heather Hart:

Sure, yeah. In general, most African Americans come from people who just didn't have physical space of their own when they landed here. So what we came up with was an oral tradition. Storytelling kept our culture alive and claimed a non-physical space, and so this oral tradition is woven around my personal work and my collaborative work. I'm interested in this translation in enigmatic space between someone who experiences a work and the work itself and the artist. These in-between places reflect the complicated nature of understanding the self and each other. I collaborate with performers and lecturers and school children to activate my sculptures. The content of my sculptures can transform depending on who experiences it, and I want to encourage viewers to relate through their own physical interactions. When

people are involved with discovery through an institution or experiencing life... I was going to say art, but life in general, I think there's some optimism that happens there.

Adeze Wilford:

Okay great. Shani, go ahead.

Shani Peters:

Hey everybody. To update on the space that I'm in, my bio was accurate as of a week ago. We just relocated, my family and I, to New Orleans. We don't have our furniture yet, so I guess it's not really safe to say that I'm based here as an artist just yet, but coming to you from New Orleans having lived in Harlem for the last 15 years. While Ms. Pindell was talking, it reminded me of the fact that it kind of made me realize yeah, I lived in New York 15 years as a practicing artist, and I never held a studio space that I had to pay rent for. Never, because how? Rent was enough. So if it wasn't through a residency or through being able to work in spaces that I taught at... I taught for Harlem Textile Works, which came out of the Children's Arts Carnival. Betty Blayton-Taylor's work, spaces like that, gave me opportunities to make. But paying a studio artist's rent, having a loft studio was like some dream that you hear about on TV, but it's not a reality for most contemporary artists in New York. Especially not from Black and Brown communities.

The other thing that I'll say about space is, a word that I always use to talk about my practice in general is access. Everything I do, I'm thinking about who's going to see it. I'm thinking about if I would be able to see it, if I would come into contact with it. I came to New York to get my MFA in art knowing very little about contemporary art world or spaces. I had wonderful parents, and they exposed us to a lot. They took us to museums, but not art museums, for the same reason that so many other Black folks don't go to art museums. It did not feel like a space that was welcome for us.

So I know that when I make my work, which is informed by my life, my experiences, the people that I am surrounded by in my life, I know that they are in that work. I know that I need them to see that work. It's fine for anyone to see that work, but they for need to be able to see that work for it to mean what it means to me, for me. I'm always sort of working, in one way or another, to forage these alternative spaces that allow a broader audience of people to access the work.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden:

Space for me has always been, I think, informed by, quite frankly, my childhood. I grew up pretty poor and didn't have access to a lot of the things that I understand a lot of my peers have had in their childhood. So space for me was, quite frankly, found in books and the imaginary. I think as an adult, my resistance, and as an adult artist now, has been trying to fight the confinement of the bigness that I feel like I want to bring to the table oftentimes with my work. When thinking about institutions, I try to stay in a space of thinking about the work, the ideas that I want to put forth within this thing that hasn't exactly been shaped yet. But when I do cross the threshold for a particular site, the reality or the path that I always put myself on is to think about what took place outside of just what the place is right now.

So I'm very interested in creating confrontational moments in terms of the history of what is now, but thinking very much about who owned the

space in terms of their sociality of the space, how they occupied the space, and thinking very much about how I can bring in a particular community that may have been cut out of the institution that my work has been shown in. So that's something that I've always challenged myself to think about, especially thinking about Black queer genealogies and memory, and quite frankly inter-subjectivity and subculture. A lot of those communities and a lot of the things, whether it's an object or a film that I've made, when I bring those pieces within a kind of institution, I have to do my own work to make sure that community has direct access to that work. Because it's not always a given, and I think that that is something that I have had to reconcile with as I've started to be able to show my work in these kinds of spaces as of late.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you all for those answers. I think what we'll do now is just go into a bit of introductory information about your work and your practice. So Tiona, we'll start with you. We'll pull up your slides, and you can talk for about five minutes. Then we'll go to the next person. Thank you.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden:

Cool. First off, my name is Tiona Nekkia McClodden. My pronouns are she/her. My practice is one that is always trying to change. I'm bound by a certain kind of curiosity in regards to my own history, my family's history in this country now and before me, as well as thinking about, again, particular parts of the culture that haven't exactly been successfully translated through other avenues of art that I've seen. Most of my work is very investigative. I find it to be that's where the citational aspect comes, because I would say my practice is 70 percent research and 30 percent work or execution. My largest source outside of books and research has to do with actually sitting at the feet of people and talking to them and listening to what I would consider their truths and putting that up against fact to kind of create these really confrontational, or maybe uncomfortable, installations that are very much in response to a time in history as well as the site that I get to have access to at the time.

There's another aspect of my work that is invested in Black mentifact. Mentifact being the thought processes behind what we do and Blackness being my investigation of how I want to process that thought, Black thought, and dealing with, I guess, the success and failure in translating Black thought into object or into film. So a lot of my work, I would say, is the residue of a process. I can't say that I've ever gone into something, as I've tried to do film, sculpture, write, whatever, with a finite idea of what it's going to be. When I feel like something is done, it's pretty much a process then that gets shaped to be presented to the audience.

The last thing I'll share is that as of late, my practice has been very much geared towards Black queer genealogies, Black, lesbian, gay, trans legacies and histories, and figuring out how to do an investigation of, again, this archive. But only in the sense of thinking about how it can assess or set correct certain kind of failures of the past.

Adeze Wilford:

Next we have Heather to speak about...

Heather Hart:

Thank you. Thanks for having me, and thank you, Ms. Pindell, for your work. I'm a woman with brown hair wearing glasses and a black shirt. As Adeze said, I'm

kind of captivated by thresholds in between truth and fictions, oral histories and written histories, between what I say and what you hear, art worlds and publics. I focus on movements between the spaces and the public, between the public and my work, and the slippage, construction, and communication that happens in between all of these. I want my work to act as a translator between the language, between architectures, and the public eye.

Like oral history, the methods of building my work are passed down from person to person. I was taught to build by my father, a carpenter. In much of my practice, I create structures that compel the visitor to re-examine their literal place in the world through engaging with my work physically and as a metaphor. I want to slow their pace and ask them to examine form that they normally overlook, because architecture or structure is always framing and influencing our perception of the world.

I also founded a nonprofit named Black Lunch Table with SAIC assistant professor Jina Valentine. We met in 2005 at Skowhegan, where we collaborated on our first staging of the Black Lunch Table. The project has existed in many variety of forms, including salons and co-teaching workshops and social meet-ups, roundtables and Wikipedia edit-a-thons, all centered around building archives of and about Black visual artists. There's a crucial, critical need for a systematic reassessment and conceptualization of authorship, archives, and access to information. The Black Lunch Table addresses these goals by mobilizing a democratic rewriting of cultural history through a radical re-imagining of digital authorship and archiving in contemporary art history as performative communal processes. This project empowers marginalized voices to write the record by recording, transcribing, archiving, and publishing their own stories.

Our organization accomplishes this goal through production of discursive spaces, both physical and digital, where artists and local community members engage in dialogue on a variety of issues. Those records are digitized and presented in an interactive archive, the integration of BLT's unique collection of vernacular histories, and archive materials, into syllabi, research journals, Wikipedia entries, podcasts, art installations, radio stories, and popular discourse further authenticates Black experiences by making them part of our shared canonical historical record. The archive is also a unique and innovative fusion of linked open data principles, network-based interfaces that analyze an analysis, and community-generated content and curation. Much like its creation of physical spaces that foster community and generate critical dialogue, Black Lunch Table creates a digital space for art, Black studies, and social justice issues.

I want to think Ms. Pindell for demonstrating, for all of us, that resource equity means equal access to knowledge, health, wealth, and social resources for everyone. It's not just representation, but reparations. Resource equity is only possible if our stories are told by us, and if you think about it, anything worth having is going to take energy, intention, trust, and collaboration. Although we do consider Black Lunch Table an act of radical archiving, this does not necessarily make me an activist. It makes me human.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you, Heather. We're going to move to Shani.

Shani Peters:

I am a woman wearing a white shirt, got my curls out. I want to begin by thanking Adeze and all the organizers for inviting me to participate in this conversation, it's such an honor, for seeing Ms. Pindell's legacy in me. It is absolutely

here. I don't know anyone over there too terribly personal, so you really saw it. I appreciate that. It doesn't always happen, so I'm really so pleased to be here in such admiration of really everyone's work on the panel.

To speak about my work a bit more, I already said access is a huge theme. I've always been interested in activist histories of the Africa diaspora. I've always been interested in making them relatable to the present and widely accessible to audiences not traditionally thought of as art-going audiences. I kind of have a two-part process that's part private, in-studio, where I'm making work that's helping me process this world that I'm in, the spaces and the histories that I inhabit. Then, after I've made a thing kind of for myself, after I've really investigated a topic, topics that I feel like I should know more about and need to know more about. I'll spend a great deal of time researching to help myself understand, I'll make this thing.

What I realized after some years, what I always do, is I then try to figure out how to share that with people. I mean not just the work, but the benefit, the actual reward that I am receiving in this luxurious space of being a contemporary artist, a professional artist. Of course that doesn't mean that you have a salary, and we'll talk more about, I think, in this conversation. But it's a luxury to spend this much time with your imagination. So I always want to share that in some way, shape, or form. In recent years, my interest in Black radical political histories has also been very much in balance with an interest in personal wellness and a need for us to maintain our health and our sanity through these generations upon generations upon generations of need for resistance work. So that's what you see in the last few slides, the last slide and this slide.

The middle slide and the third slide that you're seeing now are reflective of my work with the Black School, which I co-direct with my partner and husband, Joseph Cuillier. The Black School is an experimental art school that bridges Black radical histories with art-making. The art we are interested in making is socially relevant. We begin our workshops with the questions what do you love about your community and what do you want to change about your community, and we go from there. Kind of work through a three-part ecosystem, an art school, workshops, something like what you see here in this image, a festival. We call it an Annual Black Love Fest, where we share the work that people we've worked with over the course of the year have made.

We invite other Black artists who are working in social capacities who need a Black audience but can't necessarily get that out of the traditional institutional art spaces. We invite folks like that to bring their work to the festival, musicians. We're very committed to being cross-genre and not kind of maintain this notion of capital F Fine Art. Black creativity is expansive. Finally we have a design studio which allows us to provide tangible workforce training to folks we work with and to pay them for their work. We know that making socially engaged work for our communities is necessary, sort of an aspect of a functioning democracy, but is certainly not going to pay. Certainly Black folks don't have this luxury of just entering an art career with no resources under their belt. It also, in the long term, is intended to make our work self-determined so that we're not forever relying on donations or foundation funding.

As an update, we've had a very big year. We just completed a crowdfunding campaign to raise \$310,000 to build a Black schoolhouse here in New Orleans, which is Joseph's home town. We've been working towards this for some years now, spending a lot of time here. We've been really so thrilled to be here and really have tangible resources in hand to make this happen and to create access, to make space that we can share with more people so that

more people can have this luxury of engaging in our imaginations in this very difficult society that we all inhabit.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you all for that. I love the idea of creating access for people to have the luxury of the imagination. I think it's such a crucial, crucial thing for us all. Now I'm just going to start asking some questions to the group. The first question, Howardena, is for you. I'd love for you to speak to the legacy of spaces like A.I.R. Gallery and what working within that space was like. We've talked for a while about your history at MoMA. They operate in very different ways, and so I'd love for you to talk through that historical moment that you had with both of those spaces.

Howardena Pindell:

Well A.I.R. was the first women's cooperative. It was located in SoHo at 97 Wooster Street. I was a founding member, helped with the renovation, and was the only person of color. Most of the members did not have day jobs and had husbands, so they were not happy with those that did. We had less time to devote to committee work and gallery sitting. I remember a group of white women coming to MoMA and calling me in my office, telling me to come downstairs and picket with them. I said no, that I could not afford to lose my job.

In terms of MoMA, I was hired under the old regime. Director Rene d'Harmoncourt was hit by a car in the Hamptons and died. The Museum then became corporate. There were, after that, many changes. The head of personnel, who was Asian, was fired and replaced by a corporate Barbie doll. One of the curators of architecture and design, who was Native American, was fired. Some of the educational programming was modified when its director retired. An Afro-Panamanian was fired when his department was shut down. He became a curator at the Schomburg Collection, or the Schomburg Center for African American Culture, in Harlem. They hired an Afro-Caribbean curator, Kynaston McShine, Painting and Sculpture, but he was not a friend of non-white artists or women.

It was very hard for him to speak to me. I was part of a group that unionized the museum after they started to fire all of the older women who had been there for years before they were about to be vested or tenured. We eventually went on strike and formed the union PASTA MoMA. Both MoMA and A.I.R. were spaces of privilege. One of the longstanding members of A.I.R. kept saying that I did not know I was Black. It would always get back to me. The experiences in both places allowed me to see the additional layers of the underbelly of the art world.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you. I appreciate when you speak about these histories, because I think it's very easy to read about the length of time that you spent within these spaces. But to understand what was actually happening within the confines of what you were doing while also very much trying to do a job, it's important to talk to that legacy of the realities of working within this industry. So thank you, Howardena. And then Tiona, I'd love for you to speak a little bit more about the ways that you've activated the archive. I've put it with a capital A in this question, and how within this new space, which I'm really excited about, this new space. Hopefully when things open up a bit more I can make it to Philly to see,

in person, how you kind of employ documentation as both a preservation of histories, but also as an art-making practice.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden:

Yeah, absolutely. Let me first start off, I am a woman wearing a beige sweater thing, glasses, and a green hat. So the archive, for me, I always like to do this to folks, is that it's not always this thing that's 20, 30, 50, 100 years ago out. The archive is an hour ago. I'm always thinking about how that can lend itself to kind of expanding the way that people can even think about my work, because it does change based on that kind of time parameter. Whenever I've gone into the archive, it's been for seeking a kind of conversation. If I'm interested in thinking about a particular figure, I'm going to go look at their things. I'm going to talk to the people that may survive them. But then there's also a moment where I was confronted with the fact that people don't have people, sometimes, that survive them, so what does it look like to go look at their things?

From there, that has taken me into both institutions, but more so to people's homes, to kind of take a look at documents that they've kept on folks that I can then get closer to an idea of someone's intent or goals that may have not been manifested, and think about how I can aid, quite frankly, in allowing that work to be finished. Which I feel is how I've thought about a lot of the work, especially the work around Black queer genealogies. I feel like it comes from a place that is equally curatorial but also thinking deeply, deeply about the ideas of care. What does it mean to care for someone's things?

I don't think that it always lends itself, for me, in regards to thinking about not so much a show but more so about a certain kind of spiritual timeline. Really thinking about the ways that, in addressing or maybe arraigining someone's archives to answer some of the questions that they may have had, can lend itself to thinking about how a figure is reconsidered within a particular canon. That has been, quite frankly, the work that I've done is been one that's been geared toward an aspect of care and repair. To give an opportunity for us to look back, but look back with a certain kind of critical eye. So that's why I say, like I think earlier, that my engagement has oftentimes been hostile, because sometimes people don't want to look back and restructure and repair, or reconsider, a different kind of point of view.

Within that activation, again, I'm always thinking about what is occurring right now. So I don't have a nostalgic feeling when I go into these spaces. I'm not trying to preserve these predetermined ideas. I'm always looking for something that's going to kind of derail me and throw me off to kind of seek a new path, to figure out what I could do to assess or maybe answer some questions that are here now.

Over the years with that as kind of a core aspect of my practice, I've developed my own kind of pretty extensive library, because I buy my own books when I can. And just thinking about the handling of particular archival materials, but also the fact that I'm generating so much material in the practice. The idea that came up with my space that's located here in Philly, Conceptual Fade, which is this... I guess the center of it is the library. I'm basically making my own personal library open to the public, so they can see and get an idea of how I've maybe arrived to my thought in my projects because of the ways that conceptual practice can be read. Especially to Black folks, sometimes it's like, "Oh, this is too much. What's going on here?"

But my thing is that it's actually rather simple. I think that all of us, daily, deal with a certain kind of conceptual practice in the ways that we dress, the things that we adorn our houses with. All that stuff to me is very simple, and

so it's kind of a way to say, "Hey, these are where these things come from." They're actually very much sourceable. And so the library is a core to the space, but then the idea of thinking about micro gallery, because it's a small space. My references are Japanese bars that I visited in Tokyo. I was so impressed with the preservation of the Jazz content or the focus of a particular figure that may have shown up in the '50s, '60s that kind of maintains a certain kind of vibe in a very small space. I was very challenged around the ideas of how scale operates in thinking about architecture.

And so I have a small 3500-square-foot gallery/library space. One of the things that I'm doing outside of my own collection of books that centers all Black thinkers, Black thoughts, scholars, you name it, designers. I'm complicating the ideas around who is figured as an artist, musician, painter, fashion designer. But also thinking very much about conceptual practice in regards to curators and Black artists who are both alive and who have passed.

And so I've put myself on the challenge to develop what I call the NFS Library, which is a not-for-sale library, where I've been collecting the catalogs of a lot of Black art shows. They have had limited runs, so that a lot of them are hard to come by, and have started to lean specifically into Black curators. One of the curators that I have successfully collected all of their catalogs has been Valerie Cassel Oliver. This is one of my proudest moments, because she is somebody that I came across when I was doing work at Spelman College, early, early on, and who I saw as a curator who showed... Who I was like, "Okay, this is what a curator is. This is how this can work." I felt like she's a phenomenal writer, but her exhibits always had a certain kind of accessibility to me as a Black woman.

So I've set out, and I've successfully collected all of her catalogs. Some of those are extraordinarily expensive and would be kind of mind-blowing to think about which ones are. The reality is, is that there's a lot of information in regards to the art that was produced in that time that come in those kinds of texts. So yeah, when people are able to come to the space, they have full range and can handle the books, look at also kind of my own archival materials from my own practice. I have a whole other kind of collection of older Black lesbian documents, newsletters, and different kind of periodicals that I also have in the space as well that have been informative to my practice. It's kind of like showing the guts of the work and putting it forth.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you. And I share your love and respect and admiration for Valerie's work. It's incredible. It was definitely a resource for me when I was conceiving this exhibition, because she and Naomi Beckwith did that wonderful retrospective of Howardena's work. Howardena, I wanted to shift to you for a moment. I wanted to talk about your use of data as a means of activist practice. It's something that you've done for decades, when you've been communicating about the inequity of the art world. It's also something that you've used in the film *Rope/Fire/Water*, as well as the painting that's in the show, *Four Little Girls*. I'd like for you to talk to us about what led you to use hard data as a means to question inequity, and why you think it continues to be something that you return to.

Howardena Pindell:

My father was a mathematician in mathematics. He also was involved in statistics. I saw him writing in a gridded book for years as a child, writing little

numbers. I felt that the only way I could prove my point about the inequities... Hang on, I just have to turn the page. About the inequities in the art world, was through numbers. I'm terrible at math, but felt at home using numerical comparisons concerning the artists of color represented by galleries and shown in New York City museums. The late summer issues of *Art in America* in the 1980s published galleries with a list of names of their artists, mostly white and male. Numbers do not lie unless they're in the wrong hands. One of my projects that requires some data is to explore slavery in Europe over the century.

Apparently the Church bought slaves and gave them as gifts to the bishops. These were white slaves. Norwegians were avid enslavers of their own people, and would go to the British Isles to enslave women and children and, in some cases, selling them in Turkey, exchanging them for silks and metal. One point I left out, the original Danish people were brown with blue eyes. A lot of people do not know that Leonardo da Vinci was the son of an enslaved woman of Arab descent living in the Italian town of Da Vinci. He was the son of a friend of the family that enslaved her. She was freed when her enslaver died. I read about this in *Time* magazine.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you. And then, Heather, you spoke a little bit about this when you were talking through your practice, especially all of the ways that the Black Lunch Table functions as an organization. But I'd love for you to talk a little bit about how that work addresses the gap that's in documenting cultural production and thought, and how you're activating and animating the history, what that does for our canon.

Heather Hart:

Thank you. Yeah, I mean there's always more to say about it, I think. An example is, I guess, just concrete... If we're talking about data at the moment, one of our projects is Wikipedia workshops. So teaching people how to edit and add Wikipedia articles so that they stick and stay in Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation edited that 77 percent of their editors are white, and 91 percent of them are men. So if this is a crowdsourced encyclopedia, and anyone can use, edit, or distribute this information, including adding records, this becomes work that's central to Black Lunch Table. We need to shift that demographic.

So we train people to edit and update and create Wikipedia articles pertaining to lives and works and institutions that involve Black visual artists. Once that happens, you can instantly see or visualize the decentralization of art history and the canon, and begin to visualize a new and constantly changing aggregate of communities regardless of space and time. Like I think Tiona said, that history is not static. There's always a way to reinterpret documents and impact and history. By involving folks in the process, everyone has the power to change this record, write their own history, unpack the nuances of the system that suppresses us.

I mean I had really minimal exposure, as a student, to what was really going on in the art world. I think we had a one week of Black art history segregated, and it was about the Harlem Renaissance, in my college education. Black Lunch Table is our way of kind of meeting this legacy of access and building the archive that centers around black visual artists. There's so, so, so many ways to fill gaps in our archives, but I think simply centering those Black lives and voices and thought, having conversations with your neighbors and decolonizing our language, finding graceful ways to add our archive to curricula. I could probably go on, but yeah.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you. Howardena, I just wanted you to briefly touch on how you, as an educator... And this is something that is a through line for all of our panelists, either through formal or less formal ways, using education and engaging with viewers in nontraditional ways, how you feel your path as an educator has influenced your activism as well.

Howardena Pindell:

Okay. I use text in some of my paintings to make a point. However, I love writing letters of protest. Way back when, I would walk in protest against, for example, the Vietnam War, in the Women's March, among other demonstrations. I feel that my using numbers as part of the protests makes the facts clearer. But in the wrong hands, as I mentioned earlier, they can lie.

Our former president lied and loved to mislead and deceive. His followers have been brainwashed and do not know it. I highly recommend a book you can get on Amazon, if there are any copies left. It's called *The Cult of Donald Trump*, and it is written by the top anti-cult expert in the country, Steven Hassan. H-A-S-S-A-N. He shows how Trump does what he does. He creates an alternate reality, so that what is actually truth is seen as a lie due to the loyalty to the cult leader and the fear of questioning him, knowing he will lash out. This is a familiar playbook in cults concerning cult leaders. By lying about a virus, a half a million people have died. Confronted with this actual fact, a cult member is unable, when brainwashed, to distinguish the truth using their own critical thinking.

Critical thinking is very important in order to give oneself some protection from falling into the clever manipulators trap. Growing up as I did during segregation and Jim Crow, critical thinking was probably considered treason by the side in power. It is the same under the past regime.

Adeze Wilford:

Thank you, Howardena. I think this idea of thinking as a way to create an activist line of production is an interesting one to dwell on. I don't think everyone has to be in the streets all of the time, but to decolonize the way that you're thinking about people or a group of individuals that you're engaging with, is just as important and just as valid. So I appreciate that perspective that you gave.

I want to go back to Shani for a little bit. I know we're running a little bit behind in our questions. We've had a really engaging conversation. I could talk to you all for yours, but I am mindful of everyone's time. So Shani, I want to go back to you for just a moment and to talk about how the Black School's mission is linked to generational access, and how the way that you operate is through art workshops and education. I'd love for you to talk about the ways you're envisioning Black liberation being achieved through this type of work.

Shani Peters:

I really appreciate the framing of that question, like some of the ways, because the potential for art and activist work, liberatory work, is just infinite. The word liberation and imagination are really synonymous for me. So yeah, it's just absolutely critical to bring the two together. That's essentially what we're doing. In so doing, in so centering Black people in a creative art space, in an art education space, we're really looking to just harness this inherent creativity that is in our culture. I spoke before about kind of opening up this notion of what is art, really recognizing the nuances in our own culture that only we see.

That will be in popular culture 10 or 15 years from now, but right now we're not getting any type of credit, for or we're being criminalized for. To be able to locate these ways that we're creating in ourselves, for ourselves, and appreciate it, make space to appreciate it, is kind of fundamental.

Along with that, we are pairing that with Black radical histories, which are inspiration for the work we make. Which infuse the aesthetics with this just well off content that's always there and available for us. Activism work is creative work in itself. It's imagining the world. It's creating counter-narratives to what we all kind of accept as normal by way of our dominant society. So there's all this creativity already happening in these histories and activists of the present that aren't necessarily called artists. Not only can we take inspiration from their work, their effort, their sacrifice, but we can take inspiration from the actual creative approach that they bring that work.

Finally, we teach activist tactics, especially creative activist tactics. But again, that through line is quite open. In so doing, we are encouraging people to really self-determine the lived reality of ourselves, of our communities, to use our imaginations and our creativity and all of this style in a way that can also bring about the changes and create the conditions that we actually want for ourselves.

Adeze Wilford:

I think that's a fantastic note to draw to a close on. I really do love this concept of pushing the boundaries of what we consider someone to be an artist, pushing the constraints at what we consider to be an activist practice. I think that it's really important to touch at what the imagination can really do in these spaces. So I really appreciate all of your practices and all of you sharing this information with us and telling us about the work that you're doing. It's really important and powerful work, and I'm so honored to have you all in this space.

This is our last of the Legacy conversations for the public programs related to Howardena's work at The Shed, *Rope/Fire/Water*, so I'm very, very grateful to all of our audience members for spending time with us over the course of the exhibition. We have one more program coming up on the 18th. It is called Representation and Participation, so I hope that you all will be able to join us for that. As we close out, I'd like to thank the Howard Gilman Foundation for providing the Zoom video platform for our conversation this evening, as well as the Ford Foundation, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs for their support of the exhibition and our public programs. And I'd like to thank you all again. It's just been an incredible conversation, and I'm so grateful for your time.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden:

Thank you.

Shani Peters:

Thank you.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden:

Thank you, Howardena.

Heather Hart:

Thank you.

Howardena Pindell:
Thank you. Bye bye.