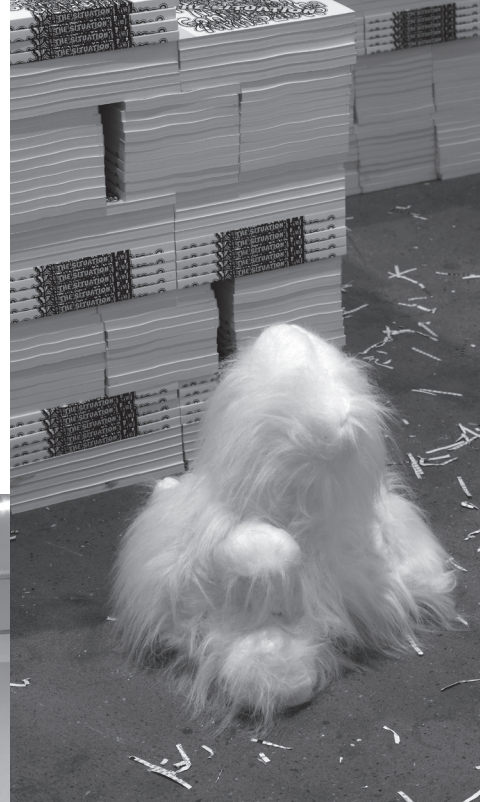
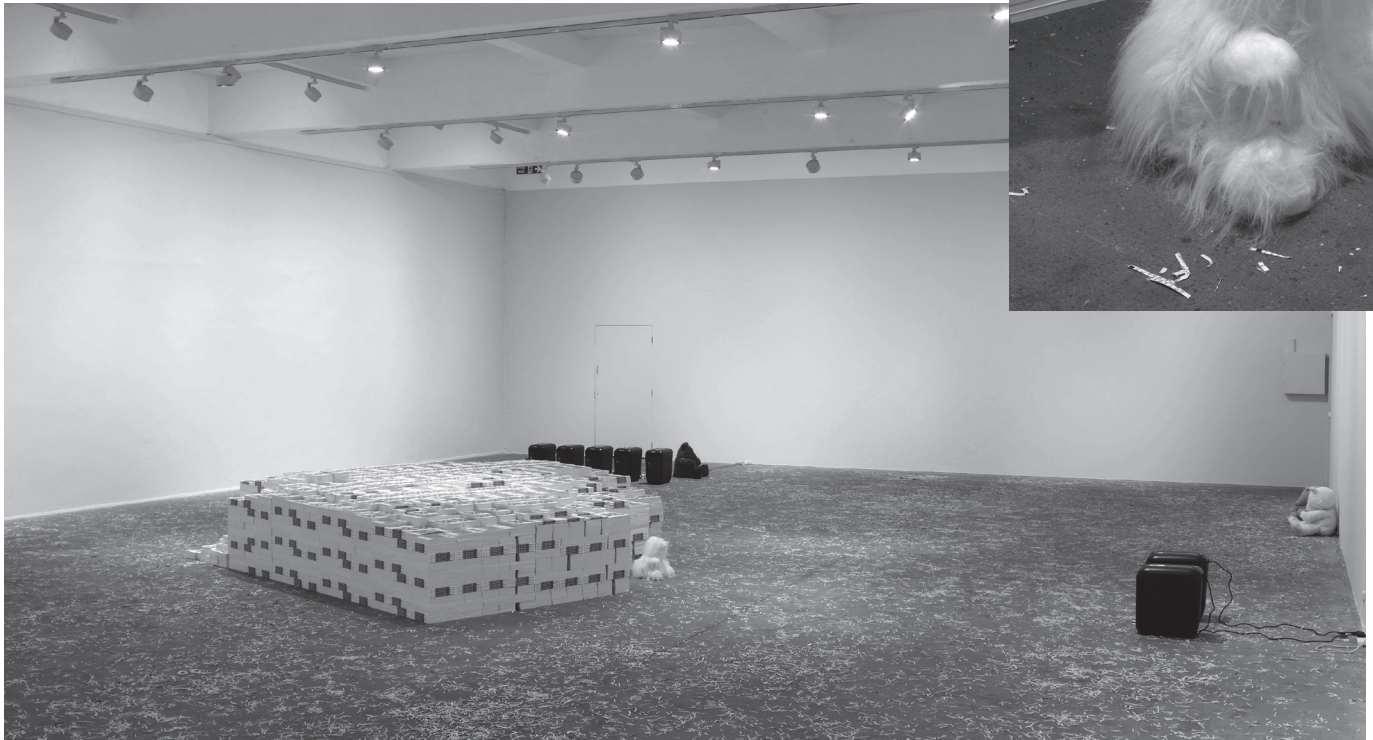


Hannah Black

LIZZIE HOMERSHAM

The Manchester-born, New York-based artist, writer and activist addresses the legacies of slavery, censorship and collectivity.



Hannah Black writes against inheritance. In her fictional, elusively autobiographical text ‘Ms Black’, published in the 2015 book *Transactions of Desire: Are you allergic to the 21st Century?*, the property form of the name, inherited through slavery and also marriage to vastly different effects, is deconstructed: ‘it expresses a property relation, not an origin.’ Further namings are found in Black’s performance collaborations, where she has appeared on one occasion wearing a jacket labelled ‘Insecurity’, as the front woman of a trio known as *Anxietina*; this title has been split three ways, shimmering and rippling in the warp and weft of banners that have been part of set designs made by Ebba Fransén Waldhör. Iterations of the project have taken place at the Institute of Contemporary Art (*Anxietina*, 2016), MoMA PS1 (*OR LIFE OR*, 2017) and Chisenhale (*The Situation*, 2017), where the installation was flooded by red light and the gallery took on a domestic feel, fitted with a sofa and a TV silently screening live BBC News as Black spoke words from her phone or memory to the rhythm of music produced by Bonaventure (Soraya Lutangu). You did not have to be there, which is to say Black’s practice tends to favour ubiquity over exclusivity, the multiple over the artificially scarce.

While one might read Black’s work through references to art history – Conceptual Art, Pop – to emphasise canonical lineage would be a strange exercise in confinement. What Black produces across different media, connected by processes of editing, is more pop R&B than Pop Art, taking the form of intimate mass communication. ‘What’s My Name?’, the 2010 track by Rihanna



clockwise from left
Some Context 2017
installation view

Transitional Object 7 2017

Intensive Care/Hot New Track 2013
video

Anxietina (The Situation) 2017
performance



featuring Drake is sampled as a backing track in Black's short video *Intensive Care/Hot New Track*, 2013. The video begins with a cross-section drawing of the 'Brookes', the infamous 18th-century British slave ship, rotating at the scale of a tampon in the palm of a hand; it then cuts to an operating theatre scene, followed by violently glamorous cut-outs of women's limbs, also rotating, prior to their replacement by overlaid transparencies – a galaxy, a face, an aeroplane, a woman dancing. An eye waters in an emoticon heart. The slave ship reappears. Produced for a solo show at Legion TV in 2013, *Intensive Care/Hot New Track* was acquired by Tate at this year's Frieze art fair. As with *Capacity*, 2016, and *My Bodies*, 2014, you can still watch it in full online, as befits 'the work of love in the age of its technological reproduction', one possible self-description of this video offered in its lyrics.

On social media, especially Twitter, Black's voice is influential, important to many since 2014 when as contributing editor for *The New Inquiry* she ran the column 'TMI', commenting on sex, love and gender. The open letter she posted on Facebook in March 2017, protesting Dana Schutz's 2016 painting *Open Casket*, derived from teenage lynching victim Emmett Till's 1955 funeral photograph, and its inclusion in the Whitney Biennial ('because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalised for a long time'), met with a world news response. Black began her letter by asking 'the curators and staff of the Whitney Biennial ... to remove Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* and with the urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed and not entered into any market or museum'. Following solo shows earlier in the year ('Soc or Barb' at Bodega gallery, 'Small Room' at mumok in Vienna, which opened publicly on the same date as the Whitney Biennial), 'Some Context' at Chisenhale felt momentous; Black's first exhibition in the wake of the Schutz controversy. How could it not carry traces of the debate?

The installation of 'Some Context' was diffuse. Artificial light fell evenly through a greyish-blue walled yawn of space in whose centre lay a block, like an abandoned pallet, of some 20,000 copies of *The Situation*, a book of partially 'censored' conversations between Black and friends. *Carpet*, made of shredded copies of *The Situation*, formed a sparse black-and-white snow over the concrete floor on which seven variously shaped, sized and coloured *Transitional Object* works sat – red, white and beige fabric shells plumped with further shredded book material into cuddly bear-like forms.

A process of displacement had occurred, in the movement of material from the books into the bears and among the in-between objects they constituted, imbued with subjectivity. The bears sat alone or in pairs, some of them accompanied by smaller alien *Creatures*, hand-formed out of non-drying modelling clay. *Creatures* also took the shape of eyes, feet, faces and grey smears encountered at unexpected

intervals on the floor and atop *Shredders* grouped at power points near the gallery's edges. *Transitional Object (Waiting)* remained unstuffed, meanwhile, hanging, beige and baggy, from a coat rack mounted on the wall to the left of the entrance. To the far diagonal opposite, a stuffed beige bear rested its back on one of the largest group of five *Shredders*, apparently guarding ten copies of *The Situation* by sitting on them, and with an arm arranged protectively over a further copy. The exhibition hand-out told us that the 'books ... will be shredded at the end of the exhibition', and that "'Some Context' gestures towards the various potential uses of art's uselessness – as comfort, as worship, as text and as archive'.

The more people entered 'Some Context', the more interesting it became. On a Sunday afternoon I observed a few different interpretations of the unstated rules of the show. Nowhere did it say that you could take a copy of the book; some visitors asked

at the front desk whether this was allowed, others gave themselves permission to pick up a copy, reading parts of it in situ or tearing pages out for shredding before tossing a remainder back on the pile. I assumed that it was fine to help myself to a book (but not to anything else) and its back cover appeared to confirm this with two illustrations: one of a joyful-looking bear raising a shredded book skyward and the other of a smug-looking bear carrying a copy of *The Situation* under its arm.

The Situation obviously has some value but the price marked on the back cover is '£0 / \$0 / 0€'. Circulating rather differently than a unique painting (including those never offered for sale), was the book devalued by its reproduction to excess? What kind of quantity does 20,000 represent? (Artists' books are seldom printed in editions of more than 1,000.) While arranged as a modular stack in 'Some Context', like a minimalist sculpture, the pile is decidedly un-minimalist insofar as it denies anthropometric relatability in its scale. Perhaps *The Situation*'s vast quantity represented a subtle riposte to the idea that the open letter penned about *Open Casket* by Black (who identifies as black and Jewish) should be equated – as it was by high-profile critics – with a call to destruction of the kind that anti-Semitic book burning has represented in the past. Redacted conversations in *The Situation* have as their condition of possibility a collective understanding that this world is dominated by anti-blackness and misogyny. You have to read difference with care. Black has for some time, notably since her 2015 solo show 'Not You' at Arcadia Missa, attempted to devise a politics that does not depend on analogy, or what Alexander G Weheliye has termed 'the grammar of comparison'. This does not mean that life-crushing atrocities – of capitalism in the wake of slavery, of the Holocaust, of the genocide of indigenous peoples with the founding of the US – cannot be thought about seriously and in complex relation to each other; in *The Situation* they are.

Although *The Situation* contains entertaining chat and anecdotes, often inflected by communist, feminist and Afropessimist theory, the decision of what to do with a copy can scarcely be consequence free. What this book communicates, in common with the programme of events devised by Chisenhale in collaboration with Black, is an international project that generally wants to abolish rather than reform white supremacist patriarchal institutions. Individualist entrepreneurialism and private property are among its targets, hence the treatment of proper names on the book's cover: interlocutors' names overlap, intimating interdependency to the point of illegibility. Transcribed voices flow together inside, and only occasionally do I think that I can connect a specific contributor to a specific passage of text.

In the midst of the Schutz debate I remember Black tweeting that 'contemporary art is only interesting when it's trying to abolish itself'. I tend to agree. 'Some Context' offered the possibility of destruction, but I still want a lot of people to read and listen to this work. ■

Hannah Black's 'Some Context' is at the Chisenhale Gallery, London to 10 December.

LIZZIE HOMERSHAM is a writer and editor.