

The Yams, On the Whitney and White Supremacy

Ben Davis, Friday, May 30, 2014



HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican?, *Still Flags*.
Photo: Courtesy HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican?

The following is the complete transcript of an interview with members of HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican?, done via phone on Wednesday, May 28, 2014. It has been lightly edited for clarity. In the week to come, we will be giving the Whitney a space to respond.

BEN DAVIS: I think the context of the collective is important. So if someone could speak to that: How the Yams formed and what it means to be a part of the group.

ANDRE SPRINGER: We've all been working together in different iterations over the last 15 to 20 years. This iteration, us as Yams, was founded last year when we went to the "[Black Portraitures](#)" conference in Paris in January 2013.

SIENNA SHIELDS: Michelle Grabner came and visited my studio last summer. And the work that she saw was collaborative in nature. When she asked me to be a part of the Whitney Biennial, I thought about it for a while and decided it would be more interesting to me—and more

true to the nature of the work—to participate as a collective. Also, I was pissed off about the history of the Whitney and its lack of any kind of initiative in changing its white supremacist attitudes. So we formalized our collective and group to not only do this project, the movie, but to use this opportunity to infiltrate an institution and to experience firsthand what happens in the art world in terms of white supremacy, to expose how the doors are closed for the majority.

BD: A lot of people haven't seen the film that was in the show. Can you talk about *Good Stock On The Dimension Floor*?

AS: The way the film itself was made is this: We started by having conversations, a big thing in our group and our collective. We have conversations about topics ranging from intergalactic space, to crystals, to slavery, to the ancestors. We created this film through the group mind rather than the individual mind. From our conversations, Dawn Lundy Martin made a script, a poem in the style of an opera, and after that we took sections and reinvented them into sound or song. And then from the films we all put together costumes and sets. It was like a collage of minds to produce this avant-garde visual and musical onslaught of awesomeness.*[Laughter.]* There are some reoccurring themes, but there is no beginning, middle, or end.

SIENNA SHIELDS: We'd been working on video projects for a while. Grabner saw a two-minute segment last summer and asked me to participate in the Whitney Biennial. I have loved Dawn Lundy Martin's poetry for a decade now and thought she was my dream poet to work with so I asked if she would be interested in collaborating—in bringing the word to the table. We all began meeting for a month to discuss, plan, share, and rehearse. In the fall, Dawn wrote the piece. We spent two months creating the 34 songs, and a month wrapping up filming and editing.

BD: Obviously, the Whitney has a history of not being very representative. That was part of the discussion for you going in from the start?

SS: Yes, it was why our collective was formed. I disagree with participating in the Whitney; it's tokenism, it's "diversity," and all of that bullshit. Every Whitney Biennial I have ever been to, you can barely count the number of black artists in the show on one hand. I didn't want to be a part of that. There are so many amazing artists of color that I have known in the past 12 years in New York that are essentially overlooked. But I just felt it was time for an intervention.

AS: The Whitney Museum promotes this idea that it is the voice of American art and speaks for the nation when it comes to what contemporary art is. But it's completely not diverse, and so it misrepresents the direction where art is going. I feel it's lost touch with what art is today.

BD: Was participating controversial within the group? The participation in the event itself?

SS: When Michelle Grabner looked at the movie, it wasn't finished. We were already working on it. So, I figured, participating doesn't really matter either way in terms of our art. What did matter was actually opening our mouths and voicing our concerns and changing this system. That was what was important.

CHRISTA BELL: One of the ways that we have discussed framing our participation—even before it started—was as a protest. Our participation inside of this white supremacist institution is a protest in itself. Of course we were aware of the politics of exclusion, the politics of white supremacy that make up the institution of the Whitney. I think a great way to consider this is that the entire participation was a protest, and the withdrawal was part of the protest.

SS: Exactly. Saying “yes” was the first step to protest.

BD: But there was a specific flashpoint. Were you aware of Joe Scanlan's work going into it?

SS: Not until the list came out. I mean, we were aware of Scanlan's work. But that wasn't even the flashpoint. There were so many other flashpoints.

CB: I want to clarify. This is not about Joe Scanlan. We are not protesting Joe Scanlan, or Michelle Grabner. We are protesting institutional white supremacy and how it plays out. A main part of our message is that we want to move the idea of white supremacy away from caricatures of white supremacy: neo-Nazis, KKK members, crazy kids who live in the mountains of Arkansas. White supremacy is embodied in these institutions that tokenize us, that invite us into spaces where they have absolutely no interest in ceding power. That's the most important thing to get about this. This is not about Joe Scanlan. He's this mediocre artist, he's part of the Ivy League, institutional collective of Yale and Princeton and the Whitney. And it's the larger part of his collective that we are concerned with.

BD: The Scanlan issue was the last straw that led to you leaving—I don't know if I am characterizing that right.

SS: There were a lot of straws.

CB: The week that we actually withdrew, there was a meeting between representatives of the Yams and the curatorial advisers of the Whitney. And we recorded that meeting so that we could all participate in our own way. [Yams member] Mitch McEwen and Sienna were suggesting ideas to the Whitney: How about making your curatorial processes transparent, so that you can get help from the public or from other institutions that are doing a better job of being inclusive and at deconstructing white supremacy on an institutional level? We were coming up with suggestions like this, and it really just felt like the entire agenda of meeting with us was to quiet down the black people. They weren't sincere, or being proactive in coming up with solutions to their internalized racism as an institution.

I feel like that was a major turning point. Sometimes that's the way that white supremacy works: The actual people who are perpetuating it have no analysis, or they pretend to have no analysis, about what they are doing—and you just feel a deep hurt at not being taken seriously. Our souls, our art, our position, our politics, are completely not being given consideration. It's just, "yes, yes, whatever we can do to keep you quiet and in the show."

For me, that was the moment—and I don't want to speak for the entire group—but it was just like, what the hell? We couldn't get ahold of the curator. She refused to answer emails that Sienna was sending out. At the beginning, they weren't even going to have us open the Whitney, they were going to have us on the back of the bus. There were these different ways that they disrespected us. This series of microaggressions. When we did open the Whitney, we didn't have a fucking wall tag! Who presents work at a major institution and doesn't get a wall tag for their art? It was just all these little passive-aggressive, or micro-aggressive, racist things that were happening, and it just mounted. And so we enacted the final part of the protest, which was the withdrawal.

BD: And that was a whole part of the dispute that didn't specifically involve Scanlan's Donelle Woolford piece at all?

CB: Again, our largest concern is not Donelle Woolford. It is not Joe Scanlan raping black women conceptually through Donelle Woolford.

Our larger concern is the way that institutional white supremacy reenacts itself.

AS: In the book that the museum put out about the Biennial, they let Joe Scanlan put in Donelle Woolford as a person in the Biennial. But they gave us hell to get all of our names in the book, on one little page. That's just a contrast in terms of that institutional bias—that shouldn't have even been a problem. Let alone leaving out the nametag of our collective.

SS: We are a collective of over 38 people all over the world. They put out the RSVP invite to the opening, and just in the few weeks leading up to the show, we found out that actually our piece is screening during the last two weeks of the Biennial. So they want us to come to make them look diverse, to come to the opening, but they don't tell us, "You're not screening until the very end." Michelle Grabner says, "Oh, I forgot to tell you." I don't want to be petty—this was not the big deal. This is just one of these little things...

CB: These micro-aggressions that happened throughout our participation/protest.

SS: It always felt like that 3/5th of a human being thing. The fictional character was promoted and 45 people of color didn't count. It was this constant battle. Being at the Whitney wasn't really our whole thing anyway. It was about exposing the situation. We've seen how the Whitney hasn't changed in its entire history. So this is our chance to say, "You know what? Things haven't changed." Things have not gotten better, since the '60s, the '70s; it's gotten worse in terms of these institutions of higher learning and art not being any more inclusive than the Republican National Convention.

BD: I've been following the debates about your protest, and there are really two themes that come up again and again from people who question your motives. The first is the question of timing, that the protest occurred at the end of the Biennial's run. People use the words "publicity stunt" a lot. What do you have to say about that?

CB: Like I said towards the beginning of the interview, our entire participation was a protest. Just because people don't know that doesn't mean it is any less of a protest. Withdrawal was the final act of protest. Black people en masse being inside of an institution like the Whitney, presenting art, is itself a form of protest. We just followed it through to its inevitable conclusion.

SS: I also don't know if you are familiar with the work of Stan Greenlee, the writer and director of *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, which is about a man who joins the CIA, in the Department of Reproduction of Records. So, he's inside, but then he goes off and becomes a revolutionary. And that was our entire foundation; we are all artists who have been aware of a certain history and decided to do something about it. So, just because mainstream media refused to write about that side, or didn't ask, just because mainstream media decided to take Michelle Grabner's word for it.... She describes it as "their long-discussed withdrawal," she's out there blasting that. Well, we don't care if she's saying that; it's just another example of white supremacy. We have the record, we have the e-mail exchanges. It's like—bring it on.

BD: You dispute Michelle Grabner's account of the way things played out?

CB: Yes, we do dispute Michelle Grabner. What she is doing is spinning the conversation in a particular way. Our protest is about institutionalized systemic white supremacy.

SS: We all found this out the other day—this is another example in terms of the system—[Critical Practices](#) is this group that Michelle brought in, just two days ago to do a round-table discussion about all these issues, about representation. And they put our picture on their flier, across from a Donelle Woolford photograph. Donelle Woolford was credited; our picture was not. We were not asked for permission. In any case, at that discussion, there was not one black person present.

CB: We are *very* black. We are familiar with how institutions like the police will shoot or kill black people and then investigate themselves and then find themselves not guilty. What Sienna described is an example of how institutional white supremacy continues to reify itself. How do you have a conversation about race, about black people, with no black people in the panel or in the room? They are investigating themselves, finding themselves not guilty, and then releasing themselves. It's very hurtful. I almost feel like we are in an abusive relationship with an institution. We're coming from the perspective of mutuality and communication: "If they only understand where we are coming from... If they only understand what they are doing that is wrong, then they'll change." And they are coming from an entirely different reality, which is one of maintaining power. Honestly, I feel like us leaving as a final act of protest was a way of us symbolically

leaving an abusive relationship. You have these people who are not interested in change at all.

BD: The other debate about your action that people bring up is that you are censoring Scanlan. That your conversation with the Whitney must have been: It's him or us.

CB: That whole line is completely derailing us from our central issue. In terms of censoring, we are artists and we believe, generally speaking, in the ethic of non-censorship *and* we also recognize that that ethic was born inside of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. So, there's going to be times, especially where the bodies of black women are concerned—sometimes you have to think outside certain hegemonic boxes that we have been given: “let white folks do whatever they want,” which is what it translates to, because they have the power and the resources and the institutions to perpetuate certain types of ideologies. In terms of censorship, the collective is absolutely anti-censorship *until* it comes to the severe conceptual rape of black female bodies—so there's that. And other people should weigh in. My opinion is not the only opinion in the collective.

AS: Everyone has the right to expression because of our freedom of speech; whatever they want to do, however they want to say it. But with all that, there's responsibility to be an intelligent individual, and as an individual who is an artist, to think about how your work influences people. And to have a mediocre approach to “questioning authorship,” and meanwhile exploiting a group of people and not having a sensitivity about that, makes us ask: What are you trying to say? You reserve the right to do that. We also reserve the right not to listen to it or listen to it or be a part of it.

SS: Can I just read something? Because the censorship idea is another part of the spin that Michelle put out there. This is actually one of our letters [to Michelle Grabner], and it makes it clear that we are not about censorship:

“I forwarded your thank-you letter to the HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican? Google Group mailing list. I don't feel like your thank-you note was heartfelt with regard to our collective. Your actions and words put you squarely with the tradition of the kind of white feminism that throws women of color under the bus. I have no beef with the actor playing Donelle Woolford—actors are actors and that is their job. Whether the role be mother, murderer, rapist, or president, we don't pin the role on the actor (...) My beef is with your curatorial curriculum and what it really represents

for people of color. You don't get it or maybe you do, which is chilling."

We never said, "Take down this work. This is creepy." We just wanted an open, honest debate about what it actually means. Especially since our curator called the show a "curriculum:" she's trying to teach something. Well, what is it you are trying to teach? Let's talk about it. Don't hush this up. That's the whole thing. Now they are saying we're for censorship. No. We were trying to have an open, honest debate about the very meaning of what this other artist was doing. That's not censorship.

BD: Was your proposal to have a formal debate about it? A public debate at the Biennial?

SS: Mostly we just wanted actually to have a conversation with our curator. What she told me at first was, "Why don't you talk to the actress playing Donelle Woolford." In other words, she was like, "Go talk to the black girl"—that's basically what she was saying. Not even the artist himself, and not even our curator. And then she refused to respond to any emails or phone calls. So you can just see the spin going on here by the Whitney—it stinks.

BD: There wasn't a request to remove Scanlan from the show?

SS: No! We never requested that. That was never a thing. And we have all the proof of that. We have emails and videotapes that our whole discussion involved with the head of the Whitney. We never said that.

BD: I have heard people frame this that way, so I think it's important to clear up.

CB: It's all derailing. All of this is derailing and this is what happens when race comes up as part of the larger conversation.

SS: Let's discredit the people who are being abused. Like a woman who gets raped: "Oh, she asked for it." Here it's, "Oh, those black people, they're just complaining about something again, and they're just after publicity." It's totally white people gathering around their own, circling the wagons, and not confronting their racism.

CB: I love that metaphor. It's the same thing that happens when women are raped. What do you do? You attack her character. You talk about other shit. What was she wearing? Why was she in that place? Instead of dealing with the issue, which is that some motherfucker

jumped her and raped her. Which is a great metaphor for what we are dealing with.

BD: As I understand it, there was debate within your collective about how to proceed. Or am I getting the wrong impression?

CB: I don't remember us saying that.

BD: In an update to the original Hyperallergic story you said, "We have been discussing this for weeks." So the impression that I got was that there had been debate over whether to take this decision for weeks, but maybe that's the wrong impression.

AS: Discussion, but not debate. Mostly discussion about the realities that were happening with this situation. It almost felt unreal. Our discussions were mainly about articulating what things are, and coming to the right thing to do, and making sure that it was well thought out.

SS: In the press they were saying, "They're just flouncing out." And talking about how we are emotionally charged versus the cool-headedness of Michelle Grabner or the Whitney's response. All this coded language. We're a group of people, and we live all over the place, and we have email exchanges, and phone conversations like the one we are having right now, where all these issues get talked out. And through all this, we arrive at a feeling about how to proceed.

And we've been investigating. We've literally been pulling up the history of our curator's 30-year relationship with Joe Scanlan. We see how these institutions play off each other and reinforce each other. It's really interesting how we get beat up for trying to get attention or furthering our careers. But look at this curator who is at all these concurrent shows while she is curating, and the same thing with Joe Scanlan—you know, the Armory, the Frieze Art Fair, whatever it may be. So talk about *that*. One part of racism is all about economics: black people are at a certain economic level, and we're mad about it. It's crazy how they want to hold onto their white male corner of the art world, in terms of who's making the money, who's in the gallery space, and then they dare to attack us. It makes me belly laugh.

BD: Did you get any feedback from any other artists in the show, either in support or against?

CB: Well, there are about 45 of us, so we got feedback from lots of artists in the show!

AS: There's another artist, A.L. Steiner, who brought to our attention Scanlan's attacks on her on the Facebook page for W.A.G.E. [Working Artists in the Greater Economy, a group that advocates for artists to be paid by museums]

SS: He would write things like, he basically believes that art is a meritocracy. Like if you are at the top, you don't have to worry about minimum wages, or protections, or insurance. He told them, "I'm not the one begging institutions."

BD: In the [New York Times piece](#) about your protest, Donna de Salvo says, "The Whitney looks at diversity in the broadest sense and does not talk about things in terms of numbers." How do you read that?

CB: I read that in terms of how we need to stop talking about "diversity" and start talking about "institutional white supremacy." This is not an issue of diversity. I mean, clearly, you had over 40 brown people in the show.

AS: When you say "diversity" you mean that there is one core group that has to allow others to come in to create the appeal. That's the wrong way to think about it. That's racist. That's culturally wrong. We need to stop using diversity as an excuse.

SS: Because it makes whiteness the universal. It's like always using "man" for human. Some of our costumes we got from [Material for the Arts](#), where artists and teachers can go to pick up things that have been donated. So, a lot of the fabrics that we use for our costumes have these tags that say "Noah" on them. They were from the *Noah* movie by the *Black Swan* director [Darren Aronofsky], with Russell Crowe. It had all white people in it, not one person of color. And when asked about it, the people involved in it said, "Well, we didn't want it to look like a United Colors of Benetton ad. So we decided to go universal, to go white." That's what we are talking about: When Donna says something like that, that's what we're really talking about. Whiteness is invisible. Whiteness is the universal. And it's always going to be 98 percent, and 2 percent of others come in—that's what "diversity" is and that's what we are against.

CB: This is an American issue. This isn't about diversity. It's about making sure that we have systems that make sure that American art is represented, and not just the work of white men, even when white

women are the ones who are negotiating for them. This is not a diversity issue; it's an issue for Americans, an issue of representation.

BD: What would you like to see happen going forward? What are the concrete steps?

AS: More transparency. Also, the idea of looking at inclusion not from the perspective of, "we need numbers," but actually of having the knowledge to understand different aesthetics, about where different art comes from and what that means. Not just, "We need two black people. We need an Asian. We need some queer people." We want to see people actually genuinely appreciate the aesthetic of the diversity that is America, and propel that into the art world.

SS: The art world is going the way of the Republican party, in a sense. The population of the US is radically changing. So are we going to be an apartheid system while the white minority increasingly controls everything and the brown folk are under that yolk, imprisoned by the institutions that bring division to America? When you think about museums and where their funding comes from, are they just going to alienate the majority of Americans and completely court white oligarchs? Is that what they want?

I was at a Creative Time gala Kara Walker opening, and I just happened to get into a discussion with a board member of the Whitney. And under the sphinx, I was told, "The Whitney isn't racist. I'm not racist. I did things for black people in the 60s." That's what she told me. Then when we proceeded to sit down at the table, a white man across the table looked over at a black woman who was also at the table and said, "Did you just say the Whitney was racist?"—as if she and I were interchangeable black women. Someone was already telling the whole table that some black woman was saying that the Whitney was racist. And I just think that's hilarious, because you're in a room with a majority of white people who are at Kara Walker's sphinx opening, and they were all taking Instagram pictures of themselves smiling in front of the mammie, and they couldn't actually *get* the art at all. Out of 1,200 white people, there were maybe a handful of black people in the room.

This is what I have been seeing in the art world in New York, and I am sick of it. *HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican?* is a response to an apartheid level of representation in the art world. There is vast talent and it is being locked out. And a certain white agenda is being promoted, and that's got to stop. This is a wake-up call.

CB: I agree with Sienna 100 percent. But I also find your question a little unfair. To ask us, the Yams, “What are the steps? Can you give me a 1-2-3-step idea of what needs to be done...” It’s unfair in the sense that we have the least resources, we have the least institutional power to set the agenda. And yet the question is consistently pointed at us. Our entire purpose is to contribute to an environment in which white supremacy is not tolerated. That’s our first step, and it should be our last step.

After that it is the responsibility of the Whitney, or Yale, or Princeton, all of the institutions who are part of Joe Scanlan’s arts collective, to investigate themselves, to interrogate their methods of curation. Let’s turn the question part of this program back to them. We’re just artists. I feel like we’ve done our part to bring attention to a problem that is just so embedded, so nasty, in the culture of art in this country. So let’s turn that question to the institutions. What are they going to do? What’s their 1-2-3 step plan?