Transcript: Transmissions 4

A Reader-in-Residence conversation with American Artist and Jessica Karuhanga

KEYWORDS

images, thinking, people, witnessing, black, holding, social media, dignity, feel, refusal, documenting, whiteness, aspect, blackness, essay, photos, pandemic, notion, intimacy, speak

SPEAKERS

American Artist, Jessica Karuhanga, Laura Tibi

Laura Tibi 00:07

Welcome to "Transmissions," a podcast of the Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto Mississauga. This podcast begins by covering "Burning Glass, Reading Stone," a series of exhibitions across four light boxes on the UTM campus, running from September 2020 through June 2021. After over a year of social distancing and intermittent lockdowns, we've become accustomed to virtual communication. The isolation and separation born out of the pandemic has evidently exacerbated our reliance on social media platforms. And, while social media can help build and solidify communities, its value driven algorithms and homogenous interfaces make it increasingly difficult to mediate intimacy. The "Burning Glass, Reading Stone" series turns to alternative methods for presenting and engaging with the images, including interpretive videos and podcasts about the works in question. Our continued conditions of mediation implore us to reflect on how the current pandemic has reconfigured nearly every aspect of our collective lives, making more apparent the social, economic, and environmental disparities in our world. We can begin by acknowledging the land on which the University of Toronto Mississauga operates, acknowledging that this is stolen, exhausted, and occupied land that has been inhabited, stewarded, and cared for by the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and, most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River, and that it continues to be the meeting place and home to Indigenous people from across Turtle Island. This podcast forms one part of our Reader-in-Residence program featuring a reader and artist in question-driven conversation. In this episode, Reader-in-Residence Jessica Karuhanga will speak with American Artist about their work, presented in "Dignity Images," part six of the Blackwood's lightbox series. So this series examines how social media and the careful curation and mediation of online identities impact our sense of self, and community. For Artist, a dignity image is a personal, intimate image, that is not posted online. Through the tension between showing and withholding images of the artists personal life, the series urges us to consider the motives of images and the values we subsequently assigned to them. It asks: How can we resist and undo the commercial standards upheld by social platforms? And, how can we, as users of social media reclaim these digital spaces. American Artist is a New York-based artist whose practice focuses on Black labour, resistance, and visibility, particularly within networked

virtual life. And Jessica Karuhanga is a first-generation Canadian artist of British-Ugandan heritage, whose work addresses cultural politics of identity and Black diasporic concerns through lens-based technologies, writing, drawing, and performances. So without further ado, let's hear the conversation between American and Jessica.

Jessica Karuhanga 03:22
I first encountered your voice through your text, "Black Gooey Universe." And I remember being moved by this insistence—you place Blackness as being contrapuntal to whiteness—and I felt that both literally and poetically, not as any kind of reaffirming Blackness as a foundation prefaced before, of everything in anywhere. When a computer shuts down, it goes blank or, or goes black. And when it turns on it flashes white, and it kind of implies or amuses a liveness. So really got me thinking about those tensions, and also innovations in relation to the unknown and unknowable, which I think you also touched on in that text. So I guess, in your practice, where do you situate these unknowns and unknowables? And what do you want to be known or remain unknown?

American Artist 04:36
Yeah, thank you. I really love that question. It has a lot to it, and I can talk a little bit about the "Black Gooey" text because I was really looking at the history of the creation of personal computers and the interfaces on them—the ones that we're most familiar with using. And how historically, there was this transition from a screen, a computer screen, that would have had Blackness as that neutral backdrop. So thinking of those early command line computers, and then, that transition in the 70s, where personal computers started to have this white, blinking screen. And it's interesting that you, you mentioned that flashing white is sort of thinking about liveliness. And I think that is, a lot of the way that we kind of personify a computer screen, is having that signal of electricity or white light as representing some kind of aliveness. But I wanted to kind of entertain the idea that this, this Blackness that's there before the white light actually is also you know, alive and has a lot of depth, and really creates the possibility for that white ground. And that, you know, of course, that happens within the context of the computer screen, but you can also think about how Blackness, Black labor also, has often formed a ground for what potential institutions or things can be, can be built—especially in the context of, you know, United States or Canada, and places of settler colonialism. So those are all things that I was thinking about, when I was writing that essay. And, and this question of what do I want to be known or remain unknown is also important to me because I do think that there's an exchange made when we decided to make some of these aspects visible, or trying to choose how visible we want to make this Black space? Or the possibilities for, you know, how do we want to make visible the breadth or the vastness of that Black aliveness that we may be more familiar with, but maybe it's not really, you know, seen that way or described that way? What is the process? What is the exchange of making that visible? And what is lost in that? What is lost in equating that black screen to that white screen as well. And so, those are the things I'm kind of thinking about now, you know, like, because I don't, I

don't really want to just think about the black screen is, you know, in response to or something, but thinking of it as its own, you know, vast space that always was, always will be, that's so much bigger than how we associate it. So those are things that I was thinking about, along the lines of what should remain unknown or be known.

Jessica Karuhanga 08:06
Yeah, no, absolutely. And as I'm hearing you speak, a few things come to mind. I think about maybe even in our language, how we talk about Blackness in relation to whiteness, oftentimes, they seem counter-dependent on one another. And I find sometimes people will, the way they address Blackness or talk about it will be, kind of, in a reflexivity or response to whiteness, but I really love this assertion that it precedes that. And then in terms of unknowability or kind of revealing, and deflecting, and turning inward, there's a kind of, there's something else about refusal. And the thing that kind of proceeds legibility or translation, something that's ineffable, maybe even. And that could be some things like code switching in terms of like the institution. But I also think there's other ways and can be articulated as something to borrow like, Katherine McKittrick's language around the absented presence, and I recently read an essay of hers called "Worn Out," where she articulates the tracking of Black impossibility in relation to Black geographies, which I think is interesting, because you mentioned, you know, Canada and the US as sort of states. They also have a geologic context as well. And in that essay, she asserts that we might find joy in this impossibility of being absorbed by the institution, being absorbed by whiteness. So I wonder if you see your work situated in this kind of refusal of tracking, being tracked, contained, restrained. I mean, all of these words I'm using have intense kind of—the way they're imbued with meaning. But I think there's a reason for those kinds of points of relation. So maybe you could speak to that.

American Artist 10:18
Yeah, definitely. I love the connections that you're making there. Especially going off what I was saying about that exchange of what to make visible. And I do think that refusal comes into play. And something that I've worked through across different aspects of my practice is this notion of refusal and thinking about it as refusing to perform in a way that you're necessarily expected, and not just for the sake of that, but as a kind of minor political gesture to assert one's agency in a given situation. So thinking about, for me how this notion of refusal occurred in an earlier project I did where it was—it's a project called "A Refusal" and it took place online, on social media, where I decided to visually redact certain images that I would have normally posted on social media, so images of myself or family or friends, and just instead posted this blank blue image—this blue like you see on a computer screen when it breaks or something, And I called it "A refusal" because I was thinking about this gesture of refusing to perform a certain way on social media, thinking of how much our content production is a matter of creating the product for these platforms, and also just wanting to insist on another way of convening with my family and friends. So as a way to challenge how I felt so much implicated in this, this system of socializing, and so that that really

kind of began my engagement with this notion of refusal. And also just thinking of how, how one can have some agency, and how they operate in virtual space by choosing how you engage. And yeah, I like what you said about it preceding legibility, and particularly thinking of this colour blue that I was using—the colour you see on the screen when there's no signal. So it was kind of saying like, this colour has the potential to represent an image, even though there's not necessarily one there. So also thinking of it having this other connotation of like a potential for an image to arise, and what might that image be. So those are some of the things that I've been thinking about. And then this notion of tracking of Blackness, I think, goes hand in hand with that, and thinking of the surveillance of Black bodies, and how often Black people are made visible for the purposes of tracking and surveillance, or keeping us in check and things of that sort. And, as far as like a joy in the possibility of being absorbed, I think that there's always this kind of this double edge sword of how much we're able to be incorporated into that system of tracking, of legibility, of surveillance. On one hand, you know, if you're thinking of things like algorithms or things where data driven solutions that are trying to make judgments on people based on their appearance. There are obviously some benefits to remaining illegible to a system like that, you know, not necessarily being policed in a certain way, if you're not able to be perceived by the thing, but at the same time, how much that infringes on your ability to be recognized as like a human or as a potential member of society if you're not able to be recognized by a system like that. Yeah, those are some of the things that come to mind. And in an essay by a colleague and friend, Mazin Hussain, where he writes an argument for Black people not necessarily being indoctrinated into systems of facial recognition, that being possibly a way of gaining authority or control and resistance to those systems.

Jessica Karuhanga 15:02
Oh, I love that. There's so much to think about. I, I've seen documentation of your project "A Refusal." In particular, I love, part of that documentation is this kind of rupture maybe that can happen in this space. I mean, we also use them as kind of conduits, or channels for connections. So there's this letter to your mother, I think, at some point, or an email exchange, where you're kind of explaining what is happening here. And I really loved that moment that happens. And yeah, and really, in terms of the algorithm, or how to navigate this thing, or kind of rupture. I mean, there are a lot of different gestures, and sometimes it comes from me and the sort of unfollow or the like, literally unplugging or deleting these accounts, but then I feel like my body or my image, still finds a way of emerging in these spaces. I really like how in your dignity images, they are displayed on these objects, they have this kind of artifact aspect. And each of these images, there's a hand holding the image. So it kind of reinforces this sort of intimacy, of being kind of sanctified or private. And I know there's something in the ways that these are framed or staged. And that they're apps and we don't know who's holding—if they're holding the image of themselves, or someone they love. And it also kind of reinforces this self-forming and self-articulation, because you're holding your image in your hand. So I guess, I want to ask about what leads you to hold images in

the way and I mean, holding in, like the poetic, romantic sort of sense, and quite literally holding them, whichever you want to speak to.

American Artist 17:14
Yeah, for sure. So yeah, I had written this letter to my mom, in at the beginning of this project, "A Refusal". And, and because my mom is like, you know, she's in California, I'm in New York. And so this is kind of my primary way of, you know, interacting with her, even though I mean, of course, we like text and call and all that, but, you know, she kind of gets updates about my life from social media. And so I felt like, she would be one of the people that's most affected by me deciding to opt out or like, not post anything. And so, I just wrote this letter, you know, to make clear what was happening, but also, you know, publishing that letter to kind of, you know, point towards how our intimate relationships do have a direct impact on how we operate on social media like, it's like social media, something we kind of use as a proxy to have this type of engagement often and, and so I did want to say like, that's actually maybe not good, maybe we should actually have some way of communicating that is more true to what our relationship is. So that's, that's something I was thinking about. And, and through that process of doing this performance is kind of how I arrived at this idea of the dignity image, because when I wasn't posting on social media, I kind of started to look through my camera on my phone, like, instead of Instagram, sometimes I would just scroll through images I take in because I wasn't posting them and just kind of reflect on them. And there was some that I would return to because I thought, this is like such a compelling image. I'm not going to share it, you know, but it has some value outside of that, and outside of that public sharing. And so that's where this notion of a dignity image arose from. Like, what are these images we choose not to share that still have a value and intimacy some, some way of having significance that falls outside of the way, significance and value are constructed on social media, you know, which is like—how many likes can you get, how sexy do you look, you know—a million other reasons, but you know, what are the limitations of those reasons? And so, intimacy very much, you know, has a relationship to this idea of the dignity image because it is often like the kind of images people might have or save as dignity images are like pictures of family that don't want to be published online. They might be photos of deceased family members; it might be photos where you're naked, or you don't like how you look—like these kind of things. So there's very much this aspect of intimacy in that sense. And in the series of photos that I've taken prior to the ones that I did for this series, I usually go out and ask people to share some of their photos, I photograph them holding their phone. And it's not always necessarily them in the photographs that they share, you know, might be other family members. But yeah, I like that you point towards this aspect of the holding, because it is, it is very intimate. And it is meant to mimic the way we see our phones, we see them as these very personalized spaces—it's like directly in your face, it's in your hands. And so when you see the photo of the hand holding, you're seeing it the same way they would see it—and that's important. And so with this selection of images, they were all my photos, because I mean, we couldn't photograph people because of COVID. So these are all dignity images that I had kind of

held on to throughout the pandemic. So, images of going to vote, images of like calling my mom on video chat and things like that. And so, wanting to share those and like hold those images and like reproduce that sort of intimacy of holding them. They're not always like the most glamorous images, but they're important for ways that are kind of, you know, exist as a context to those things, whether or not it's it's visible in the image itself.

Jessica Karuhanga 21:54
Yeah, for me, looking at these images, they are mine, but I draw analogies to my own experience and my own sort of stories. And so when I think about you documenting these bodies holding their own images, I think of the proximity that takes place in you documenting to be close to them, and reflecting on this intimate material or image. So that's one part for me, but also it is an object. So it's not unlike or is very similar to the way, I mean, we, we're—millennials are in this in-between space where we remember the internet kind of becoming normalized, right? There was a before that, where we'd leaf through photo albums or hold physical objects. I remember going to the Walmart and getting my photos developed growing up. And so there's something that reminds me of that. And the performativity is on a whole other level now. And I do you think there was still a performativity to the images that we had, or our parents or grandparent—like it's a persona that smiles for the camera, right? But I love the kind of the broken or these kind of—I was thinking of what my dignity images might be on my phone, or even physical photographs. And one of the ones I was thinking of is this photograph I stage of my sisters and father, where we're lying on our backs in a circle. And my mom kind of prematurely took the image—I was must have been eight years old or something. And so my sister's cut-off and you see the top of her head and her flailing arm, and it's just this weird, it's not anything you would even frame and put on your mantle, you know, but um, yeah, I started to reflect on what those things may be that still feels sacred and sanctified. And I also I think it's important because it is a documentation or record of Black life. And what that image means in contradistinction to violent images of Black death circulating, or Black death that we witness in real time happening on Facebook, you know, um, so I guess that tension between self-reservation and self-protection and restraint and, and then also documenting, like, "I, hey, I'm here, I'm alive. I was here on Earth." Like, maybe if you could speak to those tensions, because it feels like these images have this kind of liberating or emancipating aspect to them. In particular, when I think of all the memories we store in our bodies that are traumatic and beauteous, but maybe there's something to these images that releases some of that. So yeah, that was a long-winded question, but maybe you could speak to that.

American Artist 24:55
No, I love that. I love the example of your own image, which I think very much feels like it is a dignity image and, and that kind of reminds me like part of what was important to me about the dignity image is when I when I thought of that term and what it was, you know, these images that aren't shared, I was like, I know everyone has these, but there's not really a way of talking about it

because as far as social media goes, we're told to define and value our images through this model. So what is a word to describe this thing that I know exists? Everyone has it. And how can other people help me to, you know, define what a dignity image is. And so those early iterations were very much about, you know, finding people that could help kind of lend visuality to a dignity image by sharing their own. And so, so yeah, I really appreciate you sharing that. And as far as this idea of how we can both document Black life, but also work as a sort of self-preservation or having emancipatory quality, I definitely think that that's the case. In one sense, just because these images often do present very real moments, and by real I just mean like, like not so performative, you know, like, they're usually photographs that you didn't take planning to put them on social media, you just took them—might have taken them to remember a moment or to send to someone. And in that sense, there's some candidness about them that often isn't present in other images that we share. And so even though I think that dignity images are something that anyone can have, I do think that there's an additional element of dignity and agency offered to Black people, and people that traditionally don't have the means of documenting their lives, or maybe aren't in that position of power of holding the camera always. So another aspect of that, of how that lends agency to someone is to focus on this quality of self-photography, you know, so—what does it mean that these are photos that you took, you're editing them, you're choosing whether or not they're visible, you're choosing whether or not they're important—that also adds an element of self-preservation, dignity, and offers some possibility of emancipation, as well. So I definitely think that's the case, and existing, you know, like you said, in contrast to all these images of harm and violence, you know, inflicted on Black people that are so heavily circulated all the time and for, for various reasons—you know, some people do it because they want to help spread the message that, you know, there's ongoing violence against Black people, and some people are just, you know, capitalizing on these images being shared. I think it's, it all has these terrible aspects to it, but I do think that dignity images can kind of work as a way to contrast that.

Jessica Karuhanga 28:39
Yeah, riffing off of what you're saying is the motive of, I don't know, non-Black people circulating these images. I remember teaching a class last semester, a survey class with like 100 students, and I had a guest speaker, a friend of mine, who was speaking to data and surveillance and geographies, and a student kind of pointed out for people that maybe aren't situated in the geopolitical condition that is North America, that, they're from somewhere in Europe, that maybe, you know, they need to see the image as like proof and which made me think about this thing I was saying about, not so much proof that kind of like affirmation of like, aliveness and life. And it just was such a wild notion when I think that like lynchings or document, like documentation of Black death, is not a new construct or concept, you know. And so, that's to speak to that. But also, I think there's something about witnessing, witnessing each other. Like there's these levels of mirroring that happens and you mirroring the position of the person holding the image of the camera as if they're taking it. It's kind of like a selfie, that's not a selfie, and more self-forming self-articulation.

Um, so yeah, I've been thinking a lot about witnessing lately—us witnessing each other. And that's a kind of memory in the body. But also, what does that embodied—what is the embodied sensation feeling of witnessing? Like, what, what is that thing that happens for us and our subjectivities and communities. And that's something that I don't think can be translated like, when I think of, like, I just feel like the kind of chasms that exists between whiteness and Blackness have been really reinforced over the last year, in particular, and I don't know if it's because the pandemic amplifies that. But I do think they've, it's exasperated much deeper, the space between us. And I, yeah, I just wonder what embodied experience of witnessing is for the non-Black subject with these images? And do I even care? Not really, but I do think that they need to be thinking deeply about that, as not a kind of centre and neutral. So yeah, I don't know, do you have any thoughts on, on these embodiments in relation to like, witnessing, because I'm sure, particularly with these images, how it seems like they were these networks of affinity—they were people within your circles that you started with—so there's this level of intimacy, as well. So I wonder, yeah, what is that witnessing for you?

American Artist 31:36
Yeah, I love that idea of witnessing both as, both witnessing as, you know, seeing your loved ones, and like, you know, reaffirming their existence through seeing them, but also that that notion of witnessing, like these acts of violence, and I think you're, you're pointing to both of those. And I, I do think of the dignity images as a sort of witnessing. I think these are images that are, you know, usually reserved just for yourself, or for like a small group of people. But, I think it's also I guess, a means of, like, I don't know, self-witnessing. I think that's something that we are seeing more of in social media now that it's, you know, in its like, 10th iteration of whatever the hell it is. I do think that, like, I feel like at least personally, I'm starting to find more networks where it feels like a network just intended for like me and close friends or, you know, other like, like BIPOC folk that are like, you know, in the same conversations, and we are witnessing each other. We're accounting for the same violences that we experienced through institutions, or etc. And I think that that's something that maybe I didn't feel was so present, you know, when I, when I started this project, or when I was doing "A Refusal," because social media has changed so much, you know, in such a short amount of time. So, I think, like, how much that kind of witnessing takes place, you know, it varies because social media, it's become a place to foster that, but it's also, I think, people in general are more aware of the violence is inherent in the institutions of social media. So like, you know, Black or trans people, having their content banned, you know, for stupid reasons, while other like, white, you know, femme-presenting women can like be naked, and like, you know, not get deleted, you know, so it's like these huge contrasts in how different people are policed by the platform, I think is more apparent. So, I mean, I think social media is probably here to stay, so how we contend with that relationship, you know, is something that we need to, like, remain vigilant about. [Jessica Karuhanga is heard saying, "absolutely."] Um, and yeah, and as far as this notion of witnessing, I do feel like for, for many Black people, and for myself, like, you know, we know that

this has been going on for a very long time. And that, you know, the visualization of lynching is an American tradition, you know, a North American tradition. So I don't necessarily want or need to see that to know that that's happening. And, but at the same time, I don't know, like, not everyone feels that way. I think we just have to be really strategic over how we instrumentalize that type of imagery. So they're not we're not just reproducing the harm or creating a, a context of intimidation, you know, if I feel like I can't go out in public because I'm going to see images on screens of people getting lynched, like, you know, what kind of environment is that great for me. So like, I think we have to be really strategic about how we, how we use those images.

Jessica Karuhanga 35:25
Yeah, no, I'm with you. And I also think a lot about capacity and thresholds, like I don't know, there's been a lot—it's been a time where grief feels exasperated particularly because we can't commune or participate in the rituals, and how we might heal normally. So it becomes this kind of conduit, right? These kind of interstitial filters of like glass, and the camera, and Zoom, and whatnot, to feel something, but it's hard to feel something, you know. So that makes it harder, but then I try to remind myself, I'm this corporeal being that still here, and I can sort of go outside and like, not participate, like, but then the machine still goes on. So that's definitely like a tricky kind of tension there. But, I really love the things that you said about witnessing, I think that is some sort of triumphant, or brings it back to this joy thing, right? Because there's some things that just can't be articulated or captured by that machinery, I don't think, I hope anyway.

American Artist 36:40
Yeah, definitely. And, yeah, there are aspects of our joy that can be captured by that thing. And, and I think that's maybe something that the dignity image, you know, responds to is like, or, or also that those images of joy, you know, maybe don't look like how things are supposed to look to be, you know, like—maybe it doesn't look like a really hot selfie, maybe it's like, you know, this awkward image with my mom or something, you know, like—that might actually mean this moment of like intense joy or something. So, so also how do those affects like escape visuality or escape surveillance, or like you said, like, the ability to be tracked?

Jessica Karuhanga 37:26
Yeah, absolutely. Um, yeah, there definitely are those ruptures that happen there. I feel like that my only kind of occupation or like, emergence on something like Facebook is maybe annually—my, my mom on my birthday will post photos of us together, and they're always the most terrible photographs—but there's something so pure to that. And I love that and aspects of joy and like, truth, you know—that's when my ghost emerges on there.

American Artist 37:58
That's so funny. Yeah, I feel like social media always has these kinds of ruptures, or yeah, like, appearing in ways that you would never approve of normally.

Jessica Karuhanga 38:11
It's not on brand, but it's fine. Um, well, thank you so much. This has been so lovely speaking to you and hearing in your own words, more about what you're all about or what you're feeling.

American Artist 38:29
Yeah, I really appreciate your questions and everything you said as well.

Laura Tibi 38:43
Thank you for listening to "Transmissions," a podcast of the Blackwood Gallery. The Blackwood Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the University of Toronto Mississauga. New episodes are released with each new image set between September 2020 and June 2021. For more information, including installation images, essays and videos, visit the Blackwood website at blackwoodgallery.ca.