

Film link - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SSpqUye434>

Hello everyone. My name is Patricia Francis. Thank you to the team for asking me to participate, I'm pleased to be part of the festival.

Sorry to hear about Ruth and hope she makes a full healthy recovery.

Before I start I've put a link to my film in the chat. Can you copy and paste it into your browser? We will be viewing sections from the film at various points throughout this talk.

Hopefully you've had a chance to watch the film, it will make more sense to you for this talk, but not to worry if you were unable to view it.

So, today as I've said I'll be talking about my film *The Art of Oppression*. I've titled today's talk *Visualising the Muted Effect of Dissenting Women's Voices*. This talk is an adaptation of a talk that I gave to a gender research group earlier on this year.

Over the next twenty-five minutes I'll provide some context as to the reason I wanted to make the film, I'll show extracts from it and consider art as a means of protest.

The Art of Oppression was conceived quite a while before lockdown. It features three women artists and is a film about art that is made from an understanding of existing within a marginalised group, of being given a label, and of the social and political consequences of that labelling.

As a filmmaker my works are usually motivated by social issues, and I was keen to make a film about women artists who's motivation was to use their art as a means of conversation, activism and possibly political challenge.

The Art of Oppression is also about 'voice'. Where 'voice' is both the aural and physical representation of the women and their activism. It's not just what they say, it is also the social and political space they claim with their art within a patriarchal, capitalist and neo-liberal system.

'Voice' is important in *The Art of Oppression*. I wanted to bring together voices that we seldom hear from or see, sharing the filmic space. These are women from different cultures and although their experiences of marginalisation take different forms, the impact on their lived experience is very similar and just as impactful.

It was important that the artists were not perceived as celebrities but were ordinary people who dare to speak out. The act of speaking out, is, for women, an act of rebellion in a climate where online harassment against women is, as described by The Guardian, 'flourishing'¹ But women are not trespassing when they go onto those online sites, they have an equal right to be there and to be heard.

In her book *Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race*, Reni Eddo-Lodge asserts, '*there is such stigma attached to speaking up and being a woman, let alone speaking up, being a woman, and being black.*'² The repercussions when women attempt to occupy a social or political space can leave them feeling vulnerable, fearful and unprotected.

Attempts were made to mute Darnella Frazier's voice, the teenager who documented the last few moments of George Floyd's life on her iPhone.

An un-blurring was occurring as the reality of the Black lived experience was too blatant to ignore and white and Black voices

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/oct/05/online-violence-against-women-flourishing-and-most-common-on-facebook-survey-finds> (October 2020)

² Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury 2017), 185.

were joined in protest. Indeed, another result of Derek Chauvin's atrocious act, was that Darnella's footage provoked a world-wide anger that traversed cultures as Black and white people stood side by side in the path of tear gas and as police cars were being driven into them. Black Lives Matter! Was no longer an appeal but a demand for social justice with heightened intention. This young Black woman, who defied orders to stop filming the policeman's actions, had to defend her own voice from an onslaught of others suggesting she should have confronted the officers rather than film them, when she was not the only witness to that crime.

As women judiciously and consciously modulate their voices in an effort to navigate social systems that endeavour to mute them, they continue to strive to be heard.

The artists in *The Art of Oppression* are women who 'dare' to speak out, who dare to act knowing there is a very real potential of being harassed or abused. These women do not enjoy the protection that celebrity can bring yet are resolute in their need to 'vocalise' the injustices they encounter. They will not be silenced.

Can I ask you to watch a clip from the
Film Clip: 6'13" – 7'31" Out "... my emotions are truly relevant."

There is a need in these women to speak out and they articulate their emotions through their art. In *When I dare to be powerful* Audre Lorde asked 'What are the words you do not have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?'³ I wonder how many of us have words we need to say, but remain silent? I was interested in how challenge is made and meaning created through art and what motivated that challenge and working with the three women helped in that understanding.

³ Audre Lorde, *When I dare to be powerful* (United States: Ten Speed Press 2007), 41.

There was a lot that I needed to say: I believe that there is now sufficient evidence that my Black, female self generally has no perceived social or political value in western society. The killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, the hounding of Megan Markle, the abuse that Diane Abbott has to manage and the disrespect shown to the bodies of sisters Nicole Smallman and Bibbaa Henry, offer examples of my meagre worth. I am outraged that systemic racism, institutionalised racism, social injustice does not appear to be shifting for racialised or marginalised groups in any significant way here. The disparities in relation to housing, employment and health for marginalised groups remain. My films enable me to voice that emotion as I attempt, in the case of *The Art of Oppression*, to re-present and represent women and their truths.

The Art of Oppression offered me a means of articulating an enduring injustice with the hope that those occupying privileged positions might pause, reflect, not retreat into immediate defence, but instead consider their own actions or inactions that contributes to the inequity and make their change.

The Art of Oppression took about three years to make. After a conversation with Ivana, one of the artists, and hearing about her story as a teenager growing up during the Yugoslavian civil war, the impact it had on her and then seeing her art. I knew there was a story to tell about homeland and racism from a perspective that we are not overly familiar with. It was important that I told the British-Asian, and the British-Caribbean female experiences. Ferzana was chosen after I saw her perform at a Pit Poetry event that I attended in a north Nottinghamshire village, one poem in particular that she recited spoke of her response to the pomp and ceremony that occurred at an event she attended. Honey is a visual artist, I met at an event, and after speaking with her, researching her work and her motivation as an artist, I made contact with her.

It was also important to me that the art we see being created in this film was diverse. I enjoy art and in determining my own meaning from it and I wanted the film to offer that. What the film also offers is the opportunity to witness the process of creation and to understand the emotion and the motivation that leads to a finished piece. I also hope I've been able to show that the creative process is not always an easy one; in this case made more difficult by only giving the artists three weeks to both conceive of an idea, and then to create it.

I believe art should be accessible to all, and I hope I make that statement particularly at the end of the film in the space chosen for the reveal. *Beautiful art does not have to only be situated in pristine, expensive buildings that a select few frequent.*

So what about my role as a Black, female British filmmaker and where does my own voice fit at the intersection of social injustice, womanhood and art. I've asked myself the same question. Where does the voice of a Black, female director sit? Should her voice be heard, or should she mute herself in the way that the industry has successfully succeeded in doing?

Directors UK report revealed that 'despite the fact that 14% of the UK population consists of people from ethnic minority backgrounds, just 2.22% of our TV programmes are made by directors of colour.⁴ Similarly, the 2019 *Calling The Shots* report findings suggested that around 90% of UK qualifying films have no BAME women⁵.

I believed that inserting myself into the film might distract from the women and their truths, similarly, to exclude myself would be to silence this Black, female director. That was my dilemma. What

⁴ <https://www.directors.uk.com/campaigns/bame-directors#our-last-report>

⁵ <https://callingtheshots138740090.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/black-asian-and-ethnic-minority-bame-women-working-on-uk-qualifying-films-2003-2015.pdf> (2003 / 4 / 5 / 15)

would you do? I consider my films to be works of activism, I attempt to use them to provoke thought and to challenge.

I'll just show you some images from the film...

I used the filmic space differently, this is in part because whilst the women share many similarities in their lived experiences, I wanted to also ensure that their voices and their stories remained distinct, separate and equally valuable.

The final triptych of the clay being flattened and thinned with the rolling pin - similar to rolling flour; there is also an image of Honey with her paint brushes, they also look like make-up brushes. Those shots for me summarise the intersection of womanhood, social injustice, and art.

Of course, the women's experiences overlap, and I attempt to use the space to show that too. In creating this I was mindful that this may feel like a disruption to the viewing experience and hoped that it wouldn't distract from engagement with the women or what they had to say.

I want to play the first few minutes of the opening section of the film.

Film clip: From the start. Just watch up to: Out: "That's when I noticed that I was different I think that was the first time." (3'39")

I made the decision at the start of the production process, that the women's faces would not be shown during the first part of the film. In fact, their faces are revealed over half-way through the film. Why did I make that decision? I wanted to give the women and their stories primacy; for the audience to focus on what was being said, the stories and the emotions and to not be distracted by conscious or unconscious stereotyping or bias. If they couldn't see the women, it would be more difficult to form impressions of them.

I also made the decision to include myself in the film without distracting from the women and their stories.

As a Black British female filmmaker, I am under-represented in the industry – it therefore seemed wrong for me to continue the process of marginalisation. At the start of the film, you hear Ivana hammering and referencing me by name. This enabled me to both include her voice and to give myself presence in the film. By including this section where Ivana speaks to me as well as across me, I am present whilst still giving Ivana agency and position. I should say it was not set up; this is how it happened.

Similarly there are sections in the film where the artists are speaking *to* someone. Conventional framing would position the interviewer close to the camera so that it looks as though they are speaking to the viewer. However, I am positioned away from the camera as they respond to my questions which gives a sense of another person being present in the room. I disrupt the viewers expectation, I hope, and create a conscious or sub-conscious acknowledgement of a third person; the artist, you the viewer, and the person the interviewee is speaking directly to - me.

Not showing the artists' faces was one of the earlier decisions I made, and I realised that if I didn't show their faces, I would need to offer an alternative visual experience. I also knew that I wanted to show the three women in the one filmic place, to identify their differences whilst simultaneously bringing their shared experiences together. Triptych was the ideal tool for framing the women whilst also allowing space for their individual voices to be heard.

I was clear that I wanted to show how art can speak to us all. To show the women using their art as a means of dissent and of activism. I also had a sense of the pace and level of 'noise' that I wanted this film to have. Despite this being about activism and from

a place of frustration and provocation, I wanted my film to have a certain 'quiet' about it. I am inspired by Tina M. Campt who wrote in *Listening to Images* '[q]uiet registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focussed attention.'⁶ I was keen to encourage a level of intensity and employed the methods you see in my attempt to achieve that.

At the intersection of art, social injustice and womanhood Ivana's presence in the film also offers a description of the complexity of racism. Her dual heritage proves divisive to her young teenage self who fears having to decide between her mother or her father, during the way – one is Croatian the other is Serbian. Here in the UK the racism she endures as a white Eastern European woman is damaging. The two non-white artists understand her lived experience. The emotion they feel is also raw.

As director and practice-based researcher, I was clear that I wanted to show how art can speak to us all, and to show the women using their art as a means of dissent and of activism.

The final clip I want to show you I think demonstrates this quiet, despite the frustration and resentment that is felt:

Film Clip: 12'28" – 17'44" - Out: "...I don't think you can live like that."

Just to finish then, *The Art of Oppression* is an exploration of how to visualise an alternative on-screen space as a site for viewers to listen closely to women who voice resistance and call for change.

Thank you!

⁶ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (United State of America: Duke University Press 2017), 6.

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