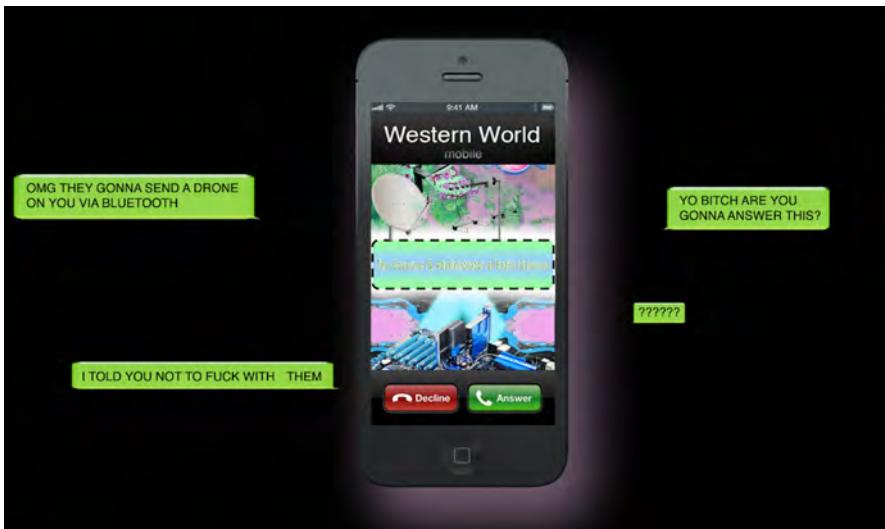


“Healing... That’s what we’re here to do”—On Systemic Insecurity, Spiritual and Historical Healing,
Conscious Use of Technology, and the Sincerity of Irony
Tabita Rezaire in Conversation with Julian Sverre Bauer





Sorry For Real, 2015, Tabita Rezaire. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, South Africa.

¹ See for instance, Rezaire, Tabita, "Prologue—Decolonial Healing: In Defense of Spiritual Technologies," in Gajjala, Radhika, Georgiou, Myria, Leurs, Koen, Snijers, Kevin, and Whitehorn, Saskia, eds., The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi/Singapore 2020, pp. xxix-xxiv.

Julian Sverre Bauer (JSB) On the one hand, your work (video art, offerings, performances, installations, writings) deals with coloniality embedded in technologies of knowledge production—especially in new media and digital technologies.¹ On the other hand, these technologies constitute forms of (digital) healing activism and propose various decolonial technologies, which are diverging from contemporary mainstream neoliberal white concepts of technology. Hence I was wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on your notion of technology? I have the feeling that you propose a different way to think about it.

Tabita Rezaire (TR) Technology is just a tool... Ok so I can give you the speech I give usually. I was trying not to go on repeat mode, but the speech I usually give to that question is that... the Apple dictionary on my computer gives this definition of technology: "technology: the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes." That is only one definition of technology but what is interesting to me in that definition is "the application of scientific knowledge." What is scientific knowledge? Who decides what falls under scientific knowledge? What is considered scientific, what is not considered scientific? And so, depending on your understanding of science, that determines your understanding of what a technology can be. In our Westernized worlds what is considered as science is defined by coloniality. Technology is then limited by what understandings colonial structures of knowledge have given to science. If we overcome the legacies of coloniality in terms of systems of knowledge, in terms of legitimacy of knowledge, then maybe we can expand the meaning of science and what a technology can be. So then maybe communication with plants can become a science—or actually a technology,



Premium Connect, 2017, *Tabita Rezaire*. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, South Africa.

because it becomes a tool, an information and communication technology. Or communication with ancestors can also be seen as technology, if you understand spiritual networks as sciences. So if we broaden our understanding of science, the scope of what a technology is can blossom. That's how I'm trying to understand technology: to open it up. To decolonize our understanding of what a technology can be.

JSB In addition to what you just said, would you agree that technology is also a practice—connected to different social spheres?

TR Not necessarily, but it can be a practice, yes. A technology allows a practice, as technology is a tool. A tool is only a tool because it is practical. It is used to do something, manifest something, to create, to elaborate ... the tool is in service of the practice. The tool allows you to act, to be in the world, to move in the world ...

JSB So if I understand you right, it is about multiplying the means of the tool?

TR Exactly, or maybe more about expanding our tools. What is considered a tool or what is not, this is what I am interested in. To see divination as a technology, to see dreaming as a technology, to see sexuality as a technology, to see death as an absolute technology of transformation. To see the body as the most sophisticated technology ever created.

JSB Would you say that you are using the technologies that you mention in your practice as an artist?

TR Well I try to die before I die, but ... (*laughs*)

JSB (*laughs*) I was not necessarily referring to death as technology.

TR I mean I'm working with death a lot actually, but coming back to your question: yes.

JSB Are your ideas about technology directly connected to the aesthetic approaches you're using in your artworks?

TR No.

JSB Because I find the look of your artworks very technological, for instance, your use of 3D technology.

TR Sure, but as I just said, my understanding of technology is not necessarily restricted to the technological as we understand it in our current language. I don't have an answer, but maybe I use a visual language that is kind of a cliché of technology in order to present a potential of technology that is broader in scope.

JSB Just to clarify, I didn't mean to say that your artworks look like the cliché of Western technology. I think you have established your own, very specific aesthetic and that's why I was wondering if there is a translation of your ideas on technology that is manifest in your aesthetic (but also in connection or opposition to this mainstream Western idea of technology)?

TR I don't really have an answer to this. I get this question all the time and I never know what to say. It's not consciously thought through, it's a language that kind of just emerged. I guess from spending so much time online, from scrolling endlessly through the depths of the internet.

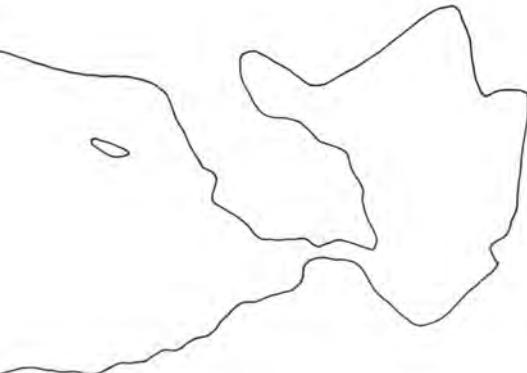
Also, my first works were very much about the internet. Namely about the politics of the internet as a colonized space, as a technology that reproduces and reinforces the hegemony of the West. So, to speak about all this, I use the internet itself or the visual language of the internet. Now, although my ventures into technological worlds diversified and expanded, the digital language stayed. A lot of people see my work as ironic and I was always offended when people said that (*laughs*)—because I'm so genuine and the things that I talk about are so meaningful to me. Like, so important? How can they say it's ironic?

You are German right?

JSB Yeah, I'm half German, half Norwegian.

TR Oh, ok. So, I was reading Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. I love this book and have reread it often. The last time I read it, I stumbled upon the passage about irony. And all of the sudden I understood why, when these people asked me this, I got irritated.

Let me read the passage to you. So, he writes from Italy on April 5, 1903: "Today I would like to tell you just two more things. ... Do not let yourself be governed by irony, especially not in uncreative moments. In creative moments try to make use of it as one means of grasping life. Used purely, it too is pure, and one need not be ashamed of it. But if you feel you are getting too familiar with it, if you fear this



growing intimacy with it, then turn to great and serious objects, before which it becomes small and helpless. Seek the depth of things: there irony never descends—and when you come close to the edge of greatness, find out whether this ironic attitude springs from a necessity in your being. For under the influence of serious matters it will always fall away from you, or else if it really innately belongs to you, it will strengthen into a stern instrument and take its place among the tools with which you will have to shape your art.”

Isn’t that beautiful?

JSB It really is.

TR I’m like wow! I guess maybe it is part of my tools. He does say that irony never descends into serious objects—at first. That’s why I was offended when people said that about my work, because I too thought that irony was just for jokey things. And I’m not here to joke about life. But then if you descend into the depth of life, into the meaning of existence, and if there, in the depths of the serious, deep, dark things, you do find irony then it means it’s a tool for you and it’s going to serve your purpose. It’s beautiful.

There is some kind of playfulness in my aesthetic, and it is definitely a strategy to cope with the heaviness of the subjects that I’m sharing. The playfulness makes it more digestible.

JSB When I was watching your video artworks again (such as *Sugar Walls* *Teardom*, *Deep Down Tidal* or *Sorry For Real*, but also your video talk *Afro Cyber Resistance*), Audrey Lorde’s infamous claim that the master’s tools cannot be used to dismantle the master’s house came to my mind. Do you agree with what Audre Lorde is claiming or is there maybe a way to dismantle the master’s house with his tools? And if so, could irony be a way to distance yourself from these tools, while still making use of them?

TR Ok, what kind of setup is this? Are you really trying to put me against Audre Lorde? (laughs)

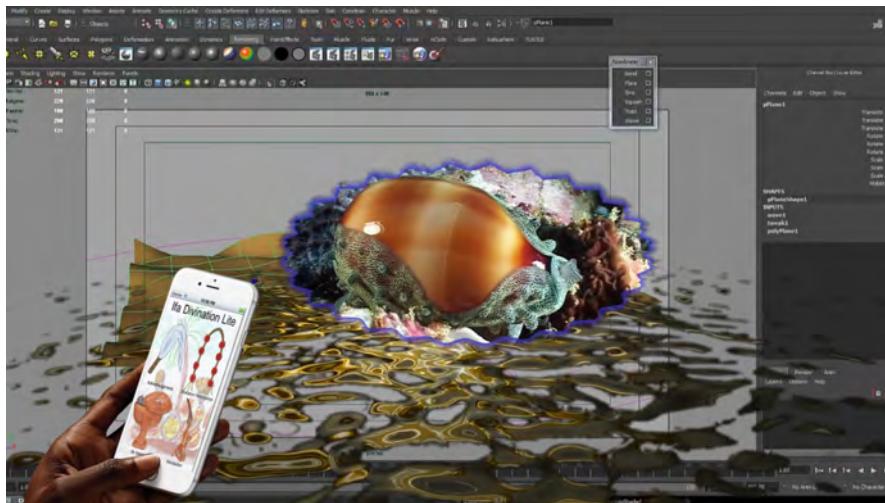
JSB If I’m doing this? No, no, no, no, no, no. Not at all.

TR It’s a joke, it’s a joke.

(laughter)

JSB I love her, but yeah ...

TR It’s actually a very interesting question. It’s a great question. Because usually questions are not that interesting. I mean it’s not to offend you or anyone, but you know, usually people just ask the same questions. But this question made me think and usually questions don’t make me think. Because without thinking much, I would say I absolutely agree. I bow to Audre Lorde, and the work that she’s done for life itself, actually. For getting us closer to life, for expanding existence into greater depth. So, for that, my love is unconditional. And this sentence has really helped me for a long part of my journey—until today (laughs). Now I’m like, oh, actually, maybe ... Ok, so I completely stand by what she says because I understand why she says it and what it means, because of the context that she’s serving. But if we remove it from that context, remember I understand technology as a tool? So then it becomes the master’s technology will not dismantle the master’s house. I believe the effects of



Premium Connect, 2017, *Tabita Rezaire*. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, South Africa.

technology depend on their users and usage, on how the technologies are used, by whom they are used, and for which purposes. What gives meaning to technology is the hand by whom it is held and the vision with which it is carried.

The master's tool will not dismantle the master's house.

But if the same tool is used for a different purpose, by different people in order to achieve a different result, then possibly because a tool has no agenda. That's what I want to say. That's the key of my understanding about technology, a tool has no agenda. The agenda is carried by the person using the tool, by the vision of the person using the tool, by the purpose they want their tool to serve. So if you give the tool to another hand, for another mission then it can potentially ... Oh I'm going to get into trouble.

(laughter)

JSB Maybe I can ask another question to keep you out of trouble: is it maybe not so much a question of dismantling the master's house than, rather, dismantling the master's tools? I was also thinking about this, because I have the feeling you're making the labor of your work visible within your artwork. Through video recordings of screenshots or desktop sharing, we can also see some of the tools (software) you are using, which (at least for me) somewhat implies a critique or statement on the colonial legacies, the sexism, racism, or ableism, that are embedded in these technological tools.

TR To answer this easy. Look, life is a mess, right?

JSB Oh yeah.

TR Yes. But does that mean you have to be messy? No. That's your responsibility. How you carry yourself, how you carry your life, what you do with your life, how you express the piece of life that you are, how you use the piece of life that you are. That's your own responsibility. So that was for the grand scheme of it, but now on the smaller scheme.

Most technologies are embedded within politics of their own ... just

Rezaire, Bauer



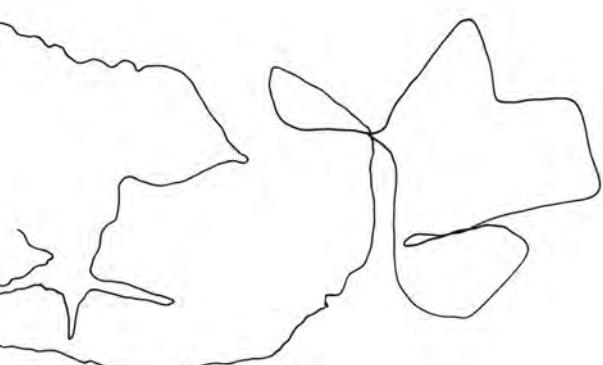
Sugar Walls Teardom, 2016, Tabita Rezaire. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, South Africa.

problems, problems, problems, problems. But that doesn't mean that you have to be part of the problem. For your specific example: if a specific technology has settings that are biased, then it's up to you to carry those biases or to work around them, transform them, update them, to serve the message you want to share. So as long as I don't perpetrate the misogyny, the racism, the mechanics of oppression embedded within the technology, then it's ok. I believe. Somehow.

Technology is never neutral. You know how I say that it's just a tool, that it depends on who uses it and what you do with it. Yet all tools are not born equal in terms of their propensity or capacity to oppress. So, for instance, if you're talking about information and communication technology, on the one hand you could say: "The internet is a mess. It's patriarchal. It's exploitative. It's a means of surveillance, of propaganda, of population control, of mind control. It's a tool for governments to control borders and people." Or you could say: "Oh, me? I'm just making memes, I'm just spreading light. So I'm not part of this." You could say this. You could say that your use of the technology is actually uplifting our collective consciousness. And if it does, then great for the people who you reach. But the tool, the use of the tool itself makes you complicit in the immense exploitation of resources that it needs in order to function and operate. It is surreal, the amount of water the internet needs. Or the electricity it needs. I mean, just to cool off those data centers and operate them. It's just insane. Then adding the destruction of ecosystems, due to undersea cables, frequencies disturbance, species are threatened by it, are disrupted by it. It

is actually terrifying when you think of the whole physical apparatus that is in place and the violence of that physical apparatus, so that we can just click on the button or just google something.

So we should actually not take any post for granted, any click for



granted. Because the click rests on the labor of so many people, on the extraction, exploitation, and rape of the earth. With that consciousness in mind: if we really were conscious of all it took for us to click on a screen, or to scroll down our phones, we would honor this technology so much and use it a bit more responsibly. But if you take, on the other hand, telepathy, it doesn't use any external resources and it achieves the same results. So that's a different tool but with very different costs. So that's why technology is not neutral.

JSB So, wow, my head is exploding with all those different dimensions. So now I'm like even more confused about the Audre Lorde question, so I was wondering if you could connect your thoughts back to it?

(laughter)

TR We have to honor the complexity of life. It can be read in many different ways. So I still stand behind her. Always. For life. And after life.

JSB So that means ... if I understand you right ...

TR You're confused now. (laughs)

JSB (laughs) Yes... so if I understand you right, you would build an extension to her claim?

TR No. I would not do anything, you're trying to make me do something with this sentence. I'm not trying to do anything.

(laughter)

JSB Ok, so we leave it with that. That's good. I wanted to ask you about healing. I guess it's also a question you've heard a lot before as it is part of your performances (e.g., *Lubricate Coil Engine* or *MerKaBa For The Hoeteps*), but also because you are using video formats and the internet as tools for healing. So it seems to be a very important topic in your work. And I was also wondering, if there is a difference for you in what sort of media you're using for this practice of healing and what is that difference?

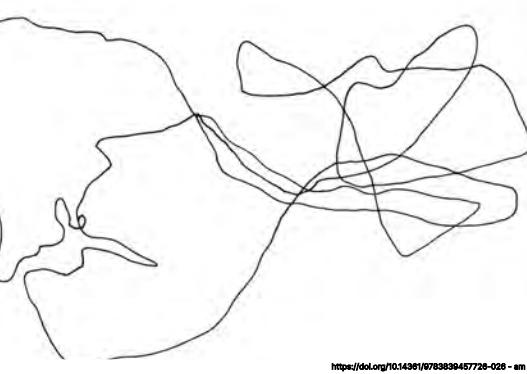
TR Healing... That's what we're here to do. That's what I believe. No, actually, it's not something I believe, it's deeper than that. That's what I know. That's life. It's the privilege of being alive. It's just an opportunity for us to grow, to bloom and to heal the wounds of lineages before us so that we can clear the path for generations after us. That's our responsibility. We're all here for that. We're all called to do this work. That's why I engage ... actually I had to, because otherwise I would have died (laughs). So you said that's what I do in my work. Yes, but that's what I do in life. I have the chance to have a job that is meaningful to me. Or maybe I had the courage (and privilege) to commit to a job that I found meaningful. I answered the call. Healing is a calling. You hear it, you answer it or you don't. It's like a seed. You know once I almost cried as I was eating a watermelon. It was so profound. I was on this watermelon fast, so I was eating watermelon all day and throwing all those seeds in the bin—I was not composting then. I realized: oh my God, this is all potential life. Life that will not grow. All these seeds, every single seed, there were maybe thousands of them; they won't have the opportunity to grow into plants. And that's like us humans. I really had an epiphany this day (laughs).

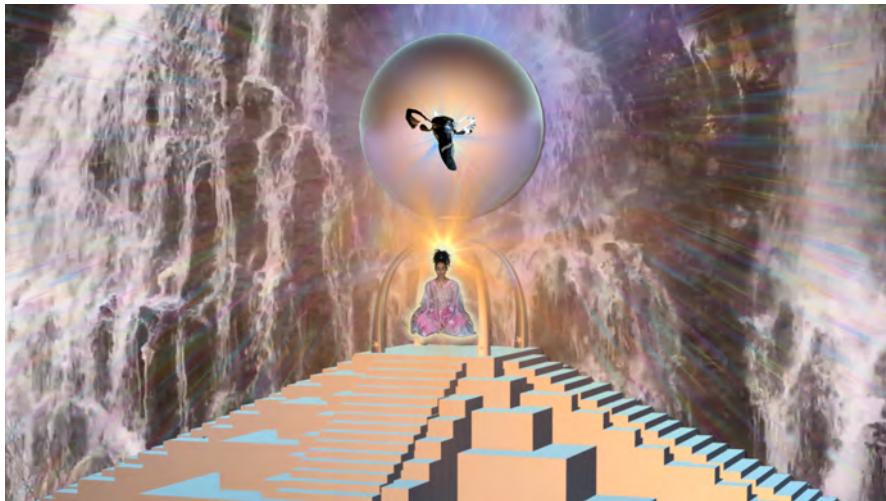
We're here on earth like watermelon seeds. And then it's up to us—or maybe our circumstances, our lives' events and the milieu we find ourselves in: whether we are planted into a soil that has enough resources for us to grow, that receives enough sunshine for us to grow, that gets enough water for us to grow, enough care for us to grow; in a place safe enough for us not to be eaten by a dog or whatever. Imagine how many plants don't fulfill their potentials each day? It's rough out there in the garden, in the forest. How many seeds get to bloom to full maturity? Not many, not many at all! Some never even get to germinate. Like all those watermelon seeds I threw in the bin. They will never germinate. It's a wasted potential. And it's the same for us. If we don't do this work of growing, of consciously growing, expanding, germinating, pruning, composting ourselves, then it's wasted life. It's a wasted opportunity. Let me not say it's a wasted life because no life is wasted. Life is just here to be lived, so no life is ever wasted. But it's a wasted opportunity for collective growth, for collective consciousness to shift, because we're doing this work of healing not only for ourselves to feel better. I mean, yes ok, I do wake up at 4 a.m. every day, do two and a half hours of yoga so I feel balanced during the day. I do, but also because that allows me to become a better human being for the people around me, for the environment that I'm in, so that I don't spread my hurts that much, because that's what we do as humans. We're all wounded. We're all hurt. And so we spread our hurts because we don't know how to contain the suffering that we carry. So we just share our suffering and pain, create waves and waves of suffering, and add more suffering for ourselves and for everybody around us. So healing is just to break that wave. You need to break that cycle so that you can actually stand and carry yourself in a way that doesn't negatively affect your surroundings and eventually lighten the collective load of suffering. And then you can carry many others along with you.

Ok, so that is still my introduction. Now back to your question. I try to do this in many different ways. One way in which I carry this mission is through my artworks.

Healing can happen or needs to happen in many realms or many dimensions of existence. I mean, most people are familiar with or understand the importance of physical healing when you fall sick, maybe emotional healing if you're heartbroken and mental healing if you're depressed or suffering mental illness. There's also spiritual healing, historical healing or technological healing and many, many other realms of existence that demand of us that we repair. Repair the damage of time, of space. Now in retrospect, I think my videos are more inclined to historical healing, because a lot is about rewriting history in a different way, offering different narratives, different positions to counteract a linear, violent, biased, racist history. In that sense it can be healing to be included into history, to be seen, to be made visible. That is deeply healing itself, to see yourself as having agency in the world's affairs, in the entanglements of time and space.

I also do what I call offerings; but you can call it performances, it's the same. I mean, I guess, I don't know. Maybe it's not. It depends on which world you find yourself in. My offerings address a different dimension of healing, which is more spiritual. So it's working more on the energetic realms of life. On the subtler realms of existence. So it's different tools that I use.





Sugar Walls Teardom, 2016, Tabita Rezaire. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, South Africa.

JSB When you talk about healing you are also talking about issues of collectivity—
(re)creating connections that are sort of lost or not used. Is that for you connected to questions of unlearning?

TR (*pauses*) You know it's full moon on the tenth? And it's an eclipse, also, you have to watch it. I think it's going to be visible in Europe.

JSB Oh ok, I didn't know that.

TR Yes. Ok. So healing and unlearning goes hand in hand. Healing and unlearning demand each other, they require each other. Healing requests that we unlearn the patterns that keep us away from who we are, the patterns that keep us trapped in our wounded selves, the patterns that make us feel smaller, unworthy, and unlovable. So that's the distance we have to walk. From the place of wounding to the place of healing, and that distance is unlearning. Potentially. Because we've been conditioned to be and to feel insecure. Also, on a spiritual level ... but let's stay on a political, economical level. It benefits the economy to have insecure people. You can make them buy anything you want. You can control them politically. You can make whatever you want out of a mass of people who don't know who they are. So that's where we're at. That gap that exists between ourselves and ourSelves—with a big S.

Between our finite self—the material part of our existence—and the subtler part of our existence, there's a world apart. Most people are not connected with the essence of themselves, which is connected to infinity, with everything that is. Most of us experience life as “me,” my body, my thoughts, my feelings, my doubts, my aspirations, my dreams, my anxieties, my fears. This is me. No, this is not you! This is just stuff that you made up. But beyond all of this there is a part of you, that is a part of existence, that is connected to dimensions beyond the world of matter. And that's what we have to connect to in order to be connected with life, to be connected with ourselves, with each other, to experience life as a piece of life, as life itself. Because now we are connecting to each other from our wounded selves, from a place of insecurity, of fear, of doubt, of pain. And what kind of connection do you want to build on such ground? It's going to collapse. And that's why we are



Sugar Walls Teardom, 2016, Tabita Rezaire. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, South Africa.

collapsing. Everyone is miserable because they forgot who they are. In order to learn who we are—the immensity of who we are, we have to unlearn who we think we are. From zero to one. You have to become nothing in order to be everything. But nobody wants to be nothing. That's why people are just going to stay in their gold prison, in their ivory towers.

JSB Yeah, that's beautifully said, but also sad.

TR Yes, but it is empowering. We need to face it as it is. It's not sad. It's what it is. It's what you make out of it.

JSB Yes exactly.

TR Sorry, now I'm being harsh. Excuse me, that was not intended.

JSB *(laughs)* No, no, you're totally right. I mean it's not just sad, but there's a certain sadness to it.

TR I know exactly what you mean *(laughs)*. But because of this, some people think it's better not to look at this, because it's too sad. Ok let's just keep things the way they are. Because we don't want to face the reality. We actually don't want to face things how they are because it's too painful. So we hide. We run away from what we feel. We go on, surviving, with different coping mechanisms. Whether it's drugs, sex, Netflix, social media. Whatever it is that can keep us away from life. We indulge because we are too afraid of life. So that's what we must unlearn. We must learn to just feel the feelings. And then let them go and continue life as life as a piece of life.—Ok, I'm done.

JSB To me that also sounds like a very beautiful description of what the decolonial, let's say ... project is about. Would you agree to that?

TR Yes. It's 11:11. Well done.

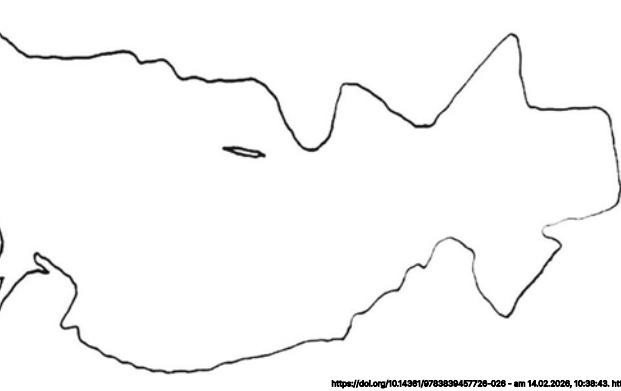
JSB In your artwork *Peaceful Warrior*, you're talking about radical self-love and you use the practice of a selfie. And I was wondering in

what way it can be radical to make a selfie. Can it, for instance, reverse power dynamics of colonial gazes and/or other objectifying gazes, such as sexist gazes?

TR You know, I don't think it is radical at all. Or I didn't say it is at least. But I understand what you say about the gaze, and it's part of it, to own and reclaim your image, but I actually don't think that most people out there are doing selfies in order to disrupt disempowered representation. People are making selfies because they feel insecure and want some attention.

And, again, because most people think that their body defines who they are, and we feel so uncomfortable in our bodies and with how we look like, if suddenly someone "likes" how we look then we're thinking, oh, maybe I'm not that bad. Maybe I can go on for a day or two not feeling so shitty about myself (*pauses*). Ok, so that's a harsh answer. The more compassionate answer would be ... Well this is not the most compassionate answer, but it's another reading. So, basically, *Peaceful Warrior* is one of my first works addressing healing and my understanding then was very limited. It was what it was, because of the consciousness I had at the time. So this work is, I guess, my self-love 101: practice meditation, move your ass, eat well, love yourself ... Do all of this and life will be good. And I tried it. I believed this. I was doing yoga every day, I was eating so well, I was doing all those things and still feeling like shit. And I was like: What? Why? I'm doing everything right! (*laughs*) Why am I still a mess? Because these things are just a bandage. And a bandage is not how you heal a wound or not this kind of existential wounding. I mean it can help, it does help to change your lifestyle. But healing is not a matter of lifestyle at all. You can have any lifestyle and do this work. It's about the depths of your experience, how deeply you can go inside yourself—and whatever you eat doesn't matter. You can eat a Big Mac and be deep. Basically, the journey towards self-love is through self-hate. You have to feel, you have to dive into your self-hatred. You have to create a relationship with all the parts of you that you're ashamed of, that you're afraid of, that you hate, and rescue them, face them and sit with them and allow them to be, truly be in you, with you. And when they've done their work, then you can let them go. That is self-love. So in that sense, a selfie has nothing to do with that. So that's the work that is demanded of us. But that is hard. So hard. And you need capacity for this. You need vitality for this. So first we need to build up that capacity and when the time is good for you then you can dive in. Because otherwise it can break you. And that's why our minds are actually protective sometimes; it blocks it out because it's too much, it's too painful. So the first thing is to build this capacity, this resilience, in order to face who we are.

JSB Thank you, it has now become even clearer to me how important it is—as you mentioned earlier—to use our technologies consciously, but also to question the assumption that new media technologies are always the best technologies available. I really want to thank you for taking the time to share all your thoughts with me. I'm really happy.



TR You're welcome. You did it. You can give yourself a hug now.

JSB (*laughs*) Yes, don't forget to give yourself a hug too.

TR It's true, that I forgot. I'm going to do it right now.

