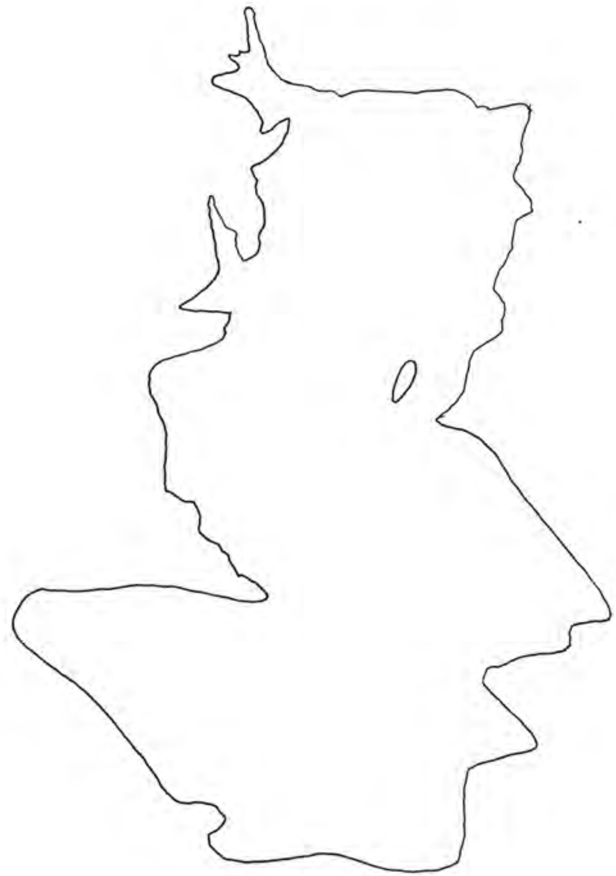
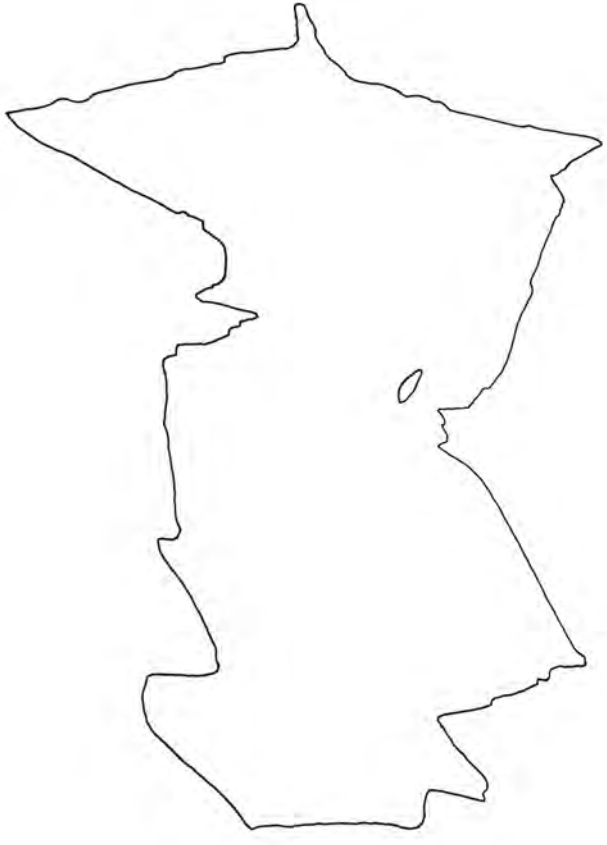


Survival Strategies—Queer and Trans Artists of Color[1] Making Space in Art and Academic Institutions[2]

Rena Onat



1 *The term "people of color" refers to people who are racialized and who experience structural forms of racism. It is thus a term that refers to sociopolitical constructions of "race" and not to "skin color" or other biological constructs of "race." It is a self-definition by and for racialized people despite the fact that different racialized groups experience specific forms of racism, and it was/is meant to create solidarity in order to overcome racist divide-and-rule politics. Lately, people have increasingly highlighted Black and Indigenous perspectives by writing "Black, Indigenous and People of Color" or "BIPoC"; here, however, since none of the artists featured in this article are Black or Indigenous, I'm writing queer and trans artists of color when referring to them and "BPoC" when writing more generally about people affected by racism. I also decided to highlight "trans" explicitly for similar reasons, which is why I use the acronym QTBPoC when referring to queer and trans people of color and Black queers and trans. I am not highlighting inter perspectives here, as this is in fact a gap on my part and I have not yet done enough work. I have decided against including "Indigenous" as I am focusing in my article for the most part on institutional criticism situated in the German context where the historic dimension of discrimination is different from i.e. those of the Americas where people are living on stolen land. In Germany, we often live in and of off stolen Jewish property but there is no historic or structural racial discrimination against people who are Indigenous to Germany. Among people of color in the German context, Sinti and Roma people have been racially discriminated against for centuries. On the other hand, Indigenous people are often particularly fetishized in Germany and it is also noteworthy to say that I and many others have been taught by and profited from Indigenous knowledges for my own perspective on decolonization and racism, which is why my own practice may change in time. However, all of these terms and collective practices of searching for self-definitions are always "under construction". I am hoping to contribute to a discourse of "queer of color critique." For writings on the term "people of color," see, for instance, Dean, Jasmin, "People of Color," in Arndt, Susan, Ofuatey-Alazard, Nadja, eds.,* Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht; (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache: Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk, *Münster 2011, pp. 597–607; For writings on the term "queer of color," see El-Tayeb, Fatima, Haritaworn, Jin, and Bacchetta, Paola, "Queer of Colour Formations and Translocal Spaces in Europe,"* Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, *vol. 33, 2015, pp. 769–778.* **2** *This article is based on a talk I gave as part of the Lunch Lecture Series of the Diversity Advisory Group at the School of the Arts Institute Chicago (SAIC) in September 2017. I had the opportunity to travel to Chicago and learn about antidiscrimination work there thanks to a small travel grant given to me by the organizers of the project "Art—School—Differences." https://blog.zhdk.ch/artschooldifferences/ (accessed May 28, 2019).*

Introduction

Queer and trans people of color and Black and queers and trans (QTBPoC) are underrepresented within institutions of higher education such as art and academic institutions. This absence is not a coincidence or an accident but a result of prevailing forms of systemic racism and heterosexism. In this article, I will discuss what can be gained by "listening" to queer and trans artists of color and their artworks for the project of decolonizing the institutions of artistic and academic knowledge production and making them more inclusive in intersectional ways. This mode of "listening" refers to a practice Nikita Dhawan and María do Mar Castro Varela have coined as "subversive listening" in regard to the argument that minoritized subjects do not need to be "given a voice," but rather listened to, when they speak.[3] What are the obstacles to creating diversity and overcoming structural and institutional discrimination and injustice in the German art context, and how do they affect queer artists of color living or working in it?

Drawing on the examples of works by Sunanda Mesquita, Raju Rage, and Hasan Aksaygın, I highlight institutional criticism and transformative potentials that are developed by these queer and trans artists of color. Furthermore, my goal is to contribute to the creation and sharing of resources for QTBPoC survival by learning from these artists. Currently, we are experiencing a growing interest in the question of decolonization, but even though there is an increase in the number of events and exhibitions and in research on the "topic," there seems to be a tendency to sideline perspectives of and a lack of linking questions of decoloniality to antiracist critique. Even if (art) institutions in Germany engage with questions of decoloniality, this is often only a temporary endeavor, such as a single exhibition on the "topic" of (post) colonialism or decolonization, rather than entering a thorough process of investigating and taking responsibility for colonial legacies and forms of institutional racism at work within these institutions.[4] However, from a decolonial perspective, we can trace racialized inequalities and structural forms of racist discrimination in the present back to constructions of "race" in colonial and neocolonial discourse that function(ed) in a way to legitimize colonial violence and exploitation. By centering the perspectives of queer and trans artists of color, I attempt to point out what is often missing from queer and postcolonial academic discourse in the German context. Even though not all the artists I am introducing are from Germany, I am interested in how their work offers a corrective to a certain discourse in Germany. Within dominant German discourse, racism is rarely understood as a power structure that affects all layers of society and produces differences and inequalities accordingly, in a similar way similar to how gender does, for example, but instead is perceived to be an individual flaw that is allegedly almost exclusively to be found in right-wing extremists such as neo-Nazis. This lack of understanding regarding the structural dimension of racism and of recognizing it as the root for biases that BPoCs face in Germany, including in academia (academic discourse, academic institutions) and the art field, results in a lack of measures to overcome these biases, overcome mechanisms of exclusion, discrimination (institutional and structural as well as individual), or create equality/ equal opportunity.

Moreover, especially in the fields of art education and cultural work, BPoCs are often seen as potential target groups to be educated and stereotypically fixated in this role, instead

3 *Castro Varela, María do Mar and Dhawan, Nikita, "Postkolonialer Feminismus und die Kunst der Selbstkritik," in Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Encarnación and Steyerl, Hito, eds.,* Spricht die Subalterne deutsch? Migration und postkoloniale Kritik, *Münster 2003, pp. 270–290.* **4** *An example of such a single exhibition is* Der blinde Fleck: Bremen und die Kunst in der Kolonialzeit *at Kunsthalle Bremen (August 5–November 19, 2017), which was curated by Julia Binter. In 2016/2017, Binter was granted a curational fellowship at Kunsthalle Bremen funded by Kulturstiftung des Bundes to research world trade, patronage systems, and the history of collecting during colonialism. While it is positive that research on (post)coloniality and arts are being addressed at an established art institution, this project seems to have ended with the exhibition and no long-term changes were implemented. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that a white curator from Austria was chosen for this prestigious fellowship; so again the question remains of who gets to work and act as an expert within an art institution on question of (post)coloniality.*

of being thought of as experts, professionals, artists, theater makers, or cultural workers.[5]

Who gets to speak and be heard as an "expert," whose knowledge and what forms of knowledge are validated in academic and art discourse, who can inhabit institutional space, who is represented in art and visual culture, and how? How does exclusion work in ways that keep the space of academia as well as the art world predominantly white? These are some questions that are important to ask if we want to think about how to decolonize institutional spaces and think of decolonization as a process that requires not only a shift in epistemology but a commitment to structural change.

In order to tackle the question of structural or institutional forms of exclusion, or to understand what it might take to open up institutions for diversification, it is useful to turn to Sara Ahmed and her phenomenological reflections on orientation of bodies in space and what kinds of orientations allow certain bodies to enter or inhabit certain spaces. She writes in *Queer Phenomenology:*

> Indeed, for bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not already at home, where they are not "in place," involves hard work; indeed, it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape.[6]

"Arriving" in a space means, that one is new, and often this is the case for BPoCs in academic spaces that are often and for the most part *white* spaces. To think of academic spaces as white spaces does not only mean that usually most of the bodies of people inhabiting these spaces, working within these spaces, passing through, are white, but also that these spaces are shaped by histories and epistemologies that center whiteness. With Sara Ahmed, we can even think of whiteness as a form of orientation that is shaped by previous actions that work in way to form whiteness as a background.[7] Not only is it hard to enter these kinds of spaces for BPoCs, it can also be difficult to remain inside once you are in, to inhabit them and make them "familiar."

The "painstaking labor" it takes according to Ahmed to inhabit spaces that do not "extend the shape" of certain bodies, and what she means be this, can be better understood by turning to an account by artist Raju Rage in which they talk about how they felt within the art school and what led them together with Evan Ifekoya, Rudy Loewe, and Raisa Kabir to found Collective Creativity, a collective of QTBPoC artists in London:

> *Collective Creativity* was born out of the fact that we needed space as artists of color who are marginalized within the mainstream to discuss how we grow as artists … we all went to art school and we all felt somewhat failed by it. We all didn't feel (white) people understood our work and didn't get what we were doing. We as artists of color have to form our own networks, we have to self-organize, we do so much to

5 *See Micossé-Aikins, Sandrine and Sharifi, Bahareh, "Die Kolonialität der Willkommenskultur: Flucht, Migration und die weißen Flecken der Kulturellen Bildung," in Gritschke, Caroline and Ziese, Maren, eds.*, Geflüchtete und Kulturelle Bildung: Formate und Konzepte für ein neues Praxisfeld, *Bielefeld 2016, pp. 75–86.* **6** *Ahmed, Sara,* Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others, *Durham 2006, p. 62.* **7** *Ahmed 2006 (note 6), pp. 132–135*

get through art school (and life) to survive, when we should just be able to come into the art school and focus on our work and grow and progress and do what everyone else does with entitlement. We were really frustrated by that. Why did we not get taught about the Black Arts Movement in school? We were really pissed off about it. That is where we decided to do a lot of self-educating by researching and reading everything we could find.[8]

Rage points out several factors that make it more difficult for BPoC artists to inhabit the space of the art school, such as Eurocentric curricula and the failure of white professors to understand and inspire their nonwhite students. Some art students, in Rage's words, are able to "just come into the art school and focus on their work and grow and progress" because the art school extends their shape, it allows them to reach things. In the case of BPoCs artists like the members of Collective Creativity, it is not the art school that allows them to extend their shape, to reach things, but their own labor, the extra amount of work they put in to evolve as artists, to grow and thus to extend their shape. It does not only involve labor to inhabit the white dominated space of the art school, but also to inhabit the subject position of "artist," as I will show later on. This in turn relates to QTBPoC survival that is at a same time about endurance and "staying in the space" but also a form of "queer futurity,"[9] as it is not only about individual survival, but about changing the space or sharing the resources of survival with others. In the following section I want to highlight how some queer and trans artists of color visualize the "painstaking labor to inhabit space that does not extend their shape"[10] and—referring to Audre Lorde[11]—frame this labor as a form of "survival" and as working to create "new impressions"[12] in order to change predominately white spaces to accommodate the bodies of queer and trans artists of color.

Epistemic Violence, or the Problems of Speaking as an "Expert" When It Comes to Marginalized Knowledges

I am the subject, I am the other that is being talked about.[13]

Speaking or writing *about* subjects who are "othered" by dominant discourse and doing research that focuses on and engages with

8 *Raju Rage in Rage, Raju, Mucossé-Aikins, Sandrine, and Onat, Rena, "Queering and Decolonizing Art and Visual Culture: Roundtable Discussion," in Paul, Barbara, Hoenes, Josch, Beyer, Atlanta Ina, Frankenberg, Natascha, and Onat, Rena, eds.*, Perverse Assemblages: Queering Heteronormativity Inter/Medially, *Berlin 2017, pp. 70–71. See also Collective Creativity's blog: http://qtipoccollectivecreativity.tumblr.com/ (accessed June 11, 2019). While Rage speaks about experiences they and the other artists in the collective have made in Great Britain, the described problems also apply to art institutions in Germany. But a deeper analysis of exclusion and discrimination at art schools in Germany has yet to be carried out.* **9** *See Muñoz, José Esteban,* Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, *New York 2009.* **10** *Ahmed 2006 (note 6), p. 62.* **11** *Lorde, Audre, "A Litany for Survival," in Audre Lorde,* The Black Unicorn: Poems, *New York 1978, n.p.* **12** *"[W]hen bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies"; Ahmed 2006 (note 6), p. 62.*

knowledges, experiences, and perspectives of people who are somewhat marginalized within academic institutions and settings is always potentially problematic and poses a dilemma. Even though I position myself as a Turkish-German femme of color, though I can pass for both white and straight, and have been part of and QTBPoC activism in Germany, my speaking as an "expert" *about* QTBPoCs makes me feel uneasy, because this kind of speaking from a position of authority may contribute to "othering" and objectification of QTBPoCs and may constitute a form of "epistemic violence."[14] What happens when knowledge that has been created and circulated in certain communities enters academic discourse? Who is speaking and who is not? I am hoping that my research works in a way to elevate the knowledge created *by* QTBPoCs in and through art by taking it seriously, rather than writing *about* minoritized subjects in objectifying ways. Following José Esteban Muñoz I also would like to "note that, for me, the making of theory only transpires *after* the artists' performance of counterpublicity is realized for my own disidentificatory eyes."[15] I argue that if we want to create "epistemic community accountability,"[16] a term I am borrowing from Jin Haritaworn, or "epistemic justice," subversive forms of listening are required.[17] In these acts of listening, people who are affected by discrimination and oppression are taken seriously as experts on the workings of power structures, mechanisms of inclusions/exclusions, and—in this case—racist discourse. Especially since so many QTBPoCs remain excluded from academic discourse, "listening" to discourse produced outside of academic conventions of knowledge production—like art—may be considered as a practice of "subversive listening."

Survival Strategies—Deconstructing Racism and Heterosexism in the Art World and Academia through the Lens of Transnational Queer and Trans Artists of Color

> ... and when we speak we are afraid
> our words will not be heard
> nor welcomed
> but when we are silent
> we are still afraid
> So it is better to speak
> remembering
> we were never meant to survive.[18]

In her well-known poem "A Litany for Survival," Audre Lorde wrote the famous line: "we were never

13 *Rage in Rage, Micossé-Aikins and Onat 2017 (note 8), p. 65. Rage is speaking about their performance in response to an article by Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,"* Social Text, *72, vol. 20, no. 3, 2002, pp. 117–148.* **14** *Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty,* Can the Subaltern Speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation, *Vienna 2008, p. 42.* **15** *Muñoz, José Esteban,* Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, *Minneapolis 1999, p. 5.* **16** *Haritaworn, Jin,* Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places, *London 2015, pp. 14–15.* **17** *Castro Varela and Dhawan 2003 (note 3), p. 278.* **18** *Lorde 1978 (note 11), n.p.*

meant to survive." These powerful words within her beautiful and powerful poem still resonate with Black and Indigenous people, people of color, migrants, and especially queer and trans people, disabled people, and working class people who are often the most vulnerable, underprivileged and in danger of premature death.[19] These words are powerful because they remind us of the hostility of systemic forms of power.[20] While the word "survival" is usually associated with overcoming a serious illness or an immediately dangerous situation, Lorde and others challenge and expand the meaning of the word from a decidedly women of color/queer of color/Black position. In this understanding of "survival," it is not only the bodies and livelihood of BPoCs, especially those who are queer, trans, female, and/or poor or disabled, who are constantly threatened by systemic violence, but also their/our histories, art, self-expression, and legacies. Our chances for education, empowerment, and individual growth are curtailed and voices are being silenced. Later in the poem, Lorde mentions "silencing" directly in the line: "The heavy-footed hoped to silence us."[21] Art may tell and pass on histories that were not meant to be told, heard, and remembered according to normative (national) discourse or that have been silenced so far. The stories of marginalized people often survive and live on in the creative output and in alternative and ephemeral archives, such as music, dance, poetry, or visual art. As Toi Scott writes:

> Seeds of survival exist within liberatory art that helps us see the unseen and speak the unspoken. Art can raise

19 *In doing so, Lorde's poetic writings make a similar point as the more recent theoretical discourse on necropolitics. These theories point to the construction of some populations as expendable, and to the normalization of mass incarceration, premature death due to drug or other epidemics, negligence, pollution, lack of access to healthy food or medical services, and so on. Using necropolitics as a theoretical framework allows us to understand how "value" is given to certain lives differently along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, age, and so on. The term necropolitics was coined by Achille Mbembe in his article "Necropolitics," Public Culture, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40. For reflections on queer and trans necropolitics see Haritaworn, Jin, Kuntsman, Adi, and Posocco, Silvia, eds., Queer Necropolitics, London 2012; for a queer of color critique on the construction of certain subject formations as "surplus populations," see Ferguson, Roderick A., Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique, Minneapolis 2004. See also the countless interventions of the Black Lives Matter movement.* **20** *In fact, Black women and other women of color intellectuals, community organizers, and artists have been key thinkers in regard to understanding intersectional forms of systemic oppression as well as in regard to shifting attention to* knowledges *gained by reflecting experiences of "everyday racism" (Philomena Essed) and other forms of discrimination. Yet while we have added much of the vocabulary and insight gained from Black women and women of color to our academic knowledge production in German academic discourse, it is often in the form of an appropriation, where Black women and other women of color are not the ones benefitting from the attention to concepts coming from Black (feminist) thought. This needs to be reflected as a form of anti-Black racism that considers the achievements of Black people as raw material or common property. This is why as academics it is not only our job to decenter white Eurocentric discourse but also to work towards changing structures and institutions and to make them more diverse, inclusive and accessible. It is time to give something back.* **21** *Lorde 1978 (note 11).*

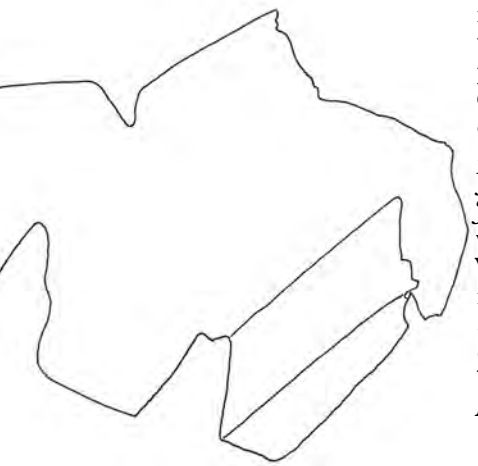
awareness about oppression, move people into action, and help us envision the better world we are working towards. Gathering and sharing our stories—expressing our voices through art—is and has always been necessary for queer and trans people of color's survival. Since the cultural theft that took place during colonization and slavery, people of color had the immense task of resisting invisibility, assimilation and erasure. This is particularly true for queer and trans people of color because violently eliminating gender and sexual diversity was an integral part of the colonization process in many countries.[22]

From a QTBPoC position, art is potentially useful a survival strategy in the sense that it can serve as an alternative and creative form of knowledge production and (self-)expression and that it may engender the communication of perspectives, experiences, and knowledges that are constantly being erased from mainstream discourse.

Visualizing the "Painstaking Labor" of Minoritized Bodies in Institutional Space

Hasan Aksaygın: JHAD

The first piece of artwork I want to discuss is the project *JHAD* by Hasan Aksaygın, a gay Turkish-speaking artist from Cyprus who studied painting at Weißensee Kunsthochschule Berlin and art in context at the Berlin University of the Arts.[23] *JHAD* is a conceptual project consisting of a fictive character called Jhad, who is a kind of performance superhero alter ego of Aksaygın. He and Aksaygın share the same body.[24] Jhad is a jihadist with great sexual powers who was created by German gays to be the defender and protector of German existence by representing its essential other. Jhad wears a trademark superhero outfit, a black and white patterned catsuit entitled *Empowering Costume* **(Fig. 1)**, which exists as a material object created by designer Saša Kovačević, and is also featured in a large painting of Jhad **(Fig. 2)**. Another object belonging to *JHAD* is the so-called *Empowering Book*, which is actually a German translation of Wilfred Thesiger's book *Arabian Sands*,[25] in which he writes in a homoerotic manner about traveling through a North African desert with young Bedouin boys.[26] This book is covered with the same fabric the *Empowering Costume* is made of.



22 *Scott, Toi, "Foreword," in King, Nia, ed.*, Queer and Trans Artists of Color: Stories of Some of Our Lives, *without location 2014, pp. i–vi, here, p. iii.* **23** *For more information on Hasan Aksaygın and his work see http://has-an.blogspot.com/ (accessed June 5, 2019).* **24** *This characterization of Jhad is taken from a text spoken by Aksaygın, which is part of an audio loop that played during the exhibition of JHAD at GSL Project Berlin. Aksaygın's voice was layered over beats by DJ Namosh, creating an audio piece that was meant to imitate the style of intros of superhero cartoons such as* She-Ra—Princess of Power. **25** *Thesiger, Wilfred,* Die Brunnen der Wüste: Mit den Beduinen durch das unbekannte Arabien, *Munich 1959.* **26** *On the homoeroticism in* Arabian Sands, *see Boone, Joseph Allen,* The Homoerotics of Orientalism, *New York 2014.*

Fig. 1: Hasan Aksaygın, Empowering Costume, *2015, polyester, courtesy of the artist*

Fig. 2: Hasan Aksaygın, JHAD, *2015, oil and acrylic paint on canvas, 140 x 220 cm, private collection*

The painting *JHAD* is a kind of self-portrait of Aksaygın, or rather, it is a portrait of Jhad while he is in possession of the body of the artist, dressed in the *Empowering Costume* and positioned in front of a pastel pink and blue background with the word JHAD written in white letters in the style of art nouveau typography on the bottom of the painting. It is painted with oil and acrylic paint on canvas and with its measurements of 1.40 x 2.20 m,it is quite big. In the painting, the body of Hasan Aksaygın/Jhad seems to float in the air, as the feet point downwards similar to the way holy figures are often represented in medieval Christian painting. With both of his hands, Jhad makes a gesture that is reminiscent of the Christian blessing gesture or an Islamic hand gesture symbolizing the one god. At the same time, the position of arms and hands in combination with his catsuit make Jhad appear quite effeminate and flirtatious. In the background, white ornamental shapes emerging from the letters JHAD form a kind of supersized halo around him. His eyeballs are either blurred or turned upwards; either way, he can't see. Aksaygın combines a number of seemingly contradictory references to art history (medieval Christian art, art nouveau, contemporary art), religion, pop cultural representations of superheroes, feminist criticism of the objectification of women in art history (the female model who is constructed to be looked at but not to look back), and contemporary discourse on "terrorism" by referencing "Jihad."[27] Together with the audio loop describing Jhad as a creation of German gays, and the book object, which is an appropriated *Arabian Sands,* we can also read the piece as a criticism of a racialized objectification or fetishization of the Orientalized male body or Muslim-read male body through a white gay gaze. This gaze is one that turns bodies like Aksaygın's into an "object of desire" by projecting (neo) orientalist fantasies,[28] i.e., of hypermasculinity, onto them.[29] At the same time, Orientalized bodies of color are not only fetishized and constructed as desirable, but also constructed as threatening and suspected to be potential "terrorists." They are turned into "objects of fear," as Ahmed explains, because the word "terrorist" has become what she calls a "sticky sign":

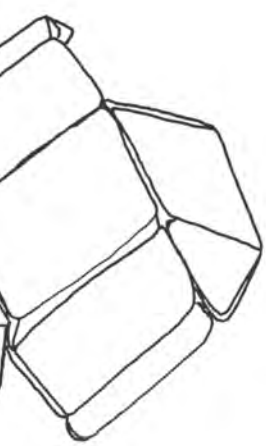
27 *In Western discourse, "Jihad" is seen as synonymous with "Islamism/terrorism," while in Arabic the word means something akin to "striving," or "working hard" and, in Islam, is a complex concept that can also refer to inner struggles. See, for instance,* Hashmi, Sohail H., *"Jihad," in Martin, Richard C., ed.,* Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, *New York 2004, pp. 377–379.* **28** *Georg Klauda describes how the so-called "Orient" served as an imaginary space of possibility for homosexual desire for European bohemia around 1900. See* Klauda, Georg, Die Vertreibung aus dem Serail: Europa und die Heteronormalisierung der islamischen Welt, *Hamburg 2016 (2008), p. 17.* **29** *For an analysis of the fetishizing of Turkish men among white gays in Germany, see* Petzen, Jennifer, *"Wer liegt oben? Türkische und deutsche Maskulinitäten in der schwulen Szene," in* Koray Yılmaz-Günay, Koray, *ed.,* Karriere eines konstruierten Gegensatzes: Zehn Jahre "Muslime versus Schwule"—Sexualpolitiken seit dem 11. September 2001, *Berlin 2011, pp. 25–45.*

> The sliding between signs also involves "sticking" signs to bodies: the bodies who "could be terrorists" are the ones who might "look Muslim." Such associations stick precisely insofar as they resist literalisation.[30]

In a short presentation at the summer school "Inside/Outside: Queer Networks in Transnational Perspective,"[31] Aksaygın talked about his motivation to create Jhad explaining the "boredom" he felt by constantly being fixed by an Orientalizing gaze and the "burden of representation"[32] put on him and other artists whose bodies are read as Muslim. His reaction was to create *JHAD* in order "to give them what they want from me," to performatively become the stereotype and at the same time confront and queer it by mirroring the Orientalizing gaze onto his body with which Aksaygın is confronted in everyday life, in the white cubes of the art world and in the cruising spaces known as "darkrooms" in gay clubs in Germany. This unusual strategy of performatively confirming a stereotype can be described with Muñoz as a form of "disidentification." Apart from disidentifying with the projections onto a "Muslim-looking" body, another mode of disidentification can be traced in *JHAD*, namely a disidentification with the figure of the artist.

Aksaygın's work points to the construction of the artist subject as white and male and bodies of color as "objects" within Western art history by referring to certain moments in time and/or regimes of representation. For instance, by referencing art nouveau style, a time of great fascination with the "Orient" and appropriation of ornamental elements from Islamic art into European design and visual languages, he hints at Orientalism as well as to a time when modernism increasingly changed older conceptualizations of how we think about "art." In his work, Aksaygın is both the subject and object of his art, which can be understood as a strategy of disidentification with both roles that bears resemblances to feminist artwork commenting on the status of the woman as "image" and "object." Since BPoCs have historically been excluded from the subject position of the artist and the racialized construction of subject/object continues to "haunt" art and academic discourse, we can begin to understand how it might be more difficult to claim and inhabit the professional identity of "artist" for BPoC artists. In order to identify as an artist, BPoC have to "disidentify" with the way this subject position has been constructed throughout art history. One can argue that there have been severe discursive shifts in art discourse and important interventions by BPoC artists decentering Eurocentric art history and redefining art. However, this positive development does not mean that we have already overcome historical constructions that work in a way to maintain normative whiteness within the art world. This is also indicated in the question "Why did we not get taught about the Black Arts Movement in school?" posed by Raju Rage in the quote above, which points to

30 *Ahmed, Sara,* The Cultural Politics of Emotion, *Edinburgh 2004, p. 76.* **31** *The summer school took place in Hanover from September 12 to 16, 2016, and was organized by Ruth Mayer and Anna-Lena Oldehus; see https://queernetworks.wordpress.com/ (accessed October 13, 2016).* **32** *Mercer, Kobena,* Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies, *New York 1994, pp. 233–258.*



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the fact that even though the Black Arts Movement existed, this doesn't mean that its contribution to art history gets proper acknowledgement and is passed on to younger generations of art students.

However, this mode of disidentification potentially leads to new and interesting rereadings of art and art history—in ways that have been missing from the discourses of art and media studies for a long time. With his work, Aksaygın—drawing on postcolonialism and psychoanalysis—theorizes the Orientalism at work within the art world from an explicitly queer perspective that engages the relation of desire and power while ironically playing with the roles and stereotypes assigned to him and thus confronting a desire for the "spectacle of the other."[33]

Both modes of disidentification can be understood as survival strategies in a sense that one finds a way to use art as an outlet for dealing with racialized and sexualized stereotypes as a mode of critique that helps marginalized stories to survive.

The project JHAD has a background story[34] that adds to an understanding of the difficulty of inhabiting certain spaces for QTBPoCs and how this links to strategies of survival. The art school Aksaygın studied at in Berlin is a very white space, and except for him there were hardly any other students of color or Black students enrolled there at the time. Similar to the experiences of Raju Rage and Collective Creativity, Aksaygın also describes how his professors did not understand his work, inasmuch as it made a number of references to contemporary Greek and Turkish art, as well as to social issues, and thus he always had to provide many references to explain his art. Aside from this general difficulty of the whiteness of the space, he experienced a severe case of discrimination, which was followed by an institutional failure to react properly. Another student, who was a known neo-Nazi, had painted an oil painting depicting Aksaygın as if he were walking through the gate of Auschwitz, with the infamous sign saying "Arbeit macht frei" slightly altered into "Arbeit macht Freigeist." This painting was discovered by another student in the basement of the school where it was left to dry and she was shocked and showed it to Aksaygın. When he reported this, the school did nothing to protect him or to punish or expel the student who painted that painting. Instead, Aksaygın was told that this is covered by "freedom of speech" and that art should be free and not censored.[35]

Discrimination, especially if it is as severe and threatening as it was in this case, is always hard to endure and to recover from. It also makes it difficult to remain in an institution like the art school, or in any university, for that matter, let alone strive in it, if the environment is as hostile and if one has to fear for their physical and mental health. Proper antidiscrimination policies that do not get twisted to blame the victim, as it is so often the case when people speak up who have been discriminated against, are therefore vitally important for fostering

33 *Hall, Stuart, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in Hall, Stuart, ed.,* Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, *London 1997, pp. 223–292.* **34** *I am referring again to Hasan Aksaygın's own report of these events during the summer school "Inside/Outside: Queer Networks in Transnational Perspective"; see the summer school's website (note 31).* **35** *This trope of pointing to freedom of speech is a very frequent reaction to any criticism or normative whiteness from Blacks and people of color and can be seen as part of silencing Blacks/people of color.*

Fig. 3: Raju Rage, Where Is Your Studio?, *2016, digital image, courtesy of the artist*

diversity within art schools and academia in general. Yet in Germany a lot of academic institutions still do not have proper antidiscrimination policies; often antidiscrimination policies are still in the process of being developed and decided upon or have only very recently been implemented.[36] This can lead to a failure to react to instances of discrimination in a manner that is in the best interest of those who might be victims of discrimination. This incidence shows how the art school can be a space that does not extend the shape of the bodies of QTBPoCs and how much work it takes just to inhabit the space, while other people—whose bodies are already "at home" within the institution—may focus their energy and work on more than on just inhabiting the space.

Where Is Your Studio?—*Art and Material Dimensions of Exclusion*

Where Is Your Studio? is a project from 2016 by the London-based artist Raju Rage that was actually realized as an audiovisual moving image collage, but I first came across the work as a digital sketch for a pink neon sign **(Fig. 3)**.[37] This "sign" was built from wire as a mock-up version and has been used by

36 *Moreover, in my experience the people in charge of writing antidiscrimination policies at academic institutions are usually members of the staff who volunteer to participate in commissions for gender equality or antidiscrimination on top of their usual tasks, with limited time and limited resources to consult experts, review policies from other institutions, etc. This shows how fostering a diverse and intersectionally inclusive culture at art, academic, and other institutions is again also a question of resources, i.e., for training staff or for counseling and mediation.* **37** *http://www.rajurage.com/2016/05/where-is-your-studio-commission-for-move-w-i-t-h-out-krisis/ (accessed June 11, 2019).*

Raju in installations and site-specific public interventions. The moving image collage consists of video footage shot on the streets of London and shows different sites of the city, especially areas undergoing gentrification, construction sites, advertisements, and so on. These images are digitally combined with the flashing words "Where is your studio?" resembling a pink neon sign. The piece poses important questions of gentrification and the role art often plays in it, but also, in turn, how gentrification leads to the vanishing of studio space and art spaces as formerly run-down areas with cheap rent have long become lucrative for investment. However, I will focus here on a different issue addressed by the piece, namely, how the work challenges a certain normative construction of the figure of the artist and how it might create means of surviving the art school.

In the digital sketch, the words "Where is your studio?" are written in cursive letters in bright pink. The neon sign itself is a medium most commonly used in advertising commodities in order to attract the attention of customers. The medium of the neon sign also evokes works of other artists working in the same medium—most importantly, well-known works by gay artist Bruce Nauman. For instance, Nauman used neon in his sculpture *Seven Figures,* a piece from 1985 explicitly showing gay male sex. During the height of the AIDS epidemic, he used neon's "flashyness" to throw stigmatized gay sexuality into the audiences' faces, thereby disrupting the public/private binary. One can also think of a neon sign by the British feminist punk artist Linder with the words "ANATOMY IS NOT DESTINY."[38] In both Bruce Nauman's work and that of Linder, the use of neon in radical queer and/or feminist political intervention interrupts its ordinary usage in consumer culture.

The title of Rage's work—"Where is your studio?"—is a quote of a question they heard over and over again when entering the fine arts program at Goldsmiths College London in 2015, and even though it was just meant to initiate small talk, Rage described how startled they were by this, as it implied that having a studio was assumed to be a given for an artist. Instead of answering to this question, Rage threw the question back at the people asking it, while at the same time asking this question of the viewers, flashing it in their/our faces in a mocking way. Rage's work exposes the underlying assumption that every artist must have a studio and how having a studio is considered to be an essential part of being an artist-subject. However, who can afford this in a city like London on top of rent, other living expenses, and the school's fees? As these are hardly affordable for anybody without a wealthy background, working class people and—as "race," gender, class, etc. often *intersect*—QTBPOCs do not only face epistemological difficulties or problems with discrimination that make it harder to inhabit certain space, as we have seen in Aksaygın's case, bu also material difficulties meeting the

38 *Art critics mention the piece but seem to regard it more as a backdrop to Linder's other work. See Ekardt, Philip, "Makeup Collage Philipp Ekardt on Linder at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris," in* Texte Zur Kunst, *vol. 90, June 2013 "Wie wir arbeiten wollen," https://www.textezurkunst.de/90/ekardt-linder-makeup-collage/ (accessed June 13, 2019).*

requirements for entering and inhabiting the institution. Coming back to Ahmed's quote from the beginning, we can say that the seemingly harmless and well-intended question "Where is your studio?" is one that works in a way to make certain bodies feel like they are "at home" and others, those marked as *Others,* like they do not fit in or do not belong.

Rage originally intended to have an actual neon sign made; however, the cost for the material and the production was too expensive.[39] Too me, this—the "failure" to turn the sketch into the sculpture—actually makes the work more powerful. It brings the only rarely addressed issue of the production costs and the potential difficulty of being able to buy certain materials. Artists are often imagined as living for their art. They are expected to work for free and somehow imagined to be free from worldly needs like paying rent or buying groceries. This romanticized myth of the "starving artist" plays into "the politics of getting paid" as Collective Creativity have coined in a workshop:

> In performing "professionality" we ask what does it mean to be a "Professional" artist, how do we overcome the obstacles of getting paid, tackling classism and wider struggles in asking for renumeration for QTIPOC artistic capital and labours? How is our art compromised in gaining recognition as a professional, yet our work placed and celebrated for being on the margins? Who gets to be "unprofessional" and how do we challenge the ways many artists are expected to work for free yet sustain a practice in London? [40]

The expectation that artists should work without payment and for "exposure" affects queer artists of color especially, as they are often imagined to be grateful just to "be-given-a-voice" and represented at all. This also means that practicing art is often not sustainable, which in turn is one of the issues discouraging people whose families cannot provide an economic safety net from pursuing art as a career.

These are things to be considered when thinking about mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from art and academic institutions. Because, as Lorde has pointed out so eloquently in regard to poetry, "even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue."[41] She goes on to explain:

> Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one that is the most secret, that requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one that can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper. … A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time. The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help to determine, along class lines, whose

39 *Raju Rage in a private chat on Facebook in 2016.* **40** *https://qtipoccollectivecreativity.tumblr.com/ (accessed May 28, 2019). The session on "Performing 'Professionality': The Politics of Getting Paid (AKA BBHMM)" was held on April 15, 2016, in London.* **41** *Lorde, Audre, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, ed.,* Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought, *New York 1995, p. 286.*

art is whose. In this day of inflated prices for material, who are our sculptors, our painters, our photographers? When we speak of a broadly based women's culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art.[42]

The piece *Where is Your Studio?* thus deconstructs certain classist norms or normative assumptions that make it more difficult for queer people of color to inhabit the space of the art school, as well as what Vika Kirchenbauer has called the "aesthetics of exploitation," in which the professional art world is complicit.[43] Instead of turning inwards, and possibly reacting with feelings of inadequacy in order to fulfill what is expected of a "proper" artist, with it their piece Rage puts their critique of questionable norms within the art world "out there," where it may work its way to other BPoC art students, thus creating means of survival that go beyond themselves. In thinking about how to make space more inhabitable to QTBPoCs, this work serves as a reminder that it is important to consider material conditions resulting from heterosexist and racist power structures within the arts as well as ideological and representational dimensions. It addresses the issue that in order to allow for truly diverse and inclusive institutions not only do we need to think about representation and recognition but also to look for ways to redistribute resources.[44]

Silenced by Academia

The large-format painting entitled *Silenced by Academia* **(Fig. 4)** by Sunanda Mesquita, a Viennese artist and illustrator, shows a portrait of a young woman of color with big curly hair wearing a pink sari with a paisley pattern, and grey sneakers. She is sitting on a bar chair/stool, looking directly at the viewer. Dangling from her mouth is a white piece of cloth; it is stuffed in her mouth, her cheeks bulging so much that her face seems distorted. The title, *Silenced by Academia*, refers to mechanisms for silencing women of color within academia, which is part of the structural and institutional racism and sexism that women of color face.[45] As the painting is a self-portrait, the artist depicts herself as having been silenced. This is a powerful gesture, which does at least two things. First, the figure/artist resists being silenced, because even though she has a giant piece of white cloth stuffed in her mouth that makes it impossible for her to speak verbally, she uses visual art to express herself, seeking another language and another medium. Second, she confronts the act of

42 *Lorde 1995 (note 41), pp. 285–286.* **43** *See Kirchenbauer, Vika, "Aesthetics of Exploitation," essay, published on the artists' website, 2017. See http://www.vk0ms.com/aesthetics_of_exploitation.html?fbclid=IwAR0o6QeE0yXxFPbUlAMNwYUO-UM5NsA089AuWZj7fWI-Ni43s9R20ys2sjTU, (accessed October 16, 2019).* **44** *See Fraser, Nancy, "Rethinking Recognition," New Left Review, no. 3, 2000, pp. 107–120. Here, Fraser argues for a politics of redistribution instead of a politics of representation and recognition. However, I don't think that these need to be mutually exclusive but rather that Fraser's argument reminds us not to neglect politics that demand redistribution, especially in queer politics.* **45** *The painting was first shown to me during an empowerment workshop (with Nissar Gardi and Fallon Cabral) I attended after a racist experience. The painting spoke to me and my experiences within academia; it made me feel seen and not alone and I have shown it to people whenever they told me of discrimination they suffered from within academic institutions.*

Fig. 4: Sunanda Mesquita, Silenced by Academia, *2015, acrylic on canvas, 180 × 160 cm, courtesy of the artist*

silencing by pointing out that this is what is happening here and exposing this silencing as a mechanism of institutional racism. This is especially remarkable because being victimized is a vulnerable position that might be uncomfortable or even make one feel ashamed (to be seen this way by others). Silencing often works by causing one to question or blame oneself, by making one feel out of place or incompetent, as if they were the only one feeling this way while everyone else is doing fine. Therefore, it is quite difficult to identify silencing as part of a set of mechanisms of exclusion that work to stabilize normative whiteness within academia. Sunanda Mesquita does not let herself be shamed by having been silenced or discriminated against. Portraying herself in this way, she allows others who have had similar experiences to relate and to recognize the structural dimension of silencing. She is surviving being silenced and this survival goes beyond her. Like Lorde, who points to the systemic dimension of racism by reminding BPoCs that "we were never meant to survive," *Silenced by Academia* reminds others of the institutional dimension of racism. Along with Ahmed, Mesquita's painting reminds us that the space of (art) academia does not extend the shape of the bodies of women of color and others who are minoritized, but needs to be changed to accommodate their/our bodies.

There is also another layer of meaning in Mesquita's painting: the cloth stuffed in her mouth and the bulging cheeks are actually references to a street performance **(Figs. 5–9)** Black feminist performance and conceptual artist and writer Adrian Piper carried out around 1970–71 as part of a series called *Catalysis.* The *Catalysis* series was not performed in art spaces and not announced as art. Piper herself does not even call them performances but "pieces":[46]

> I dressed very conservatively but stuffed a large red bath towel in the side of my mouth until my cheeks bulged to about twice their normal size, letting the rest of it hang down in front, and riding the bus, subway, and Empire State Building elevator.[47]

Especially in her early work, Piper was very vocal about issues of racism and sexism within the art world and beyond.[48] In earlier performances such as *Mythic Being* (1972–1975), she performed in drag as a Black man. She also made *Calling Cards* (1986–1990) that could be handed out to people to call them out on their racism. In contrast to this, the *Catalysis* series does not seem to address issues around race or gender, at least not as directly or literally as some of her other work does. However, by estranging herself in regard to her behavior, her looks, even her smell, Piper provokes reactions to her being different which are not linked to her being gendered and racialized. Those markers of difference may become less important, as the most striking thing about her is the towel in her mouth. Also, it leaves her in control and in an active role. Piper describes how, in those situations, she challenges herself to interact with people staring at her:

> I looked odd and grotesque, and somehow just confronting

46 *Adrian Piper in Lippard, Lucy, "Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper,"* The Drama Review, *vol. 16, no. 1, 1972, pp. 76–78*
47 *Lippard 1972 (note 46), p. 76.* **48** *See, for instance, Piper, Adrian,* Out of Order, Out of Sight, *Cambridge, Mass 1996.*

> them head-on was very difficult. It makes me cringe every time I do it, but I'm trying to approach them in a different way. … It is almost as if I manage to make contact in spite of how I look, in spite of what I'm doing.[49]

The connection between Piper's work and Mesquita's piece can be made by looking at gesture, as Muñoz has proposed:

> And although we cannot simply conserve a person or a performance through documentation, we can perhaps begin to summon up, through the auspices of memory, the acts and gestures that meant so much to us.[50]

These *acts and gestures that meant so much to us* are, according to Muñoz, those that are charged with queer meaning and in a sense allow us to get a glimpse of a queer utopia that may be found in the not-yet-here of the future or the no-longer-conscious of the past.[51] The cloth stuffed in the mouth in Mesquita's self-portrait is such a gesture. It is Piper's gesture from her past performance that *meant so much* to a younger queer artist of color in the present. It meant so much because it captures the affects of pain and anger caused by racism and heterosexism, like a physical feeling that your mouth is so full that it may trigger a reflex to vomit, a visceral reaction to discrimination. Piper's performance itself may be over but the gesture of stuffing the mouth with cloth travelled through time and space and becomes meaningful again more than forty years later in the work of a younger queer artist of color. By creating this bond, Mesquita situates her own work in the practice of feminist artists of color who came before her and honors their legacy.

Survival Strategies—Facilitating Minoritarian Belonging and Creating Space

My reading of the connection between Mesquita and Piper relates to what Muñoz has described as the potentiality of performance to facilitate modes of minoritarian belonging. According to him, a kernel of potentiality can be transmitted to the audience when we see a performance and this can set a spark: "the real force of performance is its ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging."[52] Mesquita was not only able to find belonging in Adrian Piper's performance; she actually found other ways to facilitate modes of minoritarian belonging by creating (inhabitable) space for queer artists of color in Vienna. Together with Amoako Boafo she is the co-founder of the collective WE DEY. Until recently, the collective had their own art space with exhibitions, workshops, and lectures for and by (queer and trans) BPoCs. She was also a co-curator of the exhibition *Anti_Colonial Fantasies / Decolonial Strategies* in Vienna in 2016. Apart from working on creating a queer of color critique through art and using art to create counterdiscourse, Sunanda Mesquita has thus—together with a collective—also labored to create alternative physical space, however precariously. Similarly, Raju Rage and Collective Creativity also use various formats such as workshops to create temporary spaces and resources for minoritized

49 Lippard 1972 (note 46), p. 77. 50 Muñoz 2009 (note 9), pp. 71–72. 51 Muñoz 2009 (note 9), p. 26. 52 Muñoz 2009 (note 9), pp. 98–99. 53 https://issuu.com/rudyloevecomics/docs/surviving_art_school_as_artists_of (accessed June 25, 2019).

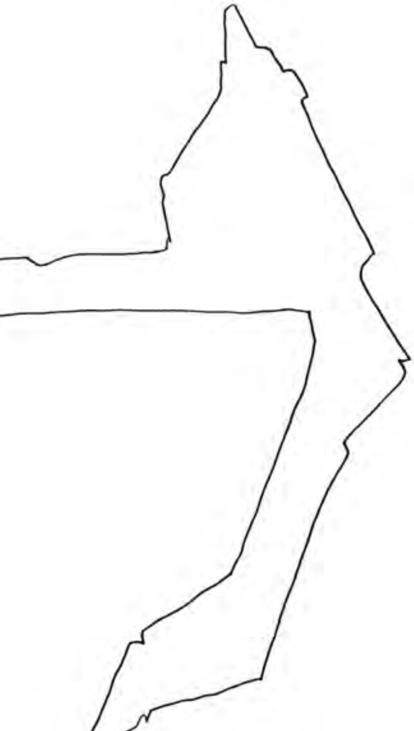
Figs. 5–9: Adrian Piper, Catalysis IV, *1971, photo documentation of performance/street performance, New York, USA, Generali Foundation Collection. Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, © Generali Foundation*

artists. For instance, they created a brochure entitled *Surviving Art School: An Artist of Colour Tool Kit.*[53] It contains documentation of debates and workshops they executed as well as collections of resources such as names of inspiring BPoC artists.

The survival strategy employed by Hasan Aksaygın is one that is not so much interested in facilitating modes of minoritarian belonging as it is in deconstructing sexualized and racialized stereotypes by mocking them, turning them against each other, reminding us of their genealogies, and by disidentifying with them. This strategy bears close resemblance to what Hall has described as a counterstrategy for contesting the racialized regime of representation by taking "the body as the principal site of its representational strategies, attempting to make the stereotypes work against themselves."[54]

In the artwork by Aksaygın, Rage, and Mesquita we can find what Scott has described as "seeds for survival" as they move people to action, criticize forms of structural discrimination, and may help us to envision a better world—one where the bodies of QTBPoCs are not out of place.[55] By "listening" to the art work from QTBPoC artists, we can gain an understanding of institutional criticism of racist and heterosexist mechanisms of exclusion, even those that may be very subtle and hardly noticeable from a position of privilege without interventions from (queer and trans) BPoC artists due to the normalization and naturalization of whiteness, heterosexuality, class-privilege, cisgenderedness and cismasculinity, and able-bodiedness within art and academic institutions. Such a form of "listening" may work in subversive ways to overcome or undermine "silencing." Within the artworks I have discussed, a number of mechanisms of exclusions from art and academic spaces have been pointed out such as the racist/Orientalist gaze on nonwhite bodies, persisting stereotypes and "othering," Eurocentrism and absence of nonwhite perspectives from the curriculum and the canon taught at art schools, persistent normative myths around "art" and the artist subject, discrimination, silencing of the few critical BPoCs who have made it inside the institution, and material factors. A queer of color perspective might then allow one to reach certain objects that are not within reach from a dominant white, cisgendered, heterosexual perspective and one that facilitates rereadings or alternative readings of our (institutional) spaces and the stories told within these spaces. A commitment to decolonization of academic and art institutions might be one that works towards rebuilding them in a way that they not only become inhabitable by QTBPoC artists and others who are structurally excluded but also extend the shape and reachability of these artists bodies.

54 *Hall 1997 (note 33), p. 274.* **55** *See Scott 2014 (note 22).*



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