

Censorship of Radicalised Racial bodies in Artistic Practice

Visual Culture

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The aim of this text is to answer the following thesis question: Can censorship of the artistic radicalisation of racialized bodies be ethical? I will be specifically examining two instances of visual censorship; 'Open Casket' (1) by Dana Schutz and 'Between the World and Me' by Uwe Max Jensen with assistance of (3). I will examine these artists and their works through conducting methods of research and analysis. I will aim to construct and display a biography of the artists, the context of their works within their epoch and location to eventually correlate the thematic connection of the implication of their artworks: That the chosen subject matter of radicalised black bodies for the consumption of the observer could be unethical. As the premises of this essay is beyond the capacity to cover the complete discourse surrounding these pieces in their totality, I shall then focus to accomplish within four paragraphs; Schutz's background, the composition and description of (1) and the context within which it was debuted, demonstrated in (2) as evidence of protest; I shall then look at Jensen's personal history, an in depth description of the performance with help of (3) and the social context of the performance in motion; furthermore, to connect the works through their use of black radicalised bodies as subject matter and the historical context of these pieces and the public reception received; finally, the implications and challenges within U.S. society that the pieces expose, demonstrated in (4).

Dana Schutz is a caucasian multi-practice artist (Basciano, 2017), born in 1976 in Michigan, specialising in sculptures and paintings of allusionary narratives to convey impressionistic individual circumstances. She garnered her bachelors of fine art from the Cleveland Institute of Art and her masters of fine art, awarded to her from Columbia University in New York where she is based. She has been heavily exhibited in the U.S. and throughout different locations internationally such as; Ireland, Italy and France. Her first unaccompanied exhibition was in the year 2004 presented in three different locations (www.davidzwirner.com, n.d.). She is known to explore circumstantial comedy and satirical expressions throughout her works utilizing fragmented shapes, fully saturated colour and exhibits use of value shifting to define form within the plane she creates (Salle, 2021). (1) is a piece by Schutz, exhibited in the Whitney Biennial in 2017, is an oil painting done on canvas, depicting the

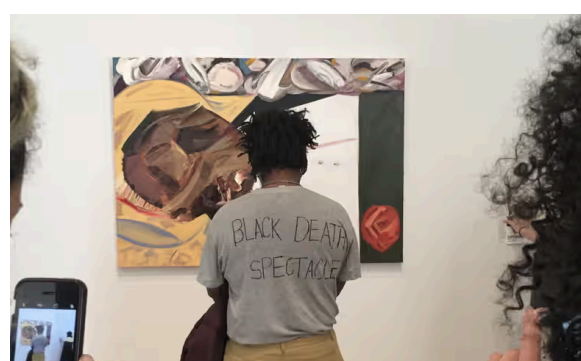
photograph of the corpse of Emmet Till; a fourteen year old african-american child who was killed in 1955 (Autry, 2017) for the false accusation of sexually harassing a white woman (Basciano, 2017) which in turn led to 'consciousness-raising in the long struggle for desegregation' during the 'Civil Rights movement' in the U.S. (Longreads, 2018). The painting exhibits 'semi-abstract' depiction of Emmet's body in a black suit coat embellished with a rouge rose over a white dress shirt contrasted by the thick spiral-like brush marks of dark brown of his head with white highlights and red marks depicting the blood of his mutilation. The state of his facial disfiguration is painted unclearly as to allow for the viewer to be comfortable in their observation. The painting itself caused uproar in the black community, many called for it to be taken out of the exhibition and even demolished as it was typed as discriminatory and continues on the destructive cycle of 'black suffering and death' for leisurely media consumption (Autry, 2017). This sparked quotidian protests in front of (1) at the Whitney Biennial, especially by artist Parker Bright which can be seen in (2) wearing a t-shirt fronting the text 'No lynch mob' and on the back written 'Black death spectacle' directly standing in front of (1) (Basciano, 2017). "She has nothing to say to the black community about black trauma." is a quote from Parker during his protest that infers that her radicalisation of this black body was not hers to depict as a caucasian artist (Greenberger, 2017). This uproar led to Hannah Black, 'a black-identified biracial artist' (Fusco, 2017) who began a movement, writing an open letter requesting 'to remove Dana Schutz's painting Open Casket with the urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed' so that Schutz or no other person, capitalises from either the sale or 'circulation' (Muñoz-Alonso, 2017). From this evidence, it suggests that Schutz's own whiteness blinded her from the repercussions of her work and that the censorship done by these artists is ethical as is to end the perpetuated cycle of black death as entertainment for the caucasian consumer (Autry, 2017).

(1)



Dana Schutz, Open Casket, 2016, Online

(2)



Anon, Black Death Spectacle, 2017, Online

Born in 1972, Uwe Max Jensen is a danish artist who works in a contemporary style (Carlyle, 2016). Shock art is the main medium in which he delivers his performance work often in the form of the utilisation of his bodily outputs such as; 'blood, urine and excrement'(Westall, 2006).He has been exhibited in multiple exhibits in countries such as; Germany, Switzerland and Poland (artfacts.net, n.d.). He works with themes of exposing 'political correctness,' and 'to confront many sensitive subjects simultaneously,' (Cremer, 2015). His work typically exhibits the use of audience participation, which is seen in live performances he has conducted throughout his career (Westall, 2006). (3) are stills from a work, self titled on youtube, 'Between the world and me' exhibited by Jensen in an exhibition labeled as 'Political Art' in 2021 held in Warsaw at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art (Mazur, 2022). Content articulated from the video of the live performance: He starts on a black tarp, unfurling a confederate flag and starts uttering the n-word, while waving the flag walking around the crowd of people. There is a protestor holding a pride flag who walks into frame, eventually Jensen and him have a slight confrontation where their flags hit and the protestor is mildly prodded by Jensen with the confederate flag to move out of his space. Then a, assumed, man in a dress holding a glass starts to invade the tarp; starts to sway and dance trying to shift the attention from Jensen. As the man in the dress dances, Jensen starts to strip his clothes; shortly after, the man in the dress is escorted by what is assumed to be a member of staff. Once fully naked he proceeds to paint his face and rest of body with black paint with the help of another while the protestors shout, assumedly, 'fascist' in polish at him repeatedly. During painting he starts to exclaim 'black lives matter' and repeats this after his whole body is saturated, walking back into the crowd as some of the audience applause then back to tarp; drops onto the floor, dragging himself along, sputtering 'I can't breathe,' seen in (3) (Jensen, 2021). These were the final words of George Floyd an african-american man who was brutally killed by police officers (The Kelowna Courier, 2021)which led to significant galvanising of the 'Black Lives Matter,' movement (Olorunnipa, 2023) . From this evidence we can suggest that Jensens performative use of a radicalised black body to further his own agenda, turning a tragedy into a spectacle for the justification of artistic practice and his sheer lack of care and empathy for the black community is utterly unethical which is proven by his own words: 'I

think it would be very difficult to do this in the United States'(Cremer, 2015) which refers to a separate piece but is also enacted under the same premise of blackface and use of the confederate flag. We can infer that the censorship of this piece done by the anti-fascist and LGBTQ+ protestors is completely moral and necessary as to not allow the radicalisation of black bodies for his own personal apathetic agenda.

(3)



Uwe Max Jensen, *Between the World and Me*, 2021, Online

Jensen and Schutz's pieces both corroborate the thematic connection: to 'de-racialize a history' through the use of black bodies as subject matter (Autry, 2017). George floyd's murder in 2020 by caucasian policemen was radicalised through video recording and proliferation on social media(Hughes, 2023); a major tragedy in which Jesnen took it upon himself to reenact mirrors the murder of Emmet till in which Schutz decided to illustrate through the use of painting. Emmet Till's coffin was purposely left open, a decision made by Mamie Till,'she wanted the world to see what those men had done to her son,' unintentionally fueling the 'Civil Rights Movement' and not for the furthering of Schutz's reputation(Fusco, 2017). From these findings we can assert that the artist's own whiteness shields them from the awareness of POC's(People of colour) lived reality: that these portrayals of racialized violence are for the caucasian observer (Autry, 2017). To further this position, we can look at Jensen's use of blackface (Cremer, 2015), a tool used in the history of the U.S. 'that reinforced the idea that African-Americans were inferior in every way,'(Desmond-Harris, 2014) and claims his use of blackface as a response to 'American puritanism': We can suggest that his performance was rooted in his own personal desire to feel free from political persecution (Cremer, 2015) alike Schutz's objective to 'Her insistence on the universality of suffering' through (1) as the

legitimising of racialized pain as leisurely observation for the white audience (Autry, 2017). From Beauchamps text on (1) it is suggested that no-one has a right nor permission to inflict what he deems to be 'cultural appropriation' and deems as 'inane'. He fails to address the suffering and trauma of these marginalized groups with a pinhole focus of comparing literature- whether factual or fiction- to artistic practice(2017, pp. 462-465) and neglects the empathic responses and public reception of these pieces: Hannah Black's open letter (Greenberger, 2017) mirrors the protestors at Jensen's performance chanting 'fascist' (Jensen, 2021) as valid forms of censorship. From examining this evidence, we can infer that the censorship that occurred was to combat the artists' trivialisation of these radicalised black bodies.'While I did not see black death, I did see white fantasies of black bodies'(Autry, 2017) is a statement made about (1) that fully encapsulates and connects the pieces justly. Given this information we can presume that Jensen and Schutz are not only unaware of the impact of their works to the black community but are navigating behind their artistic freedom and privilege as white artists. 'Those non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material' (Greenberger, 2017)is a statement made in Hannah Black's open letter that exposes even further the unjustification of the representation of these radicalised black bodies.

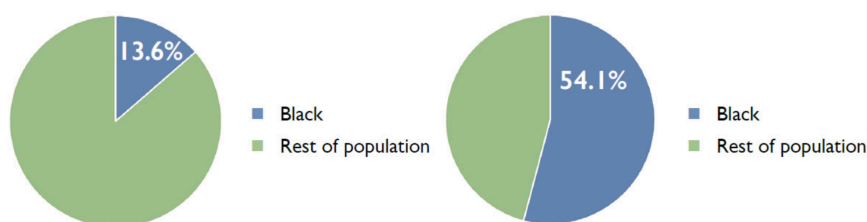
The implications of censorship and challenging of social norms is not realised in the aftermath of their pieces but by the societies that govern them. From Hannah Black's open letter: 'the evidence of their collective lack of understanding is that Black people go on dying at the hands of white supremacists,'(Greenberger, 2017) is a powerful statement and not only speaks to Schutz's work but to Jensen's too: That their collective ignorance is exposed thoroughly in their artworks, that they lack the capacity to comprehend true racial suffering. Furthermore, 'Nothing was planned. Those concerned were not invited. But had access to the opening like everyone else. The performance was a leap into the unknown.'(2021) is a response to a review, made by Jensen in his own Youtube video comments of his performance; furthering the position of the unawareness he holds of the effects of

his work towards the black community. To display the lack of awareness and sensitivity of the artists' subject matter :

According to CDC mortality data, in 2022 there were 13,446 Black homicide victims in the United States (Table 1). The homicide rate among Black victims in the United States was 29.0 per 100,000. For that year, the national homicide rate was 7.7 per 100,000. For white victims, the national homicide rate was 4.2 per 100,000. (Violence Policy Center, 2022)

This data may act as a reflection of the current nature of the U.S. society through their mortality rates and their disparities, specifically between the white and black statistics that expose that black people are still victim of higher rates of violence and we can infer that black death is not just a topic for these white artists to self-adjudicate as their subject matter but a tragic reality for black people. I have also included (4) as a visual aid to assist in the visualization of the disparity of the black victims of homicide within the context of the U.S. population. We can suggest that the implications of censorship is not from the protestors of these pieces but by the artist who'd rather address these statistics in a more meaningful way, then by re-traumatizing the community themselves under oppression. 'The spectacle, then, was not of black death, but of white rage and guilt.' (Autry, 2017) is a statement that consolidates the overall dispositions of the pieces; from Schutz's clear 'white guilt' displayed through her attempt at connecting to another identity's culture and the wrath of Jensen's need to be liberated from social and political persecution (Cremer, 2015). From these findings, we can theorise that the censorship done through protest was ethical as to expose the faults of these artists and their own ego's within their work; that the radicalisation of these racialized bodies is ongoing in the world that 'the 'opportunity' to watch people bleeding out and beheaded online' (Autry, 2017) is enough reality of ongoing racialized violence that these artists fail to sincerely address.

(4) **FIGURE 2. Black percentage of United States population (left figure); Black percentage of homicide victims (right figure), 2022**



In conclusion, I have investigated two visual instances of censorship: Dana Schutz's 'Open Casket' and Uwe Max Jensen Performance, self-titled online, "Between the World and Me". Firstly, I established a biography of Dana Schutz through her academic background and exhibitional locations, then I conducted an analytical description of (1) in its exhibition at the Whitney Biennial, to go on to discuss (2) as representative of the censorship of (1) and touching on Hannah Black's open letter. I go on to discuss Uwe Max Jensen's background, exhibitional locations and method of practice, then I articulate a thorough description of his performance exhibited in 'Political Art' in reference to (3), giving slight social context of the performance and protest. Furthermore, I explored the thematic connection of the two pieces and their charged history based upon, then looking at public reception that the pieces received and the analysis of this connection between the response and censorship that was received. Finally, I examined the implications of the pieces in the context of U.S. society with a scope on the black homicide rates, displayed in (4), as evidence for the ongoing oppression and violence of the black community, then looking at the ethicality of the censorship accomplished through protest. We can conclude from this text that the censorship was not just ethical but necessary in the display of the artists' inability to actualise sincere pieces of the victimized black body. However, a closer look at the literature is necessary as the volume of this essay is not within the parameters to justly address the morality of censorship of white artists' use of radicalised racialized bodies.

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