



***BLKNWS* and Response-Ability: Who Is Speaking, Where, and How?**

Vera Dika

I like how I felt connected to the video, as well as being sad for how unfair the world is today, acting like we all don't bleed the same.
Alieser Ferrer, Student
New Jersey City University

BLKNWS by Kahlil Joseph is a multichannel video installation presented at the 2019 Art Biennale in Venice that employs systems of opposition. Greeted with great acclaim at Biennale, *BLKNWS* offers news from a black perspective, showing black life as vibrant, compassionate, funny, and beautiful, and does so in a way that dominant white audiences rarely see. And while this shift in ideological content may seem like a way to counter the control of the white mass media, if only on a symbolic level, Joseph also engages the exhibition and distribution of *BLKNWS* to critical effect. First to note is that in the showing of *BLKNWS* at the Biennale, Joseph raises a double awareness. In one sense he underlines the impossibility of responding in mutual exchange with the mass media, or with what Jean Baudrillard had termed "irresponsibility," literally, that characteristic of the media that actively prevents the viewer's

Kahlil Joseph, *BLKNWS*, 2018–ongoing.
Installation view at Cantor Art Center at Stanford
University, October 10, 2018–February 17, 2020.
Courtesy of Kahlil Joseph Studio.

response.¹ After all, what is shown in Venice is a closed-circuit TV feed with alternative content, not network news. On the other hand, Joseph makes a crucial displacement. By allowing us to view the news from a black subject position at the Biennale, Joseph permits a new visibility to emerge, that is: the visibility of an *absence* from within the art institution itself. We become aware of that the exchange is not a mutual one. *BLKNWS* is once again speaking to a predominantly white privileged audience and doing so in the significant absence of a black American community. Political, social, and economic realities become apparent by this displacement, as well as our complicity. And while it could be noted that all art that comes from other countries and communities at the Biennale are impacted by a similar type of displacement, in Joseph's work, this positioning is further used as a point of opposition and of articulation.

A black American community, and importantly, the black diaspora that is the subject of *BLKNWS*, is largely absent from the viewing audience in Venice, and so highlights the basis of a non-exchange within the art world as well. This is made explicit by Joseph who has designed the background wall around the dual panel video screens on which *BLKNWS* is broadcast.

Here we see a floor to ceiling photograph of a seated group of black nuns who stare out at the pre-

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1 Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 164–184, orig. pub. *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1972).

dominately white audience now seated in the Giardini (*BLKNWS* is also mounted in the Arsenale where a background image features a group similarly seated black soldiers) and we stare back.² We, those who have comfortably traveled to Venice, are thereby confronted with a racial, ethnic, and economic divide.

BLKNWS accosts the viewer with an awareness of the dominant white ideology at work, not only in the news, but in other white institutions, of which the Biennale is a part. Here we see Joseph's implementation of the principal of a dialectical montage, an operating strategy that characterizes much of *BLKNWS* in its organization of space and time, as well as in its manipulation of content. As famously described by Sergei Eisenstein, dialectical montage employs an oppositional clash between cinematic elements, a clash that results in the rise of a third term and stimulates critical thinking.³ The video *BLKNWS* is composed of music, dialogue, images, and sounds taken largely from found footage. These fragments come from movies, for example, TV news (both actual and staged), music videos, sports events, personal footage, etc. all gleaned from a variety of internet sources including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, In-

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- 2 Joseph has explained that this image is "symbolic of the importance of family, of the importance of visual documentation, of the importance of the gaze, of staring history in the eyes. It is also a reminder of our American superstructure to undermine, erase, ignore and dismantle the black family, black history, black enterprise and, more generally, black assembly." From the brochure of the exhibition *BLKNWS*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, also available at <https://www.thewadsworth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/WA-MATRIX-183-Brochure-6-pages.pdf>.
- 3 Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1969), 61–62. First publ. 1949.

stagram, or Joseph says, “I use anything I can put into a computer.”⁴ Brought to us by a two panel presentation, each screen compares and contrasts its content by linking shots according to oppositional and compatible movement, sound, and mood.

In so doing, Joseph employs the concept of dialectical montage as an operating principle on several levels: in the viewing space, in editing, and then also in the exhibition and the distribution of his work. *BLKNWS* is on view at the Biennale and in other significant venues. It can be seen, for example, at Stanford University, where the installation was originally incubated; or at the Underground Museum, a venue located in a Black and Latino working-class neighborhood of Los Angeles (for the specific purpose of bringing an art museum “within walking distance” of the people) and founded by Joseph’s late brother Noah Davis and his wife Karon; or as a twenty-minute video excerpt at New Jersey City University (NJCU) where it was shown as part of my avant-garde film class. Joseph kindly sent us the episode of his work after I made a call to the Underground Museum and requested it. The screening of *BLKNWS* at NJCU will be the subject of the remainder of my essay.

Joseph’s intention across all these displacements (a strategy that initially included an attempt to broadcast an ongoing *BLKNWS* program on mainstream TV, but the offer was declined) is to present a counter-narrative to the mass media. But it is also

4 Emily Rose, email to author regarding an unpublished essay by Helen Molesworth, August 6, 2019.

Kahlil Joseph, *BLKNWS*, 2018–ongoing.
Installation view at 58th International Art Exhibition
(Arsenale), Venice 2019. Photo by Luke Lynch.
Courtesy of Kahlil Joseph Studio.

an attempt to complete the conditions of a media message as an *exchange* between speaker and listener. Joseph's goal is to open the work, to cause a rupture, and so allow a response, a responsibility.

In 1974 Baudrillard had called for transgressive gestures to counter the mass media, to "smash the code," as he states. To this end, Baudrillard found that the graffiti scrawled on the walls on city streets during the events of May '68 in France countered the hegemony of the media in terms of the people's ability to respond. He writes:

Graffiti is transgressive [...] because it responds *there*, on the spot, and breaks the fundamental role of non-response enunciated by the media [...] It doesn't lend itself to deciphering as a text rivaling commercial discourse, it presents itself as a transgression.⁵

And while it could be argued that today, with our collective access to the internet, we can post our opinions regarding the media any time we want, we are still not on the level of an exchange, moreover, we are detached from a material space and a physical community. Joseph manipulates form and content in *BLKNWS*, presenting found footage in an enervating series of oppositional clashes between sound, image, and meaning. But in finding different venues for exhibition he goes farther, confronting the viewer spatially and contextually

in various educational, art, and regional locations, encouraging channels of communication to open from within the viewing community itself.

The goal of Joseph's work is to allow a response from his intended audience, a response of the audience to the speaker of the message, as an exchange, and within a lived community of viewers. And even if the community is a small, or marginal, this has important symbolic implications, and this is part of the integral structure of *BLKNWS* itself. First to note is that *BLKNWS* itself is not a closed or completed work, but always in the process of being made. With updates and new and material added to the existing work, *BLKNWS* it is not edited by Joseph alone, but by an editorial team comprised of young, diverse individuals.

The project of this team is to always be in the process of discussion with each other, challenging the dominant media with their ideas, and continuously reformulating the piece. In relationship to the wider scope of the media, this is a relatively small gesture, yet it defines of the existence of a community. It says, "we are here." So too, the episode from *BLKNWS* that was submitted to the community of NJCU students initially allowed them to be identified, and ultimately, to speak back, to exchange with the speaker of the work of art. This was encouraged by Joseph who specifically requested to hear what the students had to say about his *BLKNWS*. The students responded by writing him thank you letters, a few of which I have included below. Like the writers of graffiti on the city streets, the response is

immediate and of its place and time. The students speak for themselves through their writings, and in so doing, help to “radically checkmate the dominant order”⁶ because of the change in the discursive model, as Baudrillard had proposed.

To re-cap, Joseph stages a three-pronged attack, a spatial affront in Venice, for example, to foreground the absence of black bodies by his site-specific work, an oppositional strategy to foster critical thinking, and then as several strategies to encourage voiced or written responses among lived members. I believe this impulse to bring the work to the people is what prompted Joseph to send a link *BLKNWS* to NJCU. This began after I attended the Venice Biennale and was duly impressed by Joseph’s work. Returning home, I made a cold call to the Underground Museum and explained that I taught a diverse population of a students at NJCU, many of which were the first in their families to earn a college degree. I also mentioned that I wanted to show the students in my avant-garde film class contemporary work that would inspire their own art making. Joseph commented that he remembered that moment as a student when he realized, in response to a work of art, “I can do that.” Joseph sent us the link. Rather than provide my interpretation of *BLKNWS*, I will offer the students’ responses. The letters below were chosen because of their insightful comments from a particular cultural perspective. They are from a class composed primarily of black and Latino students, all in their late

teens or early twenties. My personal reactions, from my white viewing position, will briefly follow.

Dear Kahlil Joseph,

Thank you for allowing our class to watch your work. It was very interesting and powerful. I just wanted to say that I loved the two videos simultaneously playing side by side. Especially when the two videos were contradicting each other. It really made me pick and choose what to see and when and how much time I wanted to dedicate my eyes and mind to one piece. I didn’t feel like I was “watching” something for my viewing pleasure but rather critically engaging with your piece. I like that all of the media was fairly recent, so your work was something of our time which made it more entertaining to watch as opposed to some old films and news reels. This work really made me think of how scary and cruel the world is. And the future scares me too. It’s funny that our professor showed us your work at the time that she did because I too am planning to make an installation with several videos playing at once. I want to show the madness going on not just in the United States, but all around the world. *BLKNWS* really gave me some more insight into creating my piece. So, thank you again for permitting our class to watch this.

Sincerely,
Ebony Torres

Dear Mr. Joseph,

The exclusive segment of *BLKNWS* shared with New Jersey City University (NJCU) was phenomenal. There were many moments that stood out and brought so much joy, from Maya Angelou on powerful black mothers, to “Unravel the Skin,” inferring how Black women have been underappreciated on film. The music too was so amazing, I tried to Shazam before it went off. I even became so impatient for new music from Frank Ocean because his voice is incredible and soothing, it made me shed a tear. The acknowledgment and celebration of love and marriage were beautiful. From the tears of marrying the love of your life to the joy of spending the rest of your life with them. Almost every meme included was hilarious and adorable like the young girl who has a prosthetic leg and her classmates were excited to see her. I enjoyed the part about the Black activists and public figures who made an impact and who paved the way for all of us. Furthermore, I would like to thank you Mr. Joseph. Thank you for sharing your creativity and art with us. Thank you for bringing me tears of joy, knowledge, and laughter. Thank you for giving me another person to be inspired by, which is you.

Sincerely,
Kenise Brown

Dear Kahlil Joseph,

As a student at New Jersey City University, I've had the opportunity to be exposed to your work. Your ongoing piece, *BLKNWS* impacted me greatly, helping me feel represented and touching parts of me I didn't know existed. It was beautiful to see something so avant-garde, yet so contemporary. It was beautiful to see so many sections of the Black diaspora represented; you've got the range! Black love is not just represented as hetero. It accepts queerness and trans and drag Black love. *BLKNWS* is something I would recommend to any and every college student, but especially Black students in media/art mediums.

Thank you, Kahlil. You've awoken something in me that I never knew was asleep.

Best Regards,
Bianca Paulino

Dear Kahlil Joseph,

Our professor, Vera Dika, showed us an episode of *BLKNWS* in class. It was thought-provoking and had the whole class discussing what interpretations and feelings they got from it, which were all very different from one another. It was nice to see us all be so verbal since it's not always like that. I personally enjoyed the segment about the Uncanny Valley. Humans have feelings of disturbance

when confronted by people and things that are similar to them in appearance—but aren’t convincingly close. Since you included Lil Miquela in the video, I took this to mean how people portray themselves over social media in ways different from what they really are. The final product can be a highly edited and not a genuine self. I think the Uncanny Valley was a metaphor for how people get weirded out by people who are different from them in sexual orientation, color, or appearance. It got me thinking about these things. I just wanted to write down my thanks to the *BLKNWS* team and to Kahlil Joseph for allowing my class to see an episode. It opened our eyes and let us find deeper meanings into these images.

All Best,
Linnett Oliveras

From my perspective, I understand that *BLKNWS* has invited white viewers to enter a black subject position.⁷ I found that I recognized some of the personalities and references presented, but not others. I am familiar with Maya Angelou and Cornel West, for example, and I could acknowledge Angelou’s discussion of the strength of black women,

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7 Arthur Jafa, “In Your Face”, interviewed by Carrie Scott, *SHOWStudio*, publ. November 24, 2017, video, 52:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAkOdkOlAWw>. Jafa discusses how black audiences have been traditionally asked to see the world in media from a white subject position. In *BLKNWS*, and in Jafa’s own work, such *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, the situation is reversed. The white viewer is invited into a black subject position to see from a different world perspective.

and the historically convulsive fact that black women have “nurtured generations of white strangers.” And while I could not have named the musician DC Young Fly or the comedian Charlie Che Matters, I could sympathize with what Matters meant in his comedy routine when he repeated, with differing inflections, the slogan “Black lives *matter ... simply ... matter ...*” noting that this was a rather “low bar to start the negotiations.” I did recall, however, Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* and the scene where the young mother on the slave ship tips backwards and falls overboard while holding her baby in her arms. I remembered originally being saddened and shocked by this moment in Spielberg’s film, but seeing it again in the context of *BLKNWS*, and hearing the responses of my students, brought me to a different level of awareness. The scene on the slave ship in *BLKNWS* is followed by a satellite shot of the oceans of the earth. The feeling of being engulfed, submerged in its vastness was palpable, but then intensified when one of my students, a young mother of a six-month old child, began to cry and said she would do the same rather have her son live in slavery.

BLKNWS’s aim is to allow an exchange between the speaker and listeners, like a graffiti scrawl, and to raise awareness to resist the dominant powers that work to subjugate a people. The “people” here can be seen to refer specifically to the black community, and to other marginalized ethnic or gender groups, and the political, social and economic challenges that face them. But by

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implication, *BLKNWS* also calls for all viewers implicated in the media's system of control and irresponsibility to acknowledge the need for a mutual exchange in all forms of communication.

Mirroring in a Movie: Or on Community Feeling Taking Shape in Vittorio De Seta and Éric Baudelaire

Malvina Borgherini

"I'm so happy when my aunt arrives from abroad ... When I see her I laugh, and feel my tummy flutter like roses in the wind." That was the delicate metaphor articulated by Alaa Al-Asaad, a little boy originally from Acre yet growing up in Burj Al-Barajneh refugee camp, upon his rare brush with a world of grace and kindness. And it is quite emblematic that this metaphor was chosen as title for a volume that accumulated the creative activities of a group of children, fourth generation Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon.¹ Looking carefully in the mirror, observing through a lens the eyes that allow others to see you, trying to describe yourself in words as well as through drawing; these were some of the activities put to the children by Laila Kanafani in the camp on the southern outskirts of Beirut. It was part of an educational project by the Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation.² Struck by Loris Malaguzzi's

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1 Laila Ghassan Kanafani, *Like Roses in the Wind: Self-Portraits and Thoughts* (Beirut: Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation, 2003).

2 GKCF is an NGO founded by Anni Høver (together with some friends, subsequently with her children Fayeze and Laila) on July 8, 1974, the second