

Kameelah Janan Rasheed on research and archiving



January 6, 2017 - Kameelah Janan Rasheed is a Brooklyn-based interdisciplinary artist, former high school public school teacher, and writer working in installation, photography, printmaking, publications, and performance. In addition to her full-time work as a social studies curriculum developer for New York public schools, she is currently an artist-in-residence at Smack Mellon and on faculty at the School of Visual Arts.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2807 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Art](#), [Culture](#), [Beginnings](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Politics](#).

My research started as a kid. Whenever I asked my parents questions, they never gave me an answer. Instead, they'd say, "Go figure it out." I'd ask a question like, "How far is such and such city from this city?" They'd say, "Go do the research." From a very early age, my parents instilled this curiosity, and also some of this rigor, in me.

I grew up in the late '80s and early '90s. We didn't have the internet to the extent that we have it now, but we did have the public library. I spent a lot of time in places where I could gather information, whether it was a library or at the laundromat where I'd look at the information on the bulletin board. I did research in traditional places, but also just by observing.

If I wanted to make sense of where my city was in relation to others, sometimes I would go walking. I would look at a map. I would ask a neighbor. I was always asking questions, and asking multiple people—engaging with different types of people and figuring it out.

I was often bored in school. I did well in school, but didn't feel challenged or stimulated, so whenever I was done early with work, I made up my own curriculum for myself, my own self-directed learning journeys.

Now that I'm an adult, what's really interesting is thinking about the ways that I worked as a very young person, and how they're very similar to the ways I work now.



Detail image of *No Instructions for Assembly*, a solo installation at Real Art Ways in Hartford, CT (2016)

The process of doing research is generative. When someone gives you the answer, there are no rabbit holes, and no accidental findings. What's fascinating to me about research is that you may have one clear question, but in the process of trying to get an answer or resolution, you stumble upon these other things... and they all soon become more interesting.

Right now a lot of the stuff I'm looking at is focused around Biology. I'm looking at invasive species and carnivorous plants, and thinking about cycles of energy and fragile ecosystems. I'm thinking about the way a lot of the ideas we apply to how non-human life exists and interacts can be a lens for how we talk about things like immigration. Or things like segregation. I'm interested in the language of the sciences as a link to understanding contemporary ideas that are part of the so-called social sciences, but that I think have a clear relationship to biology and other sciences.

Sometimes I do research and I don't actually know that I'm doing it. When I first moved to New York City in 2010, I wanted to understand the city. I'd always lived in a small town. Well, I spent one year living in a big city when I was on a Fulbright grant in South Africa in Johannesburg. But when I came to New York, there was a moment of confusion. I used to walk around the city with a voice recorder and a camera and I would literally photograph as much as possible and record sound.

Some of the first stuff that I started to record were people doing street sermons. I wanted to understand the landscape of New York through sound, and what it means for people to declare religious ideas in public spaces, and to have an audience for that. My research can look like just basic sitting and observing. It can look like me going up to a street preacher and asking questions. It can look like me going to the library.

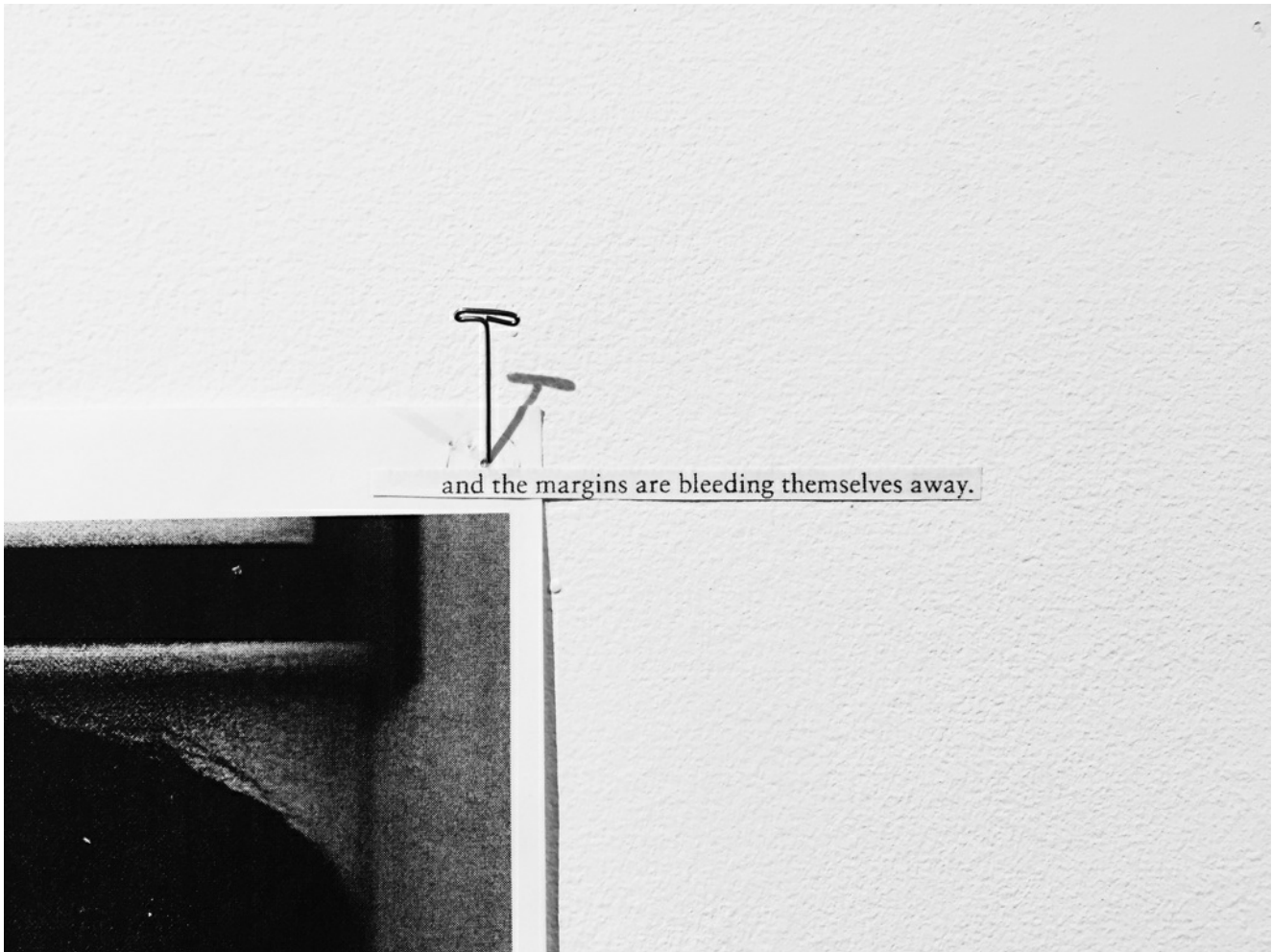


Image courtesy of David Willems Photography / *How to Suffer Politely (and other Etiquette)*, a solo public installation as part of the VOLTA Art Fair (NY) presented by the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art (2016), 10' x 9.6' Vinyl

I'm wrapping up a commission with New York Public Library Lab and Triple Canopy where I was doing research for about a year on early 20th Century Black religious communities. That's very traditional archival research, but I also do things like look at my own family's history through a range of objects. I'm also looking at larger, less personally connected histories of Black people in America through things I find on eBay. I have a collection of about 4,000 found photographs of Black families from the early 1900s until present day.

It's been fun to not always be in the library, but to be actually out on the streets talking to people and engaging with people. This is a form of important research that's not bound by having access to an institution—something that often prevents people from doing research. You don't have a university login or you don't have the right permissions to get into a particular archive or you don't even have the cultural capital to understand how to get into these things. I'm interested in validating all forms of research, whether it's questioning a neighbor or looking at an institutional archive or creating your own archive and then sharing that with people.

I've been thinking about the role of archives historically and how they gathered information for the purpose of controlling people. I'm thinking about that in relation to imperialism and colonialism, where our first libraries, our first museums, our first archives, at least in the western world, come about as a way to collect information on people that are being conquered. It was a way to extend the arm of colonialism, beyond just the fiscal force.



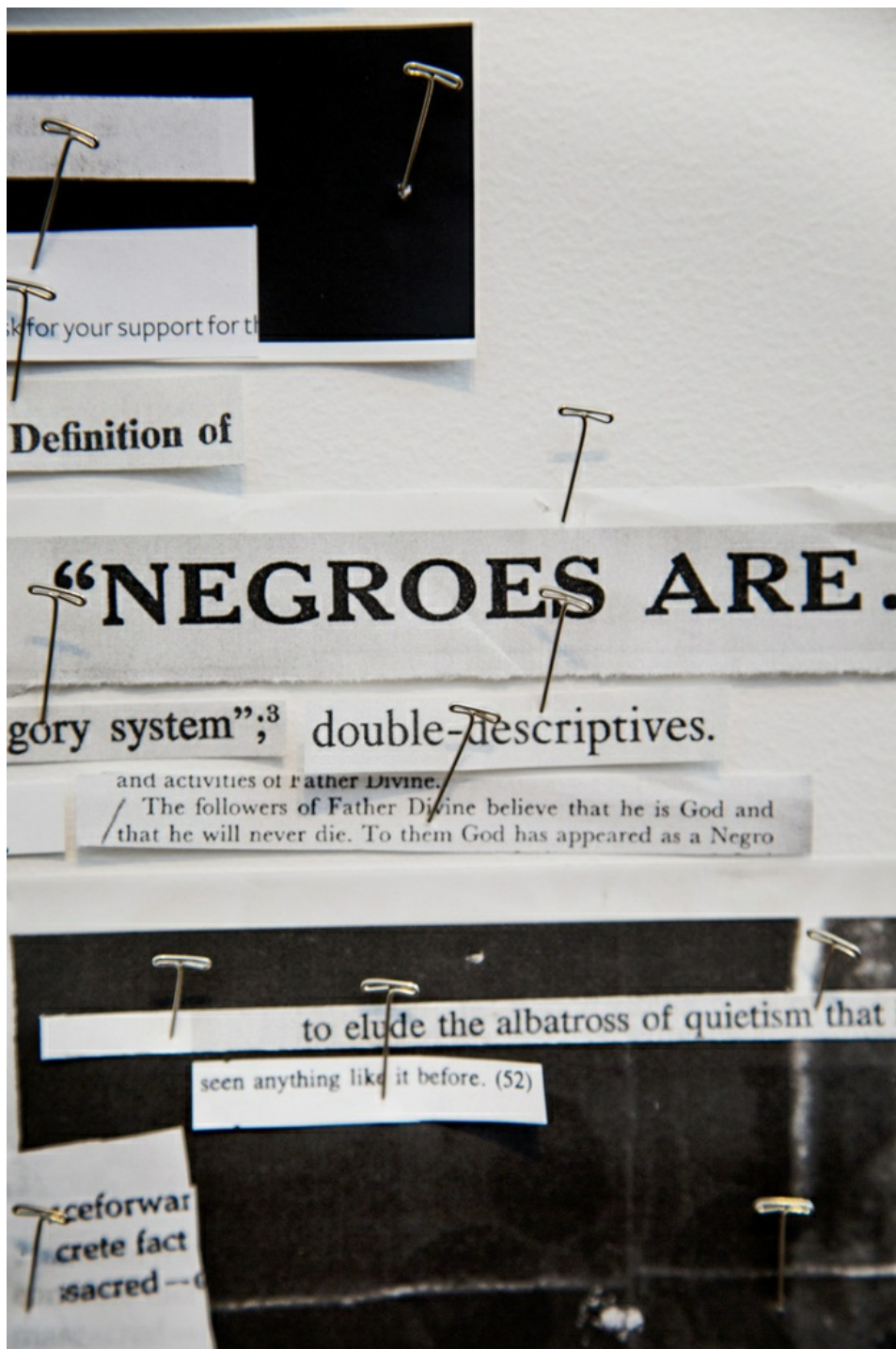
Detail image of *On Refusal*, a solo installation as part of the Fellowship program at A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, NY (2016). Materials include xeroxes, fabric, monoprints, found photographs, self-authored texts, text excerpts from a range of sources, video, and audio. The text fragment, 'and the margins are bleeding themselves away' is from August Kleinzahler's *Ruined Histories*.

I have a collection of pamphlets from people who did sermons both here and from South Africa. I have these 4,000 photos. I have different types of advertisements. I want what I've collected to be free, easily accessible, and mobile.

Right now it's a process of scanning everything, getting it to the dimensions that they need to be, and thinking about dissemination and accessibility. My main goal is to ensure that the materials are accessible for people who want to look at them. If people do want to look at them closely, being able to not only have people come to my house and look, but also being able to set up pop-ups and mobile archival spaces for people to look through things. I also want to talk to people about how they can archive the stuff they have in their house.

I think there's a certain type of professionalism around archiving. It's important, but it also invalidates the ways that people have been archiving for quite a long time. Institutions have taken it on as the thing that gives them the power. But people, particularly Black families, have been keeping photographs in plastic bags for centuries and decades and have been putting photographs in boxes under beds.

There are all these different ways people have been known to document and create archives themselves. I want to validate that and say, "Here are some other ways to do this as well. Here's how you make sure that you own your archives and don't necessarily give it away to an institution who may restrict access to people later."



Detail image of *Source Material for a Poem I've Been Trying to Write about Casual Superlatives, National Progress and Palate Cleansers* , a solo installation as part of the Jerome Fellowship for Emerging Artist at the Queens Museum in Queens, NY (2015)

I feel like all my work revolves around similar ideas. I'm very much thinking about Black life, particularly in America because that's my context, but also throughout the diaspora, and what it looks like, and all the permutations of it. I feel like the work that I'm doing is thinking about all the different permutations of Blackness. But it just happens to be manifested in a different way, or manifested through a different medium, or manifested through a different type of archival research process... I'm always thinking about in what ways am I coming back to this.

Sometimes I'm just really interested in fungi, and that's okay. I'm aware that at this particular moment, it may not be explicitly connected to what I think is the center of my work. But what has happened over time is that I'll make something and I'm like "I

don't know what this was," and then two years later, as I'm sitting there thinking about it, the idea starts coming and I'll be like, "Oh, *that's* how it's connected."

I think about my work as an open circuit, where whenever I create work it's iterative, and whenever I create work there's always a possibility of me not necessarily knowing it connects to everything else that I've made. But I'm open to the possibilities of figuring it out later and creating a visual map either in public talks or through other types of conversations to think about how we map our work within our other systems. Our work becomes its own system and so for me it's quite exhilarating to learn a lot of new stuff.

It's quite exhilarating to hop between different mediums and to hop between different systems of understanding, because I learn a lot in the process. I also feel like it makes me a bit more agile and helps me figure out how to learn quickly and to learn in strategic ways that allow me—not necessarily to master something—but allow me an entry point where I can figure out what exactly it is that I need to know next.

It can be daunting. Like, I don't have time to learn all about invasive species, but I can read about this one particular thing related to invasive species in this one particular part of the world, during this one particular time period and that's going to be important to me to narrow that focus. I love it.

Something I'm thinking through are the ways that I install and the ways that I want my work to live. This past year I did more public talks in the form of lectures. Now I'm thinking about that as being a non-negotiable part of whatever I install. It's important to have a public program attached, because it's important to people who want to engage with the context to have an opportunity to do so. I know this requires more work on my end, but every time I do it, I feel like I learned more. I'm always wanting to learn more about myself and my practice and how work is read and what it means to make work legible.

I'm not sure if you know this, but my background is not in art. I have a B.A. in Public Policy and History and I have a Master's degree in Education. I still work in education full time. I work as a Curriculum Developer and Instructional Coach.

There was a point when I was teaching, where I was trying to do work around articulating ideas and understanding history and understanding continuities. As a history teacher I was like, "Oh, I want to keep doing this work; I have to find another outlet."

I think, for me, it was always a matter of wanting to say the same thing, but in a different language, in some place different from a classroom setting. I wanted to figure out what this would look like if I were to manifest this. What this would look like if I were to write this. What this would look like if I performed it. What this would look like in all these other capacities.

That's how I came back to art. I was really into art all throughout high school and throughout college, but I couldn't figure out how to make it a thing. Now I'm thinking about the things that I want to express, then trying to figure out how to find the medium to express that.

For instance, I wanted to understand publications and book art so I did a residency at the Center For Book Arts. That helped me master a particular type of thing. Then I was like, "Oh I want to also make sense of this in the form of mass-produced printed matter," so I did a residency at the Lower East Side Print Shop.

I've been chasing ways to gain technical skills to do the things that I want to do. I want to ensure that I'm not dabbling for the sake of dabbling, but that I'm dabbling somewhere, going as deep as I can. I'm working alongside and learning from a lot of people to make the things I want to make.

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An Alphabetical Arrangement, performed at Housing Works for Art After Trump (2016)

My job and my art are connected. At a very basic level of economics and capitalism, having a full time job allows me to eat. It allows me a certain comfort. It allows me a certain peace of mind. If I'm working in my studio I might also have to think about health care.

I'm a late bloomer in relation to a lot of people who are in my peer group in that I started making art seriously maybe four or five years ago. I'm a late bloomer in a lot of ways, but I had a full career before I came into the arts and I love teaching.

I love education. I don't know how I would ever leave education. I enjoy speaking. I enjoy the dialect. I enjoy the tough work around it. For me it's important to be engaged in things that I'm passionate about in addition to art. Economically, yes that's important. And it's important for me to stay plugged into things that I'm passionate about, too.

When I'm sitting and I'm at school observing teachers or talking to students or in my office writing or developing curriculums, there's something interesting that happens to me in that I'm constantly in another register for eight hours of the day. Then as soon as I go to my studio after work I have to switch into visual arts mode.

There's a crisscross. If I'm thinking about something, this random thing that happened in world history I'm writing about, and then I go to my studio, there's a moment where I'm kind of like, "Oh that's interesting: this thing about the Mongols that related to this other thing that I've been reading that's related to this other thing that I've been reading." It becomes a hypertext.

I use the word hypertext because of Octavia Butler. She was interviewed around 1996 about hypertext. The guy who was speaking to her asked what she thought about the internet and what she thought about hypertext. She was like, "Oh, I don't really use the internet like that, but I do believe in primitive hypertext." It means that as she creates material she's reading into one thing, listening to this other thing, and floating passively between lots of different registers. This process is generative to her because it then allows her to create something that intimately connects different things that you may not imagine being related.

When I read that I was like, "Oh that articulates why it's important for me to stay where I am. Or why it's important for me to do other things beyond, or different from, making art." It becomes this generative opportunity to think about how these far-reaching things that have nothing to do with visual arts can find their way into my work. I like the challenge of having this un-contained stimuli and input that I then have to find containers or anchors for when I get to my studio.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed recommends:

Fred Moten's 2015 Talk at MoMA entitled "[Blackness and Nonperformance](#)"

Octavia Butler's [Archive](#) at Huntington Library

["Elliptical"](#) by Harryette Mullen

[National Invasive Species Information Center](#)

[@Strange_Animals](#)

Paris Review: Susan Howe, The Art of Poetry, [No. 97](#)

Name

Kameelah Janan Rasheed

Vocation

Artist, Educator, Writer

Fact

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