

Kenya (Robinson) on creating your own opportunities



December 16, 2016 - Kenya (Robinson) is an artist, born in Landstuhl, Germany and raised in Gainesville, Florida, whose practice includes performance, sculpture, and installation. She received an MFA in Sculpture from Yale in 2013, and currently lives in NYC. Her work has been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, The Kitchen, The Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, and the 60 Wall Street Gallery of Deutsche Bank. She documents her work on her Instagram account [kenya9](#).

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3710 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Politics](#).

You got your MFA at Yale, and are very much a contemporary artist, but you're working outside the gallery system. It seems like you've found strategies for doing that.

It's been easy because I'm an outsider. I wish I could say I was forward thinking, but it was just a matter of necessity. As I felt my work get stronger, less and less opportunities arose to be in a group show or whatever. The last four shows I've been in are ones that I basically curated myself. I was kind of a ghost curator.

The first one was "[Pussy Don't Fail Me Now](#)." It was a group show with folks I'd met at [Skowhegan](#). We were talking, and it just seemed like a cool idea to make a show. A big turning point came when I was listening to all of these recordings from the Skowhegan archives. They were talks. One of the things people said that would repeat was: "Oh, we decided to make a show."

That blew my mind because I could think of it as a sculptural object: making a show. Not trying to create this buzz or connect with this particular curator. I'm like, well if you make a show you don't need to have this background in art history. You could construct it the way you would do any other kind of work. That gave me confidence to make something and understand that whether it was an article or an essay or a sound piece or a more traditional exhibition, I could be as present and participatory as I would be if I decided to make something in my studio.



POUNDCAKE, 2016. Cut upholstery foam on wood board.

I'm in the process of writing my artist statement for 2017, and I realized this epiphany that I've come to with regards to my practice is a response to not having any real opportunities when I completed grad school. It was like nothing happened. When I say nothing happened, *nothing* happened. I couldn't get a good job. It was just a lot of "no's."

Part of it was understanding that sometimes that period after grad school is a little funny, but I also knew that there were people who were getting served by the machine. It wasn't a matter of talent or good ideas, it was like they'd been chosen and that was it. I just had to decide: What was I going to do with that? I can't stop making art because it's truly who I am, so I started being more aggressive about creating a space for myself. Okay, nobody's showing my work. Okay, well, I'm going to use Instagram as a platform for that. That way everybody's going to know about my piece, "[The White Man In My Pocket](#)."

Also, I applied to grad school without having a bachelor's degree, so that was the crack of the door-like "Oh, wait a minute... They have all these rules, but they're just suggestions really." That planted the seed for that idea and then when I got a chance, through my relationship with [Amanda McDonald Crowley](#), to go to [Bemis](#) and be a resident, I was like, "Oh, well, yeah, sometimes you have to apply for a residency, but sometimes you don't." That was also another eye-opening experience, that because of my other skills, it gave these

institutional bodies another thing to kind of grab hold of to justify funding me being there.

Around the same time, I participated in a small group show at Rush Arts. The curator was largely hands-off, so that was a thing where I was like, "Well, maybe I could hide behind somebody else while they take the credit, but I could also do all of this stuff myself. I could make it happen."

All those things that came together have continued to inspire, just kind of pushing that envelope and.. I care about vastly different things now as opposed to when I first became a participant in the art world.



CHEEKY LaSHAE, (Robinson)'s alter ego project

You said when some people leave grad school, they're the ones that are chosen. Why do certain people get chosen and certain people don't? What's the criteria?

It's nuanced. We already know that a white artist has a lot more leeway with the kinds of work that they're going to be supported in making. That kind of openness is not as available if you're a Black artist. There's also a kind of quota system. It's like... one, we need to be able to categorize this person. Two, once we find the person that fits in that category.

I am determined to be a contrarian. I think about it, it's like—are there any Black women artists who are contrarians in the contemporary art scene? That are vocally contrarian and actually have some other things to support a more conceptual basis? I like that. I like that possibility. If I'm kind of prickly, I'm also very clear about what I want and how I want to operate. It's all for a reason. It's not just to support some ego.

But I'm also someone who is very interested in service. I'm "thinking" about being a part of the "Out of Line" Series on the High Line this coming summer. Basically, I had a tantrum because I had no sense of why they chose me. I had no sense of what kind of efforts they were going to be making to make this happen. I sent some very typical bullet points, just as an overview, and the person I was working with basically cut and pasted my words, and I was like, no, that's not why I sent those. Those were to hopefully connect with some ideas you already had if you wanted to do this project together.

A lot of my job is convincing the people I'm working with that I want them to work, too. That I'm not just excited to have this opportunity, because I can create so many opportunities of my own, that I'm not impressed by that. I'm impressed by what happens when we work together because that's where the magic happens.

I keep on seeing that and I end up having to be pretty extreme in my communication of it because when I first tell people like, "Okay. I am adept at creating my own opportunities. I want this to be a non-hierarchical relationship and I expect you are as invested as I am or what's the point?" I think I'm pretty clear on that. Then the next time we meet it's like none of that is presented. Then I have to get crazy and be like, "Well if you don't call me and we don't have a conversation about this, then you can forget about it. Fuck it!" Then we ended up having a really uncomfortable but ultimately productive conversation. Whether or not it ends up happening, that's not really what that was about.

When we do decide to work together, I feel like I'm not out here on my own making this stuff and not having any real support. It does feel like, "Oh, well, we're going to give you this... You send us this budget, we send you this check." It's like, "No. That's not how it's going to work because you know your audience better than I do. You know what you're trying to achieve as an institution better than I do. But I know my work better than you do. If we join forces we can make this work and this experience really fruitful."

Do you think the institutions that are giving money basically just want to hand the money off versus having to put more work into it?

I think that was the endgame of having applications in the first place, because there are so many ways to know about artists, but if you actually choose the artist and something goes awry, or they do something that you don't like, you can blame it on the selection panel. That's why it's outsourced. I think in many ways that's very cowardly.

Here you are ensconced in this institution that has a lot of support and you can't take a risk? Like no risk at all? That seems fucked up. It seems like a real pimp-ho situation, and I'm not about it. It's got to be consensual.

What do people expect from you as a Black woman who's an artist? Do people have a preconceived idea of what kind of art you're going to make?

I mean the fact that I don't showcase Black figures in my work is problematic for a lot of people because they keep on saying, "Black bodies," and stuff, which is offensive to me. But that's how the mainstream has positioned itself. I don't even believe in Afrofuturism. I'm not going to co-sign to that when that's a term coined by some white scholar. Why do I have to believe in that?

On many West African instruments they have these things—these little doo-dads, basically—that they attach to things so that when you play it, even if you're a virtuoso, there's always going to be this kind of hum that's out of your control. That's like the symbol of the divine. Is that Afrofuturism? Not to me. It really communicates something much bigger than that, but not only have white people coined the term and developed it as a discipline, but Black people have co-signed it. If you are in the mindset of not co-signing that or always questioning it, you're going to be kind of difficult to deal with. I think you're going to be a problematic figure, even if you're just really presenting a critical argument.

Do you think there's a way to change the art system as it is or is the way just to operate outside of it? Is it something that you think can actually be changed at this point or is it too complicated?

I think that it's always changing and we won't know until... who knows? There are so many things that I get a chance to do because I am demanding, that I think are going to affect the future. I'll give you an example. Doreen Garner and I do this radio show and we've been doing some live events. We were asked to present artist Q&As for four artists of which Doreen is one, showing at MoCADA currently.

So I get the e-mail or whatever and I'm already seeing that the exhibitions coordinator is very young. I don't really want to do stuff unless it's going to push me, challenge me, or create another platform for me to share the work, so I'm feeling like I don't think he really knows enough. I can tell him, but that's going to be a lot of work. First I was like, I don't want to do it and Doreen was like, "Put the gun down," because I'm like, "Kill them all." She's like, "No, put the gun down." That's kind of what we say to each other when we're ready to go off. It's like, put the gun down it's not worth it.

So I got a chance to think about it and I was like, you know what, this is an opportunity to educate him, because I do have some experience. I can say, "Okay you need to make sure that you reach out to press people. Everything that you do should, in fact, be portfolio-worthy, because you don't know how long you're going to be at this place. I'm going to do the best job that I can. It's going to be excellent, and I expect the same from you." I don't think anybody had ever said that to him. No one had ever said, I'm going to put in work and I expect you to put in work. Not just for my own ego, but because it's going to be good for you, and it's going to be better for the work. I think that's one way of changing things.

I guess one of my largest criticisms is this costume of altruism that a lot of institutions put on. I actually wish they would take it off sometimes, because the reality is that they have a very specific reason why they do the things that they do. Most often it's not because they want to influence culture in a significant way. They just want to exist as a mechanism for creating wealth. I actually don't have a judgement on that. I think there is a lot to be discussed.

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One time, Andrea Fraser came to speak when I was in school and she started crying at a certain point in her presentation. I was really kind of disgusted by it. I had written an article about white women crying and I was just kind of over it. I was telling my friend this on the phone and she's like, "When did she cry?" I was telling her and she was like, "Oh my gosh. She cried at the same time when I saw her give that talk." So of course after we're able to have lunch, I called Andrea on it. I was like, "What do you think about the performativity of tears in connection with the fact that you're a white woman?" She was like, "Oh, I don't think it was a performance." I was like, this is the kind of schizophrenia that is so damaging to real support and development of culture. It's actually okay that you used that as a performance.

So one time I tried it out because I've been developing a healthy sense of entitlement. One of the easiest ways for me to get there at the beginning was to be like, what would a white woman do? I would just do that and then shit would change. Crying in public was this thing that just culturally wasn't part of my upbringing, but I've used it to great effect. I used it to great effect in dealing with a cell phone bill, and it was shocking. I just engaged that performativity with whoever was on the other end of the line and since I was performing, they were going to perform too. I think that's a much more interesting conversation than trying to be in denial.

I think that's true in many conversations that could actually change the course of how we utilize and create this art world. We could actually use a tool of authenticity to... I'm not saying that it would be any more equitable. I'm not saying that there's still not going to be people chosen by a set of gatekeepers, but if the conversation veered toward authenticity, then other voices could get heard just by virtue of that act. Then another group could choose, a group that maybe doesn't have the art history degree or the appointment at a museum or the dollars to collect million dollar pieces. I can't put all my trust in somebody who doesn't know how much a gallon of milk costs.

Do you think as an artist, the process of going to school, getting an MFA and all of that, is useful because it teaches you the system and you have a community of other artists going through the same thing? Or do you think that at this point it's not necessarily useful thing to get a degree?

I flip flop on this one because my experience was so bad in terms of actually being at art school in the sculpture department. There were so many layers to it. It was almost comedic in nature, but that extreme really jump-started a new way of thinking for me. I feel like if I hadn't gone to grad school, I would've been one of the chosen, because I would've probably been making the same work and I was kind of on that cusp. I'd had that article in *The New York Times* and I'd had that performance at The Kitchen. I got the phone calls. It was like, "Okay, can you come by the studio? This is Kara Walker," and you're like "Whoa, this is amazing!" I certainly would've been beguiled by that because I didn't know any better.

But I had a real life experience and it was very extreme. Losing a parent and going through that at the same time was really extreme, but the scales fell off my eyes. It just didn't make any sense for me to pretend like this was cool. It didn't make any sense for me to pretend that somebody was smart and had a critical point of view when they didn't. I don't know if I would've gotten that without going to grad school, honestly. It took me out of the space of New York, number one. Number two, it reminded me that it was a corporate body. The only thing that I could compare it to was being in a work environment, with the kind of politics that would go on and how you'd have to protect yourself if somebody didn't like you.

I was able to have an experiential education, so I think that grad school can do that, but you could also find that in other spaces. I would caution anybody to be intentional about getting that knowledge, though. It's almost like deciding to go to college. Like okay, you don't have to go to college but you need to do something that requires some kind of commitment and where you don't necessarily get a return on your investment right away. I think that's a worthwhile exercise. If you go to Italy and learn to make shoes, that could give you a taste of it. Then maybe you decide, "Okay, now I'm going to spend two years trying to start a business."

Having gone to Yale, I'm like, man, I'm glad I went because I had a very specific reason why I wanted to go to that particular place. I wasn't even trying to play around and apply to a bunch of different places. I only applied to that one place. If you are applying to a bunch of places, you need to be applying to the place that will pay you to go there. There's no reason for you to pay. I can't co-sign that. I don't think you should go into more debt.

In the art world, success is often more important than seeing how things work and pushing back against them. Having the blinders removed makes it a more complicated thing. Do you think you can have success on your own terms the way that you're currently doing it?

I think I gave you a little mention of that epiphany about like, "Oh, I thought I was going to be rich." I really did. I really did. But I'm understanding that there are other things that are much more important to me. Not wanting to be rich gives me a lot more flexibility because I can't be plied with that. I can't be convinced to not speak up because I might not have this opportunity or whatever. I'm like, "Do you have the qualities that I'm trying to nurture in myself?" I'm trying to follow through with what I say I'm going to do. If I can't do it, I want to be able to be transparent about that. It's very difficult to build those kind of skills in the social world we live in unless you practice it and you have a mirror to it.

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qualities that I'm trying to nurture in myself?"

I think those kinds of boundaries mean that you have a smaller net to fish with, but you get fried fish. I mean, shit, that's what I thought. I thought I was going to use art as a means for class mobility. When I went to school, I was like "Mm-hmm, I'm gonna go get this terminal degree and then I'm going to go teach somewhere." Because I can teach. I'm a really great educator. So I was like, "Oh yeah I'm going to do that and blah blah blah." The universe or whatever learned me real quick that that's not why I'm an artist.

There are plenty of other ways to get rich. I could just marry some white guy that I don't really like. You know, just close my eyes when we have sex. I don't want to live that kind of life. I think that defining success for yourself in real terms is important. You know what, it's okay if that's what you want to do, but don't tell me you weren't performing tears. Don't tell me that you didn't have class mobility in the back of your mind or performed authenticity when you chose your life partner. Chicks in the hood will at least tell you, "I want to have a baby with him because I knew we would have cute babies." You know what I mean? At least they'll be that honest.

Kenya (Robinson) recommends:



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I heart BBQ. I consider Jim's in Omaha among the best.

Name

Kenya Robinson

Vocation

Artist

Fact

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Medical Cannabis ID Card



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