Terence Nance on getting past the gatekeepers



January 27, 2017 - Terence Nance is an artist and filmmaker born and raised in Dallas, Texas. His first feature film, the genre-defying *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty*, was released in 2012. In addition to releasing a series of short films and prepping his next feature project, Nance also stages performance pieces. His most recent pieces involve doing a series of repeated Google searches in front of a live audience.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3373 words.

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You're known as someone whose work defies and subverts the notion of genre. How did this way of working—combining narrative film, music, animation, etc—evolve for you?

I think it was naiveté because I was in college, and I just didn't really know any different. I didn't know how movies were made; I didn't know what a director was; I didn't know what a producer was. I just sort of thought they happened. I knew from a technical perspective how you make a photograph, how you record a sound, make music, all that kind of stuff. I think what it became is a product of that naiveté and construction based on my instincts. It was about doing what I wanted and saying what I wanted to say and trying to impress a woman. I think that the structure is derived from the combination of those two things, really wanting to impress somebody and not knowing anything about how movies are actually constructed.

I think things move forward or backwards by accident, essentially. It's like mutation. Evolution is just the result of some random protein that decided to do *this* instead of *this*—and now we have five fingers. That feels like the best description for what happened to me, because I was very unaware of it as it was happening. I wasn't intentionally trying to even make a feature film. I was just making *something*. I thought it would be five minutes long and it came out like an hour and a half. That's just what it was.

When you were a kid, did you have the sense of what sort of creative path your life might take? Were you always making things?

It was patterned for me. My mother is an actress and she directs theater. I watched her doing that while I was growing up. My older brother's a singer, my dad sings a lot and he plays drums, all of my uncles are professional musicians. That was very normalized for me, a creative life. But nobody is doing movies, and nobody explained to me how a movie was made. My dad's a photographer by trade also, so I really understood how photographs were made and why you decide to memorialize something.

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I didn't personalize the identity of an artist. I maybe still haven't done that, but definitely as a kid, I never thought that. I knew I was good at drawing without people having to teach me, but I didn't think of that as my identity necessarily. I originally wanted to be an engineer because I knew how to take things apart. I still don't even know what engineers actually do. I didn't think about being an artist though. I think that I'm still in the process of figuring it out. The only thing I do know is that it's very much like a bodily function. The way it happens to me—the way art happens to me—is that it comes from somewhere through me, and I try to get out of its

way. I think that that's probably closest to a process of eating and breathing. Inhaling and exhaling.

After your first feature got so much positive attention, did you struggle with what you should make next? How did you navigate that?

I don't remember people telling me, "You should do this now." However, a guy who's a good friend of mine, a super great person, was like, "I know your instinct is to do something completely the opposite of what you just did, but really you should do basically *exactly* what you just did, but make it a little more accessible or structurally traditional." I think he even offered to finance something for me in that conversation. He had been drinking. I was like, "Nah."

For me, all that pressure to do something is self-imposed by me as a person who has eyes and ears. I was seeing what other filmmakers did, seeing other people who had crashed and burned with their second films. I remember the guy who made *Donnie Darko*—people loved him at first, then they hated him. I kept thinking, "How does all of this apply to me?" That kind of thinking is natural, but not productive at all. It slows you down.

When my first film came out I already had my next film written, or I had the first draft of it. I've been going back and forth trying to get it made. It's been a process. I used to have some anxiety around the feeling that the accessibility to funding—something I may have been afforded because of the success of my first film—had a time limit on it. That feeling of needing to strike while the iron was hot, needing to make something else quickly while people were still interested in me—eventually I realized that it wasn't a real thing. It was something I had invented for myself.

Also, about 80% of the people who respond positively to *Oversimplification* are in high school. At least the people who come up to me and are like, "Yo, I loved it," they're always like 13 or something. People are still asking me, "When is it coming out?" I'm like, "Five years ago!" I think that that's why there's no real truth to the timing thing. People are still discovering that film. The work is out there. It isn't going away. Realizing that has been good because the time has allowed me to get back to what's most fundamental and foundational about my process, which is the channeling aspect. I want to fortify that dynamic when entering into this next piece. Also, had I made another feature film right away, too much of it would have been related, or been some kind of echo chamber, of what my first film was.

You've also used this time in between features to make smaller, more concentrated projects and short films. I would imagine that'd be liberating, not to have to wait four or five years to get out these ideas in the form of another full-length feature.

I think that it could be that. Sometimes it functions as that. I'm happy with the stuff that I've made, but at the same time it's a double-edged sword in that it's an opportunity to say something in a much lower-stakes space. There's a way of making features that doesn't generally happen because of how there's no access to the money. There's no fluid access to it. Every time you have to go out and get it. It feels like cutting your toe off and trying to throw it across the Atlantic. Getting financing is some crazy labyrinthian humanly impossible process, until you get to a certain tipping point of fame or notoriety… and even then.

I've plugged the creative gap with other things. I'm making a lot of music. I've been producing and trying to mentor other filmmakers. It's a dynamic I'm not entirely at peace with, but it's the reality I'm working with. I'm not entirely at peace with it because I think that energy is energy. If that energy wasn't going one place it would go another, and I would much rather those short films I've made to have been features. I didn't figure out how to do it differently at the time.

With the amount of resources I had, I created a short. I made what was possible at the time. If I had it to do over again, I'd find a way maybe to make that as a feature, because I think the cultural space that's reserved for features is different. Art is a conversation. Making the feature is starting the conversation in a way that maybe more people will join it, whereas when making a short maybe less people will join that conversation. Short films aren't given the same cultural weight.

Thinking about your audience is tricky. Who is this really for? Who benefits from seeing this? How will they see it?

My favorite screening of *Oversimplification* was in a prison. It was an audience of mostly black men. Seeing them watching the film and trying to process the function of it and the vulnerability involved in that scenario was powerful and interesting. They screened it in sections and then talked about it in groups. It was this profound lesson for me and my understanding of how in making something, my unawareness or willful turning away from engineering it for a specific thing creates a focused characterization and world-making that hints at operating at a very specific frequency for very specific people. I think that having, no pun intended, a literally captive audience of black men who had to process letter writing with partners who they were estranged from in these broken emotional spaces was relatable for that movie in a way I could never have anticipated. It was an alignment that the culture of independent film doesn't fluidly enable. You realize it's on you, the filmmaker, to seek out that alignment. How do I start to facilitate that?

And how do those thoughts affect what you decide to put your energy into making?

I know that for myself, I try to treat making art like spiritual practice. The process is interior in a way that has to only serve one god or one master and whatever that is is internally articulated and defined. You try and tune out the other stuff. The first audience I remember trying to cater to was my mother. I'd make things and think, "Will my mom think that I'm a misogynist for saying this?" and then it's like "Get out of my head, mom!" You need all of those voices out of your head.

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Extrapolating that on a larger scale, most movies you see at a theater are literally engineered for the conception of how an audience should reliably react, even a specific audience, like 14-year-old boys. I find the pseudoscience of focus groups to be something like phrenology. It's a system of oppression. It's based on these facts about psychology, but then it extrapolates all of this bullshit and creates this strange dogma for rationale. "No, the ending has to be fucking like *this*, or this kind of audience—an audience known to buy these kinds of products—will never accept it!" That kind of movie making is profoundly disrespectful to humans. We're so complex in terms of how we take in information and process it, that you can't predict it, and even if you understood that complexity, we mutate. We literally mutate. Trying to predict those mutations and then cater to them is just disrespectful and the opposite of what we should be doing as artists. For me, I try and express whatever is yelling the loudest inside me and essentially just shit it out.

You've also been doing performance pieces as of late. 18 Black Girls Ages 1-18 Who Have Arrived at the Singularity and are Thus Spiritual Machines $1 in an edition of $97 quadrillion utilizes web searches and Google algorithms in a way that's really interesting—you're conducting a public search that leads you from one thing to the next in a way that's fairly unpredictable for both you and the audience. It also feels very personal.

It's a very personal thing to basically be Googling in public. Being in your browser has created a digital bathroom where you can just be naked and look in a version of a mirror. For me that dynamic of being in the bathroom in public is interesting, because some of the stuff that comes up on the predictive search is tragic—often it's hyper-violent—so the extent to which I might read it in detail alone is very different than how much I might read it in public. I'm doing these methodical searches based on ages, which often generates this uncomfortable sexual imagery about kids. If I'm reading it in public, it's like, "Oh, this is getting really sexual. How long is it okay for me to do that?"

The online searches in this performance piece reveal a kind of clickable truth, because all of that data is ostensibly true. Then it becomes how you extrapolate meaning from it. It all feels so true because the search data says that when somebody Googles "9 year-old black boy" everybody is searching for twerking. Or murder. Does that actually say anything? If I'm searching for "9 year-old black boy" and these are the most popular search results that instantly come up—things about a 9 year-old black boys being murdered—does that mean that, "Oh

everybody is having a white guilt pity party and wants to lacerate themselves by reading about poor 9 year-old black boys who've been murdered?" Or maybe it's not a white guilt thing, maybe it's all black people searching to memorialize murdered boys or indulge in some kind of fictive kinship thing. You can't ever really know, so it's weird thing.

When you do this performance, is there the expectation at the end that you'll talk about it? Or is it like, I guide you through this experience and then you make of it what you will?

I would rather not talk about it, but I think that there's probably going to be a Q&A most of the time. I was thinking about answering all of the questions with Google queries.

There is this widely-held belief that the hardest thing about making movies has to do with the fact that there are these gatekeepers—usually in the form of financiers—who basically hold the keys to the castle. More and more you see people trying to circumvent that. I think of a movie like *Tangerine*, which was shot on iPhones. What advice do you have for young filmmakers who are trying to maybe work outside of the established system?

I try and tell people to focus on the next step. Focus on the project. I do think that the principal battle in life is usually against oneself and finding a way to finish the work. A lot of the struggle to make films obviously has to do with money. As for the gatekeepers, I think that it's important to acknowledge them and then strategize around them. Every filmmaker of a certain generation talks about reading Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* book and being like, "Oh shit! You can just do it?" There's no Darren Aronofsky without that, there's no Wes Anderson without that, a host of people just took that example, that model, and applied it to whatever their situation was.

Inherent to that model is just taking the first step that's available to you. I do think the gatekeeper element is more complex and tyrannical than production funds. That's the first bottleneck, obviously. It's a bottleneck to even get something that costs "nothing" done. I was in school at the time I made my first film so I had access to camera equipment. If I didn't have that I wouldn't have been able to make the movie at all. That was before iPhones.

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Maybe I would have found another way, but maybe it would have taken longer. As it was, it took seven and a half years to make that film; without access to equipment, maybe it would have taken 10 years. I'm the type of person that would have been happy getting it done on *any* timetable, but it seems like an injustice that it was still so difficult from a financial perspective to get it done, even when a lot of things were free. A lot of people aren't in the position of being one of the 10% of students who get accepted into NYU. It's a crapshoot. All the layers, the bottleneck regarding production funds, is important to address institutionally.

I think the other layer to address is that once you've made it—especially for young black people who are imaging blackness or otherness, particularly in ways that are disquieting or uncomfortable for white people—there are other barriers. *Tangerine* is an example of a film that is not disquieting or uncomfortable to white people, as excellent as it is. I think that it's very much how white people are comfortable imaging black people and have understood us to exist from their point of view. That is in no way to disparage what it is as a piece of art because it's amazing, but for films that are *not* that, the second layer of gatekeeper is the distribution and marketing space that could either render your film hyper-visible or completely invisible.

BAM is doing a retrospective on black women filmmakers in February. I feel like maybe one or two of the films, *Daughters of the Dust*, and maybe one of the other films haven't been available for the last 25 years to see *at all*. I've been lucky enough to have seen some of them randomly in places, and they're amazing films. They are of as high quality as any of the films that were produced around that time, but nobody's seen them because black women made them. At that time—and even now—white people were not comfortable with these kinds of depictions. I think that that has not changed. That layer of the distribution situation is real and it is also international.

There were sales agents in Europe who told me specifically, “Nobody wants to see a black American films.” And they didn’t think they were saying something racist. They thought that they were just articulating a truth.

When you first encounter that high level of gatekeeping, it’s just like, “Huh? I didn’t even know this level existed!” It was like playing a video game and you’re like, “There’s somebody *past* the Donkey Kong dude? There’s another level I have to beat now?” So, I think that that’s the next one we have to address. There are a finite number of white dudes—about 40 of them, actually—who can distribute a film on 3,000 screens and green light that decision. You have to understand that that barrier exists and that there is a tyranny to it. You just have to know that it is there and you’re going to have to do devise a strategy around that.

Do you think it’s important or useful to pay attention to what people say about your work?

Depends on the people. As a general rule I think that that’s a very personal thing for different artists. For me, I like to process how legible my side of the conversation is. I see it as very much like an oratory, or something like that. There’s a million ways of presenting yourself and your message, your story, your experience, but there’s a metric around the legibility of it. The only way you can know that is by hearing people’s questions or responses to it. If you try to make a horror movie and your goal is, “I want this to feel really scary,” and then you show it and people are laughing or smiling and kissing each other, that’d be really interesting. It means your intention may not be legible. When you’re talking, there are all kinds of intended messages that are coming with what you’re saying that you aren’t even conscious of—and the same thing happens with movies. I’m interested in all of the stuff that you *don’t* know you’re even saying but that comes through.

Terence Nance recommends:

My brother Norvis Junior’s Music
Movie: The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith
Museum: MoCADA
Website: Kimberly Drew and Black Contemporary Art
This project by Tayarisha Poe, Selah and the Spades

Name
Terence Nance

Vocation
Artist, Filmmaker

Fact

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