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# Interview: Mendi & Keith Obadike

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***Mendi and Keith Obadike are interdisciplinary artists whose music, live art, and conceptual Internet artworks have been exhibited internationally. Their works proposes inquiry into the intersections between digital, social and cultural networks as it relates to blackness. Their work generated much discussion online and offline when they offered Keith's blackness for sale on eBay in 2001. More recently, I have been inspired by their vigilance and optimism***

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***especially in the face of many of the issues raised by #blacklivesmatter, but also the joy that seems to abound from their (working) relationship. Mendi and Keith Obadike's work is currently featured in the landmark exhibition Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966) at Whitechapel Gallery, London.***

**Here is our conversation:**

**Erin Sickler:** At the time you began working on the web, digital art was rarely absorbed into the more mainstream art world. Even now, brick-and-mortar venues have a hard time presenting media-based art in a way that does not diminish it. As early adopters, can you talk a little bit about “performing” in virtual spaces (as in Keith’s 2001 project where he sold his blackness on ebay) and how that has translated into performing in “real” spaces, and vice-versa.

**Mendi & Keith Obadike:** We moved through many zones to arrive at this sound centered practice that we have today. When we began we wanted to find our own way for music, language, and media to work together. We thought we might make a new kind of opera. We started talking about this around 1993, but we were already heavily involved in separate practices. Informed by a lot of experimental music and video work from the 60s & 70s and our experience with computers, we started seriously working online in the mid 90s. Working online was a simple way for us to combine our work in music, art and literature in one accessible frame. We were not living in New York at the time, so it was also a way for us present our projects to a large audience little or no institutional support. As we learned the language and nuances of the early world wide web, we began to explore all of the ways one might perform in this new space. We did live streams, animated gifs, text-based email projects, and sound pieces. All of those lessons (about communicating scale, giving a sense of register/tone, and projecting your energy in media) informed and enabled the work we would later do in brick and mortar spaces.

In recent years there have been attempts by museums to grapple with that period’s digital work. It is difficult and necessary work for museums to do. However, there is still a tendency for museum projects to focus on the visual works. Much of the interesting performance, sonic, literary, or code focused work has not been thoroughly explored in a major museum show. But fortunately there has been some decent writing done about the period, so some of the work has been historicized outside of the museum context. Interestingly, we are now in a couple of large group exhibitions that might really make a difference in how the older digital practices are enfolded into and understood against the mainstream. One exhibition is Come As You Are: Art of the 1990’s, curated by Alexandra Schwartz, originating at the Montclair Art Museum. The other is Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966) at the Whitechapel Gallery, curated by Omar Kholeif. Two very

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Superhighway (2010-1999) at the Whitechapel Gallery, curated by Umar Khattori. Two very different, but interesting approaches to a historical survey.

**Erin:** Do you have any rituals or habit that you use when starting a new project?

**Mendi & Keith:** We might not describe our process as involving unique rituals, but over the years you do notice patterns in your own thinking. Our work is usually activated by these three fundamental touchstones: blues, curiosity, and love. However, our process is never exactly the same. It often involves elements that might on the surface seem contradictory or disparate. Many times it is a mix of heavy research, intuitive introspection, and a great deal of strategic planning, often to create a platform for some improvisation.

**Erin:** You grew up together and you are partners in life and in art. One of the main reasons I wanted to speak to you, is because it all seems so seamless and quite beautiful from the outside. Can you talk about the benefits and challenges of working together so closely?

**Mendi & Keith:** Well, we assume most artists think of life as art. We know for us that this is the case. It is just that some part of this life we live together is designed to present to the public. Our practice of living together informs our creative work. Our creative work also informs how we live (and speak) together. Our art partnership endures because of our deep reverence for creative collaboration as a human activity and we share a core belief that a special kind of knowledge is produced when one engages with good art. We organize our life around these beliefs.

**Erin:** In the past, you've used blacknetart.com as a web domain. I am wondering if you talk a bit about your relation, if any, to net.art, which loosely describes artists who emerged out of hacker culture in the 90's, and how your work stands in relation to those early digital communities. But also, what sense of responsibility do you inherit as contemporary artists of color, in terms of 're-examining collective cultural experiences or memories for what is covered over or lost?

**Mendi & Keith:** To some degree we did come from this 90s scene of artists, hackers and designers. In other ways we were on our own. What was great about that time is that you could be on your own and still be heard/seen by someone. Much of the early net.art community was in Europe or focused on what was happening with a small group of artists in Europe. It seemed a bit narrow to us. We had our own aesthetic. And while we were influenced by 1st generation global sound and media artists and Black British media artists of the 80s, we were working out some distinctly American stuff in our early projects. At that time in much of the net.art world there was an inability to talk about identity in an informed way, or even to learn the lessons of the 70s regarding ephemerality, representation, or a fetishizing of the tools. We had our own strategies and

Black.net.art was one way to make it plain. The name was inspired by a shop that Mendi's parents, who were academics, had in the 70s called *Blackness Is*. It was the kind of place where you could buy an array of African or African-American objects, from high art to kitsch, that spoke to identity as new notions of blackness were being tested from the streets to the academy. So we saw the Black.Net.Art label that we launched not as 60s Black art redux, but a space where these questions about identity, aesthetics, and authenticity could be explored through projects.

**Erin:** Your work confronts “race” as a kind of code or technology, and literature often figures as a primary source, as in your recent project *Blues Speaker* for James Baldwin. Can you list some of the texts that have made the most impact on you? Recently or in your childhood?

**Mendi & Keith:** In the 1990s we began calling the technologies of race (among other things) “social filters,” to think through the ways that technological and social dynamics on Internet and in digital culture were grounded in older cultural patterns. While racial discourse is of course implicated in our projects about social filters, we have always been interested to think about who gets to belong and who does not and what the barriers are to belonging. Race is one of the many technologies that delimit this belonging, but because our work is sometimes allegorical, there are also other issues explored in the work. That said, we're often using the resources offered by African diasporic thinkers -- Igbo, African-American and other African writers.

Mendi + Keith Obadike - *Blues Speaker* [for James Baldwin] (2015)



We both luckily grew up surrounded by the great literature and music of our time. While we didn't set out to look for writers to engage in our own work, the pieces have emerged organically. Blues Speaker for James Baldwin is our meditation on what Baldwin tells us in his work about listening, to each other, to music, and our world. Blues Speaker is a 24 channel sound installation spread across the glass facade the New School's University Center in New York. It turns the building into a large speaker. For us it is a reimagining of what the blues could be. Many of sounds in the work are built from a system we developed to derive pitches from letters in Baldwin's name.

We have also used a reworking of Toni Morrison's Nobel acceptance speech of in a praise song published a few years ago. Morrison has greatly influenced our thinking and our career. She heard about our earlier work from computer music pioneer Paul Lansky and generously offered us a residency in a program that she organized at Princeton. Our conversations and that residency made new things possible for us in the work. We actually started our opera Four Electric Ghosts in her residency. That piece mashed-up elements from Amos Tutuola's novel My Life in the Bush of Ghosts and Toru Iwatani's video game Pac Man.

We used the words of philosopher and activist Angela Davis in a four channel sound work entitled Albedo, commissioned by the American Studies Association. We used a small passage from her to frame an original narrative and soundscape. We presented this work as a live surround sound mix at an event at the Washington Hilton Ballroom and Davis was present. It was a big deal to meet her. In a strange twist of fate this hotel was the same one where Davis' old political nemesis Ronald Reagan was seriously wounded decades earlier in an assassination attempt by John Hinckley.

We are currently working on a piece using some material from Octavia Butler's archives. We are really excited about this piece and plan to show it on the West Coast next year.

**Erin:** You've used the word "furtive movement" in relation to "Stop and Frisk" policies and I wonder if you can talk about the "furtiveness" or oblique strategies you apply when it comes to translating sensitive data, particularly about African-American bodies, into art (as in the NUMBERS STATION or when using Ida B. Wells' lynching statistics). I am thinking in particular here of the kind of abstraction or dissonance that comes out of both 20th Century avant-garde music but also hip-hop and other popular styles, how the remix or the dub offers, not unlike

poetry, a kind of refusal to tell the story straight or to tell only one story at a time.

**Mendi & Keith:** How does one meditate on a database of massive violence or incredible loss, as a way to hold it, frame it, or get through it? What might this sound like? These are questions we have been asking ourselves as we started this series of Numbers works. We studied sonic laments, dirges, and funeral chants from around the world. And yes, furtive in the title is both a reference formal elements in the spatialization and transmission of the sound work as well as to language used by the NYPD to justify police stops. The NYPD has said that “furtive movements” by people could be a legitimate reason to stop someone on the street. Of course this is extremely subjective, so practically anyone could be stopped and violated at anytime. This is how we end up with almost 90% of the stops being done to Blacks and Latinos at the peak of the Stop and Frisk era. In this piece we used self-reported Stop and Frisk data from the NYPD (via the ACLU) as a kind of score. We created pulsing and panning tones tuned to the numbers of stops reported for each quarter and each precinct over the years and mixed them in a dub-like fashion. We then performed a live chanting of the numbers and mix of the soundscape at the Ryan Lee Gallery in Manhattan. It was also transmitted live over shortwave radio. We think of this way of getting at the numbers not so much as a refusal of a “straight story”, but as a new way to feel something that might be hard to hold as raw data.

**Erin:** What are the things you do to stay positive, especially these days, when the news seems to be one steady stream of violence and hatred?

**Mendi & Keith:** We think in times like these it becomes even more important to choose your media and limit your intake carefully. The flow of bad news can be overwhelming if you forget to step out of the stream. We stay focused because we know we are here to do this work. We know what art can do, and we are empowered by the lasting energy of the folks who came before us.

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