

Non-rational Methodologies: Grace Ndiritu Interviewed by Jareh Das

A multi-disciplinary artist seeks to create alternative communities.



Grace Ndiritu, *Black Beauty: For a Shamanic Cinema*, 2021, two-channel film installation, twenty-nine minutes. Photo courtesy of Una Prescencia & Post-Hippie Productions.

Grace Ndiritu moves between performance art, activism, shamanism, ethical fashion, publishing, and filmmaking with the central concern of finding moments for the transformation of our contemporary world. Ndiritu is a prolific filmmaker who has created an impressive archive of over forty “hand-crafted” videos alongside experimental photography, what she describes as “Post-Hippie Pop-Abstraction collages,” and shamanic performances. Along with showing widely at arts institutions, biennials, and film festivals, her recent publication with Bergen Kunsthall titled *Dissent Without Modification* is a collection of sprawling conversations with uncompromising and unconventional women recorded between 2013 and 2016. These conversations helped inspire COVERSLOT®, Ndiritu’s fashion and economic research project founded in 2018 that reflects on youth culture, the 1990s, and the politics of today. Grace proposes alternative forms of communality by seeking out ways of being and living amid a world where the entanglements between capitalism and racism continue to be overlooked.

—Jareh Das

Jareh Das Your work is encyclopedic and ranges across disciplines at the same time that it includes life experiences which are extensive and unconventional. What led you to the decision to find other ways for being in the world through alternative community living?

Grace Ndiritu Since I was young, I have always had a curiosity about the larger world. My mother was a feminist and an activist, so I grew up in a pluralistic household going to anti-racist and anti-apartheid marches. She was also a bit of a hippie and had a boyfriend who had a caravan and took her to Findhorn Ecovillage which was a bit unusual for an African woman at that time. Also because some of my childhood was spent in Kenya I understood that the world was a bigger place than just my own house or neighborhood in Birmingham, and I naturally wanted to meet new people and have new experiences. This expanded when I started travelling independently as a teenager to Europe and India and then to the rest of the world later on. You could say that I am fundamentally interested in what we have in common as human beings rather than what divides or makes us different. And that's where my love of nature and also esoteric subjects comes into play. I am always examining what shared beliefs we have as humans. Shamanism, for example, is the first "world religion," and therefore as a practitioner of it I find that it connects me not only through time but also geography to many different cultures and peoples. This has led me to get interested more and more in issues of environmental justice and Indigenous land rights.



Installation view of Grace Ndiritu, *The Ark*, 2019, Bluecoat, Liverpool. Photo by Brian Roberts.

JD *Plant Theatre For Plant People* (2021) closed the *British Art Show 9* (BAS#9) in Aberdeen. Could you expand on what this participatory performance and community mean to your collaborative work?

GN *Plant Theatre for Plant People* is an extension of a previous social practice project I did called *The Ark: Center For Interdisciplinary Experimentation* (2107) in which I founded my own community. So for BAS#9, I was commissioned to create a temporary community of people who will gain knowledge from plants through bonding exercises, meditation classes, and workshops—connecting with plant spirits and exploring

ecological activism. Protest also played a part, and the project culminated in a *Plant People* protest, a final performance on the streets of Aberdeen. And this seems key as a kind of playful critical gesture toward the politics and problematics of art sponsorship by oil companies like BP. They are sponsors of the gallery where BAS#9 took place. And because Aberdeen is a city built on oil, it's important to find creative ways for the local community to voice their own opinions about this.

JD Living in alternative communities like Findhorn Ecovillage, Hare Krishna Ashram in Scotland, and the Vipassana Buddhist Centre in Gloucestershire informed *The Ark: Center For Interdisciplinary Experimentation*, which was such an incredible undertaking. Did you have a set framework for how you imagined the project to unfold versus what happened to bring together such a diverse group to create a new world of sorts for the project's duration?

GN When I went to live in those communities I just mentioned, I didn't know whether I was going to make an artwork about it or not. I just knew there had to be a better way to live than living in a small, expensive flat in Brixton. So I decided when I joined those communities to do the same routine as everyone else including all the chores and jobs they did, for example, working in the laundry or cleaning bathrooms. I didn't tell anyone I was an artist. Instead, I would film discreetly the architecture and spaces when no one was around. This footage became the silent film *Community* (2017). After two years of living in this way, I was invited by artist Kathrin Bohm to do a talk at her studio in Vyner Street in London about off-grid living. Shortly after that, I decided that instead of doing an exhibition about my research, I would just start my own community. That's how *The Ark: Center For Interdisciplinary Experimentation* was founded.



Image still from Grace Ndiritu, *Black Beauty: For a Shamanic Cinema*, 2021, two-channel film installation, twenty-nine minutes. Photo courtesy of Una Prescencia & Post-Hippie Productions.

JD In your film, *Black Beauty: For a Shamanic Cinema* (2021), a time-warp unites modernism with the contemporary by bringing fashion model Alexandra Cartier (aka Black Beauty) in conversation with the writer Jorge Luis Borges to debate climate change, pandemics, migration, and time. How was this film

informed by your interest in shamanism as a critical tool to address the alarming rate at which Indigenous eco-cosmological systems continue to be threatened by national and transnational policies?

GN For the last four years, I have been involved in doing research for my ongoing shamanic performance art series, *Healing the Museum* (2012–present), which started with the idea that museums are dying because they are so out of touch with what's going on in the real world. My practice involves introducing nonrational methodologies such as meditation and shamanism into museums as a way to find new answers to socio-political problem solving by accessing the right brain. Some of these have had successful real-world effects. For example, in *A Meal for Ancestors: Healing the Museum* in 2018 in Brussels, I created two separate groups and gave free meditation sessions to refugees and activists while providing creative visualization workshops to staff members of the European Parliament, UN, and NATO. After four months I brought both groups together to do a shamanic performance, focused on finding a solution for healing trauma around the Syrian refugee crisis and terrorist attacks in Europe. This culminated in one participant publishing a paper seeking to define the concept of a climate refugee, which now forms part of the EU Parliamentary Research Services.

This also spurred me to keep working on climate topics, and this evolved into being invited by the British Council in Argentina to do a residency there, which was co-organized with Arts Catalyst in Sheffield. I used the residency in Buenos Aires to write the screenplay for *Black Beauty* which I had been wanting to do for a very long time. So after travelling through Patagonia and meeting different Indigenous groups and organizing a workshop with climate scientists, anthropologists, and geneticists to answer various questions at the beginning of 2020 just before the pandemic hit, I felt I was ready to do so.

Questions such as, “Who were the first people in Patagonia? Were they African, and where do we see Patagonia in one thousand years in the future with climate change? How will nature and mankind genetically evolve because of climate change?” This led me to create a speculative fiction in which a late night talk show host called Karen Roberts interviewed Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges about climate change, pandemics, migration, and time in 1983.

JD COVERSLUT© is an economic project that traverses across time and uses fashion to expand on ways of reclaiming and shifting power dynamics. I'm fascinated by its loaded history as the term used for aprons to cover up dirty women (kitchen maids) in seventeenth-century England. How did you first discover this fabric's specific use in particular to conceal, hide, or make women modest?

GN My background is in fashion and textiles so I am always incorporating it into my practice somehow. But specifically, I already had the idea for a “political” fashion brand about youth culture back in 2010. The big turning point came when I started thinking about a name for it and when I started to seriously consider what kind of economic structure I wanted for it and remembered Radiohead selling their album *In Rainbows* as pay what you can. Usually, titles for my artworks come easily, and that's what happened with COVERSLUT©. I read it in an airline magazine on a transatlantic flight in an article about historical British words, and I knew immediately that was the name for the brand. Firstly, because COVERSLUT© sounds like such a contemporary word that anyone can relate to it, as we can associate it immediately with social media, selfies, and wanting to be on the cover of a magazine; but we also recognize the sexist connotations implied in it that connect with the #MeToo movement. But the big twist comes when one discovers it's a word from the seventeenth century, and that is mind-blowing, as it shows how little we have progressed in terms of how we continue to negatively label poor, working-class, and sexually active women.

JD What first sparked the ideas for the research-publication *Dissent Without Modification: The 1990s* (2021), and how did you decide on whom to include?

GN *Dissent Without Modification: The 1990s* came about because I was living a nomadic life and was meeting interesting new people all the time, most of whom were amazing women. So I started recording these long-form conversations with them about life, politics, art, spirituality, money markets, sex, racism, etc. But it was an organic process of whom to include. All I knew was that it had to include people who thought outside the box. They didn't need to be well-known like Monster Chetwynd; some of them could be unknown, and they didn't all have to be artists as in the case of Lisha Sterling who is a hacker. Furthermore, all the women must have gone to art school or university during the 1990s or had some sort of turning point

in their life during that time. For example, Laura Emsley moved from South Africa to London in the period because of apartheid, and German artist Kathrin Bohm moved to London and met Gavin Wade, the future director of Eastside Projects at Goldsmith. This is because the 1990s was the last time a real youth culture political movement happened with the Seattle Riots against the G8 and the publication of Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. My book took eight years to write and get published. I self-funded the transcriptions of the interviews, and then finally in 2021 curator Scott Elliott kindly published them for Bergen Kunsthall. What's exciting is that many people don't realize that the book was the conceptual inspiration for COVERSLUT®, and, in fact, the first collections of clothes take slogans from the book, such as ALPHA MALE and BLACK COCK t-shirts. And those controversial t-shirts have now been sold at pop-up stores in youth centers, art fairs, community centers, and art bookshops, which is a perfect tribute to those radical women in *Dissent Without Modification: The 1990s*.



Grace Ndiritu, COVERSLUT® The Basic Collection, Belgium, 2018–20. Photo courtesy of Grace Ndiritu and Manoeuvre, Belgium.

Grace Ndiritu's Black Beauty: For a Shamanic Cinema and The Ark: Home Edition can be seen in the Coventry Biennial in Coventry, England, until January 23; Ndiritu's work can also be seen in Our Silver City, 2094 at Nottingham Contemporary in Nottingham, England, until April 18; Dissent Without Modification: The 1990s, published by Bergen Kunsthall, is now available at De Appel alongside clothing from Ndiritu's COVERSLUT® fashion brand.

Jareh Das is a curator, writer, and researcher based in Nigeria and the UK. She holds a PhD in Curating Art and Science from Royal Holloway, University of London, for her thesis, "Bearing Witness: On Pain in Performance Art" (2018).

A version of this article appears online at bombmagazine.org, 05 January 2022