

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON

Luke Willis Thompson

autobiography

23 June – 27 August 2017

Emma Moore: You relocated to London in February 2016 to participate in the Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency. The residency supports artists to research and produce new work in response to East London, its varied social and cultural contexts and communities. Would you like to talk about the residency and how it has informed the new body of work you have produced?

Luke Willis Thompson: When I arrived in London, I wanted to look at the riots that took place in 2011. In the last 10 or so years, I have been following riots that are triggered by the killing of a person of colour by police. These riots have occurred in a number of Western cities: London, Ferguson, Paris, Sydney, to name just a few. I felt arriving here, around the five-year anniversary of the 2011 riots, that there might be something new to say about that. Truthfully, I never got very far. Artistic research rarely means a straight line of enquiry. While looking into the Chisenhale Gallery archive I became fascinated by Donald Rodney's 1989 exhibition, *Crisis*. Rodney, who lived with sickle cell anemia, often considered his own illness as a metaphor for black life in Britain. His Chisenhale show featured a number of paneled paintings, one of which depicted a figure in the manner of a religious icon painting. The literature for the exhibition named this figure as Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce. So before I even got to the riots of 2011, its precedents interrupted me.

EM: Would you like to say who Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce was?

LWT: She was a woman who lived in Brixton, who had moved to London from Jamaica, and became very much part of the Afro-Caribbean, the black British, community in Brixton. The police raided what they understood to be a squat but was actually Cherry Groce's family home. During the raid, Cherry Groce was shot. News of the shooting spread and it became the catalyst for protests, which were insufficiently addressed by the state and escalated into a riot. The riot is now understood to be largely in response to how the police were treating people of colour in Brixton, and the perceived value of black life in the UK more broadly. The riot lasted two or three days. That was in 1985 and it was the second major riot in South London in 5 years.

I was fortunate to meet Cherry Groce's son, Lee, who was there at the time of the shooting and lives with the memory of it. I started a conversation with him and he suggested that I meet his son, Brandon, who is Cherry Groce's grandson. Shortly after meeting, Brandon agreed to work with me to produce a portrait.

At the same time, I was looking into other stories of black women who had been killed by the state in London. I was watching the films of Ken Fero, a filmmaker and activist based in London who has produced a wealth of documentaries about deaths in police custody. We established a dialogue and a friendship, and through that I learnt the story of Joy Gardner. Joy Gardner was suffocated by police officers, in 1993. Again, this happened in her home. I met with Joy Gardner's son, Graeme, and from our conversation, he also agreed to make a portrait with me.

The portraits of Brandon and Graeme were combined to create the first work I produced during the residency, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* (2016). The work is two 16mm, black and white, silent portraits of these two young men from London, who themselves were representing their maternal ancestors who were killed by the Metropolitan Police. Both young men sit for the duration of one hundred-feet of film, simply looking into the camera. Their portraits play one after the other on a loop.

EM: Why did you choose to shoot the work on 16mm film?

LWT: I had been very entranced by Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-66) and reproduced the exact technical specifications of the *Screen Tests* when I filmed Brandon and Graeme. I used an electric Bolex and Kodak Tri-X 16mm film, just as Warhol had. While researching the *Screen Tests*, I learned that they were based on images of the 'most wanted' on police leaflets. You can really draw a line from police photography to the colonial archive; from the history of photographic taxonomies and eugenics, to mugshots and criminal physiognomy. There are so few people of colour, or so few people who were not white, in Warhol's archive of *Screen Tests*, that it made me think that this omission was more significant than the racial exclusion within the underground scene in New York at the time. Warhol's *Screen Tests*, unconsciously or not, draw some of their power by taking this lineage of black image production and applying it to white and privileged subjects.

EM: The final work you produced during the residency is presented in your exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery. It is a silent portrait of Diamond Reynolds who, in 2016, broadcast via Facebook Live the moments immediately after her partner Philando Castile was shot by police during a traffic-stop in Minnesota. When did you first see Diamond Reynolds' video?

LWT: Racialised life and death is something I have been talking about, and talking to, in my practice for some time. In 2012, I made a work, *untitled*, that drew on the killing of Pihema Cameron, a Maori teenager in Auckland, where I grew up. That specific case had a pursuit by a white vigilante at its core - and it came to bear dramatic similarities to the case of Travon Martin, a teenager who was pursued and fatally shot by a vigilante in Florida, in 2012. This shooting occurred a month before the exhibition of my work opened in Auckland.

In 2014, I went to New York to make a new work, *Eventually they introduced me to the people I immediately recognised as those who would take me out anyway*, that developed out of research into stop-and-frisk policies. During the research period of that project, Michael Brown, an 18-year old, was stopped by a police officer and shot multiple times in Ferguson, Missouri. Both cases of these two young men who lost their lives were turning points in the global attention and consciousness around black lives mattering. For millions of people, myself included, the crisis of growing numbers of racialised killings had moved more clearly into focus.

Last year I made the conscious decision to start watching the increasing number of videos of police violence that were circulating online. In this recent cycle of police violence, the terms of visibility changed with a wave of cell phone reportage. It was like every possible nightmare one could imagine might appear online. In July 2016, Diamond Reynolds recorded, via Facebook Live, the immediate aftermath of her partner Philando Castile's fatal shooting by a police officer. In the first three days the video had been viewed by millions of people. In the video, Diamond describes and records the moments in which she is a witness and a participant. She describes the exchange between herself, the police officer, and her partner who is passing away on camera. Diamond addresses the police officer as 'Sir' five times throughout her video and explains that Castile was reaching for his wallet when the officer shot him. She is so eloquent; she perfectly narrates what has happened, and who said what and when, which is crucial. This was an act of witnessing and a central piece of evidence, made under impossible circumstances.

After Diamond's video, I realised there was no more important conversation about the image than in these videos. For me, the project began with this video. I decided to reach out to her, or respond to her 'call', to 'call her back' in a way.

EM: What do you mean to 'call her back'?

LWT: I've been thinking about the role of collaboration in citizen-recorded videos of police violence - what it is to make images in moments of unfolding tragedy for transmission. Through the

distribution of these videos, via a global online network, the videos escape the immediate environment of their recording: in some ways they escape the terror under which they are produced. Through broadcasting, the possibility for someone with the agency to assist occurs. This collaborative approach only works if there is always someone there to catch the video. It occurred to me that this is a fundamental aspect: that the images are produced both for and by their distribution.

There is a radical communication in Diamond's video. It was a prayer to the – now over nine million – people that viewed it to do something. One answer is to watch it, one answer is to apply pressure in some way, another answer is to show up – Diamond gives her call and a lawyer shows up, others show up, and I show up. Because of her speech, in that moment of violence and terror, Diamond created the possibility for someone to respond or reply. So that is where the process began.

EM: How did you get in touch with Diamond Reynolds and begin the process of producing your response to her video?

LWT: I wrote letters to people about it. I asked friends and unnamed collaborators to help. I asked them what they thought about making contact with Diamond and whether it would be possible. I asked journalists who had covered the story about which lawyers were best to write to. I called the law firm Power, Rogers & Smith, LLP, who were representing Diamond and her daughter Dae'anna. On the day after the police officer was officially charged, I tried again and made contact. The firm agreed to pass a letter from me to Diamond. There was a lot of back-and-forth emailing. I then made a more formal proposal for the artwork – a script. I called again to enquire how things had been received and, by that time, Diamond's lawyer, Larry Rogers Jnr, and I had built up enough trust that we had a conference call with Diamond herself.

EM: Following that call, Chisenhale Gallery helped to facilitate a meeting with Diamond for you to talk about the work that you wanted to produce. Did you already have an idea of what the work would be?

LWT: In the letter I sent to Diamond I wrote that we couldn't make something that would come close to the power of her video, but we could nevertheless try to make a second one – a 'sister' image.

For eleven months, Diamond's video has been used and misused. Her video has proliferated online as, what artist and writer Hito Steyerl describes as, 'a poor image' – an image that moves through different contexts and is reworked by different content producers. Diamond's video has been edited to different lengths; it has the watermarks of various media channels. It has also been used against its original intention; for example, it has been presented on hate sites and law enforcement support forums. It is understood that every image can be torn to shreds and rebuilt within a different discursive constellation. Observing this phenomenon is how my idea for the work, for a 'sister image', formed and the 'sister film', of course, can't be the same as the original. In the case of my work, the 'sister image' consists of a set of opposing qualities to Diamond's original video: it is slow, and still. It can only be screened on a 35mm film projector and under the utmost conditions of control. It broadcasts Diamond at another moment.

EM: In February 2017, we went to Minneapolis – you, Polly Staple, Director of Chisenhale Gallery and I – to meet with Diamond Reynolds and Larry Rogers Jnr. We arranged to meet with Diamond in person, in order for you to present your idea for the artwork, and for Polly and I to introduce Chisenhale Gallery. It was also an opportunity for Diamond to ask you questions about working together. Would you like to talk about what happened in that meeting?

LWT: It was a full day meeting. It was moving for me to meet Diamond, and I think she was affected by our commitment to her, despite the distance between us.

At a particular point, Larry Rogers Jr was initially reluctant to agree to the collaboration because of the real danger in Diamond speaking publically about the events of 6 July. He was aware that her words could be used by the opposing council in the on-going case involving the officer charged with the shooting of Philando Castile, and in which Diamond would likely be a principle witness. This could be made to show a very harmless contradiction in something Diamond had previously said, and could then be used as counter evidence. In interviews, Mr Rogers would often repeat the phrase 'everything was already said in Diamond's live streamed video', so further testimony couldn't be produced. I had always imagined the work as a silent film and Diamond and Larry agreed to a silent film, which was a turning point.

EM: We also discussed the image you wanted to produce, one that could not easily circulate or be manipulated online. As you mentioned earlier, the work could only be presented within a very controlled environment. Could you say more about why you chose to shoot the film on 35mm?

LWT: I think the primary reason had to do with a connection between Diamond's video, made in a moment of trauma, and the physicality of analogue film. In both instances, what is recorded becomes the only possible image. It never felt like I had the right to take a digital HD camera and record endless amounts of footage, as it always felt like a privilege to create Diamond's portrait.

There's a depth and brilliance to the medium of 35mm film that can evoke an emotional response, even in its most abstracted capturing of shadow and light. It would be easy to say it is the contrast of Diamond's video, because it differs so dramatically in terms of pacing, resolution, and picture clarity, not to mention film grain versus pixilation. But mostly, in order to show up the consequence of Diamond's video I wanted to work in cinema's most canonical form; its high court.

EM: Did you direct Diamond's performance in the film you produced?

LWT: Yes. There's choreography to Diamond's movements, which is about breaking the rhythm of the length of film and interrupting any pressure that might build during the filming process, which was not easy for her. I felt that if the performance, on the whole, could be read as underperformed, it might critique the agency of traditional media platforms, for example, interviews and talk shows which often force their subjects to re-live trauma on screen.

Diamond and I had many conversations about how she wanted to appear. We both had similar ideas; too many to cover in great detail here, but what stands out was our shared interest in an image's life span. What Diamond wanted was less about the picture and more about the preservation of the film. She was determined to consider how the images we were producing might operate, or operate differently, 20 years from now and she urged me to keep that in mind.

*EM: **autoprotrait** is the title of your solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery and the title of the portrait of Diamond, which is presented as a single screen projection in the gallery. What resonance do you think Diamond's image might have for audiences here in London?*

To me, there are so few possibilities to work across a real boundary, or in other words, between a real psychological or physical difference between two people. I don't think the boundary at play in this work is race, class or geographical location, or the difference produced through education or life expectancy: everything that can make two people very different from each other. I don't think any of those typical markers are the difference in the work. I think the difference in the work is how hard Diamond's experience of living, day-to-day, second-to-second, can be. Four minutes and thirty seconds – the length of time to use a roll of film up and the length time she would sit for the camera without the connection of a phone, or connection with her daughter – to be alone for that length of time was, and is, incredibly hard for her. That is what it is like to be her right now – to have these memories and to live with this vigilant fear. It was continually hard for her during the filming process to keep communicating out of that place. It's likely that a large percentage of the audience can only

try to relate, as I can only do too, but the attempt at establishing that relation is itself critical for the piece.

EM: The film is slow-paced and silent. In one roll of film, Diamond's breathing comes into focus and this roll feels quite meditative. Would you like to say something about breathing and the mechanics of the film production?

LWT: Firstly, there is this single, powerful, very interesting metaphor of 'I can't breathe'. Eric Garner repeated those words 11 times when he was placed in a chokehold by police and died during his arrest in New York, 2014. The phrase became a chant, a protest song. It has also been theorised. Writers Christina Sharpe and Ashon T. Crawley, among others, write about breath, and what it is politically. What it is to keep breathing and keep living when you're under a regime that does everything to cease those faculties. My contribution to that conversation is to imagine a breathless space as an airless space and to think about how that relates to sound or an absence of it. An idea that I have been interested in throughout this process is breathing as an analogue technology in relation to singing.

EM: Is the film edited at all?

LWT: The rolls are shot and there is no editing to what is recorded but the next roll would have corrections based on what had occurred in the previous roll. There are six rolls that exist; so four rolls have been edited out, and the work is made of two rolls joined together. There are also slight adjustments made to correct the colour. I always knew it wouldn't be a film with speech, which is a kind of edit, or redaction. Silence is a basis for the work, which also relates to the legal reasons – as was mentioned – and working with this which made Diamond's presence possible. When you're doing something minimal everything is an edit.

EM: Would you like to say something about what Diamond is doing now?

LWT: This interview was recorded on 8 June and edited during the week prior to the exhibition opening on 22 June. My initial answer to this question revolved around the indeterminacy of life for Diamond, between not knowing if officer Jeronimo Yanez was to be found guilty of second-degree manslaughter or not, or whether justice would be delivered, or not. I felt then how I feel now, that I wanted this artwork to accompany Diamond in that state, reflecting both the freedom and constriction of waiting. On the 16 June, the Friday prior to the exhibition's opening, Jeronimo Yanez, the officer who shot Philando Castile was found not guilty by a jury of his peers, of all charges, which included the two counts of Dangerous Discharge of a Firearm that pertain directly to Diamond and her daughter Dae'anna. It now seems inappropriate to speculate on what is occurring for Diamond outside of the small amount I do know: breathing, mourning, fighting.

Interviewed by Emma Moore, Offsite and Education Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, on Thursday 8 June 2017. Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.