

WETTER

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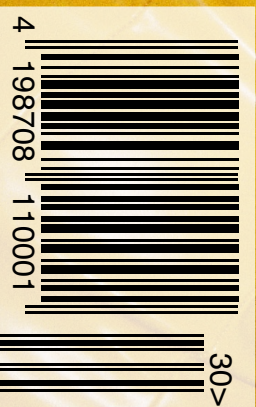
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A perspective is a Mesh

Bild: Meklit Tsige



Berlin, das wisst ihr, zieht Menschen und insbesondere Künstler*innen von überall an – manchmal für immer, manchmal nur als Zwischenstation. So auch den*die in London geborene Lyriker*in und Künstler*in Jay Bernard, sowie die Sängerin und Komponistin Elaine Mitchener – ebenfalls im UK aufgewachsen. Beide arbeiten und leben aktuell auf Einladung eines Residenzprogramms des DAAD in Berlin – und interessieren sich gegenseitig sehr für die Arbeit des*der anderen. Bevor Sie dieses Interesse kürzlich in der gemeinsamen Veranstaltung »Common Ground« münden ließen, unterhielten sich die beiden lange miteinander über die Nuancen der »Black British presence«, sowie Text und Sound – und ließen das Aufnahmegerät laufen. Es folgt: ein Ausschnitt.

Text: Jay Bernard & Elaine Mitchener

JB Jay Bernard
EM Elaine Mitchener

JB But I think you should say more before I dive in.
EM »A perspective is a mesh«. I re-read it as »a perspective is a mush« or »a perspective is a mess«. It's a provocative statement. It's a pictorial sentence that's both a statement and an artwork. But why »perspective is a mesh«?

JB Maybe underneath it all is this desire to produce stuff that I've never produced before – my work has become a body of water, and all I can do is fish things out of it. There's no form or shape, no light. I just photocopy and photocopy until something appears. It's a process that I am finding extremely ... more-ish.

EM Is it satisfying you?

JB No. It is never satisfying. It's impulsive. But it's the closest thing I have to a disciplined process. So anyway, one night I am taken by this recurring thought, which is that you don't necessarily choose your beliefs. You don't choose who you are, you don't choose how you feel, how you think, and all the rest of it, you're actually caught up in something, like what Mark Fisher calls *the Big Other*. There I was for about an hour, in this slightly feverish way, because I felt that by repeating the action I was moving towards something. And I thought why not send this to you? It could work as both a textual and visual prompt.

EM It has movement and energy, reminiscent of N.H. Pritchard, and how he creatively uses different typography, which affects the way poems are experienced; one has to work really hard to absorb the visual ... I improvised with your poem recently at Wigmore Hall in London, and I'm slightly nervous about you hearing it!

JB Well, I mean, I'll be completely honest with you.

EM I know you will, that's why I'm nervous!

JB The Wire Magazine seemed to like it.

EM Well, we (the Rolling Calf) had the responsibility of connecting with what you were describing and communicating; the connection with the Grenfell tragedy; acknowledging the homage to Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. There's a strong musicality in the way you set words so we improvised an abstracted, black avantgarde, sound world and I channelled my inner Jamaican heritage to deliver the text. When I'm improvising, I really try to get inside of it. Your poem is very dark, bringing us into the room, conjuring energies and capturing this tragic moment in our relatively recent cultural history. The sensuality of the dancing, the green dress, the horror of burning clothes, intense heat and confusion, things triggering off and people realising too late, their reactions and responses. We're drawn into these moments, flashed in front of our eyes, all told from different perspectives. Linton Kwesi Johnson used his poetry as social activism using his artistry to speak out. In the raw. And subsequent generations, sorry

to get all biblical about it, but there's the story of Prophet Elijah handing over ...

JB Begat.

EM And begat and begat. Elijah's being transported to heaven and hands to Elisha his cloak who then becomes the new prophet. That's the ritual of handing over. Linton Kwesi Johnson has passed the baton to you and you hand it to another poet.

JB Yes, it is a responsibility that I struggle with so much, I think we both do. I think the Windrush story is a story that is now being repeated and as a result, it's almost enshrined in the British psyche, British culture. The New Cross Fire is another one, I can see it gaining traction as a way to talk about the nuances of the Black British presence, without always reverting to the »Brixton Riot« narrative.

EM Whenever black British people take action, the media wants to peddle a narrative of violence and anger, not one of positive collective expressions of strength and resilience such as the People's Day of Action where everybody walked. And, you know, they stopped traffic. So powerful until the »fire« peters out and they (the system) get away with it – again. But those families affected never forget.

JB Exactly. I don't know if there is a grander European story, which is an interesting thing to consider, and I guess that's what Johny Pitts was investigating in *Afropean*. But what we don't have is a canon of stories ...

EM Anansi (a folktale character and the God of stories, wisdom, knowledge and history that originated in Ghana, Anm. d. Red.)?

JB Yeah, but Anansi is not British, though obviously he has travelled. And I know people are very critical of canons because of their power – but I think there's something interesting in that power. The British psyche is so much about winning the second world war, but because we've just had Brexit, it has become very clear that people don't actually know anything about the Second World War or its consequences, or why the EU was formed, or the very serious attempts to avoid catastrophic bloodshed in the future. Hence »a perspective is a mesh« – belief without content, borderline fascist group think that doesn't require evidence or proof or history. But now in the context of an increasingly terrifying Europe, I wonder what story is going to take hold.

EM »A perspective is a mesh« is revealing. There's layer upon layer, different angles, all covered by where you are at that time. Like there's a glitch in it. Everything is kind of a crrrrrr sound. The more I look at it the more detail I see and the more options there are. Look at it ... You could tackle it in so many ways. So the text in itself can be delivered quite straight and then everything else underpins and colours it. That's how I'm viewing it. And also now I'm looking at those contours and they look like bodies.

JB Bodies?

EM Yeah, they do. They look like an object. Don't you think?

JB Oh, yeah. Now that you say it.

EM If you gave that to a group of people, they would all interpret it differently, even as an ensemble experience.

JB You know, you're exciting me so much because this is exactly what I think I want. I'm just thinking about it, and I'm like, this desire for improvisation, to generate a lot of material, is what's driving some of the frenzy that I seem to be in.

EM And that's printing prose for yourself, or poems? I know you really thought about it ...

JB Well, it's not in some ways, because I didn't send you the other versions. So there is that selection process.

EM So there are other versions of this text?

JB Yeah, I can show them to you.

EM Really? Like, »A mesh is a perspective«?

JB No, like other versions of it being photocopied.

EM But is the text the same? That's what I'm talking about. It strikes me that you didn't just pluck that sentence out of the air.

JB No, I thought about that for a long time, yeah.

EM Exactly. Exactly. And That's really important.

JB Yeah, it is. These things that I don't consciously know, but that I've always felt ... I find that things brew... and then pop.

EM The 3am moments of »Oh that's it!«

JB What does that look like for you?

EM Well, since I devise a lot of pieces, it's more about the process. Akin to fitting a jigsaw puzzle, so there's the last piece, there's a piece that's sticking out, that doesn't seem to fit ...

JB So it's like you have it written, but you don't know where it goes?

EM Yes, for example ... for a piece I made called *The Then + The Now = Now Time*, inspired by Walter Benjamin's idea of »Eingedenken«, I created a non-linear libretto by combining texts drawn from different writers all talking about similar themes. I also wanted to add Drum and Bass, and it wasn't until I drew towards the end of the actual performance I thought, »I needed Drum and Bass here because it's coming out of Dub, out of Reggae, out of Ska, and that's all from the Windrush and if those people had not been invited to come and rebuild the UK after the second world war, they would not have shaped British popular culture and pop music in the way they have. I was making a point about how black presence has shaped British culture in a positive way.«

JB Interesting. Okay, so you sent me a sort of recording of something ... But I'm just going to go to the toilet really quick ...

EM (Between [00:40:56] and [00:42:07] [Elaine says »A perspective is a Mesh ...« in various voices, at various pitches])

JB So, yeah, you sent me a kind of ... I had to turn it all the way up as well, because I couldn't ... well, it was just, like, silence. Then I heard it and it's a repetitive sound. Some sort of machinery, something that is automatic. Then as I was listening to the rhythm of it, the word reassuring came to mind. I don't know why. It sounds like it could be a windscreen wiper ...

EM I think it's a windscreen wiper! I was in the back of a cab and I always use my phone to record random sounds and things that get my attention. Repetition in life.

JB Right. And I see why I thought it was reassuring. My dad used to drive me around London at night to get

me to sleep, and I still find the back of a car very reassuring. I think it's the deeper sound, it's that thing [knocks table] that comes before the squeak, which feels like a place you can occupy. And is it raining? There's such a sense of intimacy.

EM I think that intimacy dispels the abstractness of the sound. It just makes it more tangible, familiar.

JB Yeah, there's something powerful about having to lean in and listen harder. I went to a photography exhibition down in Zoologischer Gardens a few weeks ago, and I was struck by how close you had to get to all of the images to understand them. I thought it was a nice way to engage with an exhibition, especially of queer portraits. There were very few black faces, of course, but one of them had »female impersonator« written on it. And I thought, wow, the closer I get to this person's face, the less difference I can see between theirs and mine, so what does »impersonator« really mean?

EM It sounds to me the way those photos are being displayed, means you have to lean into them. It's not a passive thing.

JB It's a very different way of reading, one we're gradually losing. This idea that something isn't presented on a plate.

EM These sounds do draw you in – listening is active ... If I hear water dripping I have the option of feeling irritated or allowing it to be part of the environmental sound world where I am.

JB Why do you think some sounds do that and others don't?

EM I hate it when great music is relegated to muzak (background noise, Anm. d. Red.) because nobody's listening. There are archive recordings of jazz greats playing live in a club somewhere. Group genius right there. And in the background you can hear people laughing, chatting etc and this is genius in front of them and they're not listening.

JB But isn't that kind of beautiful? Not that people aren't listening, but the fact that you've got this recording of this occasion, this dissonance ...

EM Yes, but I would have listened! Although I always think twice about entering cafes & restaurants that have music. [laughs] Because I enjoy hearing different cadences of voices rather than an inane Spotify playlist. »Jazz«.

JB Doesn't the blend of voices and music give you something to go on? Doesn't it give you a kind of social world in which to sculpt something? You start to compose the piece ...

EM Yes, if I apply a rhythm, if there is a rhythm.

JB When I tap out the rhythm to the piece you sent me, I hear 3/4.

EM Oh you hear a waltz? That's really interesting because I was feeling it in 4.

JB I was hearing it as four first and then I was like, actually, this is strongly suggesting 3/4.

EM But it's more interesting in three, to be honest.

JB It's easier somehow. And then I start to think metrically. Do, do do do, do, do. What dredges up out of my subconscious? June Jordan! »Girl from the realm of birds florid and fleet ...« Thomas Hardy! »Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me ...« Which is a funny one, because that poem

seriously falls apart as it progresses. Both written in dactylic metre: *Stress, unstress, unstress*. Loss, rhythm, interior speech, longing.

EM That's fascinating. You know, it's really doing this ... enclosing, closing in, enclosing, enclosing, enclosing. Whereas I would probably ... The repetitive nature of it ... I would work with that energy and then create some interventions to pull it out of that. Three, four, one and, and, and, and, and, and, and –

JB So how would that sound?

EM Oh, I really don't know if I'm going to do this correctly now. So actually let's see if it fits, because it's also the tempo.

JB Okay, let's play this again. Oops sorry, that's Eva Cassidy. She really did only record that one album, right?

EM Yeah, I listened to her when she was rediscovered.

JB Do you like her jazz stuff?

EM It's okay but I prefer free-jazz/improvisation and experimental, contemporary music. That's not to say I don't enjoy sitting down being schooled by Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan. I cannot add to that. For instance: do you know the *GrounNation* album? It's an avant-garde Dub album that's forty years old.

JB No, I haven't. So this is what I need to listen to *today*, right? [laughs] I need to fix that problem today ...

EM When I first heard it I cried in shock. I heard everything that I'm trying to do, but achieved forty years ago. That revelation was like someone throwing cold water over me.

JB I'll have to find it. But I know what you mean...

EM Do you not get that from poetry? Like someone slaps bam bam! And you're left stunned ...

JB Absolutely, all the time. And I feel like my life is futile because, even the other day I realised I was just writing *The Hollowmen*, which T.S. Eliot wrote a hundred years ago. And the frustrating thing is that I am actually trying to write away from him. He really captured the terrain, he really did, but I am not exactly expressing what he expresses.

EM It's the same for me, hearing Jeanne Lee who I heard when I was 18 and wasn't mature enough to deal with the way she was working with the voice and her musicality. She was extraordinary – a Black American singer, choreographer, a sound poet who worked with all of the main US contemporary experimental jazz musicians and also contemporary classical composers such as John Cage. Jeanne Lee was doing what I'm doing now and she died 25 years ago. Listening to her now, I realise the ritual of handing over.

JB Well, true to my modernist moment, I've been reading Woolf, and she has that fantastic line where she talks about how the poet is always your contemporary. and I think that is probably true of the musician as well. So it's a bit like when you listen to dub, right, you can hear drums from five hundred, a thousand, years ago. Because that's the point. Right? The point is, it keeps going. As you said, that was the music played against the backdrop of rebuilding Britain, we're in Berlin together at the brink of a new political reality, but it's the same drum.

EM The same drum. The same one.