Colour it Black

The US artist, curator and educator discusses beauty, trauma, activism and play, and how these seemingly separate concerns can be reconciled in her work and life.

Howardena Pindell interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter

Free, White and 21, 1980, video

Ellen Mara De Wachter: Let's start at the beginning. What first led you to art?

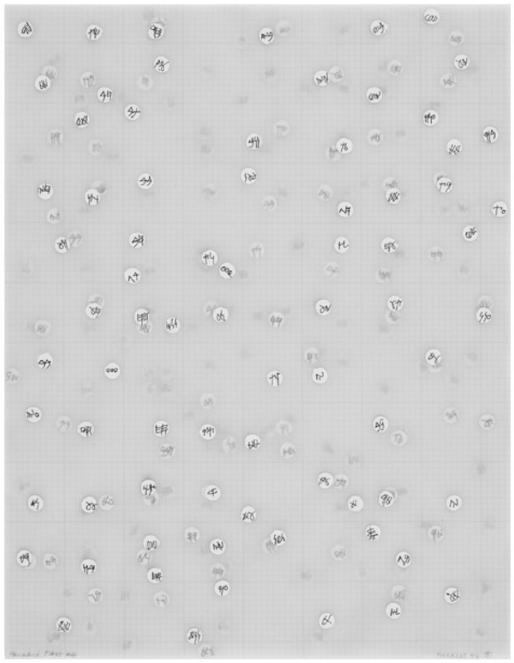
Howardena Pindell: Indirectly, I was exposed to art because of a mummy at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It was an El Faiyum period encaustic portrait on a linen mummy wrapping. Someone saw it and told my parents that I looked like the mummy. So I was dragged into the museum, up to the mummy's portrait and apparently it looked like me. Later, I went back to the museum and found Renaissance painting, but also Marcel Duchamp. Philadelphia is a very conservative city so I'm still surprised Duchamp was even in the collection. What I learned from Egyptian art was the use of text and image.

What has kept you making art throughout your life?

I think it's the only thing that hasn't bored me. I can work for hours without blinking an eye. I never get bored making art.

Soon after you first started making paintings, you developed a technique of spraying layers of acrylic paint onto canvas through a stencil you had created from manila folders that you had taped together and punctured using a hole punch. These early sprayed canvases from the late 1960s onwards are abstract but they are alive with movement: the coloured dots shimmer and dance, and the relationship between ground and figure is in a constant process of negotiation or realignment. What influence or inspiration made you combine abstraction with this impressionistic use of dots?

I took the Josef Albers colour theory course at Yale, where I studied from 1965 till 1967, along with architects and graphic designers. Albers had left because he'd had a fight with the department, so one of his protégés, Si Sillman, taught the course. I learned how to manipulate colour and that whole course changed my life. During my second year at Yale and after I graduated I was also interested in Larry Poons's work and his use of circles and ovals. A fellow student, Nancy Murata – she was European and her husband was Japanese – was also using circles. I became fixated on the use of the circle. I also love Georges Seurat, and when I worked at MoMA I could go to the galleries on days when the public wasn't there, so I was exposed to a lot of work in a relatively peaceful context.



Parabia Test #4, 1974

Was there already a political or activist intention in those early works?

Only much later did I realise why I was fixated on the circle. During segregation and Jim Crow here in this country, especially in the South, utensils were labelled. My father and I had gone to a root beer stand in Kentucky, which was a very segregated state, and he had a mug of chilled root beer. At the bottom of the mug – the same mug everyone got – was a big red circle and that meant that this utensil must be used for non-whites. When I was told the reason, I was shocked.

There is a powerful femininity to many of your works which, as well as being conceptual and rule-governed, feature materials such as small paper circles (chads), talcum powder, glitter and sequins, but also perfume. *Songlines: Connect the Dots* from 2017, for example, sparkles and seduces with a blue wateriness. More than simply a riposte to the masculine sensibility of much of the work being made by others at the time, the introduction of beauty seems to me to take it into another dimension. What is the role of beauty in your work?

This aspect of my work was considered by some in the African-American community as a form of failure. The black community wanted works about the black experience. That was in the 1960s and 1970s. I want the works to be positive experiences. I feel the weight of this beauty. I enjoy using materials that are in a sense taboo in terms of serious art-making. I was criticised for it mainly by white male art critics.

I love that you said *Songlines: Connect the Dots* is watery. I am fascinated by the colour of water. At an exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, one male art critic, after seeing that my artwork used glitter, wrote that it was nothing but a lightshow and that he wanted to have sex under my painting.

I can imagine that some people might approach it as decorative, but I see more in it than that. Especially because I see your hand's involvement, in particular with the works that are cut and stitched, and the assiduous application of one chad after another by hand. There is so much more labour there than entertainment.

A lot of women artists at that time weren't showing. And I think some of us who were exhibiting came under the critical eye of white male patriarchy. I feel beauty is the playful part of my work. For me, making art is part play. When you play, you take risks which seem to flow from one's unconscious. If you start to play and use mundane materials, you can transform them into a new artistic statement. But I have been put down by art critics for making paintings that were too beautiful.

It occurred to me that what connects your formal works, such as your paintings and collages, with your activist and issue-based work is that both involve the production of evidence. In a material way, the chads you position so carefully on the surfaces of your canvases are evidence of the action of punching a hole, and the dots on your paintings are evidence of the spraying of paint through the template. Your 1980 video *Free, White and 21* is a way to record your experience for witnesses. And in your activist work, you gather, collate and present evidence in facts and figures, graphs and tables. Evidence is an essential component in the quest for justice. Which strands connect your painting or studio work with your activism?

I think it's two different types of work. I used to do activist pieces that were gorgeous and beautiful but they had text, and the text was scary. And now all my activist work is in black and grey and the beauty is over. The non-issue-related paintings are mainly about healing and beauty. At the Shed, I had a recent exhibition where they first showed my 2020 video *Rope/Fire/Water* in a darkened room, and I surrounded the following room with my paintings to help ease the trauma of what visitors had just seen.

I like what you said about the collection of evidence. One friend connected my use of numbered dots with the numbered slave tags worn during slavery in the South. An enslaved person who was hired out to someone else would have to have that tag, especially if they moved around at night.

***Rope/Fire/Water* operates as a near black-out of the visual field: the screen is black for most of its 19 minutes, occasionally interspersed with documentary photographs of lynchings and the image of a model ship similar to those used in the Middle Passage, while your voice-over speaks about the images people have glimpsed as a metronome ticks. You briefly show audiences historical images that have been suppressed from mainstream visual culture, even though they are still highly relevant: photographs of lynchings and of the bodies of traumatised and abused black men and women. It must have been very painful to work with these images. How did the piece come about?**

It was painful to work with the images. I could barely watch the film. It was first a performance piece. What brought me to the idea was an experience I had as a

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child of seeing a horrendous photo, which is in the work, of an African-American man lying on his back being burned from within. He's partially dismembered. At the time, I was at a friend's house and her mother was cooking meat, and afterwards I couldn't eat meat for a year because I connected the image and the smell. In the early 1970s I proposed a performance piece using that image to A.I.R. – the women's co-operative gallery in New York City, which I was a member of for a short time – and they turned down the proposal. It wasn't until 2018/19, when the Shed wanted to do a show about my work, that I decided to work on this idea with digital film rather than performance, because a performance is limited to time and the film can move around.

I'm wondering how you reckoned with the process of working with and circulating these images as part of your art, handing them forth to an audience. The black screen seems to create a buffer zone. Is that how you were thinking about it?

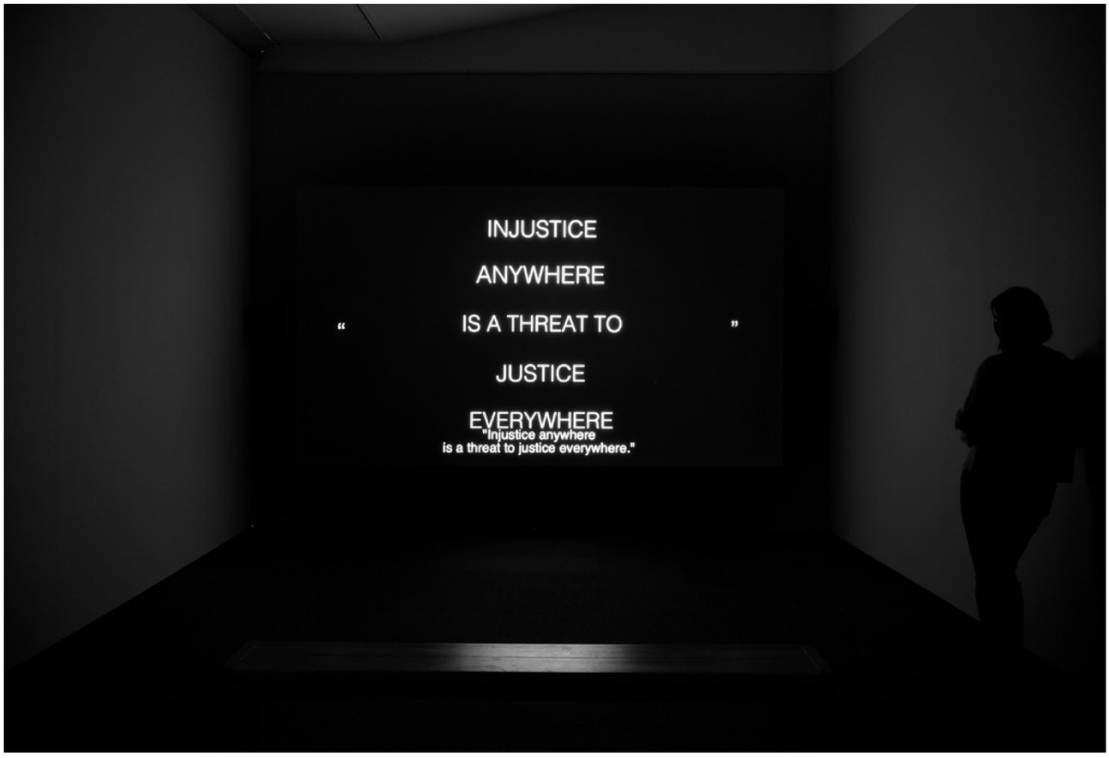
I just did it, you know. And yes, it is like a buffer zone, a space for people to think, to hear the ticking, to hear the passage of time and a heartbeat. It's hard to explain. *Free, White and 21* also has a metronome, and if I use someone else's sound I have to pay for copyright, and so far nobody has copyrighted a metronome.

I'm wondering as well about how you have used abstraction as a tool for not representing trauma. Was this your intention?

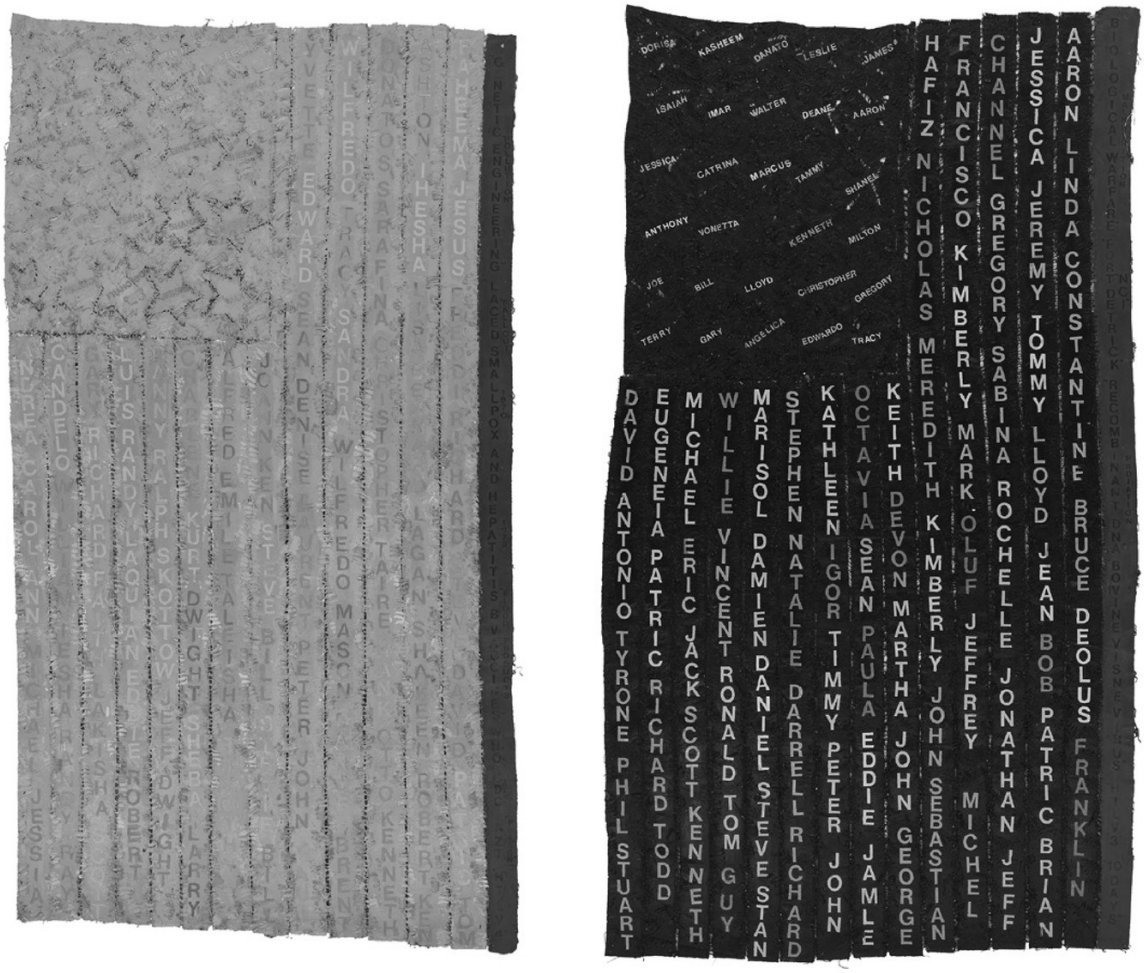
I would say it's to give people a little space to think and absorb what they see, instead of overwhelming them with images.

At the end of the video, you link *Rope/Fire/Water* to the Black Lives Matter movement, and you list the names of black people killed by police, as the metronome continues to tick. Why was it important for you to bring this element into the video?

Black Lives Matter as a group started years before George Floyd was murdered by the police officer who put his knee on Floyd's neck until he died. But a young black teenager filmed the end of George Floyd's life. The policeman was convicted of murder, finally. I thought it was especially necessary to list the names of black people who had died at the hands of the police. Under President Obama, fewer people of colour were killed by the police than under Donald Trump. In 2019 it was 1,098; in 2015 it was 104.



Rope/Fire/Water, 2020, video



Separate but Equal Genocide: AIDS, 1991–92

Counting and enumerating are key to your practice. Numbering the squares in grids, for example, using individual chads, or layering dots over the top of images photographed from the television in your 'War' series, as well counting the number of exhibitions offered to artists from different ethnic groups in your gallery and museum statistics in *A Documentation and Art (World) Racism*. Where does this interest in numbers come from and what role does it occupy in your creative process?

My father's degree was in mathematics. He was often writing small numbers on a gridded notebook. He would keep track of car mileage, etc. The car odometer would show in numbers how far we had travelled. I was fascinated by the numbers and the gridded paper. Most of my numbering now is random. I treat numbering as drawing at this point – I call it 'nonsense numbering'. I have made for fun a cassette tape of myself endlessly reading numbers. I still love numbers.

From 1967 to 1979, you were part of the curatorial team at MoMA. In addition to your curatorial work, in 1970 you joined the Byers Committee to investigate racial exclusion in museum acquisitions and exhibitions. Can you tell me about this time?

The Byers Committee at MoMA selected two black artists, Romare Bearden and Richard Hunt, for solo exhibitions. Bearden, whose work was in the collection, was hung in the hallway, away from the collection. Sadly, after those two exhibitions were over, everything went back to normal. Recently, MoMA chief curator Ann Temkin has diversified the collections.

The permanent collection was an amazing visual library for me. My favourites were Wassily Kandinsky and Odilon Redon. That's where my mind was at the time. I was drawn to colour – colour has no national boundaries. I also became very concerned about making a work of art as an artist – in other words: archival issues. Artists can call conservation departments in most museums to ask for archival advice. The conservation team at MoMA was trying their best to lure me into their profession. That department treated me very well.

You mentioned A.I.R. where you were a founding member, but you withdrew from the group in 1975. What were your aspirations in founding it and what led you to withdraw from the group?

I helped name the gallery and had one and half shows there: the first show was with Harmony Hammond,

and the other was a solo show where I presented works on paper using numbered dots. At the time only white men were being shown in galleries. There were very few opportunities for women to show, and A.I.R. was a place to show your work. One of the problems with being part of A.I.R. was that I had a full-time job and did not have as much time or the same availability as the women who had a husband supporting them. I remember when a group of white women came to MoMA to picket and called me on my office number and demanded that I go down and picket the museum. I refused to picket the museum and explained that I could not afford to lose my job. White feminists were never there for black women feminists. If you had something you were doing, the whites wouldn't show up, but they would come at you if you didn't show up to their activities and protests.

Who were your allies at the time?

Well, surprisingly, there were people in the museum who were allies. They included Lucy Lippard, whose show I was assigned to work on as my first assignment; Clive Phillpot, the librarian – he was excellent; William S Lieberman, who was head of the Department of Prints and Drawings. And there were others, including Lowery Sims, who was at the Met.

And who are your allies now?

Well, my real ally is my dealer Garth Greenan at Garth Greenan Gallery in Chelsea. He's the best art dealer I have ever had. Also Camille Ann Brewer, a friend who was at the Detroit Institute of Arts and then at the Textile Museum at the Smithsonian – she ran into a lot of inside racism and is now working independently. My attorney Barbara Hoffman is fantastic. There are some art historians who are helpful, like Katy Siegel, who teaches at Stony Brook, where I teach. And Kirsten Pai Buick, an art historian who teaches in New Mexico, is amazing. Some of my closest allies, sadly, have died.

In 1979 several things happened: you resigned from MoMA, you began teaching at Stony Brook and you also suffered injuries in a car accident. Around this time, your work shifted to become more political; you included autobiographical elements for the first time and the work spoke directly about issues of race and gender discrimination. Could you tell me more about these shifts?

Because I thought: I could be here one moment and gone the next, it drove me to more openly express my opinion. I wanted to start remembering things. My work switched to making paintings that were about autobiography, such as *Autobiography: Water (Ancestors/ Middle Passage/Family Ghosts)* from 1988 and *Scapegoat* from 1990. A teaching job opened up and Donald Kuspit, who was the chair of the department, suggested that I apply. The pressure at MoMA

Untitled (Stencil), 1970

was intense: we had had two strikes and they paid you so little. And that wasn't all: I knew that once I got beyond my associate level, I would probably run up against some problems, let's put it that way. That was the cut-off point: associate curator.

Did your art practice help you heal from your injuries from the car accident?

Yes, the repetitive action of cutting apart images and reuniting the fractured portions in my works felt very healing. It was as if I were putting myself back together from the car accident; it was a way of reuniting myself.

Was that when you first worked with cutting and re-stitching a canvas?

I think so, yes.

Activism has long been part of your life. For example, in challenging injustice and racism in museums by compiling your museum and gallery statistics about racial exclusion from the late 1970s onwards, or by protesting against an exhibition at Artists Space in 1979, which the white artist Donald Newman titled using a heinous term of racial abuse. What do you think has pushed you to consistently take a stand publicly and commit to activist work?

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My father was an activist. In the 1930s he started a black teachers' union at the school where he was principal in Frederick, Maryland. I also feel I had many opportunities in my life in spite of racial divide and I want to be helpful in righting some of the wrongs. It was after being a passenger in a car accident that I realised I could not be passive, and that I wanted to be a positive contributor to the good.

Do you keep your art and your activism separate or are they more similar than they are different?

They are both separate and yet one. My activist painting now has turned black and grey, while my abstract paintings are colourful and obsessively detailed.

Both your videos *Free, White and 21* and *Rope/Fire/Water* seem to have a pedagogical aim, to educate the viewer about facts, events, experiences, albeit with quite different emotional tones, the former being sardonic and the latter solemn. Does art, or the artist, have a duty to educate audiences?

I don't think the artist has a duty to educate. I don't think I want to pressure anyone into educating the audience: some choose to and some choose not to. I don't think it's their duty, because that's the same conundrum I was put in by the black community early on. My work was too ephemeral for them and they wanted works about an issue they felt strongly about.

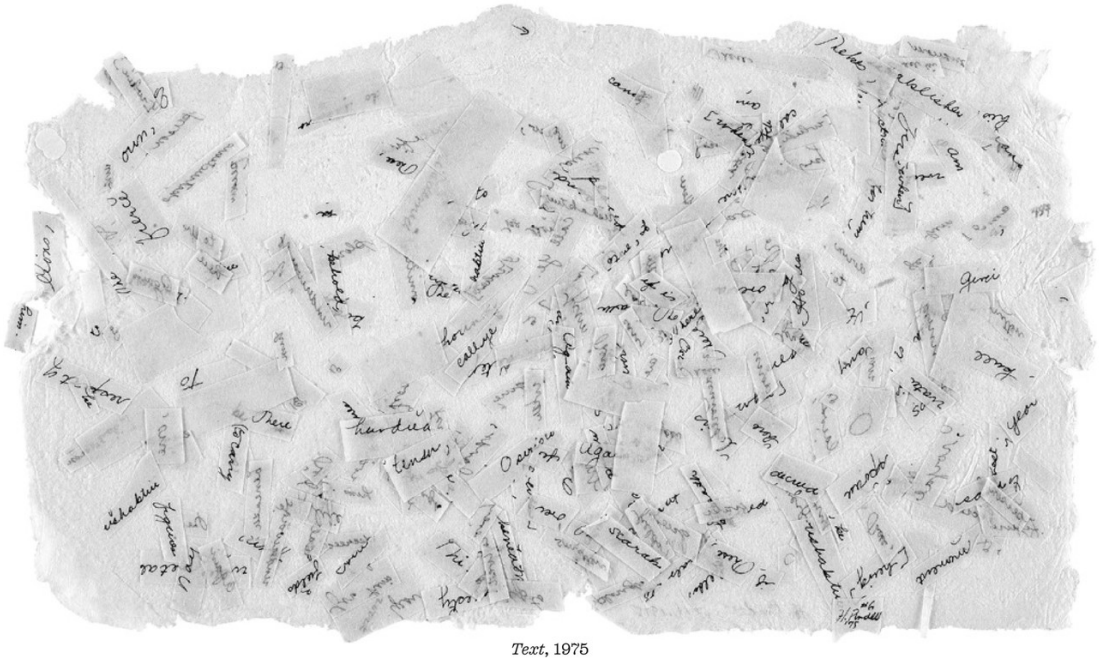
I made that kind of work when I did because of the car accident. I thought: if you're going to say something, then say something. And I learned as I made the videos.

In 1997, a decade after you published *A Documentation*, which surveyed the demographics of exhibitions in New York museums and galleries, you asked art-world professionals a question: 'Have things changed?' At that time, the artist and professor Arturo Lindsay wrote back that 'we are barely past tokenism'. Where do you think we are now?

I think the polarisation now is outrageous. People are polarised on the sides of Black Lives Matter and of having full representation, but the other side is equally putting on the pressure to make us lose voting rights, to stop abortions. I don't know what's going to happen. There are more African-American artists being shown, as well as First Nation artists being represented. But, I have a good friend, African American, who recently bought a lovely apartment in a white neighbourhood in Baltimore. She is afraid to leave her apartment to walk down the street because of the hostility she faces.

Howardena Pindell's exhibition 'A New Language' continues at Fruitmarket, Edinburgh till 2 May, before it tours to Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2 July to 30 October 2022 and Spike Island, Bristol, 3 February to 7 May 2023.

Ellen Mara De Wachter is based in London and author of *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration.*



Text, 1975