

CHARLES CAMPBELL

BLACK BREATH SPECTACLE

JUNE 18 - AUGUST 13, 2022

surrey
art gallery

engaging
contemporary art

In what follows is a conversation with artist Charles Campbell that took place concurrent with the exhibition *Charles Campbell: Black Breath Spectacle* presented at the Gallery from June 18 to August 13, 2022. Assistant Curator Suvi Bains convened a conversation with Campbell in June 2022.

You've shared how the exhibition title references the protest/performance *Black Death Spectacle* by artist Parker Bright - 2017 performance held at the Whitney Biennial in New York. Can you share how this performance helped ignite the title for *Black Breath Spectacle*?

In 2017, Parker Bright placed himself in front of Dana Schutz's painting of the brutalized body of Emmett Till and stood in protest with the words "Black Death Spectacle" scrawled across the back of his t-shirt. The action is read as a demonstration against Schutz's appropriation of Black suffering with the words as a critique of the painting, but they equally identify Bright's position. The ceaseless stream of images of violence against Black people made him, and by extension all Black bodies, a walking spectacle of death foretold.

This fact was inescapable after the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 with the spectacle of Black death on full display. The words "I can't breathe" broke through the public consciousness and became part of a daily cry for racial justice, but they were also an assault. Scrawled on the walls of buildings, posted to social media and accompanying the most harrowing YouTube videos, those three words were a reminder of the precarity of Black life. The performance's title was formulated to both reference and counter this situation. I wanted to set something up where the "spectacle" we participated in was not our own victimization. "Black Breath Spectacle" put the focus on our fundamental force, while acknowledging our fragility.

When you reflect on the participants' breath in the audio, what does breath mean to you?

When I think about breath, I first think about its immediacy and its necessity. Our need to take our next breath is measured in seconds, maybe stretching to a couple of minutes. Put that against the many millennia it took to build up a breathable quantity of oxygen in our atmosphere and breath becomes this measure of time that operates on intercellular and geologic scales. There is a massive fir tree I visit on one of my walks that has stood for centuries, turning exhalations into solid matter, giving oxygen in return. When I stand beside it, I like to think about the relationship we're forming on a molecular level.

The original performance was held at the Vancouver Art Gallery, why was it important for the audio recordings to be played out loud in the halls at the VAG?

Galleries persist as pretty white spaces and to have twenty Black folks roaming the halls was an anomaly, so in the first instance I was making our presence felt in a subtle way. Audible breath also changes the feel of a space. Initially I was thinking of the impact this might have on gallery-goers, but the real power in the gesture was the impact it had on the Black participants. People spoke of feeling "incredibly empowered" carrying Black breath and how compelling it was to carry the sound of other people breathing. It allowed them to slow down, feel grounded, connected, and powerful. As a whole, the performance was about reclaiming space, forming community, acknowledging our ancestral legacies and the depth and complexity of our histories. It felt particularly pertinent to be doing this inside a former courthouse, to be taking back the space with our breath.

The breath recordings are deeply intimate and personal and carry experiences and stories. What was it like doing those recordings?

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised by the intimacy of the recordings, but I was. I asked people I know but am not necessarily close with to let me record them and we went through a process of asking them to envision and connect with a person from their past as I recorded their breath. The idea was to create these layers of presence that went back in time. The room was really full as we did the recordings and I tried to just give people space to be with themselves and memories without prying. I had asked for permission to record their breath, not to reveal intimate details of their life and relationships. In some cases, stories emerged; in other cases, we sat together in silence, but regardless I left with the feeling of having shared something.

What would you like for a visitor to experience/reflect in this exhibition?

I'm happy for visitors to just connect with their own breath and perhaps their corporality. Although the project was based in the particular strength and precarity of Black breath, there is a visceral knowing when we encounter another's breath that makes their experience ours. A shallow breath, a gasping breath, a slow relaxed exhale. We know them in our bodies. This commonality is irreconcilable with the unknowable specificity of another person's life, especially when we cross racial lines. I want to put people in the middle of that felt knowing and the unknowability.

Suvi Bains
Assistant Curator