

- 00:00:03.65 **CRYSTAL Z CAMPBELL:** Thank you, Krista, for that introduction and a big thank you to Lauren Cornell for the invitation of Krista and is it Camila? Camila, for assisting in manifesting this talk, and I also want to express gratitude to Casey Robertson for facilitating everything from behind the scenes. I'm truly honored to be a guest speaker at CCS Bard and as Krista mentioned, we'll leave time at the end for our conversation, so feel free to gather your questions.
- 00:00:43.46 Thank you for tuning in at the end of this long week, at the end of everything. I'm based in the middle of the country, precisely in Indian territory, on Kiawah, Osage, Kickapoo and Wichita Land, more formally known as Oklahoma. I often work with archival material and sound to consider the politics of the witness. I'm interested in the slippages between gestures and movement in relation to spatial politics. I'm interested in how representation of an event has the potential to shift or obscure narrative and to alter the perception of place. Can we go to the first slide?
- 00:01:42.33 So this, for this talk, I actually wanted to go back a little bit further and this piece is actually from 2006 and it's called 'Tenderheaded' and it was one of my first installations. I was a student at the University at Albany SUNY, doing a master's in Africana studies. And I spoke to the art department to see if they would let me take some classes while I was doing that degree. And they agreed and they, [silence] of working with this, with these discarded materials. I was working with common or ubiquitous materials that I collected and I would reconfigure into these installations. The work title is a reference to what one would be referred to if you have a sensitive scalp. All of the hair is artificial and there are a pile of shoes that are hard to see in this image that lie behind that animalistic structure in the foreground. The shoes are duct-taped into a low-budget monument in the corner. Can we go to the next slide.
- 00:03:16.10 These next two images are how the work continued in this vein for the next few years while I completed the MFA at the University of California San Diego. As you can see, there are palm fronds in this particular image. I would go out and sort of collect debris and discarded objects on the streets, sort of scavenging the area. And this mode of collection and scavenging has always been sort of really critical and important to my practice. We can go to the next slide.
- So, while I was in my next to last year at the University of California San Diego, I was allowed to go on this residency, which took up most of the semester, or most of the quarter. And this residency, residency took place in Iceland, in a former fishing village called [INAUDIBLE] . And this was actually the freezer for a fish-processing plant and it was now turned into a residency. So they were using the arts, like many other places, to sort of revive the city after the industry, the fishing industry sort of dissipated in that area.
- 00:04:44.95 So a lot of these, all of these objects are collected from the nearby land. There's driftwood and also sort of this embossed paper that was used for the machines to process some of the fish. We can go to the next slide. And in the last year, my, in the last year of my MFA, my practice shifted, so I started with those three duct tape sculpture installations because I wanted to share this moment where it pivoted. And this particular installation is at Project Row Houses in Houston, which is a site that was initiated by social practice artist Rick Lowe and his co-founders and investors. And they took rowhouses that were intended to be demolished by the city and converted them into contemporary art spaces. The first show that they had was

actually a drive by show while they were still remodeling and renovating the interior of the spaces. So they invited artists to put work on the facade of the building and to do work on the windows. And in this case, this was in 2010, we were invited to do an exhibition by a guest curator at the time. And I had a totally different plan for that exhibition, which I can't remember now after 10, after 11 years. But I also at the same time had two family members that became ancestors in that same period, like within a week of each other, during that install. And I was processing that loss and processing that transition as I developed this work. So the front of this home actually has windchimes that my uncle fabricated from shower poles and they're six feet long. And they were so large that you had to sort of brush against them as you were entering the, the row house. And at night, the house sort of emitted this green glow. We can go to the next slide.

00:07:23.40 And this was the front window, my uncle who became an ancestor, was also a retiree of the U.S. Air Force, so he had all of these, he had all of these license plates that he had collected over 20 years in the military, which I used to outline those white rectangles on the floor. And then there was a sort of altar-like space that was enclosed within two fluorescent lights. We can go to the next slide. And then the center of the room was sort of an homage to my grandmother, and these are sort of this collection of things that these odds and ends that she would collect. You know, it's sort of that box of things that you intend to repair one day, but you never get to with all of the buttons that come with, the extra buttons that come with the shirt or the watch that you plan to put another band on, but you never get around to it. So these were all of those things that, you know, had some sort of value to, to my grandmother that, you know, so much that she kept them around as a to-do, in a to-do container. And so these objects are carefully placed within this painted rectangle on the floor and covered by a sheet of plastic vinyl, which is held down by brass, nails and bricks. We can go to the next slide.

00:09:13.04 And around the same time something else happened, which was sort of a shift in how I think about the Internet and, you know, up until this time, like I've never been a huge tech person. And so around this time, my friend sent me a video and it ended up being a video link to the actual police camera footage of Deandre Brunston, who was killed by the LAPD back in 2003. And this footage was really striking to me because, one, I had never seen a death online, you know, and it was so precariously shared, like, you know, that you could just sort of email somebody this. And that was really shocking to me. And the other thing was, you know, to think about Hito Steyerl's Language of the Poor Image, like that video, it was at night and it was also sort of this dashcam, like it was such a poor image that, that everything sort of became very abstract. And, you know, watching that video was--I don't know, there was a sort of disentanglement from what was happening versus like what I read about that happened. So this case became pretty important because Deandre asked for the camera, I believe, over 30 times over the course of the audio. And that also was very poignant for me because he was highly aware of what having, what it meant to have this evidence and that it could be used later. So there was a sort of foresight about having this on camera and having this witness. And I thought that was really crucial in the way that he kept asking and demanding for a witness in this process. Whereas when I read about it, it was framed as a suicide-by-cop incident. It was framed as he suicide-by-cop. You know, in short, is basically that a person, you know, perhaps would be willing to commit suicide, but they don't want to or they would, you know, they'd rather be killed by someone else. So they set up this scenario where a cop has to shoot them, which, you know, is, is sort of ludicrous and on a lot of fronts. But there is sort of like, there is a lot of legal language around that.

00:12:19.94 So this footage that you see, this is a still from the film and it was shot in eight millimeter film, which is analog film, and it doesn't have sound attached to it. So this is actually a structure,

a rock formation that I shot in Iceland during that residency. And I ended up hearing the audio footage with this particular film footage to construct this sort of dynamic between this landscape and the perception of an event. So what was interesting was sort of, it became sort of like this Rorschach test where people would watch this film and they would say, oh, so is at the back of his head, you know, just sort of associating a sort of a body on top of that, like wanting to really see a body. And it became clear to me after several conversations that people, that this is, this is so redundant and repeated, right? Like the death of, of a black man by police, like is, is already ingrained in our minds. Like, you don't actually have to see that. And as an artist, I actually don't want to re-inscribe that image to recirculate that image. So it was interesting that, like, even though what I shared was a rock formation from deep time, right, they still saw a body in this particular video. Next slide, please.

00:14:09.69

And this is an image that many of you are probably familiar with, this is Henrietta Lacks and Henrietta Lacks is a very important figure in my thinking and and I believe also linked to a greater sort of well-being. She was a sharecropper who lived in and around like the D.C. area, and she went into Johns Hopkins Hospital, you know, sort of self-diagnosed a tumor. And at the time, the scientists who worked at the hospital were, were already sort of taking cells from patients who, who cells they wanted to see if they could continue growing outside of the body. And hers were the first to actually successfully grow while she was still alive. And after she passed, they sort of went in and mined as many cells as they could get from her and, you know, didn't didn't ask for her consent. But consent was and also required at the time. But her family didn't know about it until, you know, scientists and researchers contacted them some 20 years later. And her cells are so important because, you know, having cells that grow outside of the body allow scientists to continue long term research, which is something that was not possible before this process. And, you know, of course, in the way that capitalism works, like that became the backbone of the biotech industry and her cells are the most prolifically used cells today. And also, you know, with the COVID vaccine, some research is being done on her cells as well. So I think it's really interesting that, you know, this sort of dynamic between her not being able to actually go to specific hospitals in her own time because of the color of her skin, yet her cells and the research done on her cells having a global impact on the health of the world's citizens to this day. And so I think about that often, about sort of this macro and micro dynamic and these notions of care and these notions of value. We can go to the next slide.

00:17:00.40

So back in 2012, I relocated from New York City to Amsterdam and Amsterdam has a very prolific sort of diamond industry. And I sort of had Henrietta Lacks on my mind when I arrived. But it took a long time for me to, to manifest something with that thought. Eventually, I sought out a scientist to collaborate with at the University of Leiden, and it ended up being a now retired molecular geneticist named Dr. Claude Backendorf and Dr. Backendorf was working with HeLa cells and he had been for decades before, before this was known. One of the things that surprised me about the scientist and the researchers that I contacted about Henrietta Lacks's cells. You know, I asked them, what are the ethics of working with these cells, with this material? And often they would say to me, well, what are the ethics of working with, like paint or glue or, you know, like any other material? And I found that really striking in terms of thinking about that shift between, you know, bodily material and value and inanimate material that is, you know, completely fabricated in value and that having no sort of hierarchical relationship or dynamic. So with Doctor Backendorf, you know, I, I mentioned to him that I would like to sort of give her cells a resting place, like a symbolic resting place, because they've been in circulation and have been cloned for over 60 years at that point. And we ended up growing her cells on these rough diamonds to sort of think about the value of forever and, you know, how this value is constructed and circulated. If we can go to the next slide.

00:19:39.43 And in tandem with that project, I started thinking about, you know, other contributions and contributors to medical research that are perhaps unnamed. So on eBay, I was able to purchase this collection of, yeah, I was able to to purchase this collection of bacteria slides and these slides. This was about 90 slides total. So this is two pieces together in the custom-made lightbox that are roughly about three inches high and six feet wide total. And these slides contain samples like spleen, liver, heart, kidney, blood, urine, feces. All of these samples are on those slides. If we can go to the next slide, you can see a detail of that. And I showed this during an art exhibition in connection with some of the other HeLa-centered works, thinking about the body and thinking about, you know, how, how these things circulate in the world and the sort of economy around that and, you know, which has a lot of complicated histories and modes of circulation. And someone remarked when they came in the studio that this was such a fabulous painting. And I thought, like, you know, it was really strange to think about how that context, you know, set the viewer up to see a painting. Yet, you know, these are something like, we all carry this particular painting. Like we, we all, we all can produce these particular paintings, like is this hyper-real painting, like, you know, how do we sort of think about this in relationship to an artwork? And so that became like a very strange, like point of contention in thinking about, you know, sharing these things that would otherwise be thrown away or discarded as waste, right? And this sort of second layer of circulation that happens to medical samples. We can go to the next slide. And this was an image for some of those samples that I made with Henrietta Lacks's cells growing on diamonds. I would draw over some of the documentation and this one includes a couple of drawings, and it's called The Prototype, with a piece of soapstone precariously sitting on the top of it. We can go to the next slide.

00:23:01.96 So I want to transition here and move to another work. For a year, I lived in New York City and Prospect Heights, and before I left, I was invited to go for a walk by a friend of mine. And this friend, this friend asked if I wanted to go to the Slave Theater, you know, and I was like, "Well, what is the Slave Theater?" I'd never heard of anything by that name and it was very curious. So we went to the Slave Theater and, and this is an image from the archive. So you can see Reverend Al Sharpton in, in earlier days. He used to use the Slave Theater as a site in which he pivoted the Civil Rights Movement, like the second wave in the 80s and 90s to Brooklyn. So they would hold press conferences here. They would have Pan-African meetings, they would have Black philosophers come through and speak. But they'd also have screenings of Bruce Lee, Bruce Lee marathons. Let's go to the next slide. So this is not my image. This is also, this is by another photographer. The next two are. And this is what the interior of the Slave Theater looked like practically. It was actually in worse condition when I arrived, the lights were not on. But my friend wanted me to see those hand painted murals that are on the wall. If we can go to the next slide. And this is, of course, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and you can see the level of decay of the theater not being cared for. If we can go to the next slide. So as me and my friend, so we practically trespassed into the theater. It was being squatted in at the time and there was a little bit of an opening in the front door. So we went in and as we were leaving the theater, my foot hit something and it ended up being that thing on the left side of the image, which is a 35 millimeter reel of film. And it was, as you can see, it has these sort of angular sides to it. And those sides should not be angular if that film was actually cared for properly. So it was not in a bin or, you know, in conditions for preserving. It was on the floor, uncovered and unprotected and prone to, you know, rat urine and all of the fun stuff that the floor in New York brings that is unattended. And, you know, I sent this film, I found this right before I moved to the Netherlands and I brought it with me because I wanted to see what was on it.

00:26:32.61 And I sent it to a couple of labs, film labs for scanning. And they rejected the film. They said it was, that film was actually diagnosed with Vinegar Syndrome. So, the Vinegar Syndrome, if anyone works with analog film, that means basically that this film is deteriorating, has a terrible

odor. And if they scan this film, you know, it would actually damage or, you know, it could, that, that Vinegar Syndrome could actually be transferred to other films that are scanned on the same machine. So, no one wanted to take the risk of scanning this film and damaging another work. So, I just let it sit for several years not knowing what was on it. And I got the opportunity to do a residency at Yaddo and didn't have, you know, an exact project. So I brought it with me. And my neighbor, at the time, was really incredible. And I told her, you know, I have this thing, I need to scan it. I have a scanner, which is not exactly the right scanner, but it'll work. And I need to set up, you know, a sort of makeshift scanning situation to reel this film with. I didn't have rewinds. So we sort of made, we went to like Lowe's and got plumbing fixtures and adhered them. To my table and, and I proceeded to scan starting at Yaddo and ending in Tulsa, like 20,000 frames from this film, which was about every other frame, we can go to the next slide.

00:28:23.06

So this was one of the images from the film, and this is sort of where the film gets its name, this is 'Slave Guerrilla Power'. We can go to the next slide. It's just another cell we can go to the next slide. And this was the second iteration of this installation, the first one took place at Sculpture Center and was two 35 millimeter slide projectors that were in opposition to each other. And this version took place in Michigan and was installed in a site, a mechanic shop that was about to be demolished for mixed-use development. So I was interested in this relationship between the film itself. The film was, you know, as you saw like and sort of this emblematic neglect of that is also characteristic of black Bedstuy, before it was highly gentrified. And I wanted to think about the film as a relic of gentrification. We can go to the next slide. So, I did some research when I went back to New York and I looked into various archives, I think seven archives on that trip, and one of those archives turned up a coloring book which was intended to convince children in Bedstuy that this restoration process would be generative for them. So, you know, it would actually result in them having more access to art exhibits and basketball games and puppet shows. So it was really sort of this tool that was used to convey to children this, this very nice feeling and embrace the idea of restoring this neighborhood so that that feeling would be transmitted to the parents. And so I sort of enlarge those pages of the coloring book and that 'R', I believe that 'R' says something like "'R' is for restoration! Color, the 'R'--", you know, something very pointed. Let's go to the next slide. So, Casey, that's your cue- can we go to, like, let's say minute 11?

00:31:49.64

[FILM VOICEOVER] *"I wouldn't know if I recognized. Lighting a cigarette, Nidia says, "Do as I say, not as I do." She pauses when I ask how she learned to smoke. She started smoking after her uncle died, part of the grieving process. She recited the directions from the website by memory. This is a short essay on how to smoke for those who can't see my immediate advice is don't smoke. But if you must, hold the lighter in your dominant hand, find the trigger. The trigger is not like the trigger on a gun. It feels more like this spray button on cleaning fluid. The trigger part faces you, the holes face away from you. You know you're doing this right because your hand makes a fist around the lighter and your thumb is free, kind of hovering over the thing. Now take your thumb, rub it quickly down the wheel. You want to push, but not too hard. You'll figure it out when the wheel turns. As the wheel turns, your thumb should almost automatically slide down to the trigger. Once it hits the trigger, push the trigger and keep your hand there. You should now have a flame lit. You'll know because you'll hear it 'fwish' and feel the heat. The flame is now going to be inexistent above your fist. It should be one quick little motion, not fumbling, kind of like snapping your fingers."*

00:33:30.39

CRYSTAL Z CAMPBELL: OK, Casey, that's good, thank you. So I won't talk so much about this one, but this is a model, an installation called 'Model Citizen' that reference some photographs of Paul Robeson and also quilts that were framed as very American quilts. Some of these banners are 30 feet long. They range from 16 feet to 30 feet in length. And we can go to the next slide.

This is just the front of one of them, 'This is Not Equity', and then you see the reverse image. OK, go ahead, Casey. So the images of Paul Robeson are sort of interspersed within the design of the quilt. Next slide. And there was a performance that took place that was 75 minutes long and the performance sort of wove into the conversation around surveillance and figure drawing within the installation. There were three performers and this is [INAUDIBLE] based in Tulsa. Next slide. This one says "This is not an acknowledgment." Next slide. Next slide.

00:35:19.29 OK, so I'm just checking the time here. This is the beginning of a project that I did in Sweden and I just wanted to sort of think about. This reference to the gesture and the sort of politics of specific gestures, in and out of context, so this particular image is a woman who is striking a neo-Nazi in a Swedish village and... It's a long story, I'm trying to condense it. So the short story is that an artist wanted to basically create a monument to this woman and the monument was rejected by the woman's family. The woman actually passed away. She committed suicide. And they think it was because of the scrutiny that she received after this image went viral. This became one of the most popular images from Sweden that year. And so the family rejected it and said that she had a mental condition and they didn't want her to be memorialized in this way. And the artists were posted to the city, this city where this took place. And the city also rejected it, saying that they could not memorialize violence with an act of violence, anti-violence with an act of violence, right? So we can go to the next slide.

00:37:25.98 And I was invited to do a residency in [INAUDIBLE], which is a coastal town in Sweden, and I was there for a total of 10 weeks over two visits, and I decided to shoot a film there. I worked primarily with migrants to Sweden, and this is [INAUDIBLE], he's from Cuba. The other performers were from Zimbabwe in the Congo. We can go to the next slide. And this is in front of maybe the most popular site in that town. It's known as a spa town, but before it was a spa town, it was actually a site for a tuberculosis sanatorium where people were sent if they had TB. And after the vaccine for TB was developed with the help of Henrietta Lacks's cells, they had to sort of craft a new identity for themselves. And that became sort of capitalizing on this health, this trend of health and wellness and self-care. So this is in front of the most popular bathhouse there. Let's go to the next slide. And this film, we have it on cue, but actually, if you want to see it, we can, you can go to the Hartnett Gallery link and watch the entire film. We can go to the next slide.

00:39:11.05 And this is the, one of the residences that I stayed at during the residency, and as you can see, the monument is directly in front of the house. So I would pass this statue multiple times a day. You can't see it in this image, but to the left is a tree. And all of those handbags that were, that are hanging on that monument were actually hanging on the tree. So what happened after this particular encounter is, is that this image went viral again with the Internet and people started hanging their handbags on other statues, hanging their handbags on trees and doors and anywhere that you could hang something. So it became this odd like solidarity gesture. And I wanted to sort of think about that solidarity and how thin it was, you know, like how thin it is. Like on one hand, that solidarity can be exciting and fun. But then when it comes down to like other issues, like immigration, like, is that solidarity still there? Is that solidarity still there? Let's go to the next slide. So this is, this is the most recent installation I've done, which was just completed last week at the Springfield Museum of Art, and this is the installation for 'Viewfinder'. We can go to the next slide. So it's a three channel installation with three 65-inch monitors and five framed photo collages. Let's go to the next slide. And we can go to the next slide. And I want to quickly wrap up so we have time for questions, so we'll skip playing 'Viewfinder'. We can go to the next slide.

00:41:27.24 So last week, I see Marlena in the in the participation room. Hi, Marlena. Marlena was actually

in a workshop I held last week with Black Spatial Relics. She's a residency based on [INAUDIBLE] run by Arielle Brown. And I had a workshop around the song 'Oklahoma' from the musical. I'm thinking about sort of how that construction of Oklahoma lives in sort of, you know, communal memory. And one of the participants generously sent me her free writing about Oklahoma that we did at the beginning. And I just wanted to point out, you know, the sort of sentiment that she had at the end. So in short, she was basically saying, like Oklahoma, the land is very expansive. But I wonder if the stories and the opportunity for people, if it is as expansive as the land, like are people open-minded, you know, are, there's a sense of openness and grandeur, but does that reflect in sort of the mentality of people? So let's go to the next slide. We can go to the next slide, those are just quickly, yeah, we can keep moving, Casey. Keep moving. So those first two, that's good, those first two slides with the maps were sort of oil pipelines from over 100 years ago and the second one was from 2003, showing the amount of oil that is taken out of Oklahoma. So just thinking about it as a site of extraction.

00:43:37.70 And I wanted to quickly move to the last works which are around the Tulsa Race Massacre. And this is an installation that took place in 2012 in Italy. So you can go to the next slide. So this piece is called 'Paradise', and it's just the projection of this rectangle on the ceiling of this room and it's an enclosed room. So the viewers were invited to come in and the only encounter that they had was with this projected illumination on the ceiling and the smell of burning wood. And I was just thinking about sort of the lack of accountability around the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, which took place in the Greenwood section of Tulsa, where over thirty-five blocks of homes and businesses were burned to the ground. And the city still has not sort of owned up to the, you know, any reparative acts around that, let alone just started speaking about it as it became more prominently known outside of Tulsa. So sort of really trying to like, take back the narrative and also capitalize on the narrative. So this was the first piece that I did on that questioning, that accountability. We can go to the next slide. We can go to the next slide. This was just a workshop I did where a participant found a family member as a victim of the Race Massacre and wasn't aware that this family member was a victim of the Massacre, so it was a very intense moment. We can go to the next slide. We can go to, you can scroll through, I'll tell you when to stop so we can. And. OK, we can stop there, actually here's fine.

00:45:59.29 So I have this on-going series of painted archival photographs where this, this land is sort of being enacted, right? I think one of the common images that you'll see is this image of destruction, of buildings and rubble. And I really wanted to create sort of a counter narrative to that. So I've been working with this archive of images where residents of Greenwood, after the Massacre, are engaged with the land, are lounging or reclining across this landscape and also very much positioning themselves within this evolving sort of modern city. In some of the scenes, you can see literally the city being rebuilt around them, like sidewalks being freshly poured or, you know, some of them, they're lounging across like model-T cars and things like that. So I really wanted to think about the self-determination that these residents had in rebuilding this community, rather than this pervasive image of destruction. Let's go to the next slide. So we can sort of--Ok, let's go to the next slide. You can keep clicking, Casey. I put so many slides in there for you. Ok, those are just some other images in the trees. Ok, we can go through that one. Keep going. So that's just the highway where, that was erected during urban, urban renewal in the 60s. So, so, of course, the community was sort of dissolved for the most part in 1921, and they rebuilt it and then again in the 60s and 70s, with urban renewal and all the incentives for cities to incorporate highways, Tulsa took advantage of that, to also put that right through the Greenwood district, dissipating that community once more. And that was sort of like, you know, a big stake in the ground and sort of splitting up those residents. Let's go to the next slide.

00:48:38.38 And we can end with this piece. So this is a piece called 'Searcher', which Krista mentioned, graciously, in the beginning, and 'Searcher' really is sort of a work that I installed without any notice or sort of saying "There's going to be an artwork at this place,". I just put it up and wanted people that were on the highway, which is sort of right next to this work, to see that and think about that land and sort of think about that space and why it's being called attention to. And I directed this piece in 2016 and 2017, around the time Juneteenth and the anniversary of the Massacre, which is May 31st and June 1st. So I will end there because I think I've gone a little bit long. But I really just wanted to say that I'm not really interested in defining the particular narrative of the Massacre, as there will be many different narratives that will rise over the course of this centennial year, and there have already been, and these revisions will persist. So thank you so much for your time.