



# TALKER

#10

Barby Asante

PROVE THAT



# Talker

## #10

### *Barby Asante*

We met in Barby's Brixton studio and began with a conversation about teaching. The characteristically hectic Autumn Term had just begun and we were comparing experiences from our respective institutions. It proved a fitting point of departure though. Questions about how we acquire knowledge and understanding are woven throughout Barby's practice. From them, come a number of propositions for how we might remain radically critical throughout that process. She was quick to invoke bell hooks and her 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress* with its powerful maxim that education is the practice of freedom. I find the movement against and beyond boundaries in the transgression celebrated in hooks' text a helpful framework for considering Barby's projects discussed in this issue of TALKER. 'Movement' because of its resistance to fixity and readiness to negotiate change and contingency (like all good live work) and 'boundaries' because, as we talked, it became so clear that the work is constantly challenging the arbitrarily imposed delineations that attempt to define nations, identities, society, culture and politics.

For *Noise Summit* (2013/2014), commissioned by South London Gallery as part of their Play Local programme, Barby offered young people instruments, microphones and a PA system and invited them to play with receptive musicians. The work offers a space for the 'contributor-performers' (a role that reoccurs in relation to Barby's projects) to enjoy and explore the freedom in play and improvisation with few defined terms. It's a work that emphasises the value of process over product while inviting questions about how conviviality and play have power in the machinery of learning and social behaviour.

Barby also generously shares background to her intricate and iterative work *Declaration of Independence*. She traces its development from the archive of personal rituals that were the basis for *Intimacy and Distance*, a project realised in and around the Palazzo Pisani S. Marina as part of Diaspora Pavilion during the 57th Venice Bi-

ennale, 2017. This account of the process of gathering these rituals and stories from womxn of colour describes how communities are built around her work. She finds unique ways for their voices to speak together. The different strategies that *Declaration of Independence* uses to share and amplify the words of the contributors underline their collective strength. Texts are written together through a dialogue that Barby facilitates. They are then shared as public recitations in the form of video installations, live performances and sound pieces. In December 2020, she achieved that rare thing of broadcasting a live online version as part of the Brent Biennial that lost none of the impact, love, grief, anger and defiance so vital to the previous iterations. In each case, the work reveals itself as a new and resonant historiographic model. It foregrounds the persistent and personal importance of interrogating experience in relation to the legacies of slavery, colonialism and racism.

Later in our conversation, we explore other ways Barby has presented performance work through collective endeavour. *To Make Love is to Create Ourselves Over and Over Again: A Love Poem for Audre*, broadcast live from Kettle's Yard in July 2021, employed a musicality through an ensemble composition to honour the work and life of Audre Lorde. It too succeeded to be miraculously compelling and direct in its online format.

Alongside Audre Lorde and bell hooks, many other names came up as we talked. Ama Ata Aidoo, NourbeSe Philip, Khadija Saye and a host of other friends and allies felt less like a cast of intellectuals assembled in a bibliography to bolster an academic position and more like a family, with all the love, support, dependance and complexity that comes with that. Barby never hesitates to honour the figures who have influenced her and the last work we speak about, *Baldwin's Nigger Reloaded*, is a beautiful example of her sincere investment in providing opportunities for others to share process with her. Together with a group that would grow into the sorryyoufeeluncomfortable collective, Barby looks back at James Baldwin's speech in Horace Ové's 1969 film *Baldwin's Nigger*. This open process of interpretation produced a huge archive of responses which were gathered and shared in different ways. It's a work that takes a historical artefact and dissects through the incisive perspectives of a younger generation to teach new lessons about the present. For me, this project is the best example of the empathic, curious methodology of holding space that defines how Barby works. It questions the status of performance by looking to ritual practices, radical collective action and dissident archival work. There is power and generosity in all of it.

Giles Bailey  
2022





Saturday 16 October 2021  
Brixton, London.

**Giles:** How do you find the balance of your teaching responsibilities and studio practice?

**Barby:** I work at Goldsmiths Monday to Wednesday. It's more of a container, you know? It gives a structure to the week. And that's what I need. Then I go into the studio on Thursday and Friday. Well, apart from yesterday when I hosted a BLM event at 198,<sup>1</sup> where I'm one of the board members. I've been freelance for however long in my life and just juggling. That's alright when you're younger. Things have developed so that I do fewer public projects and more of my own stuff and my own artistic practice. Now I can be a bit more organised about that.

**Giles:** How do you differentiate between what constitutes a public project and your own artistic practice?

**Barby:** Well, I didn't for many years. I just thought they were all my practice. What I would say differs now is my relationship to institutions. Lots of people are always asking me to do stuff or pitch projects and I'm like, "That's not how I work." They often come with agendas that I'm just not interested in and I find to be quite aggressive. Often they want you to come in and pitch a project to work with a certain community. To me, that feels dictatorial. I love the way that James Baldwin might have described it, like missionaries coming in and saying, "We're going to reform you!" I'm learning more and more things like abolition and that provides a brilliant language for some of these things that institutions are doing. Of course, the idea of abolition comes out of the abolition of slavery and that has grown into the idea of carcerality and prisons, but also carceral and other

harmful behaviours that exist that take away people's autonomy in ways that are explicitly and subtly damaging. Sometimes, I don't think that the institutions realise these are people, not numbers that keep the money coming in. You could go back and report to someone and say, "You know what, these kids or these elders, they're really unhappy with this," and it just wouldn't register because they've got criteria and funders that mean things are dictated in a particular way. I really pulled myself away from that because, firstly, that was burning me out and secondly, I just got more and more furious with this process. I'm not saying that education is any better, but I am part of a good team and have a bit more autonomy. I write my courses. I'm happy that I'm not bidding for art opportunities. Instead, I'm doing tutorials and exploring artmaking in a particular way that aligns with my interests. I am in dialogue with others in a different way, which I do see as very much part of my practice. I think that, as an educator, I am influenced by the ideas of *Teaching to Transgress*<sup>2</sup> by bell hooks, in the sense that it's a reciprocal relationship between the so-called teacher or pedagogue and the student. It's about holding space... I wouldn't even call it a learning, it's sharing. A space for research or an enquiry to come forth. I think, I *hope* that takes away from the carceral logic of classrooms.

**Giles:** The question of how to create a collective space to negotiate a subject with others seems to run through your work. Has that commitment to accommodating different vantage points and voices in the room always been important?

**Barby:** Yes! In all my practice.

**Giles:** It's very evident in *Declaration of Independence*, but absolutely part of

1 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning is an art space and gallery in Railton Road, Brixton, London.

2 bell hooks published her book *Teaching to Transgress* in 1994 to propose a radical new pedagogic model where education is the practice of freedom.

the James Baldwin project too. I found knowledge of those works really helped me think about your earlier work *Noise Summit*, although that work feels much more about improvisation.

**Barby:** I think I learned a lot doing *Noise Summit*. It was great because I shared a studio with Jack James who was working at South London Gallery at the time. I'd talked to him about my interest in the events around the 2011 riots after Mark Duggan<sup>3</sup> was killed. That was when I was associate curator at 198. I've been involved with that organisation since the beginning of my art life, basically since I was a student. At that time we did this exchange project and had two representatives from UNICEF Syria come over to explore the possibility of an exchange project with a group of local young people. They arrived in Brixton, into the debris of the riot. It was just before the civil war started, but they all knew that it was going to happen. The young people that they look after were mostly Palestinian and Iraqi, so they were already displaced. They walked into Brixton and there was press everywhere. They were like, "What the hell?! We can't bring the young people to this place." This was a really hard thing to see, but it was also a very interesting moment because, in the end, they did come and it was a very interesting meeting of different groups of young people who were basically dealing with different ways in which harm — and the legacies of coloniality and globalisation — were affecting their lives. They spent a week working together with an artist called Gary Stewart. I think that was really the tipping point of me saying, "Right, fuck all other organisations. I ain't working with you because you want to do something *now*?" You know, it's like 2020, everybody wanted to do something! I was just saying no. Back to *Noise*

*Summit*. In 2011 I had a conversation with filmmaker Topher Campbell,<sup>4</sup> a couple of other artists and Baroness Lola Young, who was working at the GLA<sup>5</sup> at the time. We explored what kind of projects we wanted to do post this new wave of rioting. I wanted to work with groups of young people in projects where they set the agenda. So, *Noise Summit* was that. Jack was just like, "Well, let's try it out." We're both really into music and sound. We could have worked with sound and done sound recordings and mixing, but I wanted something more affecting and alive, so we got together a number of musicians and just landed on an estate in south London. There was a youth centre on this estate and Jack negotiated with them, explaining what was going to happen. We had a drum kit and some other instruments. The kids were like, "What are you doing here?" And we're, "Well, we're just here to play." Then gradually the improvisation came. For the first one, we just showed up and were there over three days. We just landed and there was a mass of kids. I remember they were really into rapping and creating songs. It was just super fun. Then we set up on another estate for a year and would go every school break. We'd turn up and people would be like, "Oh! You're here again!" There was no prescription to make anything or to remember what you did last time or age restrictions. We had to have an end point, but only because it was taking place within a relationship with a gallery and funders. So, we had a celebration with a picnic and, you know, kind of made a bit more of it. But nothing was rehearsed, and everything was improvised. What happened on that day happened. And the gallery continued its work with those children after *Noise Summit* was over.

4 Topher Campbell is a filmmaker, artist, writer and Programme Director of the Collaborative Theatre Making programme at Rose Bruford College in London.

5 The Greater London Authority is the devolved regional governance body of the London region.

3 Mark Duggan was a Black British man who was shot and killed by police in Tottenham, North London on 4 August 2011.



**Giles:** Hearing about your journey through that project really underlines the importance of its liveness. Was that very apparent from the beginning of the project?

**Barby:** I have been very influenced by the experience of bringing these young people together. I was asking, “How do you give them space to just like express themselves?” You know, it’s funny, it makes me really emotional. I remember another project I did with the Serpentine Gallery, my agency for agency<sup>6</sup> collaborator Teresa Cisneros and a group of wonderful (and in many ways damned) young people from Westminster School. The day they all came in, Trump had been voted into power. We had young people from, Iraq, Somalia, Kosovo, Yemen and Brazil, and being able to hold a space for the grief! The anger! This was immense and I think one of the things that was really nice about *Noise Summit* was being able to create a space where whatever came up, came up. Those tipping points, the riots in 2011 and 1981<sup>7</sup> didn’t happen because they ‘just happened.’ They happened because these young people were fed up. They were fed up with being beaten up, they were fed up with being insulted, not having a job, being undereducated, or *so* many things. *That’s* the tipping point. Within that, there is emotion, anger, grief, frustration! I think *Noise Summit* was about living in a society that won’t address this relationship to its histories. And secondly, because poverty, racism and all these things are there, you need to find spaces for expression and for joy.

**Giles:** It’s making me think about the other projects where there’s like an

<sup>6</sup> *agency for agency* is a collaborative project with Barby Asante, curator Teresa Cisneros and producer Jessica Harrington. They work on projects in curation, education and advocacy in visual art, social practice, live art and performance.

<sup>7</sup> The Brixton Uprising was a series of clashes between mainly Black youths and the Metropolitan Police in Brixton, London, between 10 - 12 April 1981.

intense period of working together with a group and then a sharing point, like *Declaration of Independence* for instance. I imagine, in spite of their short-term nature, that those collaborations and dialogues are filled with very deep, positive connections. Is that the way it feels?

**Barby:** And difficult ones! We did a version of the *Declaration* when we were locked down. I remember being with Louise Shelley, who curated the project as part of the Brent Biennial. We were talking about making it and thinking, “Fuck, what are we going to do? *Declaration* hinges so much on us being together.” But then thinking, “What are the tools of togetherness? How do you create those moments?” I think that one of my biggest challenges was to think about how you create a space for a performance or a moment when we were locked down all over the world. This is a slight digression, but perhaps we should throw out the idea of performance or perhaps we could redefine performance. I had this interesting moment of thinking similarly many years ago when I was kind of adopted by the Live Art Development Agency<sup>8</sup>. With that came this moment of going, “I don’t really get what’s going on here.” And I still don’t really. It was too akin to theatre and something I just don’t understand. Perhaps I find it a little contrived especially in the western concept of theatre as a live but passive situation of entertainment. But then I also have a slight fascination with theatre. You can imagine theatre on a bigger scale or performativity as a strategy that we could employ in other ways to navigate identities in different spaces or things that we hide and don’t present to the world. At the time I found the LADA idea of performance or spectacle difficult and problematic. However, I kept on coming

<sup>8</sup> Live Art Development Agency is a publicly funded arts organisation that provides professional advice for artists as well as producing events and publications intended to enhance the understanding of and access to Live Art.

Images:

Cover:

*Declaration of Independence, 2019.*

Inner cover:

*Baldwin's Nigger Reloaded, 2014*

Throughout:

*Noise Summit, 2013/2014*

*Intimacy and Distance, 2017*

*Declaration of Independence, 2019.*

*Detail from South London Black  
Music Archive, 2012*

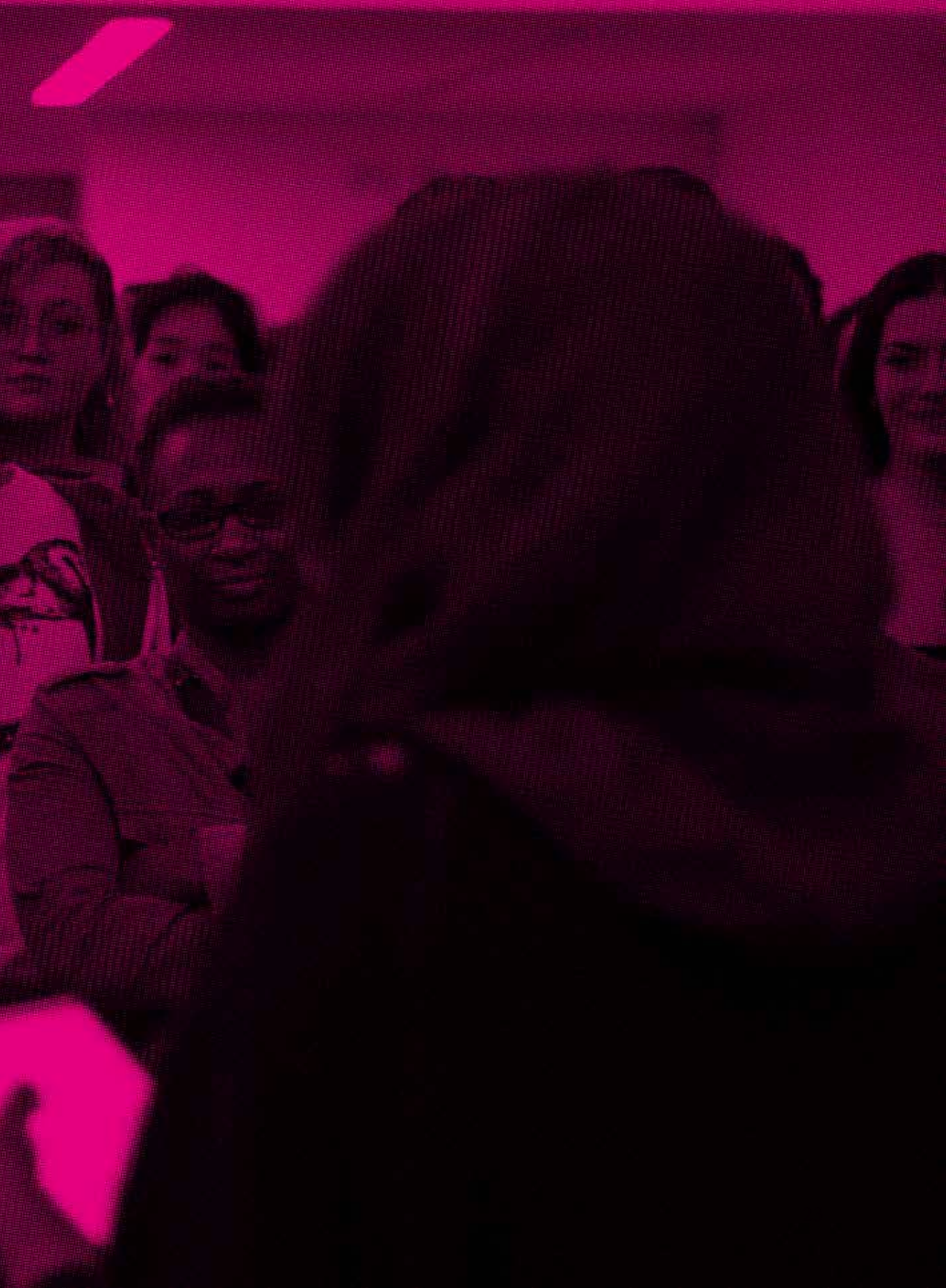
*Filming The Queen and the Black-Eyed  
Squint, July 2021. Photo: Tiu Makkonen*



Special thanks to Louise Shelley and Serena Lee

**If you would like a larger print version of any  
interview from an issue of TALKER please email me:  
[giles@1200m.org](mailto:giles@1200m.org)**

YOU BELONG



TALKER is an interview zine about performance.

Issue #10 is a conversation with Barby Asante.

Barby is a London-based artist, curator, educator and occasional DJ. Her work is concerned with the politics of place, space memory and the histories and legacies of colonialism. The work is collaborative, performative and dialogic, often working with groups of people as contributors, collaborators or co-researchers.

This issue focuses on her live work, from South London community intervention Noise Summit to her intricate, iterative project Declaration of Independence. The interview explores the crucial role of 'contributor-performers' and the challenges of presenting performances online.

Previous issues of TALKER have featured Ian White, Kate Valk, Richard Maxwell, Sue Tompkins, Spalding Gray with Kathy Acker, Dora García, Jo Fong, Paul Maheke and Clifford Owens.

[www.1200m.org](http://www.1200m.org)

ISSN 2632-8496