Listening Across the Black Diaspora

A Conversation with Tina Campt on Black Archives, Imaginaries, and Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

This interview with black feminist scholar Tina Campt explores her method of "listening" to images—from vernacular photography to contemporary art—as a way of attuning to their affective impact. The interview takes its starting point in the contemporary art exhibition Transmissions (2024) at Skånes Konstförening, which explored the resonance of Campt's method in the Nordic region. Campt goes on to discuss the centrality of photography in the current Black Archives movements in Europe, drawing comparisons with earlier efforts to reclaim Black histories in Germany. Furthermore, the interview highlights Campt's ongoing engagement with Black visuality as she considers the strategies Black artists use to confront anti-Black violence and care for their viewers under shifting political conditions.

> [H]ow exactly do we listen to images? We listen by feeling. We listen by attending to what I call 'felt sound'—sound that resonates in and as vibration. We listen by feeling the vibrations that emanate from images we think are silent, but which I argue are anything but. It is a listening that attends to how these vibrations solicit both subtle and powerful responses in and from us.
>
> —Tina Campt, A Black Gaze

Tina Campt's writings on Black visuality offer urgent and capacious theorizations of embodied encounters with images, ranging from vernacular photography to contemporary art.[1] Campt's scholarship has focused on Black communities in Germany, the UK, the US and South Africa but her insights resonate broadly across the African diaspora. In *Image Matters*, Campt (2012) extends analyses of Black family photographs beyond these images' visual properties to their tactility and musicality to consider their emotional impact. Expanding this approach in *Listening to Images*, Campt (2017, p. 28) pays careful attention to the "quiet frequencies" of identification and ethnographic photographs in which Black subjects perform futures unconstrained by coloniality. As she writes:

> Some see the realization of such a future in the form of acts and actions. They see it in the political movements and acts of resistance […]. But I believe we must not only look but also listen for it in other, less likely places. I locate it in the everyday imaging practices of black communities past, present, and future (Campt, 2017, p. 17).

In this way, listening becomes the means to access subtle liberatory practices not immediately apparent in the visual register. Campt's latest book, *A Black Gaze* (2021), highlights contemporary artworks that compel viewers to undertake the emotional labor of positioning themselves in relation to anti-Black violence. Here, too, she attunes to the "sonic frequencies" of Black visuality:

> 'Frequency' is the term I use to account for the impression images leave on us, their impact, and how they move us. [...] I'm interested in the frequency of images made by Black communities because I believe that the physical and emotional labor required to see these images gives us profound insights into the everyday experiences of Black folks as racialized subjects (Campt, 2021, p. 78).

Campt's practice of listening to images inspired the exhibition *Transmissions* (Appiah & Flink, 2024) at Skånes konstförening in Malmö, Sweden.[2] *Transmissions* took as its point of departure Black Archives Sweden's collection of family photographs that display the everyday sociality of Afro-Swedes (*Fig. 1*).[3] In response to this archive, *Transmissions* gathered works by ten contemporary artists who, through a variety of speculative and multisensorial approaches, engage with visualizing, imagining, preserving, and affirming the Black cultural archive. Throughout the exhibition, these artists draw from and articulate the complex and entangled histories and lived experiences that constitute the African diaspora and continue to shape Blackness in the 21st century.

Fig. 1. Black Archives Sweden. Installation of family photographs in *Transmissions*, 2024. Photo: Lena Bergendahl. Courtesy of Skånes konstförening and Black Archives Sweden.

We spoke with Campt during her visit to Malmö in November 2024 for the symposium *Transmissions*, organized as an extension of the exhibition. Her keynote lecture at the symposium, "Listening to Artists Listening to Archives," explored her ongoing research on how Black contemporary artists engage with and repurpose archival vernacular images, creating new ways of visualizing and understanding Blackness, through what she describes as a triangulated *correspondence* between artist, archive, and researcher (*Fig. 5*). We met Campt at Malmö Konsthall, just a few hours before her compelling keynote, and our conversation unfolded as follows:

Nina Cramer (NC): *Can you share how your dialogue with Black Archives Sweden and the curators of* Transmissions*, Tawanda Appiah and Ulrika Flink, came about?*

Tina Campt (TC): I find that a lot of Black diasporic work comes by meeting someone who introduces you to someone, who introduces you to someone, and all of a sudden, you're learning about all these different things. I had met the organizers of Black Archives Amsterdam and learned of Black Archives Sweden through them. I got to meet the Black Archives Sweden organizers the last time I was here. And I had kept in contact with Tawanda Appiah after I had written an essay for his show *FLIGHT* (Appiah, 2023). They said they were curating this show, *Transmissions,* that

it was inspired by my work, and asked if I would be interested in coming.

NC: *The curators of* Transmissions *write in their curatorial statement: "In this exhibition, listening is used as a tool in digging up narratives, dreams, and moments of joy and disseminating them across time and space" (Appiah & Flink 2024, n.p.). This provides an indication of how your work inspired this exhibition. Having just toured the exhibition this afternoon, what were your initial impressions of the works and their approach to practices of listening?*

TC: I was impressed by how the artists do two things at once. Because they are activating a sonic dimension in terms of trying to facilitate listening as a practice of encountering art in the same way that I'm wanting to make that part of our daily practice. But it's also about listening to archives, which I think is even more challenging when you're talking about visual archives, and specifically the family archive, the photographic archive that the Black Archives Sweden group is disseminating. There's a way that we take for granted what it means to look at photographs, especially family photographs. They're so familiar that we bring our own stories to them.

What I appreciated about what the artists were doing in *Transmissions* is that they were layering different narratives. They were overlapping narratives between family and broader diasporic histories, and between the diasporic histories and the histories of the nations and states that they were

related to. I just felt wonderfully stimulated to sit in all those different layers. To sit in the layers of Linda Lamignan bringing together the Norwegian and the Nigerian oil histories as part of their own history while we were listening to their family member recounting something (*Fig. 2*). I loved that experience. And that was present in a number of different pieces, of trying to get us to attend to these different fragments and the ways in which these fragments, when you layer them, can take you in all sorts of different directions.

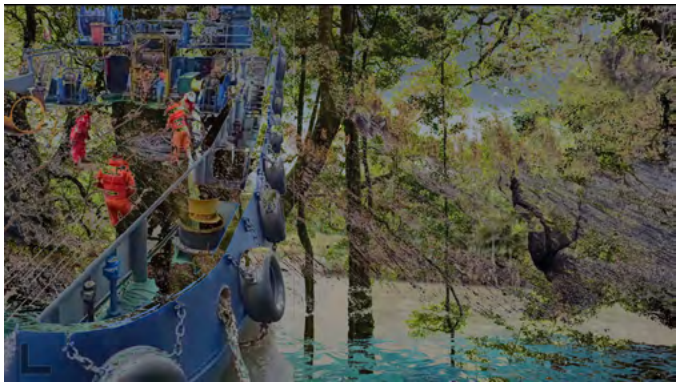

Fig. 2. Linda Lamignan. *Toru Torubiri Biri (Eye Sea Water)* (still), 2023. Video, 05:40 mins, loop. 3D lizard by Kristoffer Amundsen. Courtesey of Linda Lamignan, Geoffrey Ogoba and Seidougha Ogoba. Displayed in *Transmissions* with the sound work *Two Tongues (Abede)*, 2023.

There was a thread that went through the works from the moment you walked into the sonic environment outside the actual gallery, on the landing. You're wrapped up in this very industrial sound that is representative of this very industrial space. And then you walk into this beautiful, beautiful poem [by Makda Embaie inspired by James Barnor's photographs] that you have to listen to while you're reading it in another language. Then you encounter the individual histories and photographs that people donated—people who said, "I want to be included in this." And when you move from room to room, you get wrapped up in a series of imaginative visual tapestries that are not 1:1.

The other thing I really appreciated is that there were no narratives. There was no narration. There was no single story and there was no single timeline. All the artists were mashing things together. Even in the brief video of James Barnor (*Fig. 3*). He's 93, and he's going through photographs that he made decades ago. The film isn't telling the story of James Barnor; it's James Barnor looking back at these complicated histories.

So I really loved the extent to which they were so successful in activating all of our senses and doing that in a way that made us actively have to witness the merging of a number of different histories. And in doing so they challenged us to think about the idea of the archive differently. Because each one of those pieces, I think, was asking us to think about the archive not as fact, but as a source of imagination. Each of the artists took the archive as a source of imagination. It was their fantasy and, at the same time, their grounding. It was where they wanted to go and where they came from. It was this beautiful speculative journey that all of the artists were taking us on.

Fig. 3. James Barnor. *The Album* (still), 2019. Video, 14:13 mins. Produced by Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière. © James Barnor/Courtesy of Galerie Clémentine de la Féronnière, Skånes konstförening and Black Archives Sweden.

Qwin Werle (QW): *In 2022, we had the opportunity to attend your lecture in Copenhagen, where you shared insights on your work on Black presence in white cube spaces. Reflecting on that visit, and now during your stay in Sweden, how has your engagement with Nordic contexts shaped your understanding of Blackness here, particularly in relation to your earlier work on Black Germans? Perhaps, the ways they are similar and different or any other things you have noticed or been curious about?*

TC: [*sighs*] I've been thinking a lot about that. [*laughter*] I was thinking a lot about the differences and similarities of Black European movements that are trying to reclaim a certain visibility within their national context. One of the things I was really struck by is that there's Black Archives Sweden, Black Archives Amsterdam. We didn't have a Black Archives movement in Germany back in the day. But a lot of it did start with *Farbe bekennen* (Ayim et al., 1986), and what does it mean to write your own history—not just claim it, but to literally write it, to do your own research. And the Black Archives movements now are doing that through photography. When I was doing this work back then, I was not working with photography in any way, shape, or form, and photographs meant kind of nothing to me. But to start with photography, to me, is a really radical premise.

And maybe that's just the time we're in, where visual culture has a different salience now in a social media-based world. I was doing that work before the internet! [*laughter*] I was doing that work before email! Before cell phones! Things have changed. A photograph back then was a physical thing, it wasn't digital. Now it makes sense that photographs, or even visual culture itself, can be the mode of connection and circulation, whereas the work we were doing back then was literally trying to find people in archives, trying to find proof, trying to find just a mention of blackness. So it's incredibly enlightening to me to think about how the point of departure has shifted in time.

QW: *We've noticed in your research that you've shifted from vernacular photography to contemporary art. What has driven this evolution in your practice?*

TC: The transition to contemporary art was actually very interesting because I was writing about vernacular photography; first family photos, then studio photography. Then I came to identification photography. The transition for me was watching what artists do with vernacular photos, family photos, all sorts of identification photos, and the way that they could get us to see something different in them. Santu Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album* (1997) was profoundly influential to me because these were the kinds of photographs I had been looking at for a long time in my previous book *Image Matters* (Campt, 2012), but what he did with them was to tell a story of an entire era. And then Maria Bacigalupo's installation of these thrown-away identity photographs, cut-outs, the fact that she could bring those quite literally out of a trash can and put them on the walls of a gallery to get us to see the history of Uganda through them, was incredible. So that was a transition for me, from looking at the photographs themselves to looking at *what artists do* with photographs. That just led me on a journey of wanting to look at more and more contemporary art.

The work of contemporary Black artists that I was most drawn to was work that made me see the stakes of what it means to live as a Black person right now. They were doing it in a way that wasn't about sentences. As an academic, my superpower is words. I can make a beautiful sentence and try to make that as powerful as possible, but I was just struck by how artists were saying the same things that I was trying to say in really powerful ways, albeit without words. I was really captivated by the response their work solicited from me and from other people. Just watching people look at art was a big part of it. I would have these very intense responses, and I would look around, and there would be all these other people who were crying

or doing weird things in the middle of a powerful show where I would wonder, "Why are you giggling? Oh, that's how you deal with your discomfort." But that was just another example of how powerful the work was. So I started writing about how the work of artists was affecting me, what it was helping me to understand, how it was making me see blackness differently, and how it was challenging others to see themselves in relationship to Black life, or anti-Blackness in particular.

So that was my transition from trying to write about photographs in relationship to the histories that I knew, that I had written, to writing about how artists were using those photographs and the power of their art. It was kind of a natural arc.

Fig. 5. Jenn Nkiru. *Rebirth is Necessary* (still), 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

QW: *In* A Black Gaze *(Campt, 2021), you write: "Black artists are choosing to look after, care for, and reclaim an uncomfortable Black visual archive"(p.8). What does that look like—particularly the aspect of looking after and caring for?*

TC: Well, I think that the fundamental thing about being a Black artist is on what terms you choose to engage or inhabit the negativity of Black visuality. Do you distance yourself from that? Does it become part of your work? Is it something you're responding to? Is it something you're trying to challenge? And on what terms? The artists that I am interested in do not shy away from engaging or confronting that negative imagery. And at the same time, they are very conscientious about not giving it the power it *can* have over Black people.

So when I talk about caring for, I'm talking about how they address and incorporate this negativity in ways that takes care of a Black spectator that seeks to avoid injuring or re-injuring us. They are trying to confront the world with what it means to constantly be assaulted by Black death in popular media and anti-Black violence. The artists that I'm interested in are not trying to reproduce that violence. They're not trying to retraumatize us. But they're also not trying to say that we're not traumatized and that this is not traumatizing. They're saying, "You need to look at this and you need to position yourself in relationship to it."

The artwork I'm describing sets up a number of different points of entry that you can choose to take or not, but the one thing you can't do is to ignore the stakes and the dynamics of Blackness they are presenting. So those multiple points of entry really enable us to go to the heart of the matter and at the same time to inhabit the vestibule. And that's the moment of care I'm talking about. What does it mean to set up a situation where you can be part of the scene but not be injured by it?

Fig. 4. Tina Campt's keynote at the symposium *Transmissions*, 30 November 2024. Photo: Loc Vo. Courtesy of Black Archives Sweden.

QW: *In my research, I look at visual strategies that*

we can think of as experimental, avant-garde or surrealist, e.g. abrupt jump cuts, nonlinearity, juxtaposition, in works that blur the lines between fiction and reality and weave fantastical and surreal elements into the Black quotidian. There is an overlap with your research in A Black Gaze *(e.g. with your engagement with Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, Jenn Nkiru). Is this something you have thought about and why these surrealist or experimental formal methods are so effective at inducing a Black gaze or what you call the "affective labor of juxtaposition" (Campt, 2021, p. 102)?*

TC: Well, I think there's two things in play here. First, there's the surrealist—or, I would use the language of my friend Ekow Eshun (2022) and say the "fantastic." The fantastic is something that jostles us out of the real and, in doing so, makes us uncomfortable enough to see things differently and opens up possibilities for living otherwise. It's a sort of wedge that leads us to recognize, "That doesn't quite make sense to me, that is not my reality. Therefore, I have to do a fundamental readjustment in how I can exist under different terms of engagement." At the same time, it's a recognition that makes one incredibly uncomfortable and disoriented, which opens us up to being able to see other possibilities. So when you're talking about blackness in the contemporary moment, the effect is to create a state of hyper-attentiveness whereby people are sensing their relationship to reality differently.

In Jenn Nkiru's work (*Fig. 5*), you have a different relationship to Blackness where she presents blackness as a state of extraordinary possibility. In Kahlil's work, he's able to get us to think about Black death differently. In some of his pieces Black death, while tragic, is also a resurrection, it's going to a better place; it's caretaking. So in *Until the Quiet Comes* (2012)—that movie is so, so beautiful, but it's about Black death and Black people's ability to overcome and actually take leave from this world in a way where the last thing you're doing is saying, "I love you. I'm going to a better place. I wish you well and I still love you."

Here again it's a recognition that, "Wait a minute, this is not reality." And, at the same time, it gives me a different relationship to reality, and it gives me the possibility of seeing it differently. So there is a kind of liberatory practice that these modalities open up for us. And at the same time, they are not outside of this world. That's another thing that's really important. It's not Afrofuturism. We're still very much anchored in the real. It's just the real looking radically different.

NC: *The impact of these kinds of affective encounters with artworks and images is a consistent topic in your scholarship and you've previously written about affects like discomfort and Black radical joy. What affects are you occupied with currently?*

TC: Right now, the big one is grief. The new book that I'm working on is called *Art in the Time of Sorrow,* and it's about contemporary art and grief. It emerges from my own experience grappling with a lot of grief and a lot of loss over the course of the last few years, where I found that writing about art helped me to process my grief in really important ways. What's interesting is that writing the book is helping me see grief differently and see its constituent parts or the different affects that become grief. Because grief itself isn't necessarily an affect, it contains all these other affects within it. People talk about the stages of grief and my experience was, is, that I would love those stages. I had one. It was rage. Just ongoing, blind rage. So I'm trying to think about how that manifested in me and why it was manifesting in the way in which it did. I'm thinking about how one works through these feelings to get to another place.

The twin pandemics of COVID and anti-Black violence, which ran parallel to each other the entire time, have left us collectively traumatized and very few people are willing to talk about it. And two forms of Black grief ran parallel to these two pandemics—the grief for the many people we lost

to COVID and the grief for the many people we lost to anti-Black violence. And now, in the wake of the pandemic, people are really relieved to not be in a bunker, but nobody wants to look back on all that grief and all that trauma. But I think it's still affecting us really profoundly. So that's why it's important to me to write about my own grief particularly given the fact that some of us are entering a new phase of trauma—right wing trauma.

As we continue to think with Campt's work on the affective impact of images, the conversation we have shared here serves as a reminder of the importance of situating our encounters with images in relation to shifting conditions of coloniality, anti-Blackness, and fascism. This interview has explored a method of listening to Black diasporic archives—not only as a form of historical recovery, but also as a practice of imagination and radical possibility—and offered a glimpse into the myriad ways Black contemporary artists invite audiences to engage with the complexities of Black life in the Nordic region and beyond.

NOTES

[1] Tina Campt is currently Roger S. Berlind '52 Professor of Humanities at Princeton University where she holds a joint appointment between the Department of Art and Archeology and the Lewis Center for the Arts.

[2] The exhibition *Transmissions,* curated by Tawanda Appiah and Ulrika Flink in collaboration with Black Archives Sweden, was shown at Skånes konstförening in Malmö, Sweden from November 16, 2024-January 19, 2025. *Transmissions* displayed the work of Ikram Abdulkadir, James Barnor, Theresa Traore Dahlberg, Nolan Oswald Dennis, Lydia Östberg Diakité, Makda Embaie, Manju Jatta, Linda Lamignan, Eric Magassa, and Luvuyo Equiano Nyawose. Explore further here: https://skaneskonst.se/en/transmissions/.

[3] Black Archives Sweden's *Family Archive* (2021-) is an ongoing project inviting submissions from the Afro-Swedish public to amplify and reclaim the visibility of Afro-Swedes and Black people in Sweden, whose presence is often overlooked and erased in official archives. Learn more here: https://www.blackarchivessweden.com/submit/family-archive/.

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