PELICAN BOMB

The Transmission of Bodies: Howardena Pindell and the Moving Image

BY KRISTIN JUAREZ SEPTEMBER 20, 2016

Kristin Juarez looks back at Howardena Pindell's historic video work, which examines the boundaries between subject and object, public and private, and black and white.

A Still From Howardena Pindell's *Free, White and 21*, 1980

By the time Howardena Pindell made her seminal video *Free, White and 21* in 1980, she had been developing her Formalist abstract paintings for ten years. In 1979, she helped stage protests against an exhibition of Donald Newman's exhibition at Artists Space entitled "Nigger Drawings." That same year, she quit her position as associate curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and took a post teaching at Stony Brook University. Only months later, she was injured in a car accident that resulted in physical injury and temporary memory loss.

Pindell had reached an impasse. While she had been a founding member of the women's collective A.I.R. Gallery, she was becoming increasingly exasperated by the disinterest of white women to acknowledge the importance of race work within the feminist agenda. While she had been making labor-intensive, abstract paintings alongside her increasing activism, to make a video with herself as the subject was to replace the implied presence of her body (physically ripping apart the canvas and stitching it back together again) with the actual image of her body, an inherently politicized action in the largely white art world. To make a video was to seemingly move away from the singularity of painting in favor of electronic transmission and circulation. The circulation of *Free, White and 21* allowed her to speak when she was not present, to make palpable the racial dynamic of the exhibition space, to repeat the aggressions against her so that they accumulated each time it played.

Working with women videographers, Pindell shot the video in her studio and processed it using the facilities of the Downtown Community Television Center. The color video, shot on a U-matic ¾-inch cassette tape, shows Pindell both as herself and in the guise of an anonymous white woman, cartoon-like in white stage makeup, a blond wig, and cat-eye sunglasses. Pindell's testimony begins with her mother's violent experience of racism as a child and moves through various stages of Pindell's own life—as a child, a young student, a college student, a bridesmaid, a young professional, and an artist. Physically confronting the camera, Pindell speaks of the threat of contact between her body and others, of a hyper-awareness to how her body is perceived, managed, and objectified. The lush, high-key colors of the video contribute to a kind of bait-and-switch, providing a seductive commercial color palette to communicate the unsavory racial reality of being a black woman artist.

Through the affective charge of her image and her testimony, Pindell visualizes a social pressure point. The "hybrid blond wig person"—the term Pindell uses in an interview with art historian Kellie Jones—is a stand-in for the feminists she continued to meet in the women's movement, their interactions portrayed variously as skepticism, hostility, bullying, and dismissal. Throughout the video, the surrogate repeats, "you won't exist until we validate you"; "you ungrateful little…"; "your art really isn't political either, you know"; "you really must be paranoid." The phrase "free, white, and 21," made popular through its appearance in Hollywood films throughout the 1930s and '40s, was the ultimate statement of white privilege and calls into question a larger history of the representation of race, the optimistic dismissal of others, and the kind of being-in-the-world not afforded to the artist.

But it is not only the phrases Pindell uses that echo her interactions in the real world outside of the limits of the video. Pindell also performs a series of gestural acts that reveal an entanglement of race, privilege, and the history of images. At the beginning and end of the tape, she wraps and unwraps her head with gauze. An autobiographical gesture, the act recalls the car accident she had recently experienced and speaks to the metaphorical violence of being silenced. This act is matched by Pindell's counterpart—the white woman—pulling a stocking over her head, conflating a Hollywood trope associated with bank robberies with a symbol of polite decorum.

Near the end of the video, Pindell peels a clear film off her face. The second skin dangles in one piece as its formless shape is removed from her body. The gesture echoes one performed by Suzanne Lacy in her 1975 performance *Under My Skin: A True-Life Story*, where she pulls a layer of dried glue from her face—desiring to remove the boundaries between the self and the outside world. When Pindell quotes this gesture of "self-flaying," her blackness cannot be extracted from her body. The desire to climb out of one's skin takes on a more complex relationship when considering race, creating an intricate web that connects feminist performance art and critical race theory in surprising configurations.

In *Free, White and 21*, Pindell scrambles the assignment of object and subject and of self and image, as well as the direction of racial objectification. Turning herself into an electronic image, she effectively becomes the object. At the same time, the medium enables her testimony to circulate as subject, refusing to be tokenized. Reversing the expected direction of objectification, Pindell makes the white feminist perspective into a caricature—a performing object or objectified body. This technique of blurring the distinction between objectified bodies and embodied subjects is one that Uri McMillan traces in a genealogy of black feminist art and performance that he deems an "embodied avatar."

When the video debuted at A.I.R. Gallery for "Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States," curated by artist Ana Mendieta, it was seen as an attack on Pindell's peers. Part of the video's impact lies not only in Pindell's testimony, but also in its ability to fold in the viewer's response into its narrative, instantly absorbing and expressing reactions of doubt, anger, and silence. Holding up a deliberately distorted mirror, Pindell transforms a particular audience into objectified beings. With its aesthetic lushness, Pindell's electronic image relishes her form, using the difficulty to make distinctions between her body and her image to her advantage. Moving beyond the limits of the image, the video always exists in relation to its audience, and her testimony, even decades later, continues to unfold in conversation with current experiences of art-world tokenism, with institutional inclusivity or omission, and with new techniques of video practices as intervention.