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THE PODCAST AS PERFORMANCE ART

By Cassie da Costa January 28, 2017

The artists Kenya (Robinson) and Doreen Garner are sitting mock-regally on a divan in a moody Gramercy cocktail bar. The space is filled with elegantly arranged clusters of velvet-upholstered armchairs, Chesterfield sofas, and (mostly) white Manhattanites who are pleased to find refuge from the rain, sipping sixteen-dollar cocktails in a swank downtown speakeasy. As I trudge through the door, accompanied by a hostess who had politely asked for my name before inviting me inside, I immediately feel very black with my cropped coily hair, brass hoops, and extra-large bomber coat from Goodwill. But (Robinson), who is thirty-nine—I'll explain the parentheses later—and Garner, who is thirty, and both of whom are also black, coily haired, and casually dressed, seem to belong here more than anyone else.

I'm thirty minutes late, and they're halfway through their cocktails. "We started to be like, 'O.K., where is this girl?'" Garner says with a playfully raised brow. She scoots over, and (Robinson) moves to another chair so that can I sit between them, disarmed and central, as if ready for my complimentary consultation. The arrangement is unsurprising, since (Robinson) and Garner are the hosts of "#trashDAY," a funny, rowdy, smart, and unpredictable podcast.

At first listen, "#trashDAY" seems like a highbrow version of the increasingly prevalent hip-meets-woke culture podcast hosted by outspoken close friends. But "#trashDAY"



The podcast "#trashDAY," hosted by Kenya (Robinson) and Doreen Garner, is funny, rowdy, smart, and unpredictable, but also truly inquisitive and skeptical.

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is absurd and freewheeling but also truly inquisitive and skeptical. In the episode "Big Girl Panties," a listener sends in the question "What type of martial arts are you practicing right now?" (Robinson) is in the bathroom, so Garner answers the question alone: "I am practicing the art of deflecting white ignorance." (Robinson) returns and chimes in, explaining that "whiteness is a performance of ignorance," before Garner addresses their white producer, Jake Nussbaum. "Boy, you better turn your microphone on!" she says, urging him to contribute to the conversation and not to the problem. The episodes air once a month and run for more than ninety minutes each as (Robinson) and Garner serve as each other's hype woman, revelling in a continuous back-and-forth over non-stop music.

(Robinson) and Garner met in 2014, at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, a summer artists' residency in Maine, where they quickly became friends. They require snacks, nail polish, alcohol, and several extra hours in the studio to prime themselves for the event of recording. "The best part of our show is we have this experience where we're black girls but then we also have

M.F.A.s,” Garner says, “so we’re used to being bilingual. Like, street etiquette and art-speak at the same time, but we also like to watch reality TV.” Episodes go from intensive critique to self-help strategies to playful slander to free-association wordplay, and back again.

In the episode “Who You Callin a Bitch?,” TLC’s “What About Your Friends” plays all the way through before a new segment begins. “Oh, there’s so much magic in the world,” (Robinson) sighs into the mike as funk music rumbles in the background. Garner, undeterred by the track change, asks, “Well, what about your friends?”

“What about them?” (Robinson) echoes.

“They’re supposed to tell you when you’re looking crazy,” Garner offers.

“Yeah, like when you’ve got spinach in your teeth.”

“Yeah.”

“Or when you’re dating someone that’s crazy,” (Robinson) lobs back.

“When that weave is lookin’ real fussy.”

“Right. Or when you need to pluck your eyebrows. Mhmm. When your breath stink, too.”

“When you need to snatch that ’stache.”

“Oh, right!”

“And sometimes that results in some . . . sorcery.”

Sorcery, the segment’s theme, at once intentional and impromptu, is defined by Garner as “when something visually appears out of thin air.” The imagery unfolds, from a meditation on black girls’ braids to a polemic on make-up contouring to an inquiry into waist trainers. In the episode “Jungle Fever,” (Robinson) coins the phrase “arctic shiver,” a black-on-white counterpart to the eponymous dating term. The podcast itself is sorcery—observations, critiques, moods, tones, and visuals are not produced but seemingly conjured up.

(Robinson) always includes her last name in parentheses, perhaps as a way to undercut the power that a name holds as a government-regulated identifier, or even to represent the ambivalence that a descendant of slaves might have about her last name. She has been based in New York for more than a decade, except for a few years when she left to attend the Yale School of Art’s sculpture M.F.A. program, from which she graduated in 2013, at the age of thirty-six. She was accepted into the program without an undergraduate degree or any formal art training, but the experience didn’t provide a track to the spoils of institutional validation—solo shows, gallery representation, mainstream attention. Instead, at Yale, (Robinson) found herself contending with the egos of professors. “I think, because I was coming from a different perspective—you know, I’m a college dropout—their expectation was that I was going to be so grateful to have been accepted.” So she carried on as she had done before, creating her own opportunities.

The art critic Andrew Russeth, an executive editor at ARTnews, first became aware of (Robinson)’s work in 2011 when he saw her performance “kenya eats a cracker,” at the Kitchen, an experimental performance space in Chelsea. In the performance, (Robinson) sits at a buffet table and devours different types of crackers. While she munches away, a recording composed from the package copy on the boxes of crackers plays in the background. In a post for his contemporary-art blog, Russeth described (Robinson)’s performance art as “wonderfully out of

touch with the times.” Instead of mimicking the trend of performance art as “the glorification of long-term suffering,” (Robinson), swaddled in a bright yellow raincoat throughout a free-flowing and communal performance, takes residence in the space, focussing on the act of enlivening rather than the practice of enduring, and thus “engineers for herself a great and pleasurable time.” “#trashDAY,” which, despite its medium, is more interested in the idea of presence than of posterity, seems to spring forth from this very practice. Suffering no doubt leaves a mark, but flourishing insures a future.

Garner makes work that takes on suffering not as glorified performance but as haunting permanence. She graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design with an M.F.A. in glass in 2014, and makes corporeal, gushy, colorful, complex sculptures that incorporate African braiding hair, silicone, Vaseline, condoms, and various other manipulated and found materials to create medically and historically informed expressions of black-female physicality. Her piece “Untitled: Strange Fruit” is made from silicone, dressmaker’s pins, hair weave, and long, probing surgical instruments, arranged together and hung from a thick rope, appearing like meat in a butcher’s shop. Near the bottom of the fleshy mass, a large, pink orifice emerges from tufts of fuzzy hair with pins jutting out around it.

This sculpture, along with several other pieces, is on display at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (Mocada), in Fort Greene, where Garner currently has an exhibition up, with the photographer Keisha Scarville, called “Surrogate Skin: The Biology of Objects.” Like “#trashDAY,” Garner’s work in the exhibition takes an interdisciplinary approach, not as an academic strategy but as an understanding of life—specifically of black life.

When the Mocada curator Elliott Brown asked Garner to do a performance to accompany the exhibition, she declined, having tired of literally putting her body on display for art. Instead, three weeks after the exhibition opened, Garner and (Robinson) hosted “#trashDAY” live. Scarville and the artists Theresa Chromati and Glenna Gordon, who also have exhibitions up at Mocada, were the guests, and sat between the two hosts. Throughout the show, (Robinson) and Garner were primarily interested in creating a sense of community in the group—which involved asking each guest to recite her list of her top-five favorite rappers and engaging in candid sex talk—and in demystifying the lives and struggles of working artists. In the back of the room, the hosts sold “Best of #trashDAY” cassettes, which, they jokingly assured listeners, you can simply wear as a necklace if you don’t have a cassette player.

The event was modestly attended, but dynamic and committed. The hosts stayed on their game, but never felt the need to play up or tone down. They hit their groove from the beginning, only pausing, briefly, when a favorite song came on, to ask their producer to turn up the track so that they could relish the moment before sliding back into conversation, never too intent on one line of inquiry, but always aware of multiple available avenues. It was simultaneously the most exciting and relaxing hour and a half of improv I’ve ever watched. Afterward, I couldn’t quite parse what I had witnessed. I didn’t only have the usual post-podcast feeling of wanting to become friends with the hosts; I also had the post-cinema feeling of something internal and essential yet entirely ineffable having changed. Weeks later, when I asked (Robinson) how she thought the event had gone, she answered, with exasperation, that the question was like asking an actor what her experience of her own performance was. It was a revealing non-answer that nicely illustrated what it is about “#trashDAY” that is so deliciously outré: when (Robinson) and Garner go on air, they don’t just comment on culture—they live it.