

**Transcript of an interview of Paul Mpagi Sepuya by Curators Daniel Strong and Greg Manuel.**

Conducted in conjunction with the exhibition, *Queer/Dialogue*, on view at the Grinnell College Museum of Art from 7 September through 12 December 2021.

Daniel Strong:

Paul, welcome to our conversation. Why don't you introduce yourself?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Okay. Hi. I'm Paul Mpagi Sepuya. I'm an artist. I live in Los Angeles. My work is grounded in photography.

Daniel Strong:

Have you always been a photographer in your early artistic exploration or were there other media that you were interested in or was it always just photography?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

No. I would say I've been interested in many things but the work starts from a place of photography, either me making photographs or looking at photographs and images. But I don't say that I'm a photographer, I think it's more clear to say artist who works with photography.

Daniel Strong:

That is what I always do as a curator. I'm not sure if it's a defensive thing or I just want people to think about photographers as artists because many people don't. It's just one of these things where your general audience doesn't realize that photography is an art or what. So whenever I'm showing artists who are photographers, I always call them artists, I don't ever call them this is an exhibition of a photographer.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Exactly.

Daniel Strong:

So I'm in sync with that idea.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Well, there's too much overlap. If you're an artist and you make painting or sculpture, the first thing that's going to come up is not someone trying to sort out whether or not you're making work, whether you're a house painter, sculpture is always understood as art. Anyways, this is all incidental too, I guess.

Greg Manuel:

But I think it's important because, interestingly enough, there are eight different artists in the exhibition and all of them have different definitions of the work that they make and of themselves and how they identify. I think it's a really important thing to be clear about who we are, whether it be about our practice or about ourselves. I have to tell you, I have this weird history with your work that I only really

became more aware of as I did more research about it. I didn't realize that a lot of your early work was in things like BUTT Magazine, for instance, of which I have all of them kind of thing. So your name has been coming up for me for years and years. I think it was probably five or six years ago that I saw some work, I think it was at DOCUMENT in Chicago during one of the art fairs with the gallery I was at, at that time, I loved the work and then two years ago or three years ago in Miami, again, at DOCUMENT, I sat down and encountered the work again and they sent me a bunch of this stuff. But it keeps coming up and there's been this fascination and only since really diving into the work and the history of your work have I figured out what it is. Part of it is, I think, because you are so much more than just a photographer. On one level, the images at first glance, some of them even the early portraits, appear as simply portraits and then there's always more layers. I think of you more almost as a performance artist or as a collaborative artist in a lot of ways. All I'm trying to say is, I think it is important to say you're not just a photographer or that you don't identify as a photographer because it adds something to the work.

Daniel Strong:

But the word collaborative is community too so that aspect of it I think of in your work. I'm not sure if it's because being part of the queer community or I just think of your work in terms of community and I wonder if maybe that has something to do with its collaborative nature.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I missed the very beginning part of that question but you're asking about the-

Greg Manuel:

I think he said collaborative is community.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

In all of the work or within a specific part of the work? Because, there are a couple of specific collaborative works that I've done in 2010 or a little bit earlier. I've done specific collaborative works. In 2010, it was a project with a friend who is a painter, Timothy Hall. And then I did a project this last year with a friend here in Los Angeles, Guadalupe Rosales with an archive of her work that we were working together in a collaboration. And then, a project which was bringing together a couple of "collaborative or multi-authored" works.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I'm more interested in multiple authorship and then images that were completely authored by other people who are friends who were making work alongside me as I was working, which people have described as a collaborative project but really I would describe as a group show within the show. What I'm talking about is the Whitney Biennial project from last year. I think the word collaboration has been really confusing or used to mean various different things over the years because you have to get, like, super specific with it but there is a sense of, I guess, collaboration but in the way that just friendship is collaboration. It's collaborating on a new thing. It's like, there's you and there's another person and there's another person and there's another person and then that thing in between everyone is the collaborative thing called friendship or community or something like that so it has to exist within that. That's, I think, required as a foundation for making work that begins with the portraits and extends from there. But I think collaboration is different than authorship. I'm very careful and I'm very, very specific when it comes to saying, this work is not authored by me, because people often will attribute them to

me or works that are multiply-authored and then they will be, for example, me and A.L. Steiner or something like this or. Yeah.

Greg Manuel:

Go ahead.

Daniel Strong:

Sorry, go ahead. Greg, you asked the question and then I interrupted so why don't you continue your line of thought and then we'll go back to what my line of thought was going to be.

Greg Manuel:

I was going to ask, I guess, to specify even more so that the works ... I think you're right, the word collaborative is important as opposed to authorship. It's an interesting point because there are other people in your work including yourself often, and many of the photographs are both self-portraits and portraits of other. So I think that word collaborative can be problematic because, and to maybe that's what you're suggesting that, it's not as if... yes, those works are still authored by you, they just happen to include other people in the frame. And that was one of the questions I had, how does that relationship work when you're in the studio? Many of those people are your friends, I guess all of them are your friends or at least contemporaries or people that you work with or know well so already that collaboration or community is the groundwork or the foundation and then you extract from that or add to that. I guess, I'll let you speak.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I think it's like friendship and conversation. I would say, it's friendship, it's conversation, it's play, you know? Images are built off of prior images. I wouldn't say that there happens to be someone else in the picture but it's authored by me, yeah, that sounds really harsh. But I guess...

Greg Manuel:

But the important distinction between the word collaboration versus authorship is, I guess-

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Yeah, because everything is collaborative. Collaboration is just almost too big because it's everything. The conversation we're having is collaborative, every transaction that you have is collaborative, unless someone is forcing someone. Violence is the one moment when something ceases to be collaborative and I think a lot of photography is that way. Just walking down the street and pointing your camera at people is, I guess, the definition or opposite of collaborative. But it's a hard thing to talk about because I just think it holds everything and then it brings many things together that I think are important to have to remember the distinctions between those.

Greg Manuel:

Is it different for you when, for instance, I'm thinking of the project you did for pin-up with Dorian [Wood], that seems to me more of an intentional collaboration or a joint project versus some of the photographs that are similar but are from your studio shots or your fragment series or, is that fair to say or? As an individual specific project ... I'm playing with that word collaboration again and authorship

because it was authored by both of you, I think, or presented as being a work by two artists together. But maybe that's also not fair to say.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I would say it's a project that was organized by Christopher [Schulz] and we were both like, sure. We both love what each other are doing and that unfolds the same way as any other images with friends would except having a predetermined format and place in which we knew they were going to appear and just having known how Christopher lays out that magazine project and just thinking like, okay, this is something that we want to try to select a bunch of things from. So in the space of it, it's like, the playfulness of it and the conversation into it is the collaboration but it's all within this framework that I set up. When I'm talking about collaborative works, I'm talking about ones where the actual device is handed off. The first collaborative project with Tim Hall, the Accidental Egyptian, which is a set of collages from 2010, we're bringing together print material and we're physically making these collages that are made for scanning and then they're disassembled. It's this thing of bringing together all this existing work of ours to make a third work where we were really negotiating how these images land on a page. So the word collaboration works differently with that. But when I'm talking about collaboration and the authorship being tied to me, I'm talking about literally handing over the camera. That project is not an example-

Greg Manuel:

No, you're right, I see that now.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

That's social collaboration not collaboration in terms of the work that you see on the wall. This is again, not to try to literally stake claims in all four corners of the thing but what I'm talking about is, when I'm thinking about coauthorship or works that are not authored by me, I'm talking about a type of entanglement that came from the Darkroom Mirror Portrait works where I wanted to introduce a second point perspective of another camera because my camera, or my presence holding or manipulating the cameras, was at the center of every image. So I wanted to introduce another point perspective that could offset that, that could introduce the possibility of another space or another thing being seen that you're not.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

The whole thing about these images is, they at first appear inviting but they really don't care about the viewer. They're completely made in an enclosed circuit. The making, the looking, everything is included there. As you're looking at them, it becomes revealed that you're looking at the surface of a mirror. Semantically, you should be incorporated into the formal composition of the image on the surface of a mirror but you are foreclosed from this space. And the only way to enter into it is, you can either understand the structures of photography, you can relate to it through the way in which they play off of these queer social sexual spaces, or you can enter into them through an understanding of a feeling of them, or a photo-historical conceptual thing but the other point of recognition or whatever, relies on your proximity to the subject depicted which might only be partial or full. But the work isn't titled. There's these three things you're negotiating and the mirror makes it really apparent. The additional point perspective was about introducing another thing that might be being set up or seeing the vector without seeing what's being seen.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

And I had showed a couple of these pictures in a show. One was at the Team Gallery, Bungalow when they had that Bungalow space here in Venice Beach in 2017 and then later in the spring of 2018 at DOCUMENT in Chicago. So there are images of me and another friend both making pictures simultaneously. These are pictures that I've talked about before in other interviews because the way they were missed represented was really interesting. There was, not a listing, a brief and really wonderful little review in art forum and picks of the show at DOCUMENT, that spring of 2018.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

This one image that they talked about is my friend who was at the center of the image and he's making a photograph with his vintage Rolleiflex film camera and then I'm on the side, leaning in and I'm making photographs with my little handheld DSLR. And then this image, he's described as my assistant setting up my camera or alternatively as someone posing to make a picture, and nothing is ever posed. Anything you see happening is actually happening.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

There's this thing where it's like, factually, it's incorrect. There's two cameras in here, you see the one that he is literally holding and then there's the one that I'm holding. So the thing about this idea of collaboration is, the space in which these images are made is necessarily collaborative. They're entangled. My making the work is entangled with him making his work and his images were completely different to my own.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

The picture that was in the Team Bungalow Show the fall before, we're leaning into each other and you see both of us aiming in the same space, but for the most part, that other friend, he turned and photographed the space around us. They look nothing like these. Now, he has a book that's being published and a print edition that's from those works. Anyways, to wrap this all together, I realized that what was necessary was to put together what I was thinking would be a group show in some nonprofit art space because this whole idea completely does not work with a commercial gallery.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Also the thing that happened was, when a collector I think, that may have been at that opening for that show at DOCUMENT, asked about that picture, I was like, oh yeah, he's making his own pictures. You're looking at mine but he has his. And then it was the question of, oh, is this the one that I should be looking at or should be curating at because you guys are in between these things? Anyways, the whole thing is incredibly frustrating.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I realized it was necessary to pull together what would be a group show that was not my images but the images that are entangled with mine because they're made at the same time and they opened up this entire other space. This became a scaled down version of the project that was on view at the Whitney Biennial last year, which still the curators were so wonderful to work with. They were like, what would you like to propose to show? I was like, well, I have this idea that's not any of my work. We ended up putting two pictures of mine in there but for the most part, there was I think two collaborative works and then the rest were these images that have been made alongside mine but I was not controlling.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Again, the collaboration is the thing that's, for the most part, not the picture itself but it's the space that leads to their making. And then, I made sure that when you looked at the work, the wall label is each person's name. Some were artists photographers, some were not, but still they were the authors of the work and they attributed to it. That's the thing that I'm talking about, where collaboration it's too big. I'm interested in authorship or handing that off or complicating it within this framework of the aim, the gaze and who's looking at what and this idea of, even if I'm not physically at the center of the work, imply that at the center that I want to have something that's really, in a certain sense, rounded out.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

And then, the only real collaborative works I've done it's like, for example, the images I'm talking about with Guadalupe Rosales and her project, *Veteranas And Rucas*, which is this whole archive of East L.A. Chicano culture from the 90s. We did a triptych for this project she had for the Gordon Parks Foundation where we got together in my studio and we incorporated some of the materials that I use, the black velvet, the mirror, the staging, but all of the material in it was this archive that she has or that the community has shared with her.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

She's the custodian and caretaker of this archive. She made these arrangements. Those images are actually collaborative in the same way that those collages of Tim Hall were actually collaborative. But then the material goes off and she has her own works from them. Anyways, there's no short way to explain.

Greg Manuel:

Again, I think it's important and I thank you for specifying that because it almost accentuates the fact that you're working, and I think, Dan, you used that word earlier too but, community is almost more important, and what you're doing with your photography is documenting your community and interactions within it, very specifically your own but within that. So I feel like obviously it's a really important distinction. But I think you're right, that word is associated with you a lot and not necessarily in the right context.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Yeah. It just needs to be defined. There's just so many words that get used and then no one defines them and there comes a presumption around them. But I've been through the four works that you all have there, if I were to describe all of these with what we're talking about like *Drop Scene 1030373*, that is a work of mine but the circumstances of it's making are by friendship and making images within conversations in a whole world of making photography around with my friend, Clifford, who's an artist.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

This is an image I made but there are photographs that he made this day at my studio that exists as his own work. One of them was in the Biennial and it's a photograph that pulls back and reveals more the staging of the studio. This, yes, it's collaborative but this is in the sense of social collaboration. But in this image, you don't actually see his whole setup or his camera. That's another image that maybe *DOCUMENT* just didn't have that inventory, I think that was one that Vielmetter or something have.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

But then if you go to Darkroom Mirror 2070527, that, it's collaborative. When I'm talking just the collaborative, one of the friends in this, we've made work together for, oh God, at least 11 or 12 years and known each other longer and this is what I'm talking about in terms of recognition. There are portraits of him, he appears in the show that I just had here at Vielmetter in Los Angeles. So subjects, friends reappear over the years, but this was made when I was in New York.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I was in New York for the summer of 2017 and just making mobile makeshift studio setups. I was just seeing which friends wanted to get together and make these up or whatever and another friend of ours just happened to be over and he's like, oh, let's do one with the three of us. So it's collaborative, again, in a sense of we're using this larger concept. It's like, okay, the Darkroom Mirror ones, there's the mirror surface that's going to be developed at the bodies and then the formal execution of it is going to be basing it off of queer Darkroom arrangements or bodily configurations or whatever like that.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

But the image is singularly authored but it comes out of a collaborative space and that's something that's so much bigger and more important than any picture. The other ones, the two figure works, no, there's nothing collaborative about those. Well, I don't know. It's that concave shape and that large print. It's not that large, it appears larger just because it's reflective space or whatever. There's no abstraction in any of the work, they all come from images of people or of places. These ones come from this whole series of roses at night or photographs made in bars or at parties and stuff like that. So this is an actual photograph of a friend.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Again, it's things that are the layering or encoding of stuff. I'm not titling this to describe, okay, there's so and so and this, we were at this bar and this is what you see, there's no point in telling stories. I don't engage with an audience that way. But, again, it necessarily comes out of a collaboration which is just a community. And the same thing with the last one, figure 2010015. That's reworking with a fragment of a picture that was an outtake from what was a collaborative making images with another friend who is photographer and we've incorporated each other into our works several times over the years. So guess what, there's all this metadata content to the work, I could point to that, but maybe there is something other than collaboration.

Daniel Strong:

Well, what I find most interesting about your work and what attracted me to your work from the beginning, I guess, thinking back to my own experience in a Darkroom, although I never was a studio photographer, was just this experience of an artist in a studio. There are times when you're in the studio experimenting on your own and then there are times when you have people in the studio with you. In the latter when you brought friends and people into the studio, how much of it are you planning ahead of time? Or do you have in your mind where you want this session, if you call it a session, to go or is it really improvised?

Daniel Strong:

A lot of improvisation in a community as people getting together would be just improvising, whether it's a relationship or otherwise. Do you have a sense of what you're going to do or do you just get together

and experiment with the props, the experience and the images in the mirror? And then, how much of it is spontaneous and how much of it is more process ahead of time?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I would say it's 99%. Well, gosh, I don't know if I could break it down. It's like how do you explain if you were to just write a paragraph of a book. You'd have to talk about everything you've read before then and all of the thinking and editing and the fragments of stuff that might be in notebooks that you haven't yet pulled together. And then it's like, okay, then this moment happens. So there's a set of constraints and limitations that I've always worked with no matter what the project is because there's no sense in ...

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Too many variables leads to just a mess but with those knowns, it allows you then more variation to actually observe and respond to changes in variables. You can only really have one variable at a time or else you don't know what's happening. You need one variable at a time in any given work but the starting point requires everything that came ahead of it. So yes, there can be improvisation or can be planned or can be spontaneity, but that can only exist within a very strong and defined framework for-

Greg Manuel:

Which you've already built because of the history of your work previous to that?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Yeah. And then chance will lead to another thing happening maybe the next time. So that's-

Greg Manuel:

It's similar to what you described, I think, it's in the monograph from the-

Daniel Strong:

Saint Louis?

Greg Manuel:

Yeah, Saint Louis. You talked about how the movement from Darkroom, and I mean specifically from, I'm losing my words, analog photography into digital photography was an accident but created by circumstance while working on a project that you were already working on sort of thing and that then led to the next phase, to the next phase. And that's also what I think is interesting about the work you make and also the way you make it, that accumulative.

Greg Manuel:

That word has been used a lot to describe your work as well because there's an accumulation of references, codes, history and community that just keeps building and building. I think, for me, that's also what attracts me to it and what holds it in a space that is different than a lot of other photographers or artists that I know because it's a very specific mechanism or framework, as you've described it, that you've set up already that enables you to build off of. The foundation is there and you can go this way or go that way or bring other people in or push other people out with the mirror. I love the way that, that works.



Daniel Strong:

What is your progression in that regard? Does each body of work raise new questions for you? How much of it is just going from one project to a different project? How much of it is drawn from the questions or the investigations that arose in the previous project that then leads to the next? Because there's so many layers in your work, it seems to me that even in your own mind that, the things you're doing are then prompting the next or another layer. Is that how you approach your work or is it different?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Yeah, there's all kinds of things happening simultaneously. Things that are getting worked on. I'm just working and then having to take a moment and step back and say, what's going on at the center? And then maybe that's a moment to focus and maybe refine or change something and then push forward to get something and then you keep working or some of the work goes towards an exhibition or you have a conversation with someone on a curatorial project or something and then you start to thinking about, well, what are the unresolved questions and all that's left.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Nothing starts from scratch. I think there's a point now in having to be like, now what art has to get made and then I have to think about. All you can do is respond to what's happening. What I'm doing now responds to what happened before that and then before that, before that, all the way back to the first time I picked up a camera.

Daniel Strong:

What are you working on now? Are you able to work now? How are you responding to isolation or this kind of stasis that some of us are in? I don't know if you're in a state of stasis but some of us are in a holding a pen and wondering what's next. Are you able to work or?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I'm not in stasis but I've just realized that all of the conversations around this stuff, I just can't do that.

Daniel Strong:

Are you able to work? Are you working now or what process are you engaged in right now?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Well, I'll just say there's a lot of work. All the conversations about what are artists doing under quarantine and all this stuff, it just makes me really angry.

Daniel Strong:

Sorry, I didn't mean to make you angry.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

No, it's been nonstop since March. It's like, oh my God, we have to find all this content, what are artists doing? There's absolutely no answers. Now, since the end of March, it's just been a whole other kind of work and labor that has to be done because it's just ... Quarantine and COVID is one thing and then all of the ways of responding with institutions in terms of anti-black racism, a whole history of things,

everyone is calling up the five black people in their Rolodex or the one person they know and trying to help us save everything. There's an overwhelming amount of work and labor that is being done that no one is being compensated for and ends up being turned into shortcut marketing campaigns or something like that. So it's a complicated answer but I'll just leave that there.

Greg Manuel:

I noticed you took a break on social media specifically. I just wanted to thank you again for agreeing to the interview because we had talked about this already and the show has been planned. We've been planning the show for a year but I don't know at what point you were actually made aware of that, your inclusion in the show but, when I saw one of your most recent posts on Instagram about don't call me until September basically I was like, oh. Fair enough but also I hope we can still have a conversation because I know it's a lot and there's a lot of friends and a lot of artists. Exactly what you said, there's so many people being asked to do so much work right now uncompensated and also that everyone should have been doing from the beginning.

Daniel Strong:

It's interesting that this went in that direction because what I was talking about was actually physically making pictures. I wasn't talking about the work that needs to be done and what's going on in the world, I was really more focused on, are you in the studio, are you able to get to a studio? I guess that's the work that I was. But maybe that is part of what you're talking about, about being expected to answer how you're responding to the world in your current photography. I guess I was just curious if you're even taking photographs because some artists we've spoken to have not had physical access to their studio. That's really what I was.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I know that's what you were thinking of and I was just like, I can't answer that question. Not that I can't answer that question, I think I just made a decision not to answer those questions. I think at the beginning of quarantine or whatever, I did for a moment but only because I was like, well, there's an exhibition up and I'm just going to change the conversation to like that. But it's just one of those things that I'm just like I don't care for people to know. I guess I'm just like, it just doesn't make sense to me. I don't know. It's-

Daniel Strong:

We'll know what your next body of work is when it appears, is that what you mean, you don't want to talk about it before you've produced it or before it's finished?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Yeah. It's-

Daniel Strong:

That's perfect because an artist, I guess, shouldn't be expected to talk about what they're doing before they've done it. I guess that makes perfect sense. I guess one of the questions that was wrapped up in that is the idea of community or exploring community in isolation. Now that we're all in rooms talking like this to TV screens, what happens to community, does it contract, can it still expand? I guess even as non-artists dealing with that, coworkers or friends that we can't see or family members that we can't see, how that affects the concept of community.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I don't know if I have an answer for that either.

Daniel Strong:

Do you have a part of people that you're able to meet with and be with or are you pretty much on your own?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I'm fine, but it's like when I said that, when it comes to the work, I can go on and on and on about so many things but there's ... Oh, what's the way to say it? I don't know whoever the visitors are who are going to be listening to these interviews but I don't want them to know what I'm up to. In a way, I'm very conscious of, for example, platforms of social media and whatever I do. Aside from the occasional, like you said, post like don't call me or email me for this month, I don't share anything publicly about what I'm up to. There's a very small little close friends only or whatever who might see. But, I just don't care what people coming to an art gallery know of what I'm doing on the day to day. Not to be mean in a sense but I'm just like, that's for me and that's for people who are close to me.

Greg Manuel:

I think that's totally fair and I think it's something that, that wall has been broken more and more with the largeness of social media but also in this moment where everybody is trying to find filler literally or the same five artists are being interviewed about everything. At some point, there's, A, either burnout or also just a decision that, oh, wait, I need to reclaim part of this, because if we're sitting in a room, the obvious answer is to try to reach out and connect to everybody but actually sometimes the obvious answer is not the right answer, the answer is to pull back and reclaim some of our own space again.

Greg Manuel:

Again, well, we both appreciate you agreeing to do this. I think it goes back to community again. You create a community through your art but that's a very specific thing that you're putting out into the world, it doesn't allow me to access your community as a person. We haven't met before, I'm not going to pretend that we're besties after having a conversation with you, but I do think there's an understanding or people are starting to shift their views of what it is we control and how certainly for an artist when your work is out there, that's your work, it's not necessarily your life.

Greg Manuel:

There's a distinction that needs to be made and I think a lot of artists are starting to make that. We've seen that in some of the interviews that we've done specifically, and also just in my own personal life outside, I've seen that in a lot of people who are just pulling back and or stepping out, depending, but they're making decisions that are based on their own decisions not somebody else's.

Greg Manuel:

One of the questions that you may not want to answer either but it relates directly to the show is, and it ties into everything that we've been talking about the specificity of definitions and specific words, can I ask you to talk about your relationship to the word queer, and if there is one, where that fits in or when that came to be or your understanding of that because there's different relationships obviously? Each of

the artists have a different relationship to that word depending on many different factors. I think given that, that's one of the main basis for the show, I think it's ...

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

How is it defined? How are you all defining it?

Greg Manuel:

Do you want me to read you a little?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Yeah.

Greg Manuel:

I'll read you a blurb. Queer, it says-

Daniel Strong:

We are defining it, we're just creating an entire word.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah, we're but in our belief, it's not a term restricted to the definition of a particular sexuality but rather beautifully fractured and constantly shifting. To identify as queer means to be consistently and consciously working from a place of anti-oppression and therefore to be listening, hearing and making room for the voices of others around us, and to be challenging the assumptions of the status quo. There is not and likely never will be a complete alignment with other queers but there is room for discussion and a willingness to both educate and learn, especially beyond queer communities. There are also often places of intersection and areas of overlap which can help with learning and teaching and where one can take moments of pause. Ultimately, queer is never comfortable with limitations and its definition. Is that queer at all?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Yeah. Oh God. I honestly don't know when people started saying queer or when work became queer or something. Those on the forefront have been using queer long before I was around but now people are talking about gay. Oftentimes, I just think that sometimes things that are just basically plainly boringly gay get called queer because you have to call it queer but I'm like, honestly it's just gay. It's just gay men doing gay men things.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

So a part of the time, I'm just amused by it but it's a subject position, it's recognizing community, it's like a political position, it's all the things that you talked about. But I would say that my early work is just gay, but that doesn't mean that the people in the work are gay or even that all people are men or gay men or. There was a thing that happened where I think just the platforms and places that were publishing the work were Gay with a capital G so what was put out in the world was just the images, for the most part, of men.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

At the time I was 23 years old so we were all, for the most part, pretty young. We were all in our twenties and maybe early thirties. But again within that, the images don't purport to declare the identity of any subject. So when you look across the work of mostly male identified subjects, a lot of women identified subjects of various racial backgrounds or whatever, the work is organized around, what I would call, queer space.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I would just say I initially used the language that the organization of the work was around largely a homosocial space, that looking at it through that lens of how gay men meet each other socially and the openness and almost pleasure of undefined attraction that can be simultaneously or individually creative or collaborative or flirtatious or adversarial or just partying and having a good time. The way in which all of the work is thought about in the portraits is that, everyone in the portraits is approached as if that person could be, was at the time or had been a lover or a love interest.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Male, female, gay, straight, or whatever, if you hung out in a gay place, you were pretty much gay, it's like, hey, come along for the ride. I think the work has grown as the understanding of the language has grown and changed. I think also just the change in relationship to audience and influence and the reach of the work, this necessitates reflection and looking critically back on that earlier work because images go out in the world and when we're looking for representation and we're looking out into a sea of images to find ourselves or to put words or images to desire or to recognizing ourselves, we're very conscious of what is seen and what is not seen, the types of people that are represented, who is not visible.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

So there've been really good questions over the recent years, especially when I've done artists talks with students, a lot of times undergrads have really interesting questions around this like, who is not visible in that early work? And I'm really interested in thinking about it. There's nothing that can be changed but it's things that can be thought about in terms of like, okay, it's one thing to make work when you're just ...

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

There's so many factors that come together, just the accountability to one's own position, friendships and in relationships, and then those who wants to be seen and those who may decline to be seen. None of that gets articulated in the final results of what you may see but why do some people want to be seen in pictures, why have many people withdrawn? Maybe it's because, as an artist, up to a point, I didn't make a space that more people felt comfortable being seen in a radically charged or an ambiguous space.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

There's all of these things that go into it, but I know the initial part of this question was about the word queer so I guess all I can really say is that I'm more consciously thinking about what a queer space is. But to be honest, the starting point for the work is basically just gay and I think that's a really interesting thing to think about, what the limitations of gay are towards how gayness works within a queer framework for social justice, for politics, for liberation. Queerness questions gayness in a really productive way.

Greg Manuel:

There's a critical voice, I think. I think you've described it very well. I think what you've described is starting from one place and then opening doors to critique what was behind you, what you did yesterday, which creates in itself, consciously, a more open space which then becomes, in some cases a more queer space. I think it's harder to go back. Well, I'll omit that. But I think it would be hard to go from queer to just gay again.

Greg Manuel:

I think a lot of the artists and just people in general that I've spoken to around that word, it's not often specific, but there's a period of time where they realize that they've shifted from wanting to define themselves as gay to being more people with queer. Each individual situation requires its own reassessment of that but I think that in itself is queer thinking.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Also, honestly, I look at so many world of images and artists, and I'm not talking about the world of images not just of artists, but just people who put images out into the world described as queer and I just laugh to myself and I'm like, that's Gay, Capital G, gay, like Gay. It so falls into all of the traps of, I don't even need to describe it so much. Yes, I do agree with there's no going back but I think part of it is just being honest. There needs to be much more, I think, because queerness questions all of our conceptions and formations around gender, race, sexuality, sex, sexual orientation or the way we identifies, sexual acts that we do, the way in which family structures are organized friendships. This is a place where queer comes together. And then some things are fine if they're just-

Greg Manuel:

Gay.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

If they're just for lesbians. If it's just for lesbians, that's fine. I love lesbians' work. There are spaces that just need to be trans. But again, it's like I'm just speaking from my position, I can't speak towards any of these things.

Greg Manuel:

And that's all you can.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I'm very, very upfront on the fact that none of my work is ever meant to describe any of these things. I'm interested when the work gets used in an exhibition like this but I've never put anything out in a statement or with any initial determination that the work is about documenting or describing or making visible a queer community. That's going to pose all kinds of weird questions but the work is very much not about identity in that way at its center.

Greg Manuel:

A lot of people have written about it and other people are going to come to it with whatever they come to. I think, and this is the truth for all artists, once the work leaves the studio, it's out there and you don't have control over it anymore. But in been reading a lot of the essays about your work, one that

keeps coming back to me is the one that AA Bronson wrote in 2011, which is almost 10 years ago but still to me talks about that moment or the bigger picture and it just holds your work in a way that I think allows for all of that to be true. I loved that because reading it was for me as a distillation of a lot of those things that you've just brought up. In doing it, you are creating potentially a community but not necessarily intentionally, and it doesn't have to be intentional, it just is because the work lives outside of the studio.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

The work brings people into conversation in an interesting way. For example, just pulling together the work by all of these friends for the Biennial presentation, people who some of whom had known each other, some of whom did not know each other, were brought together. My friend, Derek, mentioned it too that being a part of the work was about entering into a community of those who I had collaborated with before, who I'd been friends with, who had been in images. Like, suddenly you enter into a whole conversation.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

And that's something that's really interesting about photography as well because I think the space around the work that's made within portraiture, within figurative or representational work is that, it becomes a space that people desire to enter into, those who offer themselves forward or desire to enter into that community. That's a whole other thing. But the work becomes a document of something, but it's not documentary. It's not accountable to, I forget the word. It's not accountable to what the discipline of documentary is accountable to, it can only be accountable to me and I need to be honest about that.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

As the years have passed and because I don't photograph random people or cast random people, it has become a document of a set of relationships, friendships, overlapping practices or just some of us as we've aged over the past 20 years and moved and done all these things. It becomes a document because the images don't pin down anything about anyone. I can think about the portraits that I've taken of a friend, what does it mean to make a portrait of a friend who then, jump forward, has transitioned? What is that portrait for? Where does that fit? The portrait doesn't tell you anything.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

That's just one example of it. So the work can't hold that. No individual work can hold that, but what is required is a really strong foundation. This is what I'm talking about, collaboration is a strong foundation of ethics and care and responsibility towards other people, towards a mutual investment in the images, in the making of them and the way they go out into the world, in the language around them, in checking in with people, in all of those things and that's where that exists. Community is outside of and around the work. The work needs them in order to have a solid foundation but the work isn't that.

Greg Manuel:

I think, for me, you've mentioned this a lot, your work, there's this reference to literature or based on literature. I think the more I think about the work, your body of work, it's like another chapter you can read back. You can read one chapter and get information but until you read the previous chapter or the next chapter, you never have the whole story. One single photograph isn't going to tell you a story. Two photographs are going to tell you a little bit more but not still enough.

Greg Manuel:

So that's why I think it's such a fascinating thing that you have continued to, A, photograph, the same people, created a space that is part of the photographs as well as your studio, and then you've talked about orange peels and succulents and things that are recurring. You see the time has passed but there are moments where you get to understand this photograph was taken before this photograph, but that doesn't tell you anything about the relationships within it, it just creates a timeframe.

Greg Manuel:

So, I imagine, there will be books written years from now dissecting the history of your work and trying to put it together and telling the stories just as there are about all of the Virginia Woolf's and all of the references that you've made earlier. There's this body of work that suddenly gets to be dissected or explored and reread very differently than bodies of work that rely on a finish and an end because there isn't really one with yours. I don't know if that's fair to say but that's how I see it. I think that's what's so intriguing to me about it, that there's so many layers and there isn't any one answer necessarily.

Daniel Strong:

One of the things that I think is interesting about work like this is, when you're talking about how these things will be dissected in the years to come, it almost loses a lot of it because what will happen is what happened with Picasso's portraits, what's written about it becomes who these people were and how they knew each other and what their relationship was and that's not what your work is about. Your work, when you have a portrait with a friend of yours in it, it's not about the relationship, it's almost about your physical relationship in that space, in the studio space, which is one of the things that appeals to me about it, that it is part of a tradition of the artist in the studio and it's just a different take on it.

Daniel Strong:

And maybe it's just because in photography we're not used to seeing the apparatus of it, whereas, in 19th century or early 20th century, like Matisse. The images of the studio, we're more used to seeing that in the more traditional art forms, whereas in photography we're not used to seeing or being used in creative ways, the apparatus of actual photography. We're used to the camera being invisible and in your case it's not and that's what I think is also interesting in your work, the relationship between you and the apparatus that you're manipulating. I don't know if that was a question or a speech.

Greg Manuel:

Go ahead, sorry.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I have to go get to another thing in a few.

Greg Manuel:

I was just going to say, I think we-

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

But is there-?



Greg Manuel:

Well, that's what I was going to ask you. Is there anything that you wanted to talk about that we didn't get to talk about or anything you want to say?

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

For me, the interest in the work in queerness would be about asserting queerness. The thing that I'm interested in is asserting queerness as fundamental to the formation of photography and to looking at the things that the medium can attempt to hold on to, what it reveals as constructions of a set of desires that have been put together through technology and looking more closely at what we choose to look at how we look at and how we find ourselves in relationship to it.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

All the other stuff, I don't care about because there's all these waves of exhibitions around identity. When I talk to friends or mentors who are older and have gone through the clusters of the late 80s or early 90s or early 2000s, the backlash was late 90s or early 2000s. When I was in school, identity politics work was so out and then this moment that we're in where it's like everyone wants QTPOC artists, we just keep adding new acronyms or, what do you call them? Is acronym the word, I don't know?

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I'm really concerned about a lot of younger artists who are emerging into this world where people are just really readily able to consume images of queer people and there's a lot of good work but there's a lot of work that needs a lot more critical attention to it. But if the work hangs on a desire for people to say, we need queer representation or we need representation of black people, of indigenous people, of people of color or whatever, the moment that the market or the whoever has the power or curators or institutions decide to just show abstract works or abstract blue paintings by a straight cisgendered man, you're not part of the conversation.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

So queerness can't be about representation of saying we need to represent queer people, it needs to be looking at how is queerness, as all the things that you've described in your curatorial statement, inseparable from the media itself. When someone just says, I'm going to do a boring ass exhibition on just historical photography on the apparatus, that queerness is inseparable, you know what I'm talking about?

Greg Manuel:

Yes.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

So that's my starting point for thinking about all of this stuff. Maybe that's a weird thing to say at the very end like, okay, that's it, but people's attentions and trends and things are going to change and come and go so it's like, okay, just making a picture of a queer person isn't doing that. It does something and I will never forget that feeling of being young and looking out and identifying particular artists and finding

a sense of recognition, but people can easily shut the book on that. So you have to say, okay, that's where queerness is in my work, the apparatus and how it is used is the thing. Maybe we might be queer people using it or whatever but I want that to be there when the conversation has turned to something else and our pictures to still be in the room because you can't talk about photography without them.

Greg Manuel:

I like that. That is a great place to end, I think. Well, it's a question. It's an ask of everyone who's listening, I think, to start to incorporate the idea of queerness into the way that we interpret and read imagery, language, everything in our lives. And I think now is a good time to do it as was yesterday and six months ago, but still here we are today.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

When is this show opening?

Daniel Strong:

February 1st, the actual show. But the reason why we're doing this now is, we are doing a specific website for it as well too that will incorporate all the different artists, the works that are going to be in the actual show and also links to these conversations, because the whole point of the thing is dialogue between and among the artists and potentially with students, faculty, staff and artists between artists.

Daniel Strong:

Many of you know each other so we're hoping to just bring out. All the artists are queer identified but it was never intended to be just about queerness because queerness doesn't live in a silo, we're dealing with political inequality, racial inequality, economic inequality and queer artists are not just making queer art. That was one of the things that we wanted to bring out in this dialogue because, when people think of queer artists or just gay artists, there's this concept amongst some audiences where, oh, well, that's all they're interested in and they're just interested in expressing that part of themselves and that's not the case at all.

Daniel Strong:

Even though we put the word queer on it, we want the people who see the exhibition to realize that it's not just one issue, certainly not now, especially when we're all living in strange times where everything is intertwined. Anyway, that's another speech of mine. But we're grateful that you were willing to sit down and talk with us today. I apologize that we didn't have contact ahead of time before you were conscripted into this exhibition. One of the reasons why you're in it is because you're in our collection and you're one of the anchors of the exhibition, because most of our exhibitions are built on our collection and that was one of you. But we won't keep you any longer, you probably got some place you've got to be.

Greg Manuel:

Thank you, Paul.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

I have another Zoom but everything is running behind today so that's fine.

Greg Manuel:

Okay. We'll keep you posted. We'll send you the transcript when we have it so you can edit or do whatever you need to do and if we have any questions, we'll go from there. But we'll keep in touch over the course of the launching of the website, which is really taking the place of ... The initial show was supposed to open at the end of August so it's been postponed because of COVID but instead, as Dan said, we're putting the website up so that there is content and that there is a starting point for it. Thank you again. We'll talk again soon, I hope.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Okay.

Greg Manuel:

Thanks, Paul.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Great. Nice seeing you guys.

Greg Manuel:

Me too.

Daniel Strong:

Nice to meet you

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Have a [inaudible 01:19:25] for the show and you all are safe and happy.

Greg Manuel:

We'll keep you abreast.

Daniel Strong:

Same to you.

Greg Manuel:

Thanks, Paul. Thanks a lot.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya:

Okay. See you.

Greg Manuel:

Cheers. Bye-bye.

Daniel Strong:

Bye.

