

**DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY**

DANIELLE BRATHWAITE-SHIRLEY

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Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is an artist working predominantly in animation, sound, performance and video games to communicate the experiences of being a Black Trans person. Their practice focuses on recording the lives of Black Trans people and intertwining lived experience with fiction to imaginatively retell Trans stories. Spurred on by a desire to record the "History of Trans people both living and past," their work can often be seen as a Trans archive where Black Trans people are stored for the future.

Throughout history, Black queer and Trans people have been erased from the archives. Because of this it is necessary not only to archive their existence, but to record the many creative narratives they have used and continue to use to share their experiences.

In 2020, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley produced a solo performance work at Tate Modern, London. Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at Focal Point Gallery, London (2020); Science Gallery, London (2020); and MU Hybrid Art House, London (2020). Group exhibitions include Re\$\$urrection Lands, Les Urbaines, Lausanne, Switzerland (2019); BBZ GRADUATE SHOW, Copeland Gallery, London (2019); and Transpose: The Future, Barbican, London (2018). They live and work in London.

DANIELLE BRATHWAITE-SHIRLEY

lives and works in London, England

EDUCATION

2015 - 2019 Slade School of Fine Art, London, England

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

(* Indicates a publication)

- 2021 QUAD, Derby, England
arebyte Gallery, London, England
Skånes konstförening, Malmö, Sweden
- 2020 Tate Modern, solo Performance, London, England
Wysing Net/Work Residency
Re\$\$urrection Lands, Focal Point Gallery, London, England
Freeword online Performance
Rus\$\$urrection Pro League, MU Hybrid Art House, London, England
We Are Here Because of Those that are Not, Science Gallery, London, England
- 2019 *Almanac Projects*, solo performance, London, England

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 *Re\$\$urrection Lands*, Les Urbaines, Lausanne, Switzerland
Digging For Black Trans Lives, curated by Nadine Ahmad and Naeem Davis, LESBIENNALE, online at 4:3 Boiler room
Trans-Port Me, Arebyte Gallery, online
White Pube Residency website takeover
Trans-Port Me, 4:3 Weekly service, online at 4:3 Boiler room
BBZ GRADUATE SHOW, Copeland Gallery, Peckham, London, England
Münchner Kammerspiele, Munich, Germany
AFROTECH FESTIVAL, London, England
Performance Club, Raven Row, London, England

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- 2018 *BLACKZILLA*, Trans Film Festival Berlin, Berlin, Germany
Transpose: The Future, Barbican, London, England
*STOP F*CKING TOUCHING/LOOKING/STARING/PHONING/_____ ME*, as
part of What's good for me is good for you? A physical multilogue Part 3,
Mimosa House, London, England
Film Screening, Southbank Centre, Brownton Abbey Bless Bar, London,
England
Video work with Travis Alabanza performance, Brighton festival, Aarhus,
Russia
Platform 1, Bloomsbury Theatre, London, England
- 2017 *Blackzilla screening*, Tate Modern, London England
SPIT, performance made by *Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, Carlos Maria
Romero*, Freeze Projects London, London, England
Other'd Artists & Travis Alabanza, Transmission gallery, London, England
- 2016 *Fade To Purple*, Charlton Gallery, London, England
ICA Bloomberg New contemporaries, performed for Georgia Lucas-Going, ICA
Bloomberg New contemporaries, London England

PANNEL / WORKSHOPS / VISITING ARTIST

- 2020 QUAD International Digital Fellow 2020-2021
System Errors Panel
- 2019 Visiting Artist at the Royal Academy of Arts
- 2018 Dream Babes event Panel, Barbican, London, England
How to work a Look, panel, Photographers Gallery, London, England
Artist talk at the Royal Academy of Arts for masters students
- 2017 *Let me show you a body*, closing event by Linda Stupart, Tate Modern,
London, England
A workshop alongside Harold Offeh for the Tates "Queer and Now" event, Tate
Britain, London, England

SOUND DESIGN

- 2019 Sound design for play 'We Dig', Oval House, Brixton, England

Sound design for Travis Alabanzas Show 'I tried to fuck up the system but none of my friends texted back' as part of Sick Of The Fringe, Wellcome Collection, Malbourough Theatre, Brighton; Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam
Sound design for MarkisCryCryCry show 'Hotter Than A Pan', The Yard, London, England

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

(* Indicates non-periodical book, catalog, or other publication)

- 2020 Vallette, Judith, "Gaming, Visibility and Black Trans Experience: An Interview with Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley," *BerlinArtLink.com*, August 14, 2020
Hart, Tamara, "Dining on trauma: Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley talks trans-tourism, motherhood, & being a 'Freaky Friday everyday'," *AQNB.com*, August 10, 2020
Guobadia, Otamere, "This video game celebrates the stories of Black trans people," *I-D.Vice.com*, March 18, 2020
- 2018 Ong, Jyni, "Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is an animation and sound artist archiving their existence as a Black trans person," *ItsNiceThat.com*, September 24, 2018
Ubuntu, Rebekah, "GUEST EDITOR – REBEKAH UBUNTU INTERVIEWS DANIEL BRATHWAITE-SHIRLEY," *TheSampler.org*, January 8, 2018
- 2017 NO, Mariel, "Travis Alabanza reframes the traditional gallery with THE OTHER'D ARTIST/S," *Gal-Dem.com*, June 17, 2017

Gaming, Visibility and Black Trans Experience: An Interview with Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: 'We are here because of those that are not/Blacktransarchive.com,' 2020 // Courtesy the artist

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is a London- and Berlin-based Black trans artist, game developer and mother. Through video game aesthetics and technologies, Brathwaite-Shirley aims to bring to the forefront the experiences of Black trans women and, more generally, to archive the Black trans experience. Her recent project 'the BlackTransArchive' is presented in the form of a video game, designed in collaboration with Black trans coders and artists as a way to fight against the erasure of their history. Brathwaite-Shirley warns against trans tourism in her work, as well as the harmful underrepresentation of Black trans narratives. In doing so, she ensures that the Black and trans people who enter her virtually-created world on the archive are given a safe space, dedicated to themselves. She does this by presenting a series of initial questions to the user, which then designate the parameters of their interaction and accessibility to the content, depending on their identity and the levels of privilege they are afforded.

We spoke to Brathwaite-Shirley about her creative process and the thinking behind 'the BlackTransArchive.' She also shared insights into her upcoming projects and spoke about her desire to constantly seek new collaborations and to create more participatory works. Through her art practice and activism, Brathwaite-Shirley calls to attention the lack of visibility for Black trans people in mainstream culture, as well as the everyday racism, colorism and discrimination in Berlin and beyond.

Judith Vallette: What was the impetus for using video game design as an aesthetic and artistic tool for getting across your political message in your project 'the BlackTransArchive'? How did your passion for video game design, coding and video editing develop?

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: In 'the BlackTransArchive' I used the idea of choice because I really wanted the experience for the player to be unique and dependent on what they chose. The work I've made before has been for a Black trans audience



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: 'We are here because of those that are not/Blacktransarchive.com,' 2020 // Courtesy the artist

but, because there wasn't the advantage of choosing your identity, often people would come and just enjoy the work without thinking anything of themselves. I really wanted to put the viewer in the hot seat, making them notice their identity as well as making their identity determine accessibility and view-ability of the archive.

I've always been into video games, it's been a very informative part of my life. I'm really into these old Playstation 1 PSX retro kind of aesthetics. I find it quite quick to work with and also the lower poly-graphics allow me to focus more on getting something across: I can quickly come up with a concept, figures and a scene to imbue it with what I really want to talk about, like Black trans life or the story of a Black trans person. All the textures in my games are usually made of images of Black people and images of Black trans people like our hands, our feet, our hair. I then manipulate those images to make something that looks like grass, a hair texture or a bio texture to imbue the 3D Earth with an archive-like layer. Perhaps the viewer won't even recognize this but the point is that this archive of Black trans people is there throughout all the layers of the film, not just in the forefront but also in the background of the scenes.

I've always wanted to make a video game and before I was able to I would make these videos of video game scenarios, there's one called 'UnArchived Adventures.' You could almost call them concept videos because you could see the mouse, the gameplay within them, but it was all a film. There used to be these false choices in the film that would pop out but you couldn't choose them as they were pre-determined. The more I made of those, the more I felt I needed to make a game specifically where someone's identity determines what happens next, so they feel responsible for the next scene they are seeing. This is where my passion for video gaming came from, that and playing Telltale's 'The Walking Dead'. This game is a series in an episodic form where every choice you make carries on to each episode and each game, so by the time you finish all four games you have a personalized story; you feel so guilty for the person who has died or the child you have brought up and the rest of the choices you have made while playing. I wanted to imbue this idea that you are responsible for what is happening, what you see and what you will hear. Another reason I made video games is because I didn't see any Black trans people. I was searching for video games with trans representations and I only found a few—like '2064: Read Only Memories'—but there was really no Black trans representation that centred on our stories. I really wanted to create something like that and make it super accessible online so everyone can see it. It's not just about the video game existing but it being unashamedly for Black trans people.

JV: You have collaborated with several different artists on, for example, sound design, performances, talks and visuals. Do you have any favorite collaborative projects?



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: 'We are here because of those that are not/Blacktransarchive.com,' 2020 // Courtesy the artist

DBS: 'The BlackTransArchive' was done with 15 different Black trans people and three Black trans artists who helped me make it. Evan Sedipo helped with landscape conceptualizing, as well as collaging. Together, we made collages with the 15 different people. Jacob V Joyce helped me do character design concepts, which involved group workshops in which everyone got to design their characters on paper sheets. I then implemented all those characters into the game. Tobi Adebajo helped with character development, creating scenarios for all these characters: what they would want to do in this world and how they would centre themselves.

I did the sound design for the dancer Marikiscrycry's show 'Hotter Than A Pan'. I did the video projections for Travis Alabanza's 'Before I Step Outside [You Love Me]'. But, I think my favorite one has been 'the BlackTransArchive'. I'm also planning a new one. I think with each iteration of what I do, I am planning more participation from my community. When I did 'the BlackTransArchive', I realized how much more it gave the work and built the world of the game when you had a room full of 20 people who have had similar experiences to you. It was really good, I can't wait to do another one.

JV: Could you tell us a bit more about the Black Trans TV project you created during your time in quarantine?

DBS: I had created that during quarantine because I wanted us to be able to speak and talk to each other about what was going on, but that project halted a little bit because, talking to my friends, it was so hard for us to produce anything productive because we had just lost all our jobs, all our security, all our money and then the Black Lives Matter protests started happening, so it became more important to focus on our wellbeing. So that kind of morphed into a new project, which is this entirely new game coming out next year in which people get their own islands—and that's all I am going to say about it. The viewer will be able to come and, again, depending on the viewer's choices, can access the islands or not, and how much of the islands they can access will vary depending on what they choose.

JV: As a British artist living in Berlin, how have both places impacted you and your art practice?

DBS: Yeah, it's been a strange one. Berlin internet is really bad. My practice has moved a lot more online and ever since 'the BlackTransArchive' I've been way more interested in that. But, making something that works online in Berlin is different, which wasn't a problem I thought would come up. There is a lot more thought about how to make my file sizes smaller to work over Berlin internet. This basically means I have to be way more inventive with the art I'm using and how everything is presented. My models before were kind of low poly-graphics yet, not enough to be running on this internet. It's interesting to see how I can make something that references an older generation of games like SNES or Sega Mega Drive or even before PS1 and Nintendo 64 and spread my messages. And now it's got me thinking what do those games have? How can



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: 'We are here because of those that are not/Blacktransarchive.com,' 2020 // Courtesy the artist

I use that to make something that tells a story again? That has got me really excited. I am going to reference something old as hell, do you know Game & Watch? Game & Watch were these old games running on these small calculator-like LCD crystal screens, and essentially they screen-print with a liquid crystal and they scrub out the rest. It's this really old technology that essentially stencils to imagine movement, like a small fun little game. So I'm looking at that kind of technology to create something that tells a story and how effective that can be. The great thing about those games is they are simple, super simple and highly addictive. These spreads kind of look a bit like Kara Walker's works, she does these kinds of wall outline prints, black silhouettes essentially. Similarly, another great thing Game & Watch does is they work solely with Black silhouettes, which is what I am trying to work with now.

Also, in relation to your question, there are a lot fewer Black trans people in Berlin. Berlin people stare more, a lot more than London, and there seems to be a lot more anti-Black sentiment. So that has been really strange to deal with and see. Colorism is a huge thing in Germany, to be honest, and often the light-skinned people are getting the light shined on them and the darker-skinned, who have been here for a longer time, are not. Coming into that world, I have to ask: how can I uphold my darker skin siblings who have been here, who have been doing the work and have not gotten the appreciation they deserve?

JV: A recent Instagram post of yours suggests the possibility of future projects bridging these two cities. Can you give us any sneak peeks into what is to come?

DBS: Yes, I can. So I'm building another interactive archive based on interviews I will be carrying out with other trans people. It will be kind of like World of Warcraft, Habba Hotel or Club Penguin, things like that where interviews will be hosted in the video game realm so you can go online and access such interviews. Essentially, you'll be playing through soundscapes that, depending on what interview you choose, will change. So it just builds and builds and builds based on choice.

I'm also working on a new game I had made during quarantine. I spent three months making this game and then my computer gave up on me but, I still have this game. It's just not working in the same way. So now, I am turning it into a game film. There will be loads of different versions of this film because there are so many choices in this game. There will be around 15 different versions, so depending on which one is displayed where, it will be a completely different experience of the film. The particular version of the film that is chosen will be dependent on who is asking me to show it. The version will be chosen particularly because you asked me, or this institution asked me. There is also a performance in the works, based on mass audience participation and the end of the performance is determined by who participates and who doesn't and who is actually in the room.

And there is one final project, which I'm hoping to get funding for, which is creating a kind of Escape Room game experience.

Hart, Tamara, "Dining on trauma: Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley talks trans-tourism, motherhood, & being a 'Freaky Friday everyday'," *AQNB.com*, August 10, 2020

AQNB

Dining on trauma: Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley talks trans-tourism, motherhood, & being a "Freaky Friday everyday"



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, 'WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT' (2020). Installation view at GENDERS group exhibition. Photo by David Tett Courtesy Science Gallery, London

"I turn to archiving because I think archives have really failed Black trans people," notes artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley over a Zoom call in Berlin, where she's been quarantining with her partner. The two are embarking on a journey of shared motherhood, an experience the London-based artist is eager to embrace. "It's given me fuel," she continues, "I'm not just trying to keep alive for myself, I'm trying to keep alive for my child and change things so that my child has a broader array of choices than I did."

One of the ways in which Brathwaite-Shirley is working to change perspectives for future generations is by archiving Black trans experiences. Her most recent project *WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT*, presented at Science Gallery in London earlier this year, is an interactive video game archive that centres the thoughts and feelings of her community, those often erased from historical narratives. Combining animation, sound, and game design, Brathwaite-Shirley's practice speaks for the silenced, for her unarchived Black trans ancestors whose experiences are lost. She desires to resurrect these forebears, to meet their buried bodies, and to preserve their lives beyond moments of pain and trauma.

What Brathwaite-Shirley's work explores is precisely the cultural politics of consuming such pain, or what she calls "dining on Black trans trauma". In '*TRANS-PORT ME*', a karaoke-style video with a hip hop, techno-goth melody, a voice explains, "we are taught that our trauma must be shared to be believed," the spoken words continue, sighing. "Or that allyship is resharing images or stories of Black and trans trauma without thinking how you sharing plays into how consumable images of Black and trans trauma are." This narration echoes psychological theorist Derek Hook's argument that the circulation of Black trauma is part of a fantasy of deserved pain. He asserts that there is satisfaction taken in disseminating images of tortured Black bodies, which are inflicted with violence they are thought to deserve.

Hart, Tamara, "Dining on trauma: Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley talks trans-tourism, motherhood, & being a 'Freaky Friday everyday'," *AQNB.com*, August 10, 2020



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, 'TRANS-PORT ME' (2019). Video still. Courtesy the artist.



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, 'Digging for Black Trans Life' (2019). Installation view at BBZ Alternative Graduate Show. Photo by Katarzyna Perlak. Courtesy Copeland Gallery, London.

One can argue that Black trans bodies are even further degraded in this social imaginary. Constantly in a state of vulnerability, they are doubled in their othering, which is used to justify their suffering. This is re-iterated in Brathwaite-Shirley's work 'Digging For Black Trans Life', in which a talk show host prompts a monstrous trans 'object' (a de-subjectivised other) to speak about their pain and trauma, rather than validating their experiences of love or empowerment. The artist reminds us that when we dine on Black trans trauma, we are not elevating the visibility of these communities; rather we are using them as an exotic spice to enhance the (cis) white palette. Feminist theorist bell hooks' idea of "eating the other" comes to mind; hooks asserts that Black experiences are often commodified in order to re-inscribe white supremacy with culturally relevant narratives. Similarly, Black trans experiences are viewed as unexplored playgrounds where existing power structures are re-asserted rather than undermined. The artist's use of gaming technology is a reminder that archives are not objective. Rather, they are often appropriated into eSports—games in which the lives of those portrayed are distorted in order to validate dominant social narratives.

As Brathwaite-Shirley prepares for upcoming solo shows at arebyte Gallery, London and QUAD, Derby, the artist discusses her views on the economy of trauma, jouissance in Black death and the power in not passing.

**To start, it sounds like your journey as a mother has deepened your perspective in many ways. How does motherhood translate to your ideas of Black trans futures?

Hart, Tamara, "Dining on trauma: Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley talks trans-tourism, motherhood, & being a 'Freaky Friday everyday'," *AQNB.com*, August 10, 2020



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, 'WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT' (2020). Installation view at GENDERS group exhibition. Photo by David Tett Courtesy Science Gallery, London

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: Often we have mothers in trans society. We call someone who looks after a lot of trans people 'mother'. We have our own motherhood, but it's interesting having a child now. It just makes me super excited to be a trans mom. I was trying to find a book by Black trans moms and I couldn't find one. I'm trying to be more open and figure out ways to have hard conversations and make [ideas] more understandable and accessible to minds that are younger than mine.

**One way of making these ideas accessible is through your project Black Trans Archive, which explores Black trans experiences through an interactive digital game. What does the process of archiving mean to you in this context?

DBS: Often when you look back to find queer history or Black and trans history it doesn't exist, because they were not recorded or failed to be recorded in the ways that they should have. The only Black and trans account I actually found was a poster of a trans woman—a really horrible poster—telling you to be weary of her and all this nonsense. And so that kind of sparked me into saying we need to start making our own archives because when we leave the archiving to someone else, often they repeat the violence that is on our bodies in daily life. It was about trying to find a way of communicating how we live and think [...] allowing us to use fiction to tell a story, to create an environment that possibly could record us and could store our experiences.

**In the beginning of the game, it states that the player's subjectivity will influence their access to and experience of the archive. In short, there are terms and conditions.

Hart, Tamara, "Dining on trauma: Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley talks trans-tourism, motherhood, & being a 'Freaky Friday everyday'," *AQNB.com*, August 10, 2020



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, 'Digging for Black Trans Life' (2019). Installation view at BBZ Alternative Graduate Show. Photo by Katarzyna Perlak. Courtesy Copeland Gallery, London.

DBS: The reason that's all in there is because originally I was going to make an archive game [just] for Black trans people. But then we came up with questions like 'Okay, so what happens when a white cis person plays?' We were like, 'God, actually we don't want them to play as if they're seeing our experiences [...] stepping in our shoes'. It's not about stepping in our shoes; it's not about that, because you couldn't, it's impossible.

So we came up with these terms and conditions. If you pick cis or trans you get terms and conditions. But if you pick Black and trans you don't, because [the archive] trusts you. And there was this idea that not everyone can be trusted with an archive. So we wanted to really think about how this person's access needs to be particular because they only have a certain set of experiences.

We're not trying to permit—I call it 'trans-tourism'. This idea that someone would come and learn, or that a fantasy of theirs would be met. And it came from often [being expected] to make work about some kind of pain, something bad to do with transness; rather than loving transness, rather than appreciating a Black trans person. So it was really rallying against that, saying, 'Actually, no. You're not here to see what you expect to see, it's about your identity within this archive.'

****How do we increase visibility of trans Black communities in meaningful ways without exploiting them through such modes of trans-tourism?**

DBS: For me I don't think it's difficult. You let them do what they want to do, give them the funding and give them resources to do that.

We never get permanent buildings, we never get support long-term. We don't get those infrastructural changes that we need. It's not about hiring one or two of us, it's about setting up a partner company, which we own. And it [must be] based on the requirements that we have set, our own terms and conditions.

*****'TRANS-PORT ME' poses the question: how can a community speak of painful experiences without re-creating trauma? How does this translate in your work?**

DBS: A couple of months after making that, I decided I didn't want to have trauma in my work, the moment of trauma. Arthur Jafa made this video with representations of trauma and Kanye West's song in the background. I was sitting in the [screening] with my other friend who was Black, but every other person in the room was white. And just the demeanour in the room, the way they were uninterested in these people being hurt right in front of them, it wasn't touching them at all. At that moment I was like, 'I don't want to make any more work that has traumatic events in it because it's consumed so easily'. I feel like there's an enjoyment in consuming Black pain.

What's happening now is that people share these videos without any thought to the effect that it will have on people who are part of the Black community. And it's seen as positive to share it, but actually there's no thought behind what that is, and who collects these images. One of the most monetised videos online is of a Black trans woman getting killed, which is crazy!

Hart, Tamara, "Dining on trauma: Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley talks trans-tourism, motherhood, & being a 'Freaky Friday everyday'," *AQNB.com*, August 10, 2020



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, 'WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT' (2020). Installation view at GENDERS group exhibition. Photo by David Tett Courtesy Science Gallery, London

I feel that there's trauma in these stories, but it's not about the moment that it happens, it's about how a community helps each other deal with it. It's all those [acts] of care, of having to hold yourself up, that are more important than the moment that instigated all of that, because you have to continue to live.

**As you said, there's a certain pleasure taken in Black pain and, in particular, Black trans pain. When we circulate these images and stories, do we extend the brutalities that they document?

DBS: I find this strange because sometimes I want to ask, 'why did you share that image [...], and you've just put a sad emoji?' I feel like it stems from having this still in us, innately, white supremacy has kept us enjoying these images. It's something that's also in movies when you see the difference between how Black people and white people are killed, often the person of darker skin has a more violent death.

So yeah, I feel it's something that is continually perpetuated in our society. Black pain is something that people consume. I feel it's also maybe this guilt and they think sharing it is doing something that it's not.

**Like an imperialist nostalgia, a fantasy of power and desire...

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, 'WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT' (2020). Video still. Courtesy the artist.
DBS: Yeah, I remember reading something about how the KKK used to do exactly the same thing. They used to disseminate images of Black trauma just as they do now but in the form of actual pictures or postcards, so I feel like it's imbued in the culture.

**In some ways what your work does is name these complexities. For instance, you often play with mashed, distorted sounds and images, using the slogan 'I'm a Freaky Friday everyday'. How does this play into the representation of Black trans bodies?

DBS: This distortion, this other body; I'm always trying to find some pride within this feeling of 'other'. When I made the 'TRANS-PORT ME' video, I was feeling like a demon, something strange, and I was trying to figure out if I could find some pride in that. Something I say often is there's power in not passing. Maybe that's something we've lost, the ability to appreciate that power. I'm always trying to appreciate a trans body. A trans body is often a body that you're not expecting to see.

We're always being told 'you're a freak'—all these words you're howled at. Just holding those words on your body, you could start to say them back to yourself. I feel like a lot of the sounds I make, and this mash—a lot of the ancestors I make are monsters—is claiming that, 'no, we're actually beautiful. This is normal, it's not otherworldly.'

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is taking part in the upcoming To Dream Effectively group exhibition at Southend-on-Sea's Focal Point Gallery, running September 13, 2020 to January 17, 2021.

i-D

This video game celebrates the stories of Black trans people

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's latest project, 'WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT', conjures up an urgent, cathartic space in which Black trans people are centred and uplifted.



London-based artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's latest project, *WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT*, is an interactive digital archive video game, which aims to preserve the stories of Black trans people in a world determined to erase them. At its simplest, the game uses keyboard prompts to allow players to be diverted down different pathways, depending on their expressed gender identity. But with its trippy visuals, unsettling music and aesthetic elements -- which recall traditional kente patterns -- Danielle conjures up something much more than that. It's an urgent, cathartic space in which Black trans people are centred and uplifted. Following its release, we caught up with Danielle to talk about why she created the project and what she hopes to achieve through her work.

Why have you created the Black trans archive?

I created the Black trans archive to enshrine the Black trans people that are around me, but also to remember our Black trans ancestors who we have forgotten, and whose lives we have no knowledge of. It's not really to honour them as much as it is to just to have them in our minds, and to be able to remember that we have lost a part of our ancestry that could be very dear to us, and to make sure that we don't let it happen again. We don't want to be erased again.

Why did you choose to make the archive in game form?

I used to play a lot of games, and I never saw any representation of a Black trans person. I used to create avatars that I would hope to look like. It was a good outlet for that. But because there's no Black trans people, I slowly fell out of love with it. And I just couldn't get back into it because I was never represented in any way. The only way that Black trans people or trans people were at all represented was very negatively -- so I wanted to change that. So if you're not here to support Black trans people, then you're not welcome in the space.

What role do you want the archive to play in contemporary society?

Hopefully, the role it plays is allowing Black trans people to see themselves represented. The archive is made to try and

Guobadia, Otamere, "This video game celebrates the stories of Black trans people," *i-d.vice.com*, March 18, 2020



really hold the experience of a Black trans person, so hopefully when they see it, they feel held and acknowledged in some way. While the space is moderated, it's also an ever-expanding archive that can be updated by anyone.

What has the process of creating this project revealed to you about yourself and the work you want to do?

It was really hard to do because I did the animation, the sound, and I embedded a lot of the landscapes and places. We worked with people like Ebun Sodipo, Tobi Adebayo and Jacob v. Joyce, to create the characters, the landscapes and to try and best archive the vision of the individuals in the workshop. We'd create characters together having a conversation around 'What parts of yourself do you want to archive?' and 'What thoughts about yourself would you like to archive maybe in the form of your avatar that you're making?' And then we took it from there. It made me realise that this is really what needs to be happening, you need to work with collaborators.

While the project deliberately centres trans people and trans experiences, you've also made pathways for cis people to interact with the project...

I wanted to create a world that centres on Black and trans people, but the cis pathway was made because I didn't want to pretend like I was putting something out that would not be accessible to cis people. It was really important that I put a lot of thought into what we allow the cis pathway to get, because we don't want it to feed into the idea of cis people consuming trans bodies. We're actually saying, 'No you're not ready to consume us. You can't consume us. I'm not accepting that.' This is not a game of trans tourism.

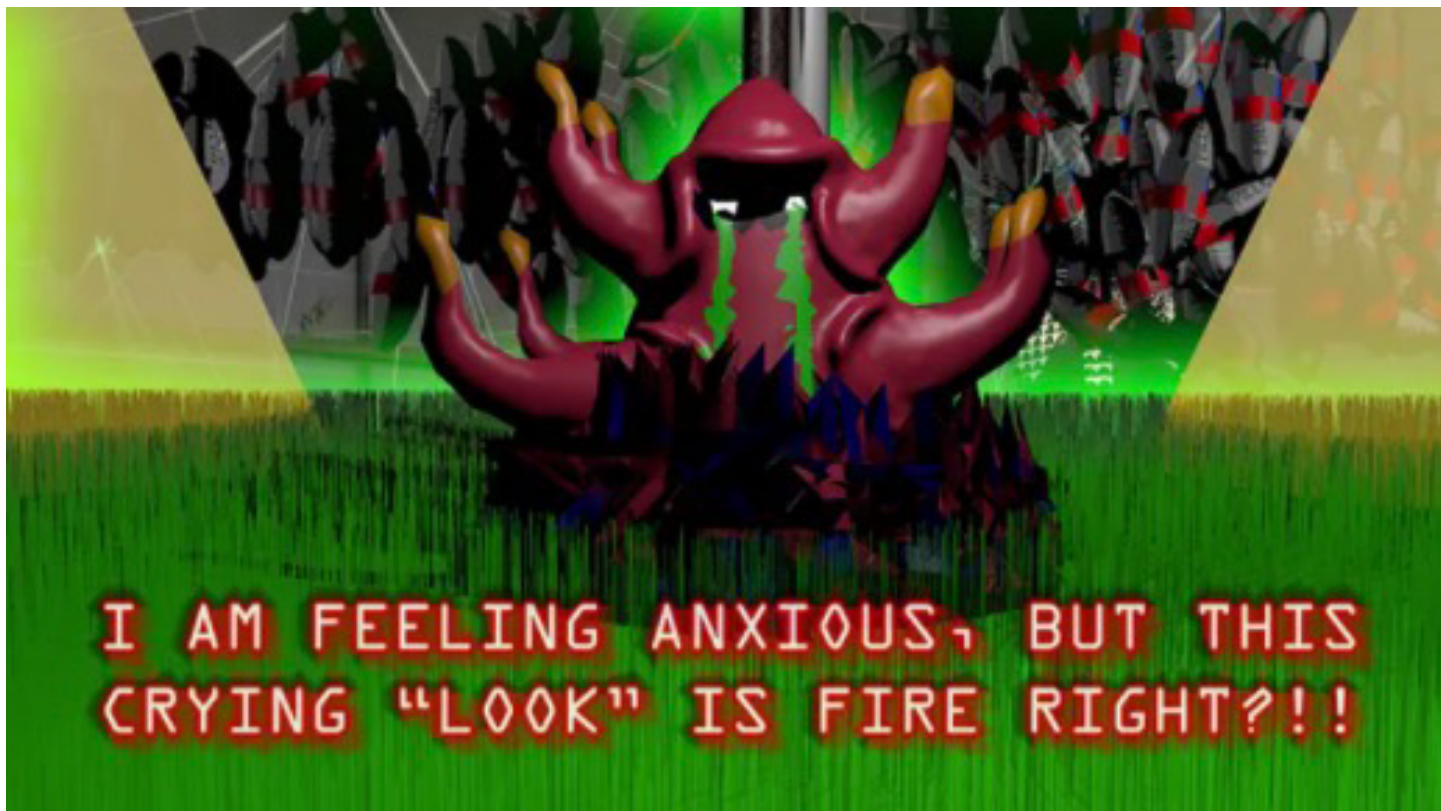
How do you want cis people to engage with this work?

I wanted them to think about who we may have buried, to think about who we may have lost and who we dig for, and who we don't even go about digging for and whose memories, identities, and places are often forgotten and erased. I want cis people to act, to use the privilege they have to enable Black trans people to live a better life. Just saying the right words isn't enough, it doesn't do anything. It doesn't change anything. You need to follow through with action.

Ong, Jyni, "Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is an animation and sound artist archiving their existence as a Black trans person," *ItsNiceThat.com*, September 24, 2018

It's Nice That

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is an animation and sound artist archiving their existence as a Black trans person



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: Unarchived Adventures

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is a radical artist making work that is the first of its kind in terms of aesthetic, sound and concept. Working predominantly in animation and sound, they combine the two in a wholly original way to communicate their thoughts and experiences around Black, trans identity. Speaking to It's Nice That, Danielle says, "there are hardly any visible Black and trans artists. We exist but people would rather have us remain quiet. I am tired of being silent. I am tired of the active silence that occurs when I experience trauma. So between being too anxious to leave my room and braving the outside, I make work as a way of dealing with, and recording ongoing events in my life. I would call them all self-help pieces. It's been the best way of dealing with the pain and love that Black and trans people exist in", they explain.

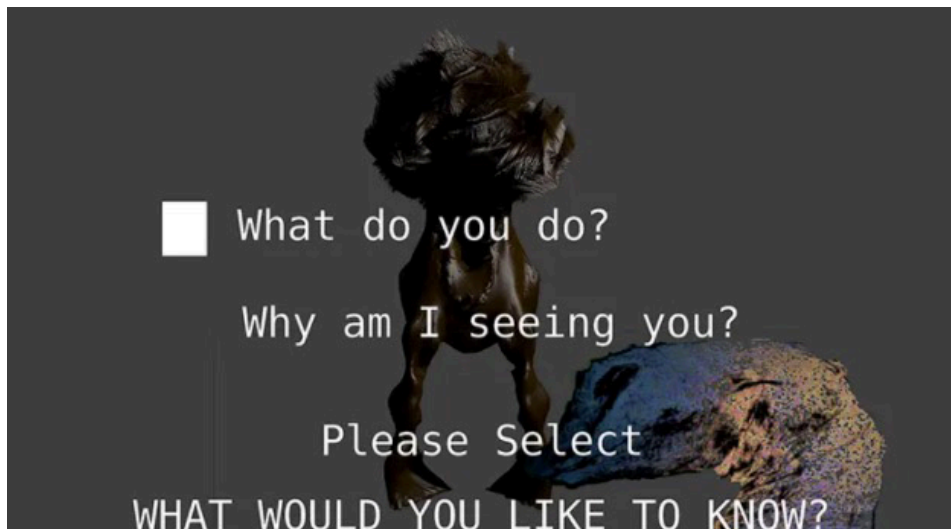
Danielle's work uses sound emphatically to further communicate intense expression in their films. The strong relationship between the sound and visuals "hold each other" and are in-keeping with the electronic, video game aesthetic of their work while conveying a sense of style directed by the artist. "I want to tell stories with the sound", Danielle adds. "Sometimes I'm listening to a track and I'm constantly using it to feel more confident whilst walking around in public. So those tracks get sampled within the work as a kind of underlying support". Agreeably, the accompanying sound of the animations exude a unique style. Sound and music is an important dynamic in the artist's life that translates into the work; "I'm constantly using sound in my real life to protect and comfort myself... Sometimes, to sing a phrase that is too painful to speak seems easier than making a visual representation", explains Danielle. "A lot of my work basks in overloading. Both the sounds and visuals overload. I want to overload a viewer. My experience is an overload. I don't ease into environments so neither does my work. It's loud, angry and busy. It needs to be".

Ong, Jyni, “Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is an animation and sound artist archiving their existence as a Black trans person,” *ItsNiceThat.com*, September 24, 2018

The game aesthetic is consciously used so the viewer of the work becomes the player in the videos; “they have a more active experience through the choices that are presented and chosen for them”. Daniel’s films are wholly immersive through the engrossing visuals and sound, particularly seen in *Blackzilla* and *Unarchived Adventures*.

Blackzilla is “based around the new world being born when Blackzilla, a ‘Black, Trans Robot Archive’ descends to earth. I made the film as a way to reclaim the idea of being seen as something freakish and demonic as a Black and trans body. How the depiction of us through history have compared us to traps and Man-monsters”, says Danielle. It looks at a want to be seen as human while being seen as a freak. *Blackzilla’s* world represents a space that accepts and archives ‘Black, Trans Monsters’. The film is a constant archive of myself and my experiences”, the artist explains.

Unarchived Adventures is a Point and Click film that comes from wanting a game to represent the artist’s existence. “I’ve been digging and digging for trans representation in video games and mostly come across violent inclusions of trans people”, says Danielle. “A trans playthrough”. Inspired by the artist’s experience to start hormone replacement treatment, Danielle’s life has been governed by the idea that “a pill may be able to get my body to more closely represent my gender”. The artist explains how the traumatic process of the hormone replacement treatment is not well documented or made visible and is a constant fight for those that need it. Finally, when we asked Danielle what we can do to improve acceptance and representation in society, they added, “I don’t know, but I know Black, trans lives need to be central if we are going to be protected in a society”.



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: Unarchived Adventures