

before they were none

danielle brathwaite- shirley



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley,
Before They Were None, 2023

**villa
arson**

February 12 – May 07 2023
Opening: February 11 2023

Galerie carrée

nice

Summary

Press release 03

Danielle Brathwaite - Shirley Before They Were None

Agenda 04

Biography 05

Danielle Brathwaite - Shirley

Before They Were None 06

Interview 09

Danielle Brathwaite - Shirley with Mawena Yehouessi & Rosanna Puyol

Contact & partners 14

Press contact
Social networks
Practical informations
La Villa Arson and partners

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley Before They Were None

Curators: Mawena Yehouessi & Rosanna Puyol
Assisted by Noémie Pirus-Hassid and Daisy Lambert

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's project stems from Agatha Christie's novel, *And Then There Were None*, which had been, actually, re-titled many times: *Ten Little Niggers*, as published in 1939, *Ten Little Indians*, *The Ten Black Figures*, *Ten Little Soldiers*.

In this work of fiction, reality-show like or Cluedo-ish, each character is both a victim and perpetrator, responsible and witness, both object and subject of investigation.

But the most surprising thing is how their story, their value as characters, is fleshed out with the risk of death, and then the death, that hovers over each of them.

We never hear from them
We never see them
Yet the presence of them
The presence of us
Is suffocating even in our absence

Those 10 little niggers

Were Neither dead nor surviving but continuously living,
alive, alived, inspiring and inspired, forever loved, breathed
in, cared for, supported and held, cherished, singing,
dancing, shimmering: vivid.

"It's gonna be hard for people to sit in" cause ain't about, or
it isn't anymore, sitting-in to occupy a stable space and
responding. Rather it's a matter of moving back to motion.
Changing the perspective from which one looks at oneself,
looks at oneself, or doesn't, doesn't look at those from
the standpoint of a death that doesn't belong to them.

"It's gonna be hard for people to sit in" because the
show is over; no more representation but an ensemble.
Because there is nothing to watch and we need to learn to
see differently.

Rewind the film and breathe-in, life.

An other(ed) life an other lives, trans lives, black lives. Lives
multiplying eyes, ears and skins, nostrils and tongues.

Lives' fungal, sporadic, saxifraga and diasporic
transmission. Humble lives and opulent lives.
Lives wandering and incessant metamorphosis.
Innumerable lives.

Lives living, that lived and will live again. Will vibrate again.
One in motion and that will be moved again. Will move
again towards other directions and other desires than the
staging of their death and surviving and a whole bunch of
principles so *exclusively* libidinous.

Towards other directions and other desires, with no more
shame about moods, matters and breaks, rifts, lumps and
marks, pus and of all that isn't beautiful and doesn't
"pass".

Because *all that beauty* isn't something you can EVER
appropriate: impetuous, fragile, immemorial, grateful,
unrecognisable and generous.

Before they were none, or not. Them and us, co-living.

Mawena Yehouessi & Rosanna Puyol

February 11 2023

6 pm

Opening, with a performance by the artist Danielle Brathwaite - Shirley

Galerie carrée.

Everyday of the exhibition

3 pm

Meeting around the exhibitions

Students on a mediation course at Villa Arson will create guided tours of the exhibitions, sometimes with performances, evoking their personal interests in relation to the artistic issues of the programme.

Free admission.

No reservation needed.

Group visit

School & Youth activities

servicedespublics@villa-arson.fr

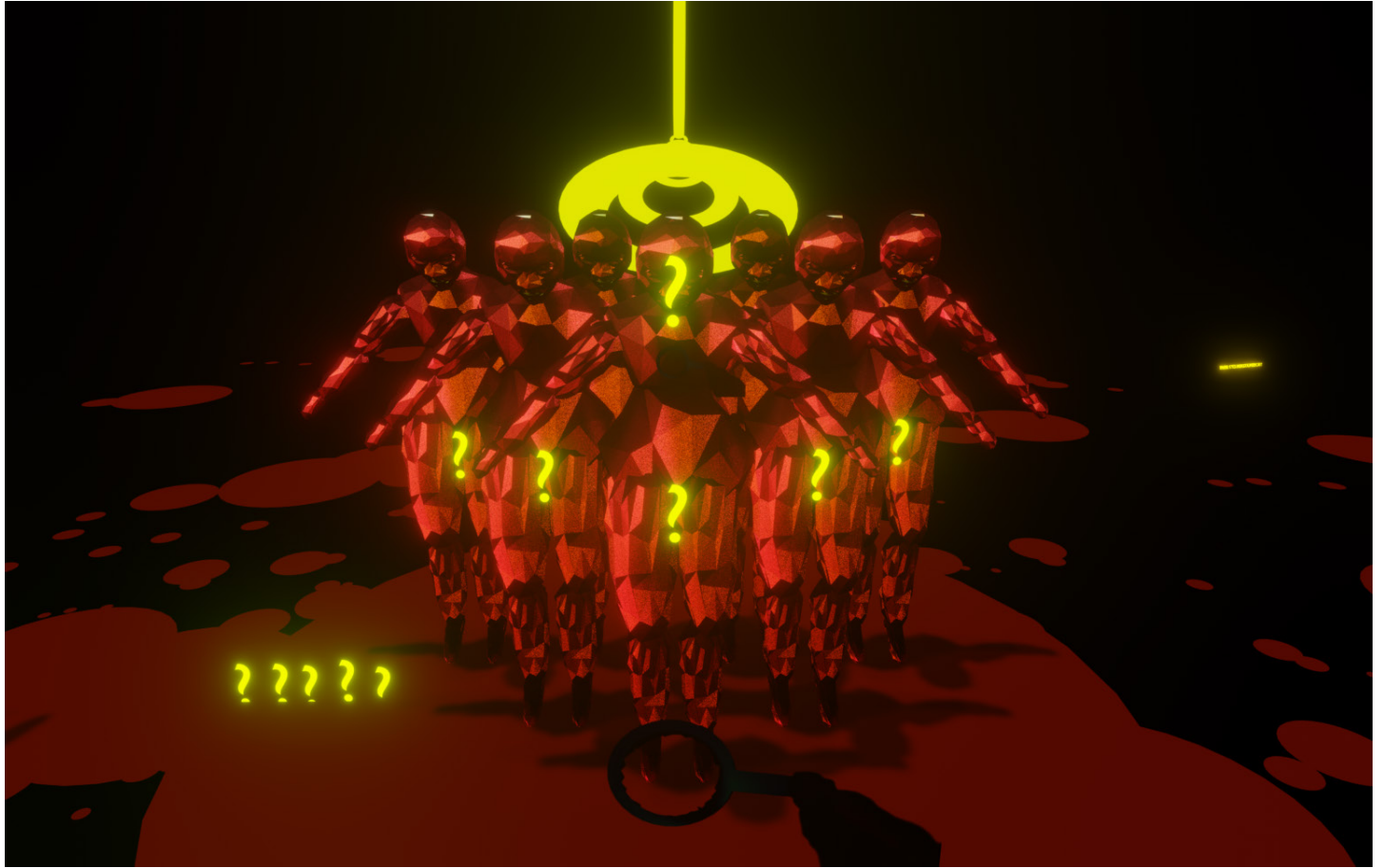
Danielle Brathwaite - Shirley

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley (born in London, 1995) is an artist based in Berlin.

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley works with animation, sound, performance and video games. Her practice focuses on archiving Black trans experience through the use of technology. Her immersive and interactive installations combine 3D animation and various DIY modelings. In doing so, she (re)imagines Black trans people's lives in ways that center their stories and bodies; those living, those that have passed and those that have been forgotten.

Information: daniellebrathwaiteshirley.com

Before They Were None



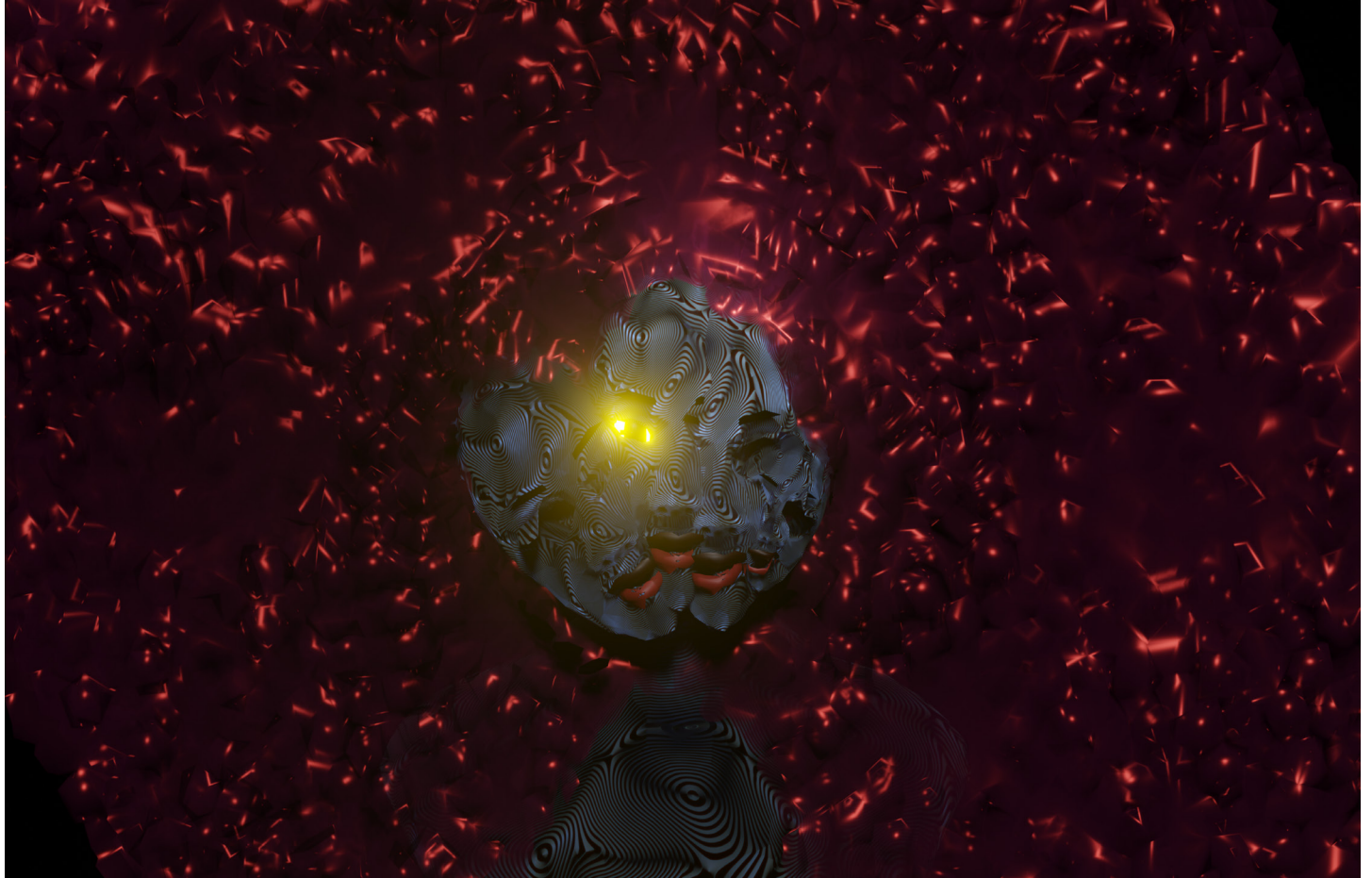
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Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley with Mawena Yehouessi & Rosanna Puyol

Rosanna Puyol: You started imagining the work and the exhibition *Before They Were None* with the 1939 novel by Agatha Christie *And Then There Were None*, could you please tell us about how it became an inspiration and how it informs the piece?

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: The book is about these white people not wanting to be black people. There is no black people in the book. Basically the whole book is a conversation about race, done in a really rubbish way, but still done nonetheless. It made me look at it in a completely different way. I almost wanted to do a version with black people, so they would have a version and wouldn't have to have this version. The insults of their existence are so insanely huge throughout the text. When I started to look into this nursery rhyme, I found this super racist book of the *Ten Little Niggers*, with horrible pickaninnies' pictures and realised there is so much more painful material around it than inside it. This book created a wealth of black torment. Having that erased didn't feel good, it doesn't feel good to know that a lot of that history exists and that probably did affect black people. All the new adaptations haven't even cared to address any of it, which would be interesting if they did. This is why I picked this book, I really wanted to do a new version. And the reason I want to make these 10 films and games is because of this amazing cut scene in this video game called *Death Stranding*. Sam, the main protagonist, meets with this other person who says we have to bury this body before it dies, cause in this world if it dies it explodes and forms huge craters in the earth. They're driving away with this body and having this conversation, you get to look around, the scene slowly changes around you as this body dies more and more and these ghosts start appearing, and everything goes wrong. And just that cut scene, I really would love to see something like that with black trans people having conversations, have all the environment reflect on the conversation but at the same time having it feel as cinematic as that moment did. Those are my two main inspirations for the work, for this whole show actually.

I don't usually work with books, things I read definitely influence me but I've never done a show where a book has felt so important to crafting the piece but at the same time I don't want it anywhere near the piece. I am gonna make a book, the posters with the covers we found, the book is called "There Are No Niggers In Here", just to record all these covers.

R.P.: At the same time I feel like you're bringing back the book through the title of the exhibition, twisting its title from *And Then There Were None* to *Before They Were None*.

D.B.-S.: Yes the book is really present, but the actual text isn't. It is called *Before They Were None* because they are no niggers in the actual book. So it's before they were, in my head, taken out of the book. And also before they were none of the ten little soldiers. It talks about this erasure. About erasing things that have happened and remaking the story. When Agatha Christie was writing that, what might have been written by someone else in an alternative world?

Mawena Yehouessi: I'd like to ask you about this idea of the lives and deaths, both already in the Agatha Christie book, about the mysterious deaths of those white people trying not to be seen as the murderer and niggers, displacing it to become the show—it is frontally about the lives and deaths of black trans people. Back to this cut scene in *Death Stranding*, the status of black trans people is always erased as being lives, it becomes something at the specific moment of their deaths. Which is also something you wish to tackle in that show. There is a moment when you're using this habitus of people being in their random comfort zone and suddenly tell them "well, that's not what's happening here". You're totally shifting the perspective. The comfort zone becomes the very turning point of the responsibility, so we are not being passive, we have to take responsibility towards the people in front of us making this space. Could you please develop on this idea of the shift in between not focusing on the death but really focusing on the lives?

D.B.-S.: Sometimes we're more important dead than alive. Our deaths are better for others in terms of talking on us, talking over us, making money of us, of the work, than it is when we're actually present. Especially with black trans people, often no one knows we exist until we pass. Whenever I talk about trans death or trans people passing or just living their life, the conversation always turns to death as this saddest moment and it's gonna happen and your life is gonna be taken before the end. As if waiting for a time when murder does come. That really limits the kind of conversations and dreams and wishes we can have when thinking about the history of black trans people, but also when thinking about what we can do now. Because we are not seen as an investment in time or energy, because we are expected to die soon.

I wanted to have this idea that the whole exhibition seems about death, seems really sad, about all these bodies in the space and you're gonna witness death. And all the works, all the games are actually about people surviving and not dying! Having conversations, taking their time, no one is running away from anything. Even some of them are confronting this moment of death and say "No I wanna live on" and they do. In the games you're waiting to see this death and it never happens, no matter what you do. That's

the point, I am hoping for the first one, through the “looking for the murderer” or “looking for this moment of death”, this climax point, they don’t get it and the next moment they get to focus on watching what they actually see.

There are many different stories, one of them is this person who chose to die by a tree, someone that loves them doesn’t want them to do that and so decides to die by them with the tree. They love each other and both decide not to die. Keep each other alive. There are stories like that, where it seems that it could go to death but it doesn’t.

There is a story where they transport this body that is dead and wrapped up. When they get there the body is alive, they unwrap it and walk back all together. It’s all about these murders that you’re expecting to happen, like “Find the murderer!”, but in the end no one actually dies. While you’re on the way to the journey, you get to hear these conversations, black trans people talking, while you’re sitting there looking at the environment, very much like this cut scene in *Death Stranding*, the ever-changing environment, things are happening around you, you hear this conversation from this very real point. And each of the locations is going to be designed of the body of the different black trans people I interviewed.

All the “deaths” are based on deaths in the book, based on the nursery rhyme, I’ve just re-written the nursery rhyme. The book is way more entwined than I thought! And you also have these 10 dead bodies in the space, that’s a bit more of a conversation about this idea that we almost want these characters to die, we almost want trans characters to be martyrs. We never have this black trans person die peacefully in their sleep when they were 70 years old, that was amazing, we don’t know that, we never know.

M.Y.: I am also thinking, this idea of stopping this silly habit of just focusing on the death aka also focusing on the solitude, loneliness of that dead body is also a way of recreating an attention to the collectivity, the surrounding and the familiarity through living, another way to go back to the collaboration. If we take that story about that person who wanted to die by the tree, and the other one, all of a sudden they’re not just alone going to die by the tree, but they’re already in this dialogue of being together and being in love together. This direction is also a way of stopping the bullshit about this idea that there is no connection, community and support. Because this is also what makes living be a living, the fact that you can always count on people breathing with you and helping you breathe. Also in the way you were interacting with the students here at Villa Arson, this idea of working together somehow is very important in the process. You’ve met people in Marseille, that’s also something you do outside of your art practice, working *with* others. Could you tell us about how you see this importance of collectivity? We’re always creating pure individualities rather than seeing them as groups, and if you see them as a collective, even the death of one, within a group, is not something that is so wrongly interpreted, then the death is part of the life. That could be a good way of seeing death as long as it is part of a community, so it’s attached to the living. Otherwise you just cut

death from the existence, you cut an individual from its community.

D.B.-S.: For me the thing that’s annoying is the expected type of death. It feels like certain groups of people that the type of death they have to encounter has to be violent, in order for someone to feel that we have a satisfactory ending. It’s really frustrating. For instance, I made a whole work about resurrection. The first work I made was about resurrecting black trans people so I could speak to them. There was no death in that work. But people wrote about it as a work dealing with black trans women that had been killed. And I was like no, no that’s never mentioned, never there. There is one scene with a coffin, and a resurrection. People’s mind instantly goes to you must be talking about black trans women death: that is the association, very negative. It also doesn’t happen this way. We also live like everyone else and have a multitude of deaths. I was watching this show, *Disclosure*, it also influenced me, when they’re talking about trans characters on screen, if they’re in a medical situation it’s because of their hormones, “your hormones are killing you, you have to stop taking them”. They usually die. It’s like “Oh, you brought that on yourself taking those hormones.” You’re dying because you’re trans, because of your genitals, your genitals are killing you. You have this whole conversation around deaths and our bodies, every time it seems like a murder mystery. I did make this work a long time ago, about a body being a murder mystery and people looking at your body for clues, trying to figure out who you are, why you are. You feel like you’re a mystery to solve. Sometimes they feel like they have more of the answer than you do.

For me, in terms of the ways of looking, that is the way I’ve seen people look, it’s the type of looking I’m trying to combat. I am also trying to combat this idea that we are alone ever, that we got here by our ones, by ourselves, through no one else, because usually behind a black trans person is a black trans community or a trans community or a black queer community or someone that made you understand that you were right. That there are words to describe yourself, which are limiting in themselves but that are words. I remember when I discovered transness, I discovered transness before I knew what the words were. I didn’t know there was a community, I didn’t know there were words to describe yourself. People would describe me with words I had no idea what they were. Someone called me “trans fem”, I didn’t know what that meant. I am also trying, in the work, and I am not sure if I’ll get there, to tackle this idea of the language we use to describe ourselves as extremely restricting idea of who we can be. Again making us feel a lot more individualized and lonely. But at the same time making you feel like you’re part of a community, by sacrificing some of your autonomy. Like “Oh okay if I call myself trans, this group of people will accept me”, but that word doesn’t describe anything I am going through right now.

M.Y.: It reminds me of something Rosanna noticed, during our very first zoom session, you were talking about the exhibition and you said “it’s gonna be hard for people to sit in”. It stayed with us and would be a super subtitle to any of your work so far! This “hardness to sit in” is super productive, because there is no interest

in *sitting in* somehow. Again it is this comfort to those who are so entitled within the habit of comfort, but it is also an invitation to do differently than from this sitting position: to activate, to dance, to speak, to chat, to sing with each other, to go towards each other. To me your work is also really hopeful, it gives you things to put you in an activity and stop being passive. Start doing things and not sitting. Your work is immersive and activating for the audience. There is no work where you'll just be here to consume content and go home, you have to do something, to displace something, to take an artifact, you have to put your body out there.

D.B.-S.: People often say, do you think art can do anything? Can you change someone's mind with a painting? I do believe you can in some ways. Maybe not in the most direct ways, but you can. A lot of the works that I love, the final piece is hung in the gallery but the work that was done in the way to building them, was a lot more than the final piece. That's what really excites me about the work. For years I had this problem where you'll go and see seminal works that meant so much hung in a massive institution that's trash, you look at the piece, the piece looks at you, the context is absolutely not available anymore. That's it and you leave. The fact that I can go and see a piece that was probably made for various particular political reasons and not have any of that reason in there, I am able to put my own references on top of it, is a fucking failure of the institution completely. It means that the work can no longer do whatever job it's trying to do. Even if it wasn't successful in the first place, now it has been displayed to make sure it is unsuccessful, it's like stealing a Banksy and putting it inside a gallery. The point of that is completely gone. It's just being shown because of who it's made by. Individualizing this piece of art to then be consumed by the audience to make them feel better about themselves. I don't want people to come into the gallery and look at my work and say this about whatever I want it to be about.

I have this philosophy that the more you put in, the more you get out. I am gonna make the threshold for you really high, so that you can't just look at it. You know you're gonna press something to start it, you know you're gonna activate it. If you don't you're not gonna get anything out of it. That's your fault, that's your responsibility. In the work you know that you can view it again, you could do something different, if you don't want to it's your choice. But I want it to be about this choice, how much do you actually care. Because usually the only decision in a gallery is: do I want to stay for this whole film or do I want to leave? Not do I want to do this thing that could kill this person in this game? Or am I a good person? I like to ask these questions to the audience so they leave thinking what have I been doing. I do want them to feel in the gallery that "am I responsible for this stuff?" At least in this context, so they know their actions have effects. I am unaware of how much it affects anything outside of this context but I know that in that room I want them to be more cautious about how they approach people and the work. If the room gets full of black trans people—and this is what I have seen and what I like—people get scared about the decisions they should make, thinking they're being judged by that particular group. If you're in front of a group of people, who are my people, and

you have to decide whether you kill this black trans person you're like "Aaaaaaah of course not!" cause you're thinking that's not your space. Just to make people feel a little like in an environment that's not yours, to make a decision that you have to make visibly in front of everyone else to reflect yourself. And you know whether you're being honest or not. I don't know and you do know.

R.P.: This makes me realize how much of your work is a dialogue that, as a viewer, you don't have the choice to be part of as soon as you enter the room, there is a question asked. It is linked to how you built the work from previous dialogues you had with friends or workshops' participants. You're proposing a dialogue shaped by conversations you had before. Can you tell us about how these conversations shape the work? It makes me think also about your practice of role play and how the games are structures for dialogues to happen, how they allow conversations within a kind of grid or security belt that you can put on embodying a character.

D.B.-S.: I never thought of it as a dialogue, It's a very rigid conversation I guess, you are kind of communicating with the structure I put in place. It is a lot less of a telling... Very often people propose ideas of things to make, things like a telling of, which is not interesting to me because if someone did that to me I'll turn away. The audience is my main medium. Even though I make everything in games, it's like highly interact is the main medium. I want them to take home questions about themselves, who they are and what decisions they make in their lives. To ask them questions that I don't know the answers to and they don't know the answers to and that's fine. I don't want to take the position where I know everything. I want to take the position where I build a world where you have to speak to it correctly and know the rules of, in order to get to the ending you want to get to. I feel that is life sometimes. Sometimes you enter spaces that have particular rules, ways of being we don't really understand, we have ways of being in this conversation, and if you don't know then you burn a bridge. I am trying to set up those bridges in the game and allow people to burn them. And say go home, go away, get out of this space, we don't like you anymore! But I never want to be like "you're a bad ally!" or "you're not black and trans, get out of here!" it's more about you make this decision, "I don't really want that right now, what do you think?"

M.Y.: You're talking about the game, and thinking of the audience as the medium, and performances, performativity of your work on the side of the audience, it brings us back to the idea of the book and the nursery rhyme. It's also this idea of finding the seriousness within the playfulness, and the reverse, finding the playfulness within something very important and strict. That you're not reenacting an imposition of thought, an imposition of a model, an imposition of an orientation. What's great is that it is about responsibility but it is not about pure ad-hoc judgment beforehand: you'll be your own judge, depending on your own actions. This is key because it's also an open invitation, you can come but you'll have to really take care and be conscious of

yourself coming. It is always open but not hypocritical, and that goes beyond the art and literature, creating a political model on how you can really invite people on a basis that is not the usual habit, habit or imposition, but really co-responsibility and co-building of every situation. All of a sudden there is no one on top of the other, you have to co-build, you have to ask the other one and the other one is to ask you, what's going on, what are we doing next. That structure to me is really political.

D.B.-S.: One of the things to know is that one work is never there. I never consider this work to be successful in making people think a certain way. This is the attempt. I try. The work could flop, that's completely fine. But I need to try and do it. I want to pose enough different questions, to pose enough opportunities for you to actually answer those questions. You would leave thinking someone wrote this, why did they write that? That can be a failure. I never think I have all the answers. I have to try a new way to have these conversations, to have this dialogue, to make art feel like it can do something in a world where most people take pictures and put it on the ground as action. I never want to say this is the way to make art political, but I often think this is the way we're trying, we're really trying to archive black trans people and to make people think about their actions in life. We could fail. But that's fine as long as we take what we learn and then implement it.

R.P.: To make this work you worked with black trans people living in Marseille for a few days, I was wondering how this collaboration shapes the piece and how the process and conversations are present here.

D.B.-S.: I don't like planning how the collaboration fits in. All I did for the first meeting was just listen, the conversation went a way that I didn't expect to go, I didn't say anything, I just let them talk and ask questions on things they were saying. And it was fascinating, it went in a lot of different directions. Some parts were really sad, some were really happy, most of it was just people chatting about who they are, how they found themselves, to be who they are and how they found themselves in Marseille. We talked a lot about how our own communities are limiting ourselves—this is why I've been thinking so much about limitations of language. How the conversation of blacktransness and non-binaryness has begun to make people separate from each other and ignore our differences and instead has the effect of the people that had been here a very long time, who were trying to get their voice out at the beginning when transness and non-binaryness weren't a big thing, they are still being silenced, but now they're being silenced by members of their own community. That was a fascinating approach and way of thinking that people were having. As well as words that people are using to describe themselves limitations being placed on how people had described themselves in the past using words like tranny, transvestite and faggot, and how some people say "Oh don't use those words to describe yourself". And someone was like "I've been here for 45 years using those words to describe myself, you literally wouldn't be here if we weren't having these conversations". And also

the separation from non-binaryness and transness, also this gate keeping of "you're trying to be a woman, you're re-stating stereotypes". That's the kind of discussions we had. So the collaboration turned into me listening to what they said and starting building games around the conversations that they took and worlds around each of them, and to hold them, rather than what I was originally gonna do, was like place them in these kinds of journeys I made. Now the journeys are those conversations.

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Villa Arson is a public institution of the Ministry of Culture and a member of UCA – Université Côte d'Azur. It is supported by the Ville de Nice, the Département des Alpes-Maritimes and the Région Sud Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur.

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Practical informations

Exhibitions open every day (except on Tuesdays) from 2 to 6 pm. Free admission.

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La Villa Arson and partners

We would like to thank our partners

