

HANDS FULL OF AIR

Interview with Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju by Mayra A. Rodríguez Castro.

Mayra A. Rodríguez Castro (MRC): I want to begin with intuition, a recurring word in your practice. How do you define this faculty for yourself?

Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju (MOI): Intuition is a knowing that runs deep within the body. It is a compass by which we make crucial decisions, the heirloom we are constantly trying to re-excavate and protect. Oftentimes, we think of intuition as something we are born with; formed in early childhood and remaining with us for the rest of our lives, inherited after generations of ancestors. But there is some difficulty there. I do wonder about corruption, what happens when intuition has been compromised by abuse, oppression, neglect. I feel that my intuition has been partially muffled and marred by many outside forces, and I am currently in the process of reclaiming a sense of being and making that feels more honest.

For me, the blanket fort embodies a form of intuition. This activity epitomizes the beauty and innocence of childhood; doing things not because you fully understand them, but because you must. Blanket forts are temporary structures, usually composed of sheets and comforters, that hold our dead skin cells, our dream life, our existential dread, bodily secretions, loved ones, our rest. There is something to learn from their ephemeral quality and how close people must be to enjoy that space together. This type of fort is usually built within a more physically stable structure, like a house or an apartment, which provides a base of safety. It is interesting to think of intuition as something that does not only concern the individual. Decisions can be made collectively, with everyone in mind. This type of synergy brings forth something new, better, sprung from collective effort.

MRC: We are indoctrinated into seeing intuition as an individual faculty, and from there, we assume that our grounds for preservation are separate, not to be shared. I never thought of intuition as a collective practice before.

MOI: Yes exactly, we compose ourselves so that one day we may arrive at a place of comfort, where we no longer need to hold our posture. But it is hard to feel cozy in the world when you don't trust people, or else, when you are not trustworthy yourself. It's a two way street. Coziness is not about feeling comfortable and warm when someone else might be freezing in the same room. It is really unfortunate that our measures for comfort are often made by comparison, that we consider someone else's lack without bringing the nature of our comfort into question or leveling the field in any meaningful way.

MRC: I think a lot about effortlessness as it relates to comfort. In dance, craft, and technique, effortlessness is only achieved with an intense amount of practice. I regard the fort in *Hands Full of Air* as a place to practice comfort with others. One cannot lean calmly without having practiced intimacy before, with others and even within oneself. Can you speak about intuition and relation in the process of creating a fort for the exhibition?

MOI: In order to create the fort, I invited contributors to provide fabrics and devote as much labour and energy as they were comfortable sharing through their contributions. They could buy fabric, find fabric in the street, even make a painting. The result didn't matter, I would kiss it anyway. I had imagined a swirling fabric constellation jam-packed with voices and perspectives, each clearly outlined but still part of a porous structure. The process of relation and intuition rested on finding ways to bind elements together without being overly restrictive.

As I began to correspond with everyone, I found a great level of excitement about the project. Although I cannot honestly say that organizing the exhibition has been all roses and sunshine, it brought a huge opportunity to collaborate across geographies. I felt the contributors were near me as I opened boxes and continued to receive fabric from all over the world, it was a kind of transference. I'm still surprised in some ways. It's like when you

throw a party and a tiny part of you is terrified that no one is going to show up, but then they always do.

Being with the material and assembling the structure, to me that is also the performance and the artwork. For the base of the fort, architect Benjamin Busch, curator Jorinde Spletstößer, head of production Carolina Redondo and I designed a structure that could easily mutate while remaining structurally sound. The idea was to create a web rope structure where anything could be adhered. The full body is now composed of wooden frames, which hug two support columns in the gallery space, there are DIY projection screens, ropes, there is a variety of objects and fabric by myself and other contributors.

MRC: As you described the architecture of the fort, along with its various interacting textures, I grew interested in material binding. Perhaps this can be an image for gathering and intimacy. There are sculptural ties and bonds that hold the structure in place.

MOI: Some of the contributors handed me their fabric without any restrictions, I could run them over with a car and they wouldn't bat an eyelash. Others provided specific conditions; not to sew into the fabric, no radical alterations, some textiles must be hung with a particular orientation, etc. I think both perspectives are reasonable. There are boundaries and differences between fabrics, and humans, and that is valid. Instead of using differences to build hierarchies of false comparison, their disparate qualities should be respected and celebrated. Each fabric requires its own treatment and placement within the structure; however, on a fundamental level, the principle of binding remains. How things connect is always changing. There is an infinite lexicon of ways to bind.

In my video practice, merging found and personal footage really excites me. In stitching clips together that are considered disparate entities, I parse out the connective tissue between them, arguing that relationships can exist no matter how distant the subjects might seem. I am also interested in certain intermediate states, where one thing slowly or rapidly dissolves into the next, and what happens in the intuitive process of naming elements in coalescence. The fort installation follows similar methodologies, but in a physical form.

MRC: The Infinite Lexicon of Ways to Bind brings me to social spaces that feel irrevocably separate; the interior and exterior. How do you reconcile with separation and estrangement within your practice?

MOI: The interior is a space where we don't have to pretend; where we don't have to pretend that the weight of life itself, and the beauty and absurdity of it all, is not completely incapacitating at times. I find a lot of power in naming that awareness through forms based in domestic life that seem mundane, such as the blanket fort, a morning routine, dust. Then you see nothing is mundane. Facts are being shattered every moment of the day only to be built back up again. I think the world could be a better place if we allowed all of the beauty and sadness and rage, the vast range of emotions we experience when we are alone, into notions of how we work, how we play, how we live in the external world.

MRC: The fort is malleable, a place of comfort but also a place for hiding, a place of permissiveness and enclosure.

MOI: I guess the question is, when do structures become bad or corrupt? Is the point of a structure to remain stagnant and have people become stagnant within it, or does the structure provide space for growth while preserving a base, where one could fall and be caught if need be? This makes me think about the fundamental differences between conservatism and liberalism, particularly tradition. I see tradition as the opportunity to reach back into the past when seeking answers. The future remains unknown, where things aren't always what one thought them to be. It can be paralyzing to be beholden to tradition, to have no room to breathe or think beyond; but it can also be terrifying to be stuck in the abyss of freedom, floating untethered.

A couple of months ago, I went to a contemporary sculpture opening at the Humboldt Forum which is a huge palace in Berlin steeped with colonial energy, a fortress of sorts. During this visit, the space was under construction. I became observant of the scene around me; wires spilling out of ceilings, errant ladders, plastic tarp coverings, half painted walls. It was the first time I had seen a massive colonial structure under construction, fully exposed and vulnerable to its absurdity. Typically, we walk into these monumental spaces

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that so blatantly boast their geographical rapes and immediately feel inconsequential. This is not at all an accident; this is a premeditated endeavor that uses wealth and power to maintain a synthetic objectivity. To witness the massive effort towards bringing this building into being revealed the trickery of architecture. When you turn on the lights and look around, the palace is an empty hole of nothingness, which only takes and is never satisfied.

Whenever an image is projected onto a surface or object, you forget exactly what you are looking at because of how luring and convincing the impression can be, how fabric can fall onto the body and assumes its shape. The fortress I have built follows the realization that all those forces—of colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity—have real world effects that I will not minimize, but their core is based in fallacies. Their projections are simply untrue. In the depth of my body, in my bones, I know it is untrue. And so, the title *Hands Full of Air* proposes more plural forces of creative action. The construction of the world order, in all its violence, chaos, and confusion can be opposed through subjective acts of creation, despite discourses that discourage these sources of empowerment.

MRC: My last question, are our bodies fortresses?

MOI: The body as a fortress. People come, people go. There are people inside, there are people outside. It is all relational. My hope is that I am a fortress and everyone is invited, but also no one is invited sometimes. The rules of who and how one can enter do change, because I am a person with a shifting psychic landscape. The person at the front desk of the fortress presents you with the rules, but maybe the rules of yesterday are no longer effective today. Or maybe there are no rules.

There are insidious processes, perversion for example, that inform our perception of everyday life. These become apparent especially as we reflect on white supremacy and heteronormativity. It is interesting to navigate these rigged systems, which do their best to desensitize us in order to exercise control, while also straddling my identity and general astonishment at having a body in the first place. There is still a voice within me that shouts "Monilola, I'm over here!" as it's being swatted away. I am becoming familiar with its

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sound again after ignoring it for so long, and now as it gets louder and louder, it begins to sound like sweet music. It's exciting to discover yourself not only as an individual, but also as a member of a community; to see how your community transforms around and with you, revealing who you are.

I am a bit weary of the fortress idea. I don't want a fortress based on static exclusion. I think a community is a fortress, and everything outside the fortress is part of it as well. The inner and outer swirl together. *Hands Full of Air* is particularly exciting because it draws a cartography of who and what has affected me in ways that are not always legible. Beyond the fortress being a sculpture, I just want to see the outline, have a visual of what has been, is, and could be.

This interview was held in November 2020.

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