

OLIVIA MCGILCHRIST IN  
COLLABORATION WITH  
JEAN SMALL

**OTHERNESS**

Nov. 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015 - Dec 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
Multimedia video installation



*otherness* is an ongoing collaborative body of work between Jean Small, a Guyanese-Jamaican eighty year old actress, playwright and traditional storyteller and Olivia McGilchrist, a French-Jamaican thirty-four year old visual artist working in photography, video and interactive media.

This installation attempts to interpret the physicality of post-colonial bodies through a filmed and re-configured live performance. Since 2013, Jean and Olivia have been exploring the re-appropriation of the foreign other body through physical gesture and sound. This collaboration is driven by the attempt to map out the tension between conflicted ideas and emotions surrounding notions of the other.

Inspired by Jean Paul Sartre's 1944 play 'Huis Clos' (No Exit) the piece embodies contested cultural narratives, which are troubled and re-invented by juxtaposing a mimed interaction over two facing screens. Created in the Caribbean, this work can become relevant in the wider Diasporic context of the Americas.

For Centre des arts actuels Skol, this installation has been set in context with several adjoining pieces in different media which are part of the larger body of work; giving a broader view of the artist's creative directions.

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**Olivia Mc Gilchrist** is a Jamaican-French visual artist who's alter-ego Whitey explores physical expressions of emotional states in the search for cultural identity. Her work has been shown in Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Grenada, Brazil, Canada, the U.S, the U.K, Germany and France.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica to a French mother and a Jamaican father, Olivia grew up in France and studied in England. In 2010 she completed her Master's in Photography at the London College of Communications and, in 2011, she returned to Kingston to work as a Curator at the National Gallery of Jamaica (NGJ) and a Lecturer in Photography and New Media at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts.

In 2014-15, she attended a Graduate Certificate in Digital Technologies in Art & Design at Concordia University, to further her knowledge of networked and interactive new media practices. Currently working on several projects in Montréal and the Caribbean, she hopes to continue working out of both regions and foster meaningful partnerships between institutions and individuals in both spaces.

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I think that the fundamental insight is that what we constitute as a whole within the subject is fundamentally constituted by that which is not itself, by its constitutive outside. Put in another way, every self or every identity is constituted by that which it lacks, which is the Other.

– Stuart Hall, “A Conversation with Stuart Hall,” 1999

We tell ourselves: [...] If I take something from the Other, then my own self will disappear. We absolutely must abandon this error.

– Édouard Glissant, “Conversation with Édouard Glissant  
Aboard the Queen Mary II,” 2009

The term *otherness* is bound up in a web of connected ideas: difference, binary opposites and power. “We” are considered separate from, antithetical to and even wielding authority over “them.” Indeed, concerns about agency, subjugation and resistance remain inextricably linked to understandings of identity but fresh eyes are needed for looking again at such categories as us/them, white/black and coloniser/colonised. Those categories are not autonomous. They are not mutually exclusive. Martinican intellectual Édouard Glissant uses the cultural space of the Caribbean and the concept of creolisation to propose an idea of being as that which is constantly taking shape with the Other. He observes: “In creolisation [...] you can be with the Other, you can change with the Other [...], you are not one, you are multiple...” This multiplicity is born of interaction. Meanings of self and other are dialogic. Efforts to construct one, involve building blocks from the other. It is this fundamental insight to which Stuart Hall refers and at which Olivia McGilchrist directs her creative energy.

Her two-screen video installation, conceived in collaboration with actress, playwright and storyteller Jean Small, aptly attends to notions of relationality and interaction. The videos face each other. Which is self and which is other? Each resonates with both positions; both in confrontation and recognition of each other; each serving as the other’s “constitutive outside” – to return to Hall’s words here. While one video is accompanied by sound, the other is silent. It is precisely through this lack of audio that the video’s identity is remade in the gallery space of Skol. Every identity “is constituted by that which it lacks, which is the Other.” The video becomes a new self, reconstituted by the wind and percussion instrumental soundtrack of the other video.

Within the videos themselves, McGilchrist and Small – ostensibly white and black identities – appear separately, yet searchingly, as though conscious of missing components to their self-definitions. When we see them together, they peer at each other, they listen to each other, hands touch and they press their bodies against the other. Modalities of

sight, hearing and tactility are presented as ways of knowing, re-discovering and making meaning. It is a dialogue without words – one that foregrounds the senses as a critical method of articulation. Self and other are brought into contact to unpack a complexity of being. The use of superimposed images gives further emphasis to identity as comprising multiple layers. Of note too, is the way in which the bodies of both women meld, each one becoming porous and as open as the space of potential around them.

McGilchrist reinforces this screening of gestures, with the performative echoes of masks, which she includes as part of her display. A mask not only conceals, it projects ontological states. McGilchrist deploys the mask to address the persona (the word “persona” is Latin in its derivation and means “mask”); the persona is that aspect of self that is perceived by others. Are those perceptions real? The artist gives focus to this question in another feature of the exhibition: a virtual reality experience, which activates issues of actuality, simulation and truth.

Taken together, the works show Olivia McGilchrist tackling the subject of *otherness* from multiple angles and through a plurality of approaches and media. She brings the identities of moving pictures, sound, still photography and sculpture into a conversation with each other – each medium simultaneously a self and an other – to constitute an intricate whole that resists oversimplification.

– Marsha Pearce, PhD

### References

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**Dr. Marsha Pearce** is a Cultural Studies scholar based at the University of the West Indies St Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago. She is also the Senior Editor and Art Writer for ARC Caribbean Art and Culture Magazine. Her writings appear in several academic and general-audience publications.