

Roundtable: Sonaksha and Carbon | DSROI 2022

Module 2

Hi everyone, this is a conversation with Karbin who is a CREATE fellow. So just to give you a little more information about the CREATE fellowship, the idea was to kind of support knowledge production, art, storytelling and community building and basically creating ideas for change within the spaces of sexual and gender diversity, intersex rights and disability. And the overall goal of the fellowship is to strengthen cross-movement cooperation, especially within these spaces because so many of us work within them, but we're also working in silos.

So the idea was to kind of have conversations, connections and build on the work that we're all doing. So yeah, it's very exciting to have Karbin here who's doing a really incredible project that I have the fortune to be the mentor to. So I'm really excited for you all to hear more about Karbin's project and I'll just briefly introduce myself and then I'll pass it to Karbin to introduce themselves.

So hi, I'm Sanaksha, I'm an illustrator, graphic recorder and book designer and I largely work with human rights organizations and feminist organizations to visualize the work that's happening on ground as well as to create art because I think art is really an important part of the revolution. So yeah, I feel really grateful to have this chance to have this conversation and yeah, I'm just going to pass it over to Karbin to introduce themselves and then we can kind of dive right in. Over to you Karbin.

Sure, thank you so much. Yeah, hello everyone. I am Karbin.

I am a multidisciplinary artist. I also am an academic and an activist in the spaces of disability rights and gender advocacy. I'm based in Johannesburg, South Africa and most of my work centers around South Africa and Southern Africa broadly.

Amazing, thank you so much for that introduction Karbin. So yeah, I just want to quickly get into the questions about your work and I think what you're doing is going to be so exciting. I'm so excited to see how it's all kind of been coming together slowly and I can't wait to hear more about it.

So I think first off we just wanted to ask you why you see yourself doing this work at the intersection of disability, sexuality and gender diversity. Why is it so important to you and where did it come from for you? I think for me it stems from my own identities. So I am a person with a disability and I am queer and I am transgender.

So all of these issues do stem from like a personal, you know, investment in these identities and in the political space of these identities. It's not just about kind of being this person who experiences these identities but rather they are systems of oppression. They are those who are being privileged and those who are being oppressed by these systems and so how can I participate in dismantling these systems that not only affect me but also affect people who are in similar positions as me.

And so how can we collaboratively work against, you know, these systems of oppression to make sure that no one is being belittled, demeaned, oppressed just because of their identity? Yeah that is amazing. As always I think for me what has always kind of stood out with your work from the beginning is how much it is informed by your lived experiences and that really kind of comes through because I think for me as an artist creating work that is also quite often surrounding and based on my lived experiences, I feel like there's a certain layer, actually there are many, many layers that come in when someone is talking from their own perspective versus when a piece is made by someone from the outside and I think that's that having, yeah and I think it's so important for us to have spaces for us to be able to create projects like this. Thank you for sharing about that and a little more like based on that same question, how important is it for your work to have intersectionality at its center and how do you kind of go about ensuring that you're doing that? Yeah, intersectionality is not like, it's a doing word to me, it's not just a word that we give ourselves, it's something that we do and it's something that we need to be hyper cognizant of because of how we've been raised in this system to not notice how you are being a participant in, you know, the privileging or the oppression of someone.

It does become like an active act to make sure that the work that you're doing follows the principles of intersectionality and it is quite important to me because intrinsically we don't live single issue lives, we don't live single identity lives, we live in occupying so many identities whether those identities privilege us or oppress us but nonetheless we have all these identities that we work with and that we walk with and that we bring to the table and so it's that importance at the fact that intersectionality is all constantly around us. So even if you want to ignore it, you're not ignoring it, you're simply privileging those voices that are already taken seriously in society. So even if you think you're opting out, you're not, you're actually just choosing the side of the oppressor if you choose not to follow intersectionality.

So it's extremely extremely important to me and it's extremely important that it is something we articulate in the foreground of our work. As I said, if you don't do it you might land up doing the work of the oppressor and that's not something I'm interested in, that's not something I'm invested in doing. So intersectionality, yeah, it's a doing word to me and I think it's just, it's just the fundamental like analysis of how the world works.

Intersectionality complicates and I think that's the point, it needs to do that because simplicity, if you're building a model and you're building a model of the world, if you land up building a simple model that's linear, it means you're not modeling the world, you're not understanding enough and where intersectionality complicates but it complicates for a purpose because we then get a true model of how the world actually works. So it's a foundational tenant of mine, it's foundational, it's a core idea that runs as a thread throughout all the works that I do. It's one of the most powerful ideas that I think has come out of, you know, kind of the late 90s, 2000s, that yeah, I don't know what I'd do without it, I need it.

I need it to understand myself but I also need it to understand how the world works so that strategically we are dismantling these systems of oppression in the way that we want to effectively. Oh my god, yes, you're so right. I don't think that there actually is a way to opt out of intersectionality, like you said, and I think, yeah, like intersectionality really does make space for all of the messiness of just the way we live our lives and you're right, like I also just

cannot imagine what, yeah, like I cannot imagine not having had this framework, not having had this way of thinking about things.

But before we go a little further into that, I want to ask you to just share a little more about your project, if you'd like to, in a few words, what exactly your project is about, the concept, anything you'd like to share about it. Yeah, I think that'll kind of set the tone and then we can maybe dive a little bit more into that. Sure, so I'm creating a multimedia performance art piece project called Not Yet Dead, and yes, there are many components to it, so I'll lead with the poetry.

So the poetry is like the kind of main component that's pushing the other elements forward. So the poetry deals with mental health and neurodivergence, deals with gender, and it deals with race, particularly from the context of South Africa, being born as a born free, you know, someone who's born after apartheid, and specifically how it's a fallacy, that are we truly born free? This idea of the rainbow nation and this kind of like harmonious multicultural environment that South Africa supposedly is, is that actually true? Is that a myth? So that's the content that the poetry has, and so this performance art piece has various elements that deal with an aspect of the content that the poetry covers. So the performance, so I'm not performing the poetry, it's not performance like slam poetry or spoken word poetry, it's performance in the sense that I'm using my body as an artistic tool.

So the most popular kind of performance artist out there is Marina Abramovic, she's probably the most well known. So essentially I have the poetry which will be recorded and recited over music, which plays in like a performance space with a gallery, a warehouse, any kind of performance space. We then have an animation which is animation superimposed on a black and white video that I shot in a small town named Kalanin, South Africa.

This is where the Kalanin diamond comes from, which the queen needs to return. And then this animation depicts a character who's being chased by another kind of monster figure, and there are these close calls where this character's trying to get away from this monster, but they're never quite caught, but they're almost these close moments where they get caught. And so that animation plays in a loop with the video from Kalanin playing in a loop.

Then we lastly have the performance element itself, where I will have rocks or pebbles, I'm not too sure, like kind of this size, the size of a fist, and on the pebbles will be the lines of poetry written. Not every single line, but kind of dominant, prominent lines, which will be placed inside a wheelbarrow. I will then be pushing this wheelbarrow around the space of the performance until exhaustion.

But most interestingly, performing the people, kind of we can call them audience members, who will come to see the performance will be given a rock at the beginning of their entry point into the space. And so then it becomes a question of what are they going to do with their rock? Will they make use of the pens around the space to write their own matters and put it inside? Will they take the rocks out of the wheelbarrow? So it becomes an interesting discussion on kind of assistance or burdening. Will people assist me when they see me struggling, or will they simply burden me with more rocks, or will they be bystanders and do nothing at all? So yeah, lots of elements coming together.

We can perhaps maybe go deeper into each element of what it means. But overall, that's what Maqiyat did is. Thank you.

Thank you so much for sharing that. And yeah, and I think it would be really interesting to hear more about the concept behind this or what you kind of hope to communicate through this, what your hopes and intentions are for this piece. And yeah, and I think that really is going to be, I think, very, very useful to hear and learn more about.

So would you mind sharing a little bit about that? Sure. So I'll start with the animation. So the animation is supposed to be a representation of my kind of mental, it's quite difficult to articulate, but rather, particularly the diagnosis of autism that I've received.

So I'm on the spectrum. And this animation of kind of this monster being chased with this character, having these close calls, it feels like a representation of myself in social situations. I feel like I'm going to be caught out one of these days as a person who's pretending, because I have taught myself social cues.

And I've taught myself in these contexts, when people do this, they mean this. So you should respond like this. But I feel like one day I'm going to be caught out as this imposter who doesn't really get it, but is trying their best to communicate with others.

So that's the animation part. The poetry itself, the poems are quite specific about, you know, ideas of gender, and are quite specific about the difficulties of living with bipolar disorder. And the, yeah, kind of suicidal ideation that sometimes comes with it, the depression that comes with it, and the mania that comes with it, and the complex feelings around that.

Because, yeah, it is, it's hard to explain to others, but the poetry attempts to frame it for others to understand. So one example I can give is one of the poems frames mania as an old friend. So surprisingly, it feels like mania is an old friend, but it's the one friend I don't recognize.

So many times I've experienced mania, I still don't pick up the signs that I'm in a manic episode, despite experiencing it many times. The poetry about gender kind of frames my theoretical framework around gender, and particularly observes how we've gone from a binary gender system to effectively a trinary system of, you know, man, woman, non-binary. But that's not liberation to me.

I don't think replacing a binary with a trinary is how we liberate ourselves from gender norms and gender stereotyping and gender roles. And as I spoke briefly earlier, this idea of the Rainbow Nation and the Born Free, which were these kind of taglines of the early democracy of South Africa and in the 90s into the early 2000s, like, is that a fallacy? Was that a myth? Was it a lie that we're being told for the sake of peace, but a peace that's an absence of justice? And lastly, it comes to the actual performance itself and the audience participation is truly where the meaning making comes from. So what I've observed is that not only do people need to experience the oppression of a system that they're under, but there's also this extraordinary onus placed on them to be the ones to solve the solution.

So for example, when George Floyd was unfortunately murdered and there was a reckoning on the police brutality in the United States, people kept on looking to African-American

people to be the ones to solve and come up with the solution. So not only do they bear the brunt of police brutality, but they must also be the ones who solve police brutality. And so I will be carrying all these poetry lines, which is my experience of these systems of oppression.

And it becomes a question of, will people take their rock with no instruction? They'll simply be given a rock at the beginning of the performance. Will they continue to burden me with more responsibility, with more solution making? And this is particularly important as someone who is assigned female at birth and is often assumed as a cis woman. And in a country where Black women are often expected to provide like maternal roles, Black women raise essentially the entire nation, regardless of race, because Black women are the ones who are in domestic settings and doing domestic work, whether they are doing it for their own family or they've been hired by other racial groups or other families to raise their children.

That this expectation that your mom is going to solve it is particularly that Black women are going to solve it. So it's a complexity that I'm not a Black woman, but the world understands me as a Black woman. And that's the expectation set on Black women is also set on myself.

And so, will people assist someone or will they be bystanders watching me struggle with the rocks that I have in my wheelbarrow? Or will they add to it because they don't know where else to put the rock? So that is, that meaning making really comes out the day of the performance. It really depends on what the audience does and what they think to do, or will they stand around and do nothing, which a lot of people do. Bystander culture is incredibly rife when people see injustice, they do nothing.

So when they see someone struggling, will they do anything about it? So we'll see, we'll see what comes of the performance to really extract that meaning making of the performance. I love listening to you speak. Yeah, so I think for just following up quickly on this, what you just shared, I guess I was also just wondering what you kind of hope to achieve in terms of, in terms of your art and activism and advocacy.

Are there any specific things that you would like to kind of communicate or that you would like to kind of ensure that the message kind of is out there? Apart from what you've already shared so far, if there are other things that you would kind of like to highlight? Yeah, feel free to do that. I think I'm very concerned of late in terms of my activism and advocacy. I'd like kind of what I call stomach politics.

People are hungry. People have basic needs that are not being met. So what are you going to do about it? And we know that the people who aren't getting their basic needs met is not a neutral, you know, happen chance.

It's very much led by the fact that trans people don't finish school. Trans people face a disproportionate amount of poverty. Trans people face a disproportionate amount of abuse.

Trans people face a disproportionate amount of all these kinds of social ills. I can broadly categorize them like that. And that is directly linked to the fact that they're trans and essentially, according to the world, transversing gender roles and are being punished for it.

So my advocacy of these days is concerned with the question of like, how are we going to assist people with their day to day need of their basic needs? So that's what I tend to think on. And someone might argue that my focus on art is meaningless, right? That's frivolous. It's disconnected from that need that I've identified.

But the arts overall can be a space that feeds you, even under capitalism, right? I do want the destruction of capitalism. That's like a key, a key, key, key objective of mine. But what are we going to do in the meantime? And that's the space that I'm quite interested in exploring because the destruction, we know it's coming.

It's the season finale of capitalism. But what are we doing in the meantime? And so that's the space I'm really in these days. I seek the destruction of capitalism.

I seek the destruction of gender, not necessarily the destruction of gender expression, but the destruction of gender in terms of a binary or a trinary system, because it's intrinsically restricting. But we are intrinsically free to express ourselves as we please. The destruction of gender doesn't necessarily mean the destruction of expression.

It's just not categorizing that expression as a particular role in society. Yeah. So that's kind of what I'm up to.

And what I've identified is like where the space I would be best used in a system, in a large group of people who are fighting for all sorts of things. I need to prioritize or specialize in a particular area while still making sure my work supports the intersectional work that we're all trying to do. I can't do everything.

And that's OK, because there's enough of us that we'll do everything together. Wow. I kind of just want to end it there because that was beautiful.

And I resonate with so much of what you said and so much of what you shared. And yeah, I think gender, I think what we really are missing out when we're making, when we're further making gender into these like smaller boxes, no matter if we increase the number of boxes, the point is that we need expression to be expansive. And it is expansive.

And no amount of boxes is ever going to hold that. So yeah, I completely agree with everything you just shared. And yeah, I think it's so, so important.

Like you said, we can't do everything, but of course, we can do something. And I think that's all we are trying to do. And I remember, I think I read in one of your submissions, you had said the person is political and the political is personal.

And that's so true. And yeah, and I think it's very evident that that's the space your work is coming from. And that's, in my opinion, what makes it so incredibly powerful.

So yeah, thank you so much for sharing about your project for being a part of this fellowship. And, and yeah, for doing the work that you're doing. I'm really, really excited to see how it's kind of gonna all play out.

And I can't wait to see the final outcome. So yeah, thank you so much for sharing. And I hope that all of the DSRI participants found this meaningful and are able to take something from it.

Thank you, Carbon. It's such a pleasure. And yeah, I am very open to people contacting me.

You can either tweet me, or you can send me an inbox on Instagram. For both of those platforms, I'm Carbonated Art. So very easy to find me.

We'll also share Carbon's handles along with the video. So yeah, thank you so much, Carbon. And thank you, everyone.