

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

ARMED WITH ART: TAKING DOWN THE WALL OF WHITENESS

LAURA FLANDERS: 2020 was in lots of ways an unimagined year, but one ironically that underscored the importance of, you guessed it, imagination. We had to find creative solutions, creative ways to connect, and creative ways to move people to care about one another. Now, no one does this work of creative imagining and solutions finding better than artists. So today we've gathered three activist artists from around the United States to talk about how they are using their art to transform a society in urgent need of a course correction. With me, hip hop artist, Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, interdisciplinary artist and social justice activist, Favianna Rodriguez, and activist poet, Aja Monet, who is also the Artistic Creative Director of the Voices Campaign at V-Day.

AJA MONET: Somewhere an artist pulls at the seams of themselves riding until their fingers bleed unstitched, until the paint runs dry and the canvas crawls, and the country is a museum of movement murals. Until the toes soak in ballet slippers walking on tight ropes or egg shells, rehearsing themselves hungry, a recital for every picket sign raised. Somewhere an artist is gluing bottle caps to the soles of their shoes, tapping at the time, stomping down tyranny with every screaming vein turning a stage sideways into a street corner with a boom box rapping the evening news. Somewhere an artist battles their breath, mumbling lyrics, counting syllables on their fingers for the abolition of 16 bars. Somewhere, an artist is pitching a portrait, throwing bullet points at a meeting of minds for the movies that lace us with revolutionary vision.

LAURA FLANDERS: Aja, coming back to you, this was a year of clairvoyance, of vision, of things coming into focus, of things getting very clear, the good, bad, the ugly, the possible. Talk about it, your 2020.

AJA MONET: I think 2020 sort of as ironic and weird and divine as it has been, and hard and difficult and a lot of suffering has taken place. I think that gave fruition to the truth-telling that we saw happening in the Bernie Sanders campaign around corporations and the ways that this country has really neglected our healthcare system and housing as a crisis, and all those things that were being championed in the movement for years. I'm a part of, we say it's a movement not a moment, right? So I think leaning on that in 2020 was so crucial because we were like, we told you all this could happen, but there was a little bit of despair once Bernie Sanders had to step down and this was ushering itself into fruition, into the world, knowing that there was a global pandemic that was dawning upon our communities and upon our realities. And then obviously, as a cultural worker, your response is to think about, yes, what are the immediate material conditions of our people? And then how do we serve the imaginations and the hearts and minds of our people at the same time? I did a homemade poetry show that was online, streaming it before so that people could have access to medicine and thinking about herbal medicine and how

we could go back to that practice. And so we saw a lot of black and brown indigenous people returning to rest and returning to their interior worlds and thinking about themselves, having the space to do that. But while also struggling in thinking and imagining ways that we could be and show up better for each other, if the government failing us. It was a painful year, but I think it really brought us into our true potential when we collectivize and work together.

LAURA FLANDERS: Xiuhtezcatl, to you, what about you? Take us back end of '19, what were you up to? What were you excited about?

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ: It's wild to think about. It's been a year since this pandemic began, but towards the end of 2019, I was sitting on a project on an album that I created with another incredible artist from South Central LA named True. And we were getting ready to begin the rollout. I had a headline show booked in New York City. We were looking at booking spaces for the album release party in the Bay Area. And so my mind was very much towards 2020 being a year where my creativity and my art combined with the organizing work that I do as far as the messaging and the stories being told within the music to really take center stage in my focus.

LAURA FLANDERS: What's changed? What have you been doing since? Where are we speaking to you as well? Where are you speaking to us from?

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ: We released the project. We played our album release show in the Bay Area on February 29th. I believe it was the week before everything started to get shut down. And I was actually ended up in Philly and basically spent the entire year in Philadelphia on the East Coast with my partner, living in a movement house with a bunch of organizers from Sunrise Movement. A lot changed and expanded both within my art, within my view of the world, within my view of my own position in relationship to these movements. And it was really fruitful.

LAURA FLANDERS: Favianna, to you, your work sits exactly at the juncture, that Aja kind of pointed to between the internal and the external. You said you were hoping for an internal year of working on your own work. What actually happened and how has it affected your cultural work, your artistic work?

FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ: Well, first, I'm inspired by Aja, just to say that I was focused on my healing because what #MeToo had also done is expose the gender inequality that many of us had been experiencing. And it gave us a language to be able to articulate how we had all been impacted. I think that in the movement, many of us, especially women of color are moving at a pace and we are holding the grief and the trauma of our communities. And it's important to move through that in order to heal from the cycles of trauma. And that just requires rest and it requires recovery. But when the pandemic hit, I live in an immigrant community in Oakland, in East Oakland, and my community immediately became one of the hardest hit largely because there's so many essential workers here. To me, what the pandemic revealed and what it offered to us as cultural workers is that really, for the first time in our human history, you saw the collapse of the

old systems and you also saw what they revealed, which is that capitalism is killing us. And as artists, we also were at a time when our art spaces were collapsing, the ways that we did art needed to be entirely re-imagined at the same time that our communities, but not just our local communities, not just the communities we identify with, but really the global community needed a new story. And we're still in that window. We have to be able to help people imagine what is the future? And I think that that's the hardest work for us as cultural workers, is to both hold the present and to be able to usher in a kind of vision.

LAURA FLANDERS: Xiuhtezcatl, I want to come to you on that. We're gonna play a couple of clips of your work and it, to me, grapples a lot with the past, present, future, the relationship of yourself to your history. You talk about trauma as deep as the love, you talk about everything changes, everything dies, being a product of history yourself, but claiming your existence right here right now.

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ: ♪ Reach out and take my hand ♪ ♪ Open up your eyes ♪ ♪ Imma show you who I am ♪ ♪ Escucha mi amor, tengo mucho que contar ♪ ♪ Medio complicado mi pasado tan real ♪ ♪ Una historia de amor, quien sabe que será ♪ ♪ Que será? Espejo del cielo, me lo dieron sin pensar ♪ ♪ Como mis ancestros elders read it in the stars ♪ ♪ Boy to a man ♪ ♪ I'm the product of a border in the sand ♪ ♪ I been wide awake ♪ ♪ I'm sick of the cold ♪ ♪ I'm acting okay when I'm really afraid ♪ ♪ Don't want them to know ♪ ♪ Mi gente trynna get by ♪ ♪ How we go live right ♪ ♪ We didn't come here for free ♪ ♪ We didn't come here for free, nah ♪ ♪ I been wide awake ♪ ♪ I'm sick of the cold ♪ ♪ I'm acting okay when I'm really afraid ♪ ♪ Don't want them to know ♪ ♪ Mi gente trynna get by ♪ ♪ How we go live right ♪ ♪ We didn't come here for free, nah ♪ ♪ We still paying the price ♪ ♪ Paying the price ♪ ♪ Born alone, die alone ♪ ♪ Pray she be my in-between ♪ ♪ The inconsistencies of how I feel rippin at the seams ♪ ♪ This country wasn't made for me ♪ ♪ They eat the fruit my people pick ♪ ♪ Grown on stolen soil flowin' ♪ ♪ Oil broken, hands that sip the water ♪ ♪ The trauma run as deep as the love ♪ ♪ The culture kept alive ♪ ♪ A secret from us ♪ ♪ It's as red as the road I walk ♪ ♪ It's all that I know ♪ ♪ It's as deep as the pain that my family hold ♪ ♪ I been wide awake ♪ ♪ I'm sick of the cold ♪ ♪ I'm acting okay when I'm really afraid ♪ ♪ Don't want them to know ♪ ♪ Mi gente trynna get by ♪ ♪ How we go live right ♪ ♪ We didn't come here for free, nah ♪ ♪ We still paying the price ♪ ♪ Paying the price ♪ ♪ Mirame mirame mirame mirame mira ♪ ♪ Yo nací con las fronteras dentro mi venas no me esperas no ♪ ♪ Mirame mirame ya amanece amanece yeh, yuh ♪ ♪ We still paying the price ♪ ♪ Paying the price ♪ ♪ Paying the price ♪ ♪ We still paying the price ♪ ♪ We still paying the price ♪

LAURA FLANDERS: You are a long-time activist going back, I think to the age of six, you're now just entering your 20s. Seems to me, you could have been a journalist, you could have been a teacher, you are all of those things in a sense. Why do you choose the medium that you choose?

And what do you mean when, Favianna talks about mark making, you call yourself a code switcher.

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ: As a young person, beginning to understand and step into the world of hip hop as a very vibrant culture. It was really beautiful for me to look at other artists who were using this platform to speak about revolution, to speak about class struggle, and to speak about how, just to give a voice to our people and to our communities. And really I had the privilege as a young kid growing up, in Boulder, Colorado, which was a very white community to sit with, like OGs in my community and some of the local carriers of knowledge in the hip hop culture and in the hip hop world. To really listen and understand the history of hip hop culture and where it comes from, and why it is continued to be a relevant force in the world. It is one of the most powerful cultural elements I think in reaching and connecting the world. It is one of the United States' greatest exports. If you look at how it has influenced the entire planet as a music culture. And so I think for me, diving into that culture and that history and also understanding the opportunity to tell new stories within that that are true to my identity in what I've been experiencing and what I've gone through. It's a space and it opens up a space for dialogue in a different way. Art in itself, I think can be either for a capital gain or for revolutions. And I think it's important to acknowledge how significant it is in pushing the envelope culturally on the conversations we have and how we view these different issues.

LAURA FLANDERS: Favianna, you talk about artists marshaling their superpowers to help people imagine and create, think through that a little bit for people who are watching who maybe think of art as art on the wall or a movie they go to on a, well, when they could go to movies, how does art do that work that you and everybody on this panel is talking about?

FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ: Art shows us what's possible. It opens up our imagination and our imagination is very important because when we're able to experience something in the future that doesn't yet exist, it gives us a marker of where to go, not to mention that as human beings, we've been held together through story, throughout millennia, it is actually what shapes us. Stories and narratives shape societies. And we live under a story today. We live under a story of domination and colonialism, but it wasn't always that way, and it's not about new stories. It's actually returning to our ancestral stories, returning to the stories of how we relate to each other, to the natural world, to all creatures on earth, the most powerful movements throughout the world have been important because of the work of artists, whether it's like Víctor Jara or the Mexican muralists.

LAURA FLANDERS: Víctor Jara, victim of the Chilean coup under Pinochet.

FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ: He was so dangerous that when they killed him, they cut off his hands, a guitarist which to this day, people sing his music. The thing about also our work is that it transcends time and it lives beyond us. And it is truly a way for us to inspire and help people feel. In the colonial mindset it's all about our mind, but in reality, as human beings, it's about

what we feel in our bodies, the experiences, right? How we move. So I think the work of artists is not just a nicety, it's a necessity, it's actually core to our survival. And if it wasn't that way, you would not have white supremacy in the cultural sector. The cultural sector, film, television, music, performance, dance, publishing, every single art form is dominated by white men. And so culture is not neutral. Culture is a battleground.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is there a piece you're working on now you wanna talk to us about?

FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ: For me, the power of plant medicine and really what we know and what people refer to as psychedelics, is that it's an accelerated way for us to heal from trauma. It's no surprise that we are at a time when these medicines are being legalized, but we also of course face the same thing we did with cannabis, which is that you have white people hoarding the benefits of it. What I'm working on is I am writing a script about how women of color, a story about how people of color are using the medicine to heal. I feel that it's time to disrupt this wall of whiteness.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right, coming to you, Aja. As I understand it, you are creating a new piece to replace the vagina logs in the V-Day movement. And you're also looking for submissions. Can you talk about that?

AJA MONET: So Voices is a new interdisciplinary, performance arts project and campaign that's grounded in black women's stories, which is by V-Day, and V-Day is an organization that started after the Vagina Monologues over 20 years ago. And this piece is, we're creating is to unify the vision of ending violence against women, CIS women, trans women, and non-binary people across the African continent and the African diaspora. The real heart of this project is recognizing that in this time, we must endeavor to understand, to listen, to build a movement on care. The project is called Voices. So we're shifting our focus from our vaginas to our voices as women. And thinking about that as a political decision in solidarity with people who identify as women across the globe. To make sure that women in the West who are often being heard a lot more than not, right? Are listening to women on the continent. There's a huge effort to use this piece to organize and also to understand that poetry is a divination practice. We're stepping into the shamanistic understanding of what a story can do, how it can transform, not just in the hearing, but in the telling. And what does it mean for us to actually be in that exchange of listening as a form of speaking. But I think it's also about the discipline and the work and the labor it takes to sit down and dedicate to the creation and the creativity of one's imagination. That is a labor. And so we're also trying to compensate women who take that time to tell their stories.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's beautiful. You're telling a story that reflects what I resonate a lot with, 'cause I think about journalism, it's not one person going out and doing X, it's about an ecosystem, a building of relationships and a continuing telling of stories. One of the people that we talk to in preparation for this conversation is adrienne maree brown who has been doing that

conjuring and healing and divining work for many years. From her most recent work, she read a portion for us recently. The book's called, "We Will Not Cancel Us." The full interview is at our website, but she begins by talking about how we are a nation not divided, but torn, a nation in which we must decide to choose to push towards life. Here's adrienne maree brown.

ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN: We are a nation, not just diverse or divided, but torn, pulled towards life and pulled towards death. As I have watched the world respond to the pandemic, the borders between nations shift meaning in my mind. I can see which countries choose life and which don't, which countries have a majority life oriented citizenship, and which countries and regions elect leaders who they believe will care for them, which countries pivot at the highest governmental level to protect their people, to guide their people, to protect themselves, places with a variety of economies and exposure have found ways to move towards life. And I have a footnote here that feels important, which is, "I'm aware that anti-abortion efforts that long staked a claim on being pro-life. I want to reclaim the language of choosing and orienting towards life for a much broader framework of choices and behaviors that align with longterm human existence. I do not think we should surrender language to those who misuse and denigrate the sacred spell inside of words." End of footnote. I wonder about the movements in those other countries, what it might feel like to live and organize in a place that truly orients towards life.

LAURA FLANDERS: adrienne, there says that we tend to submit to the shrinking of our words, that the magic of our words. We also tend to submit to the shrinking of our expectations of our government, of one another, perhaps, and of our futures. If you were not to submit to shrinking of your expectations of this period, this administration, our movements in this time, your fellow artists, how would you articulate those expectations, which in my heart verge on demands?

AJA MONET: I don't have high expectations for the government, but I do believe in the people. And I believe in the power of the people to instigate and agitate until what we want and need to happen happens. And yeah, I'm excited, I'm really excited about this time. I think it's gonna get worse before it gets better.

LAURA FLANDERS: I hear it, X, to you. We often now end this program by asking you, what do you think is the story the future will tell of this moment? We've got about three minutes left, what's the story you think will play out in this time?

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ: I think if this year showed us anything, is that what becomes politically possible is dictated and shaped by social movements and by organizers and by people's will to stand together. We saw so many strides in indigenous liberation movements that were possible because of black organizers and because the movement for black lives and this entire conversation around white supremacy, that for me, really showed us how connected our liberation is. And I hope, and I dream that this moment can be remembered as a time where our movements converged. The obstacles are absolutely enormous and I think it will take all of us organizing together and combining our power in order to shape and shift the future. So I think

this can be like a crossroads in a lot of ways. And I think it's not just in our heads and it's not just in our dreams because we saw that happen this year, the calls for police abolition and defunding the police, that was not only seen as politically impossible, not so recently, but culturally, like unthinkable. And now coming to this crossroads where culturally, we are ready to have these conversations of not just a world without these violent systems, but an alternative that is more beautiful, that is more equitable, that actually invests in our people, in our communities, in our wellbeing, that is separate from these violence systems that exists beyond that.

LAURA FLANDERS: To you in Panther Headquarters of Oakland, Favianna, last words.

FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ: Yes, well, I just wanna make sure that we don't allow white supremacy to steal our joy. Let's remember that the victory we saw in places like Arizona and Georgia is all a reflection of the growing power of our movements, of our cultural workers, and that our long-term vision and how we build power is panning out right now. We are securing real wins that are gonna have a real material consequence for our communities. So I am very much trusting and excited about the leadership of women of color, bold, black, brown, Muslim women who are going to help us usher in a different kind of democracy.

LAURA FLANDERS: Favianna, Aja, and Xiuhtezcatl, thank you so much all three of you for being with us on the Laura Flanders Show. We will include more links to your work at our website. Thank you so much.

FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ: Appreciate you all.

LAURA FLANDERS: So 2020, it was a kind of unimaginable year. There were certain things about it that we could have predicted, but in lots of ways, it surprised us. I know for myself, I started out the year doing this show in a fancy studio under someone else's lights, all dolled up talking to my guests face to face. I ended it a few months back in a small cabin, in Upstate New York, sort of jerry rigged to do a TV show, talking to people via internet link in little boxes on a platform called Zoom. At its worst, it was a year of disconnection, alienation, loneliness, lack of contact, and worse, if you didn't have good access or no access to the internet at all. At its best though, the year of our first experience with the COVID pandemic was a year of lots of prods to be curious. I was reminded of the artist, Anna Deavere Smith who calls acting an act of empathic imagination. "Empathic imagination is a muscle we have to exercise," she says, "imagining ourselves into one another's realities". It's a muscle we have to exercise more it seems these days with so much in flux. What if the reality is, we can never know what the future brings? What if the future isn't what we know, but what we imagine. There's another artist, the novelist, A.M. Homes once said to me, "What if the future isn't what we know, but what we imagine?" Let's imagine, let's stay curious. Let's thank artists for their help. I'm Laura, till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. Thanks for joining us.

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