

BLACK MATTERS in cooperation with Octavio Zaya

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Some things and some words can carry meanings that have larger lives of their own, regardless of the meanings that we ordinarily ascribe to them. But unless we are parts of these things—such as social bodies or movements—or use those words in a historically specific way, we cannot pretend that we have the authority to speak in their names, in the case of things, nor can we deny their intrinsic history, in the case of words. The exhibition *Black Matters* originates in this understanding, and follows a direction that does not try to approach the subject in a vacuum, beyond history, nor does it try to speak for the subject.

The circumstances under which the exhibition has been constructed began with the current and pervasive interest that African and African-American artists, and other artists of African descent, have been garnering in Europe, particularly through mainstream museums and gallery exhibitions, biennials, prestigious prizes, specialized coverage, and collectors. This positive reception from providers and consumers of contemporary culture contrasts sharply with the increasingly restrictive European policies toward African immigrants. It has also been used opportunistically and cynically, particularly by those who deny the widespread and expanding racism within Fortress Europe.

In addressing these issues, *Black Matters* could be unpacked from the two different angles, based on the ambiguity in meaning of the title as a phrase. If we put aside the references that this phrase might call to mind in relation to so-called dark matter in astrophysics—an unidentified type of matter distinct from dark energy, baryonic matter, and neutrinos—*Black Matters* acknowledges, on the one hand, those matters that are of interest to Black people in general and artists in particular, matters which happen to be the same kinds of things, issues, and experiences that matter to all kinds of races and people, with the exceptions of the matter of race itself, which is mostly ignored in our cultural discourse, and that of the Black experience, usually portrayed as insignificant or unworthy of widespread attention. The exhibition,

in this context, tries to cover the diversity of issues, interests, and media that contemporary African and African-American artists involve in their production and practices.

On the other hand, *Black Matters* is concerned with issues similar to those that Toni Morrison covers in her book of the same name: the Eurocentric nature of our culture—despite the four-hundred-year presence of first Africans and then African-Americans, British-Americans, Black-Caribbeans, etc., in the midst of Western societies; the negligible representation of Black artists and writers within the canon; the prevalent ignorance of Black experience, and the treatment of Africans and people of African descent in a society that continues to ignore matters of race and racial discourse. In this regard, it is important to call attention to the relation of the exhibition's title to the Black Lives Matter movement, because of how the movement's name implies, in a context of evidence, that Black lives far too often are regarded as if they do not matter, a context typified in the US by the brutalizing and killing of Black people at the hands of the police and the indifference of society in general and the criminal justice system in particular.

The exhibition's title thus yokes these two different senses together: the matters of interest to Black people—*Black Matters*—and the fact that Blackness still matters—that we are far from having entered a “post-racial” social condition. Although these two senses are distinct, they complement each other: the matters important to Black artists must matter to us all, as our multiple subjectivities share a common space of art.

Octavio Zaya

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