

Carrie Mae Weems

People in Conditions

10.09.–29.10.2022

PV: 09.09.2022, 6–9pm

Carrie Mae Weems is one of the most influential American artists working today. Over a career spanning more than four decades, she has created a complex body of multi-media work that grapples with the social and political issues of our times. Her art reflects critically on discourses of post- and neo-colonialism, identity, gender, class and systemic dependencies of relations of power.

The exhibition *People in Conditions* at Galerie Barbara Thumm brings together narratives local and global, past and future, individual and collective, all unified by Weems' performative style. Visitors can explore the full spectrum of her rich and multilayered oeuvre, with works on display spanning from the earliest stages of Weems' career right up to the present day. Themes include the colonialist history of Western culture, the role of Black artists in this history and the hegemonic structures of social and institutional practices of representation.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is the eponymous *People in Conditions*, Weems' latest work, which is being shown in public for the first time at Galerie Barbara Thumm. The work builds on Weems' 2021 video installation *Cyclorama – Conditions: A Video in 7 Parts*, which she produced for the exhibition *The Shape of Things* at New York's Park Avenue Armory. The blue-tinted photographs show choreographers and performers standing in rain and snow, including Gabri Christa, Okwui Okpokwasili and Vinson Frealey. By having the models face the viewer head on, Weems reveals these artistic and cultural creators in their unadorned being and beauty, and confronts us with the realities of hope and violence that co-exist today. At the heart of the work is the question of how we can measure the value of a life. As Weems puts it, 'When you think about the vastness of the universe in which we dwell, we are dust in the wind – and yet we are here.'

The exhibition brings *People in Conditions* into conversation with other of Weems' key works, some of which she produced during stays in Berlin. These works link the history of the German capital to global historical discourses about those who practise violence and those who resist it.

Weems completed the video and photography project *Holocaust Memorial* during a 2007 visit to Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which was designed by Peter Eisenman and had been opened just two years earlier. Capturing the memorial's austere, architectonic structure, the three photographs shown in the exhibition document Weems' alter ego performing in front of a camera, with no audience present. The figure, who is shot from a rigid central perspective, appears and

disappears between the repetitively arranged columns. Their monotonous arrangement conveys the enormity of the Nazis' crime against humanity. Through her interaction with the space, in which her figure constantly oscillates between presence and absence, Weems explores the memorial's potential as a place of remembrance and reminds us of our global society's fragile equilibrium. She uses her body to re-energise debates about racism and discrimination, bringing them into the present and reminding us of the need to continuously engage with these issues.

One year earlier (2006), Weems photographed Berlin's Pergamon Museum for her *Museum Series*. Pergamon Museum once again features Weems' alter ego, her back turned to the camera as she stares at the museum. The expansive composition, in which both figure and museum are clearly visible, draws the viewer themselves into the scene and makes their gaze an extension of the figure's observing stance. A balustrade separates Weems' alter ego from the museum. This spatial divide symbolises the exclusion of Black artists from contemporary public museums, and so from the discourse of European art history. The unequal relationship between Black artists and cultural institutions is powerfully visualised by the proportions of the image, in which Weems' body is dwarfed by the monumental scale of the ornate museum building. At the same time, the photographed body signifies a resistance, showing the presence and persistence of Black artists who have defended their right to visibility in the face of institutional exclusion and barriers.

In *Someone to Watch Over Me* (2008), four Black women are standing in a garden facing each other. They all have white angel wings on their backs. Though this photograph was not taken in Berlin, it still has a connection to Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*, in which angels are unable to influence human history but do offer us the consolation that we can control our own destiny. *Someone to Watch Over Me* is from Weems' series *Constructing History*, which she produced with students of Savannah College of Art and Design and members of other local communities in Atlanta. The project explores pivotal moments of political violence from history by recreating and reinterpreting their iconic images and visual language. The photographs reveal human history to be a history of violence, but they also show that reappropriating and reflecting on iconic moments of violence and grief can offer potential for social change.

The exhibition starts and ends with a wall-filling photograph that Weems took in Harlem, New York, in 1978. Harlem was a major centre of African American politics,

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scholarship and art. It was also an important locale for the US jazz scene, which has been a longstanding influence on Weems' artistic work. But 1970s Harlem was also afflicted by violence and crime, which was damaging to community life and brought stigma to the predominantly Black local residents. The photograph comes from the earliest days of Weems' career and reflects her desire to capture all aspects of the Black life and culture around her. The photograph documents both ongoing social and cultural developments and possibilities for the future.

Text: Dr. Sophie-Charlotte Opitz

About the artist

Carrie Mae Weems (born 1953 in Portland, USA) is one of the most influential American artists working today. In a career spanning more than four decades, she has produced a complex body of work that straddles the divide between photography, film, performance and installation art, utilising a combination of images, text, fabric, audio and video and drawing on pop culture, fashion and various genres of music. Usually conceived as series, Weems' works address the pressing issues of our time and analyse the complex social, cultural and historical relationships of our global society, with a particular focus on hegemonic power structures rooted in racialised violence, poverty and sexism. Through her work, she studies the qualities of visual cultures and critically interrogates the role and influence of media in constructing race, class and gender. At the same time, she explores ways that media can contribute to self-empowerment by strengthening personal identity and collective participation in public discourse. Weems has featured in many solo and group exhibitions worldwide, including at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, the Frist Center for Visual Art, Nashville, and the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville. In April 2022, her largest solo exhibition in Germany to date opened at the WKV in Stuttgart. She has been awarded numerous prizes, grants and fellowships, most recently the 2021 Artes Mundi Prize and a residency at the Park Avenue Armory. Weems' works can be found in public and private collections throughout the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Tate Modern, London, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Winterthur, Ludwig Museum, Cologne, Pinault Collection, Paris und Sammlung Folkwang, Essen.