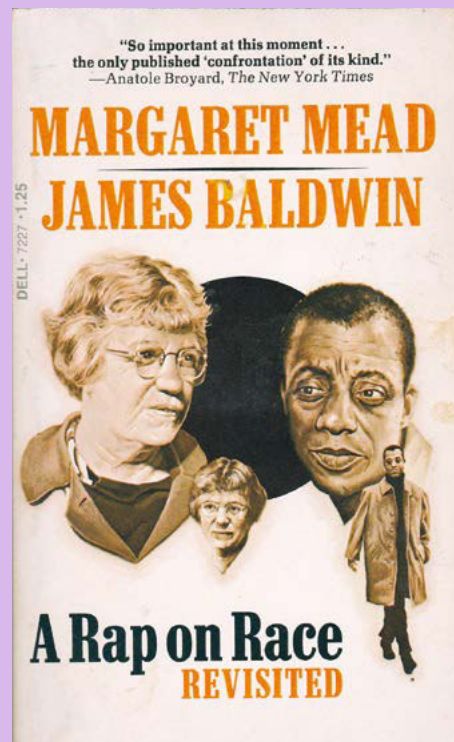


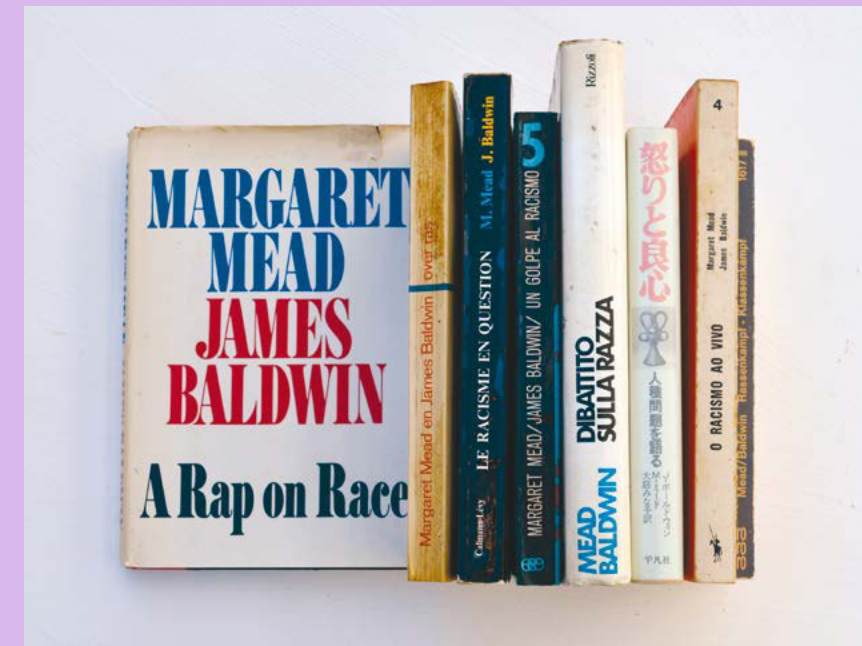
A Rap on Race Revisited

Petra Ponte
Curator in Residence, 2016



Margaret Mead, James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*, 1971, bookcover, edited by Petra Ponte, 2016

Petra Ponte is a curator, cultural producer and researcher based in Amsterdam. She studied Theatre Studies and Contemporary Art History at the University of Amsterdam. Currently she is working on a research project "Tentoonstelling Indonesië, Suriname, Nederlandse Antillen" for which she has been awarded a Deviant Practice research grant from the Van Abbemuseum.



Margaret Mead, James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race Revisited*, 1971, in various languages

Katja Stecher: During your stay in Vienna you worked on the project *A Rap on Race Revisited*; a three-part program built around the re/enactment of the 1970s conversation between the black writer and social critic **James Baldwin** and the white anthropologist and longtime museum curator **Margaret Mead**. Could you briefly explain why this dialog taking place more than four decades ago is still relevant from today's point of view?

Petra Ponte: What makes this conversation so powerful, and in my view worth reciting, is that Baldwin and Mead could in a sense be seen and heard, perhaps in spite of themselves, as "the personae, the media, through which the uncontrollable (because sub-conscious) psycho-intellectual forces that exist within a racially plural society speak"¹ as **Edward Kamau Brathwaite** has aptly pointed out. And these forces did not depart in the past decades and hence the necessity to discuss them is all but over. The United States of America, Austria and the Netherlands, are all multicultural societies where easy talk of tolerance and integration

¹ Edward Brathwaite, "Race and the Divided Self," in *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1974), 129. [Rpt. Edward Brathwaite, "Race and the Divided Self," in *Black World*, Vol. 21, No. 9 (1972), 54-68.]

² Maria Popova, "A Rap on Race: Margaret Mead and James Baldwin's Rare Conversation on Forgiveness and the Difference Between Guilt and Responsibility," in *Brainpickings*, 19 March 2015, www.brainpickings.org/tag/a-rap-on-race (accessed September 10, 2017).

is meaningless, but an in-depth discussion about interlocking systems of domination that define our reality, and white privilege in particular, is as urgently needed as it appears to be complex. As **Maria Popova** underlined in 2015 "the ideas with which these two remarkable minds tussled in 1970 emerge, unsolved and unresolved, to haunt and taunt us four decades later with urgency that can no longer be evaded or denied."² Through the verbatim live recitation of the conversation piece I aim to work and think through how their words voiced on August 26 and August 27, 1970 in the United States of America resonate now. I was curious to find out what frictions come into play, what re/actions and unscripted conversations, feelings, thoughts and disputes were dragged out along with the re-liveness.

Katja Stecher: For the performative dialogical reading sessions, you invited human rights activist and all-round artist **Patrick Bongola** and choreographer and performer **Krööt Juurak**. It took place in three parts at *das weisse haus* following the original course of the conversation, lasting



Krööt Juurak reading *A Rap on Race*, performative dialogical reading, das weisse haus, Hegelgasse 14, Vienna, 2016

several hours: It started on Monday, July 18 at 6 pm, continued the next day at noon and the final session took place that night. You also invited activists, artists, cultural producers, scholars and anyone interested to partake in the program with a text, a performance, or any other form of un/scripted re-action. Has it been difficult for you as a curator based in Amsterdam and visiting Vienna for the first time, to reach out to a potential audience?

Petra Ponte: For me it was of great importance that the project would have local resonance, so I have done my utmost best to get to know the cultural landscape of Vienna. In June, I had the chance to attend a lot of inspiring programs presenting decolonial thinking and practice.³ And I was lucky to have been invited by **Marina Gržinić** and Assistant Professor **Muzaffer Hasaltay** from the PCAP study program at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna to give a guest lecture about my practice, and *A Rap on Race Revisited* in particular. Next to this, I invited people to the beautiful courtyard of my temporary home in Vienna for close reading sessions and conversations in a more intimate setting.

³ (COUNTER)TROPICAL Season Ending at Tanzquartier Wien, Nikita Dhawan's lecture Can Non-Europeans Theorize? Transnational Literacy and Planetary Ethics in a Global Age in the frame of the lecture series on transculturality at the University of Music and Performing Arts, and the presentations by Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur, Yuderky Espinosa Miñoso, Tatiana Nascimento, Gonzaga Lorde and Mãe Beth de Oxum at the Academy of Fine Arts, specifically the PCAP study program, as part of Njideka Stephanie Iroh and Marissa Lobo's project Bodies of Knowledge – Multiplying Marginalized Subjectivities of Utopia through Art and Storytelling.

Katja Stecher: In my view, your concept was quite challenging, not only for the participants but also for you as a curator, to the extent that you were depending on the audience and could not "organize" the outcome. Would you agree that these two aspects maintain a moment of failure? And what is your personal review from today's point of view?

Petra Ponte: Perhaps it did have a potential of failure, mostly because I was depending on people to show up and be present. I had hoped that the conversation would spark various understandings and it did. What is important to me is that it became a space of genuine listening, of listening affectively, that is, of acknowledging opinions, feelings and experiences that could well be different from your own.

Katja Stecher: Your aim to create a space where dissent or antagonism is possible or wanted reminds me of **Oliver Marchart's** article "The Curatorial Function – Organizing the Ex/Position," in which he points out, that the curatorial function con-



Patrick Bongola reading *A Rap on Race*, das weisse haus, Hegelgasse 14, Vienna, 2016

sists of the organization of a public sphere, and therefore of the organization of a conflict or antagonism: "But (...) for antagonism in the strict sense is something that cannot be 'organized' at all. The antagonism that ultimately generates a public sphere can break out anywhere at any time, but it cannot simply be organized."⁴ Do you see a parallel in his analysis to your project?

Petra Ponte: Perhaps you could say that I was aiming to create a space with the possibility of difference and/or differing indeed. In order to create this space or situation I "only" suggested a beginning and did not seek to control where this could take us. What appealed to me when reading Marchart's article, is his understanding of a public sphere as emerging from "the breakdown of the consensus that is otherwise always silently presumed" on the one hand, and interpreting the practice of exposition, quoting **Jérôme Sans**, as "a mutual commitment on the part of all those participating in it."⁵ This appears to relate to the ideas of creating polemical spaces for practices of equality in **Jacques Rancière's** thinking –

⁴ Oliver Marchart, "The Curatorial Function – Organizing the Ex/Position," trans. Steven Lindberg, in *Oncurating.org*, *Curating Critique*, no. 9 (2011), 43–46.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Monika Szewczyk, "Art of Conversation, Part I," in *e-flux journal*, no 3, (2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/03/68546/art-of-conversation-part-i/> (accessed September 10, 2017).

⁷ Ibid.

or at least my understanding thereof – and this certainly inspires me. Another important position for me in conceptualizing this particular program has been **Monika Szewczyk**, more specifically her take on the art of conversation. In an article with that title she writes, with **Maurice Blanchot**, that conversation "even in its most coherent form must 'always fragment itself by changing protagonists' with an 'interruption for the sake of understanding, understanding in order to speak."⁶ It is in this interrupting, the passing from one to the other that confirmations, developments and contradictions can take shape. Consequently, having a conversation with someone means "admitting them into the field where worlds are constructed. And this ultimately runs the risk of redefining not only the 'other,' but 'us' as well."⁷

The interview took place in June 2016 and was edited in August 2017.