

# FORT GANSEVOORT

SPR 20 - SPIRIT



## A CONVERSATION

VANESSA GERMAN



In fall 2019, Pittsburgh- based multi-disciplinary artist Vanessa German opened a solo exhibition *TRAMPOLINE: Resilience & Black Body & Soul* at Fort Gansevoort Gallery. German’s powerful work resonates with undefinable wisdom, history, and spiritual weight. Her altars and power figures are energetically charged. They animate themselves and talk to you in a drum-talk, soul-opening kind of way. Constellations of seemingly random objects

combine to call attention to the majesty of the Black experience, reminding you of your accessibility to freedom, teasing you to release your power, and daring you to use your innate tools to do so.

German is layered. Her poetry and performance pieces are even more resonant. Her practice is a booming, melodious, moving call-and-response experience that conjures an ancient ancestral energy. German moves with an unseen tribe and is here work on their behalf. Through the opening and closing of portals to the soul, she is deeply engaged in the practice of spiritual activism.

We had the privilege of getting up close and personal with German to talk about freedom, creativity, and what she describes as “deep adventure.” The conversation was a journey with a hide-and-go-seek quality to it. We hope you enjoy a few excerpts from this dynamic exchange.

### On Childhood

YC: How old were you when you understood the idea of shifting time through words?

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**VG:** I was 6 or 7. I only know that because of the poems I memorized at the time. I realized combinations of words could take you to other places and recognized the ability to travel was available to you in music and in drawing. These tools are readily available to your soul; you can always access them.

There are just a lot of things that distract you from that truth, which can be very catastrophic. There is a lot of distraction in the world that we created to live in. Suffering and cruelty are distracting. I remember having spiritual experiences around the value of life and death. Death was something I became fascinated with as a kid because it can happen so suddenly and traumatically. I then recognized **living as a state of ecstatic euphoria**. I knew then that I would be okay. I had euphoric moments as a kid, and early on knew sheer, utter, luminous rightness was always available.

I was also obsessed with understanding how human beings could be so cruel. I truly didn't understand why people were that way and recognized it as **electric stupidity**. I still think that. One must protect themselves since it won't ever stop. Meanness is necessary to a certain kind of suffering and is an engine of living. Protecting yourself from it can be distracting, but it is necessary.

## On Information

**YC:** What are you calling forth? I feel as though you are calling your ancestors and giving voice to ancestral power. Are you following a particular religious system? Yoruba? What do you mean when you say "500 years of information in my bone marrow?" Is that an intuitive statement or are you reading certain works?

**VG:** I don't know a lot about Yoruba; I don't necessarily read about things like that. I can feel with precise clarity. Maybe I know about it in a language that isn't symbolic. I know about it in my soul in a way that isn't written. There are things before the alphabet or Yoruba.

I have always been interested in myself and what's inside of me in a world where Black women have been shape-shifted to be givers and vessels and are asked to be interested in things and people other than themselves. **I have been deeply, selfishly, lovingly, obsessively, possessively, creatively interested in my soul and the ingredients that are contained in this living that I have now.** I am interested in how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly and completely consumes itself, but at the same time it still has to be what it was before. I am interested in hybrid creaturality.

I am also interested in that which animates the body....that thing which is an ingredient of light.... that is with the body and was before the body. I am concerned with opening up my soul through instinct and the

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innate movement of being through materials. I am about to do this by creating and by removing as much distraction as possible. As you can see, I am not doing classical research. I gather feeling information and soul information from the world. I am in communication with my ancestors through the many things that I feel and do. Saying I trust my instincts is stupid. It is like saying I trust gravity. It is a force. It is as available as light is. It isn't available to describe in this language, but it is available in and from the land.

This space [meaning earth] in which we've projected ourselves to be whole is wildly incomplete.

I am in contact with places and people of wisdom and often have to pull back from the habitual nature of being human in this land. Only then can I see what I am supposed to be learning from the experiences I am having. I can see it clearly without the fear from my ego.

## On Freedom

**YC:** How would you describe freedom?

**VG:** To be unshackled from fear. To be unshackled from the concrete rigidity, shakiness, and horror of holding fear in your lungs and body. Freedom is about not living a majority fearful existence. It's a capacity to adventure into any thought, moment, idea, or feeling. To adventure into the living body, the imaginative body, into deep curiosity, into leaps of imagination, it is the **space of wildness**, and easiness of being, and the **gratitude of is-ness**.

Deep freedom is a place where I can channel a release of the constraint on my ancestor's spirits. I can become a channel. It is not just a space of release or relief; it is another space of existence. To live inside of the **holy knowing** with the understanding that there are doorways and that certain things can move through them - even as a human. This is the idea of adventuring in, and through and, around curiosity. We don't have anywhere near the adequate language for living in freedom, especially within American culture. **There are many deeply tranced lies around freedom.**

We pretend very well. There is great great great pretending.

This work is about accessing and igniting the power of freedom. Even old religious writing talks about how little faith is required to be powerful. We exist in a centrifuge of pretending; there is dynamic pretending happening. The fact is that the smallest movement toward dynamic freedom has mighty resonances because freedom loves you and needs you. Freedom needs you because it wants to be free.

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There is a way to adventure into your soul that does not require a map or a compass because it is the space of original trust, a **languageless faith**. The ice cube is dissolving into water.

I am trying to find out if I am strong enough - in the parts of myself that are very young - to move away from painful and glittery distraction. The clearest way I am able to do that is by making things.

## On Blue

**YC:** Can we talk about blue?

**VG:** Do you even know what blue is?

**YC:** Wait. What? I can tell you what blue means to me but don't play games with me Vanessa! (laughter). Blue means protection and infinite possibility and peace. It calls me. What does blue mean to you and how do you activate it?

**VG:** I'll try to say it in the clearest way I can. Blue for me is its own language. It is not just a frequency but a channel. You can ask it to take you some place. Blue is a vehicle. There are ways that people live inside blue - through air and through water. Blue is the frequency of creativity.

The color blue was created and crafted on purpose and with deep purpose. **They** knew we were going to need the color blue. Your brain processing the color blue can open up other channels. Blue is really special. It is a crafted place. To be able to be in conversation with it, to be in deep utility with it - with the wholeness of blue - is a gift.

People feel deeply around the color blue.

The natural ingredients of being are present in the holy wonder and deep luminosity of being, and blue is the gift of that.

You can apply it like machinery.

If one interacts with it they will recognize the great gift of it, it will begin to reveal its wholeness to you.

It is a place of revelation.

If I am using blue in my work, I am using it in ritual or I am using it on land in relation to suffering, to blood and bone, and to the quakes of constant memory. I am using it in the way that 'all time' is happening (a

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collapsing of time), in the way that a relentless suffering can shake and quake time, and in the way that a constrained spirit held in the earth can be released. If I am working on land, **I am ask blue to do the work that no language can do.** I ask blue to be present for the truth and the suffering. I am asking it to stop the breeding of cruelty.

The ricochet of cruelty can limit our ability to ingest wholeness and light and limit the power of being, making, and experiencing and loving. There are people among us that have responsibility to take some of the cruelty out of our frequency so we can collectively have expansion. If I am using blue in my pieces, it is doing work we can process but cannot articulate. The gift of blue is doing the work of healing.

**Blue is a gift with deep dimensional utility.**

We as humans have lost information and there is a gift in revealing, retrieving, and lifting the veil. If you can find a blue that is right for you, it is always a gift and it can do that work. It is a gift that wants to be joy. **Blue is a holy generosity that does not have edges.** It is not in competition. It is a radical gift. You can love through the color blue.

**I am using blue to do the work that has no alphabet to contain it.**

**Love loves and love loves loving.**

**I am in relationship to the wild wild gift that is blue.**

**Holiness is a gift.**

**They gave us a gift.**

**YC: They?**

**VC: They. Yes. They.**

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POET, PERFORMER, PHOTOGRAPHER, AND SCULPTOR VANESSA GERMAN CREATES WORKS THAT EXPLORE THE POWER OF TRANSFORMATION AND HEALING. SHE SCOURS HER PITTSBURGH NEIGHBORHOOD SEARCHING FOR OBJECTS TO INCORPORATE INTO HER ART. "I SURRENDER MYSELF TO THE OBJECTS THAT CALL UP TO ME," SHE HAS SAID. HER INTRICATE MIXED-MEDIA SCULPTURES COMBINE DOLL PARTS, ANTIQUE TINS, COWRIE SHELLS, HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS, AND AFRICAN BEADS. WITH THESE THREE-DIMENSIONAL COLLAGES GERMAN RECLAIMS OBJECTS AND WORDS THAT SYMBOLIZE THE OPPRESSION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS FOR GENERATIONS, CREATING SERENE, IF SURREAL, FIGURES THAT CALL TO MIND RELIGIOUS ICONS, CONGOLESE MINKISI SCULPTURE, FOLK ART TRADITIONS, AND THE WORK OF BETYE SAAR AND FRED WILSON.