

FRIEZE

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For Precious Okoyomon, Everything is a Nonstop Poem

The artist speaks to Hans Ulrich Obrist about poetry, plants and planning for a precarious future



Hans Ulrich Obrist You told me that, as a child, you would write poems then bury them in the ground, thinking they would grow into a garden.

Precious Okoyomon When I was a kid, my mum always told me that, if I put my words in the ground, they would grow, and I believed her. And, in some ways, they did grow, because now I make my gardens for my work. It's these small, everyday rituals that lead us to what we imagine. For me, it's literally writing down my fears. I still bury my poems in the ground, and I believe I'm planting actual seeds. Everything disintegrates in the earth, and then the earth turns my words into everything that flows through the world, which is love. The ritual of how to return to the universal pulse of love is probably the only thing that saves me daily.

HUO Can you talk a little bit about the meaning of the kudzu plant in your work?

PO I see it as hand-in-hand with how the ecological system of the US relates to Blackness itself. Kudzu was imported from east Asia in the 1930s and used by farmers throughout the southern US to prevent soil erosion. Now, it's indispensable to the region and we can't imagine taking kudzu away – which is so powerful, because it's also extremely criminalized. We had such trouble shipping it to New York because of regulations. Western culture just doesn't understand kudzu and doesn't know how to control it, so it is automatically thought of as invasive. I don't believe in invasive plants. I just believe that we need to learn how to work with the things around us.



'Earthseed', 2020, exhibition views, Museum Für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. Courtesy: the artist, Museum Für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, and Quinn Harrelson, Miami; photograph: Axel Schneider

HUO In a 2020 interview with *Sierra* magazine, the poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs said we now have the opportunity as a species ‘to unlearn and relearn our patterns of thinking and storytelling in a way that allows us to be in communion with our environment’, as opposed to dominating it.

PO We’re on that precipice. I don’t want to be a single being: I never consented to that. I’m entangled with every single living thing around me.

HUO I want to ask about the title of your work at Performance Space New York, *Fragmented Body Perceptions as Higher Vibration Frequencies to God* [2021].

PO The title started from my poem ‘Weather Report’, as most of my things do, because everything is an endless poem.

HUO Let’s talk about poetry and love.

PO Poetry translates the universal pulse, which is love. The only thing that moves the universe is love. When I’m truly tapped into the thing I’m translating from the universe, which usually feels like a message of love, I try to mark down this feeling and give it a space. Sometimes, the words aren’t enough and I have to make these objects or these actual spaces, and that’s where the installations come in. But everything sprouts from a poem. Everything goes back to love. I’m just trying to break down all that love in that interconnected blur that sometimes gets missed, and I’m trying to find the translations for it.



This God Is a Slow Recovery, 2021, performance documentation, Frieze Artist Award, Frieze New York. Courtesy and photograph: Da Ping Luo

HUO You also once told me that you actually create your poetry while walking through cities. So, I wanted to ask you about the connection between poetry, life and your body, as well as to performance.

PO Yes, it feels like it’s this endless movement of me just trying to track down places. I started writing poems again when I was an artist-in-residence at Luma Arles. I became obsessed with the mistral; the wind drove me crazy there. This was the most miraculous wind I’ve ever come into contact with. It moved my whole world. So, with these new poems, they feel like I’m being carried away with the wind or with my movement, and they swirl around, and they have no real starting point or end; it just feels like a deep breath. I’m moving into my emotions, if anything.

I took a break for a year from writing so intensely, which was interesting because I hadn't taken a break in forever. It changed my sense of how I saw the world. And, now that I'm writing again, it feels like a never-ending faucet. Even this morning, I took a walk around the golf course here in Aspen, where there are so many birds, and I just started recording all of these little poems to the birds. They feel like confessions.

HUO You are in Aspen now, beginning a long-term transformation of the Aspen Art Museum's rooftop, where they used to have sculptures installed. There are still going to be sculptures, but those will be situated in a garden. As far as I understand, it's different from your previous garden,

because you will work with local growers and gardeners. Can you tell me about the genesis of this work?

PO We have two years to make this garden, which feels special, because you never usually get two years to do an installation. But I think that's the new way we have to start approaching things. The garden itself is a symphony – it plays music by motion sensor. As the wind comes into contact with the plants, and as people move through it, they create the music that flows through the garden.

I will work with different artists every season. For the first season, spring/summer this year, I'm collaborating with Standing on the Corner, and we're creating the first symphony for all of the plants.

It's a garden of invasive species; they don't normally get the space they need to grow. It's unusual for Aspen – where everything's perfectly manicured and arranged in a specific way – to cultivate a garden of plants that have been criminalized, destroyed and basically bred out of existence. We have two ponds of mixed black algae and kudzu ash that flow across the whole rooftop.



Ajebota, 2016, book cover. Courtesy: the artist and Bottlecap Press

HUO Édouard Glissant wrote in *Poetics of Relation* [1990] about being rooted in a country or a culture. He said it's important only as long as it does not lead to the exclusion or annihilation of other people's roots or to the hierarchization of some roots over others. That made me think of your garden.

PO We're building the garden so that the roots are entangled. These invasive plants need intense root structures, and we're planting them so they merge and hold each other in an intertwined system where you can see the rooting patterns across the different tiles of the garden. The root beds won't be covered; you will see the roots crawl and grow in between tiles, which is important. Usually, all of this is hidden, and we're trying to make a garden beautiful, but I think there's something especially beautiful about getting to see that errant root system and how those connections happen. They should be in your face, because we need those root systems.

HUO You describe your work at The Shed, which is part of the Frieze Artist Award, as 'a portal for a space of fragilization'. Can you tell me what this means and also how you plan to bring together poetry, sculpture, installation and sound? It's a multisensory installation, similar to your previous work, yet also very different.

PO When I first made the piece, before the pandemic, it was centred on cooking and sharing a collective meal – a togetherness that seemed impossible to create given the constraints of COVID-19. So, instead, I started to look at our failures of communication and language, at how language breaks down. And then I thought: who else do we need to go to but the people who have all the answers – the poets? And, with that in mind, I was inspired by the Tower of Babel. So, I'm building my own Tower of Babel, where we look at new ways of making language, destroying it, building it up, focusing on what is the bridge to the new world.



Everything Dissolving, 2020, watercolour and dirt on paper, 1.3 × 1.1 m.
Courtesy: the artist and Quinn Harrelson, Miami

HUO You also make drawings. They're mostly of flowers, sometimes in a dream landscape. They're part of a living poem, as you said, but there is also a lot of pain. These flowers suffer. The ground burns, which indicates the ecological catastrophe or the extinction crisis. Amid this horror, there are also very cheerful colours and motifs, almost an innocence, which contrasts with this incredible suffering.

PO These flower drawings began as doodles. Then, I started to make them into actual drawings, and now they have their own world completely, it seems, which is always on fire. But they're not afraid about it, honestly, because things have been burning for a while, so they seem pretty good and they are doing well. It's been fun to watch them evolve and morph. I just made some of them into VR versions for Acute Art. I also wrote a poem specifically for their burning world, so they're part of the poem. Everything is a nonstop poem.

HUO You also work as a chef. In 2019, you served food at Performance Space New York with your collective, Spiral Theory Test Kitchen, and, later that same year, you joined me and Rirkrit Tiravanija in conversation at Art Basel Miami, where we discussed the importance of food and generosity, of generosity as a medium.

PO I feel like food is the ultimate love: making something with your hands to feed other people and nurture them. It enters them and changes how they go about their day; it evolves through their gut and radically changes them from the inside out. The food I make is a poem that enters people in different ways. I love caring. I feel like a lot of my work is just new forms of care and love, and food is at the centre of that.

A big part of the Spiral Theory dinners was encountering people that you wouldn't normally meet and having them feed you. These were moments of great togetherness and vulnerability, because that's a huge act of love right there: allowing somebody else to eat a meal with you. It's about creating those spaces where that verdant love can take form and grow.



Spiral Theory Test Kitchen, 2020. Courtesy and photograph: © Ryan Lowry

HUO You once said to me that you wanted to create a ‘queer space of people I love, [where you live] together and work on building what we see as the new world. I don’t believe you build the new world. You just point towards it and you move to it, and that’s what I want to do. I want to create this small world.’ Can you tell me about this as-yet-unrealized project?

PO My ‘self-fragilizing’ ecosystem is all I want in the world. I’m slowly moving towards it. It’s really just a space where anyone can come, relax and get away, if you’re just tired of the old world. I want to provide escapes that feel liveable and free. I don’t know where it is yet, but I’m

moving towards it urgently. I think it could be realized.

HUO You say that it wouldn’t be built, but that you point towards it and you move to it.

PO Building the new world isn’t a thing that you have to come together and physically do. It happens in the everyday ways we change our always-already life, which is through small rituals, and it’s understanding the world around us, entangling with the people we want, having real communications. That’s how I think about it. I don’t want to imagine working. It’s something that you just have to slowly move towards, every day, by taking very small, intentional steps. And that’s why you need the space for it, because it can’t be in linear time. To end the world – it’s not a great fire. It’s just small steps of love.

Main image: Precious Okoyomon in their studio, New York, 2021. Photograph: Davey Adesida