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Color Coded: Mendi + Keith Obadike's *Black.Net.Art Actions* and the Language of Computer Networks

MEGAN DRISCOLL

if you're white you're right / if you're black get back / if you're brown stick around / if you're yellow you're mellow

he splash page of Mendi + Keith Obadike's web-based work The Interaction of Coloreds (2002) greets you with a dizzying 2×2 grid of rapidly changing images. After a moment of watching them cycle, you realize that these are pictures of black body parts the artists' bodies—photographed in front of a brown paper bag. Running your mouse over the grid squares one by one reveals the above lines, first recorded in a Big Bill Broonzy song, since deeply embedded into popular (and literary) consciousness. The association between images and text may not be subtle, but it's incisive: we're looking at a brief history of the ways that color preference has been used to manipulate and oppress black bodies in the United States, from slavery to Jim Crow. Clicking anywhere on the grid brings you into the main site, where the Obadikes imagine how this process might work in the twenty-first century: they've created the IOC Color Check System®, which assigns hexadecimal color values to people in order to help "protect your online community from unwanted visitors." The Interaction of Coloreds is one of three net art projects that make up the Obadikes' *Black.Net.Art Actions*. Produced between 2001 and 2003, the suite deconstructs the language of color on the internet, examining how it reflects the persistence of identity categories like race, gender, sexuality, and class. Together, the works refuse claims for the disembodiment of the internet-browsing subject, while demonstrating how the values communicated by the social coding of language penetrate into the network itself.³

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the internet was widely regarded as a post-identity utopia. People still felt they could exert total control over their representations online, slip outside of their bodies to be anyone, or simply be anonymous; and this ability held the promise of transcendence, a world where categories like race, gender, class, sexuality, and mobility would dissolve into one great "virtual community."4 These idealistic claims tended to obscure the actual internet browsing experiences of many people, relegating conversation about the role of race and gender online to separated (and often subordinated) areas like cyberfeminism and black-oriented social networks. And until recently, scholars have followed cyber enthusiasts' lead in simply ignoring questions of identity. In a detailed meta-analysis of scholarship on the internet, Christopher McGahan points out that even those texts that attempt to define a kind of "cybercultural identity" exclude issues like race as though they were "somehow irrelevant to the conceptualization and conduct of the vast majority of sites of internet culture."5 Popular and academic discourses have thus worked in tandem to reinforce the perception that our subject positions simply stop mattering when we log onto the network.

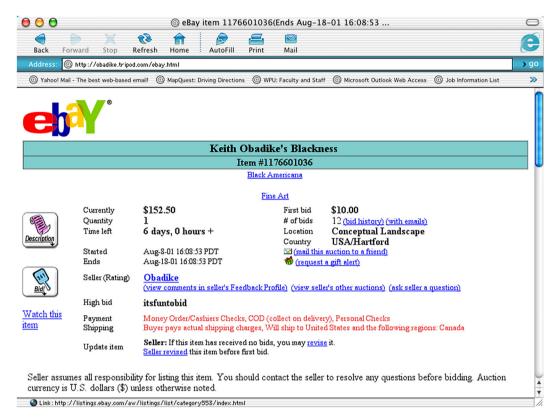


Figure 1: Mendi + Keith Obadike, Blackness for Sale, 2001.

The projects that make up the *Black*. *Net*. *Art* Actions are among a very small number of internet-based artworks from this period that contradicted these claims to confront how our bodies and our identities are affected by the online environment, focusing specifically on how meaning accrues to color and the different languages we use to understand it. The Obadikes first tackled the subject with Blackness for Sale in 2001; when they made The Interaction of Coloreds the following year, they realized that the two are linked by a shared interest in the semantics of color on the internet—a theme they expanded on with The Pink of Stealth in 2003, which rounded out the retroactively formed suite

and ended up being one of the pair's last works of self-described internet art. This is a somewhat strange claim to make, given how amorphous the categorical boundaries of internet art remain; for our purposes, we can understand the phrase internet art (or net art) as describing works that directly address the technological, social, and/or political basis of computer networks. And by that definition, the entire field of net art was indeed undergoing a major shift in the early 2000s, partly in response to more global changes in how people use the internet that included the rise of social media and a paradigmatic shift in how we think about representing ourselves-and our identities-online. The Black.Net.Art Actions can thus be considered transitional, a series of works that challenge problematic ideals that are rooted in the internet's early years and attempt to set the terms for a more analytic discourse on meaning and representation on computer networks going forward.

The first of the three works, Blackness for Sale, is the most well-known of the Obadikes' net art projects. In 2001, they put Keith's Blackness up for sale on eBay in the Fine Arts and Black Americana categories; it received 12 bids over four days before eBay shut the project down, calling the item "inappropriate."6 The description features a long list of benefits and warnings like "This Blackness may be used for making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably," "This Blackness may be used for dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny," and "This Blackness may be used for instilling fear"; or "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during legal proceedings of any sort," "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while making intellectual claims," and "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida." As it ranges across cultural stereotypes, personal experiences, and political events, the text highlights how deeply entangled language is with its sociocultural context. "Blackness" doesn't describe a value-neutral color; it speaks both of a certain quality of a person and the entire history of race relations in the States, simultaneously signifying danger and vulnerability, political disenfranchisement and cultural capital, power and subjugation. Stuart Hall has described the communication of this multiplicity of meaning as a process of encoding and decoding, arguing that "there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code" whether in images or text, communication always follows the rules of language, it is always coded, and this code is always culturally determined. There is therefore no "natural" interpretation of a word or image (or color), no neutral use of language, and when we communicate we encode a broad range of meanings into our message, which then take on further meaning as they're decoded by the recipient.7 Blackness for Sale thus highlights the role of the viewer in activating the artwork, a performative quality that is endemic to net art, which frequently relies on its visitors' clicks, communications, and other participatory acts for completion.

Hall, who was writing about television broadcasting, also emphasized the determinant role of the form of the message: how we communicate structures how we understand meaning. By putting Keith's Blackness on an e-commerce platform, Blackness for Sale ask us to examine how this coding process happens in the context of the internet. How do we experience Blackness on computer networks? What does it feel like to be a black subject browsing the web? What does Blackness look like on the internet? When we encounter it online, is it as funny, as scary, as vulnerable, as cool as when we encounter it in the offline world? And the specific choice of eBay was not an accident: the Obadikes selected the site in order to direct attention to a whole set of terms that we use to describe browsing and shopping on the internet, and explore how they influence our experience of Blackness online.

What does it mean to sell Blackness on an "auction" site that, as Keith Obadike points out, we might have visited using a web browser called "Explorer" or "Navigator"?8 And what happens when this Blackness gets put up for sale in eBay's Black Americana category, which also includes just about every form of racist figurine and memorabilia imaginable—can we really accept the site's claim that they are simply a passive "trading post" for these representations of American Blackness even as they decry the inappropriateness of Blackness for Sale? No, the work insists, of course not; whether it's the ceramic figurine of a black mammy or the abstraction of an individual's black identity, auctioning a representation of Blackness invokes the history of the sale of black bodies, and doing it on an e-commerce platform refuses the virtual world's claims to have escaped such histories. Blackness for Sale thus reminds us that neither the words that we use to talk about computer networks nor the platforms we use to access the internet are neutral; the range of significations that accrue around color language and the embodied experiences that it recalls persist online as well as off. 10

(Mendi + Keith Obadike, *The Interaction of Coloreds*, 2002 can be viewed as part of the supplemental material.)

A year after the Obadikes put *Blackness for Sale* on eBay, they produced *The Interaction of Coloreds* as a commission for the Whitney Artport. Unlike *Blackness for Sale*, which was a performance that took place on a pre-existing platform, the Obadikes built *The Interaction of Coloreds* around its own website, with an accompanying downloadable sound piece. Launching

the work brings you to a splash page that, as described above, consists of an automatically cycling grid of photographs of the artists' body parts against a brown paper bag, which on mouse over reveals a familiar series of ominous rhymes describing the relative social values assigned to different hues of black skin. The title of the piece, The Interaction of Coloreds, is a reference to Josef Alber's Interaction of Color, a text on color theory that touches on the relationship between color, personal preference, and desire; the grid format of the splash page images also alludes to the layout of the color plates in Alber's book. This first page thus establishes the conceptual framework for the project, which, like Blackness for Sale, examines the field of meaning that surrounds color language and its relationship to race, homing in on how this system is used to hierarchically sort and evaluate human beings.

When you click anywhere on the grid of photographs, you enter the main site where you're introduced to the IOC Color Check System®, which the Obadikes describe as a brown paper bag test for the internet. The background of this page is a photograph of the artists standing side by side, cropped to their torsos and revealing small patches of chest and arm, the relative hues of their skin emphasized by their solid black and white shirts. Gone is the brown paper bag behind them; whatever occupied this space in the original photograph has been removed and replaced with a layer of digitally exact "true white" (#FFFFF). This signals a shift away from old, analog systems of color evaluation into a new world where human beings can be measured so precisely that they're assigned a specific numerical color value. And that is just what the IOC Color Check System[®] proposes to do, as the introductory text on the page announces: "Websafe colors aren't just for webmasters. Register with the IOC Color Check System[®] and protect your online community from unwanted visitors." Visitors can heed this call and click on the IOC Color Check System[®] link right away, or pause to download the IOC audio, a semi-autonomous piece that mixes music and poetry. The brief recording weaves between delicate sounds and slowly building rhythms, with a female voiceover reading a cryptic rumination on visibility, (in)adequacy, and the worlds in which we find ourselves.

Clicking on the IOC Color Check System® link brings you to a new page that describes exactly how the system works, but in the hyper-enthusiastic tone of advertising. We're exhorted to "APPLY NOW!" if you "represent a money-lending institution" and "need online skin color verification for the purposes of determining projected property value." Or perhaps you're "a member of a new African-American web portal or an old Negro social club" who is "looking for a way to maintain your club's discriminating tastes in the information age." No matter what your specific needs (the artists provide several other possscenarios), the IOC Color Check System® offers subscribers a way to navigate the relationship between monetary value and skin color in the digital realm by requiring that prospective employees, customers, etc. fill out an online application and receive a hexadecimal color code that will "give you (and them) an exact measure of their color." A sample application is available; clicking on this link will bring you to an extremely detailed form that asks for demographics and family history, and contains a barrage of questions like "Has your skin color ever been in vogue?" or "Have you ever been allowed" (or denied) "access to a place because of your color?" or "How do you describe your hair texture?" If you fill out the form and submit it along with photographs of your body against a surface that's lighter than your skin tone, the site promises to register you in their international database and issue you a customer number and verified hexadecimal color value.

Like Blackness for Sale. The Interaction of Coloreds investigates how the polysemy of color functions in the context of the internet, but the later work delves more into the technical language of the web. For example, the phrase "web-safe colors" is no longer just a guarantee that a numerical color code is safe for your website; with the IOC Color Check System® it becomes a guarantee that the human being affiliated with a given color code will be safe too. And it directs our attention to the numerical color codes themselves, which are built into every website you see-hexadecimal codes are one of the most common, and consistent, ways to describe the color of any element in HyperText Markup Language (HTML), the foundational language used to design websites. But The Interaction of Coloreds argues that these codes don't just passively generate color; they communicate color, which means that they potentially convey all of its coded meanings: the "true white" of #FFFFFF can just as easily be read as the "right white" of the Big Bill Broonzy song. Thus by connecting the encoding/decoding process of spoken language to the technical language of the web, The Interaction of Coloreds even strips computer codes of their claims for mathematical neutrality, reminding us that the ideologies of language cannot be divorced from any system of communication.

The third and final project in the *Black*. Net.Art Actions suite is The Pink of Stealth, which was commissioned by Electronic Arts Intermix and the New York African Film Festival for the 2003 Digital Africa exhibition. 14 The project continues the Obadikes' investigation into color as a signifier for identity, but broadens its scope to look at how color affects representations of gender, class, sexuality, and even health, as well as race. The Pink of Stealth is a multimedia work presented in three main parts, all of which revolve around a story written by the Obadikes in response to the way that the color pink is deployed in two movies, Pretty in Pink (1986) and Six Degrees of Separation (1993). They experiment with fragmenting the story in different ways throughout the work, recalling the non-linear approach to narrative that was popular with many artists and writers who used hypertext during the 1990s. The work's pieces can all be accessed from a central website whose landing page is filled with a disorienting animated gif of oscillating pink and white stripes that automatically generates a pop-up window; the window's background is a photograph of the two artists' left hands, partly overlapping and frozen in a gun-pointing gesture, each wearing pink button cuff shirts with an indecipherable, pinkish pattern behind them. This interplay between digitized and photographed pinkness lingers in our field of vision as we click through the work's main components: a hypertext poem in five variations, a web-based game, and a downloadable audio piece. 15

The range of meanings that extend outward from the color pink weave through the underlying narrative of The Pink of Stealth and into each individual element. In the hypertext poem, we make this connection through the color of the page itself. Clicking on the link labeled "5 Hypertext Variations" opens another pop-up, with a header that reads: "Variation 1: CC6666" and a background in the rich, reddish pink hue described by the hexadecimal code #CC6666. Only pieces of the text are visible; running your mouse over the blank spaces will make the remaining words appear, and clicking brings you to the next variation (eventually, the page will also cycle forward automatically). Each variation displays and is named for a different hue of pink, revealing new phrases from the story and allowing the varying shades of pink to quite literally color your reading of the text. You can then move from the look to the sound of pink with the audio file, which is labeled "The Mauve Mix" on the work's home page. 16 Just over six minutes long, the track begins with a musical intro that moves into the background as a female voice begins to speak in a disjointed rhythm, reading the story in shifting cadences with long pauses and occasional sound effects that mimic the visual fragmentation of the text online. It's impossible not to hear her low tone as seductive, to begin to imagine the sensuality of pinkness as you manipulate your mouse to play with the visibility of the text while listening to the story play with the range of pink significations that the Obadikes have uncovered: boys and girls and their pink parts, their tongues and cheeks; desire, for another person, but also for food and for wealth and for recognition; the hunt, chasing people, chasing foxes. This quality of pinkness layers onto the explorations of blackness, brownness, and yellowness in *Blackness for Sale* and *The Interaction of Coloreds*, injecting new meaning into questions like "Has your skin color ever been in vogue?" as you consider the relationship between color and desire—the color of desire itself, as well as the color of what you desire.

(Mendi + Keith Obadike, *The Pink of Stealth* (game demo), 2003 can be viewed as part of the supplemental material.)

However, the reference to chasing foxes is not simply a metaphor-historical fox hunts are the most surprising association with the color pink that is excavated in The Pink of Stealth, and they form the centerpiece of the third and final element of the work, the game. (The fox hunt also loops us back to the artists' mysterious gun-pointing gesture in the background of the main page.) All that is viewable of the game today is a demo, in which you can watch two dog characters named "Unbeatable" and "Unspeakable" running ahead of a character on a horse, dressed in fox hunting clothes. As the project description explains, the Obadikes came across the phrase "in the pink," short for "in the pink of health" (hence the work's title), from eighteenth-century English fox The phrase refers to clothing hunting. designer's Thomas Pink's popular hunting jackets—the same jacket worn by the character in the game demo—thereby associating itself with fashion, wealth, upper-class leisure activities, and even the blush of sporting good health. By featuring this relatively obscure reference to pink from outdated fox hunting slang alongside the color's more contemporary associations with

gender and sexuality, *The Pink of Stealth* explores how the range of meanings for color language can seem to spiral endlessly outward, a game of word association whose rules keep shifting alongside social norms.

But there are rules. As Hall reminds us, contextual parameters must structure the possible range of meanings that can be decoded for communication to be possible at all, and there will always be a hierarchy, a set of meanings that are most legible to the dominant social order. 17 In its web-based presentation, The Pink of Stealth asks how these parameters are structured online. How does pink signify as we surf the web—can the color of my web page tell you something about my femininity, my desirability, my sexuality, my health, my social class? And if it's no longer an eighteenth-century fashion designer or a twentieth-century Hollywood film, who (or what) sets the limits of this signification? With their changing pink backgrounds and matching hexadecimal code titles, the hypertext poems in particular point to the protocols that limit our experience of the web as a digital arbiter of meaning. When "Variation 1: #FFCCCC" tells us that "He ... knew how to ... delight ... a ... Randi ... girl" and "Variation #FF9999" tells us that "He ... knew how to ... delight ... a ... big ... guy," the shift from pale to vibrant pink backgrounds that signifies a shift in modes of sexuality may be encoded by the artists, but the range of possibilities from which they can choose to communicate this message is dictated by the web's precise numerical codes. The Pink of Stealth thus expands the conclusion of The Interaction of Coloreds to suggest that not only are the meanings that accrue to spoken language

embedded in the language of the web, so too are the hierarchies that delimit what we are expected to understand when we read, or see.

As noted, the Black.Net.Art Actions were produced in a time when race discourses online were sidelined, kept largely contained in race-oriented social networking sites like BlackPlanet and AsianAvenue while other advocates for cyberculture simply ignored identity characteristics, assuming they had been transcended in the virtual space of the network. 18 This tendency extended into internet art as well-artists whose work dealt directly with questions of identity were few and far between, and they were frequently marginalized.¹⁹ The Obadikes recall running into disclaimers like "it's outside our scope" as a form of pushback against their work, which was often regarded as unsuccessful net art not only because it talked openly about race and gender, but also because it insisted on being situated in a specific sociohistorical context (primarily, although not exclusively, the United States and the African diaspora), which clashed with claims for the internet's —and internet art's—radical newness and globalizing universality.20 They riff on this throughout the Black.Net.Art problem Actions, commenting in Blackness for Sale that "This Blackness may be used for creating black art" but "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used in the process of making or selling 'serious' art," or asking, in The Interaction of Coloreds, "Are you an art collector investing in net.art made by a colored artist? Do you need a method of determining the effect of the artist's body on the value of the work?" And the title of the suite itself critiques this absence of open dialogue on race and identity through reference to a

specific subset of internet art. The phrase "net.art" (the dot is crucial) is typically used to describe a highly influential group of mostly European net artists working in the mid to late 1990s whose work so dominated visions of what internet art should be that anything that diverged from its main concerns (which were actually quite varied, but neither oriented toward identity in general nor American history in particular) seemed to simply become unrecognizable.²¹

That this blind spot toward race and idenshould carry from general internet culture into internet art was remarkable during the 1990s, and in the United States in particular. This was a period in which many North American arts organizations were deeply invested in working through questions of identity, language, and cultural politics that were guite similar to those being addressed by Blackness for Sale, The Interaction of Coloreds, and The Pink of Stealth. 22 But the ambition to transcend the subject and the history she carries with her isn't without art historical precedent. In some respects, it echoes late American modernism's pursuit of the impersonal, the neutral object (or concept) that would obscure the context of its maker—or, at least, certain kinds of makers. Adrian Piper, for example, has attributed the rapid rise and fall of her 1960s minimalist and conceptual art practice to the eventual discovery of her identity as a black woman, initially concealed by her ambiguous name.²³ Of course, it's important to acknowledge that changing attitudes toward women and people of color in the offline art world were reflected in the internet art world; there wasn't a prohibition on work by female and POC artists so much as a tendency to ignore net art that insisted on taking identity positions as its primary subject. It was simply "outside the scope" of what was significant in the practice of art on computer networks.

It was into this environment that the Obadikes interjected the Black.Net.Art Actions, one by one in 2001, 2002, and 2003. As a group, their primary subject is color, but it's an approach to color that emphatically refuses the neutrality of form, and delves deeply into the social coding of language. The works demonstrate how the technical codes of the web can become a system of communication, subject to the process of encoding and decoding that gives all messages their meaning, and structures the boundaries of that signification. And in the process, they reveal how the ideologies embedded in the way that we talk about color are carried over both into the language we use to describe the web-auctioning Blackness on the eBay, allowing only web-safe color(ed)s —and the language that dictates what we see when we browse the web-#FFFFF (true white), #FFCCCC (pale pink). Blackness for Sale, The Interaction of Coloreds, and The Pink of Stealth thus not only refute the idea that our bodies and our identities can, or should, be transcended as we browse the internet, but demonstrate that the terms of identity cannot be extricated from how we read the very structure of the network itself.

Notes

1. Mendi + Keith Obadike's *The Interaction of Coloreds* (2002) can be viewed at http://web.archive.org/web/20170108010002/http://www.blacknetart.com/IOC.html.

- 2. Hexadecimal color values are six-digit strings that represent colors in some computing applications, including the different types of code (HTML, CSS, etc.) that are used to build web pages. For example, #000000 tells your web browser to display black, whereas #FFFFFF tells your web browser to display white. The structure of the code itself is not arbitrary. It uses only 16 digits (0-9 and A-F) and is built of three pairs of digits that each assign a certain intensity to a range of red, green, or blue, then combine to produce a specific color. Because they use the additive color process, hexadecimal colors follow the basic principles of light: #000000 is black because it's a total absence of color, whereas #FFFFFF is white because it's a combination of all colors at full intensity. (You can explore how this works http://www.w3schools.com/colors/ colors_hexadecimal.asp.) So for the computer, the reading of these codes is strictly objective. But The Interaction of Coloreds draws our attention to the interpretive layer that is introduced by the human reader of hexadecimal codes and the colors they produce, weighing down these seemingly neutral numeric codes with the social and cultural values that the colors carry in everyday language.
- 3. It's important to distinguish the three main terms that I am using to describe the internet in this essay. The phrase "computer networks" generally describes technologies based on connections between computers, the phrase "the internet" refers to our sprawling system of computer networks nested within computer networks, and the phrase "the web" specifically describes one of the ways we access information on these networks—e.g., you might be using a web browser right now to read this on a web page.
- 4. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 11. One of the most well-known proponents of the idea that the "virtual community" would

transcend issues of race and gender is Howard Rheingold, who articulated his vision in a book on The WELL, which started in 1985 as an online bulletin board system and flourished into one of the internet's largest and longest running social organizations.

- 5. When the subject of race does come up, Christopher McGahan observes, it has typically been focused on questions of access to the network (the "digital divide") rather than racialized experience on the network. However, a small but growing number of scholars are beginning to delve into this topic. In addition to McGahan, a few of the authors in this area who specifically address visual culture include Lisa Nakamura, Wendy Chun, Jennifer González, and Tara McPherson; for a more detailed list of related scholarship see Christopher McGahan, "Introduction: Racing Cyberculture," in Racing Cyberculture: Minoritarian Art and Cultural Politics on the Internet, Routledge Studies in New Media and Cyberculture (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6-8.
- 6. A full capture of the *Blackness for Sale* eBay listing page is available on an archive of the artists' website at http://web.archive.org/web/20011221173617/http://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html. It's worth noting that, although the listing describes the item for sale as "Mr. Obadike's Blackness," the description actually scrupulously avoids gendering the potential buyer, introducing an element of ambiguity and flexibility into overdetermined tropes of black masculinity like "instilling fear."
- 7. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 131.
- 8. In a 2001 interview on *Blackness for Sale* with Coco Fusco, Keith Obadike discussed the "odd Euro colonialist narrative" that structures the way we talk about using the web—"there are browsers called Explorer and Navigator that take you to explore the Amazon or trade in the eBay"—and

how *Blackness for Sale* examines the peculiar position this constructs for black people as internet users. Coco Fusco, "All Too Real: The Tale of an On-Line Black Sale; Coco Fusco Interviews Keith Townsend Obadike," September 24, 2001, http://blacknetart.com/coco.html. Note that Netscape Navigator has been discontinued since the early 2000s, but the default Windows web browser is still called Explorer and Apple has followed this model with their default browser, Safari.

- 9. Today, Black Americana can only be found on eBay as a sub-sub-section, buried under the Collectibles and Cultures & Ethnicities categories, but it is still dominated by a parade of racist antiques, periodically punctured by items like a vintage Malcolm X poster that generate more than a little cognitive dissonance.
- 10. A much more detailed analysis of eBay and how *Blackness for Sale* specifically refutes claims for the race neutrality of e-commerce is available in Christopher McGahan, "Re-Collecting Cyberculture and Racial Identification in a Minoritarian Frame of Reference: Keith Obadike's Blackness for Sale, eBay, and the Counter-Performance of Blackness in Cyberspace," in *Racing Cyberculture*, 85–122.
- 11. Since the early 2000s, the Whitney Museum has used their Artport website as a platform to support internet-based artworks. For the gate pages, which lasted into 2006, the Whitney commissioned artists to use the Artport as a point of entry to a work that was otherwise hosted on the artist's own site. The pages typically rotated each month, and *The Interaction of Coloreds* was featured in August of 2002. You can view the archive of the work's gate page at http://artport.whitney.org/gatepages/august02.shtml.
- 12. In the early 2000s, there were still a lot of computer monitors that had a limited color range and would substitute another color for one they didn't recognize in a website's code. Thus when building websites, designers would try to stick to a specific palette of "web-safe colors" in an

attempt to ensure that the site would look the same to all visitors. Today, displays are much more likely to have a wider range of color options, so the practice has become less common.

- 13. The Obadikes work with sound, music, and poetry in addition to visual art, and frequently offer audio tracks as part of their media projects. However, these tracks are generally provided as separate downloads, rather than audio that runs automatically as you view the work. This unfortunately tends to make the sound components feel optional (or at least easy to miss), but they are worth the extra effort; adding the experience of listening to the experience of looking enhances the performative element of the Obadikes' works.
- 14. *Pink of Stealth* (2003) can be viewed at http://web.archive.org/web/20080425065057/http://www.blacknetart.com/pink/PINK-1.html. Please note that the project was designed with Flash for legacy web browsers, and some functionality may be altered.
- 15. Project notes and a link to a discontinued DVD are also available on the main page for *The Pink of Stealth*; the DVD in particular serves as a reminder of the myriad ways that the artists have presented the work, both for home viewing and exhibition (it was shown at the Neuberger Museum in 2004 in addition to the 2003 Digital Africa show).
- 16. Although the direct download from the *Pink* of *Stealth* website is no longer working, the Obadikes have included "The Mauve Mix" as a track called "The Pink of Stealth" on their album *Crosstalk*.
 - 17. Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 134.
- 18. AsianAvenue and BlackPlanet (both owned by media company Community Connect) were launched in 1997 and 2001, respectively; they were both known for having forums where people tackled difficult conversations about race and social politics alongside other social networking activities, and BlackPlanet rapidly became very successful. Cate T. Corcoran, "BlackPlanet's Universe," Stanford Alumni Magazine, April 2004,

https://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=36178. Omar Wasow, the founder of BlackPlanet, notes that the site brought much needed attention to the presence of African Americans online, which had been obscured by narratives about the digital divide. Jenisha Watts, "Interview: BlackPlanet's Founder Talks Myspace, Why He Was Skeptical of Twitter, and If Facebook May Have Peaked," *Complex*, March 23, 2011, http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2011/03/interview-blackplanet-founder-talks-myspace-twitter-facebook.

- 19. Of course, the Obadikes weren't the only artists addressing these topics; for example, in the 1990s the Mongrel collective was making net and software art that examines the relationship between digital color systems and how we think about race. (Two of Mongrel's projects have recently been archived by the Rhizome Net Art Anthology project at http://anthology.rhizome. org/.) And the cyberfeminist movement, including artists VNS Matrix and Cornelia Sollfrank/Old Boys Network, was quite prominent in early net art social communities, although they frequently popped up with the express purpose of combatting relative invisibility of female-identified participants in technology and media arts. Unfortunately, cyberfeminism was vulnerable to the same kind of idealism that ended up marginalizing a lot of the art that was trying to do this work; one of the most frequent retrospective critiques of cyberfeminist theory is that some writers tended to valorize the identity-neutralizing potential of the internet as a way to escape the limitations of gender.
- 20. Mendi + Keith Obadike, interview with the author, July 27, 2016.
- 21. At the same time, arts organizations were struggling to figure out how they related to this new field of internet-based art, leaving works like the *Black.Net.Art Actions* in a strange limbo between internet art groups that were unsure if this counted as net art, and arts organizations that were unsure if net art counted as art at all.

22. By including *Blackness for Sale* alongside artists like Nikki Lee, whose works from the 1990s are known specifically for engaging the role of identity in art and contemporary culture, the recent *Come as You Are: Art of the 1990s* exhibition is starting the process of placing the Obadikes' late 1990s and early 2000s projects in conversation with this thread of practice, supplementing (but not supplanting) their position in narratives on media and internet art histories. For more on *Come as You Are*, see https://www.montclairartmuseum.org/content/co me-youare-art-1990s.

23. Adrian Piper, "Introduction: Some Very FORWARD Remarks," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), xxxv-xxxvi.

Supplemental material

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