

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Nona Hendryx, "Nona Hendryx Invites Carrie Mae Weems Inside Her Virtual Reality," *Interview*, June 17, 2024

Interview

DREAM MACHINE

Nona Hendryx Invites Carrie Mae Weems Inside Her Virtual Reality

By [Carrie Mae Weems](#)

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Nona Hendryx and Carrie Mae Weems, photographed Sekou Luke.

As of yesterday, you can walk into the Lincoln Center and have a conversation with a humanoid robot named Bina48. Powered by AI, she is, at present, the only robot that draws input from the mind of an African-American woman, Bina Rothblatt. “If all goes to hell and only BINA48 is left in existence, what would I want it to be?” asks the artist [Nona Hendryx](#), the mind behind the mixed reality installation. On a call with the photographer [Carrie Mae Weems](#), the pair found themselves thinking deeply about futurism and their respective legacies. “I want to be sure that what you bring and what I bring will be a part of that, and not some future that Elon Musk has planned for us,” Hendryx declared. Well-known for her

role as a vocalist in the 70's funk trio Labelle, Hendryx has come to fuse her love of music with her ideas of technology to further her mission to bring about a better future. Before the opening of *The Dream Machine Experience: before the before and a er the a er*, the two artists discussed the uses of Afrofuturism and why AI couldn't be further from artificial.

HENDRYX: When I had the opportunity to walk around the grounds of Lincoln Center and download the app and see you, giant-sized, in that space, it was really so impressive. I can't wait for other people to see it. Against the other 3D objects that are in this sculpture gallery, between the George Clinton mothership, the Henry Moore that's in the water, and the Mickalene [Thomas] wrestlers, it looks like the mothership has come and dispersed these objects around Lincoln Center. It has a sense of humor, as well as a very powerful take on Afrofuturism.

WEEMS: I'd love to know how your thinking evolved around this project. Just a bit of the background into your space, your ideas about why you decided to take this enormous amount of energy to construct this radical re-imagining of a space, using AI and VR.

HENDRYX: Well, *Dream Machine* came about by my working at Berklee College of Music in Boston and wanting to work with the Electronic Production Department. The initial idea for Dream Machine was a

character called Newbie: A new being who would arrive on this planet and start to be shaped by what we're all shaped by, our parents, our family and our community. We created several iterations of it and each time it became more defined. I was working with different students every semester, so it was a bit complicated. But we kept the theme and then the pandemic happened and that moved us straight into creating something that was just going to be a virtual experience and led to where we are today, with Lincoln Center commissioning a hybrid physical and virtual installation. Does that answer your question?

WEEMS: Oh, it does. With every project I learn so much about you and your capacity, your openness, and your willingness to engage so deeply. I think the first time that I realized the depth of you was onstage, during our performance of *Refrigerated Dreams*. I was looking at you singing and everything congealed in my mind and I said, "This is it." You know, of course, I'm intuitive and analytical and I'm trying to understand certain things that are not quite coming together yet in my mind, including your performance. I think I could have laughed and cried simultaneously on that stage. It was really quite a moment of revelation.

HENDRYX: I have to say, that kind of performance is how I've come to know what it is that I'm now doing. It's different with this one, because so much of it has to be prepared. But

what I do know now is how much the term Afrofuturism can hold. I had a limited view before this project. It has expanded my view and what it means to share the work of the people who I have admired. And you are one of them. Your work is something that I can somehow take in and transform into another expression.

WEEMS: I was talking with Carl Hancock Rux about you last night, because we were coming home from the Harlem Stage Gala.



The Dream Machine Experience: before the before and after the after.
Photo by Erin Patrice O'Brien.

HENDRYX: Ah, yes!

WEEMS: He was very happy to be there to support Pat [Cruz] and Harlem Stage and other visionaries. But the thing that's interesting to me about being a visionary is the level of trust that you have to have in your collaborators. I find that both terrifying and remarkable.

HENDRYX: Yes.

WEEMS: The thing you've done remarkably well is to surround yourself with a group of people whom you know have the possibility to deliver on the promises they've made to themselves and their sense of future

and then to take that trust and use it to recon gure a project that is all yours. And we have the opportunity to join you in this quest for something bigger than ourselves. Are you excited?

HENDRYX: I am excited. I'm excited to see the vision that Mickalene has envisioned for the atrium, because her work says what I want to say about this particular African-American female-inspired AI. So to have a space where Bina48 will be able to be in conversation with a diverse audience is really important. I had this thought that, if all goes to hell and only Bina48 is left in existence, what would I want it to be? I want to be sure that what you and I bring will be a part of that, and not some future that Elon Musk has planned for us.

WEEMS: Yes. Tell me what you think about Afrofuturism's ability to expand beyond national boundaries. Because that indeed is one of its great bene ts. It allows us to see the world in its totality and complexity. It's not rooted in a city or in a state or county or country. It permeates the world and then gives you the ability to connect in a different kind of way, and that's what our futures will be. The complexity and the beauty of our future, if we are to have one, has to be one that goes beyond the confines of nations and nationalism.

HENDRYX: Absolutely. I feel that Afrofuturism hasn't become a currency that could be exploited, because it's been about a *people*. But, as you just expressed, it can expand, it can hold, it can welcome everyone

because it doesn't have those boundaries.

WEEMS: I think it's a belief that shatters notions of colonialism, in part.

HENDRYX: Yes.

WEEMS: That's a part of its core principle, that it has to shatter ideas of "global expansionism," or of the contest between nations. It's attempting to break down these barriers that have been so detrimental to us and continues to be so. If we look at what's happening in Palestine and Israel or Russia and Ukraine, it's the perfect example. It insists that the world has got to be, and is in fact, a larger place, if only we're open to the possibility of that discovery.

Capitalism, imperialism and colonialism, all of those -isms actually keep the truth at bay, for the powerful, for the wealthy, for the industrialists, for the monopolists, for men who are interested in grabbing the world for themselves and the people who are like them.

HENDRYX: Yes and that is why you have put it on the table. That's what I was saying about Afrofuturism, it has not been exploited like colonialism or like capitalism-

WEEMS: Because they have no use for it.

HENDRYX: Yes. That's why it is a wonderful lens to engage with AI, because it's our new consciousness. Although, I do look at it as just us in

another form, because *we're* the ones creating it.

WEEMS: You're right. It's a human entity no matter how you shake it.

HENDRYX: It's so interesting that it's called "artificial," because it's not artificial at all. And artificial intelligence, through the lens of Afrofuturism, makes it inclusive. I'm going to go back a little bit, because it comes from my beginnings, when I was part of a group for 17 years—

WEEMS: And it was also futuristic.

HENDRYX: Yes, but it could not be done by one of us.

WEEMS: Mm-hmm, correct.

HENDRYX: So I love that phrase: "All of us are smarter than any of us." Because it's *us* that makes the thing, not this person or that person. It's an inclusive way of being and an inclusive way of knowing that without you, *I* don't exist.

WEEMS: Then it's also grounded in a certain spirituality and love.

HENDRYX: Yeah. And you don't want to use it in a harmful way, right? I want to say to people, "Come in and listen to a conversation between Carrie and Bina48"—

WEEMS: Are we going to actually do that? How are we going to interact with her and how do we start the conversation with Bina?

HENDRYX: Bina has a translator. They will be activated and you begin speaking and they will reply to you.

WEEMS: So Bina will be in her own dedicated space?

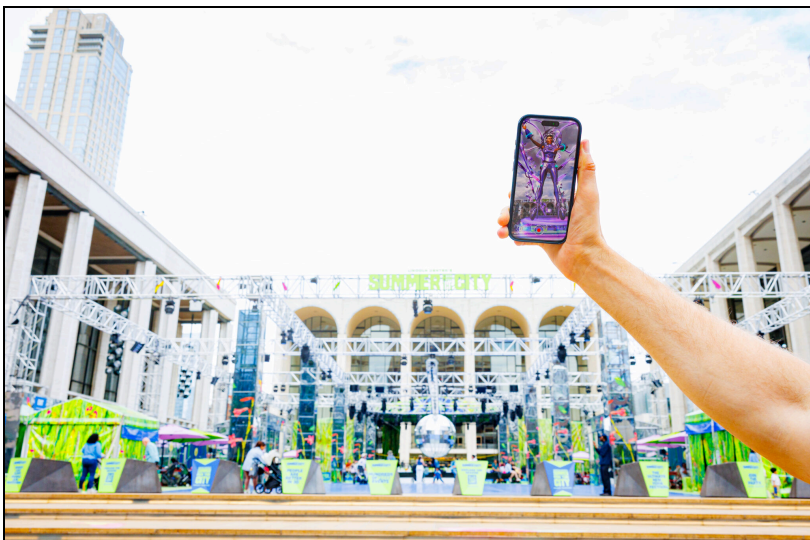
HENDRYX: Yes.

WEEMS: Then we have a conversation with Bina and that information is going to be translated?

HENDRYX: Mm-hmm, yes. Right then and there.

WEEMS: So the collaborators participating at the opening will have a conversation with Bina, but can the general audience sign up? And if you want BINA to represent the complexity of who we are, is there a frame of central ideas and conversations that we might have with her?

HENDRYX: Yes. It's completely open and the audience is able to witness artists or scholars in conversation with AI. Some of the professors are focused on gender identity and what that means in racial profiling and gender profiling. Francesca Harper will create a choreography based on laminography, symbolic language that has been shared with Bina48, and has created a choreographed piece.



Installation view of *The Dream Machine Experience: before the before and after the after*. Photo by Sachyn Mital.

WEEMS: Oh, really?

HENDRYX: Yes. Then LaFrae and other music artists will collaborate by sharing musical terminology and musical interest. LaFrae did, “What kind of music would you create if you were in Siberia?” And translating that into a midi file and generating a piece of music based on that collaboration with Bina48. So these are the different types of things that artists are doing with Bina48. There’s a poet, Sasha Stiles, who creates poetry with Bina48 using zeros and ones, which is how computers speak, and turns that into a language.

WEEMS: I think that we should have a round table of artists and scholars, with Bina at the head of the table and we’re all having a conversation with her simultaneously. That would be fabulous. There was an article in this morning’s *New York Times*. It was by a Black woman, maybe from Africa, and the headline read, “I asked AI where I was from and I answered all of the prompts and it told me that I was from nowhere.”

HENDRYX: Well, yes.

WEEMS: That really sort of speaks to this idea, right?

HENDRYX: Yes, very much so.

WEEMS: Ultimately, what is imprinted on the human imagination that allows Bina to be a future projection of our possibility.

HENDRYX: Yes, and this is why I wanted to engage multiple people who are thinking about this. AI, at some

point, will need rights and will have laws written to protect it, right?

WEEMS: All the difficult questions are there. I've just finished working on a project, literally just a moment ago. This company engaged me to do a campaign for them and when I asked them how they knew about me they said, "Well, we studied you in school." I'm getting a lot of that lately, which tells me that I'm really old and they're really young. [Laughs] But they knew that they really wanted me, specifically to do this project based on the way that I make images and the way that I build context.

HENDRYX: Good for them.

WEEMS: When they sent me their initial materials, I was a little disappointed and a little shocked. I wrote them back and I sent them several images and simply said, "Good selection, but these are actually much more poetic. These will actually get you where you want to go." They didn't quite know what to do with me. Then they sent me a set of videos that I received last night and I looked at them and thought, "Well, this won't get them where they need to go." So I pulled together my small team and directed them to recut, remake, remix this material because, well, you know your material. You wake up with it and you carry it in your veins and in your body and in your heart, in your legs, in your thighs, in your breasts, right? It's all in you.

HENDRYX: It's you, yes.

WEEMS: Nobody knows this work like you do. All of the hundreds of melodies that have drifted through your mind, I will never ever even begin to know, right?

HENDRYX: Yes.

WEEMS: I have to ask you, what do you want people to ultimately know in the process of engaging with your work?

HENDRYX: It's like that thing that Octavia Butler said best. "Whatever you touch changes you and you change whatever you touch." It's that call and response that I make and it makes me as I make it. For people who are coming to *Dream Machine*, it is about dreaming. It's the imagination. We make the world through imagination. I would like to spark some more imagination in a way that is joyful, playful, impactful. It stimulates passion for creativity and understanding that there are no borders.

WEEMS: We can see ourselves beyond the limits of our borders and the fences that we put around ourselves. The thing that I keep thinking about is that you have to remember to dream. I'm dreaming along with you.



The Dream Machine Experience: before the before and after the after.
Photo by Erin Patrice O'Brien.