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**THE SHELLEY & DONALD RUBIN FOUNDATION
AT THE 8TH FLOOR ANNOUNCES**

Scrawlspace

**Curated by Emily Alesandrini and Lucia Olubunmi R. Momoh,
2024 Curatorial Open Call Recipients**



Steffani Jemison, *WLD (content aware)*, 2018. UV curable inkjet print on glass, acrylic, paper, polyester film.
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

**The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, NYC
September 19 – December 7, 2024**

New York, NY | July 22, 2024 – The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation is pleased to present ***Scrawlspace***, a new group exhibition curated by **Emily Alesandrini** and **Lucia Olubunmi R. Momoh** at **The 8th Floor** on view from September 19 through December 7, 2024. The project brings together work by artists of the African diaspora who conceptually mine and aesthetically manipulate text, writing, and language. Artists include **Sadie Barnette, Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, Sonya Clark, Tony Cokes, Renee Gladman, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Steffani Jemison, Glenn Ligon, Adam Pendleton, Jamilah Sabur, Gary Simmons, and Shinique Smith.**

Scrawl/space explores the in/ability of language and writing to fully encapsulate Black experiences. Through the visual re/working, re/imagining, and de/construction of texts, Black artists examine historically charged relationships to the written word while revealing new possibilities for and beyond writing. Some render phrases and words illegible, glyphic, or coded to the point that letters and graphic gestures no longer constitute language but become images, demonstrating an opacity, complexity, and multiplicity of meanings beyond sanctioned readings and definitions. The act of annotating and obscuring words and documents often serves as an intervention into difficult histories, such as the threat and power of state documentation and unknowable silences and omissions within the archive. And yet, artists also demonstrate how language can be utilized in acts of refusal, sabotage, and liberation, serving as instruments in community and world-building, and to explore pleasure and identity.

The term “*scrawl/space*” appears in Fred Moten’s 2017 *Black and Blur*, where he credits the term to Hortense Spillers. However, Moten could not locate the word’s origin in Spillers’ published writings, citing instead poet and scholar Harryette Mullen who previously credited “scrawl space” to Spillers. Spillers herself has recently shared with the curators that she has no recollection of inventing “*Scrawl/space*/scrawl space.” While its source remains unresolved, given the long history of the appropriation, manipulation, and theft of Black women and queer folx’s labor and language, Moten and Mullen’s insistence on citing Spillers demonstrates a shared admiration for (and perhaps attachment to) the concept, amplifying its enchantment and use. Its movement through various texts reflects the beautifully queer and caring traditions of Black writing and research practices, while also speaking to the collective nature of the creation process and of giving meaning to words. In this way, *Scrawl/space* also draws attention to citation as Black liberation praxis rooted in notions of kinship, weaving together writing, research, and visual creative practices. The curators are honored to carry on the conversation with an exhibition that features work by visual artists who seek liberation in, through, and against language.

Many of the artists in the exhibition—including Renee Gladman, Steffani Jemison, and Kameelah Janan Rasheed—also maintain a writing practice. Indeed, **Renee Gladman** was a writer who turned to art to enhance her writing craft. Through her drawings, Gladman invokes bodily motions that approximate the act of writing and explores the inability of either medium to fully communicate thoughts on their own, while challenging the veracity and necessity of translations or descriptions. In **Steffani Jemison**’s *Same Time* series, calligraphic marks suggest an unreadable language, amplifying what the artist calls the “tensions between what can be read, what can be intuited, and what refuses to give up its secrets.” Mining the Black vernacular tradition of encrypting what cannot be said, Jemison looks to the archive for alternative genealogies of mark-making. **Kameelah Janan Rasheed** incorporates text that appears difficult to decipher, bordering on haptic note-taking, or visual glossolalia, meaning the religious phenomenon of speaking in tongues. Rasheed seeks to reveal the limitless potential of Blackness via her explorations of the inexhaustible potential of texts and language.

Several of the artists in *Scrawl/space* engage with the aesthetics, functions, and implications of writing to dispute the domination of imperial idioms and reveal how language and texts have been wielded to survey and dehumanize Black people. **Jamilah Sabur's** interrogations of individual words and colonial alphabets reflect the origins and limits of colonized languages, further rooting communication in specific lands and places. Likewise, **Sonya Clark** invented and employs the typeface *Twist* to usurp the near ubiquity of the Roman alphabet and the white supremacist ideology in its roots. Clark based her *Twist* letters on formations found in natural Black hair. Clark applies text onto textile along with actual locks of hair, evoking the Black body without representing the figure. **Sadie Barnette's** annotations of the FBI's files on her father seek to undermine the practice of redaction while revealing histories of documentation and surveillance. These and other text-based works similarly subvert the primacy afforded to figural representation.

As with Moten and Mullen, many of the artists in *Scrawl/space* find their source material via the writings of other authors, modes of citation, and efforts of collective echoes. **Glenn Ligon** stencils and obscures citations from authors such as Zora Neal Hurston, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. Through numerous layers of reinscription, he augments the meaning of the sub/text while exploring what is left unwritten. In the video work of **Tony Cokes**, the artist creates audiovisual essays reminiscent of PowerPoint presentations or advertising media, remixing quotations from other artists, art historians, or pop culture to prompt insight into racially loaded music, words, and color. **Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo's** social-justice-driven art practice employs citation to honor and visualize the ancestral and collective character of activism. Through this methodology, Branfman-Verissimo strives to manifest radically safe spaces in which Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, trans, and disabled people can find community and care. Such instances speak to expansive communicative innovation and adaptation via poetry, fiction, and illegibility — lingual means of social mobility, resistance, and assertions of personhood.

Artists in the exhibition employ words and phrases to create work with varying levels of legibility that function as both text and art. **Gary Simmons** engages with themes of erasure, palimpsest, memory, and possibilities of re-writing through a chalkboard-like aesthetic. Despite and in tandem with blurs, smears, and smudges, traces of the original text endure. **Adam Pendleton** explores the framework of Black Dadaism through an aesthetic of repetition that refuses clear comprehension. With a practice that began in written affirmations and clandestine graffiti tagging, **Shinique Smith** explores tensions between graffiti and calligraphy, text and textiles, and the ability of pattern and abstraction to convey information. “There are a couple of things that humans have invented that are genius and forever. Writing is one and fabric is another,” she shares.

Together, the works in *Scrawl/space* make apparent the de/re/constructive potential of the written word. As Saidiya Hartman reminds us, “The story exceeds the words...” By illustrating the in/ability of language to truly encompass the *excess* that is Black life, artists expand and invent new vocabularies, definitions, and grammars, while insisting that we must keep writing.

This exhibition is the result of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation's third Curatorial Open Call. Alesandrini and Momoh were selected from a pool of applications by the Foundation's curatorial team, and will be supported in their administrative, planning, and promotional endeavors by the Foundation.

About the curators

Emily Alesandrini (she/her) is an independent curator, art historian, and writer working in New Orleans and New York. Her research concerns contemporary representations of race and gender with a particular focus on issues of opacity, ornament, and the diasporic body in art by women and artists of color. She strives to spotlight underrepresented voices in the field and work in community-based collaboration to subvert systems of oppression and erasure within and beyond art history. Alesandrini has contributed to exhibitions and publications at The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, The Ford Foundation Gallery in New York, The Museum of Sex in New York, Prospect New Orleans, Wave Hill in the Bronx, and The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in New York, as well as Assembly Room Gallery. Her essays, interviews, and reviews have appeared in ARTnews, Burnaway, and BOMB, as well as numerous exhibition catalogues.

Alesandrini graduated from Smith College with Latin Honors and a BA in Art History. As a fully-funded Elizabeth Allison Emory Scholar, she earned her MA in Modern and Contemporary Art History from Tulane University. She continues her studies as a doctoral student in Art History at Bryn Mawr College.

Lucia Olubunmi R. Momoh (she/they) is a curator, writer, and researcher currently working on a combined PhD in African American Studies and the History of Art at Yale University. Momoh's research investigates the intersections of art, power, and identity. Centering African diasporic and Indigenous perspectives in Western art history, she investigates the relationship between constructs of race and the formation of national identities in the Americas during the nineteenth century, how institutions have perpetuated these volatile structures of oppression, and how art embodies the potential to dismantle them. Her independent curatorial practice supports and engages with artists who similarly seek to confront and visualize these complex structures.

Before coming to Yale, Momoh held curatorial positions with the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Prospect.5 *Yesterday we said tomorrow*, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and the New Orleans Museum of Art. She has written for exhibition catalogs and publications such as *ArtNews*, *Hyperallergic*, *burnaway*, and *Made in L.A.: Acts of Living*.

About the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

The Foundation believes in art as a cornerstone of cohesive, sustainable communities and greater participation in civic life. In its mission to make art available to the broader public, in particular to underserved communities, the Foundation provides direct support to, and facilitates partnerships between, cultural organizations and advocates of social justice across the public

and private sectors. Through grantmaking, the Foundation supported cross-disciplinary work connecting art with social justice via experimental collaborations, as well as extending cultural resources to organizations and areas of New York City in need. sdrubin.org

About The 8th Floor

The 8th Floor is an independent exhibition and event space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin to promote artistic and cultural initiatives. Inspired by The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, the gallery is committed to broadening the access and availability of art to New York audiences. Seeking further cultural exchange, The 8th Floor explores the potential of art as an instrument for social change in the 21st century, through an annual program of innovative contemporary art exhibitions and an events program comprised of performances, salon-style discussions, and those organized by external partners. the8thfloor.org

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Image description: Made of glass, acrylic, paper, and polyester film materials, a wide rectangular work has a beige background, with large light blue and dark gray paint marks consuming the center third of the frame. On top of the paint, messy letters are printed in gray with yellow and orange outlining and underlining. The center two of the four lines might be read as: "TRSE WLD N CDE / AS N WLD N CBE"