



## Blackouts and Other Visual Escapes

Sampada Aranke

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**Jack Whitten, *Birmingham 1964, 1964***, aluminum foil, newsprint, stocking, and oil on plywood, 16 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 16 in. (42.2 x 40.6 cm) (artwork © Jack Whitten Estate; photograph by John Berens, provided by Jack Whitten Estate and Hauser & Wirth)

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## Blackouts and Other Visual Escapes

1. As a term, “abstraction” is both elastic and contested. I consider here writings that turn toward the nonrepresentational with an eye toward the ambiguity and capaciousness within those practices that can loosely be called “abstract.” See Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Adrienne Edwards, *Blackness in Abstraction* (New York: Pace MacGill Gallery, 2016); Philip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); and Kobena Mercer, *Discrepant Abstraction* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2006).

2. The problem of the universal subject, whose naming brings with it a burden of normative protocols organized as an anti-Black, sexist, and homophobic apparatus, is a fundamental organizing problem for my application of gendered language. In a moment when scholarship must be held accountable to the ways and means through which some applications of gender remain unthought as “he/him,” I turn here to gendered language to instantiate that, as an author, I am making the active decision to gender the third-party viewer with “she/her” pronouns. This is by no means a corrective or a substitution of one gendered apparatus for another but rather an attempt to provisionally hold a space for a third-party viewing subject.

3. Scholars seminal to my interests here include Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997); Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 177–218; Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81; and Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions Journal* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 1–47.

A bumpy, matte black surface forms an imperfect square plane in Jack Whitten’s *Birmingham* 1964. The edges are unkempt, and paint rises to form bubbles that pop up out of the painting. Creases and folds surround a membrane made of aluminum foil whose texture resists despite being smothered as flat as possible in an organically imperfect round, touched and smeared by matte black paint and surrounded by that already imperfect black plane. The artist’s hand is felt, especially in the tearing away of foil to form a reveal. The shiny surface’s

pristine and untouched underbelly is lifted and turned outward to provide contrast with its externally painted skin. Underneath the foil, a soft, thin, fibrous synthetic nylon stocking covers an image. This inside reveals a photograph: a dog, tethered by a leash held by a white police officer, lunges toward a young Black kid. The photograph’s familiarity takes shape around its newsprint quality, a journalistic diary of a historic event signposted by the object’s title, *Birmingham* 1964.

We peak into an iconic image of social dissent, a scene of police violence against Black civil rights protesters. The contours of close looking take shape as one peers into the black mass, to lean in toward the painting’s navel, in order to get close enough to see the nuances of the form. Such is the work of the object: the viewer is implicated in the bonds of looking, in which the subject and object share proximity, space, relation.

Who is the proper subject or object of Black art? The question, as asked and answered by artists and historians alike, motivates a range of presentational strategies that span categorization from the representational to the abstract.<sup>1</sup> I take on the question with an acute attention to three works by Jack Whitten (1939–2018), Melvin Edwards (b. 1937), and Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955) that blur the boundary between the representational and the abstract precisely because their approaches embody the indisputable possibilities that manifest in nonrepresentational forms to rethink the political, social, and affective contours of Black life. What these approaches share is a deep concern for the multifaceted modes in which Blackness trespasses normative protocols, particularly the aesthetic policing and surveillance that often accompany stale representational mandates. These artists critique boundaries of aesthetic policing by mobilizing those material, affective, and corporeal registers of viewing, thinking, and feeling that can easily slip between rigid categories. Taking up a set of similar concerns, I propose a set of improper investigations organized around how the artists presented here obscure the picture plane and thus move the viewer to embody her own relationship to the kinds of Blackness present in each work.<sup>2</sup>

To critique the determining ground of the proper subject or object of Black art would mean to unpack the assumptive logic that separates subject and object from one another, a boundary so fundamental to the making of Western modernity and its extant modernisms.<sup>3</sup> Fred Moten, in his seminal consideration of how Blackness destabilizes such categorizations, illuminates how the boundary between subject and object is porous rather than not, and how the meeting ground of that boundary marks a relation between two categories thought to be divided.<sup>4</sup> The subject/object divide is made a problem by the institution of slavery and its political, economic, social, affective, and sensorial afterlives, best encompassed by Moten’s primary concern with the “historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction

of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and ‘freedom.’”<sup>5</sup> The commodity (read: the subject forcibly turned into the object of trade) who speaks throws into crisis the ideological apparatus that aims to violate it into silence. To speak back, then, creates an improper relation between subject and object. Of note here is that by speaking in the first instance, the object qualifies that its meaning is derived first and foremost in relation to those subjects that attempt to render it silent. In Black aesthetic practices, this often translates into a radical critique of subject/object boundaries with a view toward a reimagination of how both form relations through sensate practices.

Moten’s study weds together Blackness, the crisis of subjecthood and objecthood, and the question of making relation. Relation, in this formulation, operates as a connective tissue, whereby subjects and objects of a given artwork are entangled within the systems and experiences that are activated in place. What locates Black aesthetic production within this nexus is how the aesthetic object of inquiry poses a series of historical, contextual, and positional problems that correlate directly to the place where lived experience meets any potential conditions of relation.<sup>6</sup> In this place, perhaps, the object creates a gravitational pull for the viewer and draws her into the contours of a given piece; at others, perhaps, the object repels the viewer, which causes her to respond as uninterested or repulsed. When it comes to the works explored here, Moten provides a framework for how Blackness activates a varying response to the object. In his assessment, this kind of viewing practice emerges out of a Black radical tradition that works toward “the absolute ongoingness and continuity not of attention to objects but of the aversion of one’s gaze from objects.”<sup>7</sup> Eye contact—the operative sensory apparatus for sight—becomes an opportunity for the viewer to be made present through a mode of embodied position in relation to the object in front of her.

Eye contact is but one of many sensorial activities that entangle the viewer with the object on display. What does it mean for the viewer to make “eye contact” with an object that does not look back in a proper sense? The objects on view here are neither sensual nor sentient beings per se, as they lack organs and loaded terms of consciousness. However, the works considered are made to recast the aim of the object away from the stability of sight and into the proximate relationality between the object viewed and the viewing subject. Finally, while these works diverge in medium and historical context, they model modes for rethinking Blackness as an aesthetic that is deeply performative in practice and scope.

On the one hand, the artists here turn to accepted media and forms to stake their claims—painting and sculpture primarily, with assemblage marking the most “outsider” relationship. All three artists are relatively successful in terms of art market recognition as well as popular and scholarly coverage. By aiming to generate an active, attuned attention to the viewer’s position in relation to the work, the object asks the viewer to turn away from an understanding of the autonomy of the object as singular, individuated, and detached from the world. Instead, the object, as installed in a museum or gallery, deforms its assumed singular status as sculpture or painting to turn toward the modes of relation these objects make possible.

In this spirit, I aim to create a tiny footpath into a consideration of abstraction as a method of swerving the representational mandates of visibility. Looking

4. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 241. Of course, Moten is not the first to consider such an elastic relationship to modernity and modernism but is rather part of a broader Black intellectual tradition. Foundational studies include W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Dover, 1994); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Ronald Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

5. Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

6. I am referencing the intellectual friendship and dialogue between theorists Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant, and I borrow language that each scholar uses in their seminal texts to theorize the relationship between Blackness and Western Enlightenment’s imposition of objecthood versus subjecthood. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008); and Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

7. Moten, *In the Break*, 238.

at three specific works by Whitten, Edwards, and Marshall, I chart the means through which each work obscures the logics of visibility in order to call the viewer into the work, thus building on what curator Adrienne Edwards has called “blackness in abstraction,” a phrase that both resists precise definition and claims a profoundly capacious “emergent condition.”<sup>8</sup> Following her lead, I will explore Blackness in these works as “material, method and mode . . . a multiplicity” to relocate how the material obfuscations call the viewer in toward a practice of embodied positioning.

The artworks discussed do not assume or desire a contiguous, singular audience; they chart a relationship to viewing that is at once as provisional as it is learned, as emergent as it is inherited. Because easy access to the image is visually impeded, I argue that these works elicit practices of viewership located squarely in the body as modes of positioning and engaging the relational qualities of racialized subjectivity. The sensorial logic of knowledge acquisition takes shape in proximity, as everything from muscular tension to exhaustion impacts what we glean from a given moment. Bodily sensations coupled with a networked system of structures and experiences influence modes of reception. This approach can easily be called “distributed personhood—that is, personhood distributed beyond the body-boundary,” an anthropological concept that Alfred Gell applied to the context of art.<sup>9</sup> For Gell works of art can be seen as social beings (even persons). Within this understanding of social beings, art acts as a kind of doing in which a distributed person’s “actions and their effects are similarly not discrete expressions of individual will, but rather the outcomes of mediated practices in which agents and patients are implicated in complex ways.”<sup>10</sup> I read Gell’s study as a consideration of art as a sensual activity in which the person who is distributed also encounters the fleshly qualities of the self within, through, and even as the art object. Gell expands Yrjö Hirn’s meditation on Epicurean theory, particularly that “shadows, reflections in a mirror, visions, and even mental representations of distant objects, are all caused by thin membranes, which continually detach themselves from the surfaces of all bodies and move onwards in all directions though space.”<sup>11</sup> In this theorization of reception, parts of the body are contiguous with any given image, as the image is literally produced of the body. Gell expands this theory to note:

I am interested in Hirn’s point that if “appearances” of things are material parts of things, then the kind of leverage which one obtains over a person or thing by having access to their image is comparable, or really identical, to the leverage which can be obtained by having access to some physical part of them; especially if we introduce the notion that persons may be “distributed,” i.e. all their “parts” are not physically attached, but are distributed around the ambience, like the discarded “gossamer coats of cicadas” in Lucretius’ memorable instance, which are both images and parts of the living creature.<sup>12</sup>

Gell’s seamless articulation that body and image are inextricable is best evidenced by this idea of distribution—that having access to appearance is dependent upon material parts of the self one leaves behind or puts forward in the making of said appearance. Put another way, the body’s distribution—spatial positioning, compositional materiality, decentralization of parts—is what makes the act of seeing work. Distributed personhood maps the intricacies of power

8. Adrienne Edwards, “Blackness in Abstraction,” *Art in America* 103, no. 1 (January 5, 2015): 69.

9. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 104.

10. *Ibid.*, 7.

11. Yrjö Hirn, *The Origins of Art: A Psychological and Sociological Inquiry* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), 293–94.

12. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 105–6.

networked to form one's self. Gell's adoption of the phrase is useful in the context of the objects presented here because it allows for an understanding of the viewing subject that accumulates in situ. The subject is encouraged to at once activate and reflect upon those parts of self that are anti-essentialist, relational, and rooted in the shifting grounds of aesthetic practice.

It is my contention that the viewing subject is always of central concern in Black aesthetic practice. For one, histories of looking have been particularly charged in relation to histories of anti-Black violence in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Racialized violence undoubtedly is organized (pan)optically, as the nexus of surveillance and subjection are foundational in everyday Black life. Because of the ubiquity of sight and surveillance in modes of anti-Black violence, the aesthetic practices undertaken by Black artists are born out of an antagonism with such realities.<sup>14</sup> Even while aiming to escape well-worn tropes of figuration or representation, Black artistic practices tend to be always already aware of the entrapment of sight as a singular mode of aesthetic apprehension. Out of this understanding of the limited capacity of sight as a sole indicator of aesthetic engagement arise other sensorial apparatuses—namely, an engagement with the individual Black body and the collective body of Black experiences.<sup>15</sup> This approach is compatible with Gell's insistence on the distributed person as a mode of personhood that is both composite and contingent. Appearance is dependent upon modes of racialized subjectivity otherwise delimited, which is why the viewing subject is always already touched by the Blackness that consumes the object in front of her. This is not to say that the viewing subject is always assumed to be Black, but rather that the viewing subject is implicated and saturated in the kinds of Black histories, experiences, and aesthetics activated by the act of engaging the work itself.

It is with this set of theories that I consider three works by Whitten, Edwards, and Marshall. Each work activates a critique of the proper as evidenced by an investigation into the contours of both subjecthood and objecthood, as well as an engagement with modes of viewership that activate the body toward greater relational engagement with Black histories and Blackness as an aesthetic modality.

### **Birmingham 1964 and the Skin of Assemblage**

Jack Whitten is known for his innovation in painterly application and chromatic saturation, through which he repositioned abstraction as a painterly technique up until his passing in 2018. Whitten's most notable works emerge from his 1970s studio practice, but years before, he produced works that directly confront the relationship between Blackness as an aesthetic and political position. *Birmingham 1964* (1964), an assemblage painting composed of aluminum foil, newsprint, stocking, and oil on plywood, is the artist's response to white supremacist violence against civil rights demonstrators in his hometown. For the work, he applied black oil paint directly onto the plywood, allowing for the rough texture of the wood's grain to appear. Whitten then peeled back an adhered aluminum foil to reveal AP photographer Bill Hudson's newsprint image of civil rights protester William Gadsden in the center navel. This newsprint is overlaid with stocking, which gives the image a skein and a skin—at once mediating the image and troubling its epidermal racial schema.<sup>16</sup> Around the late 1970s, Whitten would directly conceive of the surface of his painting as skin, "associating incisions and

13. See Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Courtney Baker, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); and Amy Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing and Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

14. For more on this turn away from visibility and sight by Black American artists, see Sampada Aranke, "Material Matters: Black Radical Aesthetics and the Limits of Visibility," *e-flux*, no. 79 (February 2017): 1–10.

15. This understanding of the self as constitutive of a collective body of experiences is neither a reductive nor essentialist understanding of Blackness, but rather an understanding of the kinds of structures of power and experiential happenings that accumulate to develop Black American subjectivity.

16. See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 92.

marks with keloids (scarring after the skin is cut).<sup>17</sup> He would even “apply the concept of ‘painting as skin’ to objects, and he developed a series of collage-like reliefs from acrylic castings of objects and surfaces he scavenged from around the city.”<sup>18</sup> *Birmingham 1964* evidences an exploration of “paint as skin” as early as 1964, and while the materiality of the work is a combination of elements—paint, stocking, foil, newsprint, wood—it nonetheless mobilizes a surface that metaphorizes a peeling back and away (like that of skin) to reveal evidence of things otherwise not seen.<sup>19</sup> This consideration of skin is directly linked to Whitten’s own lived experience, which directly animated the object’s making.

Teresa A. Carbone has contextualized *Birmingham 1964* in relation to Whitten’s participation at a protest in the spring of 1960 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.<sup>20</sup> Shortly after an experience with white supremacist violence during this protest, Whitten relocated to New York to study painting at Cooper Union. He had been born and raised in Bessemer, Alabama, only a twenty-minute drive from Birmingham, which had become central in the civil rights struggle. By 1964 photographs and video footage from Birmingham were circulating at a rapid pace, and these images came to evidence the spectacular brutality of southern white people, thus assuaging liberal white people’s own sense of complicity with broader racist practices and protocols. Nonetheless, photographs like that of Gadsden, a curious bystander who would become an iconic figure in the movement, came to emblemize how state and vigilante white supremacist violence were commonplace in Birmingham (among other cities around the country).<sup>21</sup> Whitten encountered these images frequently, noting how “these photographs were all over the place,” resulting in a “confusion of imagery.”<sup>22</sup> In 1964 he was compelled by this photograph of Gadsden to provide a “visual response” to the latter’s experience with physical violence, as he would do with his own experience.<sup>23</sup>

Insisting that he produced his work “out of necessity,” Whitten notes how he turned to assemblage precisely because the medium allowed him to uphold the plastic quality of the art object while also communicating with immediacy.<sup>24</sup> What is striking about *Birmingham 1964*, however, is that Whitten makes the photographic source hard to see. Shirking the direct indexicality that the photograph provides, he instead mobilizes a range of material choices that obfuscate and require the viewer to come close in order to give it adequate attention.

The textured relationship between the soft, flexible stocking material and the hard, rough plywood backing inverts the more traditional relationship between figure and ground. Using wood as the painting’s structure, Whitten brings the outside in by choosing a material traditionally associated with the architecture of painting—as the structure upon which the canvas is stretched or the frame within which the final painting is bounded. By slathering this plywood with black paint, Whitten offers a commentary on how the color signals a broader racial politic, and therefore a structural relationship to power.<sup>25</sup> The racial and formal connotations of the color black intersect on the surface of Whitten’s images. In a journal entry titled “On Being a man,” dated June 24, 1964—the same year that *Birmingham 1964* was made—Whitten reflects upon the dynamics of racial violence inflicted upon Black Americans by white people, calling specific attention to the ways that Black people are forcibly fragmented, denigrated by a racial logic activated at the level of surface: “Beneath every surface lies an identity. The amount of depth beneath this surface determines the

17. *More Dimensions Than You Know: Jack Whitten, 1979–1989*, September 27–November 18, 2017, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2017, <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/5876-more-dimensions-than-you-know-jack-whitten-1979-1989>.

18. *Ibid.*

19. I borrow this phrase from James Baldwin’s illustrative reportage in Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995).

20. Teresa A. Carbone and Robert Storr, *Interviews on Art* (London: Heni, 2017), 885.

21. Teresa A. Carbone, “Evidence and the Art Object,” in *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum, 2014), 91n. See also Martin Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011);

and Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

22. Carbone, “Evidence,” 93.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Ian Bourland has offered insight into Whitten’s spectacular attention to texture in his uses of the color black as an engagement with his lived history. For more on this topic, see Ian Bourland, “Jack Whitten (1939–2018),” *Frieze*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.frieze.com/article/jack-whitten-1939-2018>.

value of its being. What is the depth of America in the year 1964? What is the depth of its people?”<sup>26</sup>

By using black as the surface ground upon which the image lies, Whitten interweaves the social and formal qualities of the color, making the center image’s visibility dependent upon the blackness from which it emerges. In this way, he troubles the question of visibility itself, as black is a color impossible to see through. As I read Whitten’s discussion of surface and depth, this center skin and image come into partial visibility through the blackness that surrounds both. By impeding total access to the center image, Whitten’s reveal is an assessment of depth that hovers right at the surface level. The America he sees in 1964 is one that inflicts violence at the level of surface, the depths of which require a perception based on unpacking the textures and limits of complete visual access. Whitten instead makes a case for the limits of transparency and a move toward the understanding that looking is only ever provisional and partial. By taking on the grounds upon which Blackness is materially made, and made political material, he demonstrates the textures and limitations of visibility itself, making a case for a consideration of the social and formal qualities of Black as always present.

This kind of material consideration places Whitten’s work alongside a broader practice of 1960s assemblage, which, as Kellie Jones as noted, “takes its energy from materials found and reconfigured, repositioned and recontextualized.”<sup>27</sup> The attention to objects and their reuses is what informs assemblage as an object that turns its attention to the viewer. Jones continues:

It represents not only the rejection of purity and fixity in material but also the singularity and fixity of address. In the juxtaposition of myriad things formerly subjected to a variety of uses and materials plucked from topography of streets of the world, artists like [Noah] Purifoy created things that held those original significations and context and yet in the act of making art freed them, releasing signification back into the cycle and play of meaning between object and viewer.<sup>28</sup>

While Jones addresses the works of artists such as John Outterbridge who utilized assemblage as a sculptural form to reshape how we might consider everyday Black life in the United States, her insights prove to be particularly helpful when thinking of *Birmingham 1964*. In something of a departure from Whitten’s usual painterly practice, *Birmingham 1964* uses elements of assemblage as a means to intervene upon the picture plane. As Jones makes evident in her salient description of the form, precisely because of its hybridity and multiplicity, assemblage allowed for a means to free these various things from their originary associations by turning to the viewer for meaning. This pivot toward the viewer can be readily assessed in Whitten’s work, which utilizes the source photograph, nylon stocking, wood, aluminum, and paint as means of assembly. Assembly here also refers to the means through which the object calls in the viewer as a crucial maker of the object itself—it is up to her to think through these objects together, to come close and squint to see, to make sense of the contours of the object. This method of bringing the viewer in materially and spatially maps the racial politic of the work itself.

This racial politic is mobilized also in how Whitten approaches scale in relation to the object. *Birmingham 1964* is 16<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 16 inches, an intimate format that positions the viewer in a proximate relationship to the gallery wall. The dimen-

26. Jack Whitten, *Notes from the Woodshed* (New York: Hauser & Wirth, 2018), 38.

27. Jones, *South of Pico*, 135.

28. *Ibid.*, 136.





**Melvin Edwards, *Cotton Hangup*, 1966**, installation view, 20/20: *The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, July 22–December 31, 2017 (photograph by Bryan Conley, provided by Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh)

sions of Birmingham 1964 fall short of a more traditional canvas size and take a step away from the conventional understanding of scale in sculpture.<sup>29</sup> Manipulating size in these ways, Whitten can be considered as in direct conversation with his colleague Melvin Edwards, whose mid-1960s metal sculptures also open up the possibility of provisional modes of looking. However, Edwards's 1966 sculpture *Cotton Hangup* centralizes the question of scale and position through a spatial composition that operates at the level of the object and its installation.

### The Tilt of Suspension in *Cotton Hangup*

Over the span of Melvin Edwards's decades-long career, he has used hard-edged industrial materials and transformed them into compressed and layered sculptural objects. This material practice opened up for the artist when he started experimenting in welding.<sup>30</sup> For Edwards scrap metal served as raw material to build out another series of associations and meanings for the viewer.<sup>31</sup> His most notable series, *Lynch Fragments* (1963–2016), embodies this conceptual and material move. In these works, which Edwards has described as both "fragments" and "new abstract relief sculpture," the self-defined "socially expressive" artist masterfully welds multiple scrap objects into uniquely bundled "object like works" that are installed against the wall at eye level.<sup>32</sup> Alex Potts has described them as "tense and compacted configurations that insistently confront one visually and refuse to settle into a state of stably posed sculptural form."<sup>33</sup> Confrontation in this register works doubly: at a formal and a social level. *Lynch Fragments* is an

29. Whitten's paintings often take up a significant amount of space, making the case for an approach to scale that takes up and over the viewer's relation to the canvas itself. That *Birmingham 1964* is smaller and thus more approachable should mark for us the intimacy of viewing and the ways that proximity reshapes the impact of the work itself.

30. Catherine Craft, "The Life as a Sculptor," in *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades; A Guide to the Lynch Fragments* (Dallas: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2015), 12.

31. Alex Potts, "Melvin Edwards's Sculptural Intensity," in *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*, 51.

32. *Ibid.*, 47.

33. *Ibid.*

unflinching indictment of racial violence in the United States, as each sculpture contains multiple parts that resemble, reference, or remind one of materials used during acts of racial violence. The series mobilizes questions around the formal qualities and social associations raised by these welded steel objects.<sup>34</sup> The viewer must look directly at each object and examine the codes of racial violence invoked by formally dense layers of steel scrap. This confrontation, it could be said, is also a confrontation with how anti-Black violence is itself dependent upon the panoptic qualities of sight.

As has been extensively noted by scholars across various fields of study, sight is an operative sensorial register within acts of anti-Black violence. Feminist studies scholar Robyn Wiegman has charted how sight is constitutive of a set of disciplinary epistemes and logics that organize who is deserving of violence and who is afforded the ability to enact it. As she notes, “what the eye sees, and how we understand that seeing in relation to physical embodiment and philosophical and linguistic assumptions, necessitates a broader inquiry into the articulation of race, one that takes the visual moment as itself a complicated and historically contingent production.”<sup>35</sup> This particular mode of enforced bodily subjection gave way to a range of specific doctrines, ideologies, practices, and affects that cemented claims to humanity and the nonhuman—along which Blackness was charted as the antithesis to white humanity.

In Huey Copeland’s account, “racialized barbarity and aesthetic discrimination go together, underlining how dark figures have been mobilized as linchpins of a modern metaphysics that not only demarcate the limits of culture and humanity within Western discourse, but that also effectively trouble the visual, epistemological, and historical categories that structure so-called white civilization.”<sup>36</sup> Copeland speaks to how “Blackness functions, then, as both a free-floating trace unmoored from individual subjects and as a concrete index of power relations that reveals the deep structure of modernity’s modes of visualization, the despotism on which they rely, and the ways that they might be contested in the present.”<sup>37</sup> He offers a vibrant link between modernity’s metaphysical and epistemological ordering of humanity and the kinds of aesthetic and sensorial conditions that sediment such racialized predications. Living in the afterlives of such ideological formations, sight continues to be a primary sense through which degrees of violence are designated, marked, and structured upon Black subjects. Policing and surveillance, for instance, are two modalities through which sight functions as a method of anti-Black violence. In light of this sensorial primacy, Edwards—like Whitten and Marshall—makes sight itself an object of aesthetic inquiry in his works. In Edwards’s hands, sculpture becomes a method of activating sight toward a series of questions and positions. To achieve this, Edwards mobilizes a spatial and material concern that is best evidenced in *Cotton Hangup* (1966), which offers another approach to how abstraction might open up a condition of relational possibilities between object and viewing subject.

*Cotton Hangup* is composed of welded steel and installed against stark white gallery walls in such a way that the steel’s shades of gray pop with a muted disposition. The sculpture is often shown in a corner space, generally at a height above gallery visitors. This installation shapes how Edwards composes a floating body with welded steel, gravity aiding the body in its suspension overhead. The contours of sharp steel edges converge to form a body in itself. Whereas Lynch

34. *Ibid.*, 52.

35. Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 24.

36. Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 11.

37. *Ibid.*

*Fragments* comprises small, compressed, almost claustrophobic objects, *Cotton Hangup* is larger in both scale and dimension, and its structure allows the negative space of the gallery wall to peek through, allowing air and atmosphere to move through the sculpture.

Undeniably, Edwards's sculpture calls attention to the intensity of bodily proximity and height spectacularized by lynching. In an interview with Catherine Craft, the artist reflects on the specificity of *Cotton Hangup*'s installation in relation to the lynching act. He recalls, "Well, even murderously hanging wasn't the only way people were lynched, you know. But I understand, that's the symbolic interpretation of the act. But for me part of what happened in my sculptural-political combination of thinking, was, that this was an opportunity to investigate the principles of suspension."<sup>38</sup> Suspension becomes the material inquiry that mobilizes a particular relationship between viewing subject and viewed object. *Cotton Hangup* recomposes fragments to make a distorted, floating, bodily whole, installed at a proximate distance—just close enough to approach yet far enough from saving. Edwards utilizes sculpture, a medium already defined by its spatial relationships, to create a relationship between the welded steel body and the bodies who view it. Edwards literally asks the viewer to tilt her head to look up to the work. This attention to the bend of the neck is twofold.

Acts of lynching were often public events in public squares and parks, and Edwards interrogates their spectatorial nature.<sup>39</sup> Victims and survivors of the lynching act were often hung by their necks from trees, scaffolds, or other structures that provided height. On the one hand, Edwards hangs this abstract body in such a way that there is an angular gesture that mimics the bent neck of victims of the lynching act. He is careful not to simply "represent" this event in a straightforward way. Rather, he makes a case for the spectatorial nature of such acts by requiring the viewer to raise her own head to take in the sculpture. The bend of the spectator's neck necessary to look at the hanging body is reconfigured as a way to take in the sculpture. This tilt of the head serves as a kind of distributed personhood in which, to see, one must position the body in an inorganic manner, thus activating feeling as a function of sight.

That is not to say that Edwards equalizes the terrors of racial violence in acts of lynching with those of viewing sculpture. Rather, he charges the activity of looking by placing it squarely in the body. In so doing, the artist offers a bridge between the body presented on abstract terms and the body that views. Within this dynamic activation, he allows the viewer to attend to her own bodily tension, account for her positionality, and reflect upon the intimacy necessitated by acts of looking. This is an intimacy that requires the viewing subject's proximity to the viewed object. To see the work, she must consider her bodily relation to it—if she is under the sculpture, the neck's bend will be more dramatic than if she stands in the corner for a more distanced view. The position the viewer takes in relation to the work—and therefore, the degree of her neck's extension—is a kind of embodied relational distribution. Her placement of self, through a positioning and then a repositioning, creates a muscular comportment that strains, reaches, or tilts and thus marks a relational ground. The viewing subject's body is understood through a distribution of self that maps the contours of relation.

This kind of movement in situ places and positions the viewer in the course of making sense, or even taking in the object, in such a way that she is implicated

38. Melvin Edwards, "Conversations with Melvin Edwards: Extended Version," interview by Catherine Craft, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, 2013, <http://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/art/artists/melvin-edwards-interview?nomo=1>.

39. For more on the history of lynching as a public event dependent upon spectatorial engagement, see James Allen, ed., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2012); and Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*.



**Kerry James Marshall, *Black Painting*, 2003–6**, acrylic on fiberglass, 72 x 108 in. (182.9 x 274.3 cm) (artwork © Kerry James Marshall; photograph provided by the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

in both the production and the installation of the object itself. In light of the histories and subjects referenced by the object, we can see how the viewer's position in relation to the sculpture mines thorny questions about the politics of looking, the responsibility of a museum or gallery to displays of violence, and the possibilities and limitations of abstraction or representation in accounting for minoritized histories, to name but a few considerations. Part of what is constituted in Edwards's sculpture is an attention to how these structural issues are implemented at the levels of both sight and bodily comportment. The knowledge acquired by looking is driven through the body of the object being looked at as well as that of the subject that looks.

Bringing Whitten and Edwards together, we might consider the means through which each artist takes on the relationship between skin and sight, the distribution of personhood and objecthood. *Birmingham 1964* mobilizes layers of "skin" while *Cotton Hangup* is bare-boned, exposed steel. In Whitten's work, the viewer is asked to come close in order to take in the object, while for Edwards the sculpture hangs above and relatively far from the viewer. Considered together, these differences in detail and approach give rise to a practice of embodied looking that opens onto a mode of activating the viewer to consider her proximate relationship to the object in front of her. Whitten and Edwards, I believe, provide touchstones that amalgamate to produce a direct engagement with this idea of activated viewership in Kerry James Marshall's *Black Painting* (2003–6).

## Opaque Grounds in *Black Painting*

Similarly to in Whitten's composition, blackness swallows Marshall's *Black Painting*, a considered and meticulous combination of multiple hues of the color black—some more purple, others more gray, and still others tinged with a pinkness in their outer glow. This compositional feat shows a scene *right before* a violent murder. Marshall pictures a room, with a figure reading in bed, in which we can barely make out contextual clues—a banner that reads “Power to the People!” with a panther featured front and center, a copy of Angela Y. Davis's *If They Come in the Morning . . .*,<sup>40</sup> a jewelry stand that is a clenched fist. These details gesture toward what is pictured, but the painting itself is hard to decipher in its entirety.

Marshall depicts the bedroom of Black Panther Fred Hampton (1948–1969), the famed and well-respected chairman of the Chicago chapter. Hampton, twenty-one, and Mark Clark, a twenty-two-year-old member of the Black Panther Party, were gunned down on December 4, 1969, in Hampton's home by the FBI and the Chicago Police Department. In the middle of the night, the police raided the apartment where several members of the party were staying, including Hampton's pregnant partner, Deborah Johnson. Court filings estimate that between eighty-two and ninety-nine shots were fired within the apartment.<sup>41</sup>

In Marshall's painting, the viewer's perspective is from the apartment's back door, the same door from which the FBI and the police would raid and kill Hampton in his bed, lying next to Deborah. While viewers arrive at the painting with varying degrees of knowledge about the party, Fred Hampton, or twentieth-century Black history writ large, in the painting we are given none of the event of Hampton's murder directly. Instead, Marshall gives us the calm and comforting scene of a domestic space, the intimacy of a familiar nighttime routine, the stuff of everyday life.

What strikes me about Marshall's rendering is how difficult he makes it to see the work in its entirety. This rendering is, I believe, Marshall's ultimate embrace of opacity, where the layers and depths of black protect the subject pictured from our vision. Poet and theorist Édouard Glissant has written extensively on what he calls the “the poetics of Relation,” a consideration of the ontological questions that fuel philosophies of life premised on racialized contact in the New World.<sup>42</sup> Against Enlightenment's “will to transparency,” which imposes upon racialized subjects to make themselves available to scrutiny, Glissant writes:

If we examine the process of “understanding” people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.<sup>43</sup>

In this view, to be understood as a proper subject one must be measured by comparative and antiquated Western ideals. Instead, Glissant calls for “the right to opacity,” a version of selfhood that is premised not upon making one's self entirely available but most importantly upon a commitment to remaining obscure, even to oneself. For Glissant this commitment to opacity is not a reductive individualism but instead takes shape in how actions occur in proximity, in the making of a ground of relation.

40. Interestingly, Davis's book was published two years after Hampton's murder, pointing us to the artist's own staging of a scene as based on historical fact but not necessarily grounded in historical accuracy. This additionally points us to the political significance of Davis as both a scholar and a political organizer, while it also positions an anachronistic relationship to how Black radical histories get positioned, thought, and taken up.

41. Elsewhere I have written about the significance of Hampton's murder in relation to broader questions of Black radical death and state violence. See Sampada Aranke, “Fred Hampton's Murder and the Coming Revolution,” *Trans-Scripts: An Interdisciplinary Journal in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 3 (2013): 116–39. An expanded consideration of Hampton's death will be featured in my forthcoming book project “Death's Futurity: The Visual Culture of Death in the Black Power Era.”

42. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

43. *Ibid.*, 188–89.

As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence; I shall also pay attention to not mixing it into any amalgam. Rather, it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it. Human behaviors are fractal in nature. If we become conscious of this and give up trying to reduce such behaviors to the obviousness of a transparency, this will, perhaps, contribute to lightening their load, as every individual begins not grasping his own motivations, taking himself apart in this manner. The rule of action (what is called ethics or else the ideal or just logical relation) would gain ground—as an obvious fact—by not being mixed into the preconceived transparency of universal models.<sup>44</sup>

In Glissant's formulation, opacity is a claim to anti-essentialism, a notion of self that is made and remade in relation to a structural yet provisional grid of contexts, apparatuses, and systems that call upon a subject to articulate herself. This sense of self should not be accepted as a stable, transparent, and thus translatable set of totalizing experiences, but rather in relation to the structures, affects, and sensations that activate one's making. As with distributed personhood, Glissant insists that the right to opacity decentralizes modes of sensorial knowledge such that the subject is only ever understood as she is seen and as she sees herself. This in turn activates a sense of self that at once organizes around difference that does not aim to flatten, but rather to open up a field of possibility onto which selfhood is approximate to the many forms of sentient and nonsentient forms of life that surround the subject.

*Black Painting* is a measured and considered activation of a right to opacity. After all, the artist takes a transparent structure (fiberglass) and paints it black, literally transforming the material's transparent surface into an opaque one. Marshall's painting is a meditation on the dynamism of the color black in all its shades, pigments, and hues, as well as on the social and sensorial modes that make Black being a subject for composition.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the social chromaticism of the color black entangles questions of aesthetics, politics, and social relations. Marshall's own response to the question of Blackness in his paintings speaks volumes:

How do you render an object with real volume without destroying the depth of its blackness? . . . When I'm painting I try to create a certain measure of density, I'm always looking to create mass—but I know that I can't use standard modeling strategies to do so. The challenge is always how to handle the way light falls on a black object without allowing it to destroy the form, but rather to merely reveal it.<sup>46</sup>

Marshall's material inquiries at the level of depth, mass, light, and form bring us to the broader implications of painting scenes of Black life with and through black paint. While he works toward a kind of reveal, much like Whitten's reveal of Gadsden's photographic image, Marshall offers an approach to exposing contours of Black life that resist transparency. The viewer is asked to make Black out of black—to sit with the obfuscations that make a will to transparency impossible and opacity irresistible. By working toward a form that would give room for light

44. *Ibid.*, 192–93.

45. For more on the multiplicity of Blackness in Kerry James Marshall's *Black Painting*, see Benjamin L. Jones, "The Black Panther as African Cat: Mondo we Langa and Criminal Blackness," in *Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the Justice System*, ed. Risa Puleo (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2019).

46. Dieter Roelstraete and Kerry James Marshall, "An Argument for Something Else," in *Kerry James Marshall: Painting and Other Stuff* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2014), 32.

to hit a Black object without destroying it, the artist motivates a considered relationship to the painting that measures the play between paint and person, as well as the textures, contours, and shades of knowledge obscured and revealed in fractals, fragments, or fleeting whims. This may be why Marshall's painting feels like a protective gesture for both the subjects and objects of the work, as if Marshall, like Glissant, speaks to how opacity requires a relational activation.

This sense of protection and care is particularly illuminated by how Marshall makes his viewer work to see the painting in partial and perspectival fragments. Relying on sight alone frustrates the viewer, because it is impossible to take in the image in its entirety. To catch glimpses, the viewer must pace from one edge of the painting to the other, squat and angle her head up, peer as she gets close to and then as far away from the painting as possible. In other words, she must move her own body, be aware of her own scale and proximity to the work, take stock of her own perspectival possibilities and limitations. Here, I believe, Marshall makes a case for the embodied qualities of the look and opens up the relational capacities of Blackness. Blackness is pictured, seen, even felt as relational and active. It is about an aesthetic position that opens up a set of questions between figure and ground, subject and object, pictured and seen. To get into these questions, the viewer must take a position in relation to the painting, activate a mode of looking that is deeply embodied, and reflect upon the relations made possible if we think of Blackness as a general field of sensibility that moves through and against sight itself.

### **Blackness and the Bodily Distributions of Sight**

What I have attempted to track are the ways in which our various encounters with these aesthetic objects instruct us in the kinds of Blackness—chromatic, sensorial, political—that are taking shape right before us. To allow for the body to usher in sensorial forms of engagement, to suggest that sight is but one of a set of entangled forms of knowing, is to signpost how Blackness touches all of us, albeit in uneven and often imperceptible ways. Huey Copeland names a version of this engagement “tending-toward-blackness”:

This approach, what I have called a “tending-toward-blackness—a *leaning into and caring for*,” animates a range of artistic, social, political, and theoretical practices aimed at establishing an *ethical posture* toward black subjects and those related forms of being that have been positioned at the margins of thought and perception yet are necessarily co-constitutive of them.<sup>47</sup>

A call toward such a posture, toward an attention to those who have been positioned at those very perceptual margins, is a call toward a distribution of one's self that sees it wrapped up in Blackness—its histories, contexts, sensations—as an aesthetic force. To tend toward—lean, pivot, pace, squat, tilt, squint, bend—is an embodied care, a sensorial dislodging, and a right to opacity, a Blackness that demands we get in formation.

47. Huey Copeland, “Tending-toward-Blackness,” *October* 156 (Spring 2016): 141–44 (emphasis added).

Sampada Aranke is an assistant professor in the Art History, Theory, and Criticism Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work has been published in *e-flux* and *Artforum* and as catalog essays for Sadie Barnette, Rashid Johnson, Kambui Olujimi, and Zachary Fabri. Her book manuscript, “Death's Futurity,” focuses on the visual culture of death in the Black Power era.