

A Year
in Black
Art

Issue

VI

2022–2023

Published

The Black Embodiments Studio

Edited

Kemi Adeyemi

Editorial Design

Jonai Gibson-Selix

Website

blackembodiments.org

Social Media

@blackembodiments

A Year in Black Art



Issue

VI

2022–2023

Letter from the Editor

In so many ways, putting together a journal of arts writing feels really simple: “here is a collection of what people have been experiencing, thinking about, feeling, reporting on—all for you, the reader!” And yet writing, as a process and as an outcome of thinking, feels as fraught as ever. There are all kinds of legislation coming down in the United States attempting to bar people’s access to writing and trying to police the content of people’s writing. Then we have the seemingly never-ending hand-wringing about the particular crises of arts writing, specifically how challenging it is to fund sustainable arts writing platforms, how unwilling people are to pay arts writers sustainable wages, and how impossibly dull arts writing can itself be. Under these conditions, The Black Embodiments Studio runs an arts writing incubator and produces this very journal knowing full well that the same people who say that they want arts writing won’t read (or fund) it.

This is a bummer in some ways. It’s mostly a release, though. Above all, the writing in this volume of *A Year in Black Art* represents people’s dedication to the practice of writing, sometimes against all odds. (When’s the last time you took a moment to yourself, for yourself, to think about beautiful art, or art that challenged you, or art that made you want more?) The work in this journal represents the writers’ interests and investments in themselves, in their own creative and intellectual well-being. They write with admiration for and with curiosity toward and with a sharp eye regarding the artists and work in question. Each piece of writing is a being-with that can feel so, so rare in this moment; they are a rare moment of communion across many scales.

So, for all the major and minor dramas that can circumscribe the production of knowledge, the simple beauty of what you are holding in your hands (or what you are reading on your screen) cannot be overstated. What a feat to put your thoughts on a page, and what a joy to have other people read it. Take a moment and just read and think and feel.



Kemi Adeyemi
Director of The Black
Embodiments Studio

Table of Contents

08

Deborah Jack
Laïssa C. Alexis

14

The Sweetness of the
Frame
Kanyinsola Anifowoshe

44

More Than Just a Fuck
Eric Villiers

50

In the creases of the
everyday: Kennedi
Carter unfolds the
magic between the
image and the untitled
Ricky Weaver Carter

20

On Forever Gwen
Brooks
Em Chan

26

Reflection on Shannon
T. Lewis, *Seals of the*
Habitual World, 2022
Rachel Dukes

56

I think about you all the
time especially in the
morning at the bus stop
Reg Zehner

62

Endnotes

32

Perennial Movements
Ella Ray

38

From Here I Saw an
Afterlife:
Carrie Mae Weems'
Photographic
Permissions and
Processions
Ethel-Ruth Tawe

Deborah Jack

Laïssa C. Alexis

Laïssa C. Alexis *[she/her]* is currently an MA student at Columbia University. She was born and lived in Haiti for 8 years, before moving to her current home in New Jersey. She enjoys reading science fiction, writing, watching movies, and always pencils time during her day to daydream.

In summer 2023, the hottest year on record, Art on Hulfish, Princeton Art Museum's new gallery, exhibited *Traces on the Landscape*, featuring various artists exploring their relationships to the natural world including its changing climate. Deborah Jack's work is particularly interesting because of her relationship with the Caribbean and her use of salt as a material.

Raised in Saint Martin and based in Jersey City, New Jersey in the US, much of Jack's work contemplates her Caribbean heritage. French and Dutch colonial leaders divided the island into two, a northern French side called Saint-Martin and a southern Dutch side called Sint Maarten. In her multimedia practice, Jack complicates narratives of the Caribbean as merely a tourist haven. Instead, she investigates the islands as early sites of colonial exploitation that face multiple and ongoing climate disasters.

A video work, two collages, and a photo installation anchor Jack's exploration of the Caribbean's changing environment, focusing on sand, salt, sea, and hurricanes. In *bounty ii*, (2006), a series of three light boxes contain small, projected images, stills from video Jack took of tall pyramids of salt, a resource historically mined in the region. The light boxes have a framing mat on top of them, allowing only part of the image to be seen. Jack desaturates the image, so that the white of these salt mines are prominent.

Sugar may dominate the understanding of resource extraction by Europeans of enslaved Africans and their descendants,

but in this series, Jack turns our attention to salt as one resource exploited by colonial powers. Following the abolition of slavery in 1848 on the French side and in 1863 on the Dutch side, salt became the island's primary industry until about the mid-20th century. Salt mining continues on the Caribbean island of Bonaire, another Dutch colonial possession, where Jack took these images. The smallness of these images force the viewer to get close, gaining an intimacy with these mounds of salt in the same way salt workers might have. On the wall opposite *bounty ii*, is *Drawn by water: Sea Drawings in three acts, Act One: wait/weight on the water* (2007). The video projection films the seashore of the Netherlands and images of the stormy sea, providing a kind of kinetic balance to the stillness of *bounty ii*.

Two collages in the exhibition more directly incorporate salt as a material. In *...the song the tempest sings, traveled the undercurrents to be heard and...*(2021) includes a blown-out satellite image of a hurricane, while near the bottom right of the print is a seismometer graph. A seismometer is a device typically used to measure earthquakes, but because of the increasing strength of the Caribbean's hurricanes, they also appear on these seismometers. Salt crystals and gold leaf appear around the graph and dapple the edges of an image of a flower that anchors the composition. Jack also places salt crystals over the edges of the hurricane. The second collage, *...the salt of their blood, still in the ocean, the sea kissing our shores...every wave a hymn...every tide a poem...the sea is an elegy* (2021), is a more stripped back version of the first. Where the image of the hurricane anchors the former composition, here, a strikingly plain background amplifies the geometric arrangement of the seismometer reading, the flower, and a lone strip of a still image of the shore. This image resembles the seashore in the video installation. Jack's focus on salt in this work highlights the salt industry's cruelty on the people of Saint Martin, while maintaining the memory of salt.

In wall text accompanying these pieces, Jack is quoted as saying,

For me, the hurricane was nature's way of dealing with loss, with trauma, with all these bodies being carted across the ocean and perishing at the sea. The hurricane was this seasonal memorial.

As long as land, resource and labor exploitation continue, climate disasters will continue to increase in frequency and intensity. By using salt, sea, sand and hurricanes, Jack calls attention to lesser-known parts of Caribbean history, though parts that tell us about the order of our world today. Jack's work reminds us that though we may forget, the earth never does.

The Sweetness of the Frame¹

Kanyinsola Anifowoshe

Kanyinsola Anifowoshe is a curator and writer based in New Haven, CT. Through curatorial work and public programming, Kanyinsola has sought to critically examine and celebrate Black women's intergenerational and historically marginalized artistic legacies. She is interested in how Land, as well as relations of love, responsibility, and belonging with the Earth, are sites of Black abolitionist and transformative justice. Kanyinsola is also curious about how dancing, dreaming, and breaking bread together brings us closer to that other world—the one in which we are free. She currently studies American Studies and Human Rights Studies at Yale College.

Come August, we've learned to live with the music of the street all day long, even as it bears us into the night. Hum of traffic, rattling rhythms, and sometimes, a sweetness that blurs the balmy air. "One summer night," reminisces the photographer Ming Smith, "I had the windows open and I could hear a neighbor playing Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain*."² This fragment of song drifts over the city throughout *Projects: Ming Smith*, the photographer's first solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

I am standing before an open window. In front of me, light falls on brick walls in a steady rhythm. From the second floor, a man leans out, dangles a slim cigarette, and gazes down at another man who is staring out, past the frame. Here is *Raise Your Window High* (1972), a photograph which draws our gaze into, out of, and between frames—ricocheting like the path of an electron.

Ming Smith makes images that refuse to capture, frames that fail to contain. Her subjects, with their heads turned away or forms dissipating into shadow, glimmer between invisibility and its opposite. The images blur darkness and light with a painterly touch. Whereas systems of domination have used photography as a "technology of capture," Ming Smith shows us free Black living spilling beyond the frame.³

In *Jump, Harlem, New York* (1976), a young man leaps, soars out of the photograph itself.

His shirt is all contrast and brightness; his face soft yet determined. He pushes down against a ledge with his right hand as his left hand propels him upwards. The crowd behind him files down the stone steps in an orderly line, but he is an affront to order. Or rather—he is an embrace of possibility.

One way to break a frame is by splitting the seam separating you from your surroundings. In Smith's most recognized print, *Invisible Man, Somewhere, Everywhere* (1991), a shadowy figure walks down a snowy street in Pittsburgh. His form is barely recognizable; here, the body is a hideaway where living can take place. Night streaks across the image like rain. The miracle of Smith's photos is that though the subjects are blurred, they are never impersonal. We remain close enough to hear the strains of music seeping through.

Rhythm,
gravity,
geography, a
city's staccato
grids—all of
these forces
calling us to
order. And yet,
doesn't their
order also
invite us to riff,
interrupt, cut
through?

Smith highlights this interplay through skillful, deeply intuitive compositions balancing structure and movement. Look at *African Burial Ground, Sacred Space* (1991): we are immediately drawn to the spectral, spectacular whirl of a young man dancing in the center. But this image is defined as much by his

motion as by the elder behind him, fresh in a bow tie and lively patterned coat, tapping his feet and rocking his hips. Or enter into Smith's photo of arms, shoulders, backs, and raised fists marching through the street (at the 1998 Million Youth March). Recognize it as an image of the relationship between a frame—the city—and people negotiating a life within and against that frame, like riffing (rifting) on a rhythm.

On Forever *Gwen Brooks*

Em Chan

Em Chan is a senior at UW majoring in Art History and English Literature. His research interests include the materialities of cultural memory and migration, the intersections of visual and literary arts, and works that move within public circuits and encourage tactile interaction. He began his work in the arts in theater and performance facilitation, and has since moved on to work in classrooms, galleries, libraries, and film forums. He currently works at the Henry Art Gallery and the UW Special Collections Library, and in his free time, he is a writer and multimedia book artist.

It is the stalks of our fire.

In a lake in angel there is this I.
How however.

Black passion in our
Camaraderie, it remember, we
discreet each other, are mutual
hurt and fume.

Physical light is in the
interruption.

Above is an excerpt from “An Aspect of Deathintheafternoon, Alive in the Lion and Chains,” a poem that Gwendolyn Brooks could have written. I generated it within seconds using poet, programmer, and digital storyteller Lillian-Yvonne Bertram’s ongoing web project *Forever Gwen Brooks*. Using Python and JavaScript, Bertram created a program that mapped the syntactical structure of Brooks’s 1987 work “An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire,” which appears as the final section of her 3-part poem *RIOT!* about the 1968 Chicago protests that followed in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Bertram’s program collected all of the nouns, verbs, and adjectives used in the first two parts of the poem, and using the structure of “An Aspect of Love,” employs these words to randomly generate alternate poems that Brooks “could have written” ad infinitum.

As is consistent with virtually generated text, the poems produced are semantically disjointed – parts of speech are misaligned, sentences emerge grammatically scrambled. Bertram notes this in a piece they wrote for the Poetry Foundation: “the intention isn’t to reach grammatical perfection. Rather, Brooks’s poems often defy customary syntactical rules and foreground a sense of play.” In this way, both Brooks and Bertram “hack” language, subvert or burlesque forms in order to create space for more expansive modes of expression. This investment in linguistic dissonance and play stands in

stark contrast with ongoing uses of computer-generation to produce flawless images and text. AI pictures of figures with pale, plasticky skin, programs that can perfectly mimic the vocal patterns of celebrities and politicians, and papers with original theses written in seconds by chatbots embody an obvious obsession with constantly approaching the “human” and erasing any imprint of the machine (while simultaneously sublimating the role of the artist/writer). This obsession is not only unachievable but inherently restrictive. The ideal notion of humanity perpetuated by mainstream artificial intelligence software is a constrictive one, rooted in white supremacist, consumerist concepts of being, working, and creating. AI engines are notorious for targeting Black art and bodies, flagging them as dangerous, suspect, and inappropriate, commandeering their aesthetics sans credit, or erasing them entirely. In this way, these AI systems corrupt Black legacies in favor of endless airbrushed stagnancy.

In *Forever Gwen Brooks*, the computer program is not a medium through which this narrow idea of humanity is achieved; rather it is a co-author that leaves its own stylistic imprint on each generated poem. The goal of this endless random generation is not a trend towards perfection but an experiment, an act of perpetual creation that implicates the poet, the reader, the programmer, and the program alike as authors. In this way, Brooks’ voice takes on a cybernetic component, deliberately refusing full humanity as a means of calling into question the criteria of both artistic creation and human existence. Brooks’s cyborg voice adapts riot and revolution for the digital age, and evolves into a battle cry that reverberates through the siloed chambers of the modern internet.

What’s more, the program lives on a notably bare-bones website – www.forevergwenbrooks.com – reminiscent of personal blog spaces from the early 2000s. Each poem is written in white serif text against a black background, and a blank white rectangle in the lower right corner functions as a refresh button. Visitors to the site encounter a portal to an internet long-past, a quiet, safe, preserved corner of what would expand to become a vast and often-terrifying terrain. Appropriately, it is in this anachronistic space that the creative legacy of Brooks is examined – an act that itself embodies a sense of future with the foraged aesthetic elements of the past. The effect is akin to an act of uncasing a large, sleek machine to reveal its unadorned interior, of laying bare a programming system before reconfiguring it as a means to resuscitate and sustain.

Amidst systems that position the digital realm as a default “white” space, what does a Black computer program look, feel, and function like? *Forever Gwen Brooks* burrows into the hardware of systems that devalue and endanger Black life, and in the hollow it creates with its presence is a space for the commemoration and preservation of legacies and an expansion of possibilities for the digital realm. It presents a burlesqued form of diy programming as a subversive engine for resistance and investment in Black futures.

Reflection
on Shannon
T. Lewis,
*Seals of the
Habitual
World, 2022*

Rachel Dukes

Rachel Dukes is a Chicago-based writer and arts administrator from Grand Prairie, Texas. She is currently pursuing an MA in Museum and Exhibitions Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago with a concentration in Black Studies. Rachel has served as a consultant for several non-profit organizations in Chicago and currently works at Gallery 400. Her practice centers Black voices and histories, and she is passionate about anchoring her exploration of Black art in community and accessibility.

My first encounter with Shannon T. Lewis's work was at Mariane Ibrahim gallery in Chicago. I didn't know much about the exhibition on display but I wandered into the space, a bit moody honestly, and in need of something that felt like home. Not a home that I knew, but a home that I could feel. *Hauntology: Ghostly Matters* was the first thing I saw after greeting the friendly gallery attendant at the door. The group show curated by Aindrea Emelife hosted eight women artists of African descent. Emelife paired the term hauntology, which refers to a present time haunted by ghosts of unknown or lost futures, with the African concept of Ubuntu which posits personhood and relationality with others as harmonious.

All of the works in the exhibition reflect an image of Black womanhood that that uncovered new facets of my identity, memory, and desires. I gradually felt my mood lifting as I moved throughout the space. Lewis's piece *Seals of the Habitual World* was the first to capture my attention

and the last I sat with before leaving. The striking shades of blues and reds were hard for me to forget and the details of the central figure were familiar- the brown skin and curly fro, the shoulders and neckline, the long fingers. This painting visualized movement and the sensation of touch in a way that my body recognized. To know that I was not alone in this feeling made the tense and dreary mood ultimately disappear.

Returning home that evening still fixated on this work,

and the exhibition, I gave a story to the figure in Lewis's painting.

The ladies in my family remind me, for lots of reasons, not to leave home without mascara. A full face isn't necessary-just a bit of mascara to polish, for the soft and effortless elegance of attentive eyes. A sweet and gentle sentient.

At my desk sits an empty mug once filled with green tea and one single rose. There I was reading and writing at dawn (my most productive hour) just trying to figure out how to connect ideas with words. Slouching in a cheap wooden chair, letting the minutes slip away from me. Refilling my cup of tea until the sounds of sun whispered "stop."

But that was then and this is tonight, and tonight I am wearing red. The boldest red I could find in my closet but somehow the softest. The kind of red that can't be ignored. The kind that somehow carries from an evening candlelight dinner to a quiet, dimly lit bar, and finally to my retreat.

I've returned to my desk with this red and this mascara. The sticky mug and wilting rose still by a leather bound pad and a fine point black pen. There's a deep yearning for my attention here

—even in this
solitude, I'm
needed.

I rub my eyes and look at my hands. I see the remnants of yester-hours. Black from the ink, from ashes, from dirt. I carry my fingers to my neck where there's a sharp pain that extends to my right shoulder

and arm. I don't know why it's here. My mother always told me to sit up straight and walk with my head high. I ignore(d) her because I know I have to sit and stand in my own way. She could never understand this pain that has made a home in my body.

I never linger in real clothes but I love this dress so much I can't stand to trade it for mismatched loungewear. And there's something especially alluring about being (by, to, as) myself. The crick is still there but my night is ending. It's Thursday night, though, and the people are outside so there will be new sounds soon and I should really get ahead of them.

I instinctually raise my right arm to undress and relieve my night of the evening that was had but I soon realize that this is the kind of red that I need to shimmy my way out of. With the help of two gentle tugs on each sleeve, I shake the dress off my forearms, freeing it to slide down my torso, below my waist and onto the rug. I wind my shoulders back and curl my neck in a circle. I run the shower water and I step through it.

This mother's daughter is gonna make waves. Waves like the stormy sea...

Nancy Wilson and I sing over each other as tiny lines of water trickle down my back and legs. They form gentle streams that greet my feet.

This mother's daughter will see the end of time go by...

I lather from the neck down, not caring too much. The curls are tucked neatly, it'll be alright.

Perennial Movements

Ella Ray

Ella Ray is a writer and library worker concerned with the manner in which refusal, worldbuilding, and illegibility can be embodied in visual and performance art. These lines of study are augmented by Ray's desire to create pathways for their people to access educational and artistic material for their own research and pleasure. Since graduating from Portland State University in 2018, they've supported institutions such as lumber room gallery, Oregon Contemporary, and their alma mater with exhibition writing, programming, and critical consultation. Ray was the 2019 Kress Interpretive Fellow at the Portland Art Museum and has been a writer in residence with the Black Arts Ecology of Portland, the Black Abbey Residency, and SteloArts. They made their curatorial debut in 2021 with the group show "Nobody's Fool," hosted by Carnation Contemporary.

Ray's essays, reviews, and research have appeared in/on Variable West, Cult Classic Magazine, the Studio Museum in Harlem's website, in exhibition catalogs for King School Museum of Contemporary Art, and more. Beyond work, Ella is committed to being a sister and a friend.

It is exhausting to visit *Signals: How Video Transformed the World* at the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition is indeed a dynamic chronicle of video art across time, geography, and application, but the colossal, multi-floor show was draining and relatively seatless.

I sometimes
believe that
museums
want us to be
fatigued,

to be depleted by the space and time we spend looking at art. While museums have the capacity to be third places that provide respite from work and home, they are currently designed to remind the public

that the institution is in charge. In exchange for an admission fee we are herded through white wall galleries and then wrung dry in the gift shop. Can you count the ways capitalism and the artworld are working together to maintain physically exhausted subjects?

The death rattle of exhibition-going fails disabled folks who are mustering what scant energy we have to get through the doors. Then there is the navigation of the winding 8-lane highway of packed galleries. And stairs are not an option for me, so in between each section of the exhibition I waited to be squished in an elevator full of maskless people. I lingered with Sondra Perry's *Double Quadruple Etcetera Etcetera I & II* (2013), Martine Syms' *Lessons I-CLXXX* (2017), and Song Dong's *Broken Mirror* (1999), feeling refreshed by embodied rage: Perry's thrashing body, Syms' declaration of "to hell with my suffering," Dong's multidimensional disruption that illustrated innovative approaches to video and installation that made space for many bodies at many angles. Yet beyond those pieces and a handful of other standout works (such as Tony Cokes' *Black Celebration* (1988) and Amar Kanwar's *The Torn First Pages* (2004-2008)), I found myself trapped in a thorny junction of ableist public space with Signal's very obvious nod toward surveillance and precarity.

And then there was *CRIP TIME* (2018) by Carolyn Lazard. Notably, this work was not included in *Signals* but in MoMA's permanent collection.

Running just over 10 minutes, *CRIP TIME* takes the point of view of Lazard as they replenish their weekly medication. The

artist's body is out of frame and we only see Lazard's hands as they move methodically, in real time, from prescription bottles to their organization system, a pillbox for each day of the week that is divided into quadrants marked "MORNING," "NOON," "EVENING," and "BEDTIME." When Lazard is done they neatly align the boxes, ready to be depleted and refilled; ready to begin again where they started. *CRIP TIME* ends without credits and is programmed to play on a continual loop. The absence of a customary ending, one that would essentially mark Lazard's performance as "complete" or "resolved," further emphasizes the ceaselessness of taking care of one's body.

Viewing this work in the museum's second-floor elevator bank, punctuated by the ding of the lift, made 10 minutes feel both like 10 hours and 10 seconds. Unwellness is a mundane dance often marked by perennial movements. Modest and recurrent tasks that may appear inconsequential to able-bodied people consume hours, days, and years of our lives. *CRIP TIME* illustrates the monotonous choreography of illness where routine gestures like refilling medication warp timekeeping. In an interview with *BOMB*, Lazard asserts that "disability reveals the structure of time itself to be soft and rather malleable." Like taffy pulled from a sharp hook, the internal and external clocks in *CRIP TIME* are stretched so thin that the beginning and the end collapse into the fold.

Watching the piece felt like a moment of parallel play. I watched what I thought was the entirety of the video with people bumping into my back, feeling oddly called to "be with" Lazard during this chore—the chore of refilling weekly medications and, for

me, of viewing the work in the space of MoMA. *CRIP TIME* bounces between mechanical and intimate as the artist's counts, recounts, pauses, and adjusts their deposits. Although the audio of the video was faint against the roar of the museum, muffled clattering of pill bottles and the artist's heavy breath bled through as I inched toward the screen.

Lazard's reserved, but piercing use of diegetic sound makes this illustration of disability and chronic illness entrancing. With the artist's body off camera, I turned inward: Are those my hands on the screen? Who stays with me while I complete my tasks that keep me alive? What is the noise of my pain?

I peel away from the video and aimlessly viewed some of the permanent collection before deciding my time at the museum was over. It was time to go home. My body had done and seen enough.

*From Here I Saw
an Afterlife:
Carrie Mae
Weems'
Photographic
Permissions and
Processions*

Ethel-Ruth Tawe

Ethel-Ruth Tawe [b. Yaoundé, Cameroon] is an image-maker, storyteller, and time-traveller based between continents. Her work explores memory and identity in Africa and its diaspora. Using collage, pigments, words, installation, still and moving images, Ethel examines space and time-based technologies often from a surrealist lens. Her burgeoning curatorial practice took form in an inaugural exhibition titled 'African Ancient Futures', and continues to expand in a myriad of audiovisual experiments.

Among the Akan people of Ghana, it is tradition to perform grand funeral rites and lavish ceremonies that honor the dead, allowing their spirits to safely transit from the realm of the living into that of the ancestors. When I first visited Accra, I was struck by the constellation of obituary posters across the city, often with large portraits of the deceased and their names of endearment. In a short Ghanaian documentary *Future Remembrance* (1998), directed by Tobias Wendel and Nancy du Plessis, a photographer insists: "If you don't photograph yourself, when you have died, you have died forever. Nobody remembers you, nobody knows you. You are doing it for future remembrance." The self-image plays a critical role in African ontologies, in this case conjuring successful transitions to the afterlife and into collective memory. But what happens when these images are seized from subjects and denied that passage?

At Carrie Mae Weems' retrospective *Reflections for Now* at the Barbican Centre in London, one particular body of work compels me to ruminate on the attempted social and corporeal death of Black people. Weems appropriates and interrogates a series of distressing images of enslaved African Americans taken by Joseph T. Zealy in 1850, and commissioned by Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz to support his racist theories. Such common pseudoscientific practices at the time aimed to let "the naked truth of Black inferiority imprint itself directly from the bodies to the photographic plate," as Ariella Azoulay writes in the *Boston Review* essay, "The Captive Photograph" (2011). Unfolding like a procession, Weems aptly titles the work: *From*

Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried (1995 - 96); a guide to see, to question, and to mourn.

A crimson red screen filters my gaze onto the old portraits on the gallery wall; the disquieting hue of a history of capture and a fractured bloodline. In Akan tradition, wearing red clothing at funerals indicates familial ties to the deceased, while black indicates condolences to the bereaved family. Weems' red and black portraits are framed and arranged in grids and diptychs, sequenced like contact sheets or medallions. Enlarging, cropping, tinting, and placing the images within circular mattes that emulate a camera's lens, Weems re-frames the narrative of Agassiz's racist study. The textual interventions offer a window of speculative repair from dissent read through the sitters' eyes:

"You became a scientific profile"

"An anthropological debate"

"A negroid type"

"& A
photographic
subject"

In 2019, Tamara Lanier filed a lawsuit against Harvard University claiming "wrongful seizure, possession and expropriation of photographic images"; two of the sitters are her ancestors Renty Taylor and his daughter Delia. During the same session, Agassiz utilized the new daguerreotype

method to produce eugenics propaganda of Drana, Alfred, Jack, George Fassena, and Jem – other enslaved people. In a radical re-understanding, Azoulay argues that Agassiz's study constitutes "crimes against humanity" and that, due to Lanier's kinship claim for them as *ancestors* and not objects, the daguerreotypes in Harvard's possession can be seen as holdings of human remains, requiring their restitution under the law. Azoulay states: "Any technical or scientific explanation of the procedure of the daguerreotype cannot ignore that these would not exist without the subjects being forced to have a portion of their naked skin open to the light and reflected onto the sensitive surface of these plates. These daguerreotypes are, in a literal sense, the remains of their presence, forced enslavement, and unwilling nudity." This concurs with African ontological understandings of how image-objects hold a personal essence and *live* beyond the physical realm.

It is important to consider the photographs' context of production and intent; they cannot be 'owned' or read outside their sustaining acts of violence. "The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, [...] an asterisk in the grand narrative of history", as poignantly stated by Saidiya Hartman in her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts." Harvard defends their possession through the logic of exploitative wealth, in fear of setting precedence to the many contestable items in their collections. They threatened to sue Weems in 1996 who initially promised *not* to use the daguerreotypes but later reversed her decision. Although Harvard dropped the case, Weems has embraced the critical dialogue that emerged.

The question remains, who really were the sitters? And who has permission to hold or disseminate their likeness today? Renty Taylor was born around 1775 in the Congo where he was

captured and later enslaved on a South Carolina plantation. While it is impossible to ever grasp a full picture of their interior lives, Weems' work operates boldly within the realm of collective memory and its contradictions. According to her, the use of "You" and "I" in the text act as framing devices through repetition. To me, they read as lamentations from a descendant to ancestor, a backward linearity that underpins Black oral traditions. While Lanier fights for their return home, Weems gives them a chance to be collectively hung together with care, perhaps as they may have within a home.

As exhibitions can often perpetuate Black spectacle, it is valid to question if these images should even be shown at all.

However, I see Weems' work as striving to redress, quite literally by clothing these photographs in new narratives. Unintentionally, she dresses them appropriately in red and black according to Akan funerary tradition, to relink familial ties across realms and timelines. Agassiz' study forced sitters to disrobe and be photographed as slaves, rather than how they may have chosen. To redress these photographs, is to constitute what Tina Campt in *Listening to Images* (2017) terms *resemblance in*

dispossession: "everyday micro-shifts in the social order of racialization that temporarily reconfigure the status of the dispossessed."

Weems' work offers *permission*, which echoes throughout the exhibition as a reference point for Black archival praxis. It is permission to work "with and against the archive," as Saidiya Hartman writes, "disordering and transgressing the protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements." This work raises pertinent questions around restitution, remembrance and care, underscoring our duty to reckon with the ethics of image-making at large.

More Than Just a Fuck

Eric Villiers

Eric Villiers [he/him] is a queer artist and scholar. Currently, Eric is pursuing a PhD in Theatre History and Performance Studies at the University of Washington. As an artist and performer, Eric's work uses (auto)ethnographic methodologies in the creation of pieces that combine traditional material art practices with performance. These pieces often work to trouble conceptions of who and what can and should perform/exist in public space. Eric's scholarship is concerned with curatorial practices of display in contemporary and modern art museums and galleries and the ways in which queer art and other minoritarian art performatively operates within these displays.

On a clear but chilly fall day in Seattle (a rare experience for this city) I enter a house in the city's Central District and climb the stairs to the second floor of this former residence, now the home of Wa Na Wari and its galleries. I am here to see artist Darryl DeAngelo Terrell's *I Wish I Was Perfectly Happy*. Installed in a small (former) bedroom, *I Wish I was Perfectly Happy* is a series of three photographs, each hanging on one wall of the empty bedroom, each photograph a portrait of Terrell.

Terrell is an imposing figure at 6'6", which reads quite clearly in these large format prints, full-length mirror like in their scale. Dressed in only a pair of gray boxer briefs, Terrell's body is exposed, the rich dark tones of their skin standing in harsh contrast to the stark white back drop, Terrell's body looks as if it is suspended in space. The poses they have taken—the silhouettes of their body—are at once familiar, and also, somehow, unfamiliar. This familiarity is no accident, but rather a determined act of citation. Terrell's poses are direct references to the infamous silhouettes of Sarah Baartman. Terrell's intervention into these silhouettes comes from the simplest of instruments, the black sharpie pen. Surrounding and intersecting with Terrell's body is a series of factual information (often struck through) and

criticisms written indelibly on the photograph.

"Cute enough to FUCK not to be LOVED," is a statement written next to Terrell's head in the first of the three photographs. This statement exposes a relationship between desire and temporality that suffuses these pieces, it poses an important question to contemplate:

How does
desire
temporally
extended in
ways that
become love?

The movement of thought that is expressed in all of the writing, the constant editing and criticism, produces a certain tension, a push and pull of self-love and disappointment, produced by a society that makes the black queer body a site of abjection. The gulf of desire sits heavy in these pieces. The desire to be loved, the desire to love oneself, the need to be desired

for more than a moment, for more than just a fuck.

Displaying these pieces in a former bedroom adds another layer of resonance to this work. I could not help but pulled back into my own memories, remembering my own bedroom as a retreat of self-criticism, standing in front of my mirror and criticizing my queer body as the barrier to my own happiness. I found myself feeling like a voyeur in this space, as if I was watching Terrell in their own bedroom, standing in front of their own mirror, as they take their body in, struggling to inhabit their body as they waver between moments in which they body is a site of love and moments when their body feels like a barrier to love.

One may think that with the harshness of the black sharpie handwriting over these photographs that the experience of encountering them would be loud, but in many ways these photographs are quiet, and it is through quietness that we might best think through these pieces. Scholar Kevin Quashie explains, "photography is, in a way, quiet—its expressiveness is always a little more ambivalent and less definitive than prose, for example. Rare

is the photograph that offers a single, sure narrative; instead the medium flourishes on the tension between definitiveness and uncapturability, how what cannot be captured is and then, as one looks beyond the frame and image, is not."¹ There is an undeniable tension in these photographs. Though Terrell is on the surface "exposed" there is so much that sits just below the surface that these photographs never actually capture. The mirror like quality to these images, asks us to think about what can never be captured by the lens of the camera, to contemplate the gulf between public exposure, one's interior life, and the world beyond the frame that conditions all of these experiences. Sitting in this tension, sitting in the deafening quietness it produces is not easy, but this is where the beauty lies within Terrell's work and may be the location in which we can begin imagining how to collapse time and desire into love.

In the creases
of the everyday:
Kennedi Carter
unfolds the
magic between
the image and
the untitled

Ricky Weaver

Ricky Weaver is an Image-based Artist and Theorist currently working in Los Angeles, CA. Her work is situated in an object-oriented practice that allows space for theorizing images in a way that extends beyond the photograph. Her practice interrogates how the body, hymn, scripture, and everyday life appear as image and how that image functions as both archive and vessel. She is currently placed at ArtCenter College of Design (Pasadena, CA) as a Faculty Fellow and a Mellon Artist-in-Residence at the University of Michigan's Institute for the Humanities (Ann Arbor, MI).

There's something about vulnerability that can make visible a shape around something we didn't know

we were holding. *Saudade* is a Portuguese term used to describe a longing for something you have not known (in this lifetime). In the context of Black Life, I relate this concept to rememory and recollection. Gathering up things, putting them together, looking at them, listening to them, letting them take you...

In Kennedy Carter's photography exhibition titled *Meditation on the Untitled*, she seduces the viewer into a particular brand of nostalgia. The texture of each work situates us in a speculative temporality. A departure from a linear understanding into a longing for something that had to have happened.

On the opening day of the show, there was an artist talk followed by a Q&A. During this time an audience member used this opportunity to ask "When is this?" pointing at one of the images on the wall. As with all photographs, like any other object, the work is always now, even if the context is tangled up in a then unknown to us. However, Carter is giving us something that is also elsewhere; a convergence of time and space that is not in response to one particular thing. The archival

pigment prints are very dark, and green and warm and blue. Even in that configuration the sign departs from the signified. Brown bodies pose and posture in scenes that are familiar and fantastical.

I had already put this artist's work in conversation with *Listening to Images* (Tina Campt) and *Black Visual Intonation* (Arthur Jafa). It was no surprise to hear that Carter is inspired by the type of world-building Sadiya Hartman writes about in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

There's one image, in particular, featuring a seated couple wearing a tender amount of black silk and lace. The figure closest to the foreground wears a gold chain with a chunky cross resting on the sternum. There is intimacy, there is softness, there is complexity, and the air is thick. I linger with the velvety skin of these black bodies, lit and colored in a dark, fantastical manner that makes them glitter like the other side of midnight. I say "bodies" because in some images we don't see faces and even when we do the gestures of fingertips, feet, and collarbones tell us more than the eyes ever could. It becomes less about their unique identity and more about their relationship with each other and the world around them. In response, I am washed with warmth and longing, wrestling with the belief required to architect a space of imagination produced by a single "what if." Like Carter's postpartum maternity photos with a prosthetic belly—one must hold a particular understanding of life and time to fathom an image that is simultaneously magic, grief, and an apparatus for transmutation.

The way that Carter moves the viewer through writing worlds could be considered alchemy but it is also something more specific, something we can't name and it is important that we don't try to.

Being without
a name
can signify
something
that is not a
derivative of
this world.

These works tether us to a "universe of her own making—that which is queer, that which is other, that which is woman." I think conjuring up an artifact of elsewhere is how I would describe it. This allows the image as an object to be a balm, a soothing song, a new kind of spiritual.

Through meditation, accompanied by the chant of an ancestral chorus (or knowing) Carter reminds us of the magic in remaining untitled or without name. We recall the fact that black life escapes the confines of language every day. These seemingly mundane images become enchanted in their aesthetic and mystical at second glance. We remember the sweet sickness of the South, I hear Toni Morrisons' voice reading *Sula*, I find rest in these narratives. The work pushes us forward by calling us back. I find something in the Untitled that is both ours and my own—chant and charm, now and then—here and a world of it's own.

*I think
about you
all the time
especially in
the morning
at the bus stop*

Reg Zehner

Reg Zehner [*they/them/theirs*] is a Black American, Jersey City-based, curator, DJ writer, and cultural worker from the Midwest. Currently, their practice expands upon errant histories of Black social geographies and how such legacies still continue to shape the current political, physical, and emotional landscapes we currently live in. As well for Zehner's DJ moniker, Love Higher – their soundscapes are multi-genre experiences that tap into high-energy worldbuilding. They currently are a member of With(in). Digital, a Black digital respite centering art conversations and Blessed Up Gang, a black DJ collective from Ohio.

a keylah imani wellington is a Columbus-based artist, friend, and lover of all sorts. Her thesis work, *I think about you all the time especially in the morning at the bus stop*, exhibited at Urban Arts Space in 2023, explores the connection between early 2000s digital beingness, the carceral state, and the connection between a mother and her child.

The installation is a corner of the gallery, the walls draped in a massive, oversized print of the default Windows XP background: blue sky. Two concrete and untreated wood benches advertising “Big Joke’s” bonding service sit on panels of astroturf. Should the sitter know someone in trouble, Big Joke’s phone number directs them to a voicemail of wellington’s mother as she tries (and fails) to recall the bail service she used in 2003 when she was arrested in Gretna, Louisiana. At that time, the FBI were investigating the dominant Gretna bail bonds service, whose owners were bribing court judges in West Jefferson Parish courthouse.

Near the benches sit a shiny chrome newspaper vending machine where copies of a newsletter crafted and printed by wellington. The paper is a digitally altered Louisiana crime blotter called *Justified*. Wellington’s version contains blurred mugshots and collaged advertisements for bail services, a lawyer, a family practice that accepts Medicare, a tailor, a number for anonymous tips, and an announcement for a cash reward for identifying a crime suspect. The words “CRAZY BUT FLORIDA” are printed in full color in *Justified’s* centerfold. The newsletter is free of charge; as if it were a newspaper you would happen to read while waiting for your next bus.

In *Rich Meme*, *Poor Meme*

(2016), Aria Dean writes that, “We, as black people, are no strangers to the alienation of mediated selfhood. We have much experience with mass surveillance, a condition that the white avant-garde would have us believe is a recent development in state control.” The essay delves into the interiority of black personhood as it relates to the circulatory nature of meme culture and the pervasiveness of surveillance culture, of which black people have been disproportionately affected by. The digital age, particularly from the early aughts ‘till now, has seen the ever increasing objectification and surveillance of black people and our personalities for consumption.

Wellington’s
installation
makes it a
point to expose
the ironies of
our embedded,
violent
surveillance
state.

The pixelated, blue Windows XP sky sits humorously against the overblown “Error” box that encases the edges of the installation. Additionally, with the careful details of the distorted mugshots alongside the pristine, fake grass, wellington’s installation can also be seen as a metaphor of the extreme ways the state

creates systems to control, disappear, and harm the most marginalized—all the while normalizing these systems as so mundane that they are unremarkable.

As someone whose family has also been infected by the carceral system, I found a deep resonance between wellington's installation and the ways the carceral system impacts every inch of your life and the echoes tracing your present moment. The installation, which invites you to sit on the bench and to hold the newspaper, blurs the lines between embodiment and simulation, a false reality that is trying to copy what is believed to be *real*. As a

gen-z person who has grown up online, in a broken reality, the blue screens I find myself turning to in solace from the pain are the same ones where isolation occurs—a quiet reminder of how the extreme blue light can be reminiscent of police, of prisons, of the box, of the container you cannot escape.

And going off of this feeling, as you look upwards to the blue sky PNG background, it acts as as an indicator of freedom and also of surveillance, watching and collecting data that will trace you no matter what you do. Despite this, you can't help but dream of the impossibility of what freedom and love, as seen in the detail and care wellington built in her installation, holds. bell hooks writes in "Love in The Practice of Freedom," "I share that belief and the conviction that it is in choosing love, and beginning with love as the ethical foundation for politics, that we are best positioned to transform society in ways that enhance the collective good." Even when the world around you crumbles and the digital reality feels hollow, you stick to the love you felt for the person taken from you and the love you hold for yourself, logging onto your social media, and the love that will carry you to the next day.

Endnotes

The Sweetness of the Frame

¹ From “April Noon” by Eileen Myles.

² Quoted in Ming Smith, Habiba Hopson, Kaitlin Booher, Ming Smith and the Energy of Jazz, MoMA Magazine, 2023.

³ Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

More Than Just a Fuck

¹ Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2012) 26.

For more information on how to apply to
the *Arts Writing Incubator*, visit:
blackembodiments.org

