JIBADE-KHALIL HUFFMAN

NOW THAT I CAN DANCE

Contents

Introduction

2020—2021

Dina Deitsch
Director + Chief Curator, TUAG

INSTALLATION VIEWS: *Jibade-Khalil Huffman: Now That I Can Dance*, Tufts University Art Galleries, Peter Harris Photography

In the 2020–21 academic year, Tufts University Art Galleries presented *Now That I Can Dance*, Jibade-Khalil Huffman's first one-person exhibition in New England and one of the largest presentations of his work to date. In the winter of 2021, Huffman co-curated a concurrent second installation—*Index*—for our smaller exhibition space, featuring his work in dialogue with videos by ariella tai, an artist with a shared sensibility and methodology of using reconfigured media to retell narratives around the Black American experience. If Huffman's work focuses on the Black male experience, tai offers a queer femme perspective—each mining the endless index of TV, music, and film for their source material.

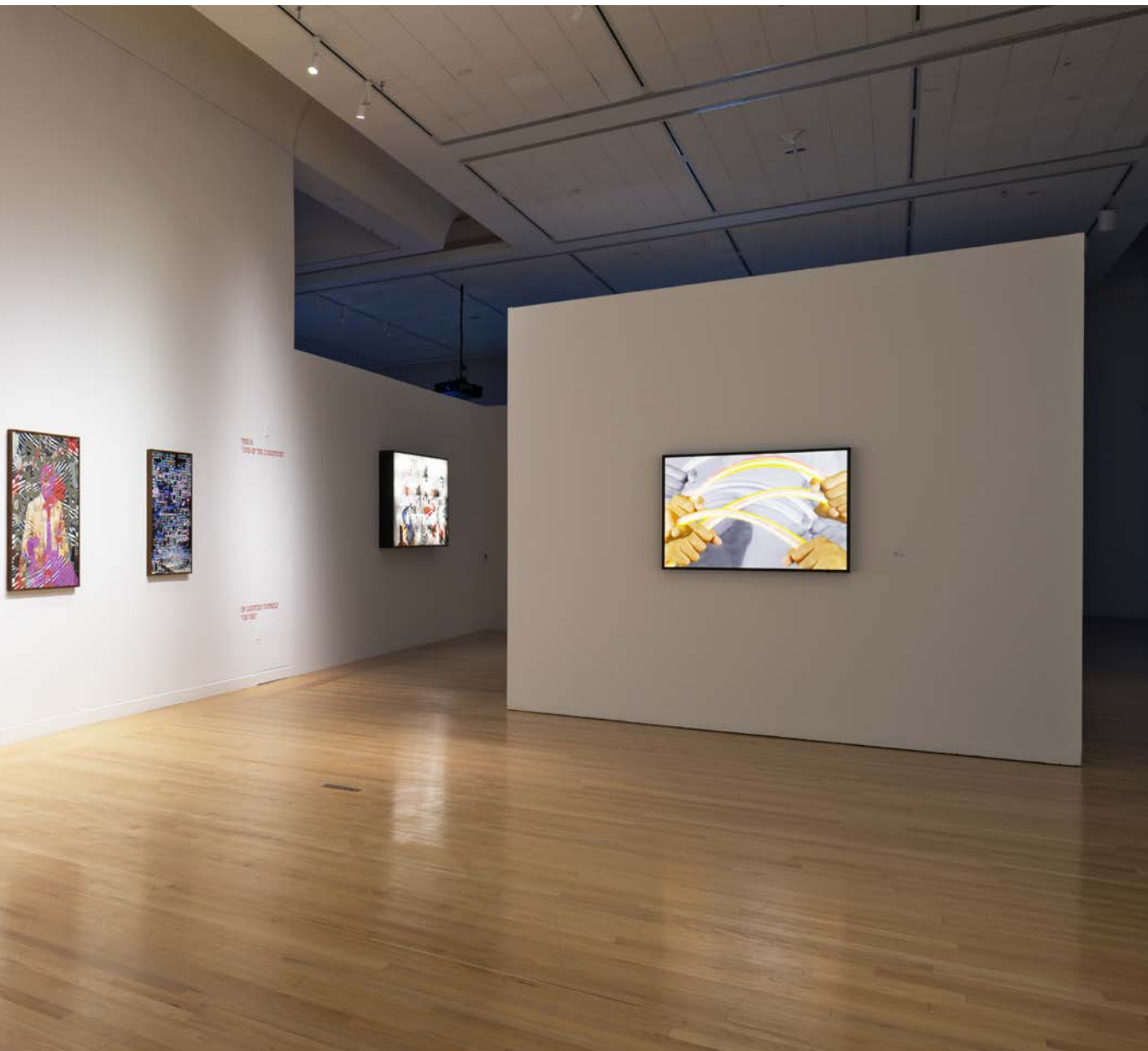
But the 2020–21 academic year, if we can trade in understatements, proved to be complicated. The exhibitions were organized over the summer of 2020, with the civil unrest in the wake of George Floyd's murder as both foreground and background of our work. In the fall, still in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic's pre-vaccination days, the galleries remained closed to outside visitors to keep our campus community safe. While both exhibitions were fully installed—thanks to the dedication of our gallery staff—our in-person visitors were limited to the few students, faculty, and staff who remained on campus. And so the majority of our guests were actually virtual—visiting the galleries and viewing the videos through online tours, photography, and Vimeo showcases.

For exhibitions centered on the impact of media and screens in and on our lives, this was maybe more than a fitting framework to view these works. But this mediated experience—like all screen-based experiences—missed the basic fact that Huffman's work hinges on installation and the physical performance it implies. Using large-scale projection, intense, heart-pounding soundtracks, and sculptural screens, Huffman makes media wholly present in the gallery as a reminder of its real impact and presence in our lives. What's on the screen does not stay there. And so in lieu of being there, we offer this publication, a physical counterpoint to the exhibitions.

Here, three texts present the exhibitions through three lenses of experience. Huffman's performative poem is an extension of an ongoing project that approaches the media depiction of othered bodies, and the complicated task of viewing Black ego through the lens of Kanye West, among other topics. Kimberly Bain, the John Holmes Assistant Professor in the Humanities at Tufts University, walks through the galleries on the anniversary of Breonna Taylor's murder by police officers, contemplating Black pain and suffering in media and Huffman and tai's refusal. Finally, I offer my own curatorial framework for understanding Huffman's strategies.

Published over a year after the exhibition, we are proud to present this volume for a wider audience and as a record of a remarkable project during remarkable, complicated times—that are very much ongoing.


JIBADE-
KHALIL
HUFFMAN
NOW
THAT
I CAN
DANCE
Visual artist and poet Jibade-Khalil Huffman creates video installation, performance, and photography characterized by densely layered imagery, rapid-paced editing, and a range of references from early hip-hop, literary theory, and Twitter to 1970s cinema. Democratic and aggressively wide-reaching in his tastes, Huffman pulls from every cultural corner within his experience to create rich yet unfixed portraits of contemporary life, underscoring the constant tension between race and visibility in our image-saturated landscape. His interests lie in the dissonance between external and internal modes of representation, exemplified in the gap between media depictions of the Black community and his own experience. Using the conventions of collage and the remix, he disrupts our media consumption to offer alternative narratives limped with humor and a deep sense of irony.
In Now That I Can Dance, a collection of Huffman's recent work exposes the media apparatus—be it the physical screen, cinematic conventions, or social media's constant scrolling—as the shared language of today. The exhibition's title derives from the 1962 Motown classic "Do You Love Me," in which The Contours' lead singer Billy Gordon wails, "Do you love me, now that I can dance?" The song's irresistible rhythm belies its ultimately futile message of a conditional love that we know will never last. Huffman mines this same false promise in our media landscape—rife with joyful colors and catchy rhythms but laced with suffering, disappointment, and a fickle sense of performativity. His work echoes the digital world's density and intensity of information—where everything is now—to convey the full range of humor, sadness, rage, and banality we find online.
Organized by Dina Deitsch, Director + Chief Curator

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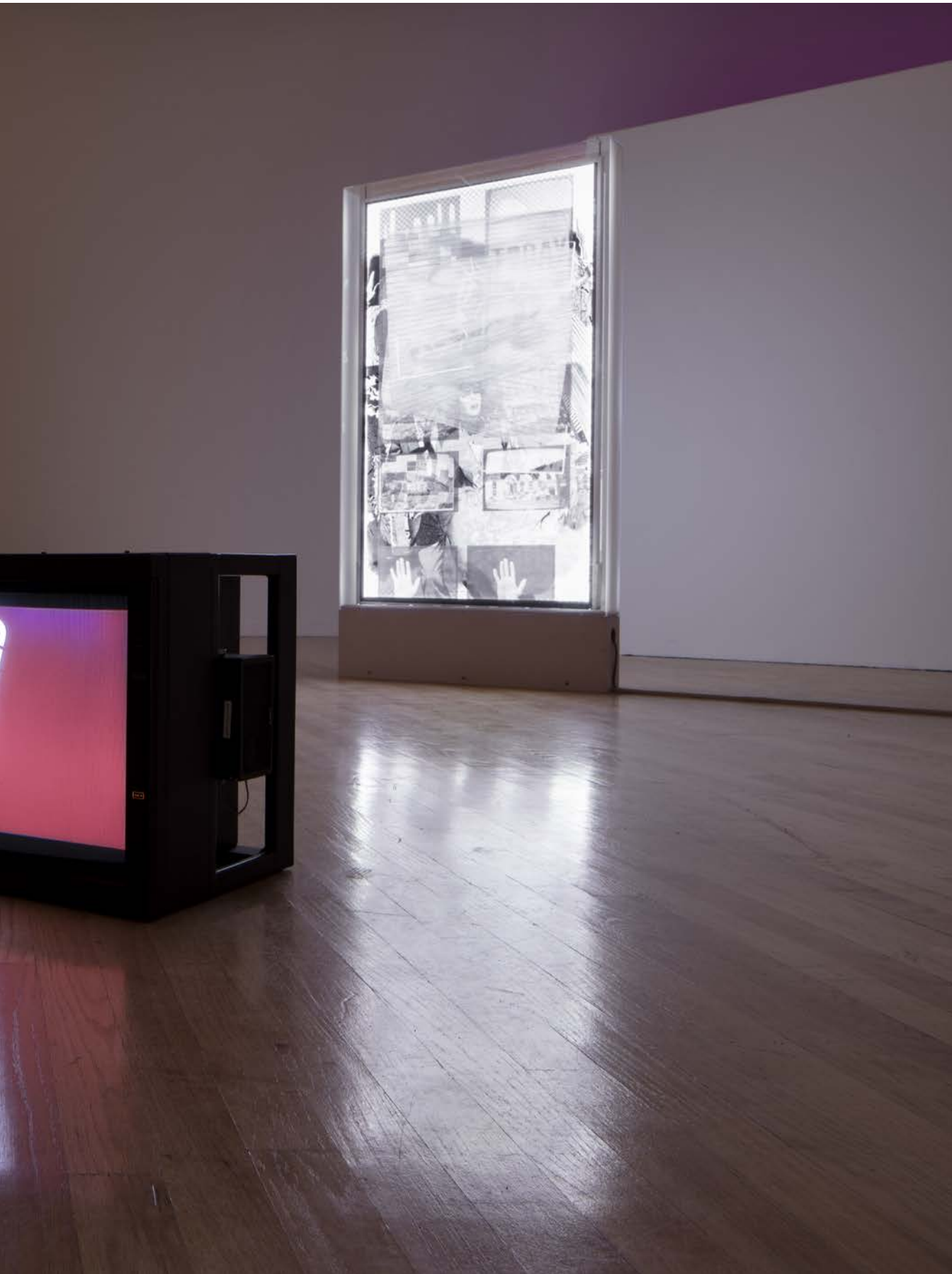


Confessional Poetry

Jibade-Khalil Huffman

Everyone
already
knows about clocks
but how many times a day

does a broken compass
perform or
even outperform its uses[1] :

How do you
lather your toast how
can
you eat
at a time
like this[2]

having made
the decision[3]

[1] Somewhere, in a different timeline, the worst person you know made a great point, among so many other Twitter pile-ons of the same joke, e.g. Kyle Kuzma booking a ticket to China to play for the Shanghai Sharks; Cancun in Five, over and over

[2] My favorite part of seeing "12 Years A Slave" was the woman sitting next to me, slowly eating popcorn for what seemed like the whole movie, to the point and degree and on the scale from which I finally leapt into the seat on the other side of my companion because I could no longer take it

[3] James, LeBron but you have to say it like that kid from Vine: "LEBRON JAMES"

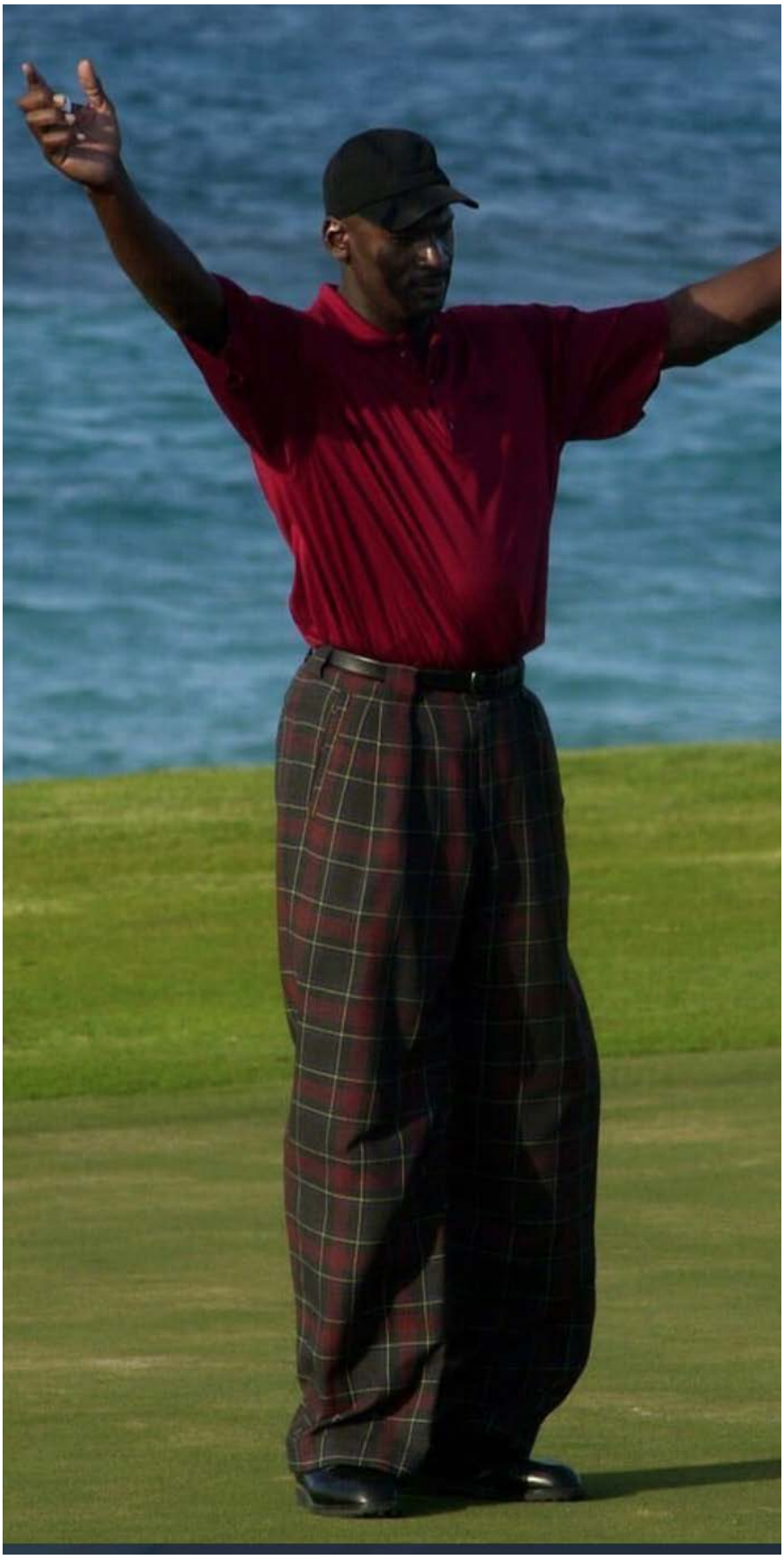
It’s not like
there aren’t
enough flowers
to resolve
in the landscape

we’ve already had
enough trouble
with the lawn

we spent several hundred dollars
on the lawn and

invested the rest of the money
in a greyhound and then
taken those winnings
to pay for graduate school.[4]

[4] My favorite part of graduate school was drifting in and out of sleep and drawing pictures of Chad Ochocinco before it was my turn and sleeping in my studio and hearing my classmate Young Joon Kwok come in early to work and initially being annoyed but then coming to appreciate this as a less jarring signal to begin my own day than the alarm I would sometimes set on my phone.



Everything starts to parallel
a minor inconvenience
in your life so that you feel
you can't say anything
about those things[5] at the
risk of sounding like
your problems are as great
as someone actually starving

We already had
an issue "with Sophia"

"How do you solve
a problem

like Sophia?" [6] you say
after you legally
change your name.

[5] At least not out loud, to anyone, except maybe your best friend and even then you feel judged.
[6] *The Golden Girls*, season 6, episode 8, "How Do You Solve A Problem Like Sophia," directed by Matthew Diamond, aired November 10, 1990 on NBC.

Tupac hologram

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Color

All

Size

All S M L

Typ

All

"I am tired" of[7]
talking in and
"around" sentences[8]
instead of bludgeoning
the surface
head on
as opposed to
just providing a
running commentary
for the news.

[ ]

[ ]

[ ]

[ ]

[7] inasmuch as my conscience, which incidentally speaks in a Chris Tucker voice, will let me
[8] by which I mean I can't help but veer away from that kind of confrontation and so blather on about why I love the art direction in "Dick Tracy"

jay-z nfl deal roger goodell

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Roc Nation's NFL ...
fortune.com

Jay-Z and NFL partnership: We're asking ...
latimes.com

Jay-Z, NFL Commissioner Discuss ...
variety.com

Jay-Z defends NFL partnership as Eric ...
washingtonpost.com

NFL deal leaves Colin Kaepernick ...
adage.com

Colin Kaepernick is fighting for s
slate.com

Much as caves persist
repeating octaves

How words achieve
an onomatopoeia
when you hear them
in a different accent
some frequent
sequence
of events or
one word
in particular[9]
standing out
among the others

[ ]

I always want
or often want
to tell poets to check their tone
and then inquire as
to whom they are speaking
when they don't pay bills
in this house
how they worked
up the courage
to defy the moon
is confusing
except as an example
of privilege of

9“_____“

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 migos

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 jaden smith

best dress

Lil Yachty Was The Best Dresse...
highsnobiety.com

Lil Yachty Wore A Top ...
thefader.com

Met Gala Red Carpet i..
pinterest.com

Met Gala ...
thefader.com

Jaden Smith & More 2...
hypebeast.com

Best Moments from 2017 Met Gal
swaggerareus.com

an order I cannot fathom[10]

A new hyperbole[11]

or a new variety

of Gatorade hyperbole
or cell phone coverage
hyperbole[12] the index

suggesting your wants
running up
to people on the street
and yelling your wants:

“ “

“ “

in a costume
based on
a bootleg of
Sonic the Hedgehog
Brolic the Anxious council person

Henny the Dexterous College
Administrator, Derek the
Dog, Arnold the Dog:
“our team is
made up
of dogs”[13]

[10] or even begin to fathom:
[11] In the sense that the speaker in the poem would have you believe, as affixing a value on this exaggeration, so as to guarantee an authentic effort
[12] Its always 5G or seven blades until its 8G and how many blades can you fit on a razor?
[13] When questioned about the tenacity of his teammates, Milwaukee Bucks forward PJ Tucker, in fact implied that his teammates were already tenacious but just didn’t know it yet; there is always some other part of us waiting to be harnessed in some origin story by some coach or teammate, an instrumental and then the reprise of the central theme but this time: slowly

Thread

You Retweeted

A Chaz in support of CHAZ
@TheChazWest

Y'all are broke while I am baroque! WE ARE NOT THE SAME

You don’t have to like
the particular angst[14]
of Willow Smith

but you should at least
be open to the possibility
of this kind of angst even if
you supposedly
know better

who can really
define the limits
of being an adult
and who is actually a child
in a fake mustache
trying to buy drones
attempting to explain
what Avril Lavigne[15]
means in the process
of walking through an airport
as the soundtrack to your layover
as a track for laughter.

[ ]

[ ]

[14] 1990s Pop/Punk/Post-Grunge/Popular/But/Still/Kind/Of/Aggressive/Alternative/Rock-angst
[15] In another poem, Avril Lavigne helps popularize skateboarding for an entire generation, in our poem, she is less of a kind trivia response about the 90’s than she is in real life and more of one element of many informing the particular rock and roll of Willow Smith.

Search

Outkast - Hey Ya! but everytime they say 'Uh' or 'Alright' it gets faster

3,575,613 views

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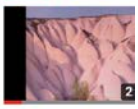

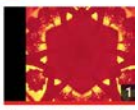

Don’t get in the marbles
don’t get lost but also
just stay away from
the marbles in the first place
take better and better care
of your sweaters
as we go along.

Inscribe the action
with the scenes you rehearsed
that you should have rehearsed
in the lead up
to auditioning for this monologue
on the way
to pursuing
justice for the victim
in the form of a seance
in the form of doing
a solid six out of ten impression[16]
of the gods daubing saucers
as a form of protest[17]
they had been planning[18]
all along.

[16] as well as a decent Eddie Murphy impersonation and a pretty good Judd Hirsch impersonation
[17] in the form of chanting arithmetic as the chorus, saying the essay questions as the verse
[18] in the build up of the music as it paralleled the scarcity of the language onscreen as well as on subsequent weekends

the hardest part of being black is dying only once

Kimberly Bain

one

Or: the hardest part of being Black is never knowing—never being able to—rest.

two

I needed an entire day to finalize my thoughts on the remarkable work of Jibade-Khalil Huffman and ariella tai, shown concurrently in Tufts University Art Galleries' exhibitions *Jibade-Khalil Huffman: Now That I Can Dance* and *Jibade-Khalil Huffman and ariella tai: Index* in 2021. It was a process that kept me fixed in place, uncomfortable during the long hours between waking up and stumbling back to my bed for something that wanted to be sleep. It didn't help that I'd chosen to sit on a hard wooden dining table chair. It's an old chair, slightly unstable from the legs repeatedly giving out after unsuspecting guests sit on it with their full weight, instead of gingerly—as if halted in the act of sitting, in the moments before fully unclenching one's muscles—like it demands. I've learned to not trust it to take the weight of my existence nor my body. I sit on it as if keeping vigil, back straight and alert to the creaks of the fragile and unforgiving chair.

That day the act of thinking and writing was intolerable. I could find no rhythm to the keys I pressed; could not focus on anything except the need to shift, to sigh, to straighten my back, to cross my legs and then uncross them so I could sit with them curled under me until they went numb. Every few minutes, the thought occurred: *What am I doing here? What am I doing here* on a Saturday morning (then afternoon then evening), eyes gritty with the beginnings of a migraine and stomach nauseated because I'd decided I wanted sleep more than I wanted food and now, with the hours ticking later and later into the day, it was too late to reconsider my choice? *What am I doing here* when I felt tender all over and in want of comfort?

I wanted my bed. I wanted to be in bed. I wanted to rest against a surface that could take my weight, could mold itself around the heaviness of my legs and hips and stomach, could support the weary curve my spine kept insisting it needed to follow. Still, I couldn't move from that chair for hours, because leaving that chair promised to unmoor the only part of me that was *here*. *Here* was both the time and a space of the (at the time) now: *here* was that hard chair and my keyboard and my difficult body; here was March 13, 2021.

three

The trauma the Black body holds exists beyond the ones we feel individually and beyond the times we are able to live personally. In Black life, time collapses in ways that are freeing and in ways that—some mornings, especially those that fade too quickly into evening and long restless nights—can be too

much for one body to hold. We are never one body; we are more than *one* though perhaps less than two. We do not ever, to quote Fred Moten, consent to be a single being. So, though I was *here*, I could do little to stop myself from also being *there*.

That *there*, which was both an *elsewhere* and *elsewhen*, was just over a year ago, on Friday, March 13, 2020. In the early hours of that day, Officers Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove fired over thirty shots into the home of Breonna Taylor as she lay in her bed, attempting to rest. Around that same period, irritating chants that "Black women are going to save us all" dominated the public sphere. The chants continue to reverberate, Black women drafted to a fight that never ends given the absence of a defining clause. *Save y'all from what? For what?*

It's a tender question, because to answer *that* question is to confront decay and pain. New media artist and experimental filmmaker, ariella tai sojourns with this tender and burning decay in *Cavity* (2019) on view in *Index*. She does so through an attention to glitch, to static, to asynchronous but simultaneous audio-visual happenings. tai's installation glitches constantly, forcing viewers to attempt—and fail—over and again to partake in a witnessing, a simultaneity. The doubled and disjointed images force us to find a polyphonic rhythm, a rocking motion for our eyes and bodies. (It's a motion akin to the sound of Black girls jumping rope, feet tapping on the concrete, fractal beats overlaid by the regular *thwacks* of the rope on the ground; it's something like a song with a bassline and accompanied by voices, multiple.) And it's that first minute of *Cavity* that confronts my question. tai sources one of the audio tracks for the installation from the season six finale of *Scandal*. In the clip, the speaker (a Black woman by the name of Maya Pope, played by Khandi Alexander) catechizes: "We still try. Try to help all y'all, even when we get nothing. Is that admirable or ridiculous?"

Is it admirable or ridiculous that Black women constantly try to and have to save the world? Is it admirable that Taylor and other essential workers would be hailed as heroes when the pandemic first shut down the nation? Or ridiculous that Black lives are so devalued that they become subordinated to state, federal, and corporate fiscal solvency? Is it admirable or ridiculous that Taylor could not rest in her own bed? Don't get it twisted: despite her career choice as an emergency room technician, Taylor had one life and it was a life that had nothing to do with saving y'all.

four

What happens (can we even think ahead and imagine such an outcome?) when Black women finally, inevitably, get exhausted? Taylor was a Black woman deemed an essential worker and a hero in the midst of the

pandemic, and a Black woman killed while seeking rest in the private sphere. When Black Americans in aggregate already sleep less and have poorer sleep quality than other groups, it seems that, in an anti-Black world, there is only one way we can be put to rest. All other forms of rest—whether it be sleep, comfort, the luxury sitting in our beds in the unbroken sanctity of our homes—evade us, sand trickling out from clenched and raised fists. The postures and positions of Black exhaustion can never translate and metamorph into the postures and positions of rest.

five

Elizabeth Alexander wrote "Can You Be Black and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" over a decade ago. In it, she meditates on Black Americans' long relationship to images of anti-Black violence and how Black community forms within this visual economy of anti-Blackness. The visual economy of anti-Blackness seeps into our mourning practices too, especially when we mourn and remember Black women.

Remembering Taylor and honoring her life has been a fraught act, especially given the commodification of her death. Just last year, a BreonnaCon (including a "Taylor-Made" women's empowerment event for "Beauty, Power, and Justice," and "Bree-B-Q") was organized ostensibly to "honor all the lives lost to police violence." To be Black and see those posters—the neoliberal commodification of Black death through a visual calculus that makes Taylor's image and memory an afterthought, washed out by the deep purple of the poster and overwhelmed by large text displaying the names of the influencers, performers, activists, preachers, and so forth—is to be reminded, again, that the visual economies of anti-Blackness and misogynoir can form under the thin veneer of a community gathering. Capitalism, it seems, will sell our own death back to us and folks will be eager to call it empowerment.

But sometimes we get things like this: the night of March 13th, 2021, a vast crowd of masked protestors convened in memory of Taylor, holding a vigil

ariella tai, *Cavity*, 2019 (still)

for her. In a video recorded by Anthony Tilghman and later posted to Twitter, they gathered in the deep twilight of the night and danced before Taylor's picture, illuminated by the tender yellow glow of candlelight, flowers strewn everywhere, a set of speakers blasting Mary J. Bilge's "Everything" (1997), bass reverberating throughout the space. The brassy notes of a trombone (played live by Sterling Anderson) accompanies the rise and fall of the protestor's voices as they sing along, dance along, nod along, sway, bawl, smile, shuffle, bounce, hug, cry. They were moved by, and moved to, what she loved.

Watching the video, late into Saturday night, my legs prickling from sitting too long and shins sore from pressing against the seat of my chair, I found myself simultaneously watching a memory of my own. Slowly at first then all at once I found myself back at the *Now That I Can Dance* exhibition, taking a meandering path through the gallery. My memory transposed itself over the video of protestors moving and being moved. In my memory, I slow down. I stop. I stand in front of Huffman's piece, *Dance Card, or How to Say Anger When You Lose Control* (2017).

Dance Card is endless movement; it's the overlapping and palimpsestic amplitudes of movement. It's shuffling feet; it's overlapping bodies; it's rage, poorly masked by movement and footwork. My eyes tried and failed to follow the pathway and the footwork of the piece. But my body, standing before it, knew those movements and knew the *one-two step*, the down beats on the two and four, knew the way my body would follow after my feet. I was moved by this piece—literally, my weight shifting from foot to foot to a sound (something like a guttural wail) that I could not hear but I could feel as surely as a bassline.

Was *Dance Card* not precisely the video of protestors, rendered differently? In placing these two texts into simultaneity, something emerged. That something was a making and doing (a making do) askance to modes of capitalist comprehensibility because it rooted itself in otherwise socialities. It was a *making do* in the sense of carrying on or managing toward life with limited resources. It was a *making do* in the active form of the phrasing: to make what we have and imagine *do* something. The unutterable became the force behind the movement.

Watching the 2021 Taylor vigil video that night—body tense, at first, with the expectation that anti-Black violence would erupt, as it always does, in spaces of Black social life—I found myself moving, drawn into the experience of their ecstatic mourning, their ecstatic rage. I watched the video over and again as Saturday night ticked into Sunday morning. When Alexander asked, "Can you be Black and look at this?," I wondered its inverse: *How can you be Black and not look at this?* When seeing is fraught, we are fortunate

Jibade-Khalil Huffman, *Dance Card, or How To Say Anger When You Lose Control*, 2017

to get something that might be called the practice of ecstatic mourning. The ecstatic, as Aliyah Abdur-Rahman writes in her essay "The Black Ecstatic," is an assemblage of "attachments, affective dispositions, political aspirations, and representational practices that punctuate the awful now with the joys and possibilities of the beyond (of alternate worlds and ways)." Put another way, the ecstatic erupts in moments of simultaneity, dilating and expanding forward into mythology and backward into prophesy. This lenticular overlaying occurs along the myriad geometries of life.

The ecstatic then is a site, experience, and practice that is necessarily collective. It never arrives alone, collecting detritus—large and small, material and intangible—as it forms. The crowd of people dancing, hugging, swaying, singing along to Blige, glowing in the candlelight surrounding Taylor's memorial, was not me; nonetheless they *collected* me. Their loud voices—discernible over the trombone and the bass and the masks covering everyone's faces because, still, we were in a pandemic, even a year later (how do I say that for some of us the most significant marker of the start of the pandemic was not the cancelled classes, cancelled flights, cancelled spring break plans. Rather it was a mundane, and all the more cruel and hideous for its everydayness, anti-Black murder?)—collected my own.

It was a blossoming of collective force.

six

Repeat it, like a mantra or a dance you know all too well: a blossoming of collective force. A blossoming of collective life. A blossoming of collective bodies. A blossoming of collective time. The capacity to step out of linear time and instead experience an embodied hereness to the triad of past, present, and future.

So yes, when I say I was *here* in the "ruinous now," seated on a hard chair with an aching neck on Saturday, March 13th, I mean to say: I was here because I was elsewhere (in Washington, DC, at a protest; at an art gallery viewing two necessary exhibitions) and elsewhen (a year prior, on Friday, March 13th). I was split into many—more than one and less than two; witnessing and being witnessed and being somewhere incomprehensible to systems of commensuration—and I pieced myself back together, a bricolage of being and feeling and doing.

I'd had to do the same—undo myself and remake myself—while walking through *Now That I Can Dance* and *Index*. In the gallery, I discovered a tender attention to Black life, in all its complications. The exhibitions weren't interested in pornotropic replications of Black death; they weren't interested in whiteness's libidinal desires for Black pain, Black bodies, Black flesh. Both artists oriented Blackness away from premature death and toward an

Untitled (Texas), 2017

ecstasy of possibility. Nonetheless, moving through the exhibits felt gritty and abrasive because they insisted on discomfort. I wanted to stand before every piece, see every image, hear every word, and know their weight intimately along the arch of my spine. But as an audio-visual sensorium that rubbed against the margins of thought, the exhibitions were never about knowing. And I'd known that.

Black life imagines outside of anti-Blackness. It has to: living is far more complicated than all that. Black expressive cultures—with their capacity to alchemize anti-Blackness, no matter whether it's a live video of protestors mourning the only way they can (by dancing) or audio clips sourced from the season finale of a popular TV show or a print showing the pathways of Black rage—can get us there: to a geography and social life within which we can reimagine the materiality of Black being. But getting *there* and *here* is exhausting.

And that was the truth: I was exhausted. I wanted out of my winter jacket and my damp shoes and away from the hard wood floors of the gallery space. I wanted, more than anything, to rest. Fully. Completely. Without interruption. I wanted to refuse living in more than one but less than two bodies. I wanted to refuse the simultaneities of experience that the exhibitions demanded. The artworks, in turn, refused. Their attentiveness to the simultaneities of Blackness was an attention that was necessarily fragmentary and partial, precisely because it is through the fragment—and the simultaneity of those fragments—that something like a total phenomenology of living Blackness can emerge. It's a sharp and taxing space to inhabit, trying to make and do and make do with fragments.

But I had been dragged into the cut of Blackness. Either I could find myself along the sharp edges of its fragments or I could turn away. I could not do the latter then, as I could not do it that Saturday at my computer, struggling for and failing to find words. Because even then I knew one thing to be true: sometimes exhaustion can feel like dying; but sometimes it can animate the work that we do. And it is then that we can find a time and place—here and there—to begin the search for rest.

Index, 2021 (installation view)

[1] Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "The Black Ecstatic," GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 24, no. 2–3 (June 1, 2018): 344

Jibade-Khalil Huffman: Now That I Can Dance

Dina Deitsch

What does the experience of watching a clip, a show, a movie, scrolling through social media, reading a website, texting a friend—of ingesting the world through a screen—*feel* like? *Sound* like? *Hurt* like? Stepping into an installation by artist and writer Jibade-Khalil Huffman can at times answer that question—a question we don't usually ask ourselves, numb under the wash of digital images that floods much of our waking life today. Working in digital photography, video, and light-based installation—the medium of his subject—Huffman breaks this flow of information with the interjecting logic of collage and the remix. Images, texts, and sounds dislodged from their sources are swirled together to offer an alternative, lived-in narrative—funny, ironic, and, in equal measure, heartbreaking and traumatizing. Huffman makes visible a screen culture that no longer merely reflects but *produces* a shared experience.[1]

This ocean or, better yet, hurricane of images[2] has only become more immersive, more a part of us, as the global pandemic of COVID-19 caused us to move online for work, classes, meetings, and socializing for over a year, if not two. Digital living was (and still is) no longer solely the domain of millennials and their juniors; it was now *the* way many of us saw our parents, grandparents, teachers, colleagues, and friends, went shopping, ordered food, and visited our doctors. Moreover, screen-based media made clear the palpable racial inequities that permeate American life. We cannot forget that the Black Lives Matter movement was re-catalyzed in the summer of 2020 by a cellphone video of horrific police violence against George Floyd, shared via social media. Nor can we forget that such trafficking, through cellphones and laptops, of imagery of Black bodies in pain has marked what poet Elizabeth Alex ander has named the "Trayvon Generation" of young Black Americans, bombarded with such imagery.[3] Seemingly unavoidable, the traumatic impact of this media barrage runs deep and lingers in the psyches of an

Poems for Every Occasion, 2018 (still)

entire generation.

Huffman's work is steeped in this tension—constantly questioning the ways in which Blackness is visualized and packaged in popular culture and exposing the myriad contradictions that emerge. He argues, much like Alexander does, that the barrage of violent imagery is ultimately damaging to this—*his*—generation, fostering a deep layer of depression and anxiety. His work examines the more subtle, perhaps even more insidious and personal ways racial inequity runs deep in American culture, perpetuated through our media landscape, permeating our lives and psyches all the same.

Huffman enters visual art through poetry. Holding degrees in both creative writing and visual arts, he has always worked at the intersection between word and image, publishing three volumes of poetry before shifting to the exhibition format as his page. Using the material of exhibition didactics—cut vinyl—for new text works, creating videos that run on the premise of linguistic collage, and composing expansive titles that are in themselves short-form poetry, Huffman does not simply fuse letters and pictures. Rather, his work represents a deeper, holistic drive to resolve our media culture into a form that is at once expansive and yet—as it is with words—oddly specific, in a way that perhaps only poetry can provide. Language, like video, is time based;[4] like music, it runs on rhythm. It is a path that can cut through and

Sculpture for Morgan Parker (A Tattoo of Harriet Tubman's Face With a Tattoo of Your face on Harriet Tubman's Face on Your Face), 2018

accommodate our lived experience of television, Twitter, and music. It, too, survives as a fragment. In Huffman's moving-image work, it comes through his staccato editing, which manages to blend YouTube clips seamlessly with high-resolution digital footage and online-video-game graphics into oddly comforting scenes. The resulting images contain a multitude of simultaneous and even contradictory meanings, a visual realization of a picture holding a thousand words.

The 2020–21 exhibition at Tufts University Art Galleries, *Now That I Can Dance,* traced the way language, collage, and screen culture coalesce in Huffman's output of photographs, lightboxes, and videos from the prior five years. Progressing from still to moving, from printed to projected images, the exhibition explored the screen as a sculptural and conceptual form, light's capacity to be material, and the hurricane of images that surround us. Each installation, in its own way, complicated our ability to read a cohesive image, echoing the impossibility of fully comprehending our own historic moment.

Let's take *Prism* (2020), an installation made for the exhibition that features a projection through an image collage—roughly the size of a landscape painting—that floats in midair, suspended by a pair of fishing lines. Huffman uses this inkjet-printed transparency as a screen through which he projects a related moving-image collage onto the

opposite wall. The effect is dizzying but mesmerizing as the viewer's eye struggles to locate a single resting place. Which is, of course, the point. Pulled from the 1950s-era TV show *Lassie*, the images that fill these screens—both projected and printed—focus on scenes where the eponymous dog attacks another figure or animal, blurring the heroic character's portrayal from savior to simple thug. In a characteristically undercutting move, Huffman uses a seemingly innocent image of an American TV icon to process the scourge of police violence against Black men, women, and children—mining the visual language of classic television to evoke deep-seated cultural racism. The work's spatially layered format literally complicates the very act of looking, foregrounding the problem of perception with regard to law enforcement and Black bodies.

The screen as a complicated physical plane recurs throughout Huffman's work. Windows, windshields, smart phones, cathode-ray tube television sets, transparencies, and pierced sheets of Plexiglas appear in the bulk of his film and sculptural work—either hidden in a cluster of images or front and center. As a stand-in for media consumption and its internalized presence in our lives, the screen in Huffman's hands is a tortured but constant presence. Shattered, pierced, or—in the case of *Prism*—remaining intact, the screen stands like a rose window as the light pours through it, reflecting and chang-

Prism, 2020

ing the world beyond it. *Prism*'s images blend together on the gallery wall, the collage's inkjet print filtered through the moving montage of cartoons, *Lassie* clips, and geometric fades, making the space beyond it messy and blurry but beautiful.

In this complex overlay of printed and light-made images, Huffman pushes at the collage impulse that defines much of his work and methodology. The disruptive and redirectionist strategy of collage is an old one—one pioneered by the Dadaists' photomontages of the 1920s. A century ago, picking up on the Cubist strategy of cutting and pasting, these artists literally reshaped cultural narratives presented in the burgeoning mass media, driven by a capitalist edge, through fragmented and re-ordered photographs and advertisements.[5] Similarly, as the cacophony of media becomes deafening and our attention spans are ever shortening, collage and its logic of excisions and interjections find new footing for many artists—from Lorna Simpson to Deborah Roberts—as a strategy to interrupt and simply be heard.

Collage and its inherent layering also offers Huffman another way into disrupting conventional media tropes by formally enacting a politics of visibility—who is seen and how and by whom. Amid the mix of film clips, memes, and music, 1980s and 1990s sitcoms loom large in Huffman's atlas of imagery. As part of his own early TV diet, they nod to his youth and are

Now That I Can Dance (installation view)

indicators of his own identity formation—stressing the thinness of the line between memory and media consumption. But many of these shows, like *The Facts of Life* (1979–88), also exemplify what media theorist Herman Gray described as "assimilation" tropes of racial representation on television.[6] In the assimilation model, Black characters blend in without any trace of tension or social struggle, which Gray argues promotes a racial invisibility by negating cultural difference. In *The Facts of Life*, Tootie, played by Kim Fields, stands out more for her pigtails and roller skates than her Blackness, which gets barely a mention in a color-blind, fictionalized Peekskill, New York. In the lightbox *Black People Explain "The Facts of Life" to Me*, 2017, Huffman memorializes Fields's eighties-era *Jet* magazine cover, in which she holds a script, overlaying the image with crops from magazines depicting a small white girl in a birthday cap and snippets of hair and eyes from white models, which frame the deep background, blown out by two raw light bulbs. While Fields's Tootie may have been lauded for diversifying the United States' sitcom landscape, Huffman argues, and Gray would agree, that she did so under the clear supremacy of white culture at every turn.

Pushing further at this tension between race and visibility, Huffman overwhelmingly layers each work with material from his deep archive of digital life and music, so much so that they verge on the opaque. But in the same way that *Prism* complicates our vision—making seeing an active, difficult action—this, too, is the point.

Huffman's lightboxes and videos deploy what poet and critic Édouard Glissant described as "the right to be opaque,"[8] a form of resistance to Western reductive classifications of others, which, in turn, leads to the othering of colonized and marginalized communities. In other words, opacity is the right *not* to be defined by others. Speaking specifically to the Caribbean experience of his native Martinique, Glissant critiques the notion of transparency as a limited and limiting structure of the dominant culture. Opacity argues for space, and even more so, respect for alterity. In a time when we are constantly surveilling each other, broadcasting ourselves and lives out to the disinterested ether, opacity can suddenly become a refuge and a necessary act of freedom.[9] Huffman stakes this claim in his work through layering, collage, and a maximalist aesthetic that, like the internet and every other screen in our lives, bombards us with information—too much information. He works against the promise of the camera, where the world is supposedly made visible, by making it so visible that it becomes difficult to see but perhaps easier to *feel*.

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Black People Explain "The Facts of Life" to Me, 2017

In the 1962 Motown classic "Do You Love Me," The Contours' lead singer Billy Gordon wails, "Do you love me, now that I can dance?" An irresistible number, the song is also tinged with futility, centered around a conditional love that we know will never last, and on the need to perform, again and again. Huffman chose the song as the exhibition's title—a practice he maintains as a writer and poet—to capture the tone and emotional tenure of the work that emphasizes the false promises of the screen played out in continuous loops. He uses the same density and intensity of information—where everything is *now*—to convey the full range of humor, sadness, rage, and banality we find online, we find in life.

Now That I Can Dance concluded, or perhaps culminated, with Huffman's newest work at the time of our fall 2020 opening, *The Circle*, a 24-minute, single-channel visual meditation on the cycle of healing and trauma. The circle provides the conceptual and formal core of the work—defining and linking a set of seemingly disparate images and scenes, and implying the cyclical loop of the editing.

Until this point, this essay has, admittedly, avoided the specific emotional and psychological content of Huffman's work, focusing more on his formal and conceptual strategies as per my own (and perhaps the artist's) training. But this formalist approach belies the depth of Huffman's oeuvre, which could be seen, in many ways, as a series of self-portraits scaled up through the artist's experiences and, in turn, echoing a series of historical and cultural moments. No work does this more than *The Circle*. Originally commissioned as a performance scheduled for April 2020,[10] the project traced and morphed over the course of the pandemic, the springtime lockdown, and the summer of global protests over racial injustice, a much overdue racial reckoning. The film features a group of performers—and then Huffman

The Circle, 2020 (still)

himself when he could no longer work with a team—meandering through a string of vignettes as they enact a series of slow, symbolic gestures that allude to therapeutic support groups, coworkers, media consumers, and even aggressors. Screen doppelgängers abound in this film: a window spray-painted with yellow, a smartphone, old-fashioned television sets. At one point, Huffman appears in a green, full-body suit—which would, if deployed correctly, render him invisible on camera with green-screen technology, making clear his interest in disappearing the body (even his own).

Saturated with deep reds, greens, and high contrasts, Huffman's video knits together enigmatic scenes with a rich overlay of audio clips. These range from an authoritative policing voice (oddly, from one of Leslie Nielson's few serious movies), to an early episode of the *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (in which a racist Southern town defends itself as locals repeatedly uses a racial slur), to a scene from *Family Matters* (where the young Black daughter beseeches a white gallerist to sell back their family quilt—a not-so-subtle dig at the art world's mining of Black culture), to French singer Jacques Dutronc crooning "Et moi, et moi, et moi" (And me, and me, and me) in a parodic song about a series of postcolonial disasters. In sum, the work speaks to a cycle of racial trauma and healing that endlessly reproduces itself through media and the art world—defined by the connective tissue of the circle.

As a viewer, do you see all of this? Unlikely (unless you read the gallery text very carefully). Here, the artist insists on opacity. But you can feel the irregular beats, the uncomfortable rhythms that cut against the beautiful imagery, the deep symbolism in each performer's gesture or in the focus on singular, familiar objects in each frame—the cups, tea, flowers—all indicative of the intensive domestic landscape of pandemic existence. *The Circle,* like all of *Now That I Can Dance,* asks us to be in this incongruous space together, with Huffman as our guide, to unfurl the unsteady world around us.

The Circle, 2020 (installation view)

[1] See Hito Steyerl's short essay "A Thing Like You and Me" in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Steinberg Press, 2010) where she succinctly outlines the mode in which the world of images are no longer reflections of the world, but actual parts of it. She writes, "the [digital] image is…without expression. It doesn't represent reality. It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like any other—a thing like you and me." "A Thing Like You and Me," *The Wretched of the Screen*, Sternberg Press pp. 46-59; first printed in e-flux journal #15 April, 2010 https://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61298/a-thing-like-you-and-me/.

[2] I borrow the term "ocean of images" from the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, *Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015*, which focused on photographers who explored the influx of images made possible by the ubiquity of the internet or a "post-internet reality." For the record, I have avoided using "post-internet" (which implies artists who came of age with the internet and use it as their subject and material) in describing Huffman's work for two reasons: his interest in media predates and exceeds our online existence; and the term has proved somewhat meaningless, since the concerns and scope of the internet are much too vast for a single timeframe or art movement to address.

[3] See Elizabeth Alexander, "The Trayvon Generation: For Solo, Simon, Robel, Maurice, Cameron, and Sekou," *New Yorker*, June 22, 2020, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation.

[4] In describing Huffman's work at the intersection of poetry and visual art, poet Simone White writes, "Poetry is a time-based art," in "Jlbade-Khalil Huffman: Dispatches from the Time That Remains," *Tenses: Artists in Residence 2015/16* (Harlem, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2016), 18, http://issuu.com/studiomuseum/docs/air_brochure_tenses_2016.

[5] While Huffman's use of collage follows the particular logic of media disruption laid out by the Dadaists in the 1920s, I'd be remiss to ignore collage's commonly cited origins in the 1910s Cubist experiments of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Indebted to African folk art, these early works fractured the picture plan in a radical formal play that later, and notably, became key touchstones for Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and even Faith Ringgold, who all emphasized the African roots of the technique and style to visualize a decisively Black American narrative. Huffman falls into a long lineage of Black artists asserting their voices through the medium and technique of collage, outside of his interest in media critique. See Patricia Hills, "Cultural Legacies and Transformation of the Cubist Collage Aesthetics by Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Other African-American Artists," *Studies in the History of Art* 71 (2011): 221–47.

[6] Francesca Gavin sums up the aptness of collage for the present: "If one artistic medium could be said to capture the moment we are living through, it would be collage. Life, accelerated through our digital experiences and the constant social-media scroll of Instagram and TikTok, can, like collage, feel like a visual mash-up of body parts, advertisements, protests and news. And the medium is no longer seen as the less respected cousin of painting or sculpture in the contemporary art world." Gavin, "Cutting Edge: The Reinvention of Collage," *Financial Times*, September 25, 2020.

[7] In the landscape of media, this question has been playing out in American homes since the dawn of television and in fewer places as notable as the family sitcom. Herman Gray's seminal study on race and television points out three common tropes for racial representation on TV: assimilation, pluralism ("separate but equal"), and multiculturalism. See Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and for a reflection on his work, Martine Syms, "Why You Watch, What You Watch, When You Watch," in *I Was Raised on the Internet* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018), 135–38.

[8] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relations*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, ¹997), 189. Glissant writes, "There's a basic injustice in the worldwide spread of the transparent and the projection of Western thought. Why must we elevate people on the scale of the transparency of ideas proposed by the West? . . . [A]s far as I'm concerned, a person has the right to be opaque."

[9] David Joselit writes, "If the political grammar of opacity centers a type of relation based on mutual respect for alterity, its visual grammar . . . is assemblage, in which unlikely components are put into aesthetic relation with one another without losing their particularity." Joselit, "Rachel Harrison, Untranslatable," in *Rachel Harrison Life Hack*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman and David Joselit (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2019), 257. He continues, "The universal fungibility of digital culture has many real-world effects, including the abstraction of financial value that contributed to the Great Recession of 2008, and the proliferation of micro- and macro-aggressions, ranging from trolling to cyber-war, enabled by social media. Under such conditions, opacity may indeed afford a kind of freedom in the refuge it offers from surveillance."

[10] *The Circle* was originally commissioned as a performance for the Tate Modern by The Kitchen curator Lumi Tan for April 2020 as part of the program *The Kitchen: Never Real Objects*, which was delayed and then canceled by the pandemic. Huffman then expanded and transformed the work into a video installation.

The Circle, 2020 (still)

Checklist

All works courtesy the artist and Anat Ebgi Gallery, Los Angeles, unless otherwise noted.

Jibade-Khalil Huffman: Now That I Can Dance

September 8, 2020—March 26, 2021
Tisch Family Gallery, Aidekman Arts Center

The Circle, 2020
Single-channel video, color, sound, folding chairs
24 minutes, 36 seconds

Prism, 2020
Archival inkjet print on transparency, video

Untitled (Marquee 1 & 2), 2020
Transparencies on lightbox

Zero, 2020
Single-channel video, color, sound
72 minutes, 25 seconds

Vinyl poem, 2020
Vinyl

Foley, 2019
Single-channel video, color, sound
5 minutes, 16 seconds

Figure, 2019
Inkjet print
40.5 x 31"

Stations, 2019
Inkjet print
37.5 x 25.25"
Courtesy Fidelity Investments Art Collection

White Flight, 2019
Inkjet print
37 x 23"
Courtesy Collection of Richard and Susan Arregui

Black Twitter in the Hour of Chaos, 2018

Single-channel video, color, sound

44 minutes, 55 seconds

Tufts University Permanent Collection: Purchase, 2021.05

Poems for Every Occasion, 2018

Single channel video, color, sound

21 minutes, 4 seconds

Glow Up, 2018

Transparency in lightbox

44 x 31"

Sculpture for Morgan Parker (A Tattoo of Harriet Tubman's Face With a Tattoo of Your Face on Harriet Tubman's Face on Your Face), 2018

Transparencies in lightbox

77.25 x 41.5 x 5.5"

Picture for Paul Mooney (Everybody Wants/ Nobody Wants), 2018

C-print

29.5 x 44.5 x 1"

Black People Explain "The Facts of Life" to Me, 2017

Transparencies, die-cut plexi, powder-coated metal lightbox

35.5 x 25.5 x 6.5"

Good Jazz, 2017

Single-channel video, color

6 minutes, 41 seconds

The Mirror, 2017

Transparencies, die-cut plexi, flatscreen monitor, powder-coated metal frame, looping video

51.5 x 31.75 x 5"

Dance Card, or, How To Say Anger When You Lose Control, 2017

Archival inkjet on transparency and canvas

35.75 x 30.88"

Courtesy Jamie Lawrence and Samantha Cooper

Stanza, 2016

Single-channel video, color, sound

12 minutes, 23 seconds

Untitled (Office), 2016
Archival inkjet print
42 x 28"

Untitled (Tears), 2016
Archival inkjet print
32.5 x 24.63"

Untitled (Monitor), 2015
Archival inkjet print
13 x 10"
Courtesy of JoAnn Busutti

Jibade-Khalil Huffman and ariella tai: Index

February 1—March 26, 2021
Koppelman Gallery, Aidekman Arts Center

Index, 2022
Single-channel video, color, sound
15 minutes, 9 seconds

ariella tai
Cavity, 2019
Single-channel video, color, sound
5 minutes, 15 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

Jibade-Khalil Huffman
Untitled (Texas), 2017
Transparency, wood, plexiglass, fluorescent lights
23.5 x 34.5 x 3"
Courtesy Allison and Larry Berg, Los Angeles

TFW, 2017
Single-channel video, color, sound
47 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Anat Ebgi Gallery

Contributors

Jibade-Khalil Huffman is an artist and writer whose video and photo works use found, archival material and contemporary ephemera to address slippage in memory and language, particular to race and visibility. Lyrical strophes of text and densely-composed imagery produce objects of perpetual flux, indexed by accumulating layers which challenge normative symbolic and semiotic hierarchies. Through projection and repetition, Huffman's work evokes the untranslatable, ruminating on the liminal qualities of singular experiences through narrative and graphic rhythms.

In addition to *Now That I Can Dance* at Tufts University Art Galleries, recent exhibitions include projects at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, Ballroom Marfa, The Kitchen, MoCA Tucson, Swiss Institute, New York, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, The Jewish Museum, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Hammer Museum. Educated at Bard College (BA), Brown University (MFA, Literary Arts), and USC (MFA, Studio Art), his awards include the Grolier Poetry Prize, the Jerome Foundation Travel Grant and fellowships from Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, the Lighthouse Works, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Millay Colony for the Arts. Huffman was a 2015-16 Artist in Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem and lives and works in Ohio and Los Angeles.

ariella tai is a video artist, film scholar, and independent programmer based in Portland, OR. They are interested in Black performance and cultural vernaculars in film, television, and media studies. tai is one half of "the first and the last," a fellowship, workshop, and screening series supporting and celebrating the work of black women and femmes in film, video, and new media art. They have shown work at Anthology Film Archives, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Northwest Film Center, Wa Na Wari, the Black Femme Supremacy Film Festival, MOCA, and Smack Mellon, amongst others. tai's most recent video work "safehouse" premiered at Trinity Square Video in Toronto, ON., Vulture, ARTnews, Barron's, the San Francisco Chronicle, and DAZED Magazine.

Kimberly Bain is the John Holmes Assistant Professor in the Humanities at Tufts University. In her scholarly and critical-creative work, her most pressing and urgent concerns have consolidated around questions of the history, theory, and philosophy of: the African diaspora, race, gender, environmental and medical racism, and Black arts and letters. Her upcoming publications include, *On Black Breath*, which traces a genealogy of breathing and Blackness in the United States and *Dirt: Soil and Other Dark Matter*, which turns to dirt for understanding how Blackness—a series of relations that have emerged as part of extractive and accumulative logics—has shaped global considerations of the Anthropocene and refused the extractive relations of racial capitalism.

Dina Deitsch is Director and Chief Curator, Tufts University Art Galleries.

Acknowledgments

Every exhibition takes a village to make a reality but this one—developed, designed, installed—and then deinstalled—under severe pandemic-related restrictions—was something else. First and foremost, I am grateful to Khalil's gallery in Los Angeles, Anat Ebgi and gallery director Stefano Di Paola. Their constant and ongoing support made the organization of this show and its related loans feel like "before" times. The exhibition would not have been possible without them nor the support and generosity of the collectors who so kindly shared their works by Khalil with us for almost nine months. We are grateful to Richard and Susan Arregui, Allison and Larry Berg, JoAnn Busutti, Jamie Lawrence and Samantha Cooper, and Lexi Lee Sullivan at Fidelity Investments Art Collection.

Our staff here at the Tufts University Art Galleries was and remains one of the most dedicated group of professionals with whom I have had the chance to work. This project was made possible by former exhibition coordinator Josh Fischer, preparator Matt Murphy, former associate registrar Tony Palocci, then-staff assistant (and now communications coordinator) Kaelynn Maloney, preparator David Thacker, and registrar Laura McDonald who all jumped back into the galleries in June 2020 after months away to make this exhibition a reality. My colleagues, curator and head of public engagement Abigail Satinsky, exhibition manager Kaitlyn Clark, and manager of academic programs Liz Canter developed robust online programming and interpretive materials around these exhibitions for our campus and broader communities. Special thanks to Natalie Gearin, our 2020—21 graduate curatorial fellow, for writing elegant labels and hunting down each and every YouTube link and source in Huffman's video collages.

Thank you to Kimberly Bain, our guest author whose paper began as a self-described casual gallery talk during the spring 2021 semester. Thank you for writing a beautiful experience of this exhibition and unfolding it for us in a whole new way. Thank you to exhibiting artist ariella tai for sharing their work with us in the gallery and on zoom.

But my deepest gratitude goes to Khalil for building this project with me as a generous and thoughtful partner while the world was quite literally burning around us. Thank you Khalil for sharing your work with our community and your partnership in crafting this publication and exhibition.

— Dina Deitsch

Credits

Exhibition Curator: Dina Deitsch
Design: Siena Scarff Design
Copy Editor: Adam Henry