Malavassi, Paola. “Arthur Jafa, Face It: The ‘Affective Proximity’ of Imagery.” *Flash Art* (March 2, 2020) [ill.] [online]

Flash Art

Arthur Jafa. Face It: The “Affective Proximity” of Imagery

by Paola Malavassi

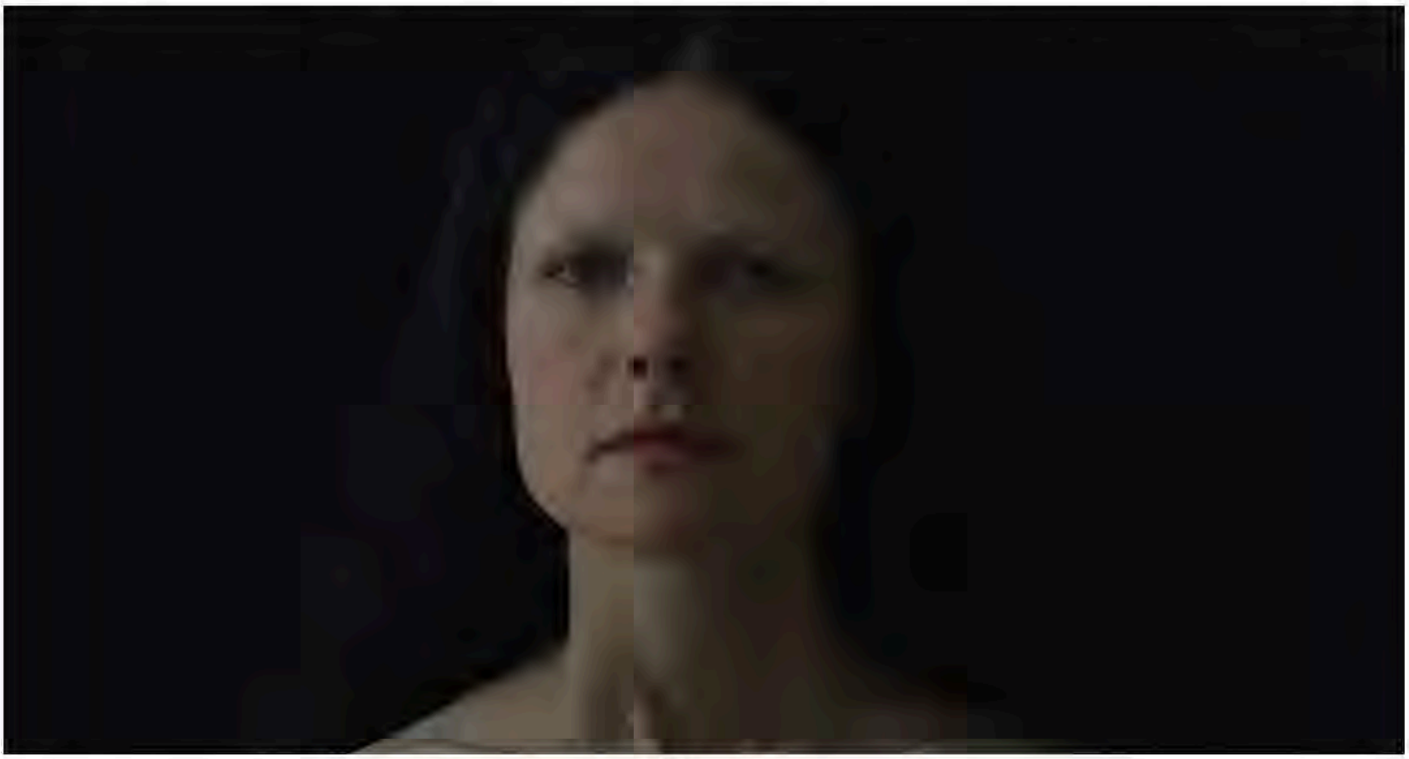
“John Akomfrah [...] said something that struck me, because I feel it’s at the core of almost everything that I do. He said that essentially what he tries to do is to take things and put them in some sort of affective proximity to one another. That really hit me because I think for me, in a nutshell, that’s what it *really* comes down to.”
—Arthur Jafa in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2016.

Arthur Jafa juxtaposes imagery from different contexts in “affective proximity.” His work consists of pictures, sequences of video, and music, which he combines and assembles anew. The artist is a master of sampling. His source materials encompass historical images, portraits, excerpts from documentaries, amateur and viral footage, music videos, TV programs both old and new, films produced by fellow artists, as well as the artist’s own photographs and films. He makes no distinction between pop and high culture, reassembling the material into a unique rendition of African American history that is as complex as it is ambivalent. The affective moment occurs by means of shifts in context, the proximity of imagery opening up spaces for reflection.

1 2 3 4

Arthur Jafa, Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death, 2016. Video still. Color, sound. 7′ 25″. Ed. of 13 + 2 AP. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York / Rome.

“What would America be like, if...”
Love is the Message, the Message is Death (2016) “is a layered homage to the ’70s club anthem ‘Love Is the Message’ by Philly International’s studio orchestra MFSB, and to the classic short story ‘Love is the Plan the Plan is Death’ by one of Jafa’s most beloved shape shifters, ’70s ‘New Wave’ speculative fiction author James Tiptree,” explains the writer, musician, and producer Greg Tate. The video became Arthur Jafa’s breakthrough, when his friend, filmmaker Kahlil Joseph, screened the video as a prelude to a private film night at Art Basel 2016. *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* merges found footage into a seven-minute music video capturing the great cultural achievements — together with the extreme pain, bliss, hope, tragedy, and injustice — of black American experience. Glorious moments in history, victories in sport, the freedom of improvised jazz, mutual support and hope through gospel singing, the expressiveness of hip-hop and street dance, but also police violence and racism on the streets: they are all here, as Kanye West’s lyrics to *Ultralight Beam*, which can be heard on *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, state: “This is a God Dream. This is everything [...] I’m tryna keep my faith. But I’m looking for more. Somewhere I can feel safe. And end my holy war.” Perhaps “affective proximity” is the route leading there, the way to a place where neither utopia nor dystopia prevails. In the middle of the video, the young actress Amandla Stenberg issues the central question: “What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?”



1 2 3 4

Arthur Jafa, The White Album, 2018. Video still. Color, sound. 29’55”. Ed. of 10 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York / Rome.

“The Pure and the Damned”

Just as pleasure and pain are linked in *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, so are the pure and the damned, love and hate interwoven in *The White Album* (2018). It was for this video that Jafa won the Golden Lion at the 58th Venice Biennale last year. It gathers together amateur videos of people talking about racism, loading weapons, shooting each other, or hugging lovingly. Jafa combines such imagery with portraits of white people he regards affectionately from his immediate milieu, in an ambivalent portrait of America in general and of his personal experience in particular. The work is unusual within his oeuvre in that it literally creates a dialogue between protagonists from different contexts. The White Album is full of confessions. Not only do the images interact with each other but so do the words: their ambivalence, their force, their aggressiveness. Language is at the heart of racism. In *The White Album,* both strengths and the dark depths of the human psyche become exposed through language and its freighting. In amateur videos three people talk openly in front of the camera about their views on racism, resulting in a quasi-conversation between them. A white man who is no longer proud of “white America” and is encouraging people to confront their own fears, determinedly states: “We don’t wanna lose power. We don’t wanna lose privileges. We don’t wanna lose benefits in a system of white supremacy that we have created here in America for white people. [...] Face your fear. Face your greed. [...] Our country is a country of white fucking supremacy. Yes sir, it is. It always has been. Let’s face it.” He explains that institutions, culture, structures, power, psychology, politics, media, education, and history have all been “whitewashed and biased.” Later, another video sequence shows a young white blond woman who self-righteous claims to be “the furthest person from being racist.” Her subsequent statements, however, reveal exactly the opposite, culminating in a demand for respect for white people. There then follows an African American sporting gold fronts who states in an offhand, easy-going manner: “You wanna argue [laughs]. I can’t argue with you. You mad! You big mad [laughs]! I’m happy. Leave me alone. I just want some money. A lot of money. I don’t get paid to argue with you. № Who is you? You ain’t nobody.” Following this trilogy of self-confessions, a white man appears, repeatedly reloading his rifle. The portraits of close confidants from Arthur Jafa’s milieu, including protagonists from the art scene, some of whom have made a significant contribution to promoting the artist, appear repeatedly. Is this a declaration of love or a comment on the hegemony of a “whitewashed” art market? Maybe both. Close-ups reveal physiognomies in all their detail. *The White Album* is a video-collage about love and hate. Or, as lyrics by Oneohtrix Point Never suggest at the beginning of the film: “The pure always act from love. The damned always act from love. The truth is an act of love.”

1 2 3 4

Arthur Jafa, APEX 2018. Video still. Color, sound. 8'12". Ed. of 10 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York / Rome.

Eight Hundred Images of Absence

There is hardly any other work by Arthur Jafa containing such a quantity of imagery as *APEX*, his masterpiece from 2013. The eight-minute video includes more than eight hundred images that appear and disappear within seconds to a soundtrack of techno music. It is a rapid slideshow of photographs from cultural memory: pop culture, the history of music, the civil rights movement, scenes of violence, portraits of famous people, physiognomies, but also abstract imagery. Brief video excerpts appear in just two short sections: a scene from Kahlil Joseph's music video for Flying Lotus, in which Storyboard P dances; and a scene from the motion picture studio TNEG, a film collective, which Jafa co-founded.

"*APEX* is a meditation, but a hard one, a difficult one," is how jazz musician Jason Moran succinctly describes the experience of the viewer confronted by this central work in Jafa's oeuvre. He continues: "And you have to face it. The music demands that you face it, the images in their rapid succession demand that you face it." In other words, *APEX* places African American history "in your face." There is no way to escape this digital collage. The mesmerizing visceral effect of this work arises from the sheer mass of imagery, the extreme speed of the sequences, but also from the volume of the Detroit techno beats, Robert Hood's track "Minus" (1994) penetrating deeply into the body.

Jafa sees the slight shifts that occur in repetitive dub techno as an expression of absence, a subject central to his work — that is, invisible, repressed history. In *APEX*, Jafa situates glory and pain, freedom and oppression, the body and physiognomy in "affective proximity." It is a history of music encompassing such names as Jessye Norman, Albert Ayler, Elvin Jones, Nina Simone, the Geto Boys, Robert Johnson, Michael Jackson, Little Richard, Marian Anderson, Beyoncé, Miles Davis, Kurt Cobain, Rihanna, David Bowie, Whitney Houston, and James Brown, as well as such important figures in African American history as Frederick Douglass and Jonathan Jackson, but also cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse and Krazy Kat, together with images of historical moments and violent events. There are, in between, both micro views that evoke a seeking of origins and macro views that lead to outer space. *APEX* unfolds hard and cool like a science fiction book. And, in fact, the work does have its origins in books. Arthur Jafa started collecting images in the late 1980s and filing them in his so-called *Picture Books*. It is these Picture Books that provide the basis of his pictorial cosmos. The idea for the video APEX came about when transferring these analog albums to the digital. The images race before our eyes, too fleeting for all them to be internalized. Consequently, *APEX* essentially expresses absence, making us think of what Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson describe as "afrotropes."[1] When asked how they understand "the process of formation, disappearance, materialization, and return," [2] Copeland and Thompson point out: "Afrotropes are [...] about the visualization of what is known but cannot be spoken and about that which cannot be seen, enabling black folks to come to terms with loss, longing, and absence."

1 2 3 4

Arthur Jafa, Screen Shot, 2017. Printed 2019. Epson fine art print face-mounted to Diasec acrylic on aluminum panel. 72 15/16 × 45 11/16 in. Ed. of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York / Rome.

A Series of "Afrotropes"

Arthur Jafa's current exhibition titled "A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions" has been touring Europe for three years.[3] The exhibition's title relates to the sense of absence that Jafa sees haunting black lives. It could be imagined that the show consists of "afrotropes" in Copeland and Thompson's sense, combining large-scale wallpapered works of historical events, photographs, and Jafa's mixtapes, with works by other artists. Photographs by Jafa's mentor Ming Smith and striking collages by Frida Orupabo are likewise part of the exhibition, as are videos by Missylanyus. At each venue, Jafa reinstalled and rearranged how the various elements interacted site-specifically.

The exhibition functions like a walk-in *Picture Book*, enabling Jafa's keen filmmaker's sense of the interplay between imagery and music to emerge within a three-dimensional space. His intention of developing a black cinema entailing "the power, beauty, and alienation of black music" succeeds by assembling images and video sequences in extreme, "affective proximity." This opens up spaces for unlikely and extraordinary renditions. As Arthur Jafa explains: "It has to do with a certain kind of contextual dissonance. When you place a thing in a context that didn't generate it, there's a weird slippage or dissonance that happens, a certain movement." This results in Jafa managing "to worry the note," as he expresses it, and in doing so achieve "affective proximity." The invisible becomes visible.

And you: You have to face it.

Arthur Jafa's solo exhibition "A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions" will be on view at the Serralves Museum, Porto, from February 20, 2020.

Paola Malavassi (b. 1978 in San José, Costa Rica) is a curator and art historian. Since 2016 she has been head of the Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin, where she curated the current exhibition "Stan Douglas: Splicing Block" (2019/2020) and a performance by Jason Moran and Arthur Jafa titled Apex Variations (2018).

1 "Afrotropes: A Conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson," in October 162, Fall 2017, p. 6.

2 Ibid. Leah Dickerman in conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson: "How do you understand the process of formation, disappearance, materialization, and return? What forces bring an image into being an afrotrope?"

3 This show was initially developed in 2017 at the Serpentine Galleries in London by Amira Gad and Hans Ulrich Obrist together with Arthur Jafa, before traveling to Berlin, for almost a year, to the Julia Stoschek Collection. It subsequently moved to the Rudolfinum in Prague and then to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. From February 20, 2020, it will be on view at the Serralves Museum in Porto.

Gaskin, Sam. “Arthur Jafa's Urgent 'Love Is the Message' to Stream Free.” *Ocula* (June 26, 2020) [ill.] [online]

OCULA

Arthur Jafa's Urgent 'Love Is the Message' to Stream Free

By Sam Gaskin
Washington D.C.
26 June 2020

Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (Film Still) (2016). Single-channel digital video. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome.

It's hard to imagine an artwork better suited to the United States' intensifying reckoning with racism.

Arthur Jafa's video *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (2016) will stream on repeat for 48 hours from June 26–28. Led by the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 13 museums and private collections in seven countries will show the work, the first time it has been exhibited outside of art institutions and galleries.

'[It] is necessary to acknowledge the ongoing violence and racial inequality faced by Black Americans,' said Stephanie Stebich, director of the Smithsonian. 'Learning from Arthur Jafa's powerful artwork is one way to do so.'

The seven-and-a-half-minute piece is a collage of found and original footage that brings together scenes of racism and violence against African Americans alongside scenes of exceptional achievement and displays of religious ecstasy. The images are soundtracked with Kanye West's 'Ultralight Beam'.

'Together with SAAM, we commit to making one of the critical works of our time radically accessible while Smithsonian doors are closed,' said Hirshhorn Director Melissa Chiu.

'I am thrilled for the opportunity, finally, to have as many people as possible see *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*,' said Jafa.

The work will be available at Hirshhorn.si.edu and AmericanArt.si.edu from 2pm ET on Friday, 26 June. It will also be available on other participating museums and collections' websites, including: the Dallas Museum of Art; The Studio Museum, Harlem; the Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin; the Luma Arles, Arles; The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Tate, London. Each participating museum and collection holds an edition of the artwork.

Roundtable discussions convened by Jafa will also be available to online audiences at sunhaus.us this weekend. The first takes place Saturday, June 27, at 2pm ET and the second on Sunday, June 28, at 2pm ET. —[O]

Nyong'o, Tavia. "Arthur Jafa's Glorious Vision And Kanye West's Gilded Faith." *NPR* (July 7, 2020) [ill.] [online]

npr

Arthur Jafa's Glorious Vision And Kanye West's Gilded Faith

July 7, 2020 · 3:11 PM ET

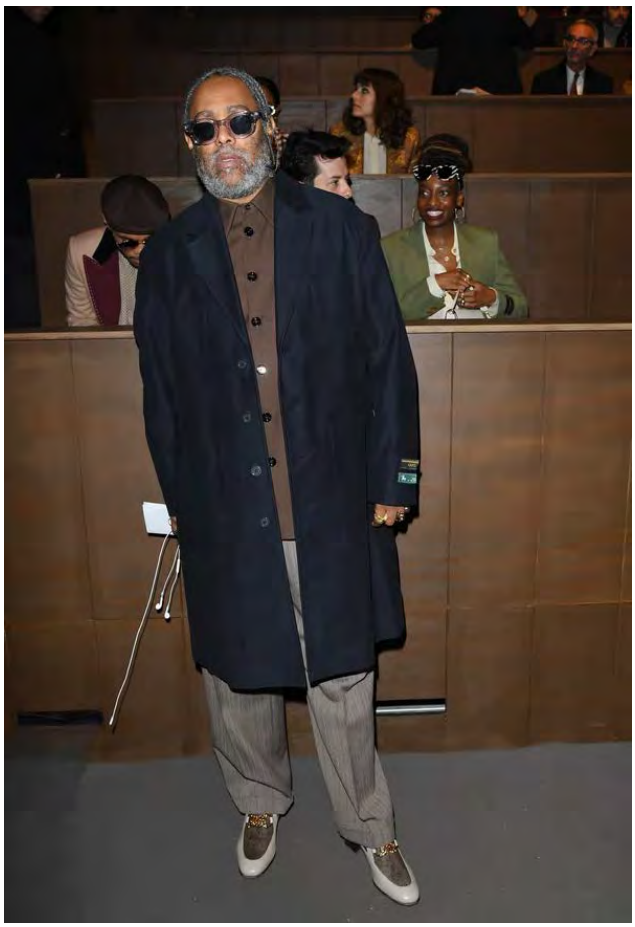
TAVIA NYONG'O

You may have already forgotten that Kanye West's most recent promotional campaign — including a deal with the Gap and a long-shot political campaign — kicked off on June 30, with the release of a new single and music video.

West's "Wash Us In The Blood" features his erstwhile rap protégé, Travis Scott, and comes to us from his forthcoming album *God's Country*, ostensibly arriving this fall. At once recalling the sound of 2013's *Yeezus* while building upon the religious themes of his most recent album, *Jesus Is King*, "Wash Us In The Blood" toggles between a jeremiad — against slavery and genocide as our event horizon — on the one hand, and the redemptive blood of the lamb on the other.

The song is moved with a jolting and hypnotic montage, featuring jarring police body cam clips, footage from recent uprisings, video game play, footage of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and gospel soloist Lateria Wooten singing with the Thomas Whitfield Company. West himself appears only intermittently, his face breaking through a CGI mask on split screen. But rather than feel rushed to meet this moment, it is clearly the work of a refined and mature artistic practice. The video was directed by Black film auteur Arthur Jafa, and allows West's song to resonate both with its moment and with the insurgent cinematic movement Jafa has been spearheading for decades. Jafa has long described that movement as the search for a Black cinema with all the "power, beauty and alienation" of Black music.

Jafa's approach to the video for "Wash Us In The Blood" samples imagery the way hip-hop samples sound, plumbing history to recontextualize and revivify it. He draws from a deep archive of footage, both his own and found or archival imagery, and reworks them into poetic meditations characterized by arresting juxtaposition and haunting interplay. Jafa has described his work as seeking a "visual intonation" akin to Black speech, giving it a signature flow. His seven-and-a-half minute short film *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, from 2016, is perhaps the best entry-point into his work and, with Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" as its chopped-and-screwed soundtrack, the piece that most clearly precedes his present collaboration. A visual essay furiously overstuffed with everything from clips of president Obama singing "Amazing Grace" to a teenage Biggie Smalls rapping on a corner to voguers showing out on the dance floor to science fiction aliens and astrophysical footage of sun flares, *Love Is the Messag*e makes effective use of West's repeated invocation — "this is a God dream" — to hold its incandescent rage and beauty together. At once maximalist and minimalist, a viewing leaves you breathless and eager for more.



Arthur Jafa, photographed in Milan, Italy on Jan. 14, 2020.
Daniele Venturelli/Daniele Venturelli / Getty Image

Besides working with West, Jafa is enjoying a career peak of late: *Love Is the Message* was livestreamed continuously by 13 museums worldwide during the last weekend in June, making a film that many describe as one of the first masterpieces of the new century available to a global audience. Jafa won the Golden Lion for best artist in last year's Venice Biennale for his film *The White Album*, which employed his now-signature use of appropriated footage to reflect a Black gaze back upon the problem of "whiteness." This recent embrace of Jafa by the art world, who has been working professionally since the early 1990s, is both telling and symptomatic of the whiteness he cross-sects — and dreams of abolishing — in *The White Album*. On the one hand, museums and galleries have afforded an ideal context for Jafa to break with the conventions of the commercial film industry that he believes stifle the potential of Black cinema. On the other, the art world has itself been rocked by a series of reckonings with its own structural white supremacy, a topic that Jafa (also an incisive writer) dealt with in a recent pamphlet, "My Black Death." The belated, deserved recognition of Jafa's work by an art world now seemingly and suddenly desperate for Black representation could oversimplify his originality, and risks reducing the richness of a work like *Love is the Message* to a depiction of Black suffering. At the same time, Jafa is in no way eager to shirk the task of depicting Black suffering. At the close of that pamphlet, in a Black *hagakure*, or spiritual code for a warrior, Jafa puts things this way: "The central conundrum of black being (the double consciousness of our ontological existence) lies in the fact that common misery both defines and limits who we are." (His feature *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* features Black studies luminaries such as Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman in dialogue on this topic, and is worth seeking out).

This metaphysical conundrum has led both Jafa and West in recent years down a converging path towards the gospel, as a location where generations of African-Americans have found meaning and transcendence amidst terror and suffering. For West, it seems to be at once sincere faith and a grandiose god complex, a tension that the song "Wash Us in the Blood" doesn't resolve. The video closes with footage of his daughter at a rehearsal for one of the family's exclusive Sunday Services, performances often based on gospel versions of West's music, that the Kardashian-West family has been hosting since 2019. It is a little reminder that celebrity remains our national religion. For Jafa, by contrast, the gospel appeals as an aesthetic of the ensemble, within which the opposition between individual and collective is overcome.

If West's turn to faith only burnishes the construction of his myth, Jafa takes a more circumspect approach. The Black gospel tradition, in all its permutations, is the subject of his feature-length film *akingdoncomethas*, from 2018. Seen in a gallery space, the epic scale and scope of the assembled footage of *akingdoncomethas* brings the viewer into the ecstatic of collective worship and holds her there, mesmerized. These services happen anywhere and everywhere in Black America, including — and here's the rub — inside the gated compounds of the one percent.

Although he claims no religion, Jafa has put it this way: "I believe in Black people believing." What makes Jafa an artist of our times is his ability to show that belief in so many kaleidoscopic forms. Being held in dispersion, striking a Black pose against a white background, spitting fire in the cypher and throwing praises as blood rains down: these are some of the vital elements of Jafa's montage. Remixing is, by now, a global lingua franca — what makes Jafa's work stand out, and stand together, is what he has to say.

Tomkins, Calvin. "Radical Alienation." *The New York Times* (December 21, 2020) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times

PROFILES

RADICAL ALIENATION

Arthur Jafa left an art world he found too white. Years later, he made a triumphant return.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

The most spellbinding art work of the past decade is a seven-and-a-half-minute film called "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," by the artist and filmmaker Arthur Jafa. Word spread quickly after its New York première, in November, 2016, at Gavin Brown's gallery. People crowded the gallery to see it, but nothing they had heard prepared them for the rapid-fire sequence of a hundred and fifty film clips of Black people in the maelstrom of American life: a teen-age girl being thrown to the ground by a white police officer, burning cars and hip-hop dancers, Martin Luther King, Jr., in an open car, a man being beaten by several uniformed policemen, LeBron James soaring in for a gorgeous dunk, Barack Obama singing "Amazing Grace" at a memorial service in Charleston, a woman saying, "What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture?" Most of the images are found footage, taken from YouTube. Their emotional impact comes from the way Jafa has put them together, shifting and editing and choreographing to create a flow of deeply resonant juxtapositions, over a soundtrack of Kanye West's ecstatic "Ultralight Beam."

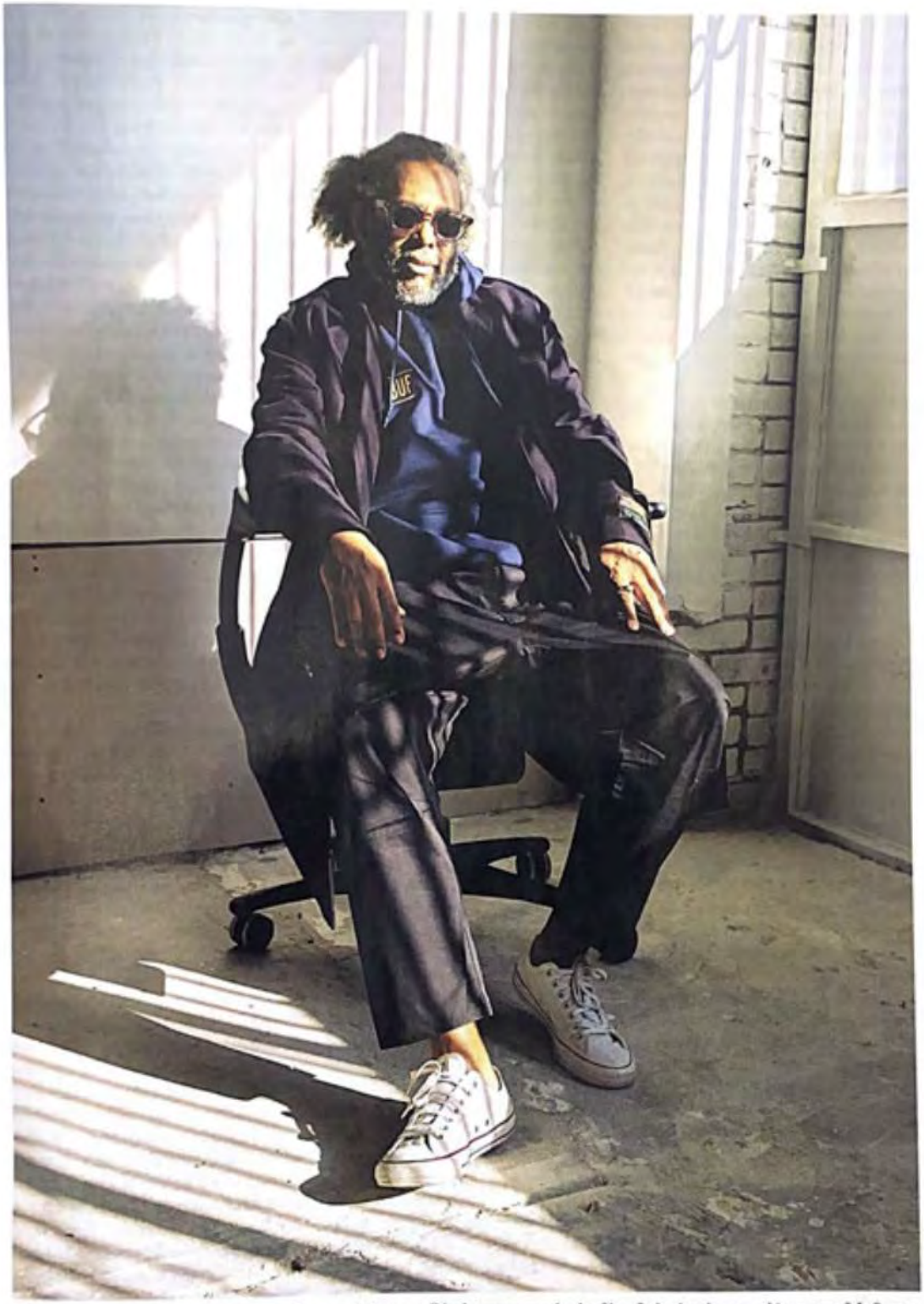
For Jafa (pronounced Jay-fa), who turned sixty in November, the film's reception was startling. A dozen major museums in this country and in Europe acquired copies of "Love Is the Message," and many more borrowed it for special screenings. As Jafa's friend John Akomfrah, the British artist and filmmaker, said to me, it was ironic that "this figure who was heralded for a long time as a kind of prophet in the world of cinema would turn out to be the savior of the art world." Jafa had a lively interest in contemporary art, and from 1999 to 2005 he had shown sculptures and other works in art galleries here and abroad, but cinema had been his primary focus since the seventies, when he was an undergraduate at Howard University, in Washington, D.C. Howard had an excellent film department, and in Jafa's third year there his interest had shifted from architecture to film studies. Incorrigibly curious and hugely ambitious, A.J., as everyone called him, identified his goal very early: "To make Black cinema with the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music." Jafa was not the first to stake this claim, but, as Akomfrah said, "somebody needed to articulate it for our generation, and A.J. was that figure."

Jafa's thinking was based on a concept that he calls "Black visual intonation." "Something I've pointed out a million times is that, if you look at Black folk and our visual expressivity, it's very, very undeveloped in comparison to what we've been able to achieve in music," he told me, one day this summer. "It's undeveloped despite the fact that we come from a visual tradition that's just as rich as the musical one. There is no contemporary art without African descent. Cubism is Picasso trying to understand African artifacts." Africans brought music with them on the slave ships, he said, and the music changed and developed in response to the new context, and this led to "everything from Billie Holiday to Jimi Hendrix to Motown, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk—you can go on and on." But nothing comparable had happened in African-American visual expression, and when Jafa's teachers in the film department at Howard introduced him to the idea of cinema devoted to Black lives, he said, "I was very excited. It sort of fired my imagination."

"Love Is the Message" is the closest he has come to realizing the goal he set for himself forty years ago. "I think what the film captures is the Black struggle to live," the writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman, who has known Jafa for many years, said to me. "It's a series of iconic images that show the brilliant virtuosity of the Black thinkers, artists, and athletes that ordinary Black folk have given to the world, alongside some of the forces that have negated Black life. You don't have to know the exact reference for each image to feel the work's density and power." The poet Fred Moten, another friend of Jafa's, talked to me about the "entanglement of absolute joy and absolute pain" that is fundamental to Black art and Black music. "'Love Is the Message' has all of that, and you know it immediately," he said. "It's in every moment. There is no break, and this is why it's good that it lasts only seven minutes, because that's as much as anyone can take."

Two of Jafa's teachers at Howard, Haile Gerima and Ben Caldwell, were recognized independent filmmakers. Gerima, who was born in Ethiopia, had been a leader of the L.A. Rebellion, a group of cinema students at U.C.L.A. in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, whose rebellion, in Gerima's words, was against "the white supremacist vocabulary" of mainstream Hollywood. Gerima was Jafa's mentor and role model. His films ("Bush Mama," "Ashes and Embers," "Sankofa"), along with those of Caldwell, Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, and other pioneers of L.A.'s Black film movement, opened Jafa's eyes to the boundless possibilities of cinema, but he gradually came to feel that something was missing in their approach. "It seemed to me early on that it wasn't enough to say a Black person made the film," he said. "It had to be something more. And, in trying to think about what I consider fundamental Black aesthetic values, one of the things that came up was rhythm. Most people will say Black people have rhythm—they seem able to do things with time. So I became interested in how cinema could be inscribed with a more idiomatic sense of timing."

Jafa had been an omnivorous reader



"It seemed to me early on that it wasn't enough to say a Black person made the film. It had to be something more," Jafa says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRANDON HICKS

Zultanski, Steven. "Surging Tides." *Spike Art Magazine* (Spring 2021) [ill.] [online]

SPIKE

COPENHAGEN

Surging Tides

ARTHUR JAFA
"MAGNUMB"
LOUISIANA MUSEUM OF ART
21 APRIL – 1 AUG 2021

Arthur Jafa (*1960) has a compelling life story that gets trotted out repeatedly in profiles and reviews (including this one). After spending years as an accomplished cinematographer, notably working on Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust,* 1991, Spike Lee's *Crooklyn,* 1994, and Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut,* 1999, Jafa started showing his own art in the late 90s, only to drop out of the art world a few years later. Then in 2016, his video *Love is the Message, the Message is Death,* screened at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, and he quickly found himself at the centre of critical attention and with the resources to finally realise his ideas.

It's a great story, but focusing too much on Jafa's biography risks adding a note of triumph to a body of work that insists on the unreconciled history of anti-Black racism in the US, as if the provocations of the work could be softened by Jafa's newfound success in the art world. There's no hint of resolution in the art itself – it's committed to evocative discordance.

"Magnumb", at the Louisiana Museum right outside of Copenhagen is Jafa's biggest show yet, and he takes the opportunity to intensify the contradictions in his work. It's a large, multifarious exhibition that brings together much of what he's done in an extraordinary burst of activity since 2016, along with new sculptures, new photos, a new installation, and a new video. Though he's become known for his videos of found footage, "Magnumb" restlessly moves between mediums, refusing to be boxed-in. The wall-mounted sculptures of steel rails and chains evoke industrial machinery, incarceration, and BDSM, while remaining fundamentally abstract. They look like they could have been made by a completely different artist than the one who composed diptychs of found photos in visual rhymes (such as *Bloods 1,* 2020, which features Robert Johnson and Miles Davis each holding cigarettes in their mouths at the same angle).

This multiplicity of style is also inherent to the well-known video pieces. His two most celebrated works, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) and *The White Album* (2018) arrange found footage, much of it gathered from YouTube, into intense montages in which there's no dip of energy, no break from the vacillation between beauty and horror. *Love is the Message* juxtaposes footage of Black cultural icons, police brutality, dancing, home videos, and viral videos. *The White Album,* as its title implies, gathers images of white people and white culture, and also draws heavily from videos found on YouTube.

The violent footage is hard to watch, even if one has already seen it repeatedly on social media, and the footage that's rousing likewise remains potent even though it's familiar. Similarly, some of the viral videos that are interspersed throughout *The White Album* are funny, and they uncomfortably retain their power to provoke laughter even in the context of the documentary material (one of the ways that the predominantly white art world sidelines Black artists is by framing their work as if it was devoid of humour and irony, so it's important to note that Jafa's sense of comic timing throws a wrench into easy interpretations of his works as acts of witness).

Not all of the clips in *Love is the Message* and *The White Album* are immediately identifiable, but by relying heavily on widely-disseminated footage, Jafa refrains from uncovering or revealing anything – there's nothing hidden about racism in the US, just as there's nothing hidden about Black cultural achievement. Jafa's work is anti-illusionistic in its steadfast attention both to harsh social reality and to the inventiveness of Black music and art, but it's also anti-revelatory, disinterested in educating its audience or justifying its existence in digestible pedagogical terms.

That said, the work is also not deliberately obscure, and Jafa generously includes images and footage of artists and thinkers that he admires, and whose work resonates with his own. "Large Array" (2020), a set of thirteen aluminium cut-outs with colour prints of figures important to Jafa's personal mythology (Miles Davis, Adrian Piper, Cady Noland, the black sheep from the cover of Funkadelic's *Greatest Hits*, the Incredible Hulk) function like an inverse key to the show: instead of providing answers, it points outwards to the world, nudging the audience to go check out the work of other artists.

In one instance, other artists take centre stage. *akingdoncomethas* (2018), a two-hour montage of gospel songs and sermons from Black churches, depicts fervent belief without contextualising or explaining it away. Incredible vocal performances are at the centre of most of the footage, but equally important are the crowd reaction shots that show audience members listening intently or being moved. Art audiences encountering Jafa's video in a museum may also be moved by what they see and hear, but it's abundantly clear that these two forms of being moved are fundamentally distinct. They're likely separated by a gulf of belief.

Perhaps the highlight of "Magnumb" is a new video work, *Aghdra* (2020) which departs dramatically from the previous videos. Made entirely with CGI, the forty-minute video depicts a sea of black rocks undulating gently with the waves, occasionally swelling high enough to block out the sun on the horizon. Both cyclical and interruptive, *Aghdra* evokes a contradictory sense of weight – the rocks appear dense, heavy, always about to sink. But they're kept aloft by an impossible, paradoxical buoyancy.

Steven Zultanski

COPENHAGEN

Photo: Anders Sune Berg, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Installation view *Large Array,* 2020, dimension variable, Wallpaper and thirteen separate cut-outs, colour print on Dibond, steel plate stands

Photo courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Installation view of *Aghdra,* 2020, 60 min., CGI rendered video, colour, sound

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Triumph and Trauma

Arthur Jafa’s exhibition at Louisiana offers a virtuosic history lesson on Black American culture. It also deals a welcome blow to Danish racism.

By Louis Scherfig 14.04.21 Review Artikel på dansk

Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death*, 2016 Video (Still: Police officer overpowering a drunk teenage girl.)

Ever since the summer of 2020, when Black Lives Matter became a global movement that found its way into prime-time media, addressing the violent paradigms of structural racism, Denmark has had a hard time maintaining its façade as an innocent teeny-tiny nation famed for its welfare socialism and fine ceramics. Although politicians and sceptics tried to dismiss the movement's relevance by saying that problems could not simply be imported from the United States wholesale, it has become clear that Denmark's understanding of what racism is has at least as many holes in it as a quintessentially Danish blue-fluted soup tureen has blue doodles. No, problems cannot be imported directly, just as experience cannot be adopted without lived life. But both things can be put into perspective through, for example, artistic work. This very perspective gives an added boost to *MAGNUMB*, Arthur Jafa's long-awaited scoop of an exhibition at Louisiana in Humlebæk.

Having worked as a cinematographer on works such as the iconic *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) by Julie Dash, Jafa has long held somewhat of a cult status within the world of film. But in the past five years, his video works in particular have travelled the world, partly in the form of music videos for a roster of artists that includes Jay-Z and Kanye West, and partly in the form of works that can now be experienced on a large scale in Humlebæk.

While Jafa's more recent video works may be harder to place within the cinematic space he hails from, they are quite comfortably at ease in an art setting, coexisting happily with the overlaps of worlds and disciplines explored here. At the same time, his project is also about developing a Black cinema that replicates the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music, as described by Jafa in the essay 'Black Visual Intonation' from 1998. The statement feels like a thread running throughout the entire exhibition at Louisiana – the way it shifts and changes, alternating between darkened halls with large video projections and rooms full of photographs and sculptural works. Poised between the digital, the mental, and the bodily – like a rhythmic multifaceted sampling of American reality that explores the broad scope of Black culture and being.

Arthur Jafa, *I Don't Care About Your Past, I Just Want Our Love to Last*, 2018, tapet. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Copyright Arthur Jafa.

One of the first works greeting visitors to the exhibition is the video *The White Album* (2016). Jafa has compiled a range of clips from YouTube, all depicting different aspects of whiteness – for example, the fragile and defensive version presented in a sequence featuring a young woman launching a whining diatribe about the injustice she believes makes life harder for her as a white person. Interspersed with cringe-worthy confessions like this, we also see a militant white man loading his automatic weapon, or CCTV footage of Dylann Roof murdering nine Black Americans in a church in Charleston. Suddenly, the video cuts to high-resolution studio portraits of white people in Jafa's own life, such as Gavin Brown, the owner of the gallery representing him.

In this way, the work alternates between micro-aggressions, love, and clear-cut examples of white supremacy, but without directly naming any of these constituent parts. This openness produces a deliberate ambivalence that puts the viewer to work. *The White Album* becomes a visual device that cuts through the internet's fluid bank of documentation, analysing whiteness as a pathology. Along the way, I soon felt my own moral fantasies darting away in search of some reliable good-evil dichotomies to hold on to, like a kind of displacement activity seeking to veer away from a work that acts as a shimmering mirror in which I can position my own whiteness, seeing how it operates and performs.

In the major work, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016), Jafa's technical practice comes very clearly to the fore. The editing done on found digital material in this work creates a sequencing of elementary pieces of the reality of Black Americans. At an early point in the video, Jafa cuts from a clip of a surging collective dance (swag surf) – creating a communal body for a crowd during a basketball game – to a young man's dance moves that take the body's physiological possibilities to entirely new levels, and, finally, to the horrific footage from 2015 of a white cop shooting and murdering Walter Scott with shots in the back.

Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death*, 2016, Video, (Still: The dancer Storyboard P in a dance-off.)

The work is set to the music of Kanye West's 'Ultralight Beam', released that same year. Combined with virtuoso technical skill in an approach that does not differentiate between different image qualities or sources, the many cuts produce a stream of opposites that merge in an essayistic supercut. British artist John Akomfrah describes this methodical use of imagery as "affective proximity," while Jafa himself compares this work to the way in which a DJ splits up musical totalities to compose new realities.

Overall, the entire exhibition feels like a composition of works that sensitively, but unsentimentally, examine a Black aesthetic from within. Photographs of Miles Davis, Whitney Houston, and punk pioneer HR from Bad Brains hang side by side with images of brutal lynchings. The same room also displays minimalist sculptures made of black-painted aluminium rails and pipes combined with chains and padlocks and gently, delicately, added Yves Saint Laurent silk scarves or bandanas. Clear links are established between structural and physical violence against Black people and the production of art and cultural sublimations. The fact that the best culture, especially music, is created by Black people and often stems from violence and oppression, pain and suffering, seems to be a contextualising motif in Jafa's art.

The title of the exhibition, *MAGNUMB*, signals a numbness towards the sublime – an exhaustion in the face of the ontological horror that Jafa has, on several conversations, associated with being Black. But even though this painful connection between culture and violence is examined with perfect proficiency and great visual coherence, it is clearly not without its problems.

Arthur Jafa, *Ex-Slave Gordon 1863*, 2017, Vacuum shaped plastic, 144,8 x 111,8 x 22,9 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Copyright Arthur Jafa; Arthur Jafa, *Big Wheel II*, 2018. Chains, rim, hubcap, tyre and fabric, 242 x 240 x 104 cm. Barasch Carmel Family Collection. Copyright Arthur Jafa.

In an interview in the exhibition catalogue, artist Faith Icecold criticises Jafa for aestheticising the traumas of white violence against Black people, pointing out, for example, that he almost appears to sexualise the gruesome image of a mutilated back in the relief work *Ex-Slave Gordon* (2018). Icecold also states that Jafa should not exhibit at white museums or be represented in white art collections. It's a complex conversation, one that also involves Louisiana as well as the question of exactly who cultural institutions address with exhibitions like this – beyond the usual privileged audience.

For this exhibition, Jafa has created a new work, *AGHDRA* (2020), a large animated projection of a sunset over a dark ocean, its waves made of solidified lava or pieces of rock floating and 'forming' a huge sea. A song played at a slowed-down pace accompanies the empty image. But the context of emptiness quickly evokes an echo of a ship on the waves, the waves on the sea – the sea as an eternal reminder of the slave ships that took enslaved Africans to America. This overwhelming and meditative work resonates directly with our own historical reality of the Danish slave trade, a chapter in Denmark's colonial history which has been conveniently – and easily – suppressed through a massive resistance to information.

For example, when a group of anonymous artists recently threw a plaster copy of a bust of Frederik V into the water to articulate the colonialism that exists in our national institutions and politics, we saw how a defensive and welfare-psychotic whiteness came to the fore to once again push back the possibility of an otherwise necessary and harmless decolonisation. It is clear that the full spectrum of power does not yet want to put this issue on the curriculum in schools, or on the visual curriculum of sculptures in urban space. In the meantime, we can engage in this and many other conversations with and through Arthur Jafa's art.

Arthur Jafa, *MAGNUMB*, Installation View (*Large Array*, 2020). Photo: Anders Sune Berg / Louisiana Museum of Modern Art.

Siddhartha, Mitter. "At His Moment of Triumph, Arthur Jafa Is Looking for Troubles." *The New York Times* (May 27, 2021) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times

At His Moment of Triumph, Arthur Jafa Is Looking for Trouble

With a survey in Europe and stark new sculptures in New York, he is bringing to the fore darker, more personal themes. "I'm an undertaker," he said. "I don't do the uplift thing."

By Siddhartha Mitter

May 27, 2021

"One of my complaints has been that I've gotten very little pushback," Arthur Jafa said. He welcomes the success after years of career frustration; until recently, he said, "I was a failure, by and large, in my own mind." Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

In 2019, Arthur Jafa won the Golden Lion award for best artist in the Venice Biennale for "The White Album." A collage of found and original video, it mapped the psychology of Black-white relations in America today — the brutality, awkwardness and sometimes care. "Just as the film critiques a moment fraught with violence, in tenderly portraying the artist's friends and family, it also speaks to our capacity for love," the jury concluded.

Jafa was at his hotel, packing to leave town, when the news arrived. What surprised him was not that he had won, he told me recently; it was that the prize existed.

"I didn't know there was an Academy Awards to the art thing," he said.

Images from Arthur Jafa's award-winning video, "The White Album" (2018). Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

"The White Album" mapped Black-white relations in a work with appropriated and original footage, and equal parts essay, poem, and portrait. Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Jafa was a creature of film, grizzled from 30 years working mostly as a cinematographer for other people, dating to "Daughters of the Dust," in 1991, by Julie Dash, his spouse at the time. (Though the film made his reputation, with its poetic images depicting the Gullah community off South Carolina early last century, it did not make for a Hollywood career.)

He's no longer the art ingénue. This season, Jafa (pronounced Jay-fa) has his first retrospective, at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, in Denmark, which gathers his video works since 2013, along with his sculpture, photography and binders of inspirational images going back to 1990. And he is showing new sculpture — chilly, brooding objects that give little away — at Gladstone Gallery's Upper East Side branch in Manhattan.

Installation view of "Large Array" (2020) in "Arthur Jafa —MAGNUMB," at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. It brings together 13 separate cutouts — images made and collected by the artist over the years. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art; Anders Sune Berg

And then there is "Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death," the seven-minute video poem that became the talismanic artwork of the Black Lives Matter era, particularly since the murder of George Floyd. Jafa's cathartic treatment of race, violence and the miracle of Black culture, made in 2016, has been called the decade's most "spellbinding" and "powerful" artwork; currently it stars in "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," the New Museum exhibition with a canonical energy.

And last June, when 13 museums — seven in the United States, six in Europe — wanted to show a single work on all their websites that, in their view, addressed the moment of mass protest against racism and police violence, it was "Love Is the Message" that they presented in a 48-hour-straight free screening.

Now, however, Jafa is complicating his story — subsuming "Love Is the Message" into his entire body of work in the retrospective in Europe, and presenting sculpture in New York that is as tight and hermetic as the video was kinetic and loud. In so doing, he is bringing to the front darker, more personal themes — control, abjection, death — that elude social-justice framings and that have concerned him all along.

"I'm an undertaker," he told me. "I don't do the uplift thing."

Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

"Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," was screened simultaneously in 13 museums, leaving Jafa wary. But he welcomed its reach. "I took it as an opportunity, because I never felt like Black people had a chance to see 'Love Is the Message.'" Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

We met on a Saturday at the Gladstone Gallery. Jafa is 60, a father and grandfather, with a suave, salt-and-pepper look. Friends and colleagues universally call him "A.J." He had just arrived from Los Angeles, where he lives, but he readily settled into a long, meandering conversation.

The value of the multi-museum online screening, he told me, was its reach. "I took it as an opportunity, because I never felt like Black people had a chance to see 'Love Is the Message.'"

Still, he said, the work's prominence — of which he was already wary, once noting that it seemed to bring white viewers a "microwave epiphany" — had grown limiting. "It's something I'm proud of; it certainly changed my life," he said. "But I'm a little embarrassed when it pops up again. I joke that it's my 'Purple Rain.'"

Jafa's new sculptures will prompt no campfire rhapsodies. They are made of black industrial pipe and rail, vaguely softened by bits of cloth and ornaments. Some include a dark material he called "high-tech garbage bag."

The pieces fairly seethe on their wall mounts. "They're all pretty stark," he agreed.

Installation view of “Arthur Jafa,” at Gladstone 64 with one of his new sculptures, made from metal pipe.
Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Gavin Brown, Jafa’s gallerist and now a partner at Gladstone, said the artist had hinted at this work, inchoately. “He’s been worrying these things a long time,” Brown said. “They’re fetish objects, in a really dark mood.”

What links Jafa’s art across mediums is the idea that items brought out of context and juxtaposed, whether metal pipes or appropriated YouTube clips, can develop expressive power beyond their original employ. It is precision work — obsessive micro-editing goes into the videos — that draws on a forager’s instinct for finding beauty in the ephemeral and mundane.

It invokes, as well, a particularly Black tradition — shaped by economic scarcity — of making art that transforms what is available. That impulse in Black creativity, in Jafa’s view, was a way to stake a claim in a largely hostile world. “It’s a form of radical determinacy in the face of the chaotic,” he said.

It connects, for instance, the craft of the D.J. — an analogy he offers for his video work — with the yard sculptures he saw in Mississippi, where he grew up between Tupelo in the hills and Clarksdale in the Delta, and where "people just felt compelled to make" things.

"A commitment in A.J.'s work is the emphatic acknowledgment of the creative genius of regular Black people," said Thomas J. Lax, curator of media and performance at the Museum of Modern Art. "Found material is a way of seeing what is genius about the way people use discarded matter, or in a gesture, how they walk down the street."

"Valencia" (2021). The sculpture, made from metal rail, steel pipe, plastic pipe, black fabric, fur and bag, is part of a stark new body of work with a contained, potential violence implied. Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

Jafa's sculptures, in that spirit, are mostly ready-mades — manufactured items given new context. Their lineage, Jafa said, dates beyond Marcel Duchamp to the African sub-Saharan masks and statues that, though alienated from their spiritual context, destabilized Western aesthetics and opened the road to Modernism.

In 2018, at Brown's gallery, Jafa introduced his "Big Wheel" series — imposing seven-foot tires swathed in chains, one hanging from a gantry. From large speakers, Teddy Pendergrass ballads filled the space. Jafa told me he considers that installation his most successful. (It reappeared as part of his Venice entry.)

I offered my reading of "Big Wheel," which had mesmerized me — raising themes, I thought, of labor, manufacturing decline, and the slippage between seductive and toxic masculinity. Sure, Jafa answered, but I had missed a significant reference: the circumstances of the car accident that paralyzed Pendergrass at the height of his career, and in which his passenger, it was later learned, was a transgender sex worker.

Jafa had chosen the music on instinct, he told me, but then realized that his selection subconsciously drew on a body of discourse particular to Black America. "The Teddy thing is Black common knowledge," he said. "This is why I say I'm not addressing white people in my work; I'm addressing Black folks, but everyone gets to listen in."

"Big Wheel II," (2018). Chains, rim, hubcap, tire and fabric from his survey at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. The complete version features Teddy Pendergrass ballads playing in the room. Arthur Jafa and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

For years, Jafa's work has doubled as a kind of symposium, convening influential scholars in Black critical studies — among them Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten. They appear in his films (notably his 2014 documentary "Dreams Are Colder Than Death"), exchange with him in public talks, are his friends. The circle extends to fellow artists and filmmakers with whom he readily collaborates.

"The conversation and vibrancy of exchange are really formative of A.J.'s work," said Leigh Raiford, an associate professor of African American studies at the University of California at Berkeley. "It's the liveness, the improvisation of working out ideas in community that make the work so exciting, and resonate with so many."

A core concern of Jafa and his interlocutors is Black subjectivity as shaped by the trauma of enslavement and its long aftermath. Jafa is adamant that the disaster that set forth Black American existence is also foundational to Black creative genius, and thus warrants unflinching examination. "I think we have an ethical imperative to mine the catastrophe," he said.

But Jared Sexton, a professor of African American studies and film studies at the University of California, Irvine, who contributed to the retrospective catalog, said Jafa's work equally "reveals the questioning that is always at the heart of Blackness." Sexton added, "Blackness is like a productive enigma that yields the most necessary insights, so long as you never try to formalize them into a doctrine or dogma."

A core concern of the artist is how enslavement and its aftermath have shaped Black American creative genius. That history warrants unflinching examination. "We have an ethical imperative to mine the catastrophe," he said. Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

What Jafa shows can disturb. His video sequences can move from the cosmic and transcendent — solar flares, ocean waves, gospel choirs — to the brutal and traumatic, including lynchings; killings by the police (like that of Walter Scott, in 2015, in "Love Is the Message"); surveillance footage of the murderer Dylann Roof entering Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. (in "The White Album").

Jafa's sculpture from 2017, "Ex-Slave Gordon," is a plastic impression of an 1863 photograph of an escaped slave, seen from behind, back violently scarred from whipping — but with a pose, hand on hip, that Jafa reads as dignified, cool. That image has fascinated Jafa since he was a teenager, he said. He has made it the cover of the retrospective's catalog — impossible to avoid.

One gets the sense that Jafa, in his moment of triumph, is looking for trouble.

“One of my complaints has been that I’ve gotten very little pushback,” he said. “Including ‘Love Is the Message,’ which, you know, traffics in violence directed at Black bodies.”

Last year, over Zoom, he sparred with an elusive artist named Faith Icecold, who had excoriated him from a now-defunct Instagram account. Their conversation, in which Icecold calls Jafa anti-Black for his choices of imagery and his association with mainstream museums, is included in the catalog. Yet the criticism did not really move Jafa. “I’m insecure about certain things, but I know I’m not anti-Black,” he told me.

Today, Jafa is riding high. “It’s been a victory lap, basically,” he said. In addition to his art exhibitions, his film production company, Sunhaus, has several commercial features in development. He welcomes the success after years of career frustration; until recently, he said, “I was a failure, by and large, in my own mind.”

Installation view of Jafa’s new video, “AGHDRA,” in the retrospective in Denmark, without found footage, moves the artist in a new direction. It is entirely computer-generated; its motif is oceanic. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art; Anders Sune Berg

Yet his newest art projects stand in sharp contrast to "Love Is the Message" — at once more personal and harder to read. One pull is abstraction: His newest video, "AGHDRA," on view in the retrospective, is entirely computer-generated; its motif is oceanic, with waves that swell yet seem made of fragments, like lava.

Another undercurrent in his work that receives less attention is the pull toward themes of sexual control and transgression, desire and degradation — sometimes involving himself. In 2018, for instance, he showed "La Scala" and "Man Monster — Duffy," photographic self-portraits where he plays Mary Jones, an 1830s Black trans sex worker, wearing a corset and, in one, a leather vagina.

This year, also at Gladstone, he curated a show of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs that included plenty of explicit imagery. And his new gallery show, where the metal sculptures give off a distinct dungeon energy, also includes several photographs of his own — one frankly sexual, showing a flaccid penis, owner unidentified.

When I asked Jafa about this direction, he answered in two stages.

First, he said, it stemmed from a rebellious impulse. "It's intransigent, punk, nihilistic, depressive, Gothic."

Then he followed the thought to a heavier place.

"Power relations and sexuality, for Black folks — these things always enter and are permeable with each other," he said. He collapsed the history of coerced miscegenation going back to the plantation into a raw metaphor. "I can't look at my face without seeing my rapist in the mirror. I don't look like those Africans who came here."

But Lax, the MoMA curator, said sexual pluralism in Jafa's work also represents a connection with his creative community; he has collaborated, for example, with the trans artist Tourmaline. "It's about bringing himself into the room in a meaningful way, but not centering his own desires or identity," Lax said.

Read this way, it's a validation of everyone's freedom. Jafa put it succinctly: "There's an infinite number of positions to occupy."

Jafa identifies the source of his unruly streak back in his Mississippi childhood, where, he said, the church was the institution that gathered and protected the community. But it was also hierarchical and it enforced conformity. The dark, disapproved, material was expressed elsewhere, in the blues.

The people who sang the blues, he said, were prone to "despair, longing and heartbreak." Yet in embracing the torment, they found tools to forge a kind of autonomy.

He has always recognized himself in that disposition. "I'm interested in fundamental change," he said. "And I think fundamental change happens in the mud."

Behrendt, Sascha. “Arthur Jafa and Dana Hoey by Sascha Behrendt.” *BOMB Magazine* (July 13, 2021) [ill.] [online]

BOMB

SUMMER 2021 ISSUE

INTERVIEW

Arthur Jafa and Dana Hoey by Sascha Behrendt

The two artists discuss their conceptual image-making, the paradox of brands, false narratives, and the "dynamic of consent."

Arthur Jafa, *Senufol*, 2021, metal rail, steel pipes, blue fabric and bags, 24 × 140 × 9 inches. Images copyright Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Arthur Jafa is an artist and theorist focused on furthering Black visual expression with works that are deeply inspired by twentieth-century Black music. A former cinematographer, his films and videos use found footage that may be intercut at dizzying speed (*APEX*, 2013) or to a pace and timing based on Black and non-Western music (*Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, 2016), thus disrupting cinematic structural conventions historically designed by and for the white gaze. As articulated in his theory of Black Visual Intonation, Jafa applies the "worrying the note" in jazz and the blues to the frame rates of his films, creating a sensory alternative Black representation and experience. His art is diverse, utilizing sculpture, photography, moving image, performance, and dialogue to reflect on the beauty, brutality, and alienation of Black American life.

Dana Hoey is a feminist and conceptual artist who employs photography, film, and performance to point out certain tropes regarding women, aggression, society, and power. For Hoey, the medium she uses is less important than what she directs her viewer to look at. There can be a forensic detachment to her approach—for instance in a photograph of a mother with her meth kit (*Trunk Lab*, 2002) or of a smoking horse rider (*Pregnant Smoker 2*, 2002)—and the provocative imagery seems secondary to the larger theme. Hoey has presented exhibitions ranging from live Muay Thai matches in gallery spaces (she is also a passionate martial arts fighter) to complex photographic collages incorporating pornography and depictions of aging, to images of postapocalyptic environments.

The following conversation was recorded over Zoom in October 2020 and subsequently edited by the artists.

—Sascha Behrendt

Mary Brulatour versus Anne Lieberman at *Dana Hoey Presents*, 2019, fight night at Petzel, New York. Photo by Pari Aryfar. Images courtesy of the artist and Petzel, unless otherwise noted.

Sascha Behrendt
Do you two recollect when you first met?

Dana Hoey
I want to say it was a party at John Currin and Rachel Feinstein's where we first talked. AJ, I think you had eyeliner on.

Arthur Jafa
I never did eyeliner. (*laughter*)

DH
It looked like it. This super handsome guy . . .

AJ
I think we were both kinda assets in that context, wouldn't you say?

DH
I was attempting to be arm candy. (*laughter*) I think it was around 1999 and your piece at Artists Space had just fully stepped forward. It felt like you were saying, Look, I've been here, but this is who I am. You played an "untrained" drum solo loudly and wildly in a staid and quiet context. It was utterly dominant. I remember David Bowie was at the performance.

AJ
Yeah. I also remember Kerry [James Marshall], a close friend, came in for the opening. He told me afterward that he had to physically turn my ex's face to make her look at my performance. She couldn't bear watching me come into being as an artist and a person. Power dynamics in relationship are often gendered anyway. Being a guy in the bottom position of what was, to a certain extent, an S&M dynamic, was complicated.

DH
I understand.

AJ
I remember, at one point having a conversation with an artist friend who said, "Do you think it's an accident that there's always a dominant and a submissive partner in every relationship?" And I was like, I dunno, which am I?

I laughed about it because I didn't really mind "being" the boy toy or arm candy. I sorta live in my head, so other folks' readings of me didn't trouble me that much. It was like, just because I'm in the "bottom" position (in this symbolic arena) doesn't mean I'm an actual bottom.

DH
Right.

AJ
It was largely performative being at these art world events. But it wasn't stressful because, ultimately, it wasn't about me. And I found myself in these incredibly interesting contexts, with folks I wouldn't have otherwise known. I can't think of many other scenarios where I'd have ended up at these particular art parties. Parties where, inevitably, I was the only Black person, apart from my ex.

I was having a conversation about Marcel Duchamp recently, about how a big part of Duchamp's urinal [*Fountain*] results from it not being pissed in, and how objects with a high functionality quotient become pure signifiers when they're not allowed to enact their function. So, as a Black person in that context, and not being whatever it is Black folks are supposed to be, you become a bit of a free-floating signifier as well.

SB
That's interesting.

AJ
Thinking about this stuff is fun. My first public artistic achievement of any note was as the cinematographer on Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. We were married at the time, so with Julie—who's a touch older than me—I had already experienced being Mr. Dash. It could be mildly irritating but I was pretty secure in what my interests were. And generally, I was more than happy to be in the mix in those public contexts.

DH
At that time, you were traveling a lot. But then you also saw all the art shows whenever you were back in New York.

AJ
I was always traveling because I made my living shooting documentaries. Actually, going to art shows was a bit atypical for me, at the time. And no one else in my day-to-day social life who was doing that. I don't only mean that as a Black person, but also as a southerner from Mississippi who lived in New York City. In the early '90s, I didn't have any sort of real art practice going on.

DH
Back then, I was working in the art world, and I was a gallerina. I don't know if I knew you at the time, but in those days, you would go see every show and come back and discuss all the exhibitions, what's good, what's bad. It felt super structured. But I prefer your method now, seeing what you *really* want to see. It's not about the art map, it's about what actually pulls you toward a show or a certain work.

AJ
Yeah.

SB
You have had a close friendship for many years. In which ways do you feel connected through your artworks?

AJ
I think of Dana's work as being in dialogue with everything, not just my work. It wasn't like we were on a public bench whispering classified information to each other like spies or something. More like whispering art-world party gossip if anything. (*laughter*)

DH
I do remember that stunning shift from you being that "bench person" to you performing at Artists Space and me having my hair blown back. I had not seen your work before, but you were quiet and you became very loud. You were dressed for the drum solo in denim overalls, one shoulder undone. That piece set into high relief biases about "innate talent," and raised deep questions about improvisation and its relationship to race. It was so powerful in a way that was really inspiring.

When I did that fifty-foot mural of a prison at night at Petzel Gallery in 1999, you were the only person to like that particular piece and to talk to me about it.

AJ
That mural was amazing.

I remember the night lights of that maximum-security prison. It was monochrome, right?

DH
It was black and white, but mostly black. I shot it in Arizona, outside Phoenix. It was the epic context for a show about a manhunt in the western style. I showed conventional photographs in black museum frames but torched the gravity of that "MoMA photo presentation style" with an overwhelming billboard. That mural is painted over now.

Dana Hoey, *Trunk Lab*, 2002, digital C print, 49 × 61 inches.

Dana Hoey, *Pregnant Smoker 2*, 2001, digital C print, 13 × 19 inches.

AJ

Like I was saying earlier, I think of your work as being part of multiple conversations. And I'm pretty sure I've seen the majority of the work you've shown publicly. Most of it is super vivid to me, and hyper-provocative conceptually. I remember a conversation we had a while ago about one of your photographs. It was of a woman with a portable meth lab or something in the back of a car. Was she making a bomb?

DH

You're talking about *Trunk Lab* from 2002. It was a portable meth lab. I read it was a typical housewife's economic support. It's very efficient. At that time, the statistics were showing that over fifty percent of meth purveyors were moms.

AJ

Bad moms! It sounds like a spin off of *Breaking Bad*.

DH

The next thing that comes to mind for me is the ArtPace residency you did in San Antonio. I didn't see the work in person, but I recall a full-size car, possibly smashed—was it a Thunderbird? The sculpture was stunning in ambition, scale, and gravity.

AJ

That was in 2002, and my "art practice," such as it was at the time, felt very fugitive. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. It seemed like most artists had some sort of learned methodology—like studio visits, critique, and all this kind of stuff. I just didn't have any of that. It was all pretty free- floating in my head. I always felt like I was a bit of a charlatan. (*laughter*)

DH

There's also that immaterial process of generating your art. I think we both are idea-driven artists.

I externalize first in drawings, you maybe do it through image collection, I don't know.

AJ

I remember reading about Lawrence Weiner and people like him, and I was like, Yeah, I'm a conceptual artist. It's all in my head. Black and formerly enslaved Black people were conceptual artists because they lived, significantly, in their heads. All the fantasizing about running free, the drapetomania—a pseudo-scientific term for the observed impulse that black people had to run away from slavery—was in their heads. The idea that the *thing* doesn't have to be materialized for it to be real, for it to have affective and catalytic capacity in the world, seemed obvious to me. In any case, I was always a bit of a dreamer. I can remember in the third grade, the nun who was my teacher whacking me on the knuckles with her ruler and telling my parents: "Arthur is always daydreaming, looking out the window, and not doing his work." So these shifts from being in my head and then manifesting something always felt like eruptions, like vomiting, or ruptures of some sort.

SB

To bring a thought to a point where it becomes real and tangible in the world is a very powerful act. Sometimes these thoughts that become art seem to anticipate important forthcoming shifts or events.

Dana, I wanted to ask you about *Experiments in Primitive Living* from 2010. In light of what we know today about our global environmental crisis, this series of photographs—which also became a book—feels very prescient.

I wonder if it has added dimensions for you now.

DH

I wish it wasn't prescient. It sort of creeps me out how prescient these photographs were. *Ash*, is of course 9/11, and then in the scope of later climate disasters, there is a big explosion where things *Freeze*, and then there is a *Flood*. Once you have a rebirth after such disasters—after being liquefied and then restored—things can get very warped. So, I'm somewhat afraid of the post-pandemic period. Hopefully some of the warping will be productive.

I have been revisiting some of those pictures, but I wouldn't make them again because that was then. AJ asked himself the question, "Can I make something material?" I live in my head a lot, too, so the most material thing I ever made was to shoot tons of pictures for *Experiments in Primitive Living* like a regular photographer would do. But I was never a street photographer. *Experiments in Primitive Living* was something that departed from my head and became material.

Dana Hoey, stills from *Pilgrim, Puritan, Whore*, video, 2021. Top: Ash Toss, bottom: Evelyn and Henry. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel, New York City, and Analixe Galerie, Geneva.

SB

I was thinking of the power dynamics that you both deal with, especially in recent portraits. AJ, I am curious about the relationship between your large-format portraits from 2018 and your film work.

AJ

It all exists in the scope of things that I'm interested in. People are always trying to brand you, and I'm very aware of that. I guess having a brand—whether you're trying to brand yourself or whether somebody else does—is one mark of a certain kind of success. Even though I've always been wary of it, I'm still someone who loves a great brand. I'm really fascinated by the reanimation, or resuscitation, of the Hood By Air fashion label; it was such a thing at a certain point, then it went out of business, and now it's kinda back.

I liked Public Image Ltd more than I liked the Sex Pistols for a lot of reasons, one of which was because they had a fucking cool logo. And I always have a deck of race cards in my back pocket that makes it impossible not to read things in certain ways.

If your sense of selfhood is bound up with being an asset, being owned or controlled, being the property or tool of some other entity, then that entity is a brand. You can't operate under your own citizenship, your own freedom as an individual. You're operating under their brand. For Black Americans, branding yourself is a big deal, whether it's in hip-hop, like G-Unit or Roc-A- Fella, or Motown. For Black artists, a brand, under capitalism, functions differently than it typically does, like, say, Apple, which just wants to make sure that you can identify and buy their product. For the Black artist, or for me at least, the brand almost precedes you into certain spaces, because what it's really trying to do is preclude or limit the anticipated assault, the assumed ill will, the inherent danger that comes with being black in a white supremacist environment. It's signifying that you aren't alone, that you're operating under the auspices of, in association with some greater entity. It's a self- minted slave pass.

Arthur Jafa, *Big Wheel II*, 2018, chains, rim, hubcap, and tire, 91 × 91 × 37 inches.

DH

Is this subject of self-ownership or branding bound up with still images more than moving images then?

AJ

Well, no. For me, it's like there is the brand, and then there is what the brand is supposed to represent. I would just say, I don't want to get stuck in a castle (of my own design) that becomes a prison. I'm super wary of, "He does video art," or "He does found-footage video," not because I don't like these things, but because I don't want to be boxed in. I just want to be able to *do as I wish*. At the end of the day, the handful of people who really know my trajectory know that the big, chained wheels [*Big Wheels*, 2018] weren't, conceptually at least, a big step for me. It's a big leap if you only know *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* [2016]. A lot of people were like "Wow, where did these big wheels and chains come from?" Well, it came from the same place everything else came from, it's just a matter of having the resources and space to put this shit on. Frankly, how could I have done the *Big Wheels* work before? There would have been no exhibition space to show them, no place to make them, and no place to store them. So having/not having that space starts to impact the kind of work you make—and I've predominantly had the traumatic experience of not having it. I almost want to make a movie about an unsuccessful artist whose whole life is bound up with trying to pay the storage on unsold (for me such a charged word) stuff. I think it's not that unique.

DH

It's totally common.

AJ

If you don't pay your storage and let your stuff get repossessed, it becomes a psychodrama. It's like, if you don't value your shit, how can anybody else value your shit, you know what I mean? It creates a tremendous amount of anxiety about your work and your value. My friend Fred Moten said it best. Someone once told him Black people are under- valued, and he said: "No, the problem is not Black people being undervalued. The problem is Black people being overvalued, of having a price tag put on them." All this anxiousness about one's worth, one's value—for people trying to make it, a lot of it just comes down to anxiety about your place and legitimacy in whatever space you're trying to move into, whether it's music, film, or the art world. In the beginning, I had anxiety around ideas, like: Am I not going to get credit for it? Or, That's just derivative of x, y, and z? But ultimately, I realized I have less anxiousness about that than I do about not being claimed. It's like the opposite of anxiety of influence, it's anxiety that nobody will claim you.

Arthur Jafa, stills from *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, video, 2016.

SB

Are there individual examples of those who influenced you that you might wish to be claimed by?

AJ

There are a lot of artists I consider "AbDads." They influence and engender you, but they don't know (or care, or value) that you exist. And if you approach them, they look at you like, Little bastard, get out of here! I do not claim you, I do not acknowledge any sort of influence or paternity of you. (*laughter*)

There are all these pictures I wish I could have used in my upcoming show. I was trying to get one by the Danish photographer Jacob Holdt, whose work *American Pictures* I really love, and also some from William Eggleston. They both made these indelible photos of the South that I grew up in, but each in very, very different ways. Holdt was an outsider, and he took the rawest, most unflinching photos of Black southern life I've ever seen. Eggleston was a genteel southerner who, even when he's taking photos of the most Black bottom context, has always aestheti- cized everything, a tough, genius aestheticization, but always through this southern genteel lens. Charles Ray made a giant sculpture of a family holding hands [*Family Romance*, 1993]. I've always wanted to do a picture like that: me holding both Jacob Holdt's and William Eggleston's hands, like my two daddies, you know. (*laughter*)

SB

What a beautiful image. I hope we get to see it for real someday.

Dana, you're known for your photography and yet your exhibition *Dana Hoey Presents* came as a surprise, with a live Muay Thai fight held in your gallery and for which you worked with performer and fighter Marcela Torres. What is your relationship to fighting and why are you so fascinated with it?

DH

I never wanted to be a person who just does one thing well and for me that comes from Martin Kippenberger's example. I will change forms in my work, whether you like it or not, and I will find a form that meets my interest in the most intense and expansive way. Sometimes that can be the small photograph that's very loaded, but in the case of that show it was a big live event that was somewhat dangerous. The current that runs through my work, and probably is my "brand," is the discomfort of being female, particularly around other females in American culture. In white female culture in the US, there are behavior patterns that fascinate me: they are manipulative and complicated, even backward. I don't always understand them, so fighting is kind of in opposition to all that—it is direct, complex, beautiful, elegant, but it's also very clear what's going on. It's a part of my art to be in my body, to practice martial arts, to deal with people trying to hit me, to hit people, so all those crazy moments where you're out on the edge of perceptual and physical existence are fascinating to me. I wanted a high level of mastery for that project and for the art aspect of fighting to be clear, so I had a professional matchmaker get the best female fighters possible, and because fighting is often anorexic, I also wanted big-bodied fighters.

The fight world is an amazing place where you have Republicans and Democrats yelling, hitting each other and laughing about it. It's very mixed—ethnically, class-wise, and politically—far more than anywhere I've ever known previously, so I wanted to take that culture and bring it into the white box of the art world, a place that is very fancy and very elite. I have done other live events, but for me that fight night at Petzel Gallery was about torpedoing the art world, which my gallery luckily was up for. It's unnerving, there can be blood and it's dangerous. We had an Emergency Medical Technician there. Nobody got hurt, but you risk your life when you fight. It's rare, but it can happen.

I wanted to bring in the crowds—there was a line down the block, hundreds of people didn't get in. I know that this was scary for the people working in a high-end gallery space, imagining all these fight people, who are assumed to be dangerous. In fact, they're far safer to be around because they know how to control their impulses. They're polite, gentle people and usually crazy dog lovers. So, the project was about that jarring, living, combination of people.

It was also a way to honor these fighters. There was a twenty-five-foot billboard of this world champion fighter, Alicia "Slick" Ashley, a remarkable Black woman from Brooklyn, born in Jamaica, who had four world titles at the age of fifty and is a three-time Guinness Book record holder, yet nobody knows her. I wanted to paper the gallery with photographs of magnificent artists like her. I had her come and shadow box in the studio, I had chills the whole time because she used to be a ballet dancer before she became a fighter. Her movements are stylized and controlled yet unpretentious and functional, with so much elegance and grace built into them.

AJ

The boxing world, too, is a place where a lot of these class differences collapsed, where everybody has to occupy the same space (a space where a Black man can become a millionaire by beating up white men), which reminds me a little bit of the S&M universe where similar kinds of things happen. The biggest crisis in the S&M world is a lack of tops because every- body wants to be a bottom. (*laughter*) Generally, it's these white men that are masters of the universe in their day-to-day life who want to bottom in these spaces. It's a psychic equilibrium thing—to experience all the things that you can never feel when everyone is deferring to you.

DH

It's fascinating to hear that the white man as a top is becoming rare. The dynamic of consent applies to every environment now. Most people think it's just evil to love the violence of Thai boxing, but it's consensual just like S&M. I love that in fighting there's always a winner and a loser. You experience humility in losing, by someone being better than you. There are a lot more white-collar fighters than there used to be, but traditionally it's not been about wealth. Rather you had people trying to work their way out of a bad economic or immigration situation. Becoming a strong fighter was often just a desperate way of making a living.

SB

Yes, that imperative to always be a winner.

AJ, in terms of making images, are there technical innovations going on that you feel particularly drawn to?

AJ

Always. Everybody thinks everything has been done, but cinema is only about a hundred years old. We've got to stop thinking we're in the future and understand that we're like primordial blues people in 1910, making jazz even before recording is in place. There are no recordings of Buddy Bolden, barely any of Robert Johnson or Charley Patton, even fewer of Geeshie Wiley. So that's where we are in terms of what the twenty-first century is going to look like in retrospect.

So yes, I've been thinking about the latent potential of Black artists for thirty years and I used to get depressed, as I've just not been in the position to do certain stuff. But I'm still here, decades later. And the vein is still largely untapped.

DH

For me, new technology is a straightforward tool that can make my life as a mother more functional—no more spending time going back and forth to the lab. It's great to have these technical means now in the hands of the people, and not just with specialists. It frees up so many possibilities.

Arthur Jafa, *Hole*, 2003, printed 2021, archival pigment inkjet print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Pearl, 4.75 x 6.25 inches.

AJ

I was always fascinated with how you manage or negotiate or resist the triggered aversion to overdetermined, falsely naturalized (and ultimately constraining) ideas about one's relationship to (ultimately weaponized) generalizations about who you are.

The double, triple, quadruple bind of these antagonistic generalizations. When, say, as a Black artist I do "Black things," there's a certain impulse to *not* do Black things. Because if you just do Black things, you're being narrow, or provincial. But then I see white artists doing what seem to me to be patently obvious "white things" without being deemed provincial. Or, perhaps even worse, white artists doing things that strike me as being super Black—like using images of basketball players, or utilizing misnamed Black aesthetics—without being declared derivative or second rate.

There's this weird thing that happens, a whole manufactured aversion to what comes natural to me. A part of me that I get angered by sometimes—even though there's nobody to be angry at, because it's systemic—says, Oh, if you eat that watermelon, you're going to be verifying the stereotype that Black people like watermelon. And by implication, all the other stereotypes about Black people. So, faced with this conundrum, you don't eat watermelon (even though I like watermelon), or you're dark skinned but don't smile (even though you have beautiful teeth) or wear red. There are just so many of these things that have been pathologized. If you are five shades darker than me, and you have white teeth and you smile, it's—

DH

Bam!

AJ

It's one of the miracles of the universe and just physics, you know.

It is not an accident that the first star of sound movies, Al Jolson, was a white man in Blackface. If you're not pretty dark, your smile isn't gonna do that. So what, you're going go stigmatize everybody who can do something you can't do? It's anti drag. It's catastrophically infuriating on one level, but what I've found over time is that it's not about running away from it, but how you circle back, and actually interface with what you're being taught, with the malformation. There's a reason this well is being poisoned in the first place. How do you make work that embraces the stereotype, or the pathologized subject, in a way that refuses the remedial understanding of it, the false narrative about it?

There's the political dimension, too. As a Black person in a white supremacist environment, or as a woman in a misogynistic environment, how can you be a living, experiencing, human being out here and not deal with it? I'm not here judging people, but to not deal with it on any level is just weird. It's very, very weird. So I was always fascinated with your feminism, or whatever term you use, Dana. Your subject matter has always been female experience, not narrowly so, or limited to that, but central to the work. It never feels rote, or doctrinaire; it's always interrogating.

DH

I feel a bond watching you navigate those issues. And, like you, I explode past the expectation of the watermelon or the smile. The categories can't contain you and that's intense. I aspire to deal with the dilemmas you described, and you inspire me in that, for sure. But I also do have a pretty strong aversion to being boxed in, so that's where the aggression in my work comes from. It's not only what I shouldn't do as a woman, but it's a quite intense aggression that I have toward any categories of being and the limitations of being myself, too. Mainly, because I can't fulfill the expectations that come with them.

When we met, I was attempting arm candy like I said. I had four-inch heels and tiny dresses, and it was super fun. But I cannot sustain such a role. I do identify with you in regard to being a member of a category in that way, and I do aspire, like you did with the burning sun in your video works, to making a sort of magnificent and expansive blast, both as an artist, and as a human being.

Sascha Behrendt is a lecturer and writer based in London and New York. Her writing has been published in *Artcritical* and *Reflektor Magazine*. She is currently working on a series of artist interviews for *Curator*, an online platform exploring art, design, and technology.

Angeleti, Gabriella. "Arthur Jafa on his long-term installation at the Glenstone Museum." *The Art Newspaper* (September 21, 2021) [ill.] [online]

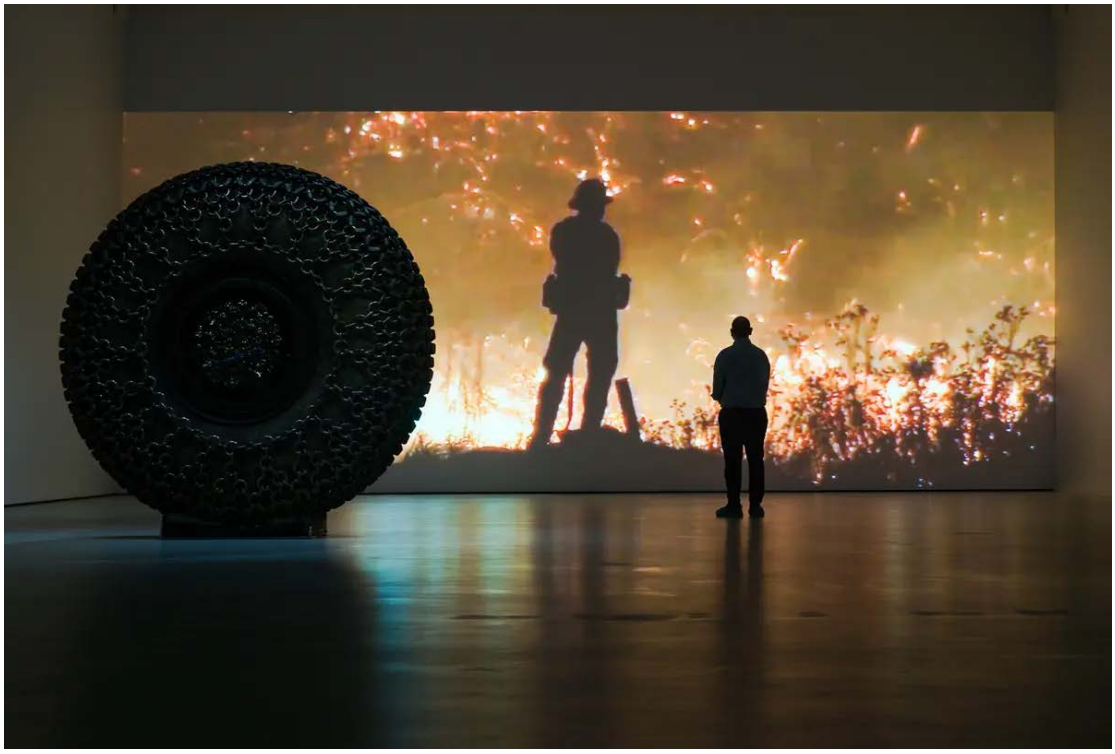
THE ART NEWSPAPER

Arthur Jafa on his long-term installation at the Glenstone Museum

The career-spanning installation includes sculptures, photographs and the monumental video that followed the artist's seminal video montage Love is the Message, the Message is Death

Gabriella Angeleti

21 September 2021



Installation View of Arthur Jafa at Glenstone Museum
Courtesy Glenstone Museum

An installation at the Glenstone Museum in Maryland devoted to American artist Arthur Jafa, the recipient of the Golden Lion at the 58th Venice Biennale, aims to examine the well-known cinematographer beyond his eclipsing work *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016)—a video montage of collaged footage that searingly chronicles the Black experience in America.

The installation includes a series of recent sculptures, photographs and the uplifting video *akingdoncomethas* (2018)—comprising nearly two hours of amalgamated Black Christian church performances. The mesmerising piece is imbued with a Luciferan quality and honours the beauty and power of Black music, according to the artist. It is one of the works he regularly revisits in his studio these days, likening it to a memento mori.

"That work sets the bar for considering how something can stand up to the relentless expressivity and virtuosity and authenticity of those performances, or whether you can even make a work that does what those performances do," the artist tells *The Art Newspaper*. "I'm not a Christian, but I believe in Black people believing. I believe in their power and majesty."

The work was first shown at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem in 2018, in the polarising years after Donald Trump was elected president, and was screened virtually by the Museum of Modern Art last summer, amid the height of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in New York.

Installation View of Arthur Jafa at Glenstone Museum
Courtesy Glenstone Museum

Two mixed-media conceptual sculptures—*Aria and Emmanuel* and *Bellest* (both 2021)—are being shown for the first time. The works, made with metal rails and other materials, represent a "constellation of ongoing ideas", Jafa says, including analogies to social hierarchies and the inversion of power structures, as well as the exploitation of Black artefacts. Juxtaposed with more visceral pieces like the sculpture *Ex-Slave Gordon* (2017)—which appropriates a photograph showing the scourged back of an escaped American slave—these more recent pieces are "slightly more opaque, but both silent and menacing", he adds.

There are also various photographs, including the piece *Shrunken Head* (2019) that depicts the "classic Black penis", referencing Robert Mapplethorpe's representation of Black bodies. "Someone told me that Mapplethorpe objectified Black bodies, but Black bodies are so ubiquitous in his work that I'm not sure focusing on that is an insightful view of the work," Jafa says. "The more complicated question is how—in what specific ways—are these bodies being objectified."

Arthur Jafa, Ex-Slave Gordon (2017)

The photograph *Monster (II)* (1988/2018)—a self-portrait shot behind plexiglass, in which Jafa has obstructed his face and appears to threaten the camera—also speaks to the idea of reclaiming Black agency and examining the ways the violent representation of Black figures has been long internalised in American culture. It is the first work visitors encounter when entering the dimmed space, which has a "strategic and rhetorical intent, creating almost a black mirror for the viewer", Jafa says.

The Glenstone was one 14 museums to host a coordinated 48-hour livestream of Jafa's *Love is the Message...* last summer in solidarity with the BLM protests. "It was wonderful to see all these institutions come together but it also brought into focus that many audiences only knew Jafa through this watershed work," says Emily Rales, the chief curator, director and co-founder of the Glenstone.

Although Jafa has had a successful career as a cinematographer, including having worked with Spike Lee, Solange and Kanye West on various projects, his “art career, so to speak, emerged in the last eight or nine years”, Rales says. Jafa’s *Big Wheels* series (2018) of sculptures, for example, comprising chain-wrapped monster truck tires—shown in an exhibition at the Venice Biennale, with one example in the Glenstone installation—are part of “various latent ideas from the past few decades that he has kept in private”, Rales says.

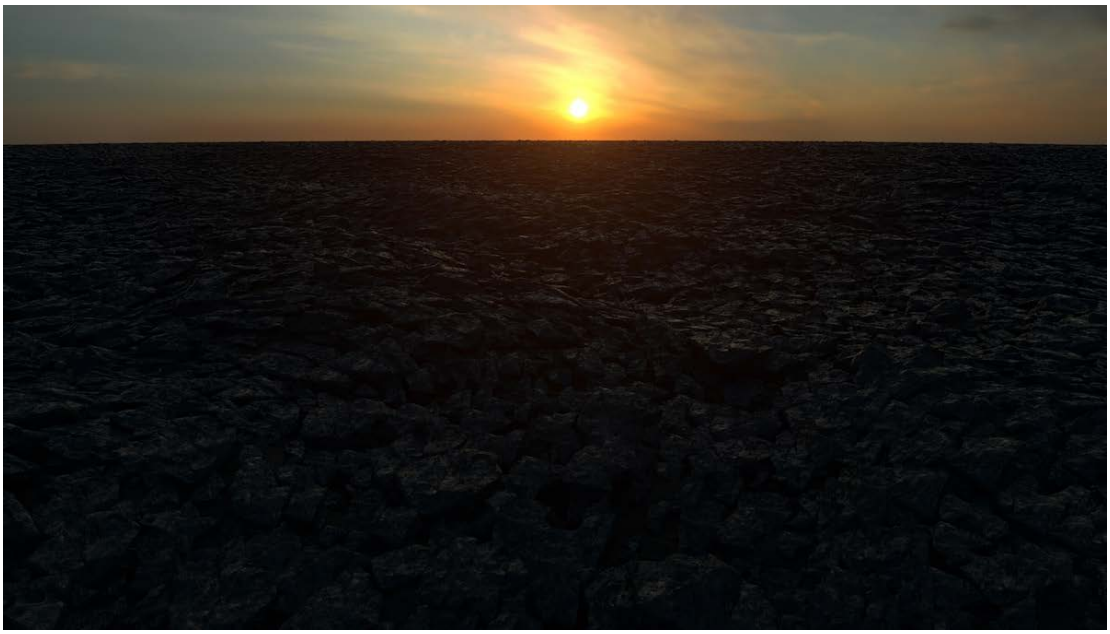
“Like his video works, these pieces capture his powerful vision and his incredible appetite for scooping up cultural imagery and remixing it,” she adds. The installation will be on view through 2022.

Greenberger, Alex. "In a Cryptic New Film, Arthur Jafa Inspires Awe—and Hope—for Black Futurity." *ARTnews* (November 7, 2021) [ill.] [online]

ARTnews

In a Cryptic New Film, Arthur Jafa Inspires Awe—and Hope—for Black Futurity

BY ALEX GREENBERGER November 7, 2021 11:00am



Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA* (still), 2021.

The New York art world fell hard for **Arthur Jafa** five years ago, when, at the now-defunct Harlem location of Gavin Brown's Enterprise, he debuted *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016), a kaleidoscopic video essay about Black America that brings together more than a hundred appropriated images and videos in the span of a fast-paced seven and a half minutes. Five years later, at the same space in on 127th Street, Jafa is showing his latest work, a new film called *AGHDRA* (2021) that takes his work in a much different direction. The film contains just a handful of cuts; all of the footage is original. It alludes to some of the concerns Jafa explored in *Love Is the Message*—the tenuousness of Black life, and the twinned notions of beauty and fear that can accompany it—but this new film does so in relatively oblique ways. Gone is the music video–style pacing of Jafa's past works. In its place is a slower kind of montage that inspires introspection.

AGHDRA—its title is pronounced "ahg-HEE-druh"—marks a sedate, pensive turn for Jafa, whose work has never lent itself to easy readings. Every image in this 85-minute film is of a rolling ocean whose computer-generated waves rise but never quite crest. At times, the camera gently floats down toward this imagined ocean, which appears to be made of oil or magma, not water. Speaking by Zoom from his studio in Los Angeles ahead of the show's opening on Saturday, Jafa jokingly described it as a "really complicated screensaver."

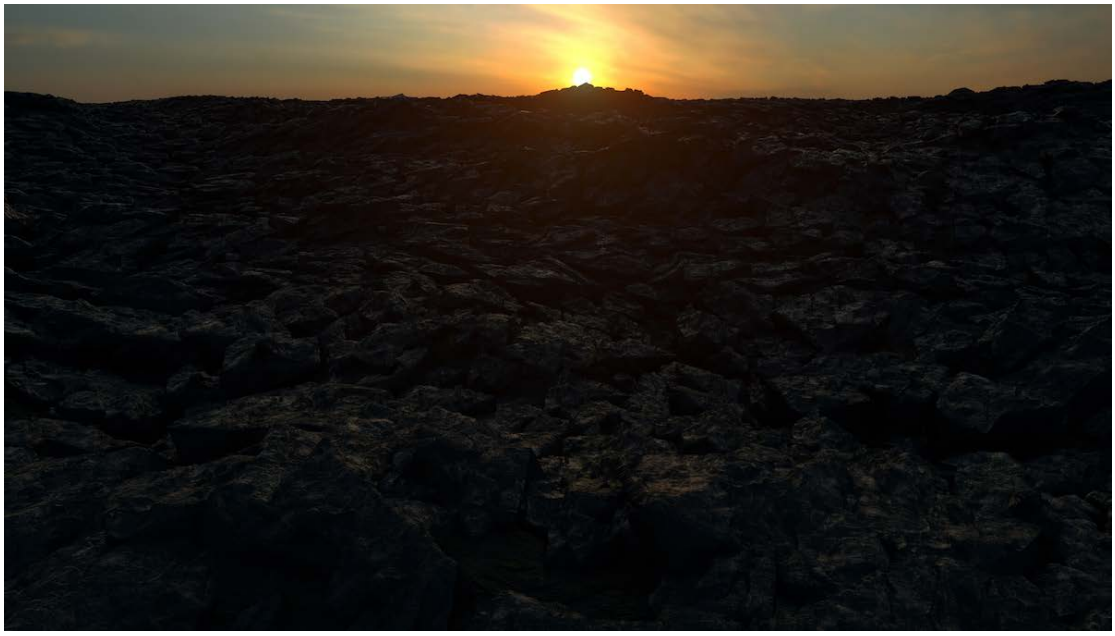
Jafa is renowned for dealing head-on with race, in works such as *The White Album* (2018–19), a 40-minute essay on whiteness and the limits of empathy, which earned him the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion award in 2019. *AGHDRA*, which will be on view for four weeks, does not function in quite the same way. The film—which comes with a soundtrack so intense it could be described as immersive—is deliberately slippery, and even though its central aquatic image is repeated over and over, sometimes with mild variations in color, *AGHDRA* refuses to give up its secrets. "I'm kind of resistant to saying, 'This is about X, Y, and Z,'" Jafa noted. Neither its made-up title nor its booming soundtrack connotes anything immediately obvious. But Jafa is quick to unfurl his films as complex, indefinable things open to multiple readings. His limitless ocean could be treated as a post-Anthropocene space or as a metaphor for endless waves of violence, although neither interpretation captures the work's full meaning.

Jafa eventually went on to suggest that the film is intimately related to a feeling of impending—and unending—catastrophe. "What happens when people experience it over and over and over and over for a protracted amount of time?" he asked. "What does it mean to be in the universe, an anti-Black universe? I wonder what it really means, like what it feels like—not on the level of 'we need to protest,' which is obviously true—to be a quote-unquote Black person. I'm so saturated with anti-Blackness. I hear a tsunami of microaggressions."

He added, "At what point [are] the effects of anti-Blackness just a given, something that defines who we are?"

Jafa began thinking about *AGHDRA* two years ago, well before the pandemic struck and prior to George Floyd's murder last summer. He has worked on it, on and off, ever since. (The film debuted at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark, earlier this year; the new version screening in New York has been re-edited.) *AGHDRA*'s origins could be traced to Jafa's 2019 visit to Tokyo, where his son and a friend saw *Godzilla: King of Monsters* at a multiplex. Some, including Jafa, have viewed Godzilla as one means by which the Japanese have processed post–atomic bomb trauma. In a similar vein, Jafa found himself wanting to create a "supreme mass," one that would make people of all walks of life "fall to their knees."

A French studio specializing in computer-generated imagery helped make *AGHDRA*. Directors usually provide post-production studios at least a loose picture of what they're looking for. Jafa's instructions were vaguer. He knew he wanted a wave of some kind, but he asked the studio to produce something of "a cross between a [J.M.W.] Turner painting and John Coltrane." The result is an undulating expanse that resembles a sea of colliding boulders. Jafa has since realized one reading of it could be "the North American continent fragmented into a hundred thousand pieces."



Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA* (still), 2021.

He first showed some footage from *AGHDRA* at a 2020 MoMA PS1 event honoring the theorist Saidiya Hartman, whose work has considered the incompleteness of written histories, specifically as they relate to Black women. It was an appropriate occasion for the work, given that Jafa wanted to invoke, by more abstract means, the transatlantic slave trade and the Black lives lost in the mid-Atlantic. (Jafa also mentioned various writings by Christina Sharpe, Fred Moten, and Tina Campt, along with the science fiction of Thomas M. Disch and the music of Miles Davis, as being among his inspirations for *AGHDRA*.)

"It's like being chained in a slave ship, and they open the hold, and you look up for a split second and see the sky, or maybe the night," Jafa said of the experience of viewing this film. "It's a kind of Turrell," he added, referring to artist James Turrell, who is known for his otherworldly installations that enlist intense lighting effects and natural environments. "But it's a Turrell while you're chained in the bottom of a boat."

Watching *AGHDRA*, one may cycle through disorientation, nausea, horror, disgust, awe, and transcendence. Projected on a gigantic screen in an otherwise vacant space, the film is paired with a low hum that is played so loudly it can be felt in one's ribcage. Various appropriated songs are also included in the soundtrack at points, but they, too, are emitted from a set of oversized speakers at such a volume that it is hard to distinguish their lyrics. This hulking film is an example of what Jafa has termed "Black visual intonation," an impulse toward rendering both image and sound unstable. "When the image is pitched down and the sound is pitched down**,** there's something about being in that space that's sort of like an undercurrent," Jafa said, referring to the film's bass-heavy soundtrack.

And indeed, many viewers are likely to find themselves lured into *AGHDRA*'s riptide by its strange beauty. Although Jafa is unafraid to tout his new show's more terrifying aspects (he views the now-disused gallery space where it's installed as something "like the Overlook Hotel" of *The Shining*), he also considers *AGHDRA* a potentially attractive image of an organism that exist in the aftermath of an ecological disaster. "It's this mass, like plankton or something, this neural network," he said, chuckling to himself. "This is my vision of future Black people."

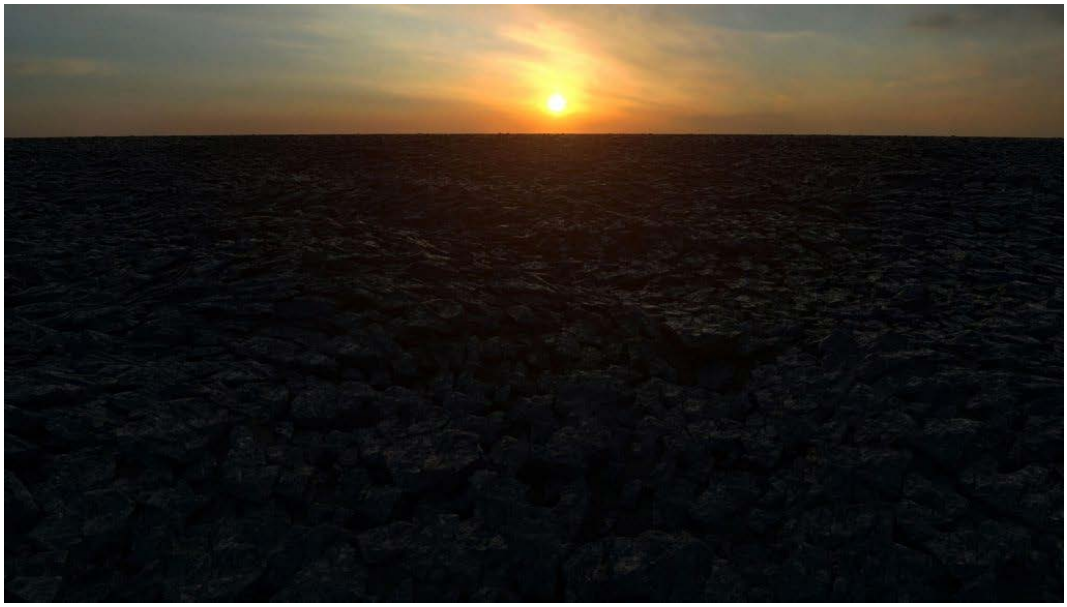
Armstrong, Annie. "Artist Arthur Jafa Takes an Abstract Turn in His First New Film Since His Golden Lion-Winning Project for the Venice Biennale." *Artnet News* (November 9, 2021) [ill.] [online]

artnet

Artist Arthur Jafa Takes an Abstract Turn in His First New Film Since His Golden Lion-Winning Project for the Venice Biennale

The film is on view for a month at the former site of Gavin Brown's Enterprise.

by Annie Armstrong • November 9, 2021



Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA* 2021, video still. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

This weekend, a beloved New York art institution came back for one night in a big way. Up on 127th Street, Gavin Brown's Enterprise reopened its doors for the first time since shuttering in summer 2020 to present the American debut of artist Arthur Jafa's new film, *AGHDRA* (2021).

Though the first floor offered its own excitements—Rirkrit Tiravanija cooked masses of paella for the crowd, followed by a party complete with several dance-offs between artists—the fourth floor of the space was where the magic really happened.

At this stage in Jafa's career, any new work is something of an event. This film is his first in three years and follows *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (2016), which made him a sensation, and *The White Album* (2018), which won the Golden Lion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. It arrived in New York with little fanfare—and no advance press attention—via an Instagram post on Jafa's page.

AGHRDA (2021) significantly slows down the artist's typical rapid-fire collaged imagery set to a maximal score, instead calling on viewers to lose themselves in one droning horizon. Unlike his previous work, its imagery is entirely computer-generated, not found.

Jafa's visual language may have shifted toward the abstract in this piece, but it's also part of the same conversation he's been having for years. This time around, he interrogates Afrofuturism as the very matter that creates Earth breaks down, while calling back to the transatlantic slave trade.

A portion of the new film, then still in progress, was previewed at a MoMA PS1 event in January 2020, and the full version debuted at Jafa's retrospective at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art this past spring. It is on view in New York until December 5.

Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA* (2021). Photo: Annie Armstrong.

For a lengthy 85 minutes, *AGHDRA* will keep you staring directly at the sun. Computer-generated waves emulate the ocean turned black, the texture of which has alchemized into a material that looks like coal or cooled lava. The sun moves through both day and night in a toxic haze.

The longer you watch, the more you feel your breath constrict. Eventually, the waves periodically rise to block out the sun—not quite providing relief from it, but rather instilling a feeling of dread. Earlier this year, Jafa foreshadowed *AGHDRA*'s darker tone to the *New York Times*, saying, "I'm an undertaker. I don't do the uplift thing."

The film is a notable evolution for Jafa, who has expressed discomfort with the way *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, a found-media video collage about Black life, was so enthusiastically embraced by white audiences. ("People were getting this eight-minute epiphany," he explained. "Even when people said, 'Oh I cried,' the very cynical part of my brain suspected some kind of arrested empathy with regard to the experience of Black folk.")

After the 2020 murder of George Floyd, a coalition of 15 museums looped the film on their websites for an entire weekend, its searing jump-cut clips of Black triumph and injustice flashing across screens in the homes of people around the world.

Jafa's follow up, *the White Album*, brought his raw Internet-surfing style to whiteness, juxtaposing clueless YouTube pundits, a sinister paramilitary type, and even his former dealer Gavin Brown.

With *AGHDRA*, Jafa continues to resist easy consumption and easy answers. After 85 minutes of staring into Jafa's sun, perhaps surface-level fans of his work will walk away with a new understanding of what he has to say. But it's clear they are no longer, and may have never been, the artist's primary audience.

"Arthur Jafa: AGHDRA" is on view at 439 W 127th Street, New York, through December 5.

Yablonsky, Linda. "Arthur Jafa's new film—a post-human slow-motion seascape—defies expectations and honours the Black voice." *The Art Newspaper* (November 16, 2021) [ill.] [online]

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Arthur Jafa's new film—a post-human slow-motion seascape—defies expectations and honours the Black voice

Linda Yablonsky

16 November 2021

AGHDRA, a new film by Arthur Jafa (right), centres on a rolling ocean that repeats on a loop (film still above) and alludes to the Black experience in America.

If you are an artist who makes an acknowledged masterpiece, what do you do for a follow-up? Do you meet the considerable expectations it raises or defy them? If you're Arthur Jafa, you go against the tide. Literally.

Oceanic swells of black, volcanic rocks filled a screen two-storeys tall at the US premiere of Jafa's *AGHDRA* (pronounced agh-ee-druh), a digital animation that is screening in the same Harlem space where his supercharged, seven-minute film *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* debuted in 2016: the former Gavin Brown's Enterprise. The gallery has been closed since March of last year, when all of New York went into lockdown.

By the time the city came back to life, Brown had merged his boundary-pushing programme with that of the venerable dealer Barbara Gladstone, who then asked Jafa to curate a show of photographs culled from the estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, which her gallery represents. A very cool merge if ever one was.

As it happens, Brown's name was still on the lease in Harlem and his landlord was amenable to a month-long residency. "We couldn't have done this anywhere else," Brown said of the onetime beer distillery at the opening, where Gladstone was one of two or three hundred vaccinated guests helping themselves to a seafood stew prepared by the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija and his students from Columbia University. For them, this event was a class. For the rest of us, it was both a nostalgic return to a beloved place and a path to the undulating, post-human world imagined in *AGHDRA*.

Jafa derived the title from a pre-pandemic trip to Tokyo with his teenage son. Its multiple references include monster movies like *Godzilla* and *Mothra*, both originally made in response to Japan's devastation by US atomic bombs. But music had the greater influence, specifically *Agharta*, the concert album recorded in Osaka by Miles Davis in 1975, when his fusion of rock, jazz and blues outraged purists and attracted a younger generation, including the now 60-year-old Jafa.

Davis's refusal to cater to his base, so to speak, is very present in *AGHDRA*, which Jafa created with BUF, the French special effects company responsible for the visual dazzle of the 1999 film *The Matrix.* Jafa's new work does away with the machine-gun barrage of downloaded imagery that characterised his powerfully affecting *Love is the Message,* as well as *akingdoncomethas* and *The White Album* (both 2018). This time he opts for the equivalent of a stationary camera. "I don't want to be boxed in as a download artist," Jafa told me, adding: "I'm sensitive to fixed identities or trapped by my own construction." He did, however, express appreciation for the impassioned public response to *The Message.* "Sometimes," he said, "people teach me things about the work that I wasn't consciously aware of when I made it."

Also absent from the new work are human figures, although the implication that human activity is responsible for the sea erupting under the watchful setting sun and rising moon is clear. "It made me think of a tsunami of waste," the independent curator Valerie Smith commented at the screening. "It's scary."

Davis's intensity and flexibility as an artist—"not a husband", Jafa was quick to add—presides over the soundtrack, where echoes of the musician's syntax ride the waves of sound that accompany, and play against, the tectonic movement of the jagged seascape onscreen. Arias of electronic static, low-frequency hums and gut-humping rumbles alternate with the rhythms of 1970s R&B standards that Jafa has elongated past recognition by producing them at a speed that a snail would envy. The slo-mo pace reveals what Jafa called "the soulfulness of the Black voice", the way photographs by Eadweard Muybridge make the intricate concert of a body's movements visible.

Any direct reference to the joys and terrors of Black life in America, Jafa's usual subject, is embedded in the "ontology of Blackness" anchoring every sequence here, where the Middle Passage of Africans shipped to the Americas by slavers lies just beneath the inky surface. "I thought about asking BUF for an ocean of chains," Jafa told me. He rejected the idea: "too literal", he said.

AGHDRA is an attempt to reckon with that trauma, a function of the horror movies during Japan's post-war rebirth. By melding the spirit of a John Coltrane improvisation with a Turner painting, Jafa's film evokes the yawning space that exists between past and future worlds.

Viewers prone to seasickness might want to take a pill.

• Arthur Jafa: AGHDRA *is on view at 439 W 127th Street, New York, until 5 December*

D'Souza, Aruna. "Arthur Jafa." *4Columns* (November 19, 2021) [ill.] [online]

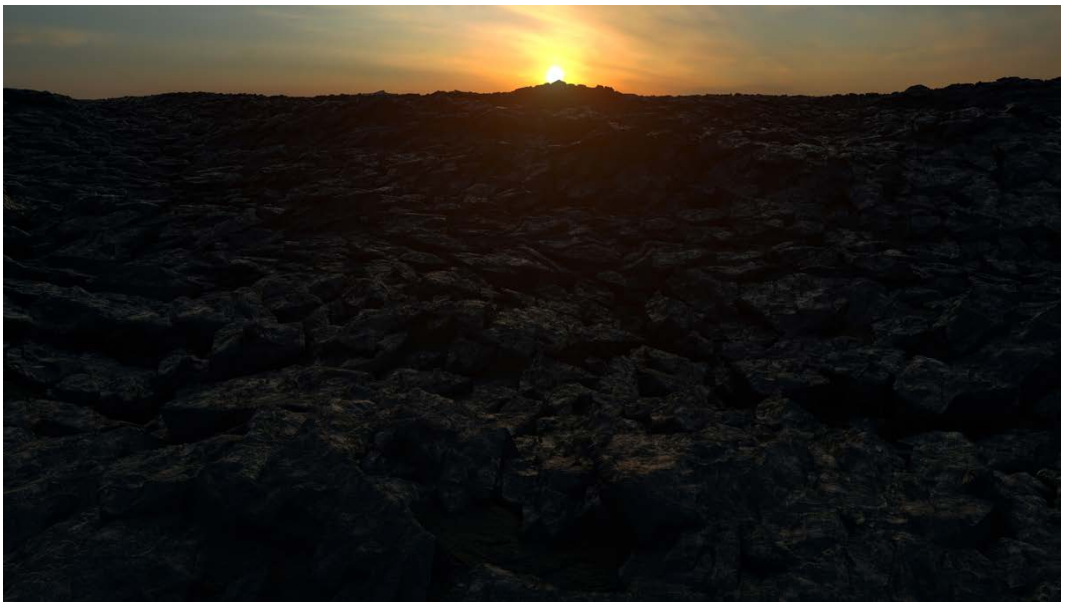
4Columns

Arthur Jafa

Aruna D'Souza

AGHDRA, his new film, approaches Blackness through animation.

11.19.21



Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA*, 2021 (video still). © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

Arthur Jafa: AGHDRA, *439 West One Hundred Twenty-Seventh Street, New York City, through December 5, 2021*

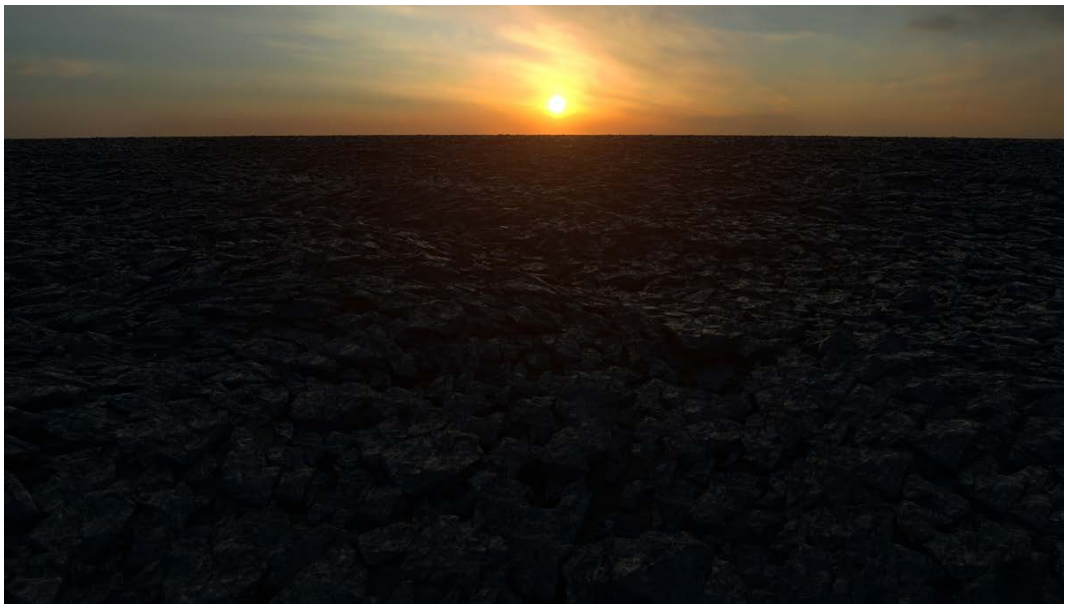
A sea roils. But it's not quite a sea. It's more viscous than that: tarry like crude oil. Filled with blackened clumps and fragments that resemble chunks of asphalt, it exists in a state between liquid and solid, like half-cooled magma. It's not quite a sea, too, because it doesn't have the smooth energy of waves. On the one hand, it's organic, akin to a surface of reptilian scales shifting as they move; on the other, it feels mechanical, rising and falling as if a million hydraulic lifts are repositioning a million pieces of . . . stuff. But even the nebulous term *stuff* feels wrong: it doesn't convey the simultaneously visceral and immaterial quality of what we see. Waves continue without end, but occasionally—jarringly—they reverse for a moment. Above the horizon, a sun hovers; the sky changes from a gaseous yellow haze to a crystalline, bluish white. These color shifts are not enough to tell us if it is dawn or dusk, though—time makes no sense here. We could be looking at the earth being formed, eons ago, or at the aftermath of an all-too-imminent ecological disaster—a postapocalyptic, even post-human world in which life means something very different than what we imagine it now to be.

Arthur Jafa's new film *AGHDRA* (2021), on view for four weeks in the cavernous space that used to house Gavin Brown's Enterprise, is a departure from the artist, filmmaker, and cinematographer's previous films, including the *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016), which debuted five years ago. *Love Is the Message* captured the imagination of so many who were looking on in horror as the anti-Blackness that permeates this country's histories and institutions became excruciatingly apparent. (For others, it was, depressingly, no surprise.) Jafa dug deep into his vast collection of found images and video clips to create a work that was simultaneously a celebration of Black life, a mourning of Black death, and a reminder of Black perseverance and survival in the most inhospitable environments. *AGHDRA* carries on those themes, but now in the realm of near-abstraction. Collaborating with BUF, a French company specializing in computer-generated images, best known for their work on *The Matrix*, Jafa has concocted a digitally animated, eighty-five-minute film of deceptive simplicity that is truly and genuinely sublime in the Romantic sense: terribly beautiful—beautiful despite the terror, terrible despite the beauty. A beauty so intense that it forces us to confront death.

Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA*, 2021 (installation view). © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

In a recent interview with the Canadian Black-studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott, Jafa recounted one of the origins of the piece: his then-sixteen-year-old son and a friend went to see *Godzilla* in a theater in Tokyo. "They went and saw it, and they came out, and said, what was that about. I said, 'Japanese people are the only people who have ever had A-bombs dropped on them, and Godzilla was an attempt on some psycho-social level to embody the trauma of that experience.' And I started to think, well, what would that look like if we tried to embody black experience in non-narrative terms, but in some other sort of way."

The result is a film that can be best described as *relentless*, which seems an apt way of conceptualizing life in an anti-Black world: the waves—of the legacy of the Middle Passage, of the traumatic afterlife of slavery, of state-sanctioned anti-Black violence, of daily microaggressions—just keep coming. Sometimes they swell to tsunami-like proportions, entirely obscuring the horizon line and the weakened sun, but they never crest and crash, a fact that provoked an anxious, almost panicked response in me as I watched. In *AGHDRA*, there is no climax, no atomic bomb, no seism that might shock us back into our humanity even for a moment. There is just endless, gut-wrenching, but still gorgeous churning.



Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA,* 2021 (video still). © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

The gut-wrenching part—the evocation of the somatic experience of living in an inescapable condition of anti-Blackness—is reinforced by the soundtrack, which booms over hidden speakers. The title of the piece, a mash-up of monsters' names like Godzilla and Mothra with *Agharta*, a concert album by Miles Davis recorded in Osaka in 1975, points, as always, to the importance of sound in Jafa's work. Alternating with a loud, buzzing white noise that settles in your pelvic floor, composed and performed by bass player Melvin Gibbs, are a variety of songs performed by Black artists, slowed and distorted so that they are, if not quite unrecognizable, made so strange as to be hard to pin down. With the help of film scholar Michael Gillespie, I managed to identify a few: the Friends of Distinction's "Going in Circles," Isaac Hayes's "Walk on By," the Isley Brothers' "Hello It's Me," Rose Royce's "Love Don't Live Here Anymore." Alongside the imagery, the seemingly anodyne love songs transform into something far more existential, scenes from a life that is all but unbearable: "You abandoned me / Love don't live here anymore"; "If you see me walking down the street / And I start to cry each time we meet / Walk on by, walk on by"; "I'm an ever rollin' wheel, without a destination real," or "I'm a faceless clock, with timeless hopes that never stop."

The beautiful paradox, of course, and an idea that Jafa comes back to over and over in his work, is that out of despair—a despair tracing back to America's original sin, the enslavement of millions of Black people—has sprung Black popular music, arguably the most important art form of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and a vehicle for Black liberation. It's this ability not just to adapt to conditions that do not support Black life but to create out of them that Jafa identified as the source of America's cultural fascination with Blackness, as he explained in a 2019 interview in *i-D* magazine: "What makes us so powerful, what everyone's arrested by, is how we've demonstrated, again and again, a capacity not just to survive but to thrive, in the most problematic circumstances; global capitalism, migrant crisis, eco disaster, white supremacy. It's why blackness matters to everyone. Because we're what the future looks like, that's undeniable."

In multiple interviews, Jafa has expressed ambivalence about the way *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* was embraced so fervently by (mostly white) art audiences, who largely saw it simply as an inspirational. But it was, I think, something much different, and much tougher: among other things, it was an instruction manual for non-Black people having to face realities— Jafa's "most problematic circumstances"—from which we have, depending on our place on a sliding scale of white privilege, been relatively insulated. *Love Is the Message* slyly asked "Who are you going to listen to, the people who got us into this mess or the people who survived and continue to survive it?" and challenged audiences to disengage from whiteness in the process. The same is true for *AGHDRA*, a work that alludes in its very form to unnamed but ominous travails to come. How will we—as individuals, as a species—learn to swim in this sublime ocean, one that is both life-giving and life-taking, and endure?

Aruna D'Souza is a writer based in Western Massachusetts. She co-curated the 2021 exhibition Lorraine O'Grady: Both/And *at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and is the editor of a forthcoming collection of the writings of Linda Nochlin,* Making It Modern *(Thames and Hudson, 2022). She is also a contributor to the* New York Times. *She was awarded the Rabkin Prize for arts journalism in 2021.*

Wu, Simon "Always Already Existing: Arthur Jafa's Aghdra Reviewed." *BOMB Magazine* (November 23, 2021) [ill.] [online]

BOMB

Always Already Existing: Arthur Jafa's *Aghdra* Reviewed

A new film that feels both primordial and futuristic.

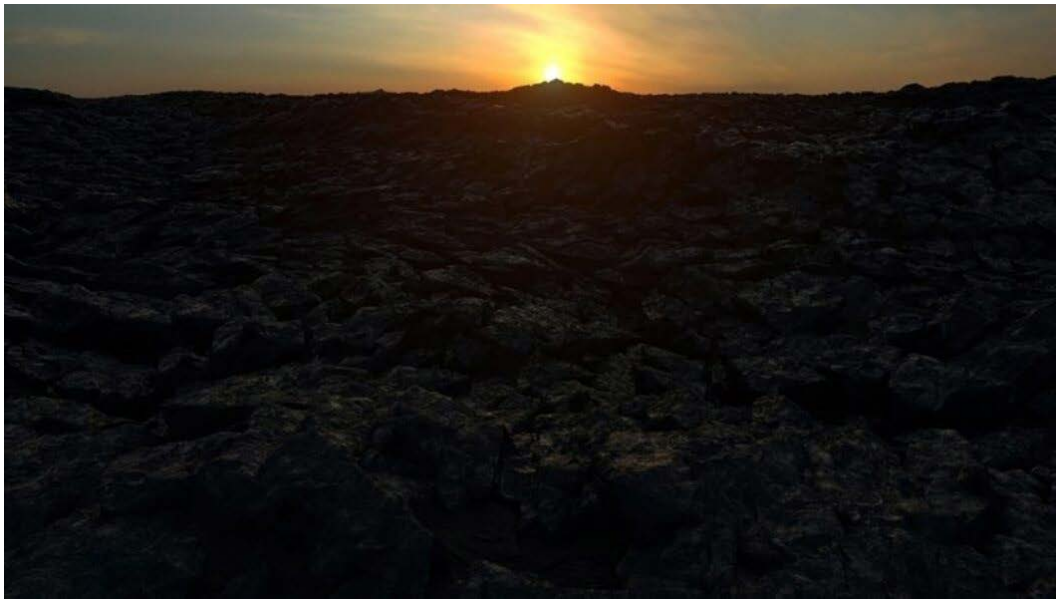
BY SIMON WU

NOVEMBER 23, 2021

Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA*, 2021, video still. © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

A sun sets over an ocean. This is presumably the subject of Arthur Jafa's latest video work, *Aghdra* (pronounced *ahg-HEE-druh*). But early in the eighty-five-minute film (which could be described as an elaborate screensaver or the end credits to a film) one realizes that this ocean is not made of water, or at least not just water. The surface is mottled and jagged. It heaves and jerks; it undulates, often synthetically (the film is Jafa's first digital animation). Sometimes the substrate looks natural—like magma or loamy, rocky soil. Other times it looks alien, apocalyptic. It could be the ruins of a city, perhaps New York City underwater after climate doom or a vast, roiling field of alien remains. Are we looking at the end of the world or the beginning? The primordial or the futuristic?

We are looking at Blackness, which, per Jafa, is both. He's called the film "a [James] Turrell while you're chained in the bottom of a boat"—that boat being the hold of a slave ship. And indeed, the film conjures a kind of sublime laced with terror and transcendence that immediately conjures what scholar Christina Sharpe describes as being "in the wake," which is to "occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding." This is just one of many theoretical resonances the film holds; I could see it in concert with diverse ideas such as Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation," Frank B. Wilderson III's "Afropessimism," and Tina Campt's "haptic images," to name just a few.



Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA*, 2021, video still. © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

This is something Jafa makes us feel more than spells out. *Aghdra* is an understated but monumental installation. The projection is enormous in the cavernous fourth-floor gallery of the former Gavin Brown space. As the camera skims closer to the water, the waves of *Aghdra* invite you to be engulfed by them, and you feel like someone is sucking the marrow out of your bones, closing your esophagus shut like a drawstring bag. It is familiar, alien, epiphanic, and obvious all at once.

Like Jafa's previous film that premiered in the Gavin Brown space, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016), *Aghdra* employs sound (a low, booming base) and music (mostly Black popular music) to visceral, emotional effect. When the music crests, it is slowed and filled with reverb. Often, the lyrics are about love: "You abandoned me / Love don't live here anymore / Just a vacancy, babe / Love don't live here, live here no more / no no no," goes one of the songs, a 1978 R&B track from the band Rose Royce. This love is existential as much as it is interpersonal. In a recent interview, Jafa described the music in the film as "an attempt to unpack some of the underacknowledged, maybe undertheorized, maybe underthought complexity of the Black articulation of feeling." *Aghdra* creates a space where we can contemplate a fuller understanding of those articulations.

Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA*, 2021, video still. © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

What distinguishes *Aghdra* in Jafa's oeuvre is its supreme emotional ambiguity. Jafa has expressed his unease with the way *Love Is the Message* served as a momentary catharsis of white guilt through the Black sublime, and *Aghdra* learns from that. If *Love Is the Message* moved one to tears, and if *Apex*, his 2013 film set to the techno of Robert Hood, moved one to dance, then *Aghdra* moves one to feel something more ambiguous. When the music was loudest and the waves biggest, I felt like a wail might escape from my lips, or an involuntary yelp. I wasn't sure whether to run toward or away from the screen. Jafa describes *Aghdra* as an organism more so than a film, an embodiment of American trauma in the way that Godzilla (a key inspiration to the film) was possibly an embodiment of Japanese trauma from the atomic bomb. Part of the achievement of *Aghdra* is to connect Black trauma to a more existential, ecological question of a world after humans, the post-Anthropocene. *Aghdra* contains no calls to action, but its thrust is primarily to affirm that Blackness, as well as its emotions and affects, is a way of existing that will always already exist.

Arthur Jafa's Aghdra *will be on view at the old Gavin Brown Enterprise space on 127th Street in New York City through December 4.*

Tate, Greg. "Greg Tate and Arthur Jafa on Ming Smith's 'Acts of Love' in Photography" *Aperture* (December 8, 2021) [ill.] [online]

aperture

Greg Tate and Arthur Jafa on Ming Smith's "Acts of Love" in Photography

In the 1970s, Smith immersed herself in jazz music, producing images with her signature poetic blur—and exploring what Tate and Jafa call the "maroon fugitivity" of Black postmodern life.

Ming Smith, *David Murray in the Wings*, Padua, Italy, 1978

Interviews - December 8, 2021
By Greg Tate

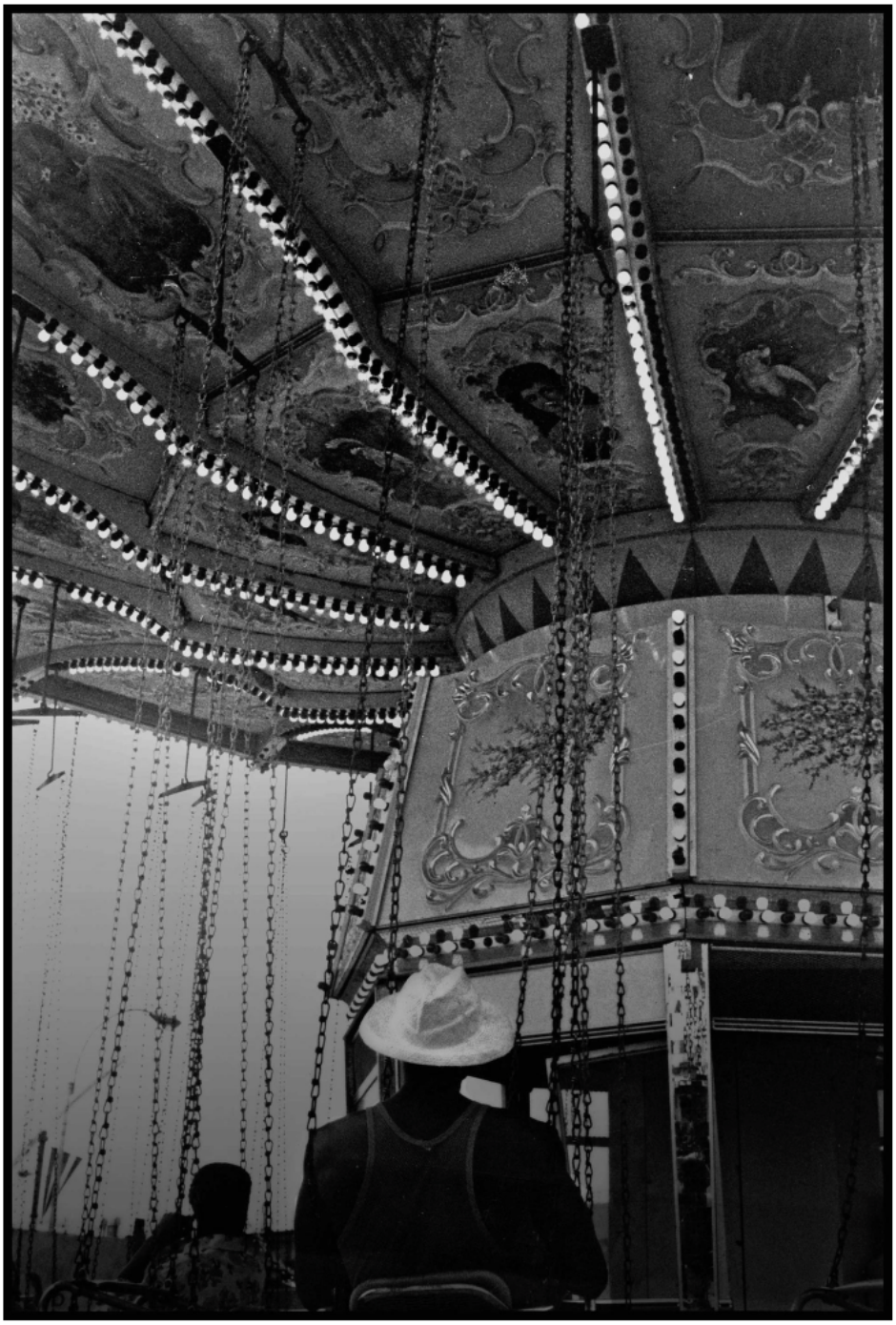
The photography of Ming Smith has haunted the international art form like a specter for over four decades. Artist Arthur Jafa has been on r enthusiastic hype man for half that time, routinely referring to her as the greatest of African American photographers, if not of contemporary art photographers in general. In 2017, he put his admiration and advocacy on "front street," per the vernacular, by including a survey of Smith's work in his epic traveling "solo" show *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, an exhibition which debuted at London's Serpentine Galleries and has since toured several European cities, including Berlin, Prague, and Stockholm.

Smith was born in Detroit and raised in Columbus, Ohio; her father was a dedicated amateur photographer. She began her own photographic journey into the art world shortly after graduating from Howard University and moving to New York to work as a model. She quickly garnered a series of significant "firsts": the only female member of the Kamoinge Workshop for Black photographers founded by Roy DeCarava, and the first Black woman photographer to have her work purchased for MoMA's permanent collection. Smith exhibited sporadically in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, but jazz fans internationally were made aware of her work via over a dozen album covers for recordings by her former husband, saxophonist David Murray, on the Italian label Black Saint and the Japanese imprint DIW. The selections were an eclectic mix of self-portraits, jazz subjects, and more oblique personal work.

The work that has most inspired and intrigued Jafa has been images in which Smith foregrounds blurred figures of Black folk. In his book *Black and Blur* (2017), critical theorist Fred Moten (Jafa's good friend and intellectual confidant) provides myriad novel ways of thinking about blurring in contemporary Black art-making as an artistic and political strategy—one frequently bent on poetically illuminating, through sublimation and subterfuge, the impact of anti-Black violence (historic and systemic) on post-traumatic Black subjects, Black interiors, and Black communities.

Smith's strategic deployment of blurring in rendering her varied Black subjects and communities is seen by Jafa as an act of love and loving protection from predation by a policing white gaze. It is also testament to Smith's creative affinity for the freedom-seeking music produced by her generation of jazz artists—that revolutionary group of outliers from California, the Midwest, and New Haven, Connecticut, who collectively transformed the music's sonics and expanse of conceptual vision in late-1970s New York. These musicians embraced Smith as a creative compatriot and fellow traveler and she, in turn, immortalized them in her artful and liminal documentation of their effigies and performances.

In our conversation, Jafa opens an initial emphasis on Smith's musicality and visual sonorities into a more complicated discussion about her work's explorations of what we'd call the "maroon fugitivity" of Black postmodernity and post-traumatic modern Black folk.



Ming Smith, *Coney Island Detailed, Brooklyn*, 1976, from the series *Coney Island*

Greg Tate: Brother J!

Arthur Jafa: I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.

Tate: We're talking about the presence of music and sound in Ming's work.

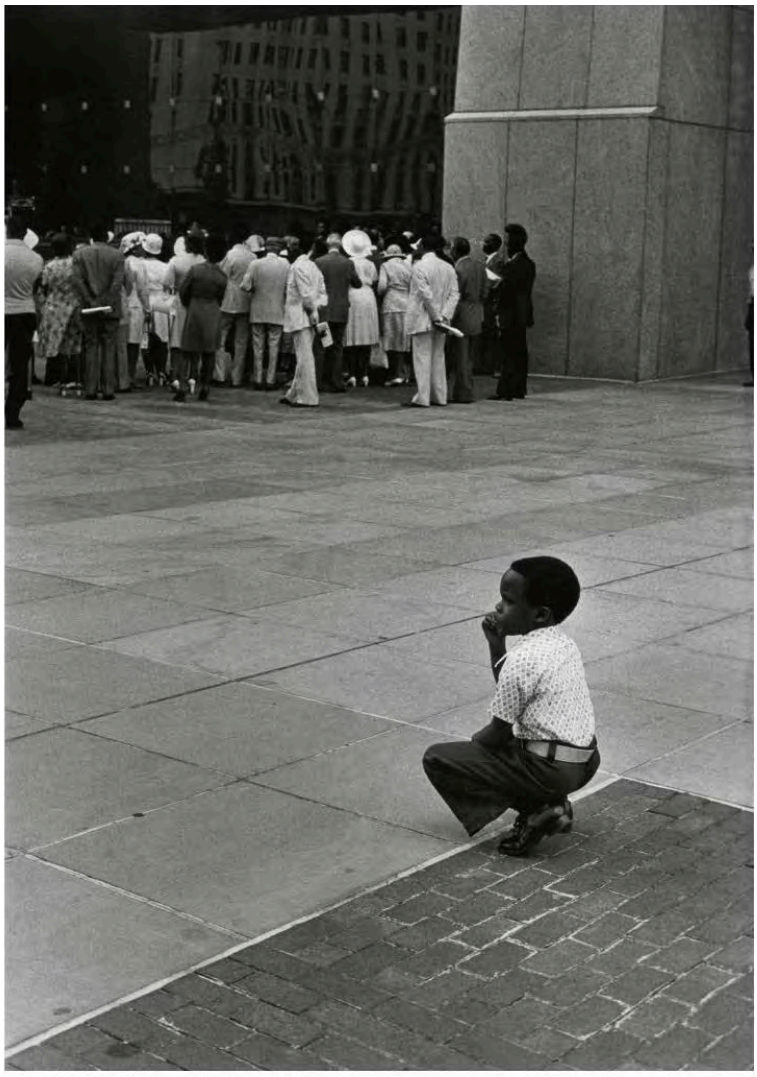
Jafa: [*hums a refrain*]

Tate: That series of album covers that Ming did for David Murray in the 1980s, was that your first exposure to her work?

Jafa: Well, no, it actually wasn't. The first time I saw her work was in *The Black Photographers Annual*, that featured the work of several members of the Kamoinge group. In each issue, everybody would get one or two photos; then maybe they would have three or four photographers who would get a bit more of an extended space, like a little portfolio section. If I remember correctly, Ming had five or six photos in one issue. So that was my first exposure to her work, and I thought it was pretty amazing.

Tate: It had an impact immediately.

Jafa: Yeah, definitely. My ongoing obsession at the time was like, Where are the photos of Black cultural modes? I knew Ming was great. No doubt about that. But being great and being somehow bound up with a quest for a thing—they would call it a "mother tongue"—they're not exactly the same thing; Black artists can be great without the thing being inherently Black. But Ming's thing was super Black. She definitely made an indelible impression on me. She was the standout of *The Black Photographers Annual*, and not just of one volume, but of the entire series. Later, when I moved New York, I became aware of the David Murray album covers and stuff like *Home* [David Murray, 1982].



Ming Smith, *What's It All About?*, Harlem, New York, 1976

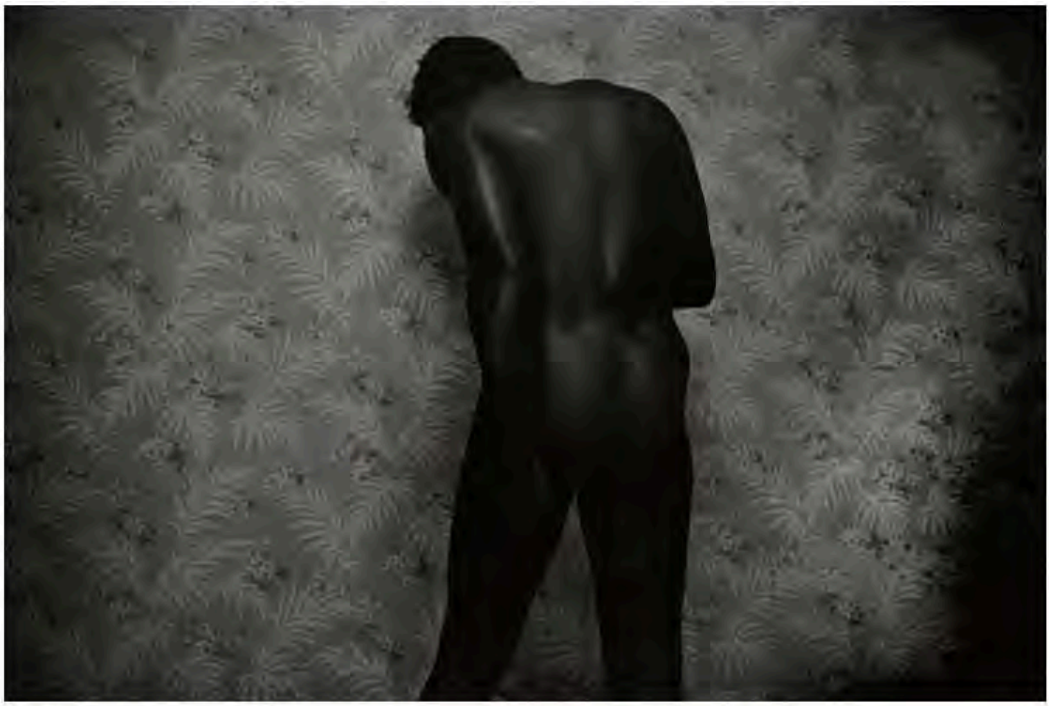
Tate: What is the relationship between Black visuality and Black musicality, in your critical sense? What's the path that binds the two?

Jafa: I was always interested in a certain kind of transformative proximity. Meaning, I was fascinated by the pressure that the music put on the visualizations which, more often than not, had to do with album covers at that point. But there was a pressure the music put on the visualization, to come up with something that seemed simpatico or consistent with the nature of the music.

There's a long history of jazz photography that's quite amazing, like many of the Blue Note covers and things like this, that are very distinctive, to say the least. But nevertheless, much of that photography, even though I think it's good photography, didn't necessarily feel like it was uniquely Black in its modalities, in its expressive and technical modalities. You know what I mean? So the first time that I saw work that I thought actually was tapping into something was, like I said, album covers. And particularly things that Ming shot, and at the same time, I sort of stumbled on Hart Leroy Bibbs [journalist and photographer from Kansas City, Missouri; 1930–1994]. Bibbs, in some ways, may be the predecessor. His work seemed to be preoccupied with the photography of jazz and Black music performing. Then, the other person one would have to reference would be Roy DeCarava, who had, as a subset of his larger body of work, jazz photography. In particular, there are some really incredible pictures of Coltrane and his ensemble.

From the beginning, from the inception of jazz, you had identifiable musical phrases, songs, melodies, things like that. Then, when you get to bebop, you start to feel an abstract relationship to melody and figures. But then you start to get to free jazz and you start talking about a blurred figure, a figure that isn't so discretely defined as a figure against a background, then you start talking about the slow shutter speed. In visual terms, you would start with Roy DeCarava. You can see it from his crisply defined but moody figures. In his photos of Trane, there is a kind of impressionism and expressionism that starts to enter into the photography. There's DeCarava's *John Coltrane on Soprano* [1963]. The combination of low light levels, like you would have in clubs, not being able to use flashes, and having to open up the shutter speed, together with people's movements being more agitated, would generate some of these sort of blurred figures that I'm talking about.

I don't know if DeCarava went into these spaces and said, "Hey, I'm going to slow my shutter down and create this effect that's going to seem more commensurate with the music," or if it just was a technical solution. But one thing that becomes really clear is that Ming, Hart Leroy Bibbs—and I would also put Spencer Richards in this group of photographers—realized that there was an equivalency between this music flow and these blurred figures, which erases much of the distinction in between foreground and background.



Ming Smith, *Male Nude*, New York, 1977

Tate: Well, part of the rhetoric around free jazz is that it's cosmic energy music, music concerned with invoking and evoking spirit possession. The kind of vibratory resonance. Anyone who's been to a really electrifying performance of the freer music knows that it does open up a heightened sense of the optical as well as the auditory, and expands our sense of the spiritual and the soulful. So we definitely see a connection between that idea of energy music and Ming's work that has the blur, has a similar kind of vibratory harmonics going on. How would you relate that to what's going on in her nonmusic practice?

Jafa: The two places that you see this pronounced vibratory quality are in the photos, like we said, of musical figures, and the other place would be in the photography of churches. In both instances, you're talking about a kind of heightened experience. You're also talking about lowlight situations, or at least situations where a flash would be inappropriate. Versus, one could be "discreet" in a pool hall or something like that, but it would have more to do with being discreet than the appropriateness in a cultural sense, in the appropriateness of a flash. Certainly not outside, or when people are posing.

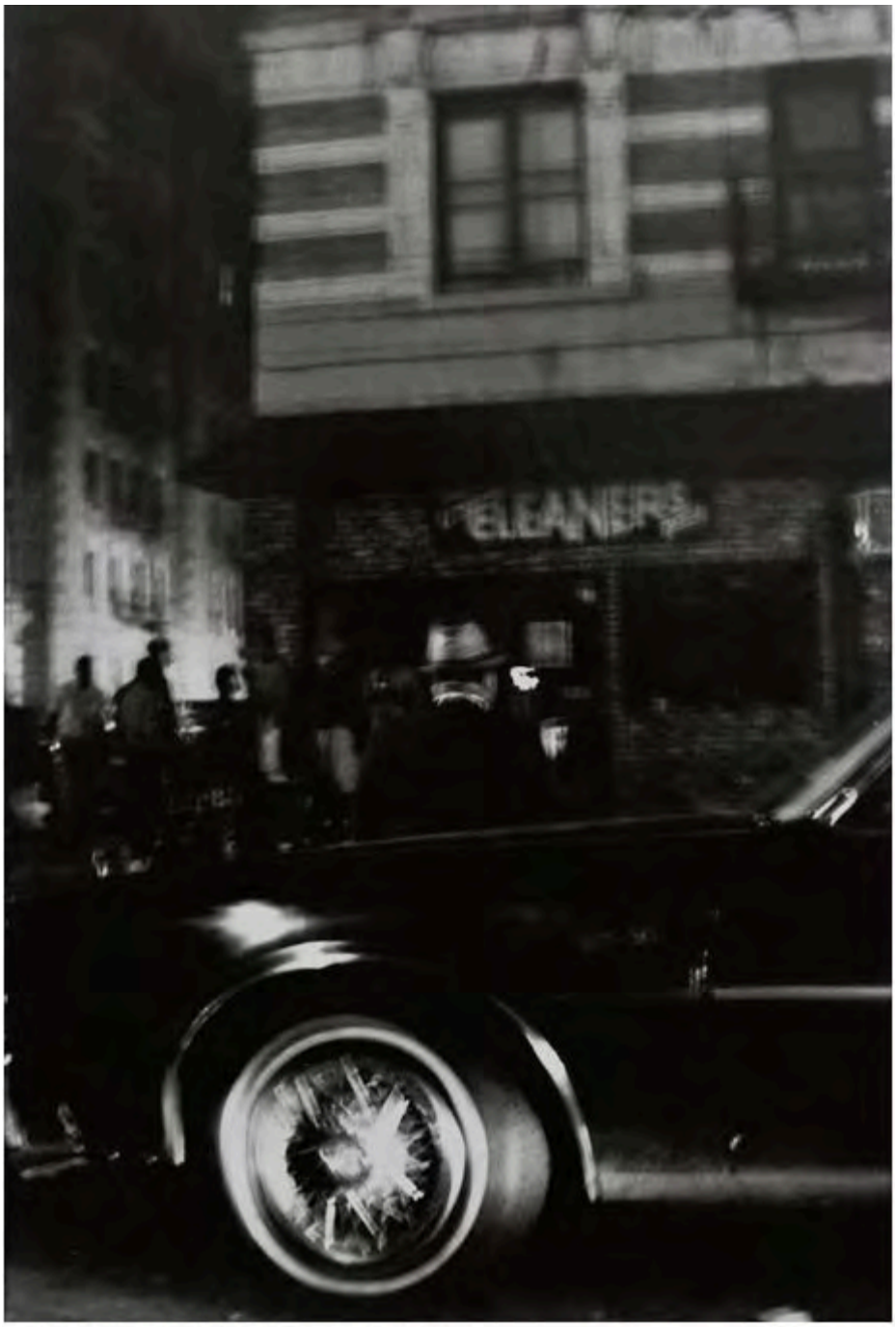
The typical Western visual dynamic has to do with figure and ground relationships. Like, what is the figure? What is the subject? What is the object? What is the background? What is the foreground? There's really two ways you can get at blurring the distinction between the foreground and the background. One way is the shutter speed, which means that the figure itself is being smeared, in a sense, on the negative, or the target. And the other way that you can get at it is tonally. Basically, the foreground figure is high-lit. You know what I mean? It's generally edged by the light in a certain kind of way. In the most elemental sense, it's what you see in classic Hollywood cinema—the subject is keyed by the light. Even if it's an interior, the sunlight is hitting their face, and the background will fall off behind them. So they actually are brighter than the background.

If you talk about Ming's work outside of the church and outside of the music thing, what you see her doing is something akin to what DeCarava does, with these flattened midtones. Or everything is in a high key. She erases or destroys this background-foreground relationship by making the figure or the subject not brighter than the background. Some of Ming's most incredible photos—I'm thinking of things like in the telephone booth in Harlem—they're striking precisely because of that. In many instances, her figures are silhouettes. There's a heightened sense of shape. If you're going to have a figure that's not brighter than the background, things like shape become one of the primary tools that's being utilized to create formal complexity, to create differentiation in the visual field.

Ming Smith, *Sun Ra Space II*, New York, 1978

Even in some of Ming's Sun Ra pictures, what you actually see is a combination of these two techniques. You see the blur and, as in DeCarava, these flattened midtones. What's unique about Ming is her ability to use this shutter thing to erase much of the distinction of the boundaries or the edge between the figure and the background, but at the same time, have it be very precise in this articulation of form. It's a very, very, very difficult thing to do, because as soon as you lower the shutter speed, you reduce the sharpness of the figure. Man, it's crazy that she can actually do that so consistently, know what I mean? It's one of the great mysteries of her photography that I've always been curious about—what her actual settings are. And then, even when you have the shutter speed, it's not just the figure moving. It's like, how much motion you induce to the figure by the camera shaking, to a certain degree. Which is another way that the shutter speed winds up manifesting itself.

Now the other thing, which I think goes even further to this question, is completely tethered to insights taken from Robert Farris Thompson's *African Art in Motion* [1974]. Thompson talks about the classic natal context in which African artifacts are being exhibited. In the West, where the object has no agency, it is on a pedestal; the eye can move around the object, which is static. The object is frozen, in a sense. It has no ability to move or to relocate itself in space, he says. In the classic or the natal African traditional context, that artifact moves around the viewer as much as the viewer moves around the artifact. And that dual movement produces a blur. You don't want to have one static thing, like a kind of open appraisal. That's what the shutter speed is, the length of appraisal, the time in which one will actually look at a thing. And if you extend that length of time and you move, you're going to get a blur. Then, in the church or the performance, there's the motion that's being induced by the actual movement of her hands—meaning not holding the camera perfectly static. That's in space-time terms too, like a target that's distended. It's the classic thing of people posing for a photo. You always say, "Be perfectly still." Right? Ming's technique is based on a complete disavowal of both of the classic tenets of the photographic capture. And I think that lines up perfectly with the deep philosophical implications of this inverted or subverted figure, foreground-background, figure object relationship that Robert Farris Thompson articulates in *African Art in Motion*. So these things are not accidental.



Ming Smith, *Cadillac Man*, New York, 1991, from the series *Invisible Man*

Tate: When you were talking about shapes and silhouettes, I thought of that great Amiri Baraka line, "the shapes in the darkness had histories," from his book *Tales* [1967]. With Ming and Baraka, you recognize this quest into the underground of the Black working-class environment. They both have created these magnificent bodies of work that put you inside of a particular kind of Black populated darkness, an Abyssinian field of communal interaction. There's been hundreds of Black photographers who have shot in the hood. But there's something extraordinary that Baraka and Ming pull out of their intimate engagement with what I call "real Black life." It's so rarefied.

Jafa: They're both more into the dark places. There is a direct correlation between this idea of darkness, just like literal darkness—in technical terms—and how your eyes adjust to the darkness at a certain point. And that darkness is both figurative and literal at the same time.

The one photography book that Baraka was involved with is *In Our Terribleness* [1970], by Fundi, who was also in *The Black Photographers Annual*. And one of the things that's really distinct about his work, too, is the darkness; and the darkness that he achieves is not just from the light level being down, but it's also completely bound up with this flattened tonal thing between the foreground and the background. You also see that in Carrie Mae Weems's work, the way she's playing with the figure against the dark ground.

Some of the way I term it is "super bad," like when people shoot things that are not just bad, like in technical terms, but they're like unrepentantly bad! And the technical badness starts to function on the meta level. It's almost like the Black man's heaven is the white man's hell—some shit like that. It's like when James Brown said, "I'm bad, I'm super bad," this whole idea that we're going to invert these values. It's this interconnected space where the metaphoric becomes literal, becomes a new point of reference to any kind of norm. So the whole question becomes: what is the default status for Blackness? And it, of course, is darkness. Because Blackness is not the same thing as Darkness, but Blackness as it's structured in the West is inherently going to be always in proximity to Darkness, because Darkness functions as all kinds of things, like positively and negatively. It functions as black. Deprivation. Not having power. But it also functions as stealthiness. Doing things under the cover of darkness. You don't really think of runaway slaves as running away in the day. You think of them as running away in the night. Steal away, steal away; you think of people stealing away in the night.

Ming Smith, Dakar Roadside with Figures, Senegal, 1972

Tate: Under cover of darkness.

Jafa: Yes, under cover of darkness, exactly. As soon as you make a photograph that starts foregrounding things like darkness, it's inherently bound up with issues of self-determinacy and of freedom.

Tate: I remember what the photographer Jules Allen was saying about Ming; this was the first aesthetic appreciation of her I ever heard from anybody. He just said, "She's the best of us." I know you certainly concur with that. But I'm wondering, if we want to talk about aesthetic benchmarks established by Black artists, what's going on in her work that generates an aspirational response? What's she doing that's so singular and powerful?

Jafa: Her capacity to control the dual technical strategies and abnormal technical strategy of slow shutter speed, and the flattened tonal range, to erase the typical relationships between figure and background, foreground and background, are unparalleled.

Tate: I've heard you talk about it in terms of Black cinematography, this whole notion of a "God particle." I'm also asking, what is it about her relationship to Black subjects in the visual fields that Black people occupy in the world that is just so potent and so poignant? Let's talk about the existential or the emotional aspects of what her photographs generate for you.

Jafa: I mean, what you see in the work, which is what you see so often in the works of any Black artist —let's talk about music, as an example. That field has been so defined, so structured by Black phonic expressivity, that even the most casual Black-produced music is doing certain kinds of things that Black people take for granted, in terms of them affirming what we consider beautiful. And then there's people, like an Aretha, or an Albert Ayler, or Jimi Hendrix, who seem to go that further distance—they're always bound up with the limits to which they are willing to go to affirm aspects of Black sonic beauty or taste, which would be considered, at best, on the margins of appreciation in other musical modalities. Vibrato. Undertone. Overtone. Things like this. It's on the edge of those things. In other words, it becomes like the space in which a Black person in the space of other values, or maybe dominant values, nevertheless will hold the line in foregrounding schemes in their work.

In photography, that thing which is taken for granted in the musical arena, around which we have basically structured ourselves, is much less prevalent. So, when I talk about these foregrounds, backgrounds, and things, that's the gist of it. Nobody else has gone as far as Ming in terms of her commitment to doing it. The existential dimensions have to do with the way in which the technical parameters of what she's doing are, in fact, structured by a commitment to being in those spaces that Black people occupy. The spaces that are underlit. And because they are underlit, and because they are secret spaces and things like this, they require the technical approaches to be aligned with those spaces.

Ming Smith, *Farewell to Alvin Ailey (Mother)*, New York, 1989

So, as opposed to saying, "People, come outside in the sun so I can photograph you," it's like, "No, I'm going to go into these dark spaces with you." And the technique that would conventionally be considered what you would have to do to rescue the photography, to make a suitable picture, is thwarted. It's like saying, "No, I'm going to put the pressure on myself of actually coming to where Black people are," rather than bringing Black people into what would be considered a technically appropriate relationship to the photography.

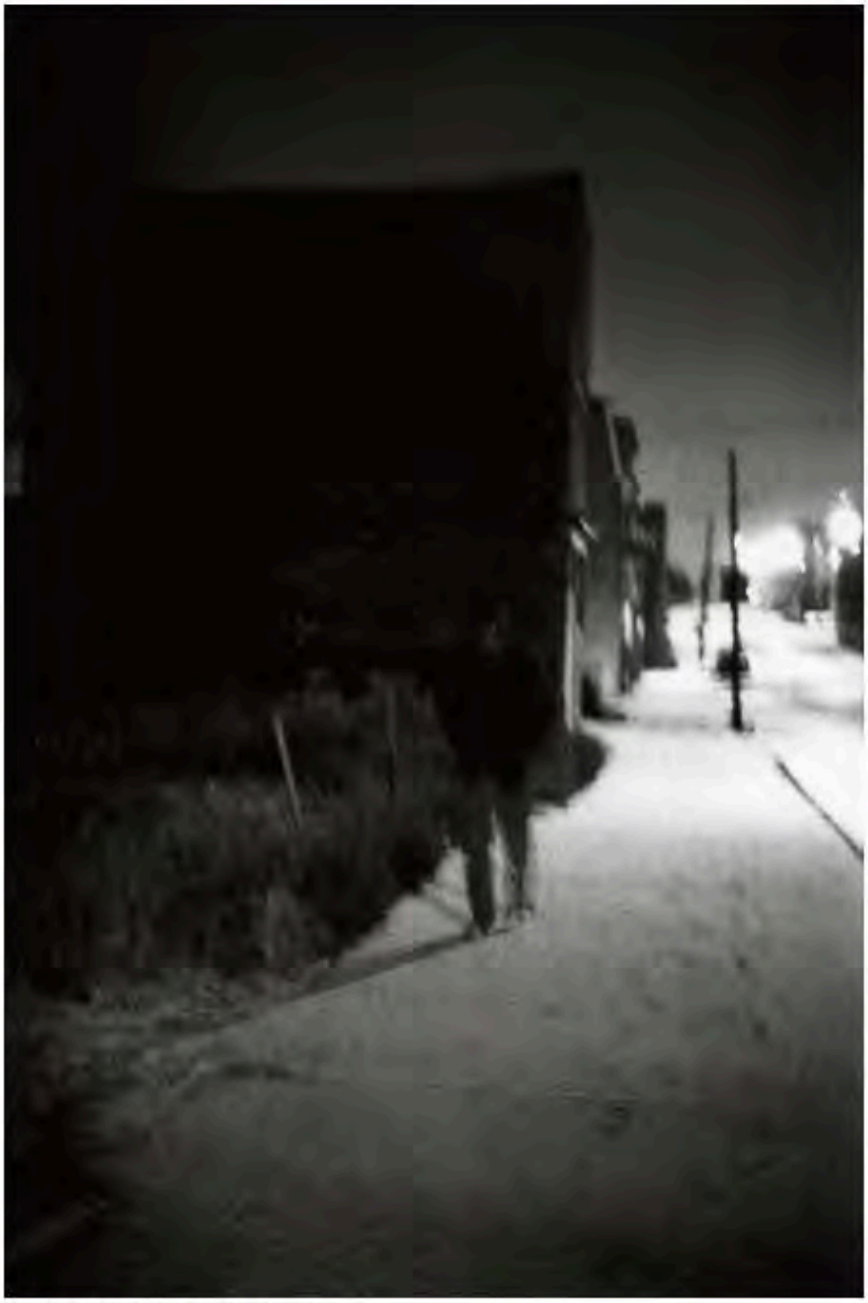
You see a lot of consequences of this commitment to going into the spaces that Black people occupy, or are forced to occupy, or left to occupy. For example, we know one of the more egregious aspects of the very mechanism itself, photography, is surveillance. Right? Black people get tight around photos, in a certain respect, because they are being surveilled, and there's always a danger that the photograph can be used as evidence against you in some fashion. But as soon as you say, "I'm going to go into the spaces in which Black people feel comfortable that they're not being surveilled"—meaning dark spaces, underground spaces, spaces in the woods—the photographer is now introducing into that space the instrument par excellence of surveillance. What that means, then, is you have to be willing to embrace techniques that, in a sense, void the ability of the photograph to function as evidence. In many of Ming's photos, you can't identify anybody.

Tate: Photographer as a predator for The State.

Jafa: Exactly. You can't identify anybody in them. They couldn't be used in a court of law, because you can't make out people's faces! What you're left with are things like the line of a person's body, a person's postural semantics, things like that, which cannot be used as evidence. You can't be like, "That person stands like X, Y, and Z," you know what I mean, when you can't really see who it is. It's amazing how in a large percentage of Ming's photos, you can't identify a single person!

Tate: It's this rendering of evidence of things unseen.

Jafa: Absolutely.



Ming Smith, *Invisible Man, Somewhere, Everywhere*, 1991

Tate: They operate in this meta-dimension. Some call it "Blacknuss."

Jafa: Or, as you say, in planes and shadows. It's not true of all of her pictures. But I mean, *Male Nude* [1977]. The person's back is to the camera. And then it's quite literally a figure against a background, and it looks a little dark. And not because the person is Black. I'm saying the tones are pressed together. Or *Farewell to Alvin Ailey Ailey (Mother)* [1989], you can see those people's faces, but that would have something to do with the nature of it. That's a more straightforward document of that event. But then you go to *Dakar Roadside with Figures* [1972]—you can't use that to say who that person is. Not at all. And the same with *Family Free Time in the Park* [1982]—they're silhouettes. You go to *What's It All About?* [1976]—that kid is on the cusp of silhouette. You can certainly identify him there. But he's on the cusp of silhouette.

These are pictures that I would say—like *God, Mary, Jesus* [1991]—that I think typically get presented in Ming's work as evidence that she can take a decent photo. They look more conventionally like the photojournalism that we associate with Black photography, which I think most people do. But when you come to *Invisible Man, Somewhere, Everywhere* [1991], which is one of her masterpieces, you can't fuckin' identify nobody in that. It's really interesting, the tension in so many of these photos between saying it's X, Y, and Z, that you can't identify the person. It's not clear of all of them. But I'm saying it's something you see quite a bit of. It's a high percentage of her photos. Or *Cadillac Man* [1991]. These are clearly pictures that are about how bodies occupy space. But they don't identify who the bodies are.

Ming Smith, *Family Free Time in the Park: Atlanta*, 1981
All photographs courtesy the artist

Tate: Ming has a romance with the mystery of Black people as shadows moving in a shadow world.

Jafa: And, I would say, she is very invested in Black fugitivity, the fugitivity of Black people.

Tate: A fugitivity that's not bound up with escape but a kind of self-illumination.

Jafa: A Yeah, totally. Circular breathing. It's like this whole question of shape, man. Shape and silhouette. How pronounced it is. She can do all kinds of things. But this is something she does that hardly anybody else can do on this level. I don't know another photographer who can do work in this modality with this level of specificity and precision. Look at *Abhortion* [1978]. If these photos are not about the whole idea of fugitivity, I don't know what else they're about. She takes a picture of a person next to, I guess she's next to a traffic light, and where she's not in silhouette, her hair is blocking her face. These are masks, people who are masked. There's a certain masquerade dimension to these photos.

And in *Prelude to Middle Passage* [1972]. This is a photo in which the figure is defining the background. It's framing the background! [Laughs] The background is not framing the figure. The figure is framing the background. In *Invisible Man*, that's the blur. The traces. The phantom. The fugitivity of people willing to be free from being fucked with. You can't fuck what you can't see. Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee; you can't fuck with what you can't see!

This conversation was originally published in *Ming Smith: An Aperture Monograph* (Aperture/Documentary Arts, 2020) under the title "The Sound She Saw."

Greg Tate (1957–2021) was a Harlem-based writer and musician. A former staff writer at the *Village Voice*, he was the author of *Flyboy 2: The Greg Tate Reader* (2016).

Taubin, Amy. "OCEANIC FEELING." *Artforum* (December 10, 2021) [ill.] [online]

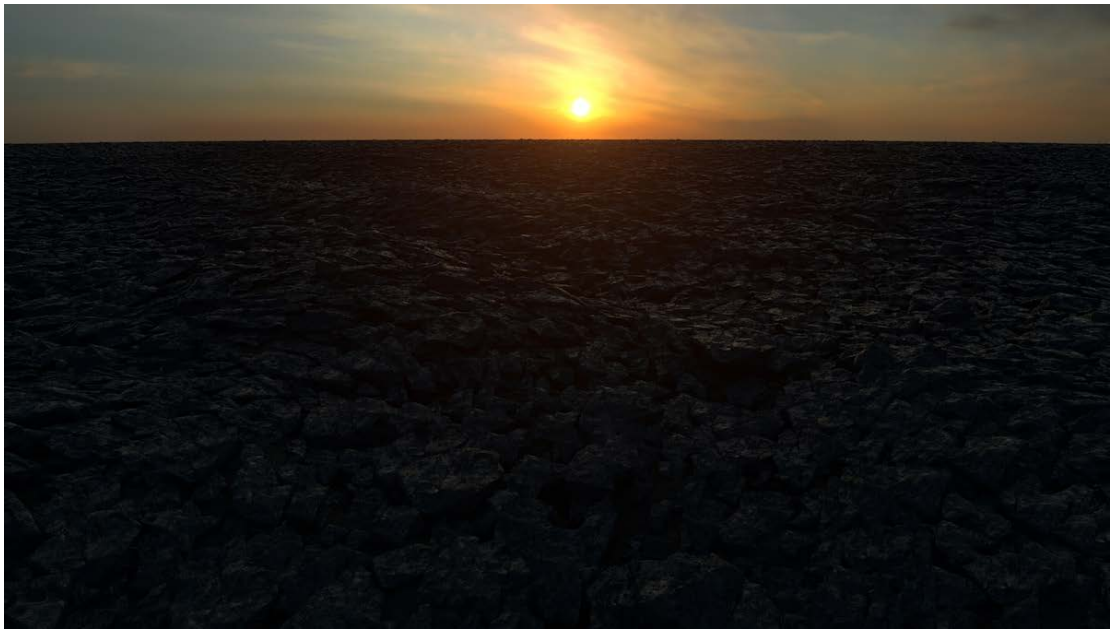
ARTFORUM

OCEANIC FEELING

Arthur Jafa's new wavelength

By Amy Taubin

December 10, 2021 4:00 pm



Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA*, 2021, digital video, color, sound, 85 minutes.

WE'RE IN A JUKE JOINT on a boardwalk overlooking the gulf, now transformed into a sea of magma. The 45s are warped, the turntable spins erratically. We sit on metal chairs and watch the waves of blackness. This is how the world ends—for me, and maybe for you.

Arthur Jafa's *AGHDRA*, an eighty-five-minute moving image and sound installation, is on view in a cavernous warehouse at 439 West 127th Street. Formerly Gavin Brown's uptown gallery, the building has been sold, and who knows to what purposes its new owner will put it. But right now, Jafa has returned to the space where in 2016 he showed *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, the seven-and-a-half-minute collage video that brought the previously unrecognized middle-aged artist and filmmaker international adulation. During the next five years, Jafa became one of the most eminent theorists of Blackness as experience and aesthetic while producing a deluge of work: newspaper photos made iconic by size and juxtaposition, photographic self-portraits and portraits of others, sculptures, off-the-cuff found and altered videos, and because this polymath is most obsessed with time-based mediums, four more major moving image works: *APEX*, 2013–17, an eight-minute explosive barrage of eight hundred photographs transferred to digital video and set to an insistent techno riff by Robert Hood; *akingdoncomethas*, 2018, an eighty-minute compilation of roughly shot internet videos of preachers and gospel singers electrifying Black church Sunday services with their voices; *The White Album*, also 2018, which won the 2019 Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale and consists of about forty minutes of white people performing their whiteness for their own cameras and occasionally for Jafa's; and now *AGHDRA*, an eighty-five-minute movie masterpiece which certainly shares sources and ideas with the previous works but takes several radical departures.

Projected on a wide screen is what resembles an ocean of black rocks, churning and banging against one another, their motion creating waves that are borne forward and backward by an unseen current. Above this undulating, broken mass and occupying the upper fifth of the image when not blotted out by the swells, is a yellow-orange sun in a Turneresque sky. *AGHDRA* is organized into some twelve segments, each framed slightly differently, so that we view this seascape from various angles: head-on, high, low, and oblique. Some of the segments are smoothly fitted together, others shift perspectives and tonalities abruptly.

Unlike Jafa's previous moving image work, the organizing principle of *AGHDRA* is not juxtaposition. In a video on the Museum of Modern Art's website, he describes the editing of *APEX* and also *Love Is the Message the Message Is Death* as the meeting of the misery and majesty of the Black experience in America. "If you take this thing and that thing and overlap them, the place where they overlapped was you." Such relationships do not exist in *AGHDRA*. The image is in flux, but it is all one thing, as if, "at the end of the Anthropocene," Jafa explained as we watched the piece together, "what remains is Blackness." Created through a collaboration between Jafa and BUF, the French CGI company which produced the special effects for *The Matrix*, *AGHDRA* is purely a digital creation. The image acts as a magnetic field, drawing out the viewers' associations, some of which may be the same as the visuals Jafa suggested to the BUF team. Among these was "Ex-Slave Gordon," a Black man whose heavily scarified back was famously photographed in 1863, and whose image has appeared in many of Jafa's works. He also told them that one of his early inspirations for the piece was Godzilla, which, as he explained to his son after they had watched it in Japan, was a manifestation of the trauma the Japanese suffered as the first and only people to have atomic bombs dropped on them. I imagined Godzilla sinking into the sea and his spiky skin metastasizing to become the entire ocean.

Jafa also suggested the last glimpse of the sky from the hold of slave ships—a kind of anti-sublime James Turrell. Because surely the question of transcendence will arise as you watch *AGHDRA*. Can transcendence arise from blackness? The final image of Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), which was likely on Jafa's mind, is a nondescript, so-called black-and-white but actually various-shades-of-gray photo of ocean waves which is gradually pulled out of focus to become nothing but whiteness. We've been on a journey of a lifetime, a fifty-minute lifetime, toward that photo, which takes over the entire screen and your entire field of vision, and which is such a paltry, clichéd representation of what is beyond representation. Is it the irony implicit in the image that makes the end of *Wavelength* transcendent, or does the moment of silence and pure white light that follows clinch the deal?

AGHDRA does something very different. Its movement does not carry you anywhere. There is no journey to be found in the unfathomable rhythms of its waves. Obdurate and impenetrable, the image is beyond time. I might have walked away from it after fifteen minutes or wished I had a copy to use as a screen saver. But the piece is not simply an image, technologically and visually impressive as it is. It is the soundtrack that accompanies it (or maybe the reverse is the case) that keeps you sitting on the floor or on a metal chair facing the screen. Jafa heavily remixed a half dozen cuts from recordings of '70s and early '80s Black artists—the Isley Brothers, Roberta Flack, Rose Royce—dance tunes slowed down, fragmented, and run through reverb so that unrecognizable voices come roaring out of memory tunnels, hinting at all-but-forgotten desires and the pain of the loss of them, and the transcendence of pain and loss through music. "You abandoned me / Love don't live here no more." Austere and demanding as it is, *AGHDRA* is suffused with feeling. I'm glad Greg Tate, who died unexpectedly on December 7, was at the opening of *AGHDRA*. He was Jafa's best friend and best sounding board. The piece is now his memorial, and I will never see it without thinking of him.

AGHDRA *is on view through December 19 at 439 West 127th Street, open Tuesday–Sunday from 12 p.m.–8 p.m.*

Fajemisin, Olamiju. "AFFECTIVE PROXIMITY." *Artforum* (September 2022) [ill.] [online]

ARTFORUM

AFFECTIVE PROXIMITY

Olamiju Fajemisin on Arthur Jafa

By Olamiju Fajemisin

View of "Arthur Jafa: Live Evil," 2022, La Grande Halle, Luma Foundation, Arles, France. From left: *Foxy Lady Latour*, 2022; *Untitled*, 2022; *Albert Ayler*, 2022. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

ARTHUR JAFA REFUSES TO BOW to the needy chorus, whose tired refrain ("What are you trying to *say*?") is blind to the fact that his growing oeuvre is less concerned with producing another transcribable dissertation on the condition of the so-called Black body than with manipulating intermedial tensions between objecthood and subjecthood, articulation and comprehension, and functionality and signification. "Live Evil," at the Luma Foundation in Arles, France, is the most comprehensive presentation of Jafa's work to date, continuing his scrutiny of the oxymoron derived from Thelma Golden's idea that "post Black" artists are "adamant" about not being labeled as Black, "though their work," as she put it in the catalogue for her 2001 exhibition "Freestyle," is "steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of Blackness." To self-identify as such would be a "parochial thing."

Moving beyond the rudimentary definition of montage theory (that Scene A and Scene C have a measured effect on the interpretation of Scene B), the typical "theatrical equation" dictates that the playwright compose a script, the actors perform their interpretation, and, crucially, the audience process this interpretation. "The meaning-axis is created somewhere in between what the performers do and how the audience proceed, where those two things meet," Jafa explained to me in conversation before complicating the sum. "'Art as vehicle' removes the audience from the equation," he continued, referring to "Theatre of Sources" (1976–82), an ethnographic project in search of the origins of pretheatrical practices by Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski, who, during an encounter with Haitian vodou in 1979, concluded that spiritual possession occurs when an archetype becomes a person, supplanting the ego for a fleeting second. The Jungian idea that an archetype is an a priori, consciousness-preceding condition and that art is the vehicle by which this condition is communicated, thus forming meaning, speaks to the metaphysical aspect of a separate theory on relationality: what Ghanaian artist and filmmaker John Akomfrah termed "affective proximity." Tests of Grotowski's and Akomfrah's theses recur across "Live Evil"; the earliest appear in Jafa's untitled scrapbooks, 1990–2007. Multiple vectors among and within distinct images are optioned inside this Borgesian Picture Library of Babel, comprising an unknown number of three-ring binders filled with magazine clippings: "pocket museums, or pocket galleries," ur-montages to be flipped out and shared among acquaintances. Of his late friend and collaborator Greg Tate, to whom a video in this show is dedicated, Jafa recalled, "He would always ask people, 'Have you *seen* the books? Or have you been given a *tour* of the books?'"

Arthur Jafa, *AGHDRA*, 2021, 8K video, color and black-and-white, sound, 75 minutes.

In the case of the moving-image works on view in Arles when I visited this past spring, the artist's custodianship is translated beyond individual encounters, as the clips and cuts are sewn into a determined order and rhythm. Going between "speaking in tongues" and "holding your tongue," per Jafa, these splayed poles of expressivity—from surplus to subjugation—represent the psychological fallout of the attempted merchandising of enslaved Black people, an enterprise aborted only after centuries. "When you suspend the assumed functionality of a thing"—or in this instance, a person—"it becomes pure signifier," the artist told me. Offering an anecdote of his childhood in the church, Jafa recalled a lighthearted yet telling moment of interpretive dissonance: "I thought the ushers were nurses or something, in case somebody fell out. But the joke, of course, is they never stopped anybody from falling out. They just kind of stand there and go, 'Behold!'" All this is to say that Jafa's practice of image collection—including his depictions of extreme violence against Black people—is part and parcel of his investigation into object-subject confusion. Whereas Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), asks the naive, if rhetorical, question, "Who are the 'we' at whom such shock-pictures are aimed?," Jafa speaks instead of "abnormativity," which he explains as "an attempt to create a legible [framework] to talk about values that would typically be considered deficits." Elaborating on this subversive upending of aesthetic categories in a 2021 conversation with Tate, he said, "Some of the way I term it is 'superbad,' like when people shoot things that are not just bad . . . in technical terms, but they're, like, unrepentantly bad! . . . It's like when James Brown said, 'I'm bad, I'm superbad,' this whole idea that we're going to invert these values." When I wonder whether the slippage of the value of the image to this point suggests that the image has failed, Jafa counters, "We have to assume that the image has function in order to fail. I'm not sure it does."

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Going between “speaking in tongues” and “holding your tongue,” these splayed poles represent the psychological fallout of the attempted merchandising of enslaved Black people.

A JAUNT THROUGH THE VAST, verdant Luma Arles campus leads to the first of the exhibition's two huge venues. La Mécanique Générale was divided by internal walls to demarcate three enclosed viewing rooms, where the "immaterial" moving-image works *The White Album*, 2018, *Slowpex*, 2022 (a slowed-down version of *Apex*, 2013), and *akingdoncomethas*, 2018, were screened on loops. Throughout the remaining open space, the white-cube effect was played to almost comic ends as Jafa flexes his abnormative muscle. Arrangements of objects, flags, cutout prints, and wallpapers of appropriated and found images of the more miserable moments in Black American history were humiliatingly lit under hospital-bright white lights. Here, proximities among images were a source of affect and affection, and uncanny compositions in which function finds increasingly little relation to signification sardonically instantiated Grotowski's notion of "art as vehicle." *Big Wheel II*, 2018, a seven-foot-tall, functionless, chain-flanked rubber tire, draws a clear association between labor and racialist subjugation. In Arles it complemented Jafa's now-ubiquitous vacuum-formed plastic relief of a keloid-scar-ridden back (*Ex-Slave Gordon 1863*, 2013), hung high on the back wall. Between these works, *Geto*, 2018, an aluminum-mounted print of a photo of a disheveled-looking Whitney Houston—one of the last sightings of the singer before she was found dead in a hotel bathtub—disrupted the mood of historical penance with the plaintive contemporary image of the moment right before disaster. "I'm not interested in the introduction part, or the resolution part. I'm just interested in the conflict," Jafa explained, though for him this doesn't necessarily mean in the literal, violent sense, as can be seen in *akingdoncomethas*, a work that is more compilation than montage, in which minutes-long found videos of pastors and gospel singers arrested in the throes of religious excitement create a pendent tension, a kind of aesthetic edging, each rousing performance taking the viewer to the brink of ecstasy but not lingering long enough to allow a single drop to spill over.

Arthur Jafa, *akingdoncomethas*, 2018, digital video, color, sound, 105 minutes 5 seconds.

Around the corner, a series of thirteen cutouts on steel stands (____*Array*, 2020) were like the pages of the scrapbooks blown up. The cutouts' rhizomatic references to art history and pop culture elicit the singular in-betweens Jafa deems significant. Miles Davis is seen reclining, shirtless, his arms spread wide as if pinned to a crucifix; Billie Holiday appears in profile and would seem as if she were only sleeping, not lying dead in her casket, were she not surrounded by white flowers; Adrian Piper sits with her hands neatly crossed in her lap, a white handkerchief stuffed in her mouth. Riding a city bus, she is in the midst of *Catalysis IV*, 1971, one of several provocative, career-defining performances, inspiring, perhaps, to Jafa.

View of "Arthur Jafa: Live Evil," 2022, La Mécanique Générale, Luma Foundation, Arles, France. Wall: Untitled, 2022. Floor: Big Wheel II, 2018. Photo: Andrea Rossetti.

In La Grande Hall, a short walk from the first venue, was the antidotal second half of this exhibition (which the artist revisited in July, amending several works and adding a few new ones). Four billboards (all 2022) presented large-scale images of musicians, specifically jazz artists, and album covers, including *Funkadelic's Greatest Hits* (1975) and a business card or poster for the record label of Detroit techno pioneer Derrick May, along with tender screenshots of a FaceTime call between the artist and his girlfriend and other found images: an enslaved man wearing a three-pronged iron collar, Kandi Burruss's mug shot from the 2018 film *Never Heard*, the picture from the cover of the Roots' *Things Fall Apart* (1999) showing Black teenagers sprinting away from police during a civil-rights-era riot, etc. While the center of the room was occupied by architectural structures that appear to be made of black shipping containers (also seen in the previous venue), the highlight of this space was *AGHDRA*, 2021, a seventy-five-minute 8K digital film projected on an enormous screen. A roiling sea of obsidian boulders crests and swells against the background of a fading orpiment sunset. Made in response to the artist's increasing frustration with allegations that montage had become his go-to trick, *AGHDRA* proves his capacity to generate pathos through a structuring of intensities. Testing the hypothesis that Jafa's cumulative works form timeless, mutable fabrics of Blackness continually available to new interpretation, "Live Evil" is artifactual—a measured exploitation of the fluctuating value and overavailability to interpretation of certain images otherwise exhausted in the current visual economy.

Levin, Max. “Arthur Jafa’s *The WHite Album*.” *Screen Slate* (December 4, 2022) [ill.] [online]

SCREEN SLATE

Arthur Jafa's The White Album

BY MAX LEVIN

Arthur Jafa’s *The White Album* (2018) is a 29-minute video collage and radical mixtape: essay film, history film, and music video interpolated with confessionals and internet virality. Like his earlier moving-image works *Apex* (2013) and *Love Is The Message, the Message Is Death* (2017), *The White Album* is assembled from produced and found footage, but unlike the earlier works, whose artifacts flicker forth with rhythmic propulsion, *The White Album* moves much more slowly as it gazes upon scenes of vulnerability and horror.

In the 2017 music video for Oneohtrix Point Never and Iggy Pop's song "The Pure And The Damned," directed by the Safdie Brothers, Robert Pattinson roams a neighborhood with a sword, eventually finding a wild animal mid meal. The animal looks up, eyes wide, teeth bloody, and stares at Pattinson, who cocks his head and raises the sword. As synthesizers crescendo, he blinks out of his murderous impulse and the animal cocks its head, acknowledging being acknowledged. The video then cuts to Iggy Pop, rendered as a CGI (re)animated corpse, singing in the street.

The White Album samples both audio and video from "The Pure and The Damned" in addition to archival footage of the 1970s fusion band The Mahavishnu Orchestra, whose white guitarist and Black drummer warm up and tune their instruments before offscreen piano chords boom. A cut brings us to Iggy Pop, on the street, along with music from "The Pure and the Damned." Only the drumroll from the previous shot continues across the cut. Next, we see video portraits of white men and women wearing blank faces. These are staff members from Jafa's then art gallery, Gavin Brown's Enterprise. The camera lingers on their hair. Iggy Pop sings, "Every day I think about untwisting and untangling these strings I'm in."

This sequence demonstrates one method at play in *The White Album*. By estranging image from sound and then remixing both into critical knots, Jafa appropriates the tactic of appropriation itself: obscuring origin, taking something from someone else, and making it work for oneself. We know that American music traditions emerged from the musics that enslaved African peoples brought to North America and developed here, but few visual artists go so far as to articulate how white-that-was-once-Black music is used to support white terrorism.

Jafa was a few days shy of eight years old in November 1968, when the Beatles released their self-titled double LP known as the White Album. Within months of the album's release, Charles Manson adopted the title of one of the songs, "Helter Skelter," to refer to the race war he hoped to bring about in the name of white supremacy. In Jafa's *The White Album*, we see contemporary incarnations of Manson's evil. Surveillance footage shows Dylann Roof parking his car and walking into the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, while Iggy Pop croons "the pure always act from love / the damned always act from love." We then see the scene of eye contact between Pattinson and the animal, but Jafa cuts back to the church surveillance camera before Pattinson backs down from his aspiration to violence. Instead, we see Roof emerging calmly into the night after massacring nine congregants.

Later in *The White Album*, Jafa samples the 2015 Oneohtrix Point Never song "Animals" ("We sit by the side / And observe all the animals . . . Primal rage / Life in a cage") as an iPhone video runs of a man demonstrating how quickly he can load and use an assault rifle, pistol, and extended magazines hidden under a t-shirt and jeans. The song continues as we see a Black character in Grand Theft Auto killed in the street and then a Gavin Brown sales associate smiling and scanning passerby in an art-fair booth.

In Jafa's work, hinged sounds and images—many we may have already heard and seen, with preexisting velocity—generate expanded possibilities beyond their discrete aesthetic and political values. Jafa explores how visual media communicates the vitality and survival of Black people—their labor, their ideas, their songs—in the face of coordinated violence. His work also highlights the tendency for these histories to be abstracted into oblivion.

Linking brainwashed terrorists to cool New York art dealers to video games, Jafa's *The White Album* is a stunning experiment of affective juxtaposition and an open-ended lesson book on how music and violence are braided together in life and online.

The White Album *screens Wednesday–Sunday, noon–8pm, through mid-October at 5 West 125th Street, under the auspices of Gladstone Gallery.*

Givanni, June. “Arthur Jafa revisited.” *Sight and Sound* (December, 18 2023) [ill.] [online]

Black Film Bulletin

Arthur Jafa revisited

Director of photography on Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust, John Akomfrah’s documentary Seven Songs for Malcolm X and Spike Lee’s Crooklyn, Arthur Jafa has crafted an oeuvre that also encompasses music, philosophy and science-fiction art. He had a wide-ranging conversation with Black Film Bulletin co-founder June Givanni in London in February 1993, excerpts from which are reproduced here.

18 December 2023

By June Givanni

Daughters of the Dust (1991)

Cinematography

The cinematography has to serve the director's vision, which means in some ways you have to function as a tool. Ideally I like to function as a cinematographer who has his own issues and concerns, and when a director hires me, hopefully – ideally – they want me to bring those concerns to that particular project.

How that works out, in some sense, depends on who I work with. Some jobs are just jobs; you just shoot them. But films like Daughters of the Dust [1991] and Seven Songs [for Malcolm X, 1993] are more collaborative: what those directors require of me is to function in a more extended kind of way. In pre-production, I'll bombard the director with images, I'll provoke the director, I'll write my own notes, I'll conceptualise around what we're trying to do. In Daughters, the film is about Black Americans coming into being. In a way it's about when Africans ceased to be Africans and became Americans. So as a cinematographer, I started to think about how we translate that into some kind of structural filmic concern. To suggest some of the indeterminacy of who Black people were at that point in the Americas, we ended up using what I call 'declensions' – playing around with speed, which is the sort of thing you see Scorsese utilise in Raging Bull [1980], for example, but to different ends.

Black film aesthetics

When I was at Howard [University in Washington DC, studying film and archiecture], the very notion of 'Black film' was a somewhat radical one. In time I started to become somewhat dissatisfied with definitions because there's a way in which the response 'Black Film is against Hollywood' has its limitations. What it does is set you up in a binary opposition to Hollywood, which is limiting, because it means that if Hollywood has narrative then you have to be anti-narrative. It's kind of absurd. Films that were being given to me as examples of Black film would use a classical Hollywood spatial continuity, which in itself is not wrong, but I began to feel like the rules around spatial continuity are intrinsically tied to the cultural systems that generated those rules. The relationship between camera placements is tied to eurocentrism, which is really egocentrism. That logic system is very much tied into Renaissance perspective, vanishing points and a way of looking at the world which says, "I am at the centre of the universe and everything proceeds from me." So what I started to ask myself was: if spatial continuity was tied to a cultural logic, then since there are other cultural logics, there should be other spatial systems.

Malcolm X (1992)

At the time I was looking at the works of Oscar Micheaux, an African American filmmaker and producer of over 38 feature films. The first film I saw was God's Step Children [1938]. After that I saw Ten Minutes to Live [1932], which I think is an amazing piece of work. The work was being described to me as 'bad cinema' – an example of what not to do primarily because of his use of light-skinned people, and because they understood his control of spatial continuity and screen direction as being deficient, quite frankly.

The point I'm making is that some of the 'accidents' he made are in fact not accidents per se, but have been dictated by some deep cultural logic... What I came to believe is that what Black people do is not arbitrary. It is tied to a deeply situated cultural system that dictates how we approach various things. The question of African retention is linked to something I like to call 'cultural stabilities' – core things which really have to do with who we are on a neurological level. If you look at the Middle Passage [the forced voyage of enslaved Africans to the New World]as a clear example of this, what you see is that African American artforms tend to be particularly developed in music, rhythm, dance, orature – the things you can carry in your head. You're not going to carry architecture or sculpture with you.

Polyventiality

The reason I talk about music as a jump-off point for Black cinema is that there's some consensual agreement... We've got a consensus around achievement and if we start thinking about Black music's relationship to African philosophical tradition and understand Western music's relationship to these philosophical traditions, then we can start positing in a very speculative kind of way certain possibilities for Black cinema. Music is less about sound: it's really about how our minds work, how we see and understand the world and not just what we see in the world, but actually how we see the world. What you can see in music is the polyrhythmic – towards double, triple, quadruple entendre.

Polyventiality [a term Jafa coined and defined as "multiple tones, multiple rhythms, multiple perspectives, multiple meanings – multiplicity"] is central to understanding Black expression because what it's about is a different kind of relationship to the world – much less hierarchical. In Black music this plays itself out in a tendency to treat tonality not as a fixed sonic phenomenon, but as an inherently unstable phenomenon that's always moving. That sense of dynamic instability is really part and parcel of a Black way of looking at the world. A musicologist at the turn of the century studying African music said the most difficult thing about studying music of the Negro is his tendency to "worry" the note... My whole thing is about opening up possibilities and then we can decide which are best.

Independent film

I'm very much a product of the American Black independent film scene. My ideas have been shaped by it and by much of the discourse of these filmmakers I've been privy to. The school of UCLA filmmakers [comprising] the 'LA Rebellion', from the mid-1970s up to the mid-80s – Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Julie Dash, Ben Caldwell, Haile Gerima, Barbara McCullough – was the first sustained attempt by a group of African American filmmakers to create films that reflected who we were at a multiplicity of levels, in terms of subject position, not subject matter.

At the same time I always felt there was something of a generational difference. I always felt like they were operating inside a certain pre-1960s notion: for example, I can't remember a time before colour TV. I think that's the main critical difference.

Killer of Sheep (1978)

Black British film

When the Black British workshop scene started, I had a very intense engagement with it because here was another example of Black filmmakers articulating some of the same kinds of issues: what does 'Black cinema' mean and is it something that's desirable? This whole question of Black cinema came up in a [1988 issue of] Screen journal titled 'The Last "Special Issue" on Race?'. The critique of essentialism came up and I didn't agree with what the anti-essentialists were saying because they went in the face of everything I knew. I just assumed at that point that I was an essentialist and eventually realised that in fact I was not an essentialist, and I jokingly started referring to myself as an anti-anti-essentialist. I understood the political necessity of critiquing essentialist notions of who Black people are, which are used to bang us over the head, but I felt that throwing out the notion that there is anything specific to the Black experience was incredibly problematic and aesthetically limiting at the very least.

Later on, I had an opportunity to see some Black British films and meet some of the filmmakers – John Akomfrah at the Flaherty Film Seminar, where he was showing Testament [1988]; Isaac Julien after that, and then Maureen Blackwood actually came down to the location when we were shooting Daughters. Over the years, it turned to friendship and trying to create different kinds of communities based around different aesthetic considerations.

US Black film ’93

We haven’t achieved Black cinema yet… Black cinema is the orgasm that you can talk about but can’t really describe to people until they experience one. Filmmakers who have done things that I think have been successful – like Charles Burnett’s Killer of Sheep [1978], like Daughters of the Dust, like Larry Clark’s Passing Through [1977] – haven’t been picked up and developed… Consequently, these people have been erased to a certain degree. The generation of filmmakers that preceded Spike Lee had a lot of anxieties about success and they couldn’t really conceptualise a moment where they could be both radically Black and successful – how to get around that bind of ‘selling out’.

What Spike did was change the stakes overnight. It wasn’t just enough to be a Black filmmaker who had Black issues. You basically had to get out and engage with the real world. Spike’s success with She’s Gotta Have It [1986] put people on notice. If they were to be relevant, they were going to have to work out theoretical issues in a mainstream context.

Mitchell, Tyler. "Arthur Jafa's America." *W Magazine* (March 2024) 72-75[ill.] [print]

Arthur Jafa's America

The artist known for confronting the country's racist history head-on talks to poet Simone White about institutional attention, the importance of titles, the film Taxi Driver, *and his two daring new exhibitions.*

Photographed by Tyler Mitchell

Before Arthur Jafa became an art world sensation, he was a sought-after but under-the-radar filmmaker. He was the cinematographer for *Daughters of the Dust*, a 1991 film by his then wife, Julie Dash; for Spike Lee's *Crooklyn*, in 1994; and, in the 2010s, for the music videos for Solange's "Don't Touch My Hair" and "Cranes in the Sky." He worked under Stanley Kubrick on *Eyes Wide Shut*, codirected the video for Jay-Z's "4:44," and shot documentaries on subjects including Malcolm X and Audre Lorde.

Then, in 2016, at the age of 56, he was invited by the Hammer Museum to display a selection of items from his personal collection of historical and pop cultural images, amassed over decades and organized in hundreds of binders, as part of the museum's "Made in L.A." show. This was a few years after he had released a film essay titled *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, which juxtaposed interviews of Black intellectuals with shots of outer space, nocturnal streetscapes, ocean surf, and artist Kara Walker's cut-paper silhouette works.

Jafa's impulse to archive was also reflected in his breakout project, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, which opened at the gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem a few days after Donald Trump was elected president. Made up of rhythmically spliced footage from viral newsclips, police body cameras, civil rights marches, basketball games, and concerts set to Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam," the 7-minute-30-second film is a multifaceted portrait of Blackness and racism in America that manages to be brutal, funny, and breathtaking all at once. *The New York Times* called it a "digital-age 'Guernica'"; for 48 hours in June 2020, when the world was roiling in protest over the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks, 13 museums streamed the film on their websites.

Born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1960 to a middle-class family of educators, Jafa (pronounced *jay-fa*) was raised in the largely segregated South. The music of his youth often makes appearances in his videos: clips of Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix are slowed down, distorted, and used to intense emotional effect. His work since *Love Is the Message* has evolved to include sculpture, installation, wallpaper, and painting, but his unique ability to manipulate and recontextualize found footage remains at the core of his practice. In 2019, Jafa won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for *The White Album*, a 30-minute film that weaves together his own intimate shots of gallerists and friends with a surrealistic computer-animated Iggy Pop and clips that include a clueless young white woman protesting allegations of racism, cyber goths dancing under a bridge, and Dylann Roof entering and exiting the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, where he murdered nine people during a Bible study.

This spring, Jafa will have two simultaneous exhibitions in New York City: a multimedia installation at 52 Walker, the David Zwirner space curated by senior director Ebony L. Haynes; and a video at Gladstone Gallery titled *BEN GAZZARA*, a détournement of key scenes in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* that is sure to become a lightning rod. While putting the finishing touches on both shows, Jafa sat down for a conversation with the poet Simone White, whose oeuvre is similarly raw and unsparing. ANDREA WHITTLE

Simone White: Could you tell me about what you'll be showing this spring?

Arthur Jafa: The 52 Walker exhibition is called "Black Power Tool and Die Trynig [*sic*]." It's a sort of structure—a maze, basically. We call it the picture unit. You walk through it—it's just another way to structure the presentation and sequencing of images, like a book or a film. I'm very interested in how you make a heterogeneous set of things occupy space in a way that doesn't erase their individual specificity but that does create a sort of gestalt effect. It's like post–*Bitches Brew* Miles Davis. I'm interested in that cacophony.

The words "die" and "death" often reappear in the titles of your work.

There is something obsessive about it, for sure. My brother laughed when I told him about this one. He was like, "You hadn't had a death title in a while!" [*Laughs*] I mean, my first doc was called *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, which was a play on Fassbinder's film *Love Is Colder Than Death*. And then, of course, I did *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*. And the one essay I've written, my sort of manifesto, is called *My Black Death*. The big term that everyone likes to use now is "the precarity of Black life," so it's a little like, what happens when you become a machine that consumes or absorbs precarity, or presumes precarity? To me, a piece is not finished unless it has a title. It's almost like conjuring. If you don't crack the code of the title, then the work can't fully manifest.

In some ways, the primary power of your work is not simply the pain or exhaustion of Black trauma but also the ways in which the pain coexists with comedic or tongue-in-cheek ways of relating to everyday life.

Arthur Jafa, in his own clothing and accessories.

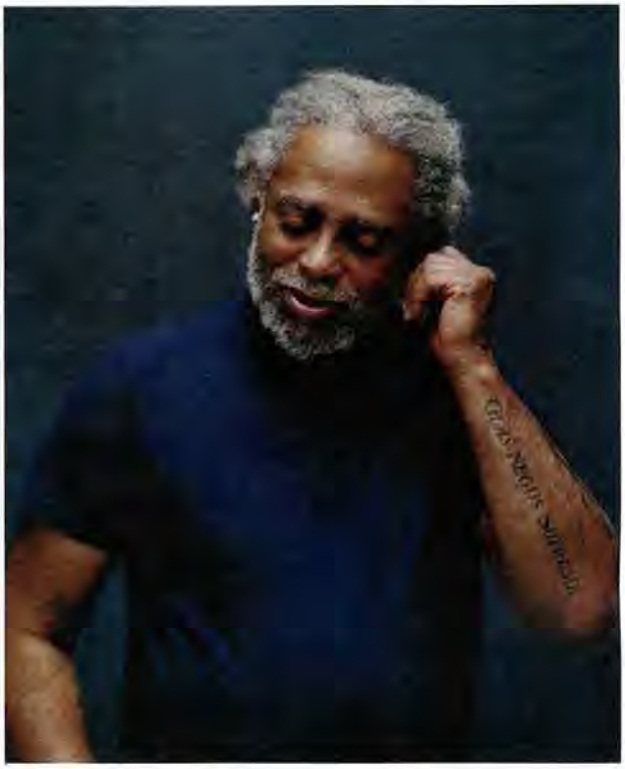
I've had this ongoing discussion with [the poet and scholar] Fred Moten. Fred has said that he thinks that trauma, death, and horror are a fundamental context out of which Blackness evolves and emerges, but that Blackness is not in itself fundamentally a product of horror. Now, I don't agree with that. If you put together the equation—African people enslaved and transported to the Americas—I don't think there's any way you can produce us, meaning Black people, without that horror. If a deity said, "Hey, look, you can snap your fingers and every horrible thing that ever happened to a Black person would have not happened," we would, by that very same gesture, be erasing ourselves because there's no way to produce us outside of this equation of horror. And there's something profoundly paradoxical about that. I've even written before something to the effect that even though, on the one hand, we're all moving toward the transcendence of these white supremacist and racialized structures, at the same time a move toward that is a move toward erasing the very things that bind us together as a community. At the very core of being Black is a discrepancy between circumstances that insisted, demanded, and disciplined us to understand ourselves as not human—and yet, despite all of that, we still were able to retain, insist, and reinforce our humanity. It's what distinguishes Black people from African people.

I'd like to talk about *BEN GAZZARA*, the video you're debuting at Gladstone.

The film *Taxi Driver* always had a really big impact on me. I was mesmerized by it, but it always struck me as a racist film. I have a compulsion to, as I say, force a thing to show its true face. In the film, when Travis Bickle [the titular taxi driver, played by Robert De Niro] goes to rescue Iris [the child prostitute played by Jodie Foster], everyone holding her captive in that scene is white. But I read once that in Paul Schrader's original script, they were all Black. But somebody said, "No, we can't do this." Because Black folks would have rioted. But when you see the film, you feel that ethos. The move to make the pimp character white doesn't correct the central thesis of the film, about his relationship to Blackness and Black men in particular. I never bought Harvey Keitel's rendering of the pimp. It always seemed like a joke. But earlier in the film, there's a shot that's cut into a scene in a diner of two Black pimps, and you see who Keitel's character should have been. He should have been one of these cats. I mean, they have real gravitas; they're clearly not actors. They are two actual pimps who just hung around the location where they were shooting. I was fascinated with the question of, how would you transpose these guys into the roles for which they were intended? It's twisted, the whole idea of wanting to create a scene where Black people are being murdered, but for me it

This page, clockwise from top left: One of Jafa's works in progress, 2024; details from *APEX GRID*, 2018; an installation view of ___ *Array*, 2020, at Jafa's 2021 solo show "MAGNUMB," at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark. *Opposite:* Jafa, wearing his own T-shirt and jewelry.

GROOMING BY BEN NOBUKO FOR CLARINS AT BRYCE ARTISTS; SET DESIGN BY JULIA WAGNER AT SECOND NAME AGENCY; PRODUCER: JULIA LEVIN AT ART PARTNER; PHOTO ASSISTANT: ZACK FORSYTH; DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: MIKE SKIDEN; RETOUCHING: MAY SIX STUDIO. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: © ARTHUR JAFA, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND 52 WALKER, NEW YORK; © ARTHUR JAFA, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GLADSTONE GALLERY; PHOTOGRAPHED BY LANCE BREWER; © ARTHUR JAFA, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDERS SUNE BERG.



has something to do with seeing the true face of the thing. The film focuses so much on Travis's interiority, so one of the things I did was open up the Black pimps' interiority.

What is it about revisiting that scene at the end of *Taxi Driver* that is illuminating for you?

I don't know if I would use the word "illuminating." There's a certain presumption that Black artists, particularly conscious or intentional Black artists, are going to do the uplift thing. I don't do the uplift thing. I'm definitely an undertaker. I'm like, Let's go down. I'm interested in where the bodies are buried. I'm genuinely drawn to the darkness, to the shadow, and I've accepted it. It really comes down to the complexity of freedom, the problem of choice. I keep saying I'm a libertine, and people keep not hearing me. That doesn't mean I'm not a principled person. But I'm not a moralist. I'm interested in what it means to make choices in this world and to live with the consequences of those choices. I'm not interested in anybody dictating what I do. And as much as I love Black people, I'm also not interested in Black people dictating what I do. I once had a conversation with the artist Faith Icecold. I don't know if you ever saw that conversation.

Yeah, I did.

They said I was a neoliberal and anti-Black. I am fairly confident that I'm not anti-Black, but I can understand why a person might come to certain conclusions about me, because the way my understanding of Blackness is configured is maybe a little atypical, a little unapologetic. I know that some will question the impulse to, as is the case with *BEN GAZZARA*, remake the thing so that all the Black people get killed. It's about keeping it real. Black people's primary superpower, historically, has been our ability to keep it real. *Taxi Driver* was a response to blaxploitation films, which was the moment when Black masculinity was put in people's faces in an unprecedented way, starting with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* straight through to *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, and *Slaughter's Big Rip-Off*. All these films were a tsunami of Black masculinity. And *Taxi Driver* was an attempt to defuse it, if not destroy it. That doesn't diminish my attraction to or appreciation of the film.

You've talked about how your success came in the middle of your life, as Dante would say. Middle of my life? Jesus, I hope so! The last quarter, maybe.

You're supposed to live to be 105! One of the things that your practice gives me is a chance to think about, what does one do with the opportunity that institutional attention will give you? Once an institution sets its gaze upon you, how do you operate inside your artistic impulses? Because in my understanding, that's going to bend or shape your work, to a certain degree.

Yeah, it does. For a long time, I was stuck in the modality of imagining. I spent a lot of time conceptualizing. My biggest Achilles' heel was that once I worked out something in my head, I didn't even feel the necessity to make it. I always got off on ideas. And the thing about ideas is they're uncompromised. So what's been challenging to me is to try to function in the space of actualization, but with the same intent to be unconstrained. I said to [the gallerist] Gavin Brown at one point, "I'll always see myself as a failure when I look in the mirror because I spent the larger part of my life being a failure and understanding myself as such." I'm not even sure if 30 years of success will supplant the fundamental understanding I have of myself as not being a success. When I was growing up, success to me was Michael Jackson or Prince. I felt like I was a consumer of dope books, movies, comic books, and art. I felt like I had a very sophisticated appreciation, but those were people who existed "over there." It's been very complicated for me to realize that I'm a producer. I'm constantly having this conversation with my son. I'm like, "This shit is not easy for me." I don't know if it was easy for anybody, but it used to seem like they just got up and did it. I feel like a charlatan sometimes, that I'm just getting away with shit.

What?!

The level of shit is so diminished now, compared to the '60s and '70s. I'm not saying there's not great art being made. But there's something to have been incubated in, to have emerged in, as a very young person in the '60s—I missed it. I missed the '60s because I was an infant! But you still feel the energy. I still feel like I remember my parents taking me to see James Brown when I was 3 or 4 years old. And I can't tell you what it looked like at all, or even what it sounded like. But I remember the intensity of it on a haptic level. I have a memory of how it felt. That's why I'm always going back to the music. I want my shit to function on the level of Miles Davis or Jimi Hendrix, and I don't know if I'm gonna get there. If you had asked me this 15 years ago, I would have been like, I'm definitely not gonna get there. Now I'm like, is it possible? Am I within striking distance? I don't know. I can kind of see it in my head. ◆

Holiday, Harmony. “Arthur Jafa’s America.” *Los Angeles Times: Image Magazine* (March 19, 2024) [ill.] [online]

Los Angeles Times

image

Arthur Jafa shifts into another realm

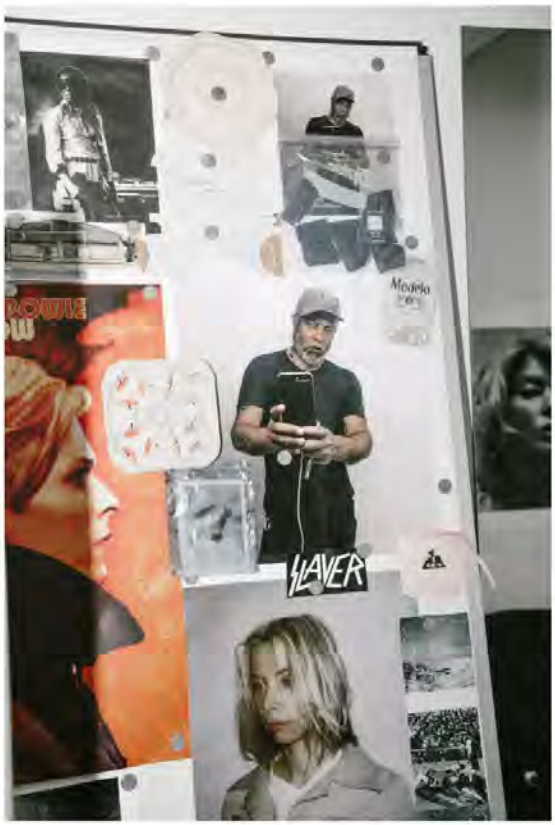
BY HARMONY HOLIDAY

Photography by JAMES MICHAEL JUAREZ

MARCH 19, 2024 7 AM PT

The artist Arthur Jafa in front of his painting “Thirst Trap” (2024).

When I first met Arthur Jafa, Fred Moten was still living in the West Adams area of Los Angeles, and I was living in New York, visiting L.A. for the holidays. Fred invited me and AJ, as friends call him, to dinner, and I remember, because I recorded it, their conversation about Sly Stone recording and then deleting entire albums late into the night at New York's Electric Lady Studios. I remember this so vividly because it crystallized my sense of the ungovernable collective subconscious of Black life in the U.S. and how evidence of that anarchic mode survives hand to hand, voice to voice and eye to eye. It is rare to find people who care about these stories as if they are the missing minerals in a nutrient-deficient social regime and not scattered tabloids to jut at one another when we don't feel interesting as discrete subjects. Arthur Jafa, best known as a filmmaker and cinematographer, is possessed by this obsession, this care for missed, uncategorizable, atemporal images and their traces. He shares it the way an arranger shares his manner of hearing a song, as texture and sequence, an etheric demeanor made material.



Jafa is possessed by this care for missed, uncategorizable, atemporal images and their traces.

In February in Los Angeles, AJ and I met to discuss his current work and preoccupations. In an industry where an array of handlers is a marker of having made it, he works alone in his studio, perfecting one of his new endeavors: sound sculptures that feature the altered voices of recognizable performers. Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack become two men confessing love for one another. The Jackson 5's "All I Do Is Think About You" is led by Michael Jackson had he been allowed to reveal his post-puberty voice to the world. He sounds like an adult and serious man, and he and his brothers slow down their dance to allow this rite of passage. They spin in unison in two directions at once and the new pace feels natural, like it's making room for the trouble they all know is coming. They get to grieve in AJ's fiction. He invents new funerary rites, for bands and individuals. He makes a sonic requiem for Greg Tate. I send a Sun Ra sample in which Ra discusses how seldom Black men are mourned publicly by composers. Greg Tate is the vigilante on the other side of AJ's timing, his best friend in life and afterlife. Michael is among his most reliable haunts. The myth of Michael was that his father dosed him with hormones to preserve his boyhood vocal pitch. This could be the myth of Blackness itself, that it is never permitted to grow up, to sound too bitter, forever young and inchoate, never atrophying past the dazzling tones of entertainment so that all the world accepts wholeheartedly of Black life is its half-life.

It is rare to find people who care about these stories as if they are the missing minerals in a nutrient-deficient social regime and not scattered tabloids to jut at one another when we don't feel interesting as discrete subjects.

— Harmony Holiday

AJ has two shows coming up in New York this spring, one at Gladstone Gallery and another at 52 Walker. He says of the 52 Walker exhibition that he hopes it will feel like a group show, which is his goal with every solo exhibition: to multiply, proliferate and collaborate with selves present and former and the here-but-gone friends and muses that inflect those selves. He's also working on a feature-length biopic on blues singer Son House. We discuss the failure of biopics as a form alongside the need or at least rapacious demand for them. What if biopics of Black men and women weren't so linear and grandiose? What if, like AJ's films, they sliced and slurred images to get at the contradictory nature of human beings?

What we circle back to throughout our conversations is the idea of breakthrough, breaking through, the big break one gets within the context of a chosen industry and how to not let it break you. AJ has been working for more than 30 years, producing, thinking and making, but there was a point at which he broke through, and we wonder together about it in the context of other artists, whose moment came sooner and then they died, or whose moment is overshadowed by legacy or addiction, or who could not see the moment or seize it if it came. He says he's in a new realm, a new world, with a new frequency, where obscurity can no longer be nursed as a defining characteristic. He's a known quantity and compelled to show up as many versions of himself as possible.

Harmony Holiday at Jafa's studio in Los Angeles.

Harmony Holiday: Do you want to talk about why you were in New York last week?

Arthur Jafa: We can. I was in New York to do a talk at Columbia University as part of the Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter lecture series.

HH: What was the topic?

AJ: I've been doing talks since I was in my mid to late 20s, and I don't see any appreciable difference between when I prepare and when I don't, so I just don't prepare. I generally literally don't think about it. I actively try not to think about it. To a certain degree, I think that's because I'm not sure if I have very much new to say.

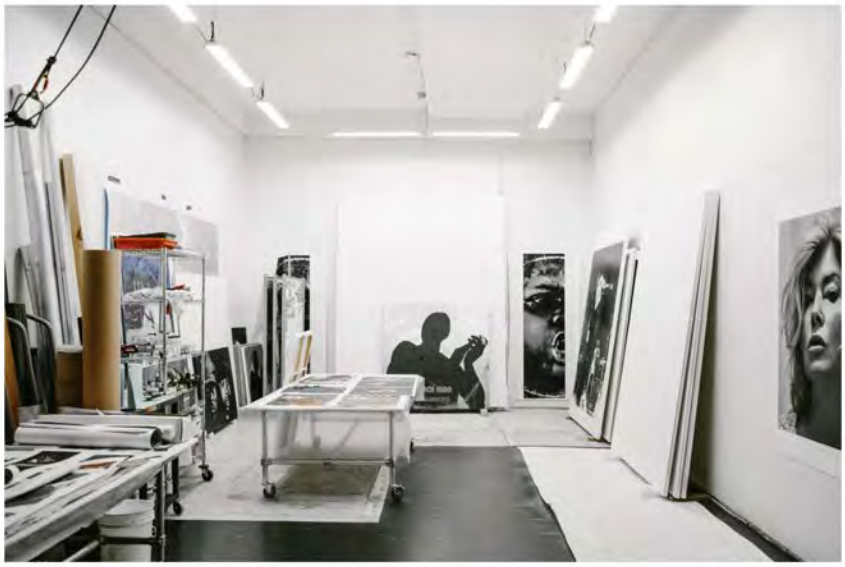
HH: I'm sure you do, you clearly do.

AJ: Well, increasingly it does feel like when I'm doing talks, I'm just sort of repeating myself. I've felt that for at least a few years now.

Most people who know me know that I really like talking, it's really important to me — not necessarily just public discourse but discourse in general. And when I wasn't producing nearly as much, I created quite an elaborate discourse around the kinds of things that I was interested in. There was a notion that perhaps my talking about what I wanted to do was, in some ways, getting in the way of doing things. I had a little bit of anxiety about it because I wasn't sure that was the case. I'm not sure that by stopping talking, I'd be any more productive.

I've said a few times, my art is hit or miss but my rap is elite. Greg [Tate] used to always say that was my Achilles' heel — once I worked something out in my head, I just didn't necessarily feel that compelled to actually make it.

Jafa has two shows coming up in New York this spring, one at Gladstone Gallery and another at 52 Walker.



Arthur Jafa's studio in Los Angeles.

HH: When you think of someone like John Coltrane, you think of him rehearsing until he bled, his mouth in pain — the pain of constantly practicing and trying to work out a theory with your physical body. Esperanza Spalding once told me that she thought that was an old way of thinking, that it's not that necessary to rehearse that much. It shocked me — I've never heard anything like that, especially from a jazz musician. It was refreshing. As someone who grew up in dance, I've always just believed that you were supposed to drill yourself, that the way that you can make something new is by knowing it so well that you improvise on it. Muscle memory allows you to get out of overthinking. That's how I conceive of your elite rap game, because if you've articulated an idea so much, you have to do something new when you go to enact it.

AJ: For me, it requires a collective effort — one person can't envision jazz, it just doesn't work. But you can trigger a critical mass, a catalytic context that will mobilize or put the thinking and the practice of individual practitioners into some sort of coherent form.

I think that's important, as an ontological model of cinema. And not just cinema, basically any expressive medium. I'm very interested in what the Black version of things looks like. If you're talking about music, Black music is so developed in some ways, just because we've done so much. But it can almost apply to anything. There were times when I was very interested in what a Black aesthetic in skateboarding looked like. Basketball has Black aesthetics, and jazz does ...

If you step into a realm where a Black person has ever operated or Black people have very seldom operated, you transform that realm.

— Arthur Jafa

HH: To me, it's some mix of collective improvisation and this will toward sovereignty.

AJ: You can demonstrate the realness of Blackness by demonstrating its capacity to empower or implement itself in these different realms. If you step into a realm where a Black person has ever operated or Black people have very seldom operated, you transform that realm. That, to me, is a demonstration of the realness, the beauty, the power of Black aesthetics. Cinema was such a perfect realm to think through these ideas of what a Black aesthetic manifestation might look like, because it's a realm where our participation has been spotty. When I studied architecture at Howard, I was interested in the same questions. I used to say, if "Kind of Blue" was a house, what would it look like?

HH: I feel like you tap into the elegiac a lot, like your sound piece for Greg Tate. Would you call that elegiac?

AJ: Yes, and requiem. It's also an attempt, on some level, to nominate Greg as an Orisha.

HH: Like a coronation, like nova.

AJ: I always felt like there were producers, and then there were consumers of producers. As much as I dreamed of being a producer, at the end of the day, I was really just a consumer, a very sophisticated consumer. I had a sophisticated sense of what was dope. But outside of a handful of instances, there was no large-scale collective acknowledgment that these moments, these eruptions, were world-class eruptions. "Daughters [of the Dust]" kind of was, but Julie [Dash] directed it; I'm a cameraman on "Daughters." It made my reputation more than anything, even though I didn't direct it. I just shot it. For a lot of people, it made me a player, but it's kind of like, if Trane had just played on "Kind of Blue," if he had never done his own records, people might say, "That guy was a hell of a saxophone player," but Trane, sensing his actual capacity, would feel like he had failed.

HH: Well, you don't believe in the binary of birth and death, so how can you believe in the binary of success and failure? That black and white. Do you feel like you were sparing people?

AJ: No, it was more like I was arrested. An ex of mine once said I was like Michael Jordan with a limp — this dichotomy of absolute capacity and very real inability.

HH: That almost makes me think of the trickster archetype, Legba, the god who pretends to have a limp to get you to mirror it, turning on itself.

AJ: You've met my business partner, right? Sometimes I tell her I think I'm lazy. I'm just not working as hard as I should be working. She says, "AJ, given how you're always working, only a workaholic would say you're not working hard enough." But I do know I procrastinate and hold onto things which are left over from how I was for 30 years. I have more demands on me now, more expectations, and I have more capacity to finish things. But nevertheless, I know I still struggle with procrastination, with doubt, all these kinds of things. It's only been in the last three or four years that I was like, "I think I'm a success." I just think I had blinders on for so long.

Going back to what we were saying earlier, this thing about realms and being in different realms, I often think in the last 10 to 12 years I almost unknowingly shifted into a different realm. It looks very much like the realm I grew up in. But it's different because when I envision things now, they seem to happen. I'm not thinking harder than I used to, and I don't think I'm working harder. It's almost like you knew these spells, but you knew them in French, and you were in an English-speaking country. You're speaking these spells aloud, and fundamentally, they are powerful spells. But because you're speaking them in French and not in English — as if God is listening in English or French or whatever dictates these things — they're not working. And then, all of a sudden, you inadvertently stepped on a train, and you woke up and God was listening. It's a very peculiar feeling.

"I often think in the last 10 to 12 years I almost unknowingly shifted into a different realm," says Jafa.

HH: Do you feel like maybe you did enough of the spell work with ancestral forces and now you're being held up?

AJ: It's funny, the other night, as I got out of [my Uber], the driver said something to me. I couldn't hear him and when I got around to the other side of the car he said, "Are you Arthur Jafa?" And he was from Chad. He said he had taught himself how to read English by looking at videotapes of people like Dave Chappelle and me. His name was Rizzo. I think he was listening to our conversation. And he says, "You're very humble." I mean, socially, probably. It's no longer possible for me to uphold this sort of neurotic mechanism I have. It no longer can supersede the objective reality. Sometimes I ask, did I sleep through my moment? If I got a cheat code, did I do everything possible with my code?

HH: Do you think you're awake in your current moment? Are you motivated to take more risks? Because the sound stuff that you were playing me and the paintings seem brave and new.

AJ: The painting is more like taking a risk just because they generate a whole lot of anxiety. But at the same time, what's the risk? I made six paintings total in 50-some years, they all sold for six figures — what's the risk?

HH: What's great from the outside is that it seems like your marker is still whether or not you like something, which makes you effective, more like yourself.

AJ: My aspirations are way higher than what anybody else thinks I'm capable of. My aspirations are: How do you make the s— be on the Hendrix level or Miles level? Or Billie Holiday or Aretha Franklin or James Brown level? Now, whether I'm able to do that or not is seriously in question. But maybe for the first time in my life, I don't feel like it's absurd.

The painting is more like taking a risk just because they generate a whole lot of anxiety.

— Arthur Jafa

HH: Can you talk a little bit about what you're doing at 52 Walker?

AJ: This specific work is an extension of what I was able to come up with as far back as the Serpentine show in London in 2017. My model for a great solo show is a great group show. I want my solo show to look like the best group show you ever saw — it's composed of a lot of different things; it's got a lot of variegated artifacts. It's almost like a slave ship, like individuals chained into a boat together. The Middle Passage transforms them to this unified thing.

HH: Duat, the boat that carries the sun in the Egyptian myth.

AJ: Artifacts, physical material artifacts, are something that I'm very, very interested in. And I'm very interested in how to situate and compose and arrange and organize these artifacts, and how you orchestrate the kind of co-occupancy where one artifact inflects another artifact, which inflects two other artifacts. How do you create a chain reaction?

HH: What's the title of the show there?

AJ: "Black Power Tool and Die Trying." It's a maze of these different artifacts trying to do that.

HH: To detonate or go off like Jimi or Trane or Michael, but together or in unison this time?

AJ: It has an ensemble dimension. I just want people to have an experience; whether they like it or not is less important as long as they experience something. This show is at the very bleeding edge of my exhibition practice that way.

White, Simone. “Arthur Jafa’s America.” *W Magazine* (March 26, 2024) [ill.] [online]

W

Arthur Jafa, in his own clothing and accessories.

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Arthur Jafa’s America

The artist known for confronting the country’s racist history head-on talks to poet Simone White about institutional attention, the film *Taxi Driver*, and his daring new exhibitions.

Interview by **Simone White**
Photographs by **Tyler Mitchell**
March 26, 2024

Before Arthur Jafa became an art world sensation, he was a sought-after but under-the-radar filmmaker. He was the cinematographer for *Daughters of the Dust*, a 1991 film by his then wife, Julie Dash; for Spike Lee's *Crooklyn*, in 1994; and, in the 2010s, for the music videos for Solange's "Don't Touch My Hair" and "Cranes in the Sky." He worked under Stanley Kubrick on *Eyes Wide Shut*, codirected the video for Jay-Z's "4:44," and shot documentaries on subjects including Malcolm X and Audre Lorde.

Then, in 2016, at the age of 56, he was invited by the Hammer Museum to display a selection of items from his personal collection of historical and pop cultural images, amassed over decades and organized in hundreds of binders, as part of the museum's "Made in L.A." show. This was a few years after he had released a film essay titled *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, which juxtaposed interviews of Black intellectuals with shots of outer space, nocturnal streetscapes, ocean surf, and artist Kara Walker's cut-paper silhouette works.

Jafa's impulse to archive was also reflected in his breakout project, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, which opened at the gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem a few days after Donald Trump was elected president. Made up of rhythmically spliced footage from viral newsclips, police body cameras, civil rights marches, basketball games, and concerts set to Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam," the 7-minute-30-second film is a multifaceted portrait of Blackness and racism in America that manages to be brutal, funny, and breathtaking all at once. *The New York Times* called it a "digital-age 'Guernica' "; for 48 hours in June 2020, when the world was roiling in protest over the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks, 13 museums streamed the film on their websites.

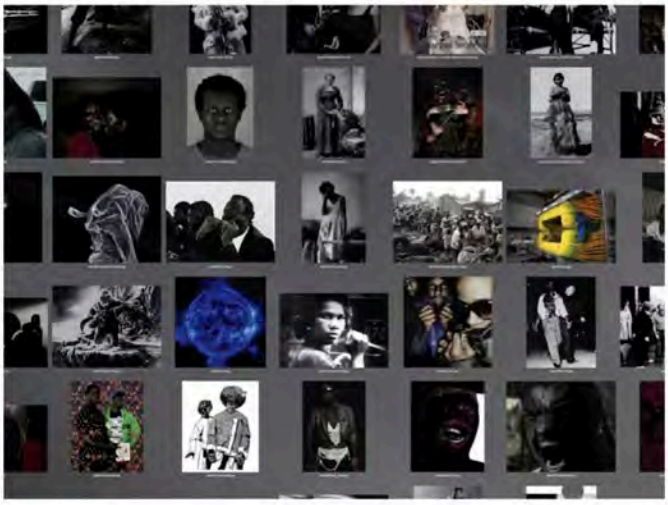
© Arthur Jafa, Courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker, New York
One of Jafa's works in progress, 2024.

Born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1960 to a middle-class family of educators, Jafa (pronounced *jay-fa*) was raised in the largely segregated South. The music of his youth often makes appearances in his videos: clips of Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix are slowed down, distorted, and used to intense emotional effect. His work since *Love Is the Message* has evolved to include sculpture, installation, wallpaper, and painting, but his unique ability to manipulate and recontextualize found footage remains at the core of his practice. In 2019, Jafa won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for *The White Album*, a 30-minute film that weaves together his own intimate shots of gallerists and friends with a surrealistic computer-animated Iggy Pop and clips that include a clueless young white woman protesting allegations of racism, cyber goths dancing under a bridge, and Dylann Roof entering and exiting the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, where he murdered nine people during a Bible study.

This spring, Jafa will have two simultaneous exhibitions in New York City: a multimedia installation at 52 Walker, the David Zwirner space curated by senior director Ebony L. Haynes; and an untitled video at Gladstone Gallery, a détournement of key scenes in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* that is sure to become a lightning rod. While putting the finishing touches on both shows, Jafa sat down for a conversation with the poet Simone White, whose oeuvre is similarly raw and unsparing. —*Andrea Whittle*

Simone White: Could you tell me about what you'll be showing this spring?

Arthur Jafa: The 52 Walker exhibition is called "Black Power Tool and Die Trynig [*sic*]." It's a sort of structure—a maze, basically. We call it the picture unit. You walk through it—it's just another way to structure the presentation and sequencing of images, like a book or a film. I'm very interested in how you make a heterogeneous set of things occupy space in a way that doesn't erase their individual specificity but that does create a sort of gestalt effect. It's like post–*Bitches Brew* Miles Davis. I'm interested in that cacophony.



© Arthur Jafa, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, Photographed by Lance Brewer
Details from APEX GRID, 2018.

The words "die" and "death" often reappear in the titles of your work.

There is something obsessive about it, for sure. My brother laughed when I told him about this one. He was like, "You hadn't had a death title in a while!" [*Laughs*] I mean, my first doc was called *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, which was a play on Fassbinder's film *Love Is Colder Than Death*. And then, of course, I did *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*. And the one essay I've written, my sort of manifesto, is called *My Black Death*. The big term that everyone likes to use now is "the precarity of Black life," so it's a little like, what happens when you become a machine that consumes or absorbs precarity, or presumes precarity? To me, a piece is not finished unless it has a title. It's almost like conjuring. If you don't crack the code of the title, then the work can't fully manifest.

In some ways, the primary power of your work is not simply the pain or exhaustion of Black trauma but also the ways in which the pain coexists with comedic or tongue-in-cheek ways of relating to everyday life.

I've had this ongoing discussion with [the poet and scholar] Fred Moten. Fred has said that he thinks that trauma, death, and horror are a fundamental context out of which Blackness evolves and emerges, but that Blackness is not in itself fundamentally a product of horror. Now, I don't agree with that. If you put together the equation—African people enslaved and transported to the Americas—I don't think there's any way you can produce us, meaning Black people, without that horror. If a deity said, "Hey, look, you can snap your fingers and every horrible thing that ever happened to a Black person would have not happened," we would, by that very same gesture, be erasing ourselves because there's no way to produce us outside of this equation of horror. And there's something profoundly paradoxical about that. I've even written before something to the effect that even though, on the one hand, we're all moving toward the transcendence of these white supremacist and racialized structures, at the same time a move toward that is a move toward erasing the very things that bind us together as a community. At the very core of being Black is a discrepancy between circumstances that insisted, demanded, and disciplined us to understand ourselves as not human—and yet, despite all of that, we still were able to retain, insist, and reinforce our humanity. It's what distinguishes Black people from African people.

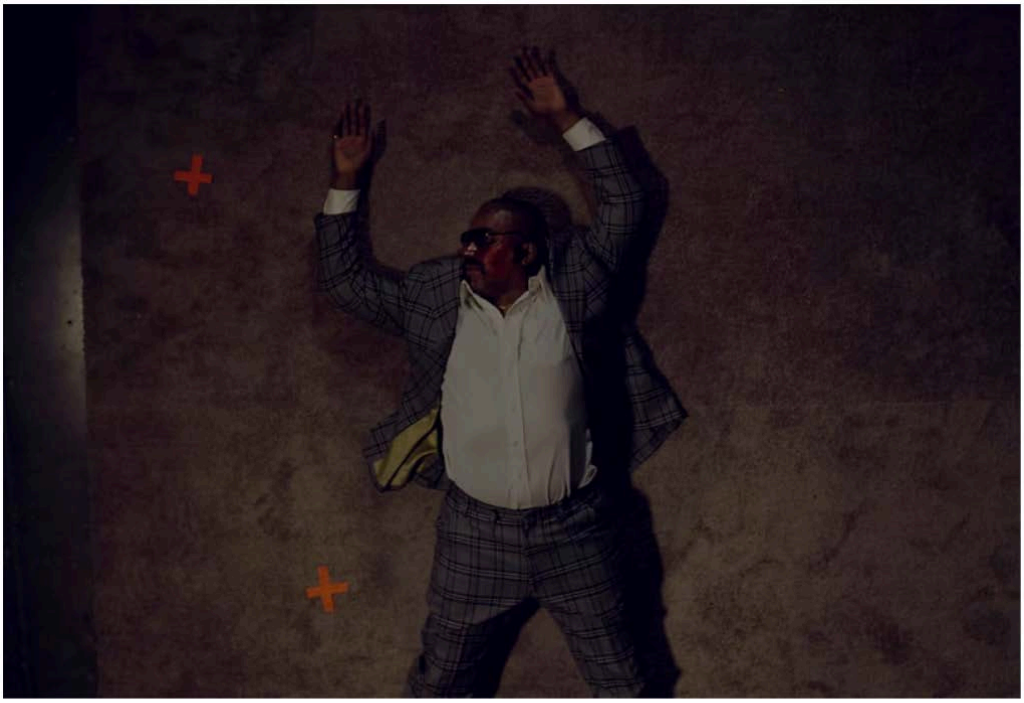
© Arthur Jafa, Courtesy of the artist, Photographed by Ander Sune Berg
An installation view of ____ Array, 2020, at Jafa's 2021 solo show "MAGNUMB," at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humblebæk, Denmark.

I'd like to talk about the video you're debuting at Gladstone.

The film *Taxi Driver* always had a really big impact on me. I was mesmerized by it, but it always struck me as a racist film. I have a compulsion to, as I say, force a thing to show its true face. In the film, when Travis Bickle [the titular taxi driver, played by Robert De Niro] goes to rescue Iris [the child prostitute played by Jodie Foster], everyone holding her captive in that scene is white. But I read once that in Paul Schrader's original script, they were all Black. But somebody said, "No, we can't do this." Because Black folks would have rioted. But when you see the film, you feel that ethos. The move to make the pimp character white doesn't correct the central thesis of the film, about his relationship to Blackness and Black men in particular. I never bought Harvey Keitel's rendering of the pimp. It always seemed like a joke. But earlier in the film, there's a shot that's cut into a scene in a diner of two Black pimps, and you see who Keitel's character should have been. He should have been one of these cats. I mean, they have real gravitas; they're clearly not actors. They are two actual pimps who just hung around the location where they were shooting. I was fascinated with the question of, how would you transpose these guys into the roles for which they were intended? It's twisted, the whole idea of wanting to create a scene where Black people are being murdered, but for me it has something to do with seeing the true face of the thing. The film focuses so much on Travis's interiority, so one of the things I did was open up the Black pimps' interiority.

What is it about revisiting that scene at the end of *Taxi Driver* that is illuminating for you?

I don't know if I would use the word "illuminating." There's a certain presumption that Black artists, particularly conscious or intentional Black artists, are going to do the uplift thing. I don't do the uplift thing. I'm definitely an undertaker. I'm like, Let's go down. I'm interested in where the bodies are buried. I'm genuinely drawn to the darkness, to the shadow, and I've accepted it. It really comes down to the complexity of freedom, the problem of choice. I keep saying I'm a libertine, and people keep not hearing me. That doesn't mean I'm not a principled person. But I'm not a moralist. I'm interested in what it means to make choices in this world and to live with the consequences of those choices. I'm not interested in anybody dictating what I do. And as much as I love Black people, I'm also not interested in Black people dictating what I do. I once had a conversation with the artist Faith Icecold. I don't know if you ever saw that conversation.



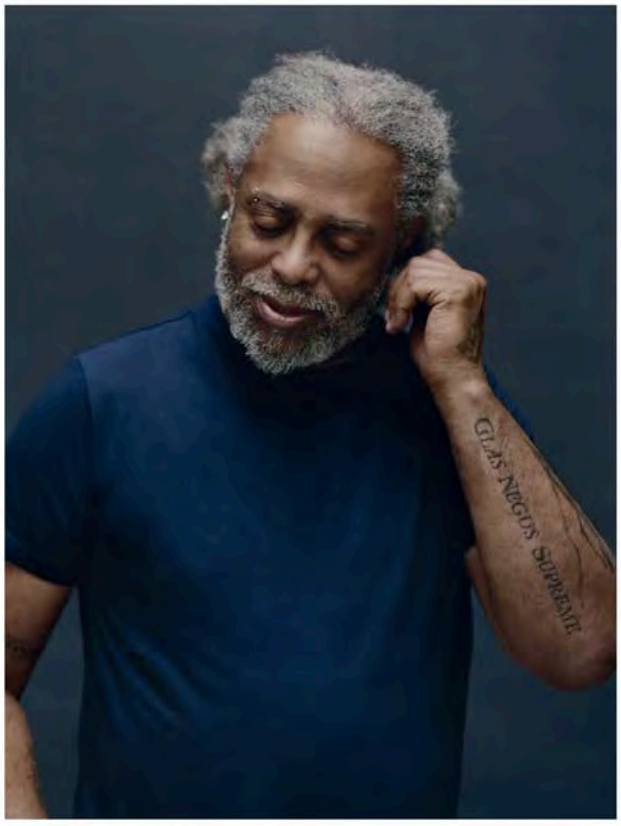
Arthur Jafa, "Untitled," 2024, film still. © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

Yeah, I did.

They said I was a neoliberal and anti-Black. I am fairly confident that I'm not anti-Black, but I can understand why a person might come to certain conclusions about me, because the way my understanding of Blackness is configured is maybe a little atypical, a little unapologetic. I know that some will question the impulse to, as is the case with this work, remake the thing so that all the Black people get killed. It's about keeping it real. Black people's primary superpower, historically, has been our ability to keep it real. *Taxi Driver* was a response to blaxploitation films, which was the moment when Black masculinity was put in people's faces in an unprecedented way, starting with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* straight through to *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, and *Slaughter's Big Rip-Off*. All these films were a tsunami of Black masculinity. And *Taxi Driver* was an attempt to defuse it, if not destroy it. That doesn't diminish my attraction to or appreciation of the film.

You've talked about how your success came in the middle of your life, as Dante would say.

Middle of my life? Jesus, I hope so! The last quarter, maybe.



Jafa, wearing his own T-shirt and jewelry.

You're supposed to live to be 105! One of the things that your practice gives me is a chance to think about, what does one do with the opportunity that institutional attention will give you? Once an institution sets its gaze upon you, how do you operate inside your artistic impulses? Because in my understanding, that's going to bend or shape your work, to a certain degree.

Yeah, it does. For a long time, I was stuck in the modality of imagining. I spent a lot of time conceptualizing. My biggest Achilles' heel was that once I worked out something in my head, I didn't even feel the necessity to make it. I always got off on ideas. And the thing about ideas is they're uncompromised. So what's been challenging to me is to try to function in the space of actualization, but with the same intent to be unconstrained. I said to [the gallerist] Gavin Brown at one point, "I'll always see myself as a failure when I look in the mirror because I spent the larger part of my life being a failure and understanding myself as such." I'm not even sure if 30 years of success will supplant the fundamental understanding I have of myself as not being a success. When I was growing up, success to me was Michael Jackson or Prince. I felt like I was a consumer of dope books, movies, comic books, and art. I felt like I had a very sophisticated appreciation, but those were people who existed "over there." It's been very complicated for me to realize that I'm a producer. I'm constantly having this conversation with my son. I'm like, "This shit is not easy for me." I don't know if it was easy for anybody, but it used to seem like they just got up and did it. I feel like a charlatan sometimes, that I'm just getting away with shit.

What?!

The level of shit is so diminished now, compared to the '60s and '70s. I'm not saying there's not great art being made. But there's something to have been incubated in, to have emerged in, as a very young person in the '60s—I missed it. I missed the '60s because I was an infant! But you still feel the energy. I still feel like I remember my parents taking me to see James Brown when I was 3 or 4 years old. And I can't tell you what it looked like at all, or even what it sounded like. But I remember the intensity of it on a haptic level. I have a memory of how it felt. That's why I'm always going back to the music. I want my shit to function on the level of Miles Davis or Jimi Hendrix, and I don't know if I'm gonna get there. If you had asked me this 15 years ago, I would have been like, I'm definitely not gonna get there. Now I'm like, is it possible? Am I within striking distance? I don't know. I can kind of see it in my head.

Arthur Jafa: BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG wheatpasting, 2024
Photo: Jordan Kelly. © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker

Grooming by Ren Nobuko for Clarins at Bridge Artists. Set Design by Julia Wagner at Second Name Agency. Producer: Julia Levin at Art Partner; Photo Assistant: Zack Forsyth; Digital Technician: Mike Skigen; Retouching: May Six Studio.

Woodward, Daisy. “Brilliant Things to Do This April.” *AnOther* (April 1, 2024) [ill.] [online]

AnOther

Brilliant Things to Do This April

APRIL 01, 2024

TEXT Daisy Woodward

Peter Hujar, Susan Sontag, 1975 © The Peter Hujar Archive/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

From stand-out solo shows from Peter Hujar and Yinka Shonibare to tantalising restaurant residencies, here are our recommendations for an exceptional month

Exhibitions

Arthur Jafa, Work in Progress, 2024 © Arthur Jafa, courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker, New York

***Arthur Jafa: Black Power Tool And Die Trynig* at 52 Walker, New York: April 5 – June 2, 2024**

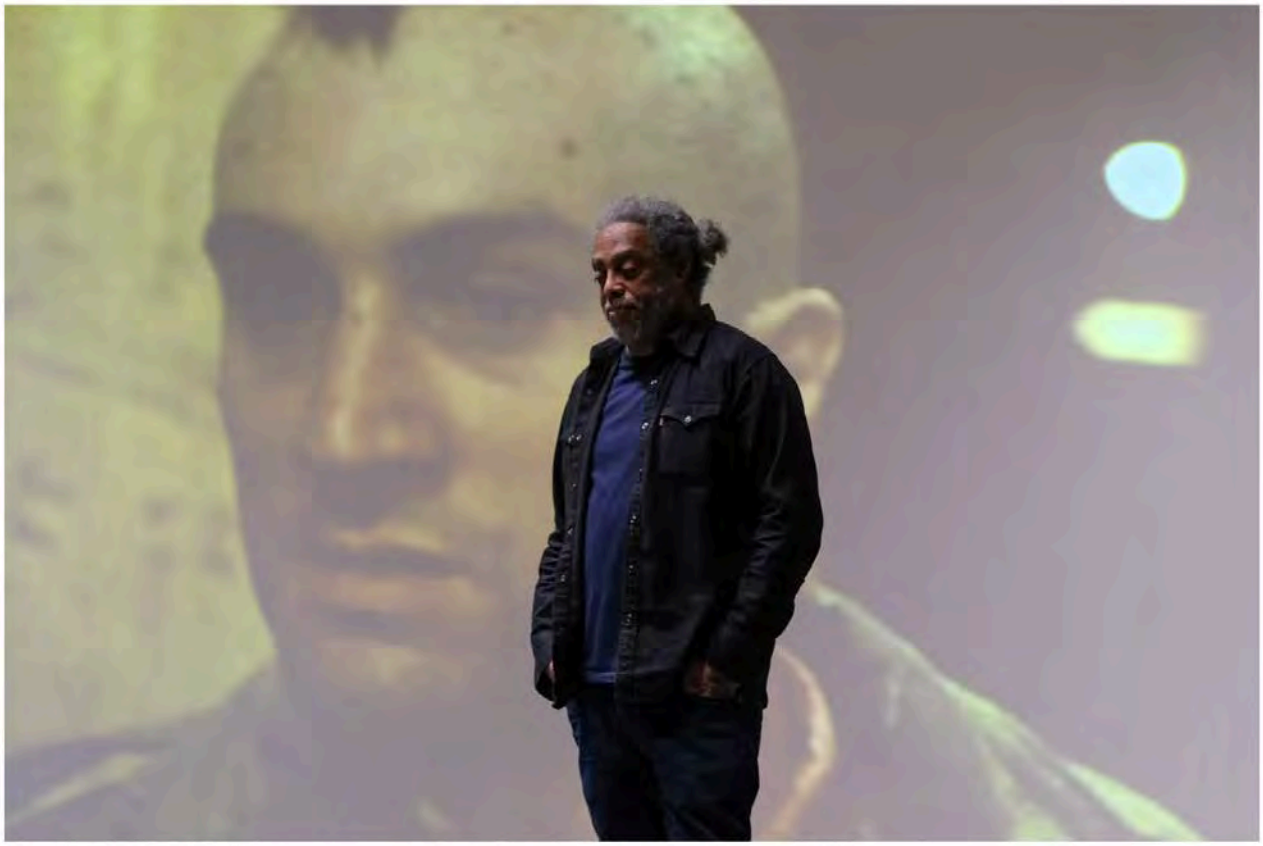
Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker Arthur Jafa's multifaceted practice seeks to "unravel the cultural significance and strictures ascribed in tandem upon Black existence in the Western world" at 52 Walker gallery. Made up of all-new works, the solo show will feature paintings, sculptures, a film and a site-specific labyrinthine installation covered in Jafa's "characteristically potent" imagery. The result? A "forceful and maximal space that beckons toward engulfment and revelation alike".

D'Souza, Aruna. "A 'Taxi Driver' Remake: Why Arthur Jafa Recast the Scorsese Ending." *The New York Times* (April 5, 2024) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times

A 'Taxi Driver' Remake: Why Arthur Jafa Recast the Scorsese Ending

The artist has gone back to his filmmaking roots, re-examining what he sees as racial undertones in Martin Scorsese's classic 1976 movie.



Arthur Jafa before a screen at the Gladstone Gallery in New York showing an image of Travis Bickle. Jafa recast the climactic ending of Martin Scorsese's "Taxi Driver," replacing all the characters -- except for Robert De Niro and Jodie Foster --- with Black actors and adding two original scenes. Laylah Amatullah Barrayn for The New York Times

By Aruna D'Souza

April 5, 2024, 5:03 a.m. ET

Call it a return to his roots. The artist Arthur Jafa began his career as a cinematographer, working with his then-wife, Julie Dash, on the acclaimed "Daughters of the Dust" (1991) and with Spike Lee on "Crooklyn" (1994), before garnering art world fame, including a Golden Lion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, for "Love is the Message, The Message is Death," a snapshot of Black life in the United States created from collaged video footage. Jafa's practice has embraced film and video, sculpture, installation, and even painting.

His newest film, which goes on view Thursday at Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, has a provocative conceit: Jafa has remade the shockingly violent climax of a classic of American cinema — Martin Scorsese's "Taxi Driver" (1976) — in which the main character Travis Bickle, played by Robert De Niro, storms into a seedy Times Square brothel and kills everyone in sight in order to save Iris, a child prostitute played by Jodie Foster, then 12 years old.

In the original movie — what Jafa calls the "redacted version" — these characters, including Iris's pimp Sport (played by Harvey Keitel), were white. That never felt right to Jafa. When he discovered that the film's celebrated screenwriter, Paul Schrader, had intended Sport to be African American, he decided to "restore" the movie by introducing Black actors, except for De Niro and Foster. In the 73-minute-long film, titled "******" — or as the artist pronounces it, "Redacted" — we see this recut version of the bloody climax over and over, each time slightly but crucially different. The result is extraordinary — both technically and conceptually — and brings to the surface the racist animus long accepted as underpinning Bickle's barely contained rage. (Quentin Tarantino also criticized the decision to change the character to white in his 2022 book, "Cinema Speculation.")

Arthur Jafa cast a replacement actor, right, as the pimp in "Taxi Driver," originally played by Harvey Keitel, then skillfully wove in the new footage and rerecorded the voices. via Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery

Schrader, who is still making movies at 77, said in a recent telephone conversation that the change to his original vision was the right call. "Someone at Columbia Pictures said to Marty, 'we're going to have a riot in the theater if we cast Sport as Black,' and I realized they were completely right."

"I think it would have been a much more vile and revolting film if his hatred was directed completely at people of color," he added. "You can't make something that is so off the meter that it can't be seen or that people simply can't bear watching." (Martin Scorsese did not return several calls seeking his comment.)

Jafa is also debuting another installation, "Black Power Tool and Die Trynig," deliberately misspelled, at 52 Walker in TriBeCa this week. It will include paintings, sculpture and a film titled "LOML" (2022/24), a homage to the musician and cultural critic Greg Tate, who died in 2021. (Its title is an acronym for "love of my life" — the two were dear friends.) He took a break from installing the two shows to speak about "******." The conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Why "Taxi Driver," and why now?

It's literally a 30-year-old idea. I saw "Taxi Driver" when I was a senior in high school, and in a lot of ways, it went over my head. I remember seeing it and being mesmerized by the filmmaking, but also being very disturbed by it. I knew something was off about it. But I didn't really know the sort of cinematic worldview it was trying to express.

Harvey Keitel (left) as "Sport" Matthew, a pimp, and Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle in "Taxi Driver," the 1976 film directed by Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures

And what is that context, as you now understand it?

It was a remake of "The Searchers" on one hand [a 1956 film starring John Wayne about a man who saves a young white woman who has been kidnapped by Native Americans]. And it was a response to two things happening in the '70s: the impact of foreign films in Hollywood, and blaxploitation.

Blaxploitation sort of saved Hollywood at the end of the ’60s. You had the sexual revolution and feminism and the whole civil rights movement happening in the streets, but Hollywood was making these films that seemed almost willfully in denial of the major cultural shifts going on. Then all of a sudden you get “Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song” [1971] and “Shaft” [1971] and “Superfly” [1972] and after that it’s a tidal wave — the studios had been struggling, and these films were bringing in audiences.

But at the same time, to be frank about it, they were also taking up space that had been reserved for white men till then. Resources, but also a lot of psychological space. You hadn’t seen much unmediated, unconstrained depictions of Black men in Hollywood up until that moment

Do you read “Taxi Driver” in part as Martin Scorsese’s and Paul Schrader’s response to blaxploitation films?

Yeah. When you say Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola and then George Lucas and Steven Spielberg saved Hollywood, in a way, they actually saved Hollywood for white men.

There are almost no Black people in “Taxi Driver.”

There’s something slightly perverse about the way Blackness is both there and not there in “Taxi Driver.” There aren’t that many depictions of Black pimps in American cinema in the ’60s — pimps had too much agency for white people to want to make movies about them. But then here comes a film that shows this pimp character — and he’s white. It threw you off the scent a little bit, even though the rest of the film reflects the ethos of Travis, which seems pretty clearly racist.

When I read that Paul Schrader had originally conceived the Sport character as Black, a lightbulb went off — I said, “Wow, it’d be so cool that to replace the white characters with the Black characters they had intended.” But it was really just a fantasy at that point — it wasn’t anything that I thought was possible technically.

Film still from Arthur Jafa's "******," 2024. The artist's recut version shows the bloody climax over and over, each time slightly but crucially different, with Black actors added in the roles of the night manager (shown) and pimp. It opened in a new exhibition at the Gladstone Gallery. via Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery

What changed?

I was starting to see all the facial replacement effects on Instagram, and it got me wondering if I could finally make this idea happen. But none of the existing consumer software would work. So we had to restage all the shots where we were replacing the actors. It was a very intricate technical exercise. We tried to replicate the optics, the angle, the distance of the subject from the focal lens, the actual lenses, these kinds of things, so that it would just fall into place seamlessly.

But you can't just pop the new piece in, because as soon as you introduce Black people, Black men in particular, it just doesn't operate the same way. For example, with the night manager, we had planned to use the original sound, but it's so incongruous hearing this Italian guy's voice come out of a Black guy, so we replaced that audio.

In your film, Travis Bickle ends up coming off like Dylann Roof, the white supremacist who walked into a Black church in Charleston in 2015 and killed nine parishioners. You used footage of Roof in your earlier film, "The White Album," which won a prize at the Venice Biennale.

My Travis Bickle is Dylann Roof. I think he always was Dylann Roof. It just got muddied up [in the original] because Scorcese and Schrader had him killing these white folks.

You include a scene in which the pimp sings along to Stevie Wonder's "As," from his album "Songs in the Key of Life" which came out in 1976, the same year as "Taxi Driver."

That album was really like the soundtrack of Black America when it came out — the preachers and the pimps and everybody was listening to it. The idea that this pimp would be standing and humming a Stevie Wonder tune — it's period accurate, but an alternative reality, in a way. I don't think it would've changed the world if the pimp had remained Black, but I think it would've landed in a completely different way if the "Dylann Roof moment" had been seen for what it truly was.

An actor playing a pimp opens fire in Arthur Jafa's film. via Arthur Jafa and Gladstone Gallery

You introduce another scene that doesn't appear in the original movie, in which the pimp — whom you renamed "Scar" in reference to a character from "The Searchers"— delivers a monologue, or maybe a soliloquy.

I think my character of the pimp is a lot more like the pimps I knew or saw. Having Scar listening to Stevie Wonder — I hate to say it — humanizes a type of person of whom most people have a very narrow understanding.

I always insist white folks have no idea what's going on in Black people's heads. But when Scar talks, he quotes Du Bois, he quotes Samuel Delaney's "Dog in a Fisherman's Net," there's all kinds of other stuff that's floating through his head.

What do you make of one of the earlier scenes in the film, in which Scorsese himself plays a passenger in Travis Bickle's cab, and spouts some pretty offensive things about Black people — and definitely makes clear the world Bickle is operating in.

I thought the character he played was nominally racist. Meaning it was contextually driven. Scorsese playing the part himself was one of the more audacious things in the film. As if he knew the unapologetic virulence of the character had to be explicit and not undermined by an actor's need to be liked. So he took it upon himself to get the needed performance.

What do you think is the end result of doing this remix?

My brother said, "It rewires your brain a little bit. It's going to be hard to look at 'Taxi Driver' again without thinking, 'What we got back then was the redacted version.'" And this is maybe not an unredacted version, but I think it's definitely restored to something closer to the way it was conceived.

So, in your opinion, is “Taxi Driver” a racist film?

I know there’s an argument, is this a film about a racist or a racist film? Racism is just part of the paradigm and the structure will lead you to it. Unless you are very consciously trying to counter those tropes, you’ll inevitably find yourself in that place.

With “******,” it’s like I’m polishing a troubled artifact. Part of the (perhaps waning) superpower of Black people is our ability to see stuff for what it is, not to be in self-imposed denial about it. I’m seeing “Taxi Driver” for what it is.

Jackson, Danielle. “Scarification, Open Caskets, and Blood Stains: Arthur Jafa's 52 Walker Show Tests the Limits of Social Propriety.” *Cultured Magazine* (April 11, 2024) [ill.] [online]

CULTURED

Scarification, Open Caskets, and Blood Stains: Arthur Jafa's 52 Walker Show Tests the Limits of Social Propriety

The artist continues a tradition of pushing the bounds in his exhibition with the Tribeca gallery, a rotation of provocative imagery and film.

Portrait of Arthur Jafa. Image courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

WORDS

Danielle Jackson

Upon walking into Arthur Jafa's new exhibition at 52 Walker, titled (and intentionally misspelled) "*BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG*," one sees *Summer Dark*, 2024, a diptych of two heavily made-up pinups gazing solicitously into the camera. Initially, it looks like the stuff of nudie magazines until you realize both images bear scarification. On the right, the singer Summer Walker dons a blue lace bikini that barely conceals a fresh gash from breast implants; on the left, the novelist Akwaeke Emezi is pictured after a gender-affirming mastectomy with twin keloid scars. Beneath is a tattoo that reads "dead thing." Themes of the lifecycle permeate the exhibition. In one work, *No Mountain High*, 2024, black acrylic shapes are placed across black canvas. Are they labia, or are they skulls?

At the heart of the show is a giant box. *Picture Unit (Structures) II*, 2024, is a formidable (60-foot long and nearly 12-foot tall) windowless rectangle with a slick black exterior. It is Kubrick's monolith; it's Kaaba; it's Serra, black site, and sarcophagus. Inside are a dozen or so fuzzy, blown-up photographs that progressively evoke a house of horrors. In part, it is a tribute to outlaw cultures and forbidden practices and full of easter eggs of cultural figures who have influenced the artist. There are bikers from the East Bay Dragons motorcycle club and Richard Prince's appropriated *Untitled (Girlfriend)*, 1993, wearing a skull and bones. We see a fairly recent scene from Atlanta's famous Magic City strip club and a vintage subway train painted by the legendary graffiti artist Cano.

Arthur Jafa, "BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG," Installation View of *Picture Unit (Structures) II*, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

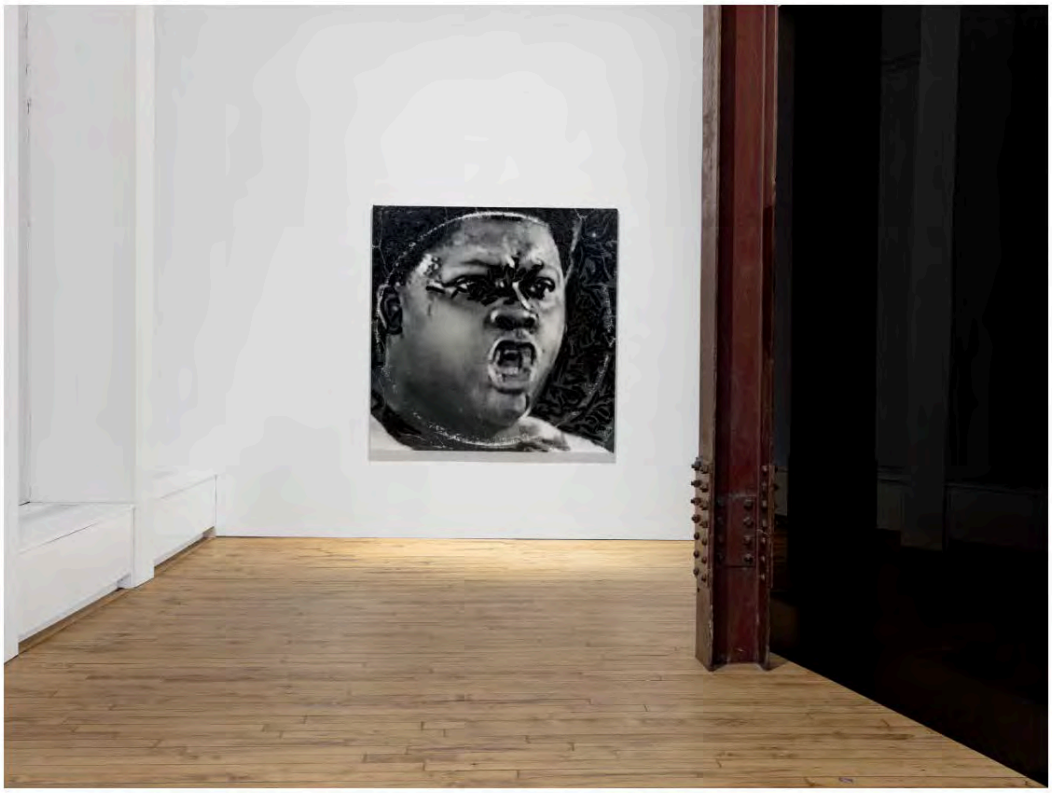
For two decades, artists have used the absolute glut of images available online to make often erratic works about the nonsequitur quality of the Internet itself. Jafa is doing something else here. His project adopts this practice of endless trawling to create something that feels distinctly old-fashioned. The exhibition feels like living inside a mimeographed zine or a snuff film; it lies somewhere between the photomontage of *The Black Book*, 1974, and the 1978 snuff film *Faces of Death*. By combing the underground of his own psyche and ours, Jafa reveals a visual netherworld that was always right in front of us. Many of these images were once in circulation but have been shuttled out of view and deemed inappropriate for the public. My searches for some of these pictures brought me to dark and private corners of the Internet where pictures of violence are still passed around as samizdat.

The specter of the macabre is ever present. In the box, Bobby Hackney from the Detroit punk band Death is pictured wearing a shirt bearing the band's name in sparkly, iron-on letters. There is Jafa's own photograph of piles of soiled clothes at a memorial for the Rwandan genocide, and shockingly, a crime scene photo of the pregnant actress Sharon Tate covered in blood at the hands of the Manson family. Throughout the show, women are on the defensive, barricading doors and brandishing rifles, while eccentric Black male genius—especially in the presence of Miles Davis and Jafa's beloved friend, the late critic and guitarist Greg Tate—is exalted. I can hear music playing, a sweet and mournful tune, but the spirit of the show is something between Sun Ra Arkestra and the metal genre called sludge.

Arthur Jafa, "BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG" (Installation View), 2024. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

After rounding the bend and exiting the box, you encounter an array of larger-than-life cut-out photographs mounted on steel in a kind of collage. You've seen these pictures before, but can't place where. The themes of death pervade but so do ideas of failure. At left, we see a profile of Billie Holiday in her coffin; behind it is a 1964 photo of investigators examining the car of the murdered civil rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. Sid Vicious and the Sex Pistols are present, as is Miles Davis, here staring from the corner of a boxing ring, arms outstretched like a Christ. (Amid all this masculinist violence, it's hard to forget the accounts of Davis hitting his wife.) A photograph of artist Adrian Piper and her popped bubble gum from her '60s performance *Catalysis* sits next to a grinning Michel Foucault and his gold-capped molars. In the center, Jafa, in bondage gear, takes a selfie as does elsewhere, the artist Tourmaline. And, at the very front of this eclectic arrangement appears an image from the cover of Funkadelic's *Greatest Hits*, a prize-winning (literal) black sheep.

Like *Picture Unit* itself, this show is dark, but also slick. Jafa works through a language that is highly sui generis. After making films in the 1990s and showing small works in group shows at Jack Shainman in the early 2000s, Jafa's breakout video *Love is the Message; The Message is Death* (2016), a mix of video footage sourced online, was received with mixed impressions. It was tragic, but it was also sentimental, and arguably commemorative in the mode of much work produced in the period of viral videos of police brutality. Jafa's recent video titled *****, the subject of a concurrent exhibition at Gladstone Gallery, replaces the shooting victims at the end of Scorcese's *Taxi Driver* with Black actors.



Arthur Jafa, "BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG" (Installation View), 2024. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

Paradoxically, Jafa's projects that flirt with the concept of "Black social death," a theory of people who are forever alienated by wider society, often highlight the popular image, the celebrity, and the viral over ordinary people. It occurred to me that perhaps "Black social death" is like surrealism 100 years ago—an approach to politics, sure, but also something akin to a lifestyle for a small group of cultural luminaries. It was hard to square the pessimistic idea of unshakable racial marginality as I pushed through the monied and well-heeled Black visitors queuing outside the exhibition's opening—Black social death as Black social life.

Still, "*BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG,"* among Jafa's other works, feels like an end to the sometimes repetitive project of building positive Black representation. For this, I am relieved. It is as though these disturbing and glitchy visions are the archival underside of all of the uplifting and ameliorating exhibitions of Black art on view in New York right now—of the Harlem Renaissance at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the videos in the Whitney Biennial, and especially the collection of Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz at Brooklyn Museum (where Jafa's sculpture is one of the show's only non-figurative works). For a change, a show on Black subjects that can't be described through the lens of beauty. If those shows are the ego, here lies the id.

"BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG" is on view through June 1, 2024 at 52 Walker in New York.

Kane, Ashleigh. “May 2024 exhibitions: Art shows to leave the house for this month.” *Dazed* (April 24, 2024) [ill.] [online]

DAZED

Ryan McGinley, "Dakota Hair" (2004) © Ryan McGinley Studios

May 2024 exhibitions: Art shows to leave the house for this month

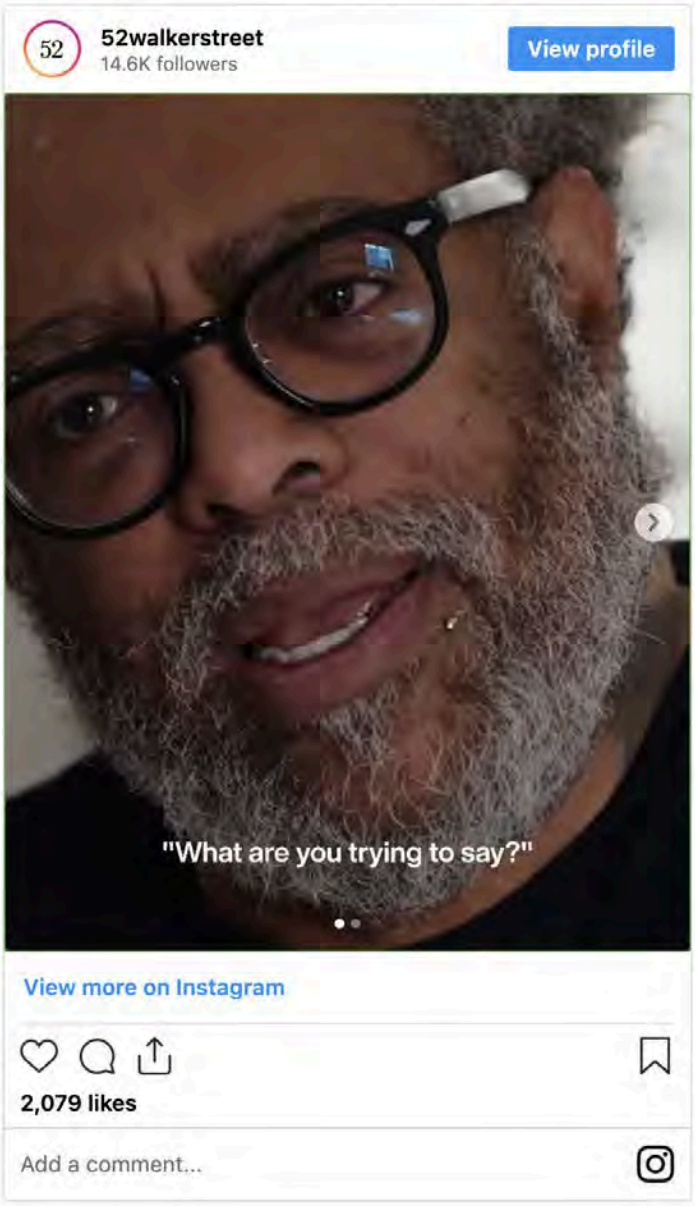
ART & PHOTOGRAPHY - LISTS

From rebels and revolutionaries in Amsterdam to the fragility of beauty in London, and much more besides, we round up the most exciting art events happening over the coming month

24th April 2024

Text Ashleigh Kane

May's shows serve as a reminder of a world in flux. Across continents, artists grapple with the complexities of identity, solidarity, and resistance, weaving together forgotten histories and collective memories. In London, Mexican artist Fabian Ramírez ignites a dialogue between Christian iconography and Indigenous cultures, challenging colonial narratives through encaustic paintings. In New York, Arthur Jafa examines the nuances of Black existence by combining the personal, political and industrial. Suzannah Pettigrew takes over the former residence of surrealists Lee Miller and Roland Penrose with an exploration of her family archives, and Jeanette Beckman gets all the flowers in a retrospective of her work with youth movements over the last four decades.



BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG, ARTHUR JAFA, 52 WALKER, NEW

Los Angeles-based Arthur Jafa brings large-scale installation, new and recently made paintings, sculptures, and film to New York City for in *BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG*, curated by Ebony L Haynes. Black existence in the Western world is examined through personal, political and industrial themes, using deliberate wordplay in its title to prompt reflection on form, resistance, and the nuances of the word 'black'. At the same time, Gladstone Gallery will also host a solo exhibition of Jafa's work featuring a new film.

Running until June 1, 2024 at 52 Walker, NYC.

Levin, Max. “Arthur Jafa's BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG + *****.” *Screen Slate* (April 24, 2024) [ill.] [online]

Arthur Jafa's BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG + *****

BY MAX LEVIN

APRIL 24TH 2024

Diagonal interventions transform both of Arthur Jafa's concurrent exhibitions in New York. *Picture Unit (Structures) II* (2024) is a plexiglas passageway that cleaves 52 Walker, David Zwirner's Tribeca outpost. Images from Jafa's archive wrap the interior walls of the unit and the exterior is clad with mirrored acrylic that reflects an array of surrounding sculptures, paintings, and a new hour-long video. At Gladstone Gallery on 21st Street, a nearly 52-foot long wooden wedge juts across the darkened space where a 73-minute video, ***** (2024, pronounced "redacted"), is projected above a polished concrete floor. As an unconventional bench and spatial bisector, the wedge materializes many of Jafa's cinematic tendencies. As a tool, a wedge can split apart, raise up, and achieve balance. So does Jafa's practice.

With early camera credits including Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1994), Jafa's career further bloomed when he began making short-form moving image artworks that were fluent critical inquiries of racism and visual media and also, almost, music videos. These include *APEX* (2013), propulsively edited to Robert Hood's "Minus," and the crossover hit *Love Is The Message, The Message is Death* (2016), set to Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam." Around this time, Jafa also directed a feature-length documentary, *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* (2014), which edits interview footage into Jafa's vernacular: images of sublime cosmos and microbiology collaged alongside earthbound views of ecstasy and grief, from preacher to slave to alien to bacterium to hadron collider.

With the new work, Jafa continues his focus on sequences of passion and violent destruction, using the wedge and the tools of cinema to un-redact—and thereby reveal—the racist thirst for blood coursing through veins onscreen and off. In "The Deflected Corrected," an essay published to accompany the new exhibition at Gladstone, Amy Taubin introduces ***** as "a digital motion picture installation, in which the climactic, approximately seven-minute massacre scene from *Taxi Driver*, with alterations and additions, plays on a loop." When he first saw *Taxi Driver* as a young man in Mississippi, Jafa was attracted to the high-contrast expressionism of the visual images and soaring score. He was also disturbed by what he registered as racialized and racist elements in the film.

As Taubin writes, the Times Square of the 1970s, which was the cruising ground for the title character, "was populated almost entirely by black people. Unlike the black characters in early 1970s Blaxploitation movies, in *Taxi Driver*, they are treated merely as background color." Paul Schrader's script initially called for Robert DeNiro's Travis Bickle to unload his weapons into people of color in the brothel, but when Martin Scorsese and Schrader worked through the script to make the film, they made Iris's pimp and the other men white because otherwise "there would be riots in the theaters." Taubin argues compellingly that the "gamble made with *Taxi Driver* was that if the only black person Travis kills is a junkie attempting to hold-up a Puerto Rican bodega owner… we won't notice that Travis's racism is as all-consuming as white supremacist Dylann Roof's."

Jafa's brilliance in recasting the pimp and six others is that he allows us to more clearly see what was there all along, while also speculating on and embellishing the interiorities of characters not given much of any attention from the original makers of the film. We still hear the entrancing harp and booming orchestra of Bernard Hermann's score, but other sounds are muted and then foleyed in, resulting in a ghostly ASMR. Each varying repetition of ***** offers an extended contemplation of the psychosis and carnage on view.

As with all of Jafa's work, the film is like a DJ set. Some rhythms are stretched and slowed down, other elements are distorted, and the embodied audience has the chance to move and follow along, ready for a momentary break from the cycle of terror. In one such a moment near the end of *****, Travis puts the gun to his head and pulls the trigger, but this time there's a bullet in the chamber. Down he goes. In this alternate reality, the pimp at the front is still alive, singing along to Stevie Wonder and spitting a beautiful cigarette soliloquy. But the next time the loop comes around, he will not be so lucky. His white suit will again be drenched in blood.

While the off-kilter *Picture Unit* is technically the centerpiece of the 52 Walker show, Jafa's strongest work here is *LOML (52 Walker Version)*, a moving image elegy dedicated to his dear friend and collaborator Greg Tate (1957-2021). Unlike *****, which takes a singular filmic source material and endlessly reworks it, *LOML* melds screen recordings of Instagram Reels with bystander footage of police shootings, climatological documentation, and extended footage of performing musicians.

After a nearly 20-minute ambient "break" in which there is no image and not much sound beyond undulating rumbles, Jafa cuts back to a procession of imagery from *SloPEX* (2022). This sequence includes black-and-white photographs of Jimi Hendrix, microbes, Beyoncé, the Sun, and the Warner Music Group logo upside-down, all set to a throttled throb. The choice to follow this segment with almost five full minutes of a slowed-down recording of Donna Summer singing "I Feel Love" is a microcosm of Jafa's magistery, extending Summer's voice and movement, deploying the potency of the music itself and its relational function within a web of material.

As with Jafa's The White Album, which paid special attention to twisting and tangling hair, *LOML* features multiple self-recorded videos of women having their hair done in home-studios, collapsing any distinction between sites of living, working, and performing for the camera. A cut to heavily post-produced footage of African-American sorority sisters in the South throwing their hair around and "getting loose" reiterates Jafa's preoccupation with the constricting, malleable, and expressive qualities of hair.

Donna Summer's arms rise and lock into formation, cradling her body and then cradling all that is beyond it. *LOML* begins and ends with grainy black-and-white footage that could also be views of writhing, shifting figures. Is what we're seeing light passing between bodies? These 11 minutes of intimate footage, which comprised the original iteration of *LOML* before it became the expanded *(52 Walker Version)*, is the heart of the matter. It's as if, for the Tribeca exhibition, Jafa wedged a musical shard into the center of it.

BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG *is on view through June 1 at 52 Walker and* ***** *is on view through May 4 at Gladstone Gallery.*

Image: Arthur Jafa, ***** *, 2024, installation view, courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery*

Yablonsky, Linda. “At Gladstone in New York, Arthur Jafa sets record straight on Scorsese's Taxi Driver.” *The Art Newspaper* (April 26, 2024) [ill.] [online]

THE ART NEWSPAPER

At Gladstone in New York, Arthur Jafa sets record straight on Scorsese's Taxi Driver

For his latest exhibition, the artist recasts the penultimate scene of the 1977 film with Black characters

Rewind: a still from *****, Arthur Jafa’s retelling of the final scene of *Taxi Driver*
Courtesy of Gladstone gallery

Linda Yablonsky

26 April 2024

In whatever medium Arthur Jafa works (video, photography, sculpture, or painting), his primary subject—his calling, eve—is Blackness. Essentially, he is an archivist of historical sound and image.

From his obsessive collecting and editing have evolved such magisterial video compilations as *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) and the Venice Biennale Golden Lion-winning *The White Album* (2018). Neither locates its specific sources, but both provide an effective counterweight to the values and aggressions of a forcibly dominant white culture that has borrowed just as freely from Black material. The difference is that Jafa doesn't claim to own those sources, only the layered compositions he makes of them.

Now comes ***** at Gladstone Gallery, an appropriation of a different sort. Viewers can readily identify its source: the penultimate scene from Martin Scorsese's 1977 film, *Taxi Driver*. Beginning with the sociopathic protagonist's murder of Sport, the man who pimps out Jodie Foster's teenage prostitute, Jafa shows us Robert DeNiro's Travis Bickle, but Sport, played by Harvey Keitel in the film, is now Scar, a Black actor (Jerrel O'Neal) who speaks Sport's lines and makes the same moves. Black actors also fill the roles of the other men killed in the bloodbath; ditto the police who come into the room, guns drawn.

The scene, including its famous overhead shot and long tracking shot through the hallways and into the street, repeats and repeats, from different starting points and cut to different rhythms, throughout the nearly 75 minutes of Jafa's film. After several repetitions, some opening-night viewers left the Gladstone's 21st Street space, thinking they had seen the whole loop. They hadn't. Jafa inserted one take where Bickle kills himself, and gave Scar two hummed monologues taken from song lyrics and poems he talk-sings to, including *As*, the hit from Stevie Wonder's 1977 album, *Songs in the Key of Life*.

As a white viewer in decades-long thrall to the cinematic lyricism of *Taxi Driver*, I did not think it needed fixing. Notwithstanding its somewhat coy title, ***** arrives at a moment when schools across the US are removing significant elements of Black American history from their textbooks or banishing it altogether. *Taxi Driver* is also very much about its time, its place, and most of all its white protagonist, whose barely repressed racial hatred explodes in a hailstorm of deadly gunfire, from which he emerges as a living (white) folk hero.

That emancipating coda for an unredeemable figure was the one big problem I had with the film in 1977, while the rest of it, including the unbridled racism of other white characters, felt brutally realistic. It was as hard to take as it was supposed to be. For Jafa, who saw the film as a teenager, something else was unbelievable: that the men in the brothel were white, when that business then as the province of Black entrepreneurs.

Evidently, Paul Schrader's original screenplay called for Black actors to play those roles, but with racial tensions in American cities running high, the studio shot down the idea. Jafa waited thirty years for the technology that allowed him to set the record straight—and own it. His seamless repurposing of the scene didn't change my regard for *Taxi Driver*, which also derived from an earlier movie, John Ford's 1956 western, *The Searchers*, but I doubt that I will be able to think about it the same way ever again.

Two nights later, Jafa was installing in-progress paintings during the opening of *Black Power Tool and Die Trying*, his evolving exhibition at 52 Walker, the David Zwirner Gallery's curatorial platform in Tribeca led by Ebony L. Haynes.

"It's all about the edit," she said of this elaborately conceived show, parts of which were previously on view at Luma Arles and OGR in Turin. Here, Jafa has exercised a bit of relational aesthetics by directing viewers through his "picture unit," a maze of connecting rooms that runs the length of the gallery and obstructs it. Large photomurals of guitar heroes and both Black and white bikers line interior walls that are encased in black Plexiglas shiny enough to reflect the paintings and voluptuary sculptures made from railroad ties on the gallery walls.

A freestanding array of life-size cardboard cutouts that nod to Cady Noland's use of that form depict performers and artists significant to Jafa, whose likeness appears at its center. (Noland is there too, with Adrian Piper and the legendary New York DJ Larry Levan.) But Jafa has keyed the whole show to *LOML* (or Love of My Life), a 45-minute-long video dedicated to the late critic Greg Tate, his closest friend. It portrays what looked like an overcast sky and was accompanied by loudspeakers amplifying a musical mixtape I couldn't quite hear in the din of chatter.

When I left the gallery, there was a block-long line to get in. By then, Jafa was in a basement room, tinkering with LOML—and drawing our collective memory of the past into a very active present.

Hopkins, Zoë. “For Arthur Jafa, the Only Way Out Is Through.” *ArtReview* (May 10, 2024) [ill.] [online]

ArtReview

For Arthur Jafa, the Only Way Out Is Through

Zoë Hopkins Reviews 10 May 2024 ArtReview

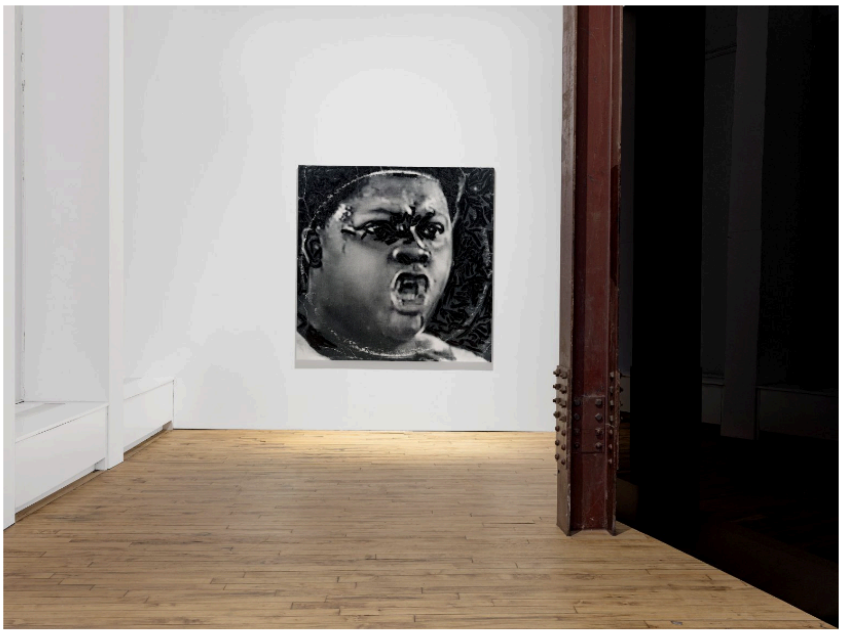
Arthur Jafa, *BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG*, 2024 (installation view with *Large Array II*, 2024). Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York

***BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG* at 52 Walker, New York takes on the charged proximity of Blackness, power and mortality**

The confrontation is immediate and unmitigated: setting foot in Arthur Jafa's exhibition, visitors are accosted by a massive black structure measuring 2.6 metres wide, 18.5 metres long and 3.6 metres tall, an unwieldy presence that looms over almost half of the gallery. The exterior of this architectonic sculpture – titled *Picture Unit (Structures) II* (all works 2024) – evokes a minimalist sculpture: its sleek mirrored acrylic facade is one of hard edges and impenetrable, reduced form. But the inside of the sculpture is a pictorial maelstrom. Openings at either end suck viewers into a literal labyrinth of images – blown up and displayed sequentially – that index a whiplashing sweep of heterogeneous people and places: as we meander through the maze's twists and turns, our eye moves from a blurred picture of victims slaughtered by Charles Manson, to Arthur Rhames riffing on the guitar, to pole dancers at Atlanta's Magic City strip club, to a memorial for those killed in the Rwandan genocide. Being caught in this current of images produces a turbulent, if not terrifying, ebb and flow of feeling, the tension of which only builds as you round each corner of the maze. And the only way out of it is through.

This disturbed, indeterminate air steals into every encounter in Jafa's exhibition: we find ourselves in the constant and unshakeable grip of artworks that elude emotional and intellectual resolution. The exhibition's title turns on the charged proximity of Blackness, power and mortality. The works on view seem capable of knocking you over with all the loud overabundance that attends stereotypes of Black culture. Yet a sobering mood of violence and grief casts its shadow across the gallery, often overtly – like in the photo of the Manson victims – but often with a subtlety that is arguably even more discomfiting.

For example, a wall-based silkscreen titled *Lateria* features a pixelated black-and-white image of gospel singer Lateria Wooten, mouth wide open as she screams into a microphone. Her face is contorted into an expression that simultaneously evokes ecstasy, pain, praise and rage – epitomising the complex viscerality embedded in Black religious and musical traditions and evoking their intimate link to resistance movements. She looks like someone who might be ready to die trying for the love and salvation that gospel music promises.



BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG, 2024 (installation view with *Lateria*, 2024). Courtesy the artist and 52 Walker, New York

The mournful and ferocious beauty of Black music is more obviously summoned in *LOML (52 Walker Version),* an hour-long film installation commemorating Jafa's beloved friend, the late critic Greg Tate. Far from a typical elegy, the video does not feature images of Tate himself: instead it presents a thread of footage that includes tornadoes, Jafa himself and Black performers from Michael Jackson to a group of TikTok dancers. Intermittently, the film drifts into a blurred black-and-white abstraction, suspending us in a lull of visual quiet and contemplation. The score samples from ambient instrumentalism, soul and rap – at times overlapping different genres at once: it is a cacophonous outpouring redolent of the instability of grief itself.

The crushing intensity of the work in this presentation picks up the cadence of other moments in Jafa's film practice, which is known for its unsettling juxtapositions of images mined from a dizzying array of sources with explicit and furtive links to Black culture. Here, this strategy is transmuted into intransigently in-your-face sculptures like *Picture Unit (Structures) II* and *Large Array II*. In the latter, Jafa assembles an iconic crowd of larger-than-lifesize Cady Noland-esque cutout figures, among which we recognise Miles Davis, Michel Foucault, Adrian Piper, the Sex Pistols and the artist himself. Many of the figures in *Large Array II* don't obviously relate to Black people. For Jafa, their presence is – put simply – visually interesting and beautiful. Rather than pointing to any neat idea of who or what represents Black culture, the work intimates Blackness in *how* it presents these images: they are joined through incoherence and collision, through dense contradictions that forcefully evoke the complex alterity and discomfort of Black aesthetics.

Nearby, in his ‘rail sculptures’, Jafa pushes beyond representational images and pivots towards found objects, including traffic and construction materials, to evoke his idea of Black aesthetics. In *Boundary 3*, three plastic traffic bollards protrude from the wall in a stacked sequence redolent of Donald Judd. They bear all the dirt and marks of abuse that come from their previous life in the busy street. They signify an ontological register that, like Blackness, is deemed fungible and degraded. In Jafa’s hands, these found objects rhyme with the eerie violence that pulses from the found images and footage elsewhere in the gallery. Together, they suggest an abject and alienated political sensibility, a Blackness and power that is at once strikingly obtrusive and discreetly lingering.

BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG ***at 52 Walker, New York,*** ***through 1 June***

Zoë Hopkins Reviews 10 May 2024 ArtReview

Diehl, Travis. “Arthur Jafa’s “BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG.” *e-flux* (May 23, 2024) [ill.] [online]

e-flux

Arthur Jafa’s “BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG”

Travis Diehl

Arthur Jafa, *Large Array II*, 2024. Color prints on Dibond, plate stands, and wallpaper, dimensions variable. Courtesy 52 Walker, New York.

Arthur Jafa, *****, 2024. Production still from film, 73:00 minutes. © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Arthur Jafa, *****, 2024. Film, 73:00 minutes . © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Arthur Jafa, *Untitled*, 2024. Metal rails, painted pipes, anodized pipes, plastic pipes, and feathers, 273.1 x 734.1 cm. Courtesy 52 Walker, New York.

View of Arthur Jafa’s “BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG” at 52 Walker, New York, 2024. (Left) *Picture Unit (Structures) II*, 2024. Black mirrored acrylic, wood, wallpaper, metal rails, and lights, 260 x 1849 x 360 cm. (Right) *Garvey / Hendrix (Extradition)*, 2024. Print on Dibond, 132.1 x 231.1 cm. Courtesy 52 Walker.

May 23, 2024

52 Walker, New York
April 5–June 1, 2024

With the subtlety of a revolver, Arthur Jafa's merciless ***** distilled the racial psychopathy of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) by replacing the white characters in its climactic bloodbath with Black ones. Robert De Niro and Jodie Foster still play Vietnam vet Travis Bickle and the pubescent sex worker he thinks he's saving but—by recording new performances and stitching them into the original footage—Jafa transformed the white pimp Sport into the Black Scar, the bouncer and the john were made Black, and so too the horrified cops who edge in after Bickle has emptied his guns. This wasn't so much a subversion as a restoration: the script had called for a Black body count, but was recast to avoid inflaming audiences. Critics of Jafa's redux—recently screened at Gladstone Gallery—have complained that *Taxi Driver* was already about race.[1] But Jafa's grim snuff film takes that fact to be obvious, then warps it, repeating his revised climax with small differences and new surprises, for seventy-three minutes.

Jafa's show of sculptures at 52 Walker carries the same themes of Blackness, erasure, violence, and moving images, but in a more damning, paranoid register. A walkthrough structure, studded with extruded aluminum sculptures like bisected window sashes, is wallpapered with blown-up pixelated photos from Jafa's expansive mood board, pulling the viewer through a hall of horrors. A line of battered white plastic traffic bollards juts out from another wall. But the main event is *Large Array II* (2024), a personal cultural pantheon ranging from the Sex Pistols to Michel Foucault, rendered as shaped aluminum standees and arranged as if for a class photo. The work cites Cady Noland's series of aluminum standees from the late eighties and nineties depicting overlapping, clipped-out American icons: the Manson Family, Lee Harvey Oswald. In the front row of Jafa's group is Noland herself, blocking her face with both hands.

Within *Large Array II* are clusters of associative meaning. Middle-right is Jim Marshall's 1971 portrait of Miles Davis, bare-chested and arms outstretched in the corner of a boxing ring: the posture is Christlike and confident. Nearby is a closeup of Billie Holiday lying in state. Both musicians are silent. There are other artists, too—Noland; Adrian Piper, from documentation of *Catalysis IV* (1971), in which she traversed New York with a white cloth stuffed into her mouth; the video artist Tourmaline. In the mix is Jafa himself, wearing a glossy corset and taking a mirror selfie.

Jafa puts holes in his own picture and Tourmaline's (but none of the others, it's not clear why), nodding to a 1989 Noland work titled *Oozewald*: an aluminum cutout of Lee Harvey Oswald photographed the instant he was shot by Jack Ruby.[2] Noland's standee is punctured by eight perfectly machined holes, four in the body, four over eyes and mouth. One of the mouth holes is stuffed with an American flag. In Jafa's portrait, holes puncture his phone as well as neck and shoulder. The hole is a formal device—there when it's empty, gone when it's full—gunshot wound, gun barrel, absence, grave. Noland covers her face, as if to stop a bullet, and stops the camera; hiding, but wholly there.

An Afropessimist sense of erasure links these two shows, both of which hinge on the idea that mediatized murder is a good way to get attention. The line between celebrity and monster is gossamer, mixed up in a culture of antiheroes and gunslingers, fuzzed out by the noir tradition of cinematic murder—in which both *Taxi Driver* and ***** (and Jafa's 2016 breakthrough, *Love is the Message the Message is Death*) indulge. Jafa has said that Bickle "is Dylann Roof."[3] Lee Harvey Oswald is remembered for killing John F. Kennedy, and the chain of notoriety carries to Jack Ruby, who killed Oswald—the assassin's assassin—and is treated in some circles as a hero.

Only since Hollywood can people plausibly claim the insanity of confusing mass culture with real life. John Hinckley Jr., Jodie Foster's actual stalker, fell in love with her twelve-year-old character in *Taxi Driver*. To win her respect, if not her love, he shot Ronald Reagan (his second choice—he'd flubbed an attempt on Jimmy Carter) and said he got the idea from the movies. (Killing Foster's pimp is Bickle's fallback plan, too; first he tries to shoot a senator.) Jafa, perhaps sanely, wounds his own image. The hole prompts a sort of forensics—here you have a corpse, a Kennedy or an Oswald or a Scar—and it's the viewer's paranoid role to trace the shots back to the gun: to reanimate the still.

Notes

1 See Alex Greenberger, "Arthur Jafa Produces a Nauseating Disappointment with a Revisionist Take on 'Taxi Driver'," *ARTnews* (April 2024), https://www.artnews.com/art-news/reviews/arthur-jafa-gladstone-gallery-taxi-driver-redacted-52-walker-review-1234702666/; and Jerry Saltz, "Taxi Driver Was Always About Race," *Vulture* (April 2024), https://www.vulture.com/article/arthur-jafa-taxi-driver-jerry-saltz-review.html. ***** was exhibited at Gladstone Gallery from April 4 to May 4.

2 Rasmus Røhling and Travis Diehl, "Cady Came Home," X-TRA (August 2019), https://www.x-traonline.org/online/cady-came-home.

3 Aruna D'Souza, "A 'Taxi Driver' Remake: Why Arthur Jafa Recast the Scorsese Ending," *New York Times* (April 2024), https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/05/arts/design/jafa-taxi-driver-scorsese-film-art.html.