Prepare for the Past…

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“THE POEM JOHNSON PHD PAPERS: TIDALECTICS RE-IMAGINED (AFTER KAMAU BRATHWAITE)”

by Marc Johnson

This artistic research project concerns itself with *the archive*; not simply with specific archives (institutions or documents), but rather with *the archive* as a *modus operandi.*[1] The inquiry proceeds through experiments with archival documents and processes. The experiments entail various forms of intervention upon existing records but also include an experiment with a fictionalized repository. The research task is to test the limits and problematize some of the operational logics of *the archive.* This foreword offers the background of the research project in relationship to existing scholarship and artworks, and summarizes the research contribution.

ALONG/AGAINST THE ARCHIVAL GRAIN: UNDERSTANDING THE DUAL ROLE OF THE ARCHIVE

To define the logic of *the archive*, I first look at how state Archives have defined themselves. The Society of American Archivists reports that archives refer to collections of records, both physical and digital, that are preserved due to their long-term value for entities such as individuals, organizations, and governments, encompassing a wide range such as letters, photographs, and official documents. The word “archives” also denotes the building or space where archival materials are stored, known as the archival repository. An Archive, as an institution (often denoted with a capital “A”), is responsible for the preservation and management of these records, affecting cities, businesses, universities, and other communities by maintaining their documentary heritage. Archivists are professionals tasked with the assessment, organization, preservation, and facilitation of access to these archives, serving a crucial role in information management, historical research, and the protection of collective memory and rights.[2]

The logic of Archives and their mode of operating are defined as “core archival functions.”[3] These core functions encompass acquisition and appraisal; processing, controlling, and promoting the use of archives; and

1 ***modus operandi* (n.) “way of doing or accomplishing,” 1650s, Latin, literally “mode of operating” (see *modus*). *modus* (n.) “way in which anything is done,” 1640s, from Latin *modus* (plural *modi*) “measure, extent, quantity; proper measure, rhythm, song; a way, manner, fashion, style,” from PIE root *med-* “take appropriate measures.” Especially in *modus operandi and modus vivendi*.**

2 **Society of American Archivists, “What Are Archives?,” *Society of American Archivists*, accessed October 14, 2025, https://www2.archivists.org/about-archives.**

public service. The preservation of the original order of records (Respect des fonds) and their chain of custody (Provenance) create the sanctity of Archives. A critical point to mention is that these functions remove material from circulation and exposure to change, ensuring its stability as an unalterable record for reliable evidence, historical accountability, and future research.

However, this traditional understanding of archives, as neutral repositories of historical truth is contested. Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand illuminate this shift in "Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction,"[4] where they emphasize the dual role of archives as tools for both oppression and liberation. They argue that recent scholarship critically interrogates the role of archives in either perpetuating social injustice or fostering reconciliation and empowerment, particularly within marginalized communities. This view challenges the conventional roles of archives, suggesting that they do more than preserve cultural heritage—they also shape cultural and political discourses, often in ways that reflect and reinforce dominant power structures.

To mention a famous example of archival processes wrapped in pseudo-scientific truth, circa 1893, in Paris, Alphonse Bertillon elaborated a system to identify criminals based on recording photographic analogue mug shots enhanced by a set of arbitrary written physical characteristics (physiognomy); supposed to capture the ultimate criminal type.[5] Each card (*observations anthropométriques*) was ordered and placed within a filling cabinet for future research. Behind this invention for use by the French Police lies a campaign for control over the population. Later in 1976, Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, coined the term "bio-power" to define "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era […].[6]

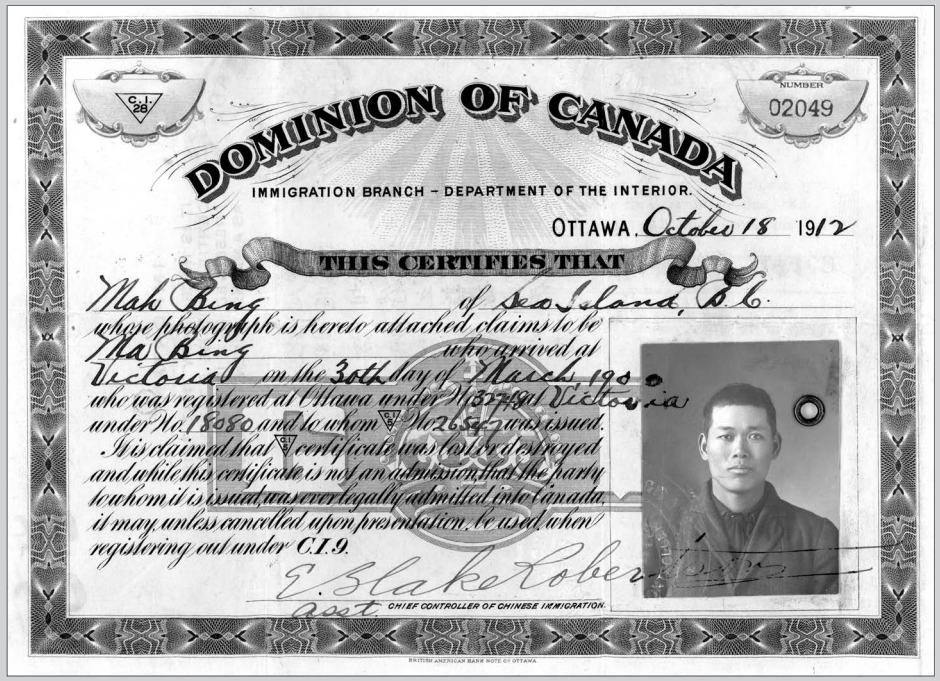
In her insightful book *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia*,[7] Michelle Caswell explores the nuanced role of archiving practices in shaping collective memory, specifically through the example of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Caswell critically examines how the photographs of prisoners, originally taken by the Khmer Rouge at Tuol Sleng prison for documentation, were later displayed in the museum with minimal contextual information. This manner of presentation effectively strips the images of their detailed historical backdrop and individual narratives, transforming victims into abstract symbols of suffering. Caswell argues that such decontextualization can lead to a dilution of the atrocities committed, thereby impacting how history is remembered and understood. Through her work, Caswell underscores the profound responsibility of archivists in curating archives not just for preservation but also for truthful and comprehensive historical education, ensuring that archival practices do not contribute to the erasure or alteration of historical truth.

Alphonse Bertillon, Filling cabinet, «fichiers du Service de l'identité judiciaire», Box n°1, document: FRAPP_YB1_048, circa 1950.

Elsewhere, the *Canadian Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals* shed light on how selective archival retention policies significantly impacted historical narratives and suppressed certain histories. For instance, the report revealed that critical immigration and citizenship documents were destroyed under routine policies, rendering vital evidence largely unavailable for revoking citizenship of, or deporting Nazi war criminals. Such archival omissions effectively obscured the historical record and hindered accountability for war crimes, thereby shaping the collective memory and historical consciousness in ways that compromised crucial aspects of justice and truth.[8]

3 **Society of American Archivists, "Core Archival Functions,"** ***Society of American Archivists*****, accessed October 14, 2025, https://www2.archivists.org/node/14804.**
4 **Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, "Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction,"** *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* **1, no. 2 (June 27, 2017), https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.50.**
5 **Christian Phéline,** *L'image Accusatrice* **(Laplume, France : Association de critique contemporaine en photographie, 1985).**
6 **Michel Foucault,** *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction***, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, Inc., 1978).**
7 **Michelle Caswell,** *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* **(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).**

Also, in 1923, the Canadian state passed the *Chinese Immigration Act*, also known as the "Chinese Exclusion Act," which banned Chinese immigration outright except for merchants, diplomats, foreign students, consular staff, and children born in Canada returning from abroad. Families were deliberately separated, as wives and children were excluded, while those already in Canada were required to register and carry identity certificates. This exclusion built on decades of discrimination, including the head tax (a fee imposed only on Chinese immigrants, raised to $500 CAD in 1903—equivalent to roughly $16,000 CAD in 2025), which was designed to deter entry.[9] In 2021, a researcher's *Access to Information and Privacy* (ATIP) request asked *Library and Archives Canada* to open restricted immigration records, specifically the C.I. 44 forms (Chinese immigration records) and index cards, through its *block review* process meant to facilitate access under the *Access to Information* and *Privacy* Acts. During this review, the records were initially flagged for destruction before archivists intervened, a blunder that highlights how precarious access to such histories remains and how preservation decisions continue to determine whose voices endure in the national record.[10]



"C.I.28 certificate of Mah Bing," 18 October 1912. Dominion of Canada, Department of the Interior, Immigration Branch. ***The Paper Trail collection: Registration and identification certificates*****, UBC Library Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. RBSC-ARC-1838-DO-0010r.**

The archival principle aims to neutralize subjectivity in how documents and artifacts are treated and considered, promoting a semblance of objectivity in the aggregation of records. However, the ideological underpinnings of what is chosen to be preserved reveal inherent biases, often reflective of dominant cultural narratives. This selective process of memory-making reflects larger socio-political directives and preferences, thereby framing historical knowledge within specific confines. As Jacques Derrida mentioned "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."[11]

These examples underscore the dual role of archives as both guardians and gatekeepers of history, revealing a dynamic interplay between power and protection within archival practices. While archives serve as critical resources for historians and the public, they also reflect the cultural, social, and political currents of their times. This inherent tension highlights archives as active, evolving entities, rather than neutral repositories. They are crucial for safeguarding collective memory and facilitating historical research, yet they also possess the authority to shape narratives and influence public perception. Thus, the archival endeavor is a complex mechanism that continually interacts with and reshapes our understanding of the past, present, and future.

DEBATES AT THE INTERSECTION OF ARCHIVAL STUDIES AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Substantial literature and a wide field of artistic practices engage with questions of the archive.[12] Many artists and scholars examine and perform archival practices, often excavating the colonial legacies of empires. Through often research-based practices,[13] they expose the blind

8 Jules Deschênes et al., ***Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals Report. Part I: Public*** **(Ottawa: Privy Council Office, Information Systems and Services, December 30, 1986), http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/471452/publication.html. For a comprehensive analysis of this case see: Terry Cook, "'A Monumental Blunder': The Destruction of Records on Nazi War Criminals in Canada.," in** *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society*, **ed. Richard J Cox and David A. Wallace (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 2002), 37–65.**

9 June Chow, "The Right to Remember the Past: Opening Chinese Immigration Records in Canada's National Archives," ActiveHistory.ca, March 27, 2025, https://activehistory.ca/blog/2025/03/27/the-right-to-remember-the-past-opening-chinese-immigration-records-in-canadas-national-archives/

10 June Chow, "Near-Destruction: Chinese Canadian Records at Library and Archives Canada," ActiveHistory.ca, September 17, 2025, https://activehistory.ca/blog/2025/09/17/near-destruction-chinese-canadian-records-at-library-and-archives-canada/.

11 Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* **25, no. 2 (1995): 10.**

spots, holes, and fragments of institutional collections. They investigate the ways in which photography, anthropology, and national archives produce and reproduce images of exclusion and cultural othering. Decades of scholarship requalify the Western colonial Archives as amnesia-making machines.[14] Such machines inscribe as much as they erase (appraisal is the most powerful archival function, as it determines who gets in and who is left out). This is the theoretical base for my practice-based artistic research.

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's filmic works, such as *From the Pole to the Equator* (1986) and *Images d'Orient, tourisme vandale* (2001), exemplify how archival materials can be transformed to critically engage with historical narratives. Their work involves elaborately reworking found footage to critique colonial and imperial attitudes perpetuated through visual media. In *Images d'Orient, tourisme vandale*, they dissect and repurpose footage from the colonial era in India, highlighting Western attitudes of domination by altering the film's speed, color, and frame to draw attention to the subtle cues of imperial arrogance and oppression embedded within these "exotic" depictions. Similarly, *From the Pole to the Equator* utilizes early 20th-century footage to expose the imperial nature of photography and cinema, illustrating how the moving image served as a tool for objectifying and dominating colonized cultures. Their work not only scrutinizes the content but also the form, showing how the very act of filming is complicit in the structures of power and control, thus providing a profound critique of archival sources as instruments of colonial legacy.

Fred Wilson's seminal installation *Mining the Museum* (1994), exposed at The Contemporary Museum in Baltimore,[15] exemplifies an impactful artistic critique of traditional archival and display practices. By juxtaposing and recontextualizing objects from the Maryland Historical Society's collection, Wilson exposed racial and historical biases inherent within these institutional narratives. His method of placing slave shackles next to elegant silverware and pairing a whipping post with antique furniture disrupted conventional museum narratives, compelling visitors to confront the intertwined histories of racism and colonialism often omitted in museum displays. Wilson's intervention challenged the neutrality of museum presentations and demonstrated the power of curatorial strategies to reshape historical understanding and stimulate critical engagement.

Theaster Gates' *Stony Island Arts Bank* revitalization project (2015)[16] in Chicago encapsulates an approach to reimagining archival and community space. This project transformed a derelict bank building into a cultural hub that both houses new art installations and serves as a repository for African American history and culture. Gates' initiative repurposes the traditional concept of an archive and a museum by integrating community engagement with the preservation of cultural heritage. The *Arts Bank* archives include a wide array of materials, from slides of the Johnson Publishing Archive to Frankie Knuckles' vinyl records, representing a dynamic fusion of historical and recent African American cultural expressions. This endeavor demonstrates how architectural and cultural restoration intertwined with community involvement can reinvent the archival space, making history accessible, activated, and relevant to local communities.

Brook Andrew's theatrical work *GABAN* (2022), performed in the Art Gallery of New South Wales (Australia), leverages the museum space to reframe and challenge dominant colonial narratives through an Indigenous lens. *GABAN*, a Wiradjuri term meaning "strange,"[17] reflects the disorienting museum experience for many Indigenous Peoples. The play depicts personified cultural objects from colonial collections interacting with characters representing institutional powers, engaging in dialogues about amnesia, violence, repatriation, and revenge. The narrative reawakening of ancestral memories critically exposes how museums have historically enacted and sustained colonial dominance, offering a powerful and healing reclamation of Indigenous stories and perspectives.

12 **Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen,** *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art* **(München: Prestel, 1998); Hans Ulrich Obrist et al., eds.,** *Interarchive: archivarische Praktiken und Handlungsräume im zeitgenössischen Kunstfeld (Interarchive. Archival practices and sites in the Contemporary Art Field)* **(Köln: Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg & Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2002); Anthony Downey, ed.,** *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, **1st ed., Ibraaz Series (London: I.B. Tauris, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015); Sara Callahan,** *Art Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* **(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).**

13 **Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian,"** *October*, **no. 120 (April 1, 2007): 140–72, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo.2007.120.1.140.**

14 **Trouillot, Michel-Rolph.** *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* **(Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Terry Cook, "What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,"** *Archivaria*, **no. 43 (February 1997): 17–63; Rodney G. S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence."** *Archivaria*, **September 25, 2006, 215–33; Flinn, Andrew, and Mary Stevens. "'It Is Noh Mistri, Wi Mekin Histri.' Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the UK, Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream." In** *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, **edited by Ben Alexander and Jeannette A. Bastian, 3–28. Facet, 2009; Michelle Caswell,** *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* **(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).**

15 **Fred Wilson et al.,** *Mining the Museum: An Installation*, **ed. Lisa Graziose Corrin (Baltimore: The Contemporary Museum of Baltimore, 1994).**

16 **The building was acquired in 2012 by the Rebuild Foundation (founded by the artist) and reopened to the public in 2015.**

17 **Budi Miller, "Brook Andrew: GABAN", The National 4: Australian Art Now (Biennale), 2022, https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/brook-andrew/gaban/**

In addressing the limitations and biases of traditional archival practices, particularly the selective digitization that prioritizes colonial narratives, artists like Stephanie Syjuco take novel approaches that offer compelling counter-narratives.[18] Syjuco's *Rogue Finding Aid* (2023) directly challenges the conventional archival framework by creating an independent, parallel archive focused on the visual representation of Filipinx Americans—a group historically marginalized in mainstream archival collections. This project employs a method of "mining and rephotographing" institutional archives, thereby exposing and filling gaps left by institutional apathy and curatorial oversight. Her methodology not only diversifies archival content but also democratizes access. By photographing non-digitized archival items and sharing them through a speculative, "rogue" finding aid, Syjuco circumvents traditional barriers—both academic and financial—that many researchers and artists face. This initiative highlights the power dynamics embedded in decisions of what is considered "worthy of preservation and display." The *Rogue Finding Aid* also fosters a collaborative and inclusive approach to historical inquiry by inviting other researchers and artists to engage with, reinterpret, and re-narrate archival materials. This contrasts sharply with the restrictive practices of many historical archives, which often limit access to physical spaces and prioritize certain narratives over others. Syjuco's work embodies a critical, participatory approach to archiving, which not only broadens the scope of what archives can represent but also who can access and interpret them.

CORE OBJECTIVE OF MY RESEARCH

I admire many of these artists and scholars that have paved the way for my research. My inquiry started by critiquing and dismantling the colonial gaze embedded in and inherited from found footage; building on and following similar artistic and research-based strategies. However, during the research I noticed that most archival film practices and critiques were strangely made from within archival logics. I observed that most of these practices are still deeply invested in and caught by the regime of the archives. While recognizing that filling gaps in the archives, examining blind spots, and seeking justice or historical repair through reclamation and restitution are valid methodologies that heal important societal wounds (in relation to past and present colonial rules and powers), in my research I seek to go beyond filling gaps or pointing to blind spots in the Archives.

The core objective of this research is to investigate and expose ways to expand the limits and logics of the archive. By expanding, I mean going

beyond the power of the Archives (institutions) and beyond the institutional imperative that comes with dealing with archives such as copyrights, paywalls, and any attempts to restrict "the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."[19] How can I go beyond appraisal and curatorial processes? How might I move away from linear historiography (past, present, future) while still engaging with the past or historical narratives? How does one break free from the archival logic, while publishing a PhD thesis within a National Archive? Could I produce another historiography?

My research positions archives as vehicles to the canonization of knowledge systems and cultural viewpoints, as well as creation and maintenance of power relations. My research employs artistic mediums such as film, tapestry, and an artist book as investigative tools. In light of my doctoral thesis belonging to an Archive, I choose a thought experiment as the primary framework for exposing the results of my excavation and exploration. Directly engaging with and challenging the established order of the archive, *The Poem Johnson PhD Papers* seek to formally, (a-)temporally, and performatively disturb the illusion of permanence underpinning the Archive's core archival functions. What is proposed is an aesthetics of archival re-imagining, one that wishes to confuse and question both the fixity of linear time and the authority of the archive, both in my artistic practices and their academic discourse.

I consider the production of historical narratives and the production of archives as evidence of loss.[20] I acknowledge the intricate dynamics of power and authority entrenched within the archival framework[21], delineating the contours of our comprehension regarding who is deemed significant enough to be remembered, whose narratives are considered paramount, and the consequent limitations on the scope of historical knowledge that can be assembled.[22]

18 **Stephanie Syjuco, Astria Suparak, and Carmen Winant,** ***Stephanie Syjuco: The Unruly Archive*** **(Santa Fe, NM: Radius Books, 2024).**
19 **Derrida, "Archive Fever," 10.**
20 **Michel-Rolph Trouillot,** ***Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*** **(Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).**
21 **Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand, "Critical Archival Studies."**
22 **Sonia Combe,** ***Archives interdites : les peurs françaises face à l'histoire contemporaine*** **(Paris : Albin Michel, 1994); Jacques Derrida,** ***Archive Fever : A Freudian Impression*****, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever in South Africa (A Seminar by Jacques Derrida, University of the Witwatersrand, August 1998, Transcribed by Verne Harris)," in** ***Refiguring the Archive*****, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 38–60; Okwui Enwezor,** ***Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*** **(New York: Steidl, International Center of Photography, 2008).**

METHODOLOGY

To counteract and offer a contrasting narrative to the predominant, often colonial histories enshrined within archives, I leverage counter-historical methodologies, such as the technique of archival re-staging. This approach aims to express the inherent potential embedded within documents for re-interpretation. I endeavor to interrogate, expand, and redefine the interpretative possibilities latent within archival documents, enabling these documents to articulate alternative discourses divergent from their original intent. This methodological framework involves an immersive engagement with documents. I use an expanded definition of the word "document" here that encapsulates both human and more-than-human remains such as film, cotton, or wool.

In filmmaking, I use common[23] and tailored processes of reading, re-reading, slowing down, zooming within the frame, sequence repetition and modulation of the frame rate. The intention is to fracture the prevailing narrative, infusing it with alternate interpretations by emphasizing minute details within the frame, recontextualizing the soundscape, and refiguring the decay of the original materials. In weaving, I combine different provenances of yarns and techniques to re-orient time through the cultural and historical meanings carried by materials and objects.

My exploration extends across a wide spectrum of strategies aimed at re-using, re-configuring, re-programming, and re-conceptualizing archival logics and functions. The thesis experiments with adding, restoring, repairing, sewing, twining parallel histories and counter-narratives beyond grief and grievances.[24] Through artistic production, I endeavor to uncover novel pictorial and historiographic dimensions that stand in opposition to conventional historical inscriptions, policies, and procedures governing the appraisal of historical significance and remembrance. In constructing counter-historical narratives, I employ a broad compilation of archival materials. My process is geared towards uncovering latent narratives and promoting alternative historical discourses, thereby pivoting the role of archives from passive vaults to active sites of political power.[25]

23 ***Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Dal Polo All'Equatore (From the Pole to the Equator)*, 1987; Robert Lumley, *Entering the Frame : Cinema and History in the Films of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011); Christa Blümlinger, *Cinéma de Seconde Main : Esthétique Du Remploi Dans l'art Du Film et Des Nouveaux Médias* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2013) ; Yann Beauvais and Jean-Damien Collin, *Agir le cinéma: écrits sur le cinéma expérimental (1979-2020)*, ed. Antoine Idier (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2022).**

24 **Enwezor, Okwui, Massimiliano Gioni, Naomi Beckwith, Glenn Ligon, and Mark Nash. *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* (London and New York: Phaidon Press Limited and New Museum, 2020).**

The video pieces "Control Unit" (2021) and "A Whale of a Tale" (2022) reflect on historical and cultural amnesia embedded within archival footage. Similarly, "Winnie the Pooh is no Longer Safe" (2022) uses anonymized images from the Xinjiang Police Files to comment on the ethical limits of contemporary surveillance and documentation practices.

The multi-channel video "Riot/Uprising" (2023) revisits the Attica prison rebellion, processed through edits emphasizing material decay and auditory glitches. These editing techniques metaphorically underscore the erosion of historical memories and the fragile, selective nature of historical recollection. By foregrounding the decay and focusing on the asymmetrical relationships between inmates and videographers, the work critiques the power dynamics in recording and preserving such histories.

The series of weavings titled "The Sea is History" (2024) draws from Derek Walcott's poetry, incorporating themes of Afrosurrealism[26] within the colonial legacy of Jacquard weaving techniques. This combination infuses the symbolically and historically rich method of weaving with elements of Caribbean mythology, rethinking the imprint of colonial legacies on cultural identities. The textured narratives embedded within each textile merge historical memory with surrealist fantasy, allowing for a dynamic reimagining of cultural history and identity formation.

Further expanding this research terrain and seeking an appropriate form of writing to disclose its findings, I devised a speculative fiction centered on the imagined artist-estate of the PhD candidate Poem Johnson, who—according to this narrative—passed away in 2088. In this scenario, Johnson's complete archive, including his PhD Papers, is entrusted to his estate and subsequently donated to the Kamau Brathwaite Center for Research in Black Studies, as a way to secure and protect Poem Johnson's legacy. The reader is invited to experience the work from the vantage point of a future institutional context.

Using provenance research and the poetic/political dimensions of the archive(s), I employed a thought experiment as a framing device. This speculative construction allowed me to explore the documentation of my artistic research from multiple temporal and narrative perspectives. Borrowing the archival logics of the catalogue raisonné and the archival

25 **Achille Mbembe, "The Power of Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht, Boston, Londo: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19–26.**

26 **María Elena Ortiz et al., *Surrealism and Us: Caribbean and African Diasporic Artists since 1940*, ed. María Elena Ortiz (Fort Worth, TX: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; New York: Delmonico Books/D.A.P., 2024).**

finding aid, I adopted these documentary forms not only to present and organize the work, but to critically examine how value, authorship, and historical legitimacy are constructed and conferred within institutional frameworks.

Emerging from the depths of this investigative journey is the prospect of an *alter/native* historiographical paradigm, one that renounces linear narratives of colonial progress in favor of a tidalectic worldview.[27] Kamau Brathwaite's concept of "Tidalectics," described notably by Elizabeth DeLoughrey as a "geopoetic model of history"[28] and a "methodological tool," emphasizes a dynamic geographical imagination to illuminate Caribbean history and cultural production. Brathwaite formulates this as an "alter/native" historiography that actively resists the linear, teleological model of colonial progress, specifically rejecting the Hegelian dialectic's closure in synthesis. Instead, tidalectics foregrounds the cyclical rhythms and perpetual movements of ocean tides, emphasizing the intertwined, ongoing interactions between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots. Brathwaite's imagery highlights this perpetual cycle through the figure of the "submerged mother" who crosses oceans, continuously moving between continents and islands, retreating and re-emerging into an expansive future of creative chaos.

This oscillatory approach serves as a methodological compass in my research, offering a framework through which the complex interplay between oceanic and terrestrial realms, the dynamics of diaspora and indigeneity, and the intertwined narratives of routes and roots can be explored. Through this lens, the research offers new paths for understanding and interpreting our collective past, and argues for a reimagined approach to historical narratives.

Tidalectics resonate closely with historical imaginaries developed by Paul Gilroy in "The Black Atlantic,"[29] particularly in his rejection of fixed or essentialized identities in favor of fluid processes of cultural exchange, diaspora, and migratory circuits. Gilroy's transoceanic "Black Atlantic" emphasizes how cultural identities form and reform across maritime routes, a notion reinforced in Brathwaite's model that similarly resists notions of cultural purity or static origins. Tidalectics align conceptually also with Édouard Glissant's "Poetics of Relation,"[30] wherein history is understood through "submarine roots"—mobile, relational connections that link islands, continents, and peoples across oceanic expanses rather than fixed ancestral origins. Glissant's work complements tidalectics by similarly stressing fluidity, multiplicity, and openness to continuous relational encounters.

Drawing upon these genealogies, from Gilroy's Atlantic-centered diasporic frame to Glissant's poetics, my own artistic research integrates Brathwaite's tidalectics into practical explorations most notably within the textile and performance works "The Sea is History" and "Sun/Sum" (2024). Overall, Tidalectics foregrounds dynamic historical engagements, enabling my artworks to reflect cyclical movements, represent evolving interactions between cultures, and evoke ongoing processes of flux and historical relationality. My artistic research within archival critique has led me to an artistic practice that embodies and performs tidalectic historiography, visualizing and materializing cyclical and relational narratives as critical alternatives to historical and colonial canons.

This preface has explored the dynamic and multifaceted nature of archives, presenting them not merely as repositories of historical records but as active instruments that shape and influence cultural and societal narratives. Through experimental engagements with archival documents and diverse artistic mediums, this research illuminates how archival practices in contemporary art can and should be expanded and redefined. By challenging conventional archival logics and engaging with counter-historical methodologies, the project promotes a more inclusive and participatory approach to history, allowing for a broader range of perspectives and stories to be acknowledged and preserved. Moving forward, it is essential to continue exploring these transformative approaches, encouraging ongoing dialogues that question, reinterpret, and reimagine the role of archives in our understanding of history and culture. This endeavor not only enriches scholarly and public engagement with the past but also fosters a more dynamic and equitable archival practice moving forward.

27 **For further readings of the concept of "Tidalectics," see Chinedu Nwadike, "Tidalectics: Excavating History in Kamau Brathwaite's The Arrivants,"** *The International Academic Forum (IAFOR) Journal 7, no. 1 (2020): 55–67***; Stefanie Hessler, ed.,** *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science* **(London: Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Foundation/TBA21–Academy, 2018).**

28 **DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M.** *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literature***. Honolulu: UH Press – University of Hawai'i Press, 2007, p. 2.**

29 **Paul Gilroy,** *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* **(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).**

30 **Édouard Glissant,** *Poetics of Relation***, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).**

LIST OF SOURCES AND RELATED ARTWORKS

Institutions, Sources	Collections, Documents	Algorithms	Artworks
The Freedom Archives	Committee to End the Marion Lockdown		Control Unit (2021)
Amazon Mechanical Turk	Custom tasks requested to workers		Answering Machines (2021)
OpenAI, Lucidrains		Gpt-3, Deep-daze, CLIP (Contrastive Language-Image Pre-Training)	@P0lice P0lice (2022)
Universal Pictures, Håkon Hukkelås	Frankenstein	DeepPrivacy: A Generative Adversarial Network for Face Anonymization	Frankenstein (After Whale) (2022)
Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation	The Xinjiang Police Files	DeepPrivacy: A Generative Adversarial Network for Face Anonymization	Winnie the Pooh is no longer safe (2022)
Private collector	Captain Salvesen's Whaling Films		A Whale of a Tale (2023)
The New York State Archives	Collections Relating to the 1971 Attica Correctional Facility Uprising (Series B1340 Motion Picture Film and Videotapes of Attica Correctional Facility Riot, 1971–1972)		Riot (2023)
LAION, StabilityAI	LAION-5B dataset	StableDiffusion v1.4	The Sea is History (2024)
Kamau Brathwaite	The poem "Red Rising"		Sun/sum (2024)

A Contract with Yourself (the Reader)

From here on, THE READER agrees to a thought experiment in which documentary forms are performed rather than simply reported or given as true.

The foreword and the documents that follow assume an institutional voice with its characteristic forms and procedures, yet they belong to a speculative framework. The names, institutions, dates, and archival apparatuses are fictional constructs, sometimes blurring the lines between autobiography and fiction. The following pages adopt protocols familiar to artist estates and museums: catalogue raisonnés, stewardship guidelines, digital repositories, and metadata schemas. The writing performs institutional truth-making roles to underline how such truths are constructed, circulated, and preserved. What follows is not a recovered historical record, but an imagined one—an artistic gesture that inhabits the language of official memory to question its boundaries.

The "Poem Johnson PhD Papers" present artworks, writings, and research produced during Marc Johnson's doctoral studies at Stockholm University of the Arts, but staged as if encountered within a future archival setting that cares for and interprets the work. The name "Poem Johnson" demarcates a slight distance from and fabulation of the real life and artistic research of Marc Johnson. This volume traces the researcher's methodological influences from Fine Arts through architectural training to artistic research. It situates the materials within posthumanist, archival, and counter-historical perspectives. It foregrounds non-linear temporality, material experimentation, and critical responses to dominant historiographic models.

THE READER acknowledges they are entering a fiction, though it may not feel like one.

A "Last Will and Testament," written in 2088, bears the cadence and format of legal writing to function as a speculative device—an imagined Will that reflects on how legacy, memory, and authorship might be codified through institutional language. Two scholarly essays (*Kamau Brathwaite: Alter/native* and *Fred Wilson: In Depth*) anchor the project's lineage in institutional critique, counter-archival practice, and tidalectic thinking. The essays inhabit a speculative space in which historical and fictional figures coexist; their evidentiary rigor mobilized to model how critical authority is produced, cited, and preserved through the discourse of contemporary art and curatorial scholarship. These texts explore how artistic genealogies are narrated, how influence is staged, and how fiction can inhabit the structures of academic knowledge.

By proceeding, THE READER agrees to read with both hemispheres of the brain: one side welcomes the documents as presences — relics, traces, and rituals of cultural memory — while the other examines them as carefully staged constructions in which the logics of memory, authorship, and power are exposed.

CONSENT

☐ **I agree to the above statement.**

Inscribe your name to enter a portal into the future—your commitment echoes forward, threading memory across time:

Please write your name here

.....

Date and Place of departure

.....

THE POEM JOHNSON PhD PAPERS

The Kamau Brathwaite Center for Research in Black Studies, Archives and Library Division is pleased to present *The Poem Johnson PhD Papers*: a series of artworks, research materials, curatorial remarks, and exhibition records assembled during Poem Johnson's doctoral studies (2021–2025) at Stockholm University of the Arts. This research project has been made possible through the generous donation of materials by the Poem Johnson Estate in 2090, ensuring the long-term preservation and accessibility of Johnson's intellectual and artistic contributions.

This catalogue represents a significant effort to chronicle and contextualize Johnson's research trajectory. Working in close collaboration, three archivists have meticulously compiled a biographical and curatorial survey, tracing Johnson's methodologies and artistic inquiries. This publication serves not only as a record of a pivotal period in Johnson's career, but also as an archival apparatus, reflecting the artist's deep engagement with archival structures, processes, and materialities.

BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poem Johnson (1986–2088) was born Poem Ahlin Woede Johnson in Paris, France, to Catherine-Eliane and Mathieu Couanvi Johnson, as one of nine children. Johnson's heritage from Benin through his father's lineage is reflected in the naming traditions he carried forward. His second first name, "Ahlin," meaning "first son," and his clan name, "Woede," inherited from his Congolese grandfather, highlight the cultural and historical continuity embedded in his identity. The name *Woede* in the Gen language (spoken by the Mina people of Benin and Togo) translates as "one who plans for the future as a form of care to the community," a notion deeply resonant with Johnson's lifelong artistic practice. Notably, the word *Woede* also appears in Dutch with the meaning "rage," a linguistic convergence that invites further research into the etymological and colonial intersections of language.

Johnson's formal education began at the Ecole Maximilien Vox in Paris, where he was introduced to art history, typography, and drawing—subjects that would remain central to his artistic vocabulary despite the school's entanglements with institutional racism. He pursued higher education at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris (2006–

2011), earning a Bachelor and Master of Fine Arts, with a six-month exchange at Hunter College in New York. His academic path extended into architecture, obtaining a Master of Architecture from the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Malaquais (2011–2013) and professional licensing (HMONP) in 2014. His transition from architectural practice to artistic research began with *YuYu* (2014), a film made in China, marking a shift towards an investigative, archival, and transdisciplinary approach to art.

Between 2015 and 2021, Johnson developed a body of work shaped by posthumanist thought, particularly the philosophical inquiries of Cary Wolfe and others who engage in critique of anthropocentrism (human-centeredness). Posthumanism challenges the centrality of the human subject by recognizing its entanglement with technological, ecological, and economic networks, reframing traditional notions of agency, subjectivity, and knowledge production. Within this framework, Johnson's work engaged with the *more-than-human*, an approach that acknowledged the symbiotic relationship between human and nonhuman entities. His practice operated within a broader symbiotic framework, treating the archive as a dynamic system of empowered contents, rather than a static repository for dead objects. In this approach, past and present, organic and synthetic, human and nonhuman continually shape and influence one another. Through collage, film, and material experimentation, Johnson's work disrupts linear narratives, constructing layered temporalities that invite new ways of relating to the past.

His work also drew from archival practices and historiographical methods, positioning the archive as both a site of retrieval and a space of active reconstruction. These thematic concerns—posthumanism, archival reactivation, and the instability of historical narratives—became central to his later doctoral research. Johnson's artistic practice thus aligns with a lineage of Black artists and intellectuals who interrogate historiographic methods and engage in counterhistorical and speculative narratives as strategies of archival reimagination, such as Saidiya Hartman, Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, and Fred Wilson.

Engaging posthumanist discourse, Johnson aligns with contemporary artistic and theoretical inquiries that dissolve hierarchical distinctions between nature and culture, technology and the body, archive and imagination. His research suggests that artistic practice itself operates as an *archival symbiosis*—a generative space where knowledge is continuously reconfigured through the interplay of human and nonhuman forces.

SCOPE AND ARRANGEMENT OF THE PAPERS

The Poem Johnson PhD Papers (2021–2025) document the arc of Johnson's artistic research as a PhD candidate at Stockholm University of the Arts. The collection includes artworks, textual records, and research materials that collectively map his evolving methodologies. By systematically studying, sorting, and arranging these materials chronologically, a clear trajectory emerges: Johnson's research begins with archival film practice—deeply influenced by the Italian filmmakers Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci-Lucchi—and progresses through a series of experiments exploring alternative methodologies for engaging with archival processes and materials.

This presentation of Johnson's research adheres to the principle of *respect des fonds*, maintaining the original structure of the materials as they were produced. This catalogue functions on a meta-level as both an archival device and a research tool, reflecting Johnson's iterative approach to inquiry. By tracing the accumulation of ideas, interventions, and experiments over time, it mirrors his engagement with the archive as both subject and method.

The Poem Johnson PhD Papers not only provide an invaluable resource for understanding Johnson's artistic and intellectual contributions but also reinforce the role of the Kamau Brathwaite Center in preserving and disseminating the work of Black artists and thinkers. This publication extends beyond a mere documentation of Johnson's doctoral research; it functions as an invitation for future scholars, artists, and researchers to engage with his work as an ongoing and generative process, ensuring its continued resonance in the fields of Black cultural studies, artistic research, and archive science.

James J. Brown, President
The Kamau Brathwaite Center for Research in Black Studies

CURATORIAL NOTE:

CATALOGUE METHODOLOGY

As stewards of Poem Johnson's artistic legacy, the Kamau Brathwaite Center for Research in Black Culture, Archives and Library Division has undertaken the responsibility of documenting and preserving his extensive body of work. This catalogue follows a rigorous methodological framework designed to ensure precision, consistency, and accessibility; aligning with best practices in archival science.

From the outset, this project has been driven by a dual imperative: to ensure that Johnson's work is contextually preserved for future research while making it accessible to contemporary audiences. A standardized metadata structure has been developed to maintain continuity with Johnson's own documentation efforts while adapting to the needs of institutional research and long-term scholarship.

The cataloguing structure is organized into ten core metadata sections listed below, each playing a critical role in the identification, contextualization, and preservation of Johnson's work.

By structuring the metadata in this way, the catalogue ensures that Johnson's practice is not only preserved as a static record but actively serves as a site for research, curation, and discourse. The system is designed to accommodate both archival completeness and curatorial adaptability, allowing scholars, collectors, and institutions to engage meaningfully with Johnson's work in a structured and research-driven manner.

1. ARTWORK ID

This section consists of comprehensive metadata elements essential for identifying and cataloguing each artwork. These elements include:

- Artist's name
- Certificate status
- Current condition
- Current location
- Date
- Dimensions
- Duration
- Granularity
- Inventory number
- Keywords
- Materials
- Medium
- Processes
- Resolution
- Series title
- Short description
- Support
- Techniques
- Themes
- Title
- Alternative titles

2. DOCUMENTATION

- Invoices
- Correspondence(s)
- Insurance documents
- Other documents

3. FINANCE

- Transactions
- Value

4. IMAGE(S)

- Reduced-scale representations of original artworks for identification in the catalogue

5. ARTIST'S REMARKS

Since Poem Johnson began cataloguing his own work during his lifetime, we have carefully integrated his existing documentation into the current catalogue. This section preserves and expands upon Johnson's original records, compiling statements that offer valuable insights into his personal motivations and creative journey. His reflections include his intentions behind each artwork, influential figures and works that shaped his practice, the origins of his artistic ideas, and notable shifts in his working methods over time. By building upon Johnson's own documentation, this section ensures faithful representation of his evolving vision while situating it within the broader framework of archival research.

- Intentions
- Influences (Artists and artworks)
- Influences (Scholarship)
- Origin stories
- Shift in working practice

6. CURATORIAL'S REMARKS

In this section we offer an in-depth reading of Johnson's work, exploring various perspectives for understanding its significance and long-term re-

search value. We delve into the broader trends and patterns engaged by Johnson's work while situating it within its historical context. We identify the significance of the work and propose future research areas, highlighting under-researched aspects that hold potential for scholarly contribution.

- Long-term research value
- Broader trends and patterns
- Historical context and significance
- Future research

7. LEGAL AND AUTHENTIFICATION

- Certificate
- Donation / gift
- Insurance
- Rights
- Signature status

8. LITERATURE AND EXHIBITIONS

- Bibliography
- Exhibition history

9. MAINTENANCE

- Condition reports
- Production and fabrication details
- Installation instruction
- Long-term care and preservation
- Restoration
- Maintenance, storage and access

10. PROVENANCE

- When was the work acquired?
- Who acquired the work?
- What is the story behind the acquisition?

CURATORIAL NOTE:

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CATALOGUE

The process of cataloguing Poem Johnson's work began during the artist's lifetime. In 2023, recognizing the importance of structured documentation in shaping his artistic legacy, Johnson initiated efforts to create a comprehensive system for organizing his works. His early inquiries led him to online resources such as "legacy planning" guides provided by the Joan Mitchell Foundation and academic studies on catalogue raisonné methodologies.

His research extended into scholarly publications, particularly Caroline Gabrielli's *Preparing the Catalogue Raisonné: A Guideline for Publishing Online*, based on her work as head archivist at the Richard Serra Studio. Gabrielli granted Johnson access to the full report, later published in a condensed form by the *Art Libraries Journal* (Cambridge University Press). Loretta Würtenberger's *The Artist's Estate: A Handbook for Artists, Executors, and Heirs* reinforced the necessity of developing a structured, professional cataloguing system that would extend beyond traditional documentation.

Initially, Johnson was inspired by the technological rigor of major online catalogues raisonnés, such as those for Paul Cézanne, Arshile Gorky, Isamu Noguchi, and Mark Rothko. Following Gabrielli's recommendations, he hired a database consultant and a full-stack web developer, opting to use the open-source software CollectiveAccess, developed by Whirl-i-Gig. French full-stack developer Gilles Bedel, then based in Taiwan, implemented the system in just six weeks. During this time, Johnson received technical and archival support from John Turner, director of Museum Technology at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, who provided guidance on metadata structuring and backend implementation. The first prototype of Johnson's digital catalogue was presented at the "Bug Bounty 50% Seminar" in May 2023 to Sarah Callahan, an art historian at Stockholm University and author of *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art.*

Despite the successful development of an online framework, Johnson ultimately found that the technological maintenance and time demands of the system made it unsustainable for his needs. While a digital catalogue raisonné was originally envisioned, the project was eventually discontinued by the artist due to inefficiencies in long-term usability.

THE ROLE OF THE ESTATE AND THE KAMAU BRATHWAITE CENTER

Following Johnson's passing in 2088, the Poem Johnson Estate was formally established as the legal entity responsible for managing his posthumous legacy. The Estate initially oversaw archival administration, exhibition coordination, posthumous fabrications, and publications related to Johnson's work. Recognizing the importance of ensuring long-term accessibility and scholarly engagement, the Estate sought a research-driven institution to carry forward Johnson's original archival and cataloguing intentions.

In alignment with this vision, the Kamau Brathwaite Center for Research in Black Culture, Archives and Library Division assumed formal responsibility for the management and study of Johnson's archives. The Estate officially transferred the materials to the Center in 2090, entrusting it with the preservation, documentation, and scholarly interpretation of his artistic and intellectual legacy.

This transfer marked a critical shift from an estate-managed posthumous archive to an institutionally curated research collection, reinforcing the academic and curatorial rigor required for sustaining Johnson's influence within contemporary scholarship. The Kamau Brathwaite Center now maintains a comprehensive archive of photographic, video, and printed documentation related to Johnson's artistic practice, as well as his exhibition history, curatorial records, and scholarly references.

While the Poem Johnson Estate continues to manage artwork sales, coordinate with galleries and auction houses, and handle external media relations, all research inquiries, scholarly collaborations, and archival access requests are now directed to the Kamau Brathwaite Center for Research in Black Culture, Archives and Library Division.

By building upon Johnson's original inquiries into documentation, metadata design, and legacy planning, this volume represents both a continuation of his intellectual vision and an evolution of his catalogue into an enduring scholarly resource. The transition from a digital catalogue raisonné to a research-driven book format reflects a practical reassessment of archival methodologies while ensuring that Johnson's artistic legacy remains accessible, well-documented, and engaged with the evolving discourse of contemporary art.

Klara Reed, Kate Jones, and Kara Kennedy
Curators and Archivists
The Kamau Brathwaite Center for Research in Black Culture

SEPTEMBER 3, 2088

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF POEM JOHNSON

I always thought I would never die. But here we are. And that's ok. If you're reading this, it means I've moved on to whatever comes next—whether it's nothingness, an eternal dream, or some cosmic joke we never saw coming. But don't mourn too much. Instead, celebrate.

This last Will and testament is my final act of responsibility. It is for you, the people I love, and for those who must handle the practical remnants of my earthly life.

1. DECLARATION AND REVOCATION

I, Poem Johnson, residing at 6066 Gleneagles Dr West, Vancouver, BC V7W 1V9, Canada, do hereby declare this to be my Last Will and Testament, revoking all prior wills and codicils heretofore made by me.

2. APPOINTMENT OF EXECUTOR

I appoint Paloma Davis residing at 150 Walnut Ln, Oakville, CA 94562, United States, to serve as the Executor of this Will. If the above-named Executor is unable or unwilling to serve, I appoint James Johnson as successor.

3. FUNERAL AND BURIAL INSTRUCTIONS

My deceased body should be placed on a mountaintop to be consumed by vultures and other scavenger birds. My bones should then be gathered in a basket and delivered to sharks somewhere in the South Pacific Ocean, near a vast array of archipelagoes such as the Marquesas Islands. If logistics or law fail me, freeze my body and wait until someone figures out how to do it properly.

A separate ceremony must be held with a coffin, a photograph of the full moon, family members, friends, and colleagues. This must be a dance party, with generous and delicious local plant-based catering, and full moon water.

I have put aside $15,000 for the event.

Please don't invite Doug or Anselm, they are liars!

4. SPECIFIC BEQUESTS TO FAMILY

I give and bequeath (100%) of the "special class 1" artworks and *the Gleneagles* residence to my son Balthazar Aristotle Johnson. Three textile works have already been given to him.

I give and bequeath (100%) of the "special class 2" artworks and the *Théoule-sur-Mer (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur)* residence to my wife Helen Luz Baum, as well as the contents of all safe deposit boxes located at Bank of America Corporate Center, 100 North Tryon Street Charlotte, NC 28255, United States (safe number 7131962). If my said wife does not survive me, these works are not to be considered as separate from the works remaining in my collection.

I give and bequeath all remaining artworks in my collection (outside of "special class") to the *Poem Johnson Estate* (legal entity), as well as the residue of my estate including the contents of all files, the diaries, notes, correspondence, the logs, and other biographical papers and records, the photographs and negatives of my artworks, the digital files of my artworks, all documentation of my artworks and other reproductions.

I herewith declare null and void all letters to individuals, whether relatives of mine or not, assigning to them textiles or other works of art executed by me. Any works listed in such letters are hereby to be considered a part of and remain in the main body of my collection.

The term "Special Class" refers to artworks designated as such in the official catalog of works, following the precedent of the Paul Klee model. These works are strategically classified based on their artistic, historical, or personal significance, ensuring a carefully curated selection rather than a random or value-based distribution. The Special Class designation guarantees that what is passed on is meaningful, not excessive, and that my loved ones inherit works that enrich their lives without complicating them. This decision is intended not to overwhelm their lives with an excessive burden of material responsibility, nor the pressure of managing an entire estate.

The *Poem Johnson Estate* is created to ensure long-term preservation, accessibility, and impact, so that my work is not fragmented or dispersed in ways that diminish its cultural and intellectual value.

4.1 BEQUESTS OF INTELLECTUAL NATURE

Since I am no longer here, let these words stay with you:

Life is uncertain, but you can shape the odds in your favor.

A reliable factor of happiness and longevity is maintaining strong social connections throughout life. The people you surround yourself with will shape you more than you realize—choose them wisely. Seek out those who challenge you, bring out your best, and encourage you to grow. The company you keep shapes not only your present but also your future. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lives of children.

Children do not rise or fall in isolation; they are sculpted by their environment. A child's future is not determined by lectures, rules, or even genetics—it is shaped by the environments they are exposed to consistently. If you do one thing, place them in the right environments.

Peersuasion—the influence of one's peers—is the strongest force shaping a child's future. If you want them to thrive, be deliberate about the worlds they grow up in. Stack the odds in their favor.

Children are far more likely to develop into independent thinkers, compassionate individuals, socially and emotionally intelligent people, resilient problem-solvers, disciplined learners, and strategic decision-makers if they are shaped by their peers rather than by higher authorities like gods, parents, or teachers.

There are paths to success through exposure to the right people and the right activities. I encourage you to think deeply about who surrounds you and what you spend your time doing. I truly believe in the power of Peersuasion.

If I could suggest six areas that will serve someone for a lifetime, they would be:

- **Well-being** ..... built on sleep, nutrition, and exercise, because ..... sustained health fuels everything else.
- **Humor** ..... because it is the highest form of intelligence and ..... the greatest antidote to suffering.
- **Reading** ..... through a habit of deep and diverse reading, ... because it expands the mind, sharpens thinking, ... and grants access to the wisdom of others.
- **Mathematics** ..... through Soroban and Anzan, because it ..... shapes logic, precision, and clarity of thought.
- **Music** ..... because it cultivates discipline, creativity, ... and emotional depth.
- **Duplicate Bridge** ..... because it teaches probabilistic thinking, ... strategic decision-making, and the art ..... of reading uncertainty.

Curate these influences at all costs. Thinking long term is what truly sets people apart. These principles are not just ideas; they are tools for shaping a stronger, wiser, and more fulfilling life. Use them well.

That said, one thing must never be forgotten: fun is essential on the road to mastery. Discipline and persistence matter, but they should be introduced in a way that makes learning pleasurable and intrinsically rewarding. There is no point in teaching these great disciplines if no joy can be derived from them.

5. LEGACY VEHICLE

The legal entity (The Poem Johnson Estate) responsible for administering my legacy should plan to cease its activities upon the expiration of the transferred copyrights, 70 years after my death. I bequeath to the legal entity all unsold artworks owned by me at the time of my death, whether in my studio, on consignment, or on loan to any gallery or museums, as well as my archives and the copyrights to all of my artworks and writings. When copyrights have expired, the legal entity shall bequeath all unsold artworks executed by me and still owned by the entity to an American or French city that agrees to build or assign and maintain permanent quarters for these works and assure their physical survival, with the explicit requirement that none of these works shall be sold, given, or exchanged. An Art Lending Library is acceptable, provided the works are retained in perpetuity for exhibition and study. The joint venture of the Getty Research Institute and Getty Museum, together with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art might be an ideal recipient of the remaining assets.

The Archives of American Art could also be an alternative institution. If the institutions named above decline to accept the collection under the specified conditions, the legal entity shall seek an alternative institution that meets the same preservation criteria.

5.1 FINANCIAL OBJECTIVES OF THE LEGAL ENTITY

The entity will function as a charity with nonprofit legal status. The mission must be to expand and enhance the value of the legal entity's assets by earning money to support the entity's charitable mandates, elaborated below. The leitmotiv of the legal entity shall be:

"MORE ACCESS. NO GATEKEEPERS."

PRIMARY STRATEGIC SOURCES OF INCOME FOR THE LEGAL ENTITY:

1. Real estate rental income
2. Sales of artworks
3. Copyrights fees management for commercial projects

SECONDARY SOURCES OF INCOME FOR THE LEGAL ENTITY:

1. Corporate sponsorship
2. Crowdfunding
3. Donations
4. Grants
5. Posthumous casts and artworks

CONTINGENCY PLAN FOR FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

If revenue targets are not met due to market conditions, legal restrictions, or economic downturns, the legal entity should take a strategic, phased approach to financial recovery:

1. Prioritize alternative revenue sources – Explore partnerships, joint ventures, or financial models that align with the foundation's mission while ensuring long-term sustainability.

2. Accelerate artwork sales – If necessary, adjust the pace of artwork sales to generate liquidity while maintaining the long-term preservation strategy.

3. Downsize staff temporarily – If financial recovery is projected within a reasonable timeframe, reduce operational costs by downsizing staff for months or years as needed, ensuring core functions remain intact.

4. Liquidate real estate only as a last resort – The sale of real estate assets should be considered only under extreme circumstances, and only after all other financial stabilization measures have been exhausted.

5.2 THE GOALS AND MISSION OF THE LEGAL ENTITY

A COMMITMENT TO ESTABLISHING AN ENDURING LEGACY AND SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE.

The Foundation's aim is to serve the public interest by fostering, cultivating, developing, and supporting a deeper understanding and appreciation of art and imagination, particularly in relation to

- Anti-colonial practices,
- Counter-archive(s) and counter-hegemonic practices,
- The pursuit of world peace, understood as an ongoing process of demilitarization and the gradual de-escalation of violence in society.

5.3 CORE OPERATIONS AND FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

The entity operates in six main areas superseded by a financial department that focuses on preserving assets.

FINANCE		
LEGACY	ARTS EDUCATION	RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION
ARCHIVES AND CONSERVATION	CURATORIAL PROJECTS	CHARITY

5.3.1 JOHNSON'S LEGACY

The legacy department focuses on strategies for promoting the artist's legacy. The Legacy Department promotes the artist's legacy by publishing monographs and special editions, mounting exhibitions at strategic venues, and making sales and gifts to museums. For gifts to museums, beware of special requirements beyond the legal entity's stated financial objectives and/or goals and mission. Request a *part purchase/part gift* deal from the institution receiving artwork(s).

5.3.2 ARTS EDUCATION

The Arts Education Department is committed to fostering critical, socially engaged, and transformative artistic practices that focus on art as a tool for resistance, historical reclamation, and social change.

Through interdisciplinary research, experimental pedagogy, and participatory projects, the department explores:

- Anti-colonial artistic practices that challenge dominant narratives and advocate for decolonization.
- Counter-archives and counter-hegemonic expressions that preserve marginalized histories and amplify suppressed voices.
- Art as a peace-building tool, advancing de-militarization, de-escalation, and nonviolent resistance in society.

The department encourages innovative, grassroots-driven models of education, wherein students and practitioners engage with art as a means of social critique, community empowerment, and cultural intervention, ensuring that art is not just taught but used as an active force for justice, liberation, and structural change.

5.3.3 RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION

The Research and Publication Department develops and manages research projects by enabling scholars to conduct research and analysis on the work and archives.

The department may prepare reports and presentations, manage publication of research results, create and manage databases, and/or advise scholars on research-related topics.

The research and publication department can be responsible for managing grants and contracts, providing technical assistance to the organization, and developing and implementing policies and procedures related to research and publication.

5.3.4 ARCHIVES AND CONSERVATION

The Archives and Conservation department is responsible for preserving, protecting, and managing the artist's work and material legacy. This can include collecting and organizing documents, photographs, audio and video recordings, or any other materials related to the artist or their work. The department conserves and preserves the artwork, ensuring that it is properly stored and protected from the damaging effects of the environment and time.

The department may provide access to the collected materials for research, education, exhibition, and other purposes.

5.3.5 EXHIBITION AND CURATORIAL PROJECTS

The Exhibition and Curatorial Projects helps to create, manage and promote artistic projects, which may include exhibitions, lectures, workshops and other public programs. This department works to build relationships with galleries, museums, and other organizations to further artist-initiated programming. This department collaborates with other departments within the legal entity to produce quality programming relevant to the entity's mission and goals.

5.3.6. CHARITY

The charity department works to provide financial assistance to artists and/or organizations that align with the legal entity's mission and goals. This may include providing grants, scholarships, fellowships, endowments, gifts, or financial aid. They work with the educational department to provide access to programs, workshops, and other resources to help artists achieve their creative goals. In collaboration with the legacy department, they may work to promote public awareness and understanding of the artist's work.

5.3.7 BOARD STRUCTURE

The advisory board must be composed at minimum of

A LAWYER
AN ACCOUNTANT
AN ARCHIVIST
AN ART HISTORIAN
A FAMILY MEMBER
A COLLECTOR
A GALLERIST

The lawyer shall have at least fifteen years of professional experience and be familiar with foundation law.

The accountant shall have at least ten years of professional experience and be skilled in tax law.

Preferably the art historian has experience at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, or is an expert of the Vatican Apostolic Archive. The art historian should not be young and foolish.

The archivist shall be of African descent and be able to rigorously organize, comprehend and execute an archival standard – such as an extensible markup language (XML) schema intended for delivering metadata – while diplomatically liaising with national archives and museums. The archivist must have a sense of humor and have great communication skills to breakdown the jargon into clear and unambiguous language for everyone to grasp.

The collector and gallerist may advise but shall not have financial voting powers due to possible conflicts of interests.

The lawyer and accountant may advise but shall not have artistic voting powers regarding the artworks or the foundation's program, as they have technical expertise but generally poor understanding of art history.

The board members could be hired on a part-time basis or hourly, providing services as needed. Do not hesitate to replace any of the board members if they do not meet the professional standards or foundation's best interests. Do not allow incompetence within the legal entity. Making mistakes is important, accountability is paramount, yet underperformance should not be tolerated. Do not be emotional or rash when making such decisions related to the legal entity. Seek second and third opinions.

5.3.8 COPYRIGHTS MANAGEMENT

No photography, video or copyright fee shall be charged for scholarly publications (including students' written and practiced-based thesis), neither for exhibition organizers. Request that citation standards are respected strictly. Creating enduring legacy and scholarly discourse demand diverse collaborations which must be eased of paywalls and gatekeepers. Gatekeepers exist in police states, colonial regimes, and dictatorships.

Charge a fee for commercial projects or merchandizing (commercial poster design, corporate brochures, fashion photography, flyer design, newspaper ads, postcard design, social media ads, vehicle wraps, video production, etc…) proportionate to current industry copyright rates and size of commercial project and budget. Accommodate demands that serve the legacy department.

The legal entity shall oversee the maintenance, preservation, and ethical use of my digital archives, including online materials, unpublished writings, and digital works.

6. CONCLUSION

This document has been prepared for you who will have to administer the legacy vehicle and process my deceased body. This is a basic framework, and many events and human interactions will not go as planned. This document is a guide, but reality will shape its execution. Adopt its principles and adapt as necessary.

Any disputes regarding the interpretation of this Will shall be resolved through binding arbitration rather than litigation. The arbitrator shall be a neutral third party agreed upon by both the legal entity's board and the disputing party.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I subscribe my name and affix my signature, this **3rd day** of **September** in the year **2088**.

Poem Johnson

Signed, published, and declared by the within named Testator in the presence of us who at his request, in his presence and in the presence of each other, hereunto subscribe our names as witnesses.

(1) Paloma Davis

Paloma Davis

(2) James Johnson

James Johnson

APPENDIX 1

FINAL WORDS

To ensure that those entrusted with my legacy make decisions with clarity and reason, I want to share a final framework: a list of common psychological biases and heuristics. These are pitfalls to avoid and tools to be used strategically in life and business. I have gathered them over the years and included a short bibliography for further exploration at the end. These insights are my final contribution to those I leave behind. Use them wisely. Awareness won't make you immune, but it can help you sidestep costly mistakes.

ASSOCIATION TENDENCY

People form automatic connections between ideas based on past experiences, even when no logical relationship exists. For example, someone who once had food poisoning from seafood may associate all seafood with sickness, even when the meal was not the cause.

ATTRIBUTION ERROR

Also called the *fundamental attribution error*, this bias occurs when people overemphasize personality traits and underestimate situational factors. For example, if someone cuts us off in traffic, we assume they are a reckless driver, but if we do the same, we blame it on running late or being distracted.

BASE RATE NEGLECT

People tend to ignore general statistical probabilities in favor of specific case details. For instance, a person buying a lottery ticket may focus on a story about a recent winner rather than the extremely low odds of winning. Imagine a nationwide coin-flipping contest where millions of people participate. Each round, they flip a coin, and only those who land on heads move forward. After 20 rounds, a small group remains, having flipped heads every time. Observers might assume these finalists have a special talent for coin-flipping, but in reality, their success was pure luck. Ignoring the base rate leads to the mistaken belief that the winners possessed skill rather than benefiting from randomness.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

When people experience conflicting beliefs or behaviors, they adjust their reasoning to reduce discomfort. For example, a person who smokes but knows it is harmful may justify their habit by saying, "My grandfather smoked every day and lived to be 90."

COMPETITION NEGLECT

People underestimate how many others are competing for the same goal, leading to overconfidence. A new business owner may assume their café will succeed because they have great coffee, neglecting the fact that many other cafés offer similar quality.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

People seek information that supports their existing beliefs while ignoring contradictory evidence. For example, someone who believes a certain diet is the best will only read studies supporting that diet and dismiss opposing research.

DEPRIVATION SUPER-REACTION SYNDROME

When people feel something is being unfairly restricted, they react more strongly than necessary. A child who normally ignores a toy may suddenly want it desperately when another child starts playing with it.

ENDOWMENT EFFECT

People overvalue things simply because they own them. For example, someone selling their used car may demand a much higher price than the market value because they are emotionally attached to it.

ENTRAPMENT

Entrapment occurs when people continue investing time, effort, or resources into a failing endeavor because they feel they have already committed too much to quit. For example, a student pursuing a difficult degree they no longer enjoy might refuse to switch majors because they have already spent years studying the subject, even though changing fields would make them happier in the long run. The fear of "wasting" past efforts keeps them trapped in an unfulfilling path.

ESCALATION OF COMMITMENT

Similar to entrapment, people continue investing in a poor decision instead of cutting their losses. A company might continue funding a failing project simply because they have already invested millions in it.

FRAMING EFFECTS

The way information is presented affects decisions. For example, people are more likely to choose a "95% fat-free" yogurt over one labeled "5% fat," even though they mean the same thing.

IKEA EFFECT

People place higher value on things they helped create. For instance, someone assembling their own furniture might believe it is better quality than an identical pre-assembled version.

ILLUSION OF CONTROL

People overestimate their ability to control events. A gambler may believe that throwing dice in a certain way increases their chances of winning, even though the outcome is purely random.

ILLUSION OF SKILL

People overestimate their expertise, assuming past success was due to skill rather than luck. For example, an investor who made a lucky stock pick may believe they have a unique ability to predict the market.

INDECISION BIAS

People avoid making choices due to fear of regret. Someone struggling to choose between two job offers might delay the decision so long that they lose both opportunities.

INSIDE BIAS

People focus too much on their personal perspective and underestimate external factors. A manager launching a new product might be overly optimistic, failing to consider industry trends or competitors' actions.

LOSS AVERSION

People feel the pain of losses more strongly than the pleasure of gains. For instance, losing $100 feels much worse than the joy of gaining $100.

LUCK NEGLECT

People attribute success solely to skill and ignore the role of luck. A successful artist may believe they succeeded because of their intelligence alone, overlooking the fortunate timing of their market entry.

OMISSION-COMMISSION BIAS

People prefer inaction over action, even when action would be beneficial. A person may refuse to get a vaccine because they fear potential side effects, even though the risks of the disease are much greater.

OPTIMISM BIAS

People believe they are less likely to experience negative events than others. For example, someone may not save for retirement because they assume they will always have enough income.

OUTCOME BIAS | RESULTING

People judge a decision based on the result rather than the quality of the decision-making process. A person who speeds and avoids a ticket may think reckless driving is safe, ignoring the fact that they were simply lucky.

OVERCONFIDENCE

Overconfidence causes people to overestimate their abilities or knowledge. For example, a driver who believes they are far better than average may take unnecessary risks, like texting while driving, assuming they can handle distractions better than others. This bias leads to poor decision-making and increased chances of failure.

PLANNING FALLACY

Planning Fallacy causes people to underestimate the time and costs of a task. A city might predict a bridge will take three years, ignoring past projects that took five due to delays (Base Rate Neglect). This leads to cost overruns and missed deadlines.

RECIPROCATION TENDENCY

People feel obligated to return favors. For example, if a neighbor helps you move, you might feel compelled to help them with yard work, even if it's inconvenient.

RECOGNITION BIAS

People prefer familiar names over unfamiliar ones. A person may trust a well-known brand over a lesser-known one, even if the quality is the same.

SUNK-COST FALLACY

People continue an effort due to past investments, even when quitting would be better. For instance, someone might keep watching a terrible movie because they already paid for the ticket.

SURVIVORSHIP BIAS

Survivorship Bias occurs when people focus only on successes while ignoring failures. A company studying past startups to learn the "keys to success" may overlook the thousands that failed despite using similar strategies. This leads to overestimating the likelihood of success and underestimating the role of luck.

THE GAMBLER'S FALLACY

People mistakenly believe past random events influence future ones. A roulette player might think that after five reds in a row, black is "due," even though each spin is independent.

THE HALO EFFECT

People assume one positive trait means overall excellence. If a person is attractive, others may assume they are also intelligent and kind, even without evidence.

TUNNEL VISION

People focus too narrowly on one factor, ignoring the bigger picture. A manager obsessed with cutting costs may neglect investments that could improve long-term efficiency.

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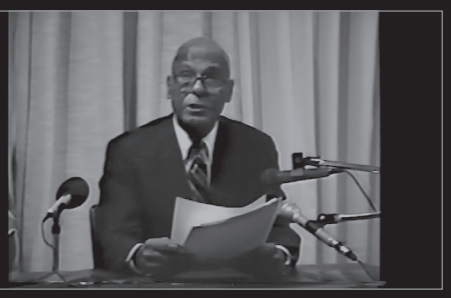

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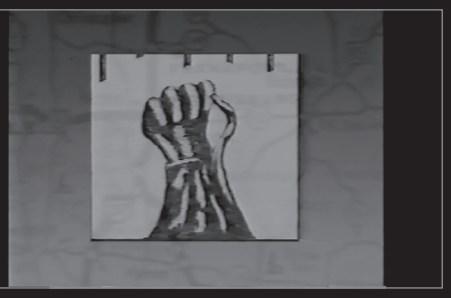

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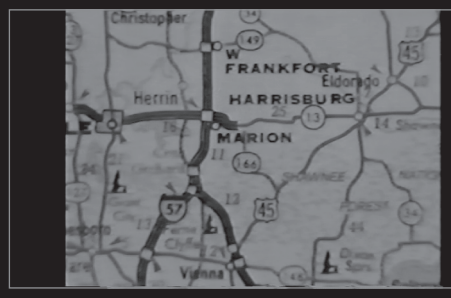

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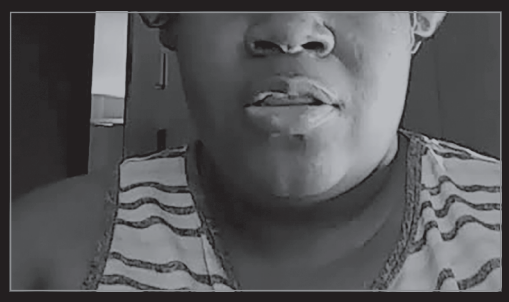

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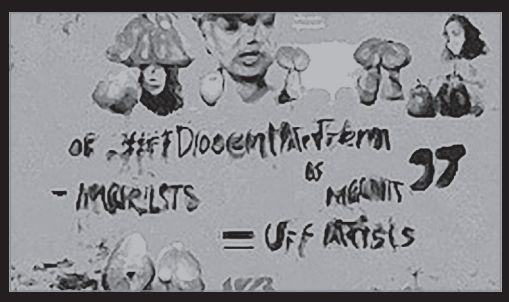

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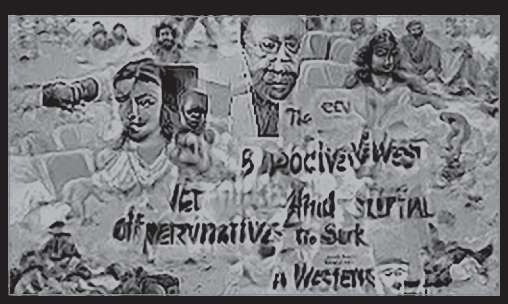

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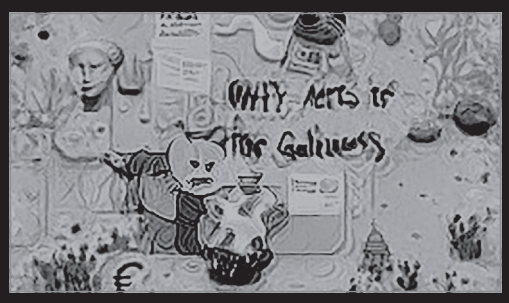

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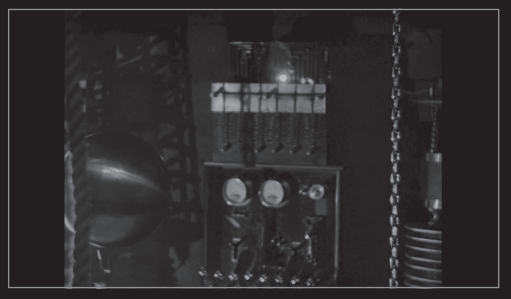

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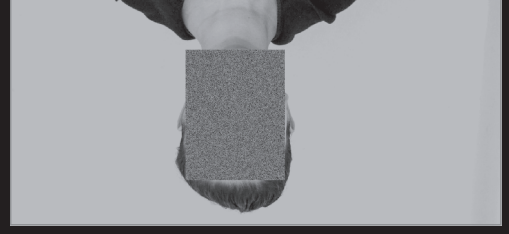
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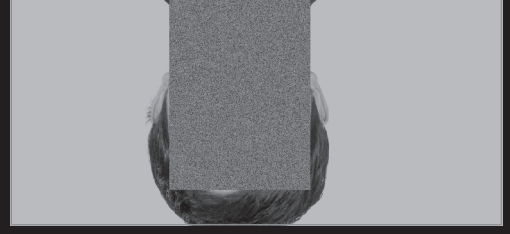
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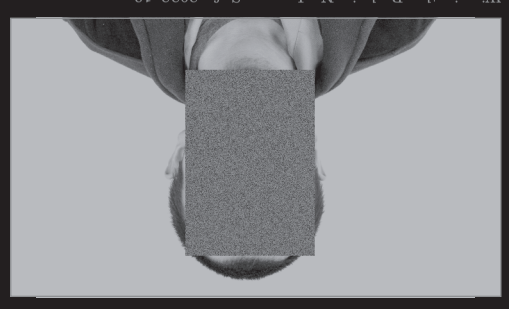
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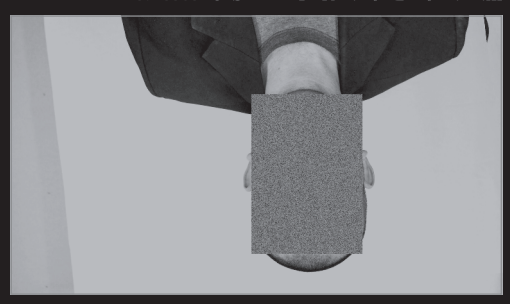
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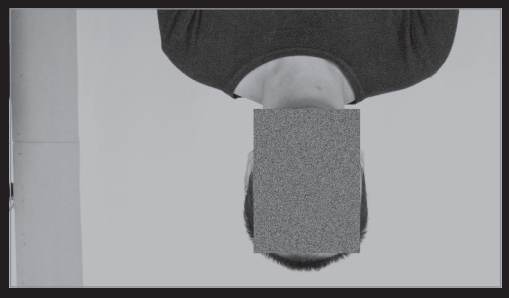
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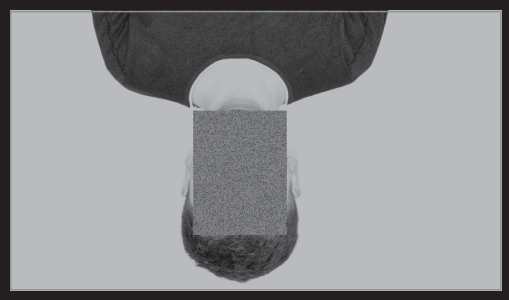
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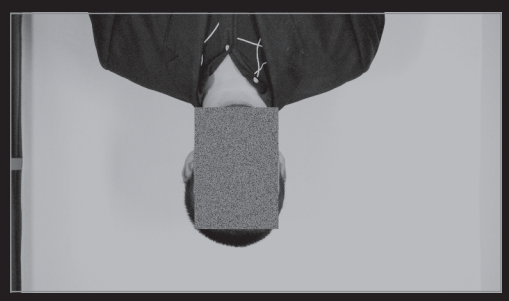
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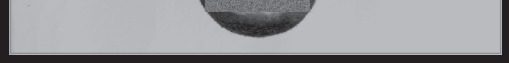
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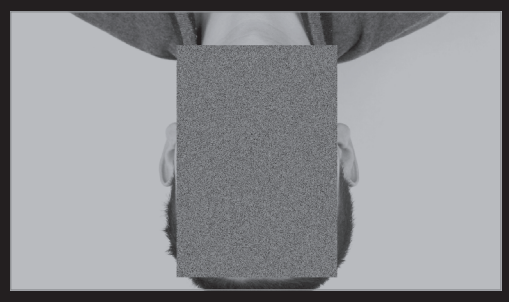
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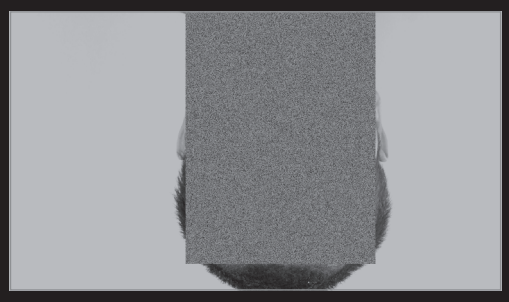
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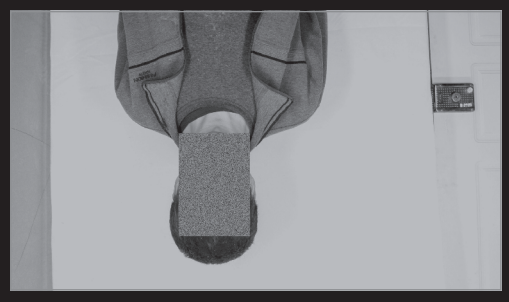
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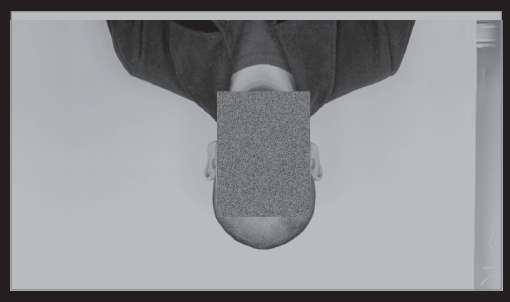
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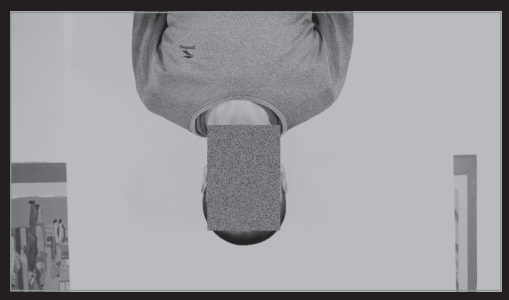
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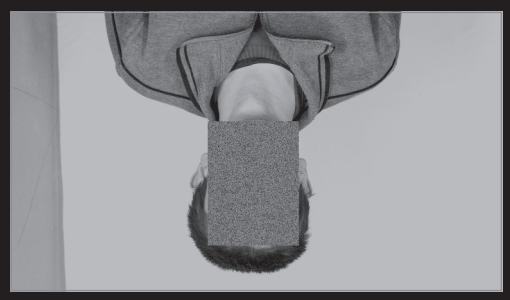
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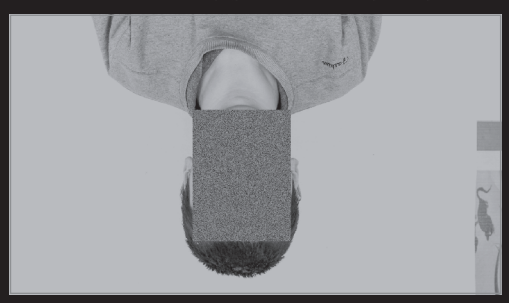
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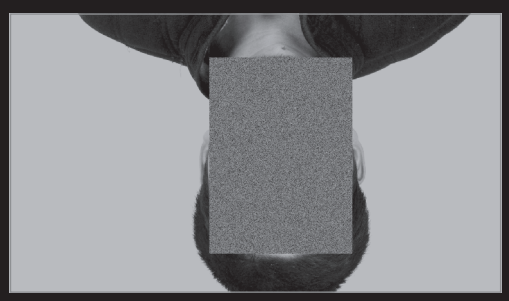
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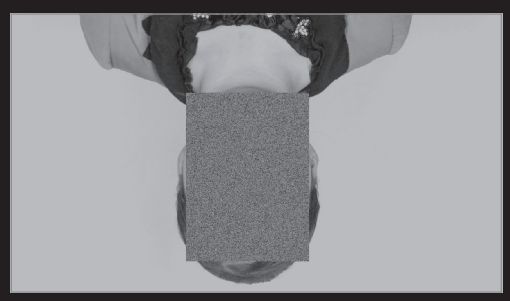
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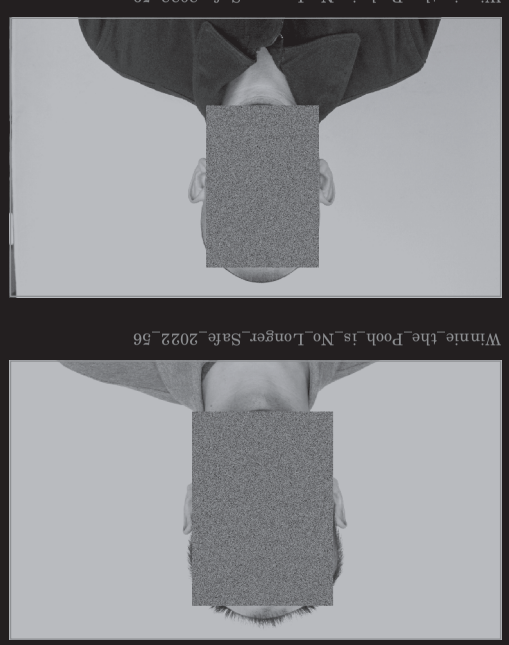
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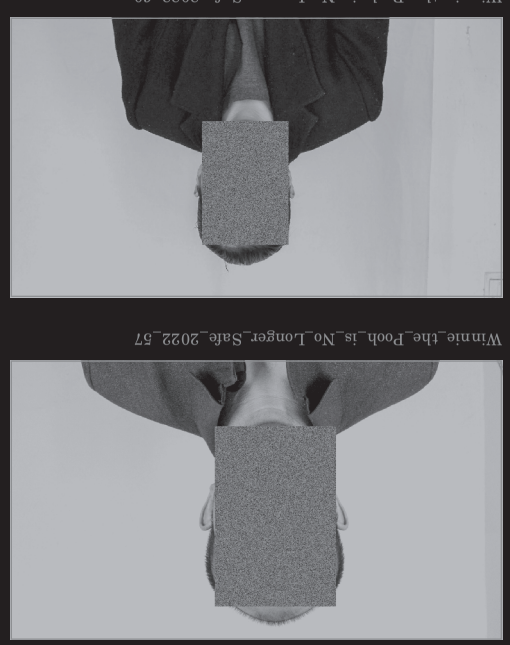
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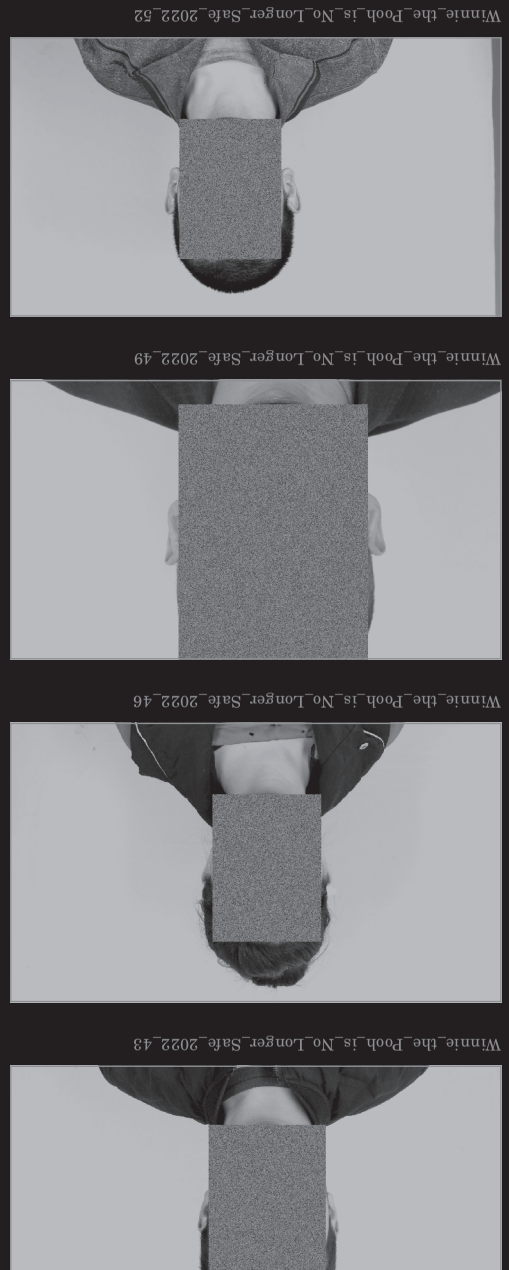
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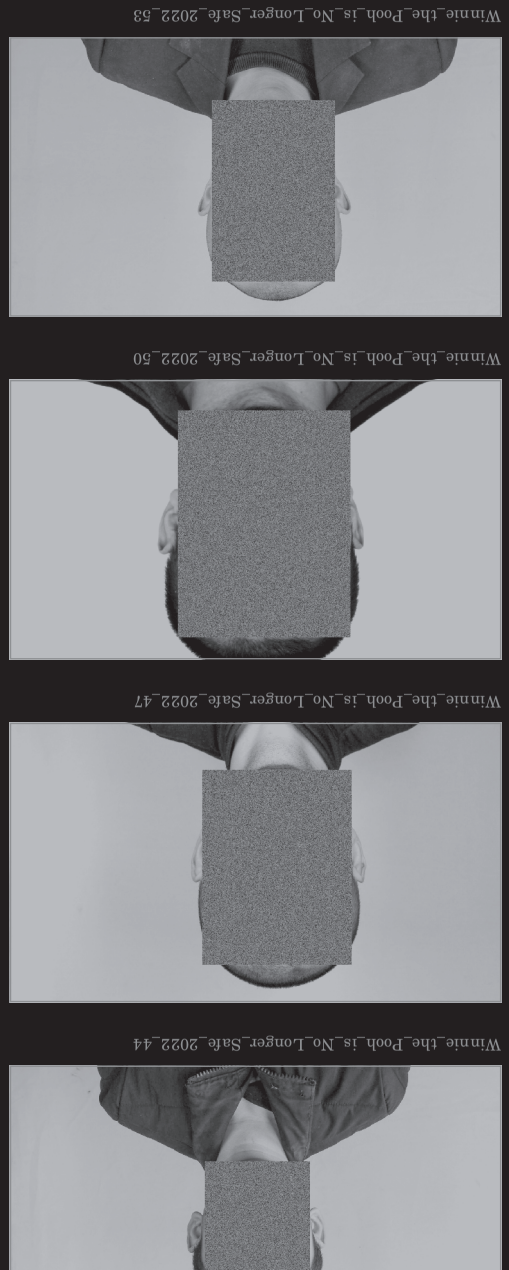
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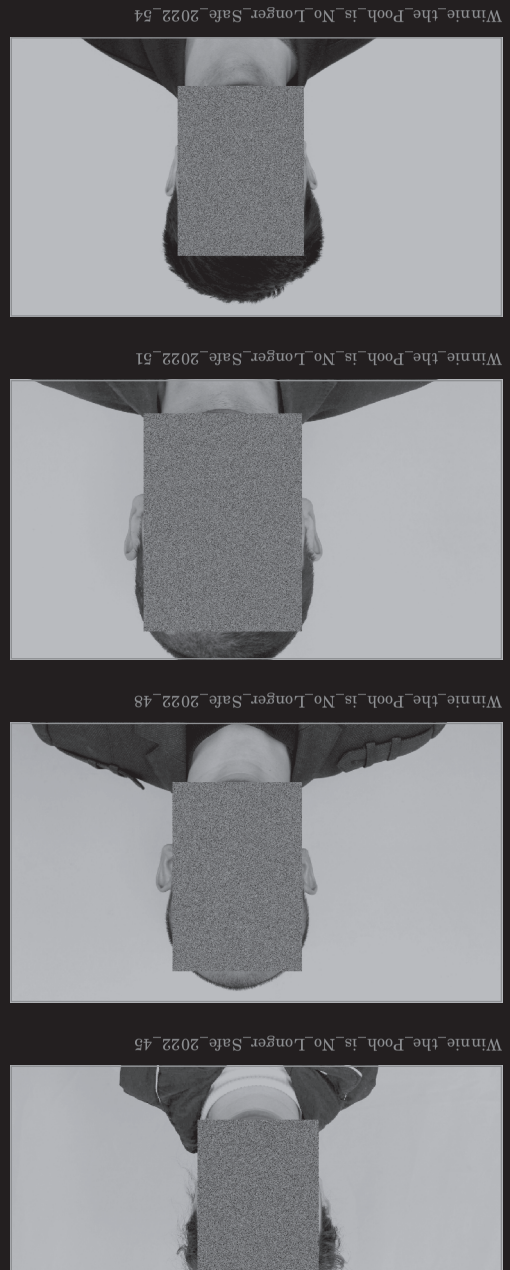
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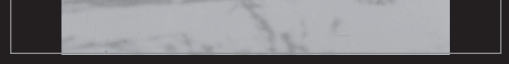

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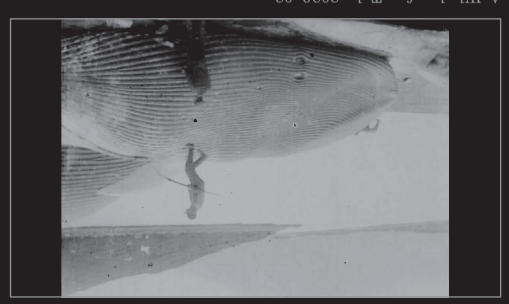

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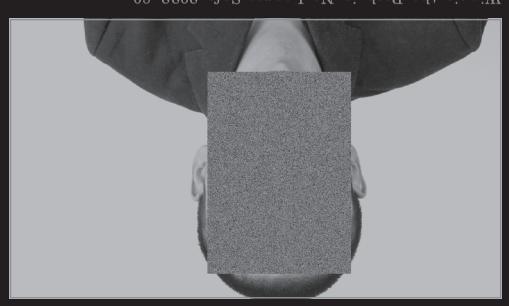

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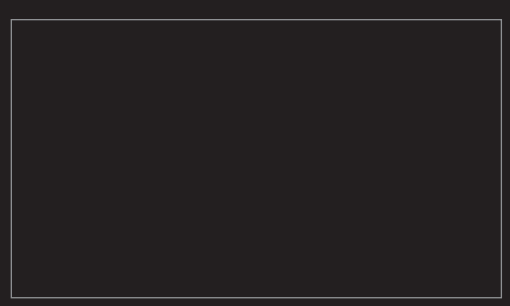

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Riot/Uprising_2023_01

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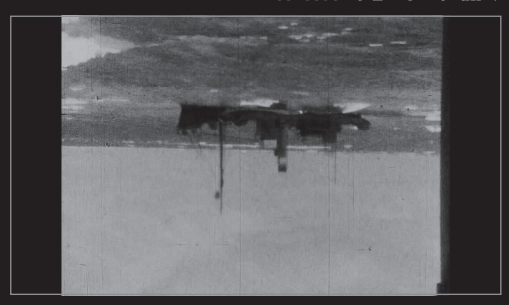

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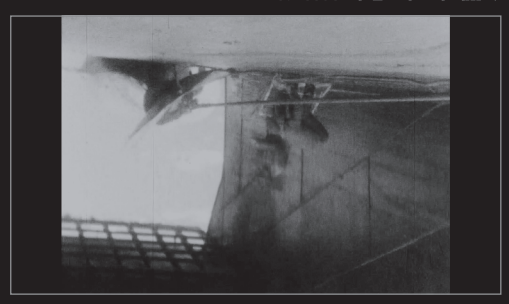

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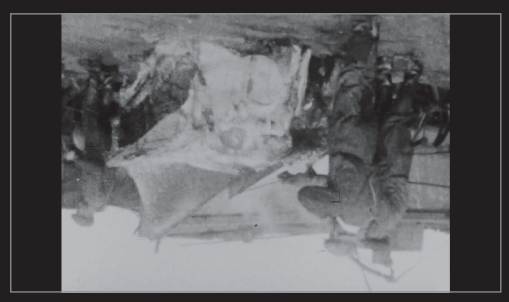

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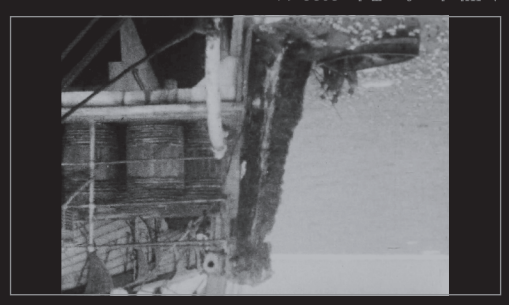

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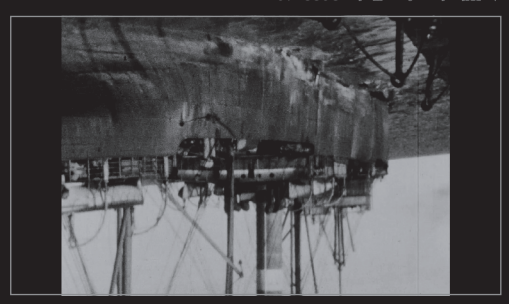

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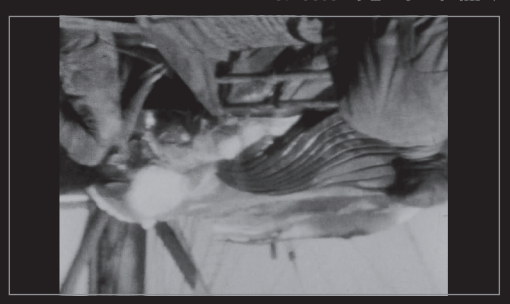

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A_Whale_of_a_Tale_2023_09

Riot/Uprising_2023_09

Riot/Uprising_2023_08

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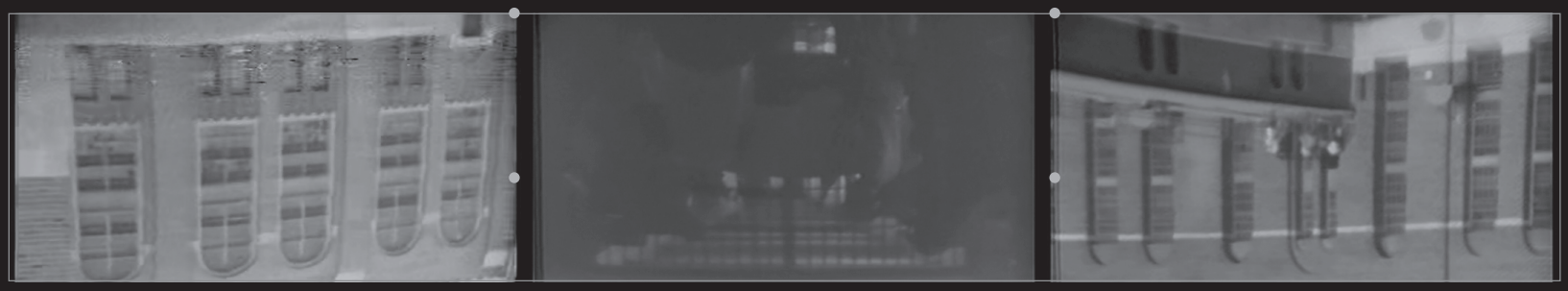

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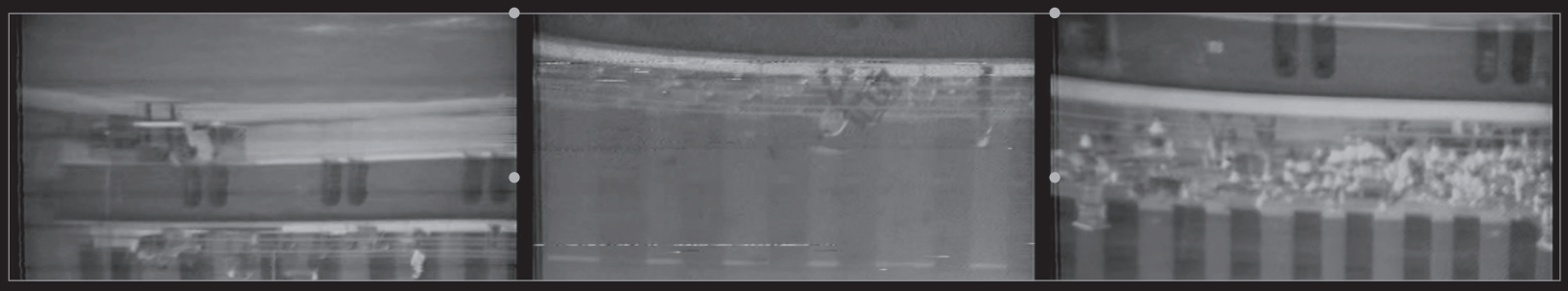

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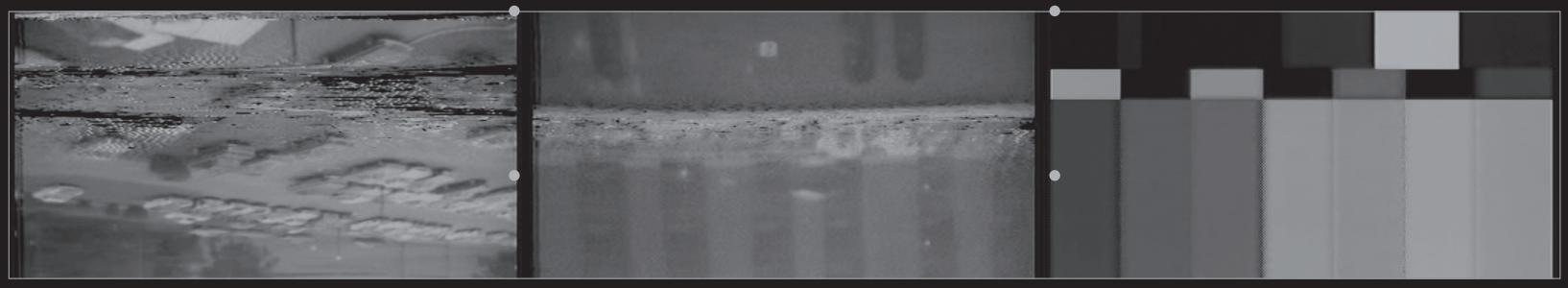
Riot/Uprising_2023_14



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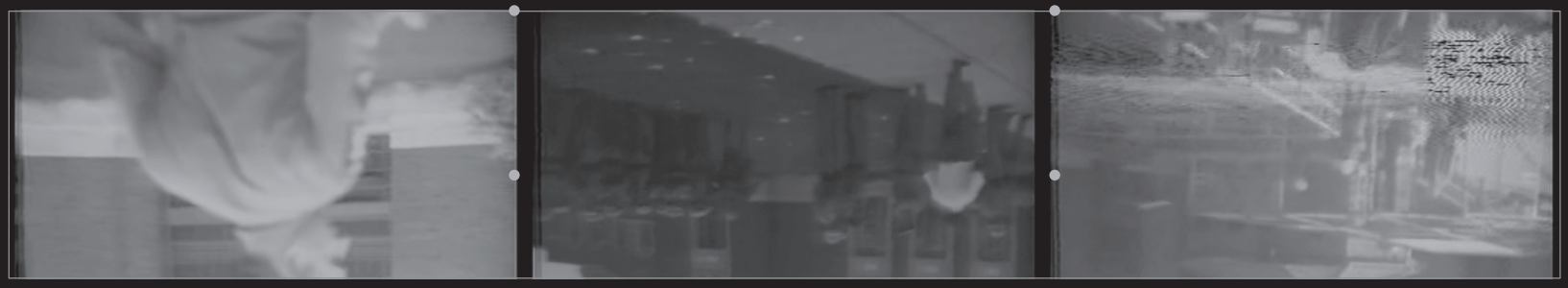

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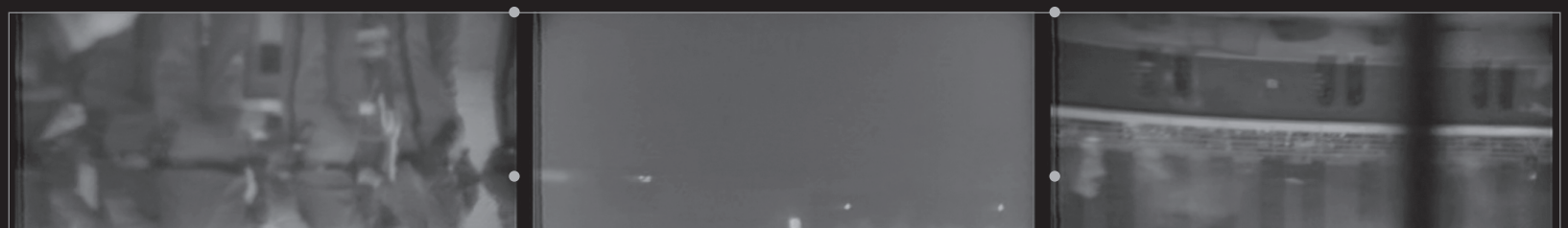

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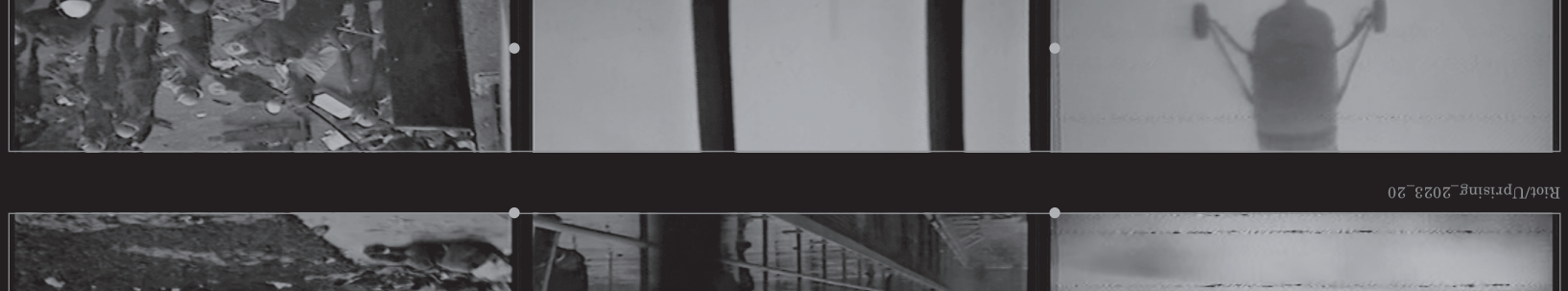

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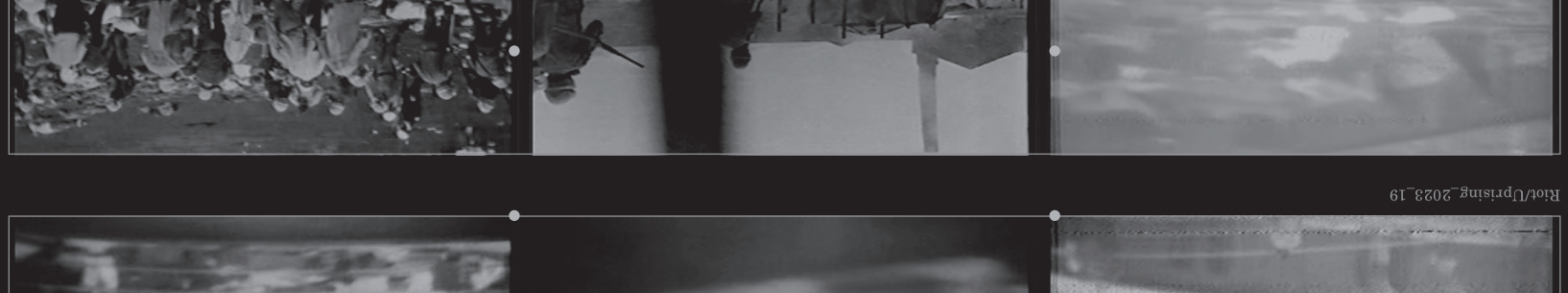

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Riot/Uprising_2023_21

Riot/Uprising_2023_20

Riot/Uprising_2023_19

Riot/Uprising_2023_18

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The_Sea_is_History_2024_19

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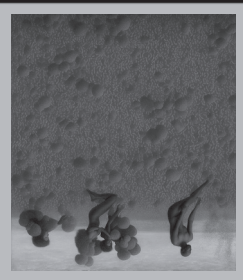

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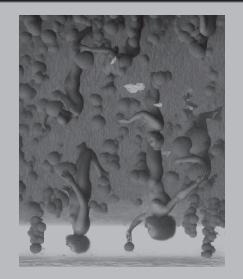

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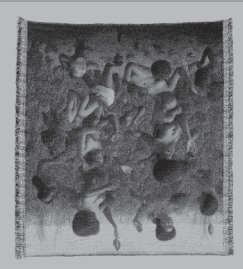

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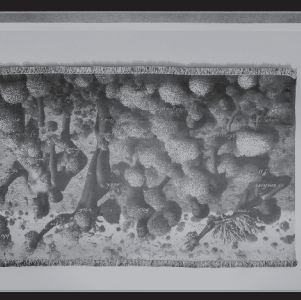

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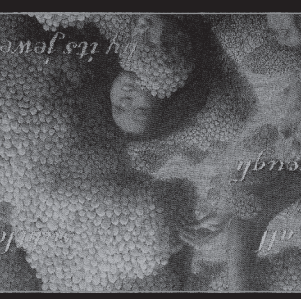

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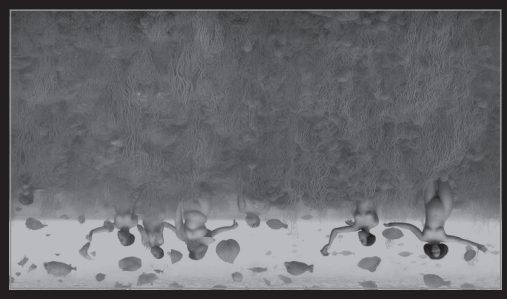

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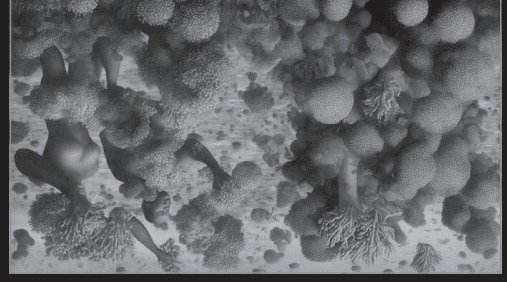

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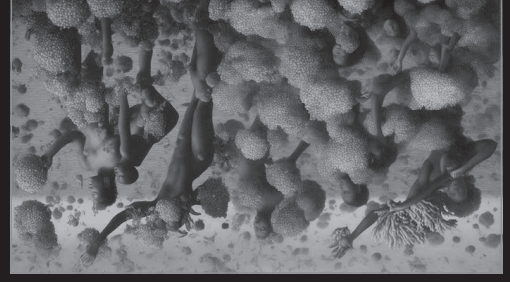

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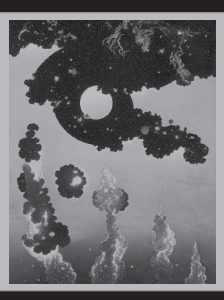

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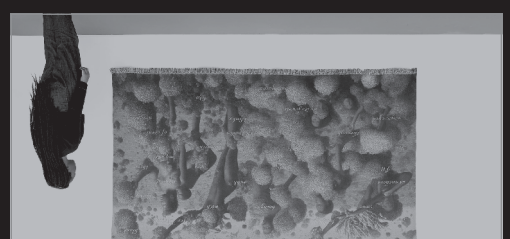



Sunsum_2024_01


Sunsum_2024_02


Sunsum_2024_03


Sunsum_2024_04

Sunsum_2024_05

Sunsum_2024_06

CONTROL UNIT

***Control Unit* (2021) is a digital color video with sound that reassembles archival footage from The Freedom Archives, centering on the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML) and its resistance to control unit prisons from 1985 to 2000. Through edited recordings of political prisoners, including Sekou Odinga, and women incarcerated in Lexington, the work revisits sensory deprivation, systemic racism, and the politics of confinement. By re-editing these materials, *Control Unit* offers a critical engagement with the history of incarceration and explores how archival film can serve as a tool for reclaiming suppressed narratives.**

Control_Unit_2021_01

▷ 00:31:25 ✲ Digital file format □ Found footage

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Monday, 8th of March 2021

I need to start somewhere, and I am turning to the Freedom Archives almost instinctively. I am not making a rational or calculated decision. I am seeking a place where the politics of access to documents align with my curiosity. I am thinking about the difference between state archives and community archives, and the Freedom Archives feels like a living space to tune into. I reached out, spoke with Nathaniel, Danielle and Claude, and listened to how they conceived of their collections. That initial conversation helped me ground what was still a loose idea (something to do with archival film practice) in a more tangible direction.

Today, I pulled everything I could find from "the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown" collection.

~~*Fragments of urgency, carried on tape.*~~

My process was simple: I took them all, placed them into a timeline, and began to assemble. Editing here meant assembling those fragments into a longer sequence, like reassembling a puzzle (pieces together to stitch). I wanted something to appear, I wanted to understand how the collection was structured, but through a web browser, it was, it prevented me from accessing the full picture. It was less about imposing a new order and more about

✣ Control unit prisons, lockdown

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

listening (seeing) what the images wanted to say when they were put side by side. Exporting that first sequence gave birth to "Control Unit". It is a found footage piece, but more importantly, it is a way of re-reading history through the act of cutting and re-joining. It is not easy to access these fragments. It is a lot of efforts to dig up and constantly ask for access (special permissions).

Revisiting these fragments made me wonder:

What drove the construction of the Marion Lockdown, and how does it still shape confinement today?

Re-editing the footage became a way of reclaiming what had been buried in an archive, making the suppressed visible again, ~~particularly in a moment shaped by the Black Lives Matter movement.~~ Reading "Out of Control: A 15-Year Battle Against Control Unit Prisons" by Nancy Kurshan deepened this process. The book gave me language and detail (the harshness of sensory deprivation, isolation, racialized violence) that resonated with the images on screen. It felt like the text and footage were speaking to each other. That dialogue shaped the rhythm of "Control Unit" (slow pacing, somber tones, and moments of rupture where voices break through). Editing became not just technical work but a political act (holding space for memory, insisting on the weight of these histories). The persistence of the

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

CEML, despite limited resources and systemic resistance, reminded me that archives are never neutral. ~~They are acts of preservation and defiance.~~

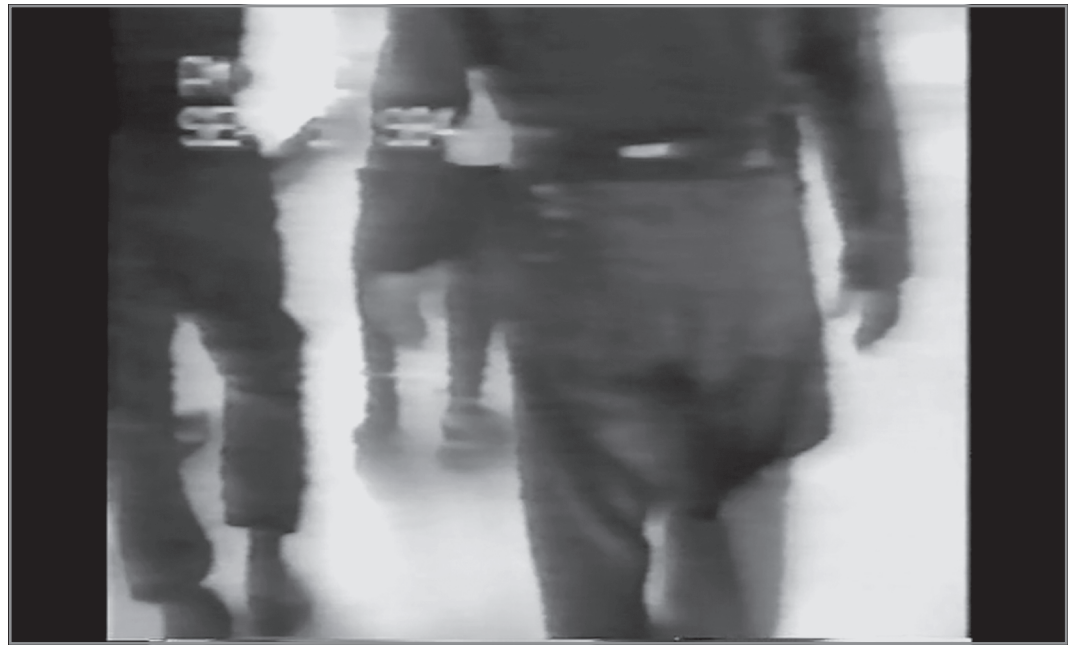
My role is very modest:

- Step into that space of struggle
- Handle the footage with care
- Consider ethics
- Let the fragments speak for themselves

Still from video “Control Unit” (2021) showing Judge Bruce Wright on 4 November 1989 seated at a table before pale curtains, reading from papers into several microphones. Wearing a dark suit and striped tie, he faces the camera as he speaks about the legacy of racism in United States courts and the Supreme Court’s role in sustaining it.

Still from video “Control Unit” (2021) showing two concrete watchtowers at Marion Prison in Marion, Illinois, circa 1988. The octagonal glass cabins rise above perimeter fences and a gatehouse under a dull grey sky, with bare trees and clipped grass in the foreground, the soft, grainy image bearing the flicker and tracking noise typical of worn video home system (VHS) tape.

Still from video “Control Unit” (2021) showing a close view of two hands meeting mid-frame, fingers splayed. An arm in a red sleeve reaches from the left toward an open palm attached to a patterned purple sleeve on the right.



Still from video “Control Unit” (2021) showing three figures in dark uniforms walking away down a bright corridor. Their backs face the camera as they move in loose formation toward an open doorway, the blue-tinted, low-resolution image recalling worn VHS footage.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

The video artwork *Control Unit* contributes to the evolving discourse on archival film practices and visual culture. By employing such methodologies as archival re-reading, recontextualization, and deconstruction, the work opens a space for reflecting on how archival practices intersect with histories of oppression, resistance, and memory.

At its core, *Control Unit* reclaims historical footage from the Freedom Archives, particularly materials from the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML). Revisiting and reassembling archival fragments here serves not only to preserve the documented resistance against control unit prisons but also to challenge dominant narratives of state power. The video exposes the human cost of incarceration, from the sensory deprivation of Marion's control unit cells to the lived experiences of political prisoners like Sekou Odinga and the women held in Lexington. These images are not static records but active sites of inquiry, enabling a critical re-reading of histories often marginalized or suppressed.

The work's aesthetic approach carries a form of labor. The simple act of assembling, presenting, and discussing these fragments becomes a way of working through access and making histories available as shared knowledge. By re-accessing the footage, the film lets new connections and questions surface, making visible aspects of control and resistance that might otherwise remain buried. In this sense, the piece shows how archival film can be used not only to revisit history but also to reflect on how power and memory are carried through images.

Control Unit provides a resource for researchers interested in media studies, particularly in understanding how archival material can serve as a medium for resistance. Its critical engagement with the politics of memory invites interdisciplinary inquiry, from the ethics of representation to the cultural impact of incarceration systems. The video's methodologies inspire further exploration of how art can both preserve histories of resistance and confront contemporary injustices, ensuring that these narratives continue to resonate across time and disciplines.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Control Unit stands within a lineage of contemporary art that critically examines systems of power and representation through experimental practices. Its use of found footage situates it alongside works that repurpose archival materials to disrupt dominant narratives, engaging in a dialogue with both the history of the medium and the broader sociopolitical forces shaping it.

For example, Cameron Rowland's body of work critiques the prison-industrial complex not only through the display of objects manufactured by incarcerated workers, but also by reshaping the very economic terms under which art circulates. For his exhibition *91020000* at Artists Space, Rowland sourced benches, desks, manhole rings, and uniforms produced by prisoners in New York and California through Corcraft and CALPIA—state-run prison industries that pay inmates wages averaging less than one dollar per hour. Rather than sell these works, Rowland introduced a "rental-at-cost" contract: institutions could only rent the objects for five years, paying the exact cost of the prison-made goods themselves.

By fixing the value of the artwork to the below-market price of prison labor, Rowland forced museums and collectors to confront their participation in the same economies of exploitation that sustain state power. The legal contract, publicly displayed in captions and exhibition materials, made the transactional structure inseparable from the artistic form. In this way, his work withholds ownership, disrupts art-market expectations of property, and materializes the ties between racial capitalism, dispossession, and the field of art.

Placed alongside works like *Control Unit*, Rowland's project shows how recontextualization—whether through found footage or state-manufactured objects—can expose the hidden infrastructures of systemic oppression. Both practices transform existing materials into acts of resistance, using the archive and the contract as tools to reveal how power operates and to demand accountability from institutions.

In employing archival footage from the Freedom Archives, *Control Unit* participates in the broader artistic practice of recontextualizing historical materials. This technique not only preserves memory but also reframes it, offering counter-histories. This aligns with experimental cinema's commitment to uncovering suppressed perspectives, with influences ranging from Harun Farocki's politically charged investigations of visual culture to Arthur Jafa's explorations of racialized imagery. *Control Unit* uses deconstruction and reassembly to expose the violence of incarceration and the human resilience that resists it, echoing the material and conceptual strategies of these predecessors.

Beyond its formal and aesthetic strategies, *Control Unit* connects to larger cultural movements advocating for anti-racism, and the politics of archival storytelling. It engages directly with the legacies of systemic racism, exploring how control unit prisons became instruments of state control over marginalized communities. This echoes contemporary dialogues within art and activism that critique the entangled histories of colonialism, capitalism, and state violence. By revisiting and repurposing archival footage, *Control Unit* positions itself as both an artistic and political intervention, fostering a critical interrogation of past and present injustices.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

Control Unit delves into the historical context of the Marion Lockdown, a pivotal moment in U.S. carceral history that saw the transformation of Marion Federal Penitentiary into the first all-control unit prison. By utilizing archival footage from The Freedom Archives and material produced by the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML), the film connects the dehumanizing conditions of control unit prisons to systemic racial and political oppression.

The Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (1985–2000) was central to documenting and resisting the proliferation of control unit prisons, exposing their use of indefinite solitary confinement and sensory deprivation as tools of social control. The archival footage in *Control Unit*—including interviews with political prisoners and a cell re-creation staged by the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown to show the extreme confinement—brings these histories into view, revealing how control unit prisons were used to suppress political dissent and target marginalized communities. By re-editing these archival materials, *Control Unit* revisits the narratives of confinement and resistance documented by the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown. The film does not aim to provide a definitive history but to bring fragments back into circulation, making visible how these struggles were recorded and how they continue to echo in the present. In doing so, it keeps alive stories that are often overlooked, inviting reflection on their relevance today.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Control Unit opens avenues for future research, particularly in the realms of archival practices, visual culture, and carceral politics[1]. One key area is the ethics of re-editing archival material, focusing on questions of authorship, authenticity, and representation. How does recontextualizing historical footage reshape narratives, and what responsibilities do artists bear when reinterpreting sensitive, often traumatic, materials?

1 Carceral politics refers to the political, social, and economic systems, policies, and ideologies that govern the use, expansion, and maintenance of carceral institutions, such as prisons, detention centers, and other systems of surveillance and control. It encompasses the ways in which power is exercised through incarceration, punishment, and surveillance, and how these systems intersect with broader societal issues like race, class, gender, and state authority.

The film's visual and sensory portrayal of systemic control also invites further inquiry. Researchers could explore how media—through framing, pacing, and sensory manipulation—reflects and critiques mechanisms of confinement and state power. This line of study might examine parallels between artistic representations of control and the lived experiences of those subjected to carceral systems.

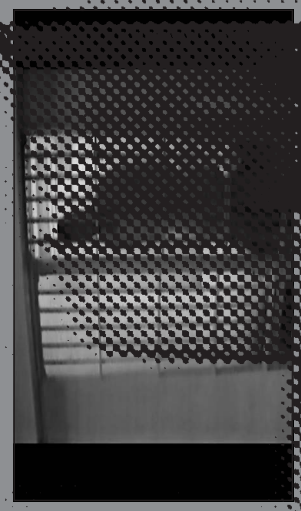
Control Unit also serves as a foundation for exploring the intersections of art and activism. Future research could investigate how artistic practices contribute to movements against mass incarceration, linking creative methodologies to broader strategies of resistance and advocacy. This includes examining the role of art in building solidarity, raising awareness, and disrupting entrenched narratives around incarceration.

Finally, the work's methodologies—such as deconstruction and layered visual/auditory elements—offer a framework for studying media materiality, memory, and human rights. By dissecting how archives function as sites of both power and resistance, researchers can better understand the role of media in preserving marginalized histories and challenging systemic oppression, ensuring their relevance for future generations.

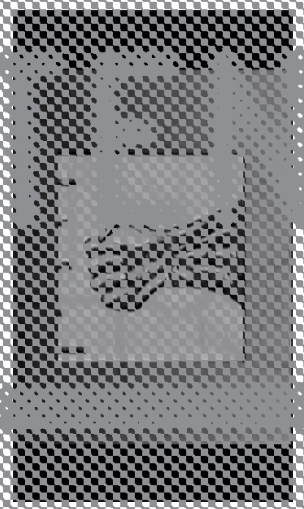
Control Unit - 2021 - 18

▷ 00:31:25 ☼ Digital file format □ Found footage

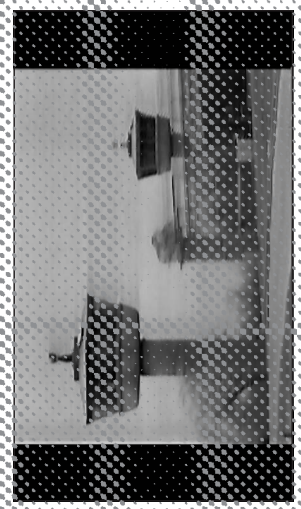
Control unit prisons, lockdown



Comedy Unit, 2021, 98

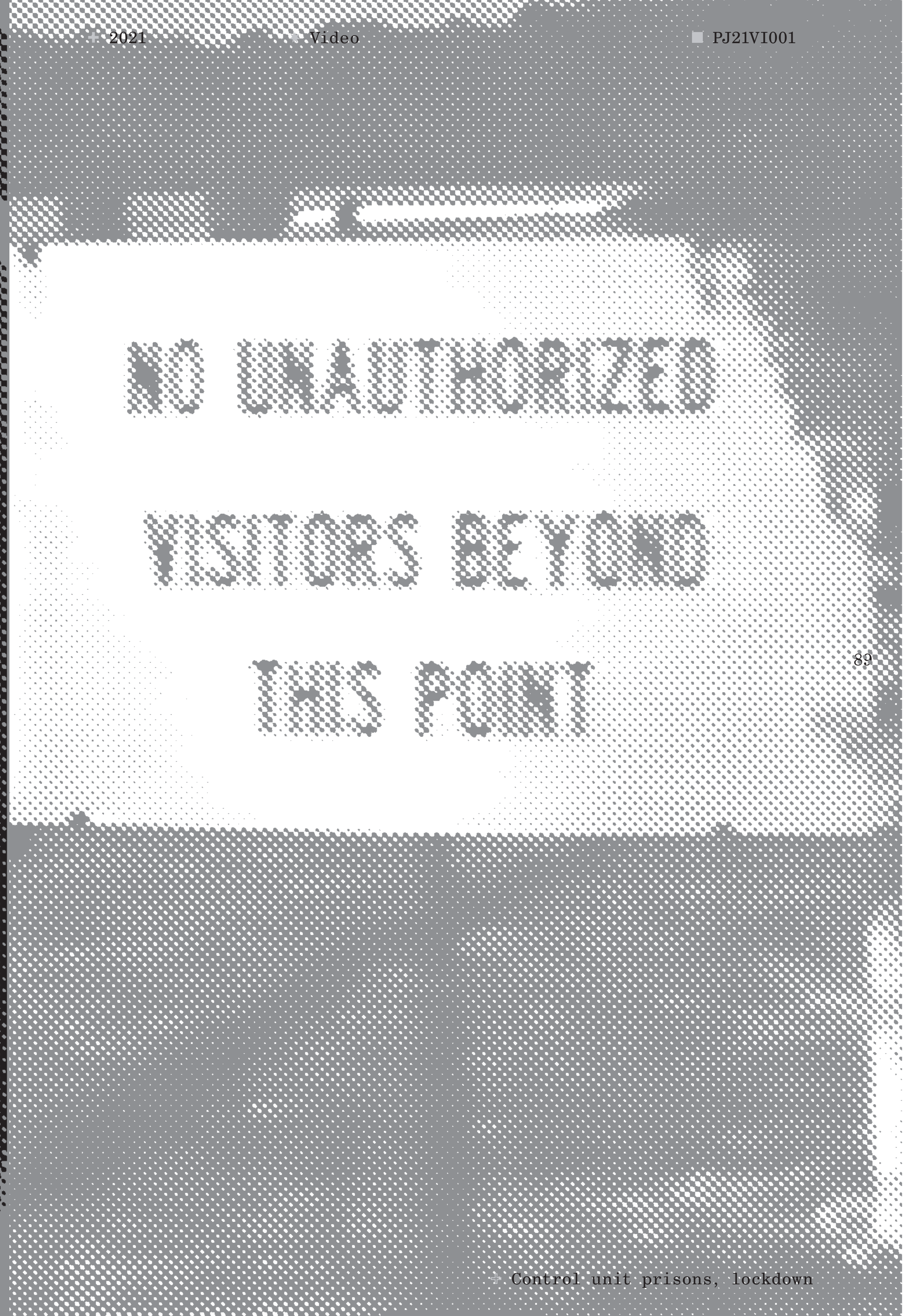


Cell, 92



Control Unit, 2021, 38

00:31:25 Digital file format Found footage Control unit prisons, lockdown


NO UNAUTHORIZED
VISITORS BEYOND
THIS POINT

ANSWERING MACHINES

Answering Machines **(2021) is a series of 96 digital color videos with sound, featuring Amazon Mechanical Turk workers performing a simple scripted task: to record an answering machine message while making a defiant hand gesture. Each participant interprets the instruction individually, introducing variations that underscore the personal dimensions of outsourced labor. The series examines the commodification of human action in digital marketplaces, highlighting the tension between impersonal automation and individual expression while encapsulating the dual themes of compliance and resistance within the digital workforce.** ***Answering Machines*** **draws attention to the fragmented, anonymous conditions of digital labor and the systems that render its workers functionally invisible.**

Answering_Machines_2021_01

▷ 00:13:45 ✲ Digital file format □ Outsourcing

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Saturday, 24th of July 2021

I am starting a work that might be titled "Answering Machines."

I am curious about the intersection between technology, labor and crowdsourcing. I am trying Amazon Mechanical Turk: a platform where people perform tiny tasks, but anonymously via a cloud system. Their website displays almost as a click bait:

"Access a global, on-demand, 24x7 workforce,"

"crowdsourcing marketplace that makes it easier for individuals and businesses to outsource their processes and jobs to a distributed workforce who can perform these tasks virtually."

I am wondering what happens when I encounter the workers on the "other side"?
Meeting their faces, expressions and responses.

Today, I asked workers to record themselves as if they were answering machines. While doing that, I demanded that they display their middle fingers to the camera.

The task was simple: "pretend you are an answering machine." But adding the gesture made it something else, a

✣ Middle finger, Amazon mechanical turk

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

crack in the system. It was still labor, but also a refusal, a small rebellion carried inside the task.

Watching these clips, I was struck by how different they all looked like. Some felt dry, almost mechanical. Others were funny, playful. Some looked tired, others sharp, defiant. Each one carried the worker's own mood, their own circumstances, even if hidden behind the task.

The anonymity seems to break a bit.

The task is less about technology itself than about the people behind it, the invisible crowd that makes our digital lives run smoothly. By showing their gestures, I want to highlight not just the monotony or absurdity of this kind of labor, but also the resilience, the tiny sparks of personality and resistance that leak through.

I feel like, I am testing my own limits. It feels uncomfortable and "borderline" ethically. I don't think the "ethics" within this project can ever meet ethical standards. The claim that "giving" a face to anonymize worker online is "special" is a farce.

How wrong I am? (I am curious)
What are the feelings attached to the tasks?
Santiago Sierra: methods = provocation and controversy.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

What does it mean to intervene in non-predicted ways in a gig economic system?

Exploitation, satire, critique, or all at once?

I want to sit with that discomfort, to see how this task can open a space for conversation without pretending to solve the contradictions it reveals.

The work isn't a finished statement. I am thinking of a process of inquiry.

Perhaps it is a dialogue between workers and viewers, between labor and technology, between efficiency and humanity.

A reminder that behind every automated voice, every outsourced click, there is someone on the other side, negotiating their own dignity.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Wednesday 28th of July 2021

I keep circling back to other artists, exhibitions, fragments that stay in my head while working on "Answering Machines." They act like echoes, not exact models, but reminders that I'm not alone in trying to think about digital culture, labor, archives, gestures.

"Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age" (2011).

I think of this exhibition as a kind of compass.

What can an artist do when faced with the endless flood of online images and data?

Reordering, reinterpreting, preserving. That feels close to what I am doing here. I am archiving small human responses inside a labor platform. Maybe.

Ed Atkins, "Warm, Warm, Warm Spring Mouths" (2013).

I remember the intensity of his videos—digital, yet too close, almost embarrassing in their intimacy.
I think about this when watching workers pretend to be machines. The cold frame, the scripted task, but underneath: emotion, awkwardness, the physical body leaking through.

Matthieu Delaurme's "HundredSpotPictures" (2012).

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

An archive of gestures and movements. Patterns, but also anomalies. This resonates with how the answering machine recordings all follow the same instruction, yet each breaks it in a different way. The beauty of repetition that never fully repeats.

Lorna Mills' "Ways of Something" (2014–2015).

A digital quilt. Too many voices, all stitched together. I think of my clips the same way: fragmented, uneven, stitched into a sequence that reflects not order but multiplicity.

Siebren Versteeg, "Something for Everyone" (2007).

Endless churn of digital images. For me, Mechanical Turk is the human version of that churn: repetitive, yet always with a trace of individuality. The labor hides inside the repetition, but also resists it.

Carlo Alberto Treccani, Giovanni Fredi, Giorgio Minunno, "Bovezzo Mano Armata" (2014).

Their work reminds me how easily sensitive material flows online, detached from its source. That ease unsettles me. It mirrors the way tasks are outsourced—personal, intimate actions reduced to a line in a job queue.
These influences don't form a neat theory. They sit around the project like companions. They make me think about archives, repetition, visibility, intimacy, exploitation. They push me to see "Answering Machines" not just as my work but

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

as part of a larger conversation: about how digital economies touch our lives, how traces of identity always leak through.

I keep thinking about the shows and books that sit beside me. Not just references, more companions, nudging me to open, to broaden my views.

"I Was Raised on the Internet" (2018, MCA Chicago).

This exhibition pushed me to think harder about digital identity and the way online platforms reshape how we behave, how we feel. I saw in it the same tension I notice in Mechanical Turk: personal gestures flattened into platform logic, the blur between intimacy and automation.

"A Little Bit of History Repeated" (2001, Kunst Werke Berlin).

The weight of history looping back. Old contexts re-appearing in new forms. It reminded me that what we call "new" digital labor is also recycled (echoes of older labor systems, dressed differently).

Batia Suter "Parallel Encyclopedia" (2007).

Endless images assembled, like an avalanche of fragments. Exhaustive, overwhelming, but also strangely revealing. It made me think of Mechanical Turk tasks as another kind of endless compilation, and the challenge of how to arrange them so that hidden patterns surface.

Susanne Kriemann "10%: Concerning the Image Archive of a Nuclear Research Reactor" (2021).

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

A very different archive, highly specialized, but her attention to responsibility stayed with me. What does it mean to handle material that carries weight—political, ethical, human? I feel that tension with the workers' recordings: fragile, small, yet also charged.

Reminder that digital tasks, even fleeting ones, leave marks. They carry history, ethics, contradictions. They aren't neutral. And maybe my role is just to hold these fragments together for a while, long enough to see what they reveal.

One night in a crowded cybercafé. The glow of monitors everywhere, the constant clicking of keyboards. It felt mechanical, isolating. I overheard a someone saying (half-joking)

"Are we just answering machines?"

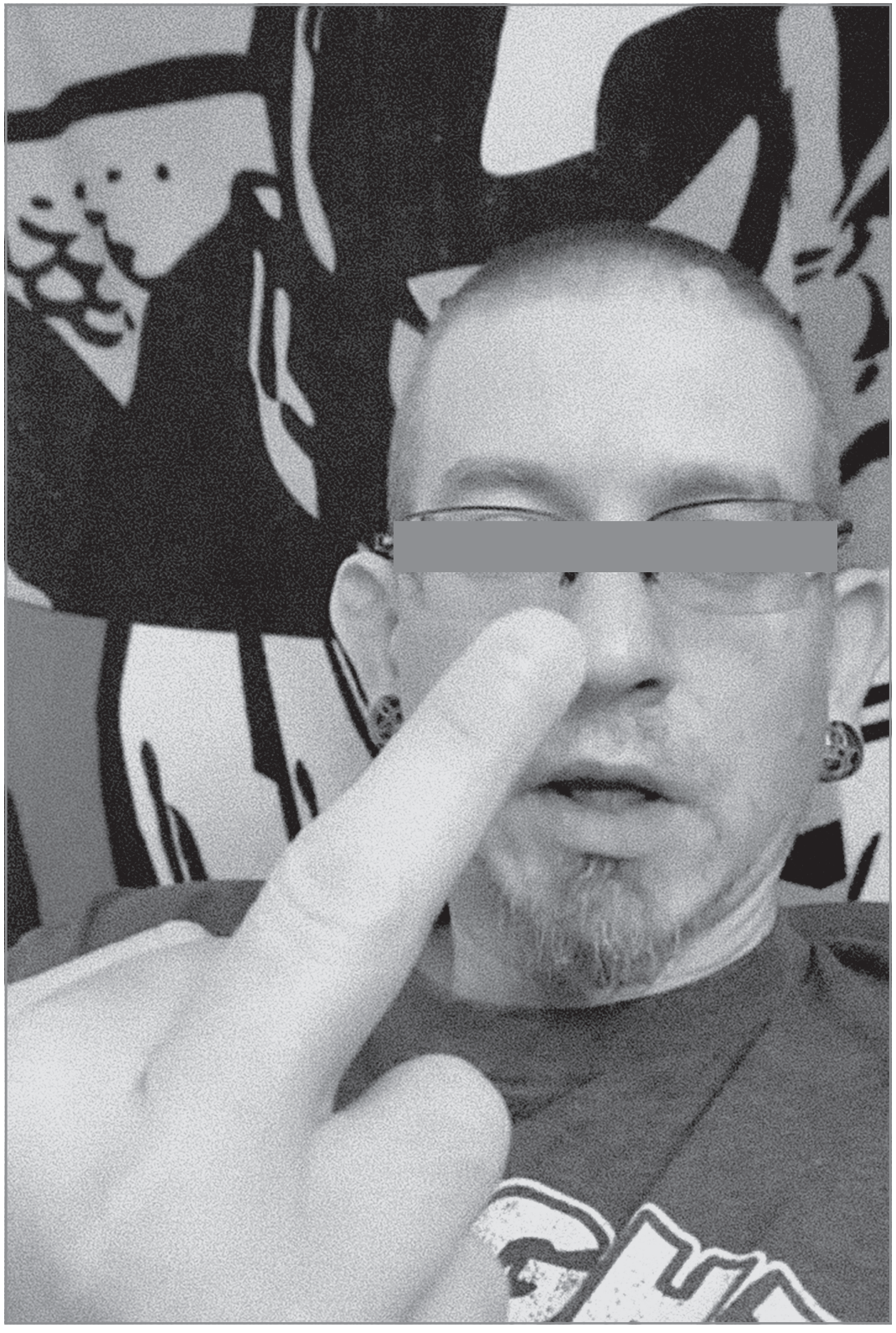
That sentence stayed with me. From there, I started looking closer at digital labor. Platforms where people are reduced to IDs, faceless, completing tasks without contact. Human work that doesn't feel human. I wanted to find a way to show this paradox (tasks performed by people, but stripped of presence). That's how I began. Exposing the hidden backbone of digital economies, where labor is invisible but essential. I turned to Amazon Mechanical

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Turk, asked workers to record themselves as answering machines. At first it was just that. Then I added the instruction:

"Show your middle finger to the camera."

That gesture changed everything. Suddenly it wasn't just simulation, it was defiance. Still a job, still a task, but also a refusal. A signal of frustration, resistance, satire—tiny cracks in the system. Not a neat critique or documentary. It's an interruption. A face, confrontational, awkward, funny, tired (where usually there is none). A reminder that even inside the most anonymized systems, people are behind it. I always thought about the metaphor of "the cloud" as stupid. It is marketing spin technobabble. There are individuals and infrastructures behind everything. Absence blindness at its best. I am also thinking that the amount of "science" inside my phone is insane.



Still from video "Answering Machines" (2021), from a series of 96 digital color videos with sound, showing an adult person in glasses seated against a graphic wall hanging, arm lifted so their hand dominates the foreground, middle finger pointed toward the viewer in a stark, confrontational pose.

Still from video “Answering Machines” (2021), from a series of 96 digital color videos with sound, showing a young person with glasses looking directly into the camera in a domestic interior, hand raised close to the lens with middle finger extended in a blunt, confrontational gesture.

▷ 00:13:45 ✲ Digital file format □ Outsourcing

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

The piece highlights the absurdity and depersonalization inherent in tasks that are both trivial and deeply personal, performed for minimal remuneration under precarious conditions. Johnson’s decision to juxtapose the mechanical role of answering machines with a gesture of defiance explicitly reveals the tension between the workers’ prescribed roles and their individual agency. The performers are not only executing a task; they are asserting their identity and resistance against a system that commodifies their labor.

Simultaneously, *Answering Machines* serves as a critique of broader socio-economic systems that prioritize efficiency and profit over human dignity and social justice. By satirizing the impersonal nature of digital interactions, Johnson challenges the viewer to recognize their complicity in a system that often overlooks the human suffering it perpetuates. This critique transforms the piece from being merely a task completion into a mirror reflecting our digital dependencies and the struggles embedded within them.

The piece instigates a critical discourse on the responsibilities of artists when engaging with social issues through digital mediums. Johnson negotiates his role as both a commentator and a participant within these dynamics, enhancing our understanding of contemporary art’s potential to provoke societal reassessment and instigate change. This strategic positioning underscores the dialogic nature of *Answering Machines*, inviting viewers to contemplate the future of labor, identity, and resistance in the age of digital reproduction.

Bojana Kunst’s insights in *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (2015) resonate with Johnson’s approach, where the performative acts in the artwork blur the lines between art, labor, and capitalist constructs. Kunst argues that the performative aspect of art significantly engages with and critiques the labor structures within capitalist frameworks. In *Answering Machines*, this is evident as the workers’ performances highlight the mechanized nature of their labor—both performed for the camera and as a metaphorical enactment of their routinized digital tasks.

The artwork’s performative dimension extends to the audience, who are impelled to reflect on their role within the economic and social systems necessitating such forms of labor. This interaction begs a dynamic performance of engagement with the work’s themes, facilitated by Kunst’s theoretical framework. Such engagement underscores the complexities of navigating agency and complicity in digital and capitalist contexts, affirming contemporary art’s critical role in examining and potentially altering these constructs.

In summary, *Answering Machines* not only manifests the conditions of digital labor through a performative lens but also challenges the viewer to engage actively with the ethical and social ramifications of the gig economy. Through its layered performances, Johnson’s work becomes a tool for reflection and dialogue about the interplay of art, labor, and capitalism in contemporary society.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Answering Machines explores the intersections of technology, labor, and contemporary art, embedding itself firmly within a global discourse that includes digital culture and labor commodification. Johnson’s piece uses the performative actions of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to delve into nuanced themes explored by other artists such as Hito Steyerl, Trevor Paglen, Bureau d’études, Ed Fornieles, Amalia Ulman, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Taryn Simon, each bringing different perspectives on how technology intersects with human agency and systems of control.

Johnson’s creative strategy, involving Mechanical Turk workers as subjects and co-creators, echoes Paglen’s approach of demystifying obscured networks and infrastructures that commodify everyday life, albeit through a direct

✣ Middle finger, Amazon mechanical turk

human performance lens. Similarly, the investigative zeal of Steyerl, with her focus on the media's manipulation of information through digital platforms, finds a methodological kinship with Johnson. Both use the medium of video to make visible the often-anonymized human elements within digital interactions, punctuated in Johnson's work by the symbolic defiance of the middle finger juxtaposing the automated nature of answering machines against a backdrop of human resistance.

Further expanding this dialogue, Ed Fornieles and Amalia Ulman explore digital identity and performative aspects of online behavior, paralleling Johnson's critique of digital labor dynamics. Fornieles' immersive environments simulating social media dynamics reflect Johnson's depiction of the commodified labor landscape, while Ulman's crafted narratives on Instagram resonate with Johnson's use of Mechanical Turk as a platform for critiquing personal and detached digital interactions.

Additionally, Thomas Hirschhorn's use of everyday materials to tackle socio-political themes invites audiences to reflect on their participatory role in these dynamics, mirroring Johnson's critique through the direct involvement of his subjects. Taryn Simon's explorations into hidden infrastructures also complement Johnson's revealing of the labor behind digital tasks, enriching the conversation around the obscured and the visible in contemporary labor practices.

In *Answering Machines*, Johnson not only critiques the reduction of personal interactions to mechanical outputs but also challenges the audience's passive reception of digital technology. By engaging Turk workers in the critique of their conditions and involving them in an act of artistic creation, Johnson transforms viewers into active participants, thus broadening the scope of spectatorship and challenging prevailing socio-economic systems that prioritize efficiency over human dignity. *Answering Machines* stands as a commentary on the dignity and (in)visibility of labor in the digitized world, challenging us to reconsider our role within these pervasive technological and capitalist structures.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

In 2021, the globe began to emerge from the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic bruised and fundamentally altered. The labor market witnessed seismic shifts, most notably the proliferation of remote work and the heightened reliance on digital platforms for employment. *Answering Machines* comments on and critiques emerging labor paradigms characterized by digital gig economy platforms.

The historical significance of 2021 as a juncture for labor cannot be overstated. The pandemic accelerated the already growing digital gig economy, validating digital as the predominant medium for not just communication, but also for employment. Workers, separated from traditional workspaces, found themselves in precarious, often anonymized tasks—facets Johnson critiques in his artwork. The performative element of his work—workers acting as machines—mirrors the broader dehumanization and mechanization of labor in digital mediums. Johnson situates his work in this historical lineage, using digital video to challenge viewer perceptions of labor and technology. The strategic use of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers highlights anxieties about the facelessness and disposability of gig workers, urging a re-evaluation of how society values labor in a post-pandemic world.

This artwork's significance is compounded by the use of satire and symbolic defiance in the workers' gestures, confronting viewers with the latent indignities borne by those entrenched in the gig economy. This technique of defiance links back to a rich history of protest art, recalling how artists like Diego Rivera used murals to comment on workers' rights and social justice in the early 20th century.

Answering Machines not only dialogues with technological and labor issues unveiled or accelerated by the pandemic but also reflects on a broader historical concern with the dignity and visibility of labor. It exemplifies how contemporary art remains a vital lens through which we can explore and critique evolving socio-economic landscapes. Johnson's piece underscores the unresolved tensions between economic efficiency and human equity, a recurrent theme in the history of work and art now seen through the prism of digital labor in the twenty-first century.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Answering Machines opens avenues for forward-looking scholarship in the digital inflection of labor practices and artistic activism. Notably, this piece posits technology both as a facilitator and an alienator in the gig economy, beckoning a multidisciplinary approach to its study. Future scholarship could productively dissect the layers of agency and automatism within digital labor markets, extending beyond the immediate framework of Mechanical Turk to similar platforms that abstract human input into commodifiable tasks.

Further analysis could incorporate a sociotechnological lens to scrutinize how such platforms as depicted in Johnson's work reconfigure both worker identity and labor dynamics. This could include comparative studies with traditional freelance markets, evaluating how digitization influences job security, worker satisfaction, and identity construction.

Johnson's use the middle finger invites a dive into the language of resistance within digital labor contexts. Researchers could explore this symbolic resistance against depersonalization, correlating with historical acts of defiance in labor movements. Besides sociocultural interpretations, this aspect also warrants psychological and philosophical inquiries into the nature of protest in increasingly virtual realms.

Answering Machines can be situated within a trajectory of works that utilize technology to critique technology itself, challenging the viewer's acquiescence in faceless economic systems. Comparing Johnson's strategies to historical precedents in artistic activism will enrich discussions around the evolution of art forms responding to industrial and post-industrial labor conditions.

TASKS N°1

Please use your imagination and produce an audio recording of your voice answering the phone while you are not there – like for a voicemail or answering machine.

[format: .wav, .mp3]

TASK N°2

Please take a photograph of yourself (selfie) pointing your middle finger at the camera.

OR

Please take a short video of yourself (selfie) pointing your middle finger at the camera while recording a voicemail or answering machine as if you were addressing someone while you are not there.

ANSWERING MACHINE EXAMPLES:

You have reached [your name]. Thank you for calling. Please leave your name, number and a message, and I will get right back to you.

You've reached [your name].
I'm sorry, but I'm temporarily unavailable. Please leave your name and number, and I'll return your call as soon as possible.

Thank you for calling. I apologize for missing your call. I'm busy right now, but if you leave your name, number and message, I will return your call as soon as possible.

Thank you for calling. I'm sorry for being unable to take your call at the moment. Please leave me your name, number and message and I'll return your call at the earliest opportunity.

Hi, you've reached [your name]. I'm away from my desk. Please leave your name, number and a message, and I will get right back to you.

Hi, you've reached the voicemail of [your name]. I'm away from my desk, in a meeting or on the other line. Please leave your name, number and a brief message after the tone and I will get back to you as soon as I can.

Hello. You've reached the office of [your name]. I will be out of the office from [date] to [date]. Please leave your contact information with a brief message, and I will call you back as soon as I have the chance. If you need to speak with someone urgently, please contact [name of colleague] at [email or phone number]. Thanks for calling.

Hi, It's [your name]. I'm in a meeting at the moment. Please leave your message and contact information, and I will get back to you within [realistic timeframe]. Thank you for calling.

Hey, there. You've reached [your name]. Please leave me a brief message about the reason you are calling and your contact information. I will call you right back at the earliest opportunity. Have a nice day!

Hi, you've reached [your name]. I'm unavailable right now on official duties. But if you leave your name and number and a brief message on why you are calling, I will call you back at the earliest opportunity.

✚ Middle finger, Amazon mechanical turk


Answering_Machines_2021_02

@P0LICEP0LICE

@P0licP0lice (2022) was a Twitter bot[1] that operated for 500 consecutive days, producing one post per day. Conceived in response to Documenta 15, the project functioned as an algorithmic artwork, adopting the persona of a fictional art historian who issued satirical commentaries on curatorial authority and archival appraisal. It examined how institutional power determines what is remembered or excluded from cultural narratives. The content of each post, comprising both texts and images, was generated through machine learning systems including GPT-3 (a large-scale language model for text generation)[2], CLIP (a neural network linking images and text)[3], and SIREN (a neural representation network for image synthesis).[4]

1 https://x.com/p0licep0lice (The profile bio of the account declares: "Mushroom co-operative enhanced by a decolonized stochastic parrot and neural networks @documenta__ #documentafifteen #lumbung #humor"). Twitter was an American microblogging and social networking service on which users post and interact with messages known as "tweets." Registered users can post, like, and retweet tweets, but unregistered users can only read those that are publicly available. The website twitter.com was renamed x.com July 23, 2023.

2 Tom B. Brown et al., "Language Models Are Few-Shot Learners," *ArXiv:2005.14165 [Cs]*, July 22, 2020, http://arxiv.org/abs/2005.14165.

3 Alec Radford et al., "Learning Transferable Visual Models From Natural Language Supervision," *ArXiv:2103.00020 [Cs]*, February 26, 2021, http://arxiv.org/abs/2103.00020.

4 Vincent Sitzmann et al., "Implicit Neural Representations with Periodic Activation Functions," *ArXiv:2006.09661 [Cs, Eess]*, June 17, 2020, http://arxiv.org/abs/2006.09661.; Ryan Murdock and Phil Wang, *Lucidrains/Deep-Daze*, Python, 2021, https://github.com/lucidrains/deep-daze.

@P0licP0lice_2022_01

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

January 17th 2022

I visited several Twitter bots that sparked my interest, such as @chernobylstatus by Brian Moore, a bot that periodically reports on the safety of Chernobyl (reminding us that full recovery is still estimated to take around 3,000 years). I was ignoring this medium for a while. Perhaps it's a mistake. I am considering using a bot to convey a message that keeps lingering in my brain:

"Appraisal is the most significant archival function"

I am reading this basic manual from the Society of American Archivists on Appraisal and Accessioning. The chapter itself is titled "Importance of Appraisal". I am not looking for evidence of my frustration around access to Archives. This is not confirmation bias.

"Appraisal is the area of the greatest professional challenge to the archivist. In an existential context, the archivist bears responsibility for deciding which aspects of society and which specific activities shall be documented in the records retained for future use. Research may be paralyzed either by unwitting distraction or by preserving too much."

Basically, appraisal is a process of determining whether records and other materials have permanent (archival) value. The evaluation process determines what will be kept

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

by the archives and what will be destroyed. It means that this process alone determines what will be remembered and what will be forgotten.

Howard Zinn (Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest, 1977)

"the collection of records, papers, and memoirs, as well as oral history, is biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure: we learn most about the rich, not the poor; the successful, not the failures; the old, not the young; the politically active, not the politically alienated; men, not women; white, not black; free people rather than prisoners; civilians rather than soldiers; officers rather than enlisted men."

January 19th 2022

I am thinking of building a persona on Twitter. A posthumanist absurdist troll. It would perform as an art historian, although sliding into satire, poking at the edges (memory, power, margins, archives). [redacted], but parasitic. The occasion could be Documenta 15 in Kassel. The account would shadow the event, producing small texts (satirical, strange, half-serious, [redacted] anti-archive). The posts would not "explain" art, but distort reason. Point out absences, biases and mock the authority of art-historical speech. Borrow the weight of the archive

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

only to flip it. A way to test how authority is performed online. [redacted]. Margins speaking back. Automated (relinquishing control over authorship). Beyond the basic inputs and parameters, anything spoken by the bot should be acceptable, posted as such. An experiment.

February 7th, 2022.

Instead of waiting for recognition (staff pick), the automated system inserts itself in small ways into the discourse and digital history of the exhibition, through daily tweets aimed at the exhibition's Twitter handle @ documenta__.

From the bot I created, I got:

> @PolicePolice is a thief who steals time from #documentafifteen's visitors and resell it to Web-Crawler on the dark web. @documenta__ #lumbung

> @PolicePolice are bears who have been watching people (including artists) for hours and days in order to understand how they transport their bodies from one place to another @documenta__ #documentafifteen #lumbung

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

@PolicePolice are monsters feeding on your imagination, created and nurtured with your own hands. You looked at it from time to time and said: "I wish I could eat this." @documenta__ #documentafifteen #lumbung

A collective of owls who love the dark and live in an abandoned school building in the middle of a field that seems endless, wonders how they can end starvation. @documenta__ #documentafifteen #lumbung

Plants growing on the site of #documentafifteen hideouts in Kassel are interested in your memory of past events. @documenta__ #lumbung

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

February 8th, 2022.

I am Reading "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots" by Emily Bender (2021) and it is shifting how I think about my own work. It's not only about the abstract ethics of AI, but about what happens when I use these models inside an artwork. The authors warn about scale: the bigger the model, the bigger the hidden costs (energy, bias, opacity). In "Answering Machines" and "@PolicePolice," I am literally depending on these systems to generate texts and images. The critique isn't theoretical; it sits inside the artwork. The piece embodies the paradox: I use the tool and expose the risks that come with it. What strikes me most is the call for documentation and transparency. Mechanical Turk, for example, hides the worker. GPT-3 hides the training data. Both systems erase the conditions of production. My project tries to make that erasure visible (perhaps a kind of counter-documentation). The article is about language models, but for me it's also about artistic practice: how to show the seams, how to hold open the uncomfortable questions: who builds these systems, at what cost, who benefits, who is erased? The artwork is where I put those questions into play.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

@P0liceP0lice preserves a continuous record of an automated artistic intervention during Documenta 15. Across five hundred days, the bot posted texts and images that experimented with satire, distortion, and critique. Experienced both directly on x.com and as a digital archive, the project documents a moment when large-scale language and image models such as GPT-3, CLIP, and SIREN were first entering contemporary art practice.

The value of this archive lies in how it mirrors and unsettles the process of appraisal. Instead of selecting what should be kept, the bot produced without distinction, leaving behind an unfiltered record. This method highlights how arbitrariness and bias shape what is remembered or forgotten in cultural institutions. For future researchers, the series provides evidence of how automation and authorship were tested as artistic strategies in the early 2020s.

Beyond its immediate context, *@P0liceP0lice* offers insight into the cultural debates surrounding curatorial authority, institutional power, and the ethics of AI. The project's long-term significance rests not in individual posts but in the accumulated archive, which captures the intersection of satire, memory, and machine mediation. As a record, it stands as both a case study of algorithmic critique and a reference point for understanding how digital art engaged with the politics of archives in this period.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Since the mid-2010s, artificial intelligence has moved from the margins of media art into a central site of debate across culture and technology. The public release of large-scale models and image generators accelerated this shift, making AI both widely accessible and highly contested. These developments raised urgent questions about authorship, bias, and the hidden material costs of computation.

Philosopher Nick Bostrom's *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (2013) dramatized the potential long-term consequences of advanced AI, warning how machine systems might reinforce cultural narratives without ethical foresight. Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (2021) grounded these concerns in the present, revealing the labor, data extraction, and environmental costs hidden behind AI interfaces. Together, their perspectives frame the stakes of using AI not only as a technical resource but as a cultural actor.

Projects such as *@P0liceP0lice* belong to this wider field, where artists employ AI as collaborator, performer, and subject of critique. By adopting the persona of a satirical art historian and posting daily automated messages, the work stages AI as both medium and method of critical reflection. In doing so, it aligns with contemporary artistic practices that foreground the infrastructures and exclusions shaping digital culture, emphasizing that the stakes of AI are as much political and historical as they are technical.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

The artwork *@P0liceP0lice* is positioned at the confluence of technology and critical art practice, echoing historical movements that sought to disrupt traditional narratives through innovative mediums. The absurdist discourse generated in *@P0liceP0lice* echoes Dadaists' use of montage to critique cultural narratives or Conceptual artists' emphasis on ideas over aesthetic form. Like these movements, *@P0liceP0lice* uses the disruptive potential of AI to challenge and redefine the parameters of archival value, illuminating how technology can both perpetuate and challenge historical biases.

This project comments on the dynamics of power within archival systems, a theme prevalent in both the historical avant-garde and contemporary critical practices, especially in monumental exhibitions such as Documenta. Historically, Documenta has served as a pivotal platform for artists who challenge societal structures and push the boundaries of conventional artistic expression. *@P0liceP0lice* does not merely participate in this tradition but critiques it through modern technological means. By automating the role of an art critic, the project engages in a meta-critical dialogue about the power curators wield over archival narratives, paralleling past artistic practices that questioned authoritative discourses in art and society such as the work of Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Andrea Fraser, and Fred Wilson.

By embedding AI within the critical framework of a renowned art exhibition, *@P0liceP0lice* also mirrors and advances discussions around the "archival turn" in contemporary art, where artists and theorists critique and reimagine archives as sites of power negotiation. This resonates with scholarly discourses, such as those espoused by theorists like Hal Foster and Okwui Enwezor, who have interrogated how contemporary art engages with and redefines historical documentation and memory.

FUTURE RESEARCH

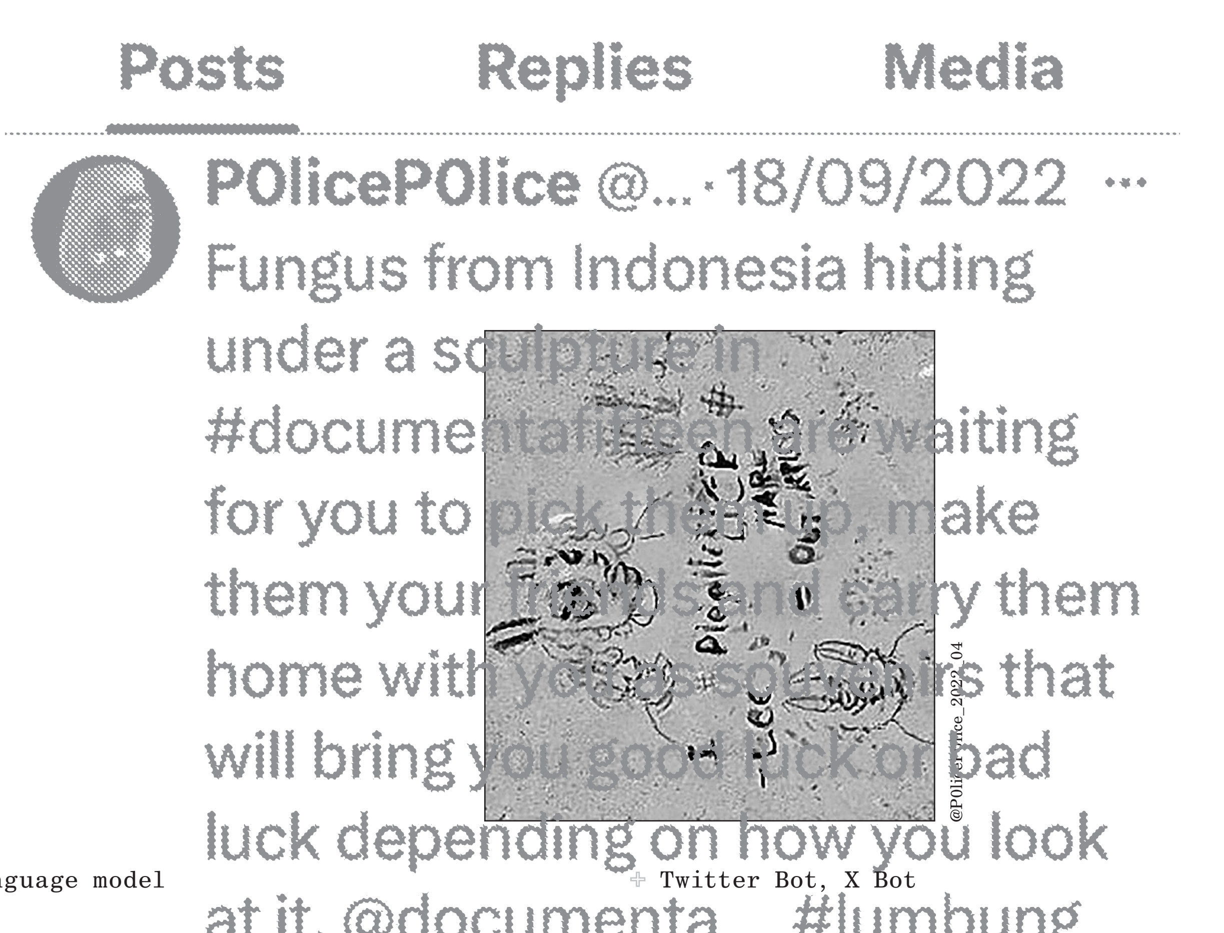
The artwork *@P0liceP0lice* invites further interrogation at the intersection between artificial intelligence and cultural critique. Inspired by this project, several avenues of study emerge, each promising to elaborate the themes and methodologies it employs, particularly regarding AI's role in maintaining dissident voices within a democratic system.

For example, a deeper exploration into AI's capability to engage with and reinterpret historical narratives could be undertaken. This involves analyzing how artificially generated critiques might influence the preservation of memory and the selective historiography that dominates cultural institutions. Such a study could build on the project's use of AI to propose alternative archival strategies that challenge traditional notions of historical significance and archival worthiness.

Also, there is a need to investigate the ethical dimensions of employing AI in cultural criticism and archival processes. This research would assess the implications of AI autonomy in making decisions about what constitutes cultural memory and the potential biases these technologies might perpetuate or subvert. Here, the thematic concerns raised by *@P0liceP0lice* could be used as a case study to explore broader ethical issues surrounding AI in the arts.

Additionally, comparative studies could be developed that link the methodologies used in *@P0liceP0lice* with those employed in other art-technology initiatives. This would provide a broader context for evaluating the impact of digital technologies on contemporary art discourse and practice, especially concerning potential to alter power dynamics within the art world.


@POlicePOlice_2022_12


Posts
Replies
Media
POlicePOlice @... · 18/09/2022 ···
Fungus from Indonesia hiding under a sculpture in #documentafifteen are waiting for you to pick them up, make them your friends and carry them home with you as souvenirs that will bring you good luck or bad luck depending on how you look at it. @documenta #lumbung
@POlicePOlice_2022_04

Posts Replies Media

POlicePOlice @... · 17/09/2022 ···

An anarchist with a political agenda against mainstream art institutions is willing to engage in critical dialogues with people on social media to reveal life's complexities and contradictions. @documenta__ #lumbung #documentafifteen

Posts Replies Media

POlicePOlice @... · 16/09/2022 ···

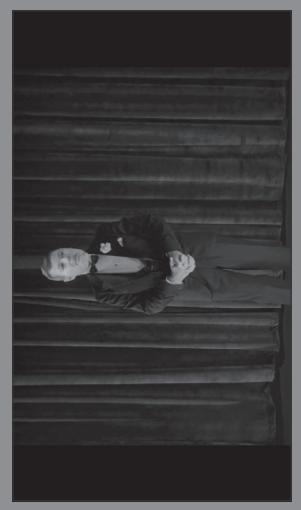
You tell tales of refugees lost at sea, of migrants shunted between countries, of displaced people searching for a place to settle as they flee war and poverty. Do you feel their pain? @documenta__ #lumbung #documentafifteen

@POlicePOlice_22_10

▷ 500 days · ✲ Digital file format · □ Latent Diffusion, large language model · ⌖ Twitter Bot, X Bot

FRANKENSTEIN (AFTER WHALE)

Frankenstein (After Whale) **(2022) is an experimental film that applies a face anonymization algorithm to James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931). Every human face in the film is detected and replaced by a generated model, producing distortions that are sometimes uncanny, sometimes comic. The experiment tests how anonymization technologies function when applied to moving images and reflects on their ethical implications in relation to facial recognition, bias, and transparency.**



Frankenstein_(After_Whale)_2022_01

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

March 5th, 2022

I am testing the algorithm "DeepPrivacy" (A Generative Adversarial Network for Face Anonymization) developed by Håkon Hukkelås at NTNU in Norway. I am experimenting with its capabilities across moving images, still images, and live cameras. My interest lies in the ethical issues surrounding artificial intelligence and facial recognition (Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency). I keep returning to concerns of bias amplification and the lack of transparency in how these systems are built, often described as a "black box." The word "black" itself, as in "blacklist," carries negative connotations, reinforcing racialized associations with opacity, danger, or illegitimacy. I am applying the GitHub repo to the film "Frankenstein" (1931), which I read as a parable about assembly, recognition, and fear—a man-made creature who feels and suffers but is estranged from the world and rejected by society. Applying the anonymization algorithm to the film produces another layer of erasure, where faces recognized as human are stripped of their features and substituted with synthetic composites. The result often appears collage-like, even cartoonish, reminding us that the process of anonymization is not neutral (it distorts, invents, and reimagines identity as much as it conceals it). The experiment exposes how these technologies rewrite identity, sometimes absurdly, sometimes disturbingly, and

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

how they intersect with long-standing cultural narratives about monstrosity, recognition, and exclusion. I am impressed by the speed and accuracy of the algorithm, developed within a university research context. Yet, I am equally aware that similar AI systems are being deployed by states and corporations for surveillance and warfare. My exploration feels absurd when set against these realities, but it remains a way for me to start understanding how these man-made systems think.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

The long term research value of *Frankenstein (After Whale)* lies in how it records an artistic experiment with face anonymization applied to cinema. By running *DeepPrivacy* on James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), the project produces evidence of how generative systems distort and substitute human faces, sometimes with uncanny precision, sometimes with absurd failure. This body of work will be of use to future researchers studying not only the technical limits of anonymization, but also its symbolic weight: how erasure, substitution, and distortion echo longer histories of exclusion, monstrosity, and social fear.

Equally important is the project's critical framing. The artist reflects on bias, the "black box" nature of AI, and the racialized language embedded in terms like "blacklist." In his notes, the artist situates the experiment in broader debates around fairness, accountability, and transparency in artificial intelligence. Preserving this material ensures that the ethical questions attached to anonymization remain visible, alongside the visual outcomes themselves. In this way, the project has enduring value as documentation. It provides a case study of how anonymization technologies were tested in artistic contexts in the early 2020s.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Since the early 2000s, artists have increasingly turned their attention to surveillance technologies, databases, and the growing role of algorithms in structuring social life. Early works explored the aesthetics of control and the infrastructures of data collection, while more recent practices have examined artificial intelligence and machine learning as both material and subject of critique. *Frankenstein (After Whale)* participates in this lineage by testing anonymization tools on historical cinema, linking the visual politics of machine vision to longer cultural narratives about fear, exclusion, and recognition.

Within this broader field, artists such as Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, and Forensic Architecture have foregrounded how images are read, misread, or weaponized by algorithmic systems. Their works expose the power embedded in technical infrastructures, from surveillance cameras to predictive policing software. Against this backdrop, *Frankenstein (After Whale)* shows how anonymization produces distortions and new forms of visibility.

By situating a classic film inside the logic of anonymization, the project underscores how artificial intelligence reshapes cultural memory. It reflects a wider trend in contemporary art to approach algorithms not as neutral tools, but as cultural actors whose operations affect how we see, what we remember, and whose identities are protected or erased.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

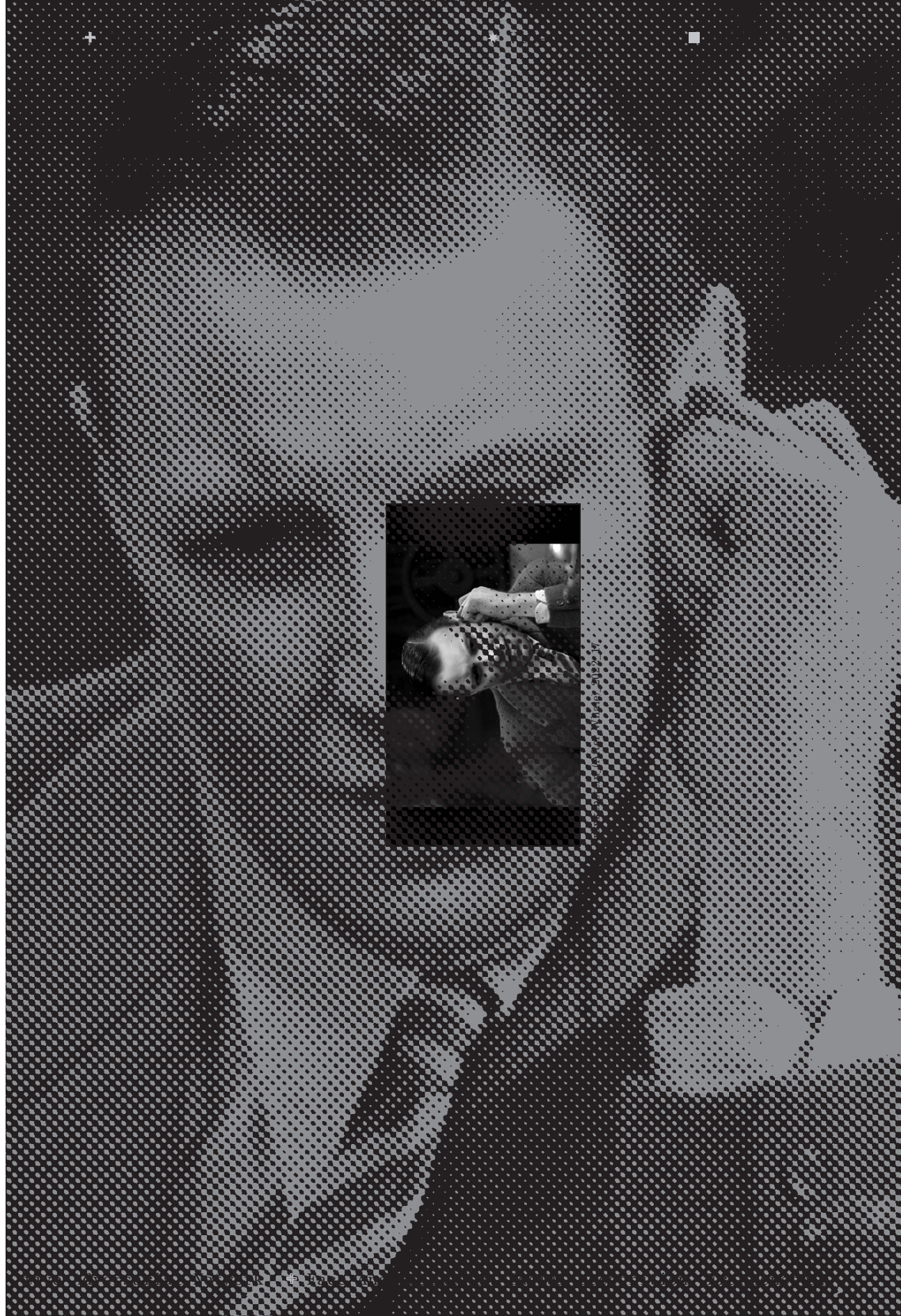
Frankenstein (After Whale) situates itself within a long history of cultural anxieties about recognition, identity, and otherness. James Whale's 1931 film, adapted from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel, staged the figure of the monster as both man-made and socially rejected. This parable of estrangement and fear has endured as a cultural touchstone, shaping how monstrosity and alterity are imagined in cinema and beyond.

Applying a face anonymization algorithm to Whale's film places this historical narrative into dialogue with technologies of surveillance and artificial intelligence. Where the original film made visible a body marked as "other," the anonymized version erases or replaces every face, producing synthetic composites that are alternately uncanny, comic, or grotesque. In doing so, the project exposes how anonymization (intended as a tool of protection) can itself become a form of distortion, generating new regimes of visibility and invisibility. The significance of this work lies in its dual lens: it connects a canonical moment in film history with debates about privacy. It preserves a record of how artistic practice in the early 2020s grappled with these questions, offering future

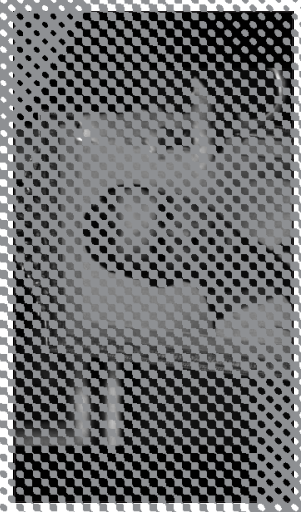
researchers insight into the entanglements of cinema history, artificial intelligence, and cultural memory.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Frankenstein (After Whale) invites further exploration into the artistic applications of anonymization technologies, questioning their use in surveillance, identity protection, and creative re-imaginings. Future research could focus on how these tools can reshape narrative structures, enhance privacy in documentary filmmaking, or be integrated into live interactive art installations. It also raises critical questions about AI's role in preserving and altering historical media, opening discussions on the ethical boundaries of algorithmic interventions in cultural artifacts.



Frankenstein_(After_Whale)_2022_08



Frankenstein_(After_Whale)_2022_08

01:10:12 Digital file format Found footage, Genera tive Adversarial Network Face Anonymization, facial recognition, Frankenstein

Frankenstein (After Whale)

2022

Video

PJ22V1001

Frankenstein (After Whale)

“WINNIE THE POOH IS NO LONGER SAFE”

“Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe” (2022) is a slide projection of 80 anonymized photographs sourced from *The Xinjiang Police Files*[1], a set of leaked documents detailing conditions in China’s internment camps. Using a generative adversarial network, the artist modified facial data to preserve individual privacy while retaining the documentary impact. The project engages with questions of surveillance, censorship, and the ethics of representation in politically sensitive material. Framed around the case of documented abuses in Xinjiang, the work reflects on how visibility, anonymity, and image circulation shape the boundaries of artistic and journalistic responsibility.

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Winnie_the_Pooh_is_No_Longer_Safe_202

1 Adrian Zenz, “The Xinjiang Police Files: Re-Education Camp Security and Political Paranoia in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,” Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies 3 (2022): 273–311.

▷ ✲ Digital file format □ Found footage,

[ARTIST’S REMARKS]

June 4th 2022

I am coming across a disturbing article by anthropologist Adrian Zenz meticulously detailing the systemic confinement of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. “The Xinjiang Police Files: Re-Education Camp Security and Political Paranoia in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” publishes evidence from leaked police documents exposing the truth of so-called “Vocational Skills Education and Training Centres.” I am immediately struck by the gravity and inherent violence of the images captured within the documents from the Xinjiang internment camps (also shedding light on the profound level of disdain and paranoia directed towards the Uyghur and other ethnic minorities). I am feeling compelled to respond. I want to find a way to communicate the realities shown in these photographs while also confronting the ethical dilemmas they present. I feel the need to respond to the violence and suffering encoded in the original images. I want to rethink what would be an acceptable way for me to re-use these images. What operations may I conduct? It is clear that creating a ready-made of these images, or talking about them in my archival course, or within a seminar, is a first step to make people aware of the situation if they are not already. But I am thinking of a way to re-use them without perpetuating a cycle of violence, or retraumatizing. I am looking for a way to rework these images. These photographs have been taken against

Generative Adversarial Network ✣ Censorship, Uyghurs

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

the detainees' will of consent. I don't want to mirror this while still acknowledging that this material is real and out there in the world. I am thinking about the risk of reusing these images as a researcher. Could there be a backlash?

Having used a face anonymization algorithm for another experiment, I see another way to use this tool. Anonymizing the faces in the photographs could potentially be a solution to respecting the dignity and privacy of the individuals depicted in the documents, while still relating to the images in some way. One could simply describe the images without showing them, but the anonymization does something. Another layer of reflection is that these images pass through a software, even though the faces are not registered by the algorithm (the generative adversarial network never sees any privacy-sensitive information as it utilizes bounding box annotation to identify the privacy-sensitive area, so the end result is a fully anonymized image). I understand technology as never neutral and often weaponized. There is a tension between recognizing the potential harm and still proceeding with using a university-based algorithm (a tradeoff).

While the algorithm is designed to place a noisy rectangle on the faces in the image, the context remains largely visible. The clothing, the space, sometimes the gestures are still revealing a lot of the situation. I like that, because the

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

viewer has to become a reader and decipher the image for clues of the context. I think that using a printer and making it pretty with a frame is the wrong choice. I should use a projection and find a protocol for viewing the images. Let them remain digital and transparent (ghostly) through the projection (diaphane).

The aim is to bring awareness, to resolve my own discomfort around detention, and potentially to provoke or trigger the viewer to act: to think, revolt, protest, or at least give time and attention to pass the message along. At this stage, anything feels better than ignoring the issue. I am questioning the responsibilities of artists and journalists in handling sensitive material and challenge the audience to consider the impact of recontextualizing such content through art. This project is not just about showcasing hidden truths, but also about the methods we use to tell stories, the boundaries of representation, and the ongoing quest for ethical integrity.

June 6th 2022

My engagement with [redacted] is shaped by a mix of personal experiences and media portrayals. I am moving through different parts of [redacted] society—conversations with locals, food, books, architecture—and each encounter adds another layer to how I understand the country. At

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

the same time, my perspective is shaped from the outside too, especially through European documentaries that take a critical view of [redacted]'s politics and the so-called "five poisons" the state identifies as threats to its stability. While researching, I am coming across an article in The Guardian about the [redacted] government banning Winnie the Pooh. The reason: memes comparing [redacted] to the [redacted]. What begins as a joke suddenly turns into something politically charged. A cartoon character becomes a subversive icon. It shows how fragile the balance is between state control and popular culture, and how even the most innocent symbols can take on sharp political dimensions. The absurdity of censorship is revealed.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

"Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe" is a conceptual artwork by Poem Johnson that examines surveillance and censorship as instruments of political and social control, while inviting reflection on their historical roots and future consequences. Johnson's method of composition, re-using photographs from a dataset alongside advanced anonymization techniques, preserves the facticity and urgency of raw testimonial data while softening the ethical concerns of representation. The utilization of a generative adversarial network (GAN) negotiates the dual necessities of protecting individual identities and confronting viewers with the stark realities of [redacted]'s internment camps: anonymizing the interned peoples' faces deepens the impression of their dehumanization in a haunting way without exploiting their individual privacy. Although the raw leaked data remains available online, the artist's reflection and intervention operate within the sphere of artistic research and fine art, rather than directly affecting the legal or political realities from which these documents originate. Re-using documents is a well-established tradition in contemporary art, and here the gesture functions as part of a research practice rather than as a claim to liberation or political resolution.

The long-term research value of Johnson's work lies in its layering of art, technology, and political commentary. As digital technologies continue to evolve, the project interrogates their dual role in both concealing and revealing truths within authoritarian contexts. It reflects the anxieties that have emerged since the 2000s around digital surveillance and the erosion of privacy, while opening questions relevant to historians, technologists, and ethicists alike.

Johnson's narrative strategy (linking a universal children's character with geopolitical critique) echoes the historical trajectory of art's use in political dissent, as seen in the mail art movement. According to the exhibition *Pushing the Envelope: Mail Art from the Archives of American Art*[1], mail artists of the 1960s to '90s used ordinary correspondence to circumvent galleries and state censorship, turning everyday networks into sites of resistance. By positioning "Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe" alongside this legacy, Johnson invites layered analysis of how symbols rooted in public consciousness can be mobilized as tools of cultural resistance.

1 ***Pushing the Envelope: Mail Art from the Archives of American Art*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, August 10, 2018 - January 4, 2019, https://www.aaa.si.edu/exhibitions/pushing-the-envelope/poltical-dissent**

"Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe" provides an insightful entry point for discussions around the interplay of new technologies, human rights, censorship and privacy, reflecting contemporary concerns in a global context. Poem Johnson's approach invites a careful consideration of how art incorporates and critiques these issues, potentially guiding mindful investigations into the evolving relations between public discourse, state power, and individual rights. Additionally, this project presents an opportunity for further academic exploration into how art navigates and influences social and political frameworks without overstating its capability to reshape these structures fundamentally. This work thus offers meaningful trajectories for scholarly consideration about the role of visual culture in expressing and examining the nuances of modern geopolitical landscapes.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

In "Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe," Poem Johnson engages in a dialectic within political art, one that wrestles with the tension between exposure and protection, visibility and anonymity—a balance critical to ethical practice in both artistic and journalistic domains. Johnson's use of generative adversarial networks to anonymize detainee faces resonates with broader concerns in the art world from the 2010s onwards about how artificial intelligence is applied to shape narratives while safeguarding human dignity. This strategy recalls [redacted] Weiwei's memorial work following the Sichuan

earthquake, where he exposed the state's concealment of student deaths by publishing the names of thousands of children who perished—making visible what official accounts sought to obscure, even as it risked retaliation. It also echoes the tactics of the Guerrilla Girls, whose anonymous masked interventions shifted attention from their identities to the systemic sexism and racism of the art world, demonstrating how concealment itself can serve as a form of resistance. Johnson's project thus stands within a lineage of practices that probe how visibility and invisibility are negotiated in political art, especially when confronting authoritarian control.

The title's reference to *Winnie the Pooh* (a seemingly innocuous character now imbued with controversial political significance) comments on the absurdities of political censorship and situates Johnson's work within a broader field of art that uses pop cultural icons to question authority. A useful comparison can be drawn with "The Yes Men," whose satirical "identity correction" stunts—such as impersonating corporate spokespeople to issue fake apologies or absurd promises—expose the hypocrisies of global capitalism and state policy. Like them, Johnson employs humor and symbolic inversion to test the boundaries of official narratives, reflecting a wider tendency in early 21st-century contemporary art to deploy satire and subversive symbolism as a way of questioning prevailing political paradigms.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

Understanding the historic relationship between the People's Republic of China and the Uyghur communities of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is pivotal to interpreting Johnson's work. From the ethnic and cultural tensions exacerbated by the Han Chinese majority's migration into Xinjiang, to the economic and geopolitical strategies that heightened during the Communist Party's consolidation of power, these dynamics set the stage for 21st century policies and conflicts. The PRC's labeling of Uyghur dissent as terrorism—part of a broader strategy to legitimize stringent crackdowns and assimilative practices—finds a visual counterpoint in Johnson's portrayal of anonymized resistance against erasure.

In addition to the specific case of Xinjiang, China's broader implementation of surveillance technologies, such as the social credit system and ubiquitous facial recognition, underscores a national trend towards comprehensive social control. This system rewards or penalizes citizens based on their behavior, with ramifications on travel, employment, and social privileges—demonstrating a methodological extension of surveillance into the everyday life of all citizens. Likewise, the UK's increasing deployment of facial recognition technology underlines a global movement towards leveraging digital surveillance that echoes China's tactics but in distinct socio-political frameworks. These systems, while aimed at enhancing security and compliance, also raise significant ethical questions about privacy, consent, and the scope of state power in personal affairs, reinforcing the critical inquiry driven by works like "Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe." These technological practices, evident across different states, highlight the pervasive nature of modern surveillance and the shared global challenges of balancing security with civil liberties.

This work, hence, does more than display a series of images; it demands a critical re-evaluation of complicity, surveillance, and the narrative sovereignty of oppressed populations. Johnson's work is a compelling intersection of art and activism, urging a reconsideration of how history informs present injustices and the way we view—and fail to view—the ethical application of technology in art. Through this nuanced visual dialogue, "Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe" challenges viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about control, identity, erasure, and historical memory in the age of digital surveillance.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future avenues for scholarly research derived from Poem Johnson's "Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe" invite an interdisciplinary examination, spanning the spheres of digital ethics, political art, and human rights documentation. This project manifests a commentary on the interplay between technological advancements and ethical responsibilities, posing questions that could guide a thoughtful inquiry into the implications of AI tools in narrative constructions and anonymity.

One area ripe for exploration is how the anonymization of imagery, when placed within the framework of human rights abuses, affects the interpretation and empathy of an audience. Scholars might delve into psychological and cultural responses to anonymized versus identifiable imagery, examining how such visual choices compel or deter viewer engagement and comprehension. Research could also assess the balance Johnson strikes between the portrayal of anonymity to protect identity and the potential depersonalization it could evoke, thereby influencing viewer perception of the subjects' humanity.

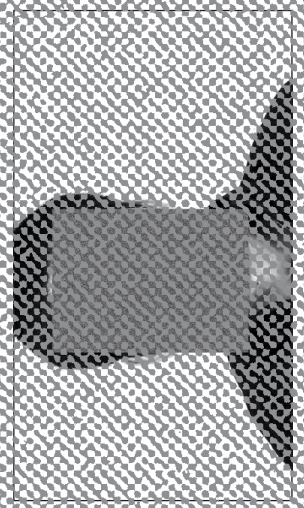
Furthermore, the utilization of a generative adversarial network (GAN) in art opens up debates on its broader implications within creative domains. As machine learning continues to evolve, there is an urgent need to examine how these technologies can be harnessed for activism without compromising ethical standards or privacy and/or facticity. Inquiry might extend to the transparency of data sources for AI learning, especially in sensitive uses such as those depicted by Johnson, striving to ensure that technology does not perpetuate the very injustices it seeks to highlight, or invent "evidence" that hasn't any basis in real life events.

The geopolitical dimensions baked into the artwork, touching on issues like censorship and surveillance under authoritarian regimes, present a fertile ground for comparative studies with other global contexts. The research can expand to consider the role of digital surveillance technologies worldwide and how they reshuffle the dynamics between state control and personal liberties.

"Winnie the Pooh is No Longer Safe" symbolically comments on soft power and cultural instruments as tools of political dissent. This metaphorical use of a children's cartoon character against the backdrop of serious political issues encourages research into how seemingly benign cultural symbols become politicized, offering a lens through which to view cultural resistance movements globally.

The project's inherent reflection on the documentation and reportage of human rights abuses through visual media could lead to substantive scholarly work on media ethics. This includes the journalist's and artist's responsibilities in handling and representing sensitive material, providing a basis for developing ethical or best practice guidelines that can be generalized for broader journalistic and artistic practices.

Overall, Poem Johnson's work serves as a nexus of challenging questions about technology, ethics, art, and politics—each of which holds significant potential for deep academic inquiry, with implications that reach far beyond the purview of art history into realms of technology, sociology, and international human rights.



Winnie the Pooh_PJ_Photo_2022_28

✳ Digital file format ■ Found footage,

Winnie the Pooh_PJ_Photo_2022_18

Concept ✚ Design

A WHALE OF A TALE

A Whale of a Tale **(2022) is a digital color video without sound that reworks archival footage of the whaling industry in South Georgia from the 1920s, using techniques such as slowed frame rates, repetition, reframing and coloring. The film interrogates how historical film records have shaped narratives of industrial activity and ecological transformation. Drawing on experimental cinema methods, it treats archival images as material open to re-interpretation, prompting reflection on the visual construction of labor, resource extraction, and the mediated memory of environmental histories. A two-channel video version of the film *Autoimmune* (2022) was also produced by the artist but lost or destroyed.**

A_Whale_of_a_Tale_2023_10

▷ 01:04:36 ✲ Digital file format □ Found footage

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

April 4, 2022

I am fascinated by whaling films I witnessed, and at the same time extremely frustrated about the accessing process I had to go through to research these 35 mm films. Nonetheless, after many months, I finally got into the Steenbeck editing table and touched and manipulated the cans of films in a dark room in a basement in London. I enjoyed the experience a lot because these films according to my findings have not been screened since 1929 which makes them under researched. Gaining access to these materials required navigating a labyrinth of bureaucracy, costs, and legal restrictions. Each delay, only fueled my determination to unearth. My beloved shovel.

Previously, I had a terrible encounter with the French National Film Archive and I abandon any hope of reusing the material I researched there. I wonder how and if reworking these whaling films make sense. Refilming, rewinding, re-editing. Examining the past while experiencing it anew.

How are these films shaped?
Who made them?
Who speaks behind the camera?
How to re-enact these fragments?

✚ 1920s, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Whaling

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

The act of repeating, dismantling, and reconstructing these films felt essential (a way to ask questions that the archives themselves had left unanswered or obscured). I feel it is also about process, peeling back layers of the emulsion, dissecting, and layering. How can I emphasize the conditions of production and the hidden ideologies behind the camera or outside the frame? There is a bridge between this past and my present condition as a filmmaker. I want to show that the archive is not only a place of preservation, but a dynamic site where desires encounter: between the state and the citizens (historians or otherwise), there is an obvious asymmetry.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

May 3, 2022

LABOR OF ACCESS

My initial point of departure is my burning passion for whaling films I encountered as part of a feasibility assessment of my artistic research enquiry. I contacted several institutions requesting access to several films for non-commercial, educational creative re-use. I have reproduced below some of the responses I obtained from these institutions:

Dear Marc,

Many thanks for your email enquiry. We received your email here in Archive Sales, and I have asked one of our Senior Curators about this and they fedback to me with the below:

Unfortunately, we are unable to help you with this project as it falls outside of the institution's cultural plan. From the titles we have looked at they seem to be held on film only, and so any project would also have to cost for film prep and transfer fees to digitization, and these are not on our queue with the funds we have.
I'm sorry we cannot help you on this occasion.

The project sounds really interesting, this is just not something we are able to work on as a partnership deal.

▷ 01:04:36 ✲ Digital file format □ Found footage ✣ 1920s, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Whaling

Still from video “A Whale of a Tale” (2022), based on silent found footage from circa 1928, showing several men clustered on the bow of a whaling ship, leaning over ropes near a mounted harpoon gun, the vessel’s name partly visible (T55 SHERA) as it juts into calm open water under a hazy sky.

Still from video “A Whale of a Tale” (2022), based on silent found footage from circa 1928, showing a crowded rookery of seals sprawled across a rocky shoreline, several animals mid-bellow with open mouths and raised necks, distant snow-covered hills soft in the background behind the heaped bodies.

▷ 01:04:36 ✲ Digital file format □ Found footage

[ARTIST’S REMARKS]

Good luck with your future projects and thank you for thinking of us.

Kindest regards

I must emphasize that I had seen the films through the research viewing service. The viewing sessions took place, using Steenbeck flatbed film editing tables for film and VHS/DVD players with headphones for video. The viewing fees are based on running time; the actual duration of the films requested. The institution charged me around 60 euros plus a value-added tax (VAT) for viewing the material. I had to fill several forms and wait for the answer of the institution for schedule meetings.

I received a follow-up email by another employee of the institution for the same request:

Dear Mara

Thanks for your follow up, which my colleague passed onto me. The process would be the digitisation of the films to archive standards at a preferred facility of ours. Our resources for such work are allocated to support our own cultural programme which is already set for the coming year, so your project would have to cover all of the expenses of transfer. My colleague could certainly help provide costings on these.

✣ 1920s, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Whaling

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Any of the analogue film copies that have a viewing copy could be requested for screening at an appropriate venue, but I understand it is extracts for a re-use that you are looking for. See here if the screening angle might be of interest.

We certainly appreciate the seriousness and dedication of your project; but hopefully you understand that our archive budgets are limited each year and are allocated according to our own cultural plan in the first instance, which is set for the coming years. We do partner on academic projects through a governmental body, but these projects have quite a substantial lead time and have costs built in. Where material has already been digitized there can be more leeway to respond, but working from film has more significant resource implications – in terms of time as well as finance.

If you feel there is more to discuss then I am happy to meet – I am in the non-fiction team, currently undertaking the management of the team as my colleague has been away for health reasons. Although I am not sure what I could add to the above, and my colleague might be better to follow up on costings.

Incidentally I spent a fantastic afternoon at a Museum in Canada about 15 years ago – despite discovering that the Fall weather was not enough to put off a couple of hardy sunworshippers at a nearby nudist beach on my walk there.

With best wishes,

Following these exchanges, I came to understand money as a language. I applied for funding to be able to find ways to work with these films. I intended to re-work, re-film and re-wind the material as ways in which to re-member and re-visit the past as a foreign country (Here I invoke the work of Terry Cook "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape"). I wanted to interrogate and find ways to perhaps re-enact and re-enable an experience of the past in the present and into the future. I thought about repeating fragments of history whose importance might not have been fully understood or acknowledged. I thought about [...] reworking in every imaginable cinematic way material that has been found, given, or loaned: altering the speed, most often slowing it down, coloring or tinting (retouching a frame with a single colour), reframing, entering, de-framing, zooming within the image, zooming in, and then adding sound to silent pictures or pictures with other sounds, generally music, not commentary, rare commentaries being in the form of wording on cards."

The quote is from Colinne Diserens, "A Propos d'images Oubliées" in The Arrow of Time: Notes from a Russian Journey: 1989-1990 — Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

May 5, 2022

I got the research grant I applied for and requested again for the reproduction of the material for non-commercial, educational creative re-use. You will find below the answer:

Dear Marc

Congratulations on your award but I think I need to put a sharp brake on your ambitions. I made it clear in our first phone discussion that our scanning resources and budgets are tied up on our current activities and that there are no current plans to digitize these films as they are not currently in our cultural programme. We do have student internships but they are not actively involved in film inspection, handling of digitisation unless they are trained archivists, and they are generally engaged in assisting on work that we are already doing if it benefits their own study or research goals.

My understanding is that you were applying for a mobility grant, to maintain access to the existing viewing copies of these films. You asked me for "a reference letter saying that I have engaged with the institution before and studied materials relevant to my research and that I am allowed to research and view archival material from your collection" which is what I provided. The letter of support sets out that these films are only available for access on our premises, which is why mobility might be an issue. As these films have viewing copies, they remain fully available to

you for research.

We have engaged in academic partnerships that have involved digitisation of films but there are subject to an internal approval process and detailed budget costing – as is generally required by any application process. This lays all the groundwork if the project finance award is successful.

None of that groundwork has been laid, and the best use of your funds would be in laying it, which is what I had assumed was your intention. I don't see how you can use mobility funds to finance digitisation.

If your project is simply dependent on having copies of this material then the most straightforward path would be to contact our archive footage sales team to get a quote and timeframe for completing this kind of work independently, and discuss the rights clearances which would be involved for your intended purpose.

This would keep you free of the intense approval and application process required for entering into a more engaged research partnership with the institution.

If you do want to engage in a partnership with the institution, then there would be numerous other hurdles to jump internally to gain support for an active digitisation project, in what is already a competitive environment. Many of the curators here have their projects which do not make it, and we receive

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

many partnership proposals which have to a selective
responce for resource issues. Any project that does go forward
is based on a professional restoration & remastering pipeline
and internal quality control (QC) rather than any ad hoc
arrangements. This is the national collection and we only
work with approved framework partners who have been vetted
by our image quality specialists.

Obviously, we have provided material for more creative
applications of archive footage, but these have been either on
a straight archive sales basis, or outcomes of funded archive
projects. And if they have required digitisation of films
(rather than use of previously digitised footage) they have
had to have been fully costed for archive standard work on
the complete films as well as any subsequent creative work.

Since our last communication my colleague who is engaged
in archive projects and has a particular interest in travel
and exploration films, has proposed a cultural project in this
general area. This is at an early stage and will in itself go
through an internal research, development and approval
phase. I can discuss your ambitions with my colleague if it is
something that might help get these films on the institution
agenda, and support your end goal.
I hope this is in keeping with the discussion that we had
many months back, and I am happy to provide further
clarification as required.
With best wishes

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

May 7, 2022

RESTRICTED BY LAW.

On another occasion looking for other sources to dismantle
and re-dress, I requested archival material from a national
archive. I have received the following automated system-
generated email:

We acknowledge receipt of your request. Your Order
ID is: ******

Due to COVID-19, we have adapted our copy services.
Our rush service is suspended until further notice. Delays
beyond our usual service standards should also be expected
as we are applying significant safety measures and
protocols, including physical distancing and mandatory
isolation of collection items.

Please do not contact us to get a status update on your
order as it will create additional delays for all copy
requests, including yours. Rest assured that we will process
it as quickly as possible, and that we will contact you back
if further information is required.

Discount for text documents. Please email proof that you
are a senior or student to ***@******

Seniors (over 65 years old) must email a scanned

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

copy of a document that shows date of birth, preferably with a photo, such as a driver's license, birth certificate, provincial health insurance card, or passport

- Students must email a scanned copy of their photo identification card showing full-time status as a student at an accredited educational institution.

For more information on our service standards, please visit: https://www.******/****/**********/*****/******/******

Please note that for textual documents, orders are processed:

Within 30 business days for regular service orders
Within 10 business days for rush service orders
Please note that for Special Collections, orders are processed:

Within 6 to 10 weeks for regular service orders
Within 10 business days for rush service orders
We will be pleased to provide an update if your request is overdue. If it is overdue, you may contact us by email

We thank you for your interest in our institution.

May 21, 2022

14 days later, I received another message from the same institution:

Dear Marc Johnson,

We have started processing your request for copies reference number ***** Our copyright services are now verifying the copyright and/or donor restrictions for each of the 22 items on your request.

The 13 items for the ********** are sound recordings and we can offer them to you once the copy has been made either as .MP3 or a .WAV files. A request has been placed but, there could be an extra delay due to the restrictions. This will be confirmed when we receive the notice from our copyright services.

The following items: "****" and "****" requires a copy made from the original and one was requested.

We will keep you informed of any issues arising from your request as soon as possible. Should you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us.
Thank you for your patience.

Best regards,
Documents Consultation Unit

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

June 21, 2022

31 days later, I received a message
by the Copyright Services:

Dear Marc Johnson,

The Copyright Services at institution X have reviewed
your copy request, reference number: *****

The items that you are requesting are subject to copyright
and/or have donor restrictions and some are restricted by
law, please read the paragraphs below:

ACCESS TO MATERIAL RESTRICTED BY LAW

Access and copying of the material listed below is
restricted by law and must be cleared by Access to
Information and Privacy (ATIP) Services. The following
link will give you all necessary instructions to make a
formal request: https://www.*******/***.aspx.

In order for Access to Information and Privacy Services to
proceed with verification of the works for which you wish to
obtain a copy, please supply a complete description of the
works (see material listed below). By providing as much
information as possible for us to identify the works
accurately, the verification process will be expedited.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Items descriptions:

Series: [***]
IDCISN: ******

Please do not hesitate to contact Copyright Services if you
have any questions relating to copyright in this request at
@**

MATERIAL PROTECTED BY THIRD PARTY COPYRIGHT

Our institution is not the copyright owner of the material
identified below. However, we are pleased to provide you
with the following contact information of the copyright
owner so that you may obtain their permission for our
institution to release copies.

Please do not hesitate to contact Copyright Services if you
have any questions relating to copyright in this request at
@**

MATERIAL PROTECTED BY THIRD PARTY COPYRIGHT

Our institution is not the copyright owner of the material
identified below. However, we are pleased to provide you
with the following contact information of the copyright
owner so that you may obtain their permission for our
institution to release copies.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Please do not hesitate to contact Copyright Services if you have any questions relating to copyright in this request at ***@******

MATERIAL PROTECTED BY THIRD PARTY COPYRIGHT

Our institution is not the copyright owner of the material identified below. However, we are pleased to provide you with the following contact information of the copyright owner so that you may obtain their permission for our institution to release copies.

Please do not hesitate to contact Copyright Services if you have any questions relating to copyright in this request at ***@******

Once you have obtained the permissions which must contain the ISN, title, format requested and the context for the use of the material, please forward a copy to ***@****** ATT: Permission and resubmit your order for the items.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding your order, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you for your patience and interest in our institution.

Best regards,
Consultation and Reference Officer, Public Services Branch

▷ 01:04:36 ✲ Digital file format □ Found footage

Still from video "A Whale of a Tale" (2022), based on silent found footage from circa 1928, showing a huge beached whale lying on a shoreline while a man in work clothes stands on its ridged head, raising a tool mid-strike, with water and dark hills stretching into a pale, flickering distance.

Still from video "A Whale of a Tale" (2022), based on silent found footage from circa 1928, showing a whaler flensing a huge beached whale, standing on its ridged underside and raising a long knife over a pale, stripped section of flesh, the massive body filling the frame beneath a blank, overexposed sky.

✣ 1920s, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Whaling

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

July 3, 2022.

This summer, I am reading the encyclopedic work "Agir le cinéma: écrits sur le cinéma expérimental (1979-2020)" by Yann Beauvais. It is an amazing work published recently. I am deeply fascinated with the specific historical, social, and economic contexts behind the creation of experimental films. I found myself questioning how to engage with such a monumental work (986 pages) and what insights I could draw from it. It quickly became clear to me that this book is a significant account of experimental cinema, its methodologies, and its contextual frameworks. To delve deeper, I created a spreadsheet as a way to explore the book comprehensively, treating it almost like an investigative journey.

My aim is to remember and make sense of these rich accounts. I structured my exploration around several key aspects: the processes and techniques employed (how), the people and stakeholders involved (who), the semantic field mentioned (what), the types of economies utilized or endured (how much), the spaces for creation, production, and distribution (where), the temporal spans examined (when), and the underlying motivations or rationale (why).

This methodical approach allows me to uncover patterns and themes that brought the world of experimental cinema to life.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

The techniques outlined through my reading are striking in their diversity and ingenuity, reflecting the boundary-pushing ethos of experimental cinema. Central to these processes is appropriation, where existing material is recontextualized to uncover new meanings. Filmmakers use bold physical interventions to manipulate the medium itself: peeling away layers of emulsion (arracher les couches de l'émulsion des films couleurs), burning (brûler), chiseling (ciselure), and degrading the film stock (dégrader). Other techniques, such as décollage (removing emulsion), découpages (cutting), and démontage (disassembly), reflect a deconstructive approach to cinema (breaking the image down to its elemental parts to challenge its original intent). Experimental filmmakers also explore methods like citation (quoting existing works), collecting (collecter), and burying film materials (enfouir) to engage with themes of memory, history, and decay. Notably, the practice of filming without a camera (filmer sans caméra) exemplifies their rejection of traditional cinematic tools, focusing instead on the material and conceptual possibilities of the medium itself. They push further by employing an expressive use of words (usage plastique des mots), introducing decontextualized sound effects, and exploring projection innovations like triple projections. Through techniques like optical printing (tireuse optique), they amplify visual distortions and create layered, transformative imagery. These methods are not merely aesthetic; they are acts of defiance and

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

reinvention, peeling back layers of convention to expose the raw potential of cinema as an artistic and critical medium.

The keywords extracted from my record reveal the rich and multifaceted semantic field that underpins experimental cinema. Central to this vocabulary is the concept of agentivité (agency), reflecting the filmmaker's active role in shaping narratives and challenging dominant power structures. The archive emerges as a pivotal element (both as a source of inspiration and a subject of critique). Filmmakers engage with archives to uncover histoire sous-évaluée (undervalued histories) and question how memory is constructed and preserved. Themes of autobiographie (autobiography) and ciné-document (cinema-document) blur the boundaries between the personal and the documentary, intertwining subjective experience with broader historical realities.

The field extends into notions of combat and luttes des classes (class struggles), signaling an engagement with political and social movements. Terms like circulation, cooperation, and pratique mineure (minor practices) emphasize the communal and decentralized nature of experimental cinema, often produced and distributed outside mainstream industrial systems. The presence of documentation, enregistrement (recording), and dispositif (apparatus) reflects a commitment to capturing fleeting moments and interrogating the mechanisms of production itself.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Other evocative terms, such as fantome (ghost) and parasitage (interference), suggest a haunting quality (cinema as a medium that carries traces of the past, yet disrupts its established narratives). Meanwhile, words like haptique (haptic) and souffle (breath) invoke the sensory and tactile dimensions of the cinematic experience, drawing attention to its material and visceral qualities. Finally, concepts like politique (politics), re-voir (re-seeing), revanche (revenge), and transparence (transparency) underscore experimental cinema's defiant, critical stance (an art form committed to reimagining the world through its lens).

The timeline of experimental cinema is marked by landmark works that push the boundaries of the medium, each reflecting the spirit of its era while contributing to an evolving discourse on art and society. From Luis Buñuel's surrealist masterpiece Le chien Andalou (1929) to Steve McQueen's reflective Sunshine State (2022), these films span nearly a century of innovation and ideological exploration.

Luis Buñuel, alongside Jean Cocteau with Le Sang d'un Poète (1930), laid the groundwork for experimental cinema with surrealist and poetic approaches that challenged the linearity and conventions of traditional narrative cinema. Their works interrogated the subconscious, using striking imagery to dissolve the

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

boundaries between dream and reality. These early explorations set the stage for later innovators like Isidore Isou, whose Traité de Bave et d'éternité (1951) and Maurice Le Maître's Le film est déjà commencé (1951) expanded the language of film with lettrist techniques, focusing on textual and oral deconstructions of cinematic norms. The Combat between orality and literacy shapes these films.

By the mid-20th century, experimental cinema became a vehicle for political critique and formal experimentation. Guy Debord's Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps (1960) critiqued consumer culture and society's commodification of time, while Bruce Conner's Cosmic Ray (1961) juxtaposed found footage with dynamic editing to evoke a frenetic, postmodern perspective. Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci-Lucchi's Dal polo al l'Equatore (1986) revisited colonial archival footage, recontextualizing it to expose imperialist ideologies. Similarly, Cécile Fontaine's Cruises (1989) used decaying film materials to reveal the fragility of both memory and the cinematic medium itself.

In the late 20th century, experimental filmmakers began to interrogate the archive more explicitly. Martin Arnold's Pièce touchée (1989) used repetition and frame-by-frame analysis to dissect the mechanics of cinematic representation, while Craig Baldwin's Tribulation 99:

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Alien Anomalies Under America (1990) combined conspiracy theories with found footage to critique U.S. imperialism. Peter Delpeut's Lyrisch Nitraat (1990) celebrated the visual beauty of decaying nitrate film, creating a dialogue between cinema's materiality and its historical significance.

Chris Marker's politically charged Le Fond de l'Air est Rouge (1977) paved the way for modern filmmakers like Steve McQueen, whose Sunshine State (2022) interrogates memory and racial histories through a cinematic lens that is both deeply personal and politically resonant. Across this timeline, each filmmaker's work reflects the cultural, political, and artistic tensions of their time, while collectively contributing to an enduring conversation about cinema's possibilities.

The figures behind these works represent a spectrum of approaches and ideologies, from the poetic and surreal to the political and critical. Together, they form a lineage of cinematic rebellion, innovation, and reinvention, each challenging audiences to rethink not only what cinema is but what it can become.

The motivations behind experimental cinema are profound and revolutionary, challenging both the medium and its traditional frameworks. At its core is the desire to abandon the supremacy of the eye as the sole distributor of

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

history and representation (a rejection of the ocular dominance that has long defined classical cinematic discourse). This drive is accompanied by a commitment to abolish the rules and norms of classical cinematic language and to liberate cinema from literature, detaching it from narrative conventions that constrain its potential. As Jozef Bury remarked in his 1995-96 interview with Jozef Robakowski, it is about "peeling the camera away from the eye" and opening new pathways for expression.

Experimental filmmakers envision film as an instrument of knowledge, one that can transport viewers to uncharted shores of thought and perception. Their work seeks to expose the conditions of image production and to interrogate the possibilities of the medium itself. By placing cinema in a state of crisis—pushing it to the brink of destruction—these artists affirm its necessity as a counterpoint to the dominant media landscape, which often dismisses experimental cinema as nostalgic or obsolete. Instead, they reveal its enduring power to create new meanings and provoke thought.

A deep material engagement also drives these creators, from revealing the expressive qualities of film emulsion to employing techniques that make cinema tactile and sensory. This ethos extends to practices such as filming like a plant, embracing a slower, organic perspective that aligns with non-human rhythms. The use of found footage becomes a

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

means of value reversal, enabling the reappropriation of existing images to produce and distribute new ones, while simultaneously critiquing their origins. This practice invites the emergence of memory—a sudden resurfacing of recollections that disrupts linear time and challenges established historical narratives.

These motivations are not just philosophical; they are deeply personal, political, and transformative. Experimental cinema becomes a space where the medium is interrogated, memory is summoned, and the very act of seeing is redefined.

The economy of experimental cinema operates largely outside industrial systems (en dehors du système industriel), relying on alternative and localized models such as neighborly economies (économie de voisinage) and cooperatives (économie alternative de coopérative). These small-scale economies (petite économie) are supported by networks of associations, ateliers, and cinémathèques, which serve as hubs for creation and distribution.

Production and exhibition spaces range from private and public institutions to laboratories, museums, studios, and universities, reflecting a diverse ecosystem of resources. Experimental filmmakers also navigate relationships with galleries, enterprises, and subcontractors (sous-traitants), creating a unique interplay between grassroots collaboration

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

and formal structures. This multifaceted economy underscores the resourcefulness and resilience of the experimental cinema community, thriving through shared values and innovative partnerships.

Experimental cinema is not merely a genre but a dynamic space of inquiry, resistance, and reinvention. It exists at the intersection of material innovation, political critique, and personal expression, continually challenging the boundaries of what cinema can achieve. Through the meticulous exploration of "Agir le cinéma" and the patterns revealed in my investigative spreadsheet, I came to appreciate experimental cinema as an ever-evolving dialogue—one that reimagines the medium itself while engaging deeply with the historical, social, and economic contexts of its creation.

From its foundational figures to contemporary innovators, experimental cinema is defined by its relentless questioning of cinematic norms. It dismantles conventions, interrogates the medium's possibilities, and affirms the necessity of alternative narratives and perspectives. Whether through the peeling of emulsion, the reappropriation of found footage, or the rejection of traditional storytelling, experimental filmmakers push the medium to its limits—not to destroy it, but to uncover its potential to provoke, to inspire, and to transport.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

The community of experimental cinema thrives outside industrial constraints, forging economies and networks built on collaboration, creativity, and resilience. It is a practice rooted in autonomy, fueled by a belief in cinema as a tool for knowledge, critique, and memory. From the intimate atelier to the vibrant cinémathèque, from small cooperatives to university studios, experimental cinema exists wherever there is a commitment to questioning and creating.

Ultimately, experimental cinema invites us to re-see the world—to confront the visible and the invisible, the remembered and the forgotten, the political and the poetic. It dares us to imagine new horizons, both in filmmaking and in how we perceive the world around us. In this exploration, I have found not only a deeper understanding of the art form but a renewed appreciation for its power to shape, challenge, and expand our ways of seeing.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

"A Whale of a Tale" holds long-term research value by critically engaging with archival film practices to explore the entwined relationships between humans, animals, natural resources, and imperial histories. Through its innovative methodologies—such as re-editing, slowing down footage, and reframing archival material—the work deconstructs whaling films to reveal their underlying ideologies and mechanisms of power. These techniques expose how visual culture has been historically complicit in shaping narratives of resource extraction and environmental domination.

By reinterpreting archival footage, the film challenges the neutrality of archives, positioning them instead as contested sites where memory, authority, and history are constructed. This critical perspective contributes to research in media studies by interrogating the aesthetic and political implications of archival re-use. Moreover, its focus on the commodification of animals as natural resources resonates deeply with environmental humanities, offering a powerful lens to examine ecological exploitation through historical visual records.

In postcolonial discourse, the film's critique of anthropocentrism and imperial legacies expands the conversation around decolonizing visual culture. It creates a framework for understanding how archival practices can be reimagined to resist dominant narratives, reclaim silenced histories, and foster new modes of storytelling. This multifaceted approach ensures the work's enduring relevance in critical scholarship and creative inquiry.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

"A Whale of a Tale" aligns with broader trends in contemporary art and cinema, particularly within the realms of experimental film practice. Its reworking of archival footage places it within a lineage of experimental cinema that uses found materials to interrogate historical narratives. By emphasizing the non-human—both in its subject matter and its critique of human-centric visual traditions—it contributes to ongoing challenges to anthropocentrism within visual culture. The work also reflects the early 21st-century turn toward decolonial discourse in art, critiquing the colonial gaze embedded in archival footage and reframing it to foreground histories of exploitation and resistance. This approach resonates with early 21st-century cultural movements confronting the environmental costs of industrial modernity, particularly those that critique the commodification of natural resources, as seen in land-based art practices of First Nations in Canada. "A Whale of a Tale" exemplifies the principles of media archaeology, treating archival film as both an artifact and a malleable medium for contemporary critique. Through artistic reappropriation and the critical re-use of historical materials, the film connects with cultural movements questioning ecological and cultural sustainability.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

"A Whale of a Tale" is deeply rooted in the historical context of archival film practices. The original films, often produced under imperial agendas, functioned as tools of propaganda, celebrating industrial prowess while masking the violent extraction of natural resources and the environmental and cultural consequences of such activities. By re-editing and slowing down this archival footage, "A Whale of a Tale" dismantles the colonial gaze, exposing the ideological constructs embedded in these images and challenging their original narratives. The work aligns with a lineage of experimental cinema practices that interrogate the archive as both a site of power and a source of creative reimagining. Filmmakers such as Gianikian and Ricci-Lucchi similarly recontextualized archival material to critique imperial histories, using techniques that emphasized the materiality of film to underscore the violence of colonialism. Likewise, Isidore Isou's lettrist approaches influenced the disassembly and reconstruction of cinematic language, offering a template for reclaiming and transforming found footage. "A Whale of a Tale" draws from these traditions, but it uniquely engages with environmental humanities, extending its critique to the ecological ramifications of resource extraction. This critical engagement situates the film as a contribution to experimental cinema and a tool for revisiting and challenging the narrative histories of imperial visual culture.

FUTURE RESEARCH

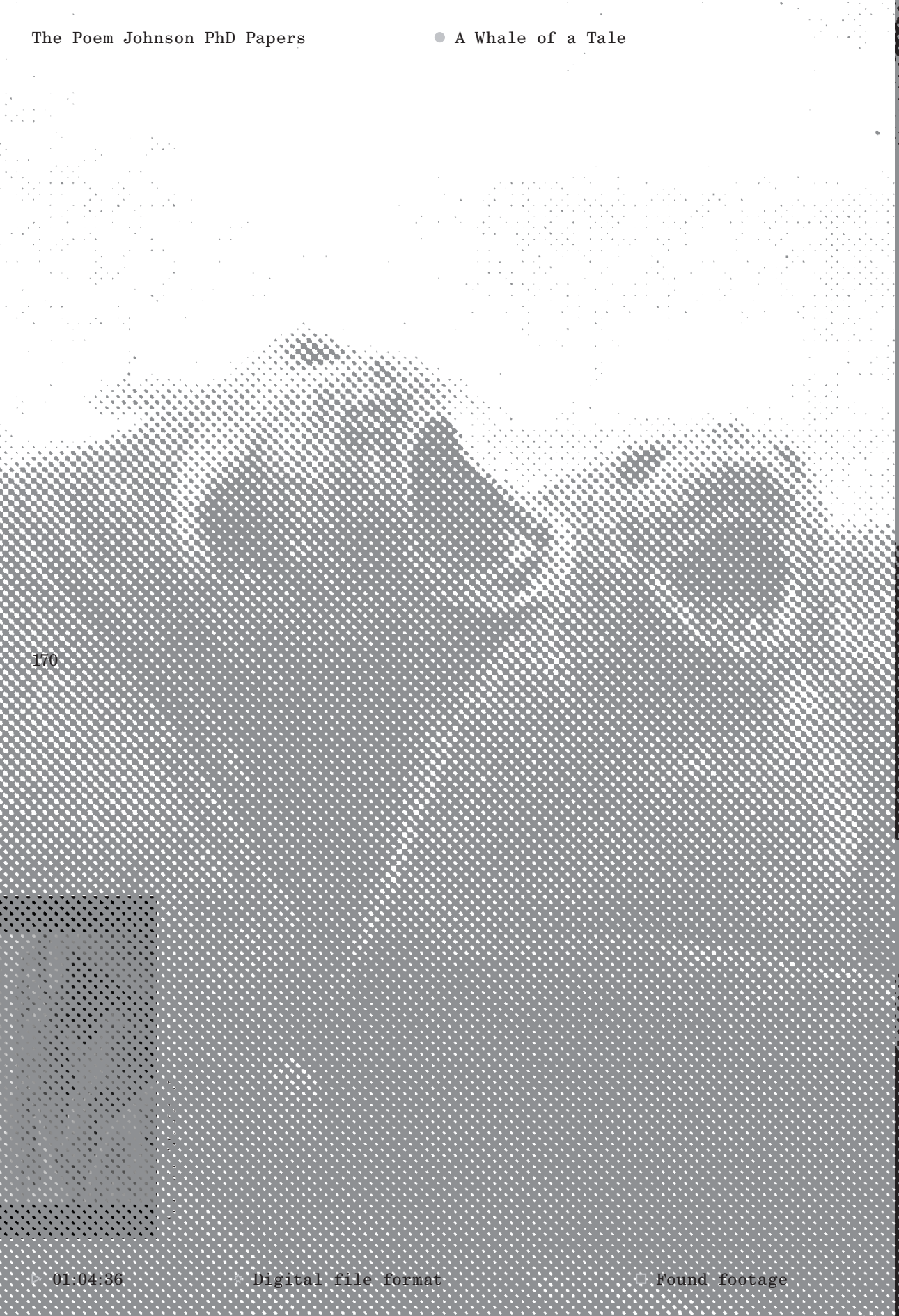
"A Whale of a Tale" opens pathways for future research into the ethical implications of archival access and re-use. The challenges faced in obtaining, digitizing, and reinterpreting historical materials highlight the barriers that gatekeep cultural memory. Further research could examine how institutional policies on archives shape narratives of inclusion and exclusion, emphasizing the need for equitable access to historical records.

The film's re-imagining of industrial histories invites critical inquiry into the representation of labor, resource extraction, and their environmental consequences. By deconstructing and reassembling colonial-era footage, the work demonstrates how archives can be transformed into tools for critique, offering new narratives that confront ecological and social exploitation. Scholars might further explore how these methodologies can be applied to other industries and archives, uncovering hidden connections between imperialism, capitalism, and environmental degradation.

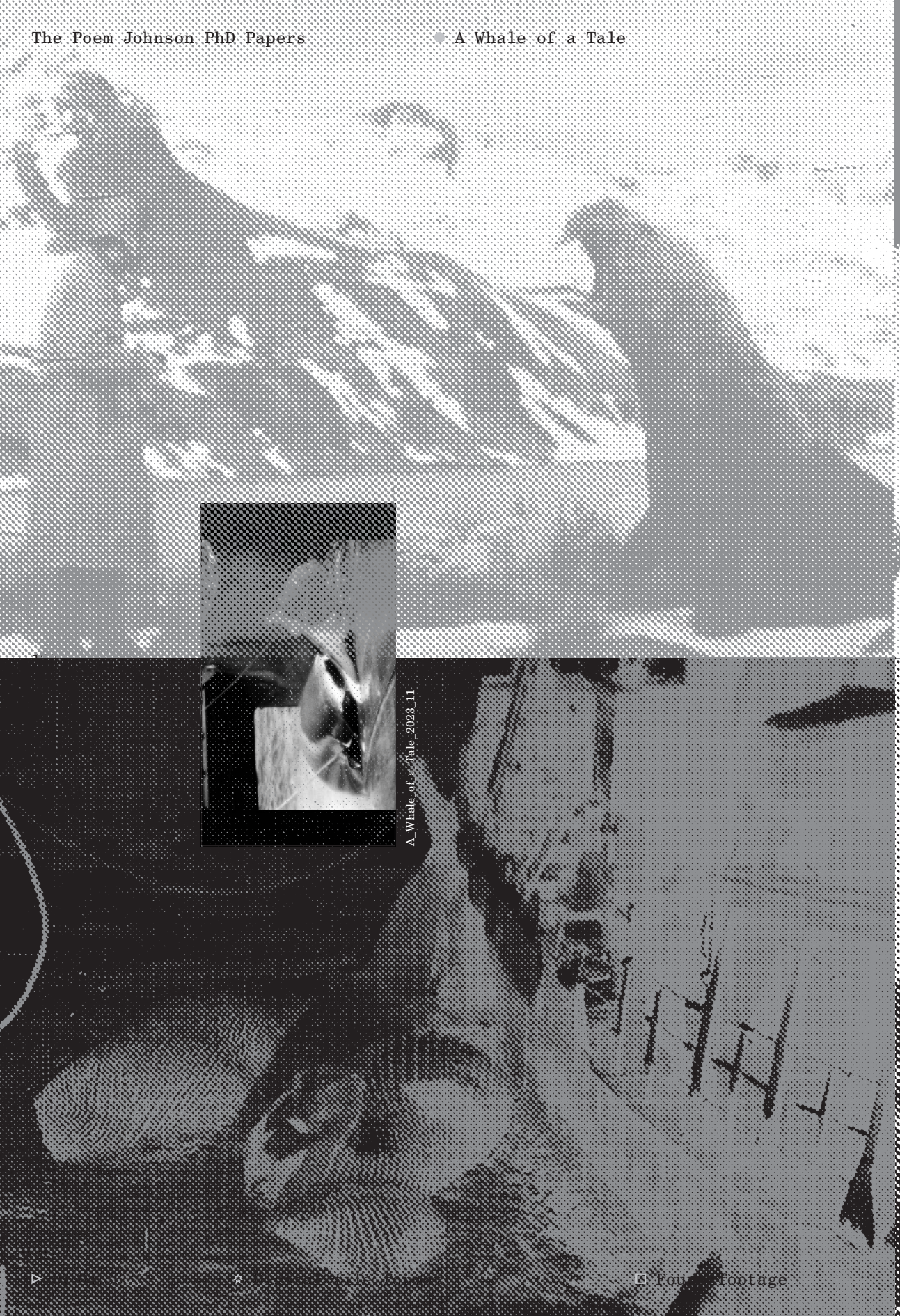
The sensory manipulation employed in "A Whale of a Tale" slowing down frames, reframing, and introducing new textures and soundscapes—suggests possibilities for studying media materiality. This approach extends to non-human agency in visual culture, probing how natural resources and ecosystems are portrayed in historical and contemporary media. Finally, the film's interrogation of memory politics raises questions about the role of experimental cinema in reactivating forgotten or suppressed histories. Future research might explore how artistic practices like these can serve as a bridge between historical critique and contemporary environmental and decolonial movements, fostering new ways of seeing and understanding the world.

A Whale of a Tale

2022 · Video · PJ22VI001

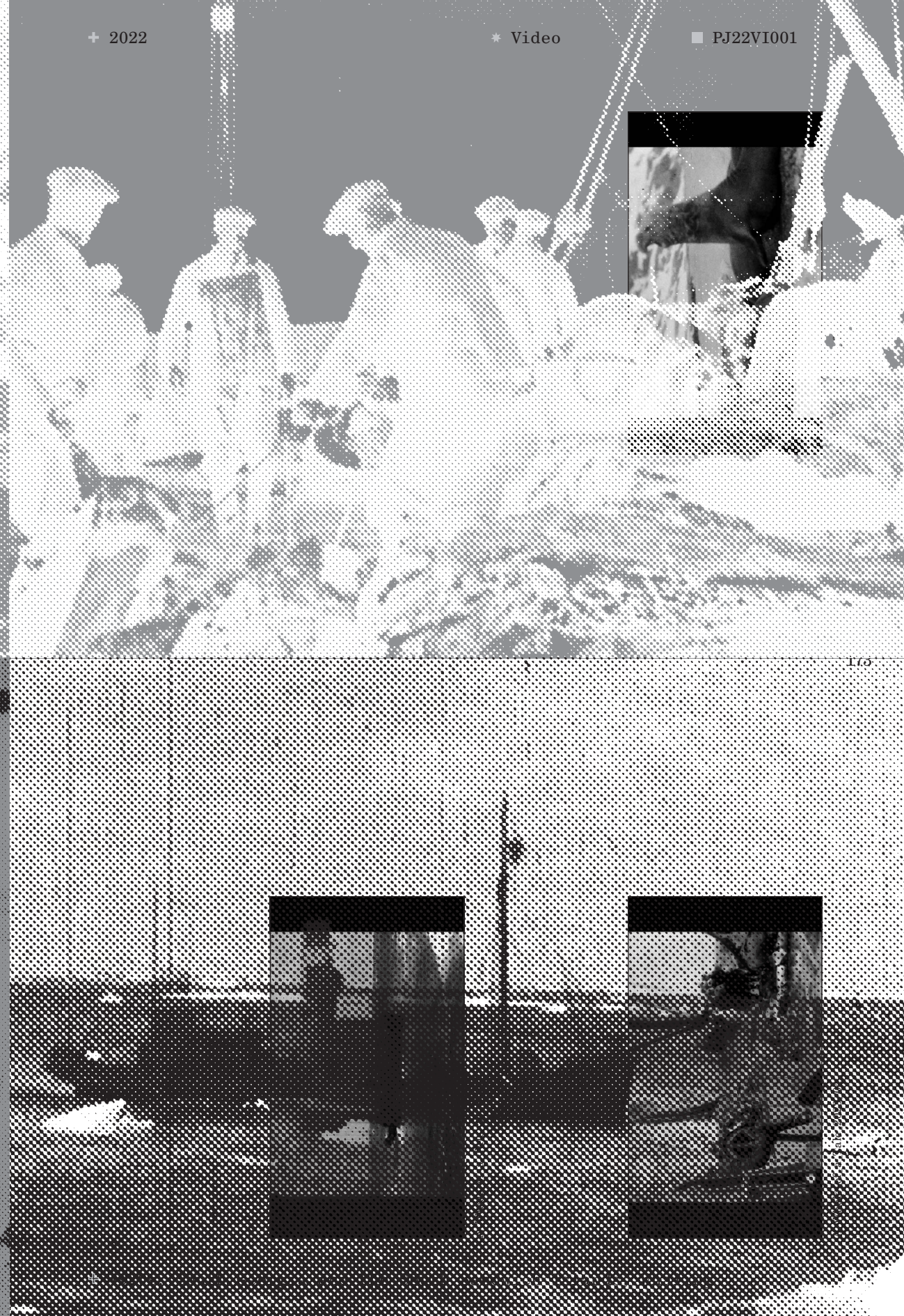


01:04:36 · Digital file format · Found footage



A_Whale_of_a_Tale_2023_11

Found Footage



RIOT/UPRISING

“Riot/Uprising” (2023) is a three-channel digital color video with sound that re-edits archival footage of the 1971 Attica prison uprising, sourced from the New York State Archives. Through parallel montage, glitch aesthetics, and an unpolished editing style, the work foregrounds the asymmetry between the incarcerated and those documenting them. Emphasizing the materiality and obsolescence of video itself, the artwork exposes the constructed nature of archival records and the role of mediation in shaping public memory. By disrupting conventional narrative structures, “Riot/Uprising” invites viewers to reflect on state violence, resistance, and the politics of historical representation.

Riot/Uprising_2023_03

[ARTIST’S REMARKS]

January 9, 2023

I am puzzled by the criminal justice system, police states, and their possibilities of existence. I am coming from France, and I received an education in Paris in the 1990s until the 2010s; I am familiar with philosopher Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower and his commentary on the panopticon.

Biopower refers to the practice of controlling and managing populations through various social, political, and economic systems, often involving techniques affecting individuals’ bodies and behaviors.

The panopticon is a circular prison design with a central watchtower, where a single guard can observe all inmates and enforce self-discipline through constant surveillance. Mass surveillance programs such as ECHELON and PRISM that collect civilian communications data have been widely and publicly debated (for example through Laura Poitras’s practice).

One would think that a theory developed in 1975 by Foucault would have somehow led to a more rightful and just future. But it seems to be the opposite. The more theories and criticisms of state violence are developed, the more states seem to become violent. I know that coincidence is not causality, but I found the coincidence

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

troubling. My interrogations of state violence led me to research prison riots and prison typologies. I started to look at prison motion picture films in 2021 from the Freedom Archives records, originally made by the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown.

How is it possible to study and understand these tactics of control (how they operate and how states implement them) while simultaneously being subjected to the very violence they produce?

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

January 11, 2023

I made a single-channel video in 2021 (Control Unit) and a three-channel video work in 2023 (Riot/Uprising) as a way to educate myself and others about such systems of control and power relations between an individual and a state.

I started composing "Riot/Uprising" in May 2022. I asked the New York State Archives for access to the motion picture films depicting events associated with the Attica Correctional Facility uprising in September of 1971. The archives transferred the video records to a hard drive I provided. They sent the hard drive from New York to Stockholm. I paid for the hard drive and the transport but there were no fees for reproduction of records.
I started editing in September 2022. My editing strategy was simple: to drag and drop all footage in the digital editing timeline as they were arranged in the hard drive and start creating a three-channel parallel montage.

The next step required more work. I had to mix all three audio channels in relation to one another in panning and volume, and that is where in my opinion the work was really born. It was important to spend time with the material despite its violence both from the point of view of the prisoner subjected to a specific gaze and the subject matter. I could see how the videos were made, the comments, and the

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

framing, which I aim to highlight for the audience. It is more than 2 hours long and I wish for people to immerse themselves in the material as I did during the editing process.

I want people to react to it.

The editing is brutal and annoying at times. I did not polish the editing for the audience to be entertained, I want the audience to riot with the prisoners, to realize that our lives should not be subjected to state violence.

▷ Variable ✲ Digital file format □ Found footage

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

February 15, 2023

In 2013, I immersed myself in a survey exhibition of British artist Steve McQueen at the Schaulager Basel (Laurenz Foundation). Accompanied by my friend Gabriel, we spent five days exploring the exhibition extensively from morning till evening. We meticulously analyzed each work multiple times, making our experience exceptionally enriching.

Although I was not familiar at the time with the history of financial support behind his practice, which enabled his artistic production, I studied and admired his works, from "Bear" (1993) to "Small Axe" (2020).

I contemplated the impactful choices in his films, which frequently address boiling political issues, as seen in "Shame" (2011) and "Twelve Years a Slave" (2013). I pondered McQueen's personal connections to these stories, as well as the filmic intelligence and cinematography they exhibited. I reflected on his British identity and how the anglophone realm dominates the francophone sphere, particularly in contemporary art.

I first met Steve McQueen in March 2010 in New York during the Armory Show art fair. The introduction occurred at a private dinner in midtown, facilitated by Joni Waka, whom I had met in Tokyo during the

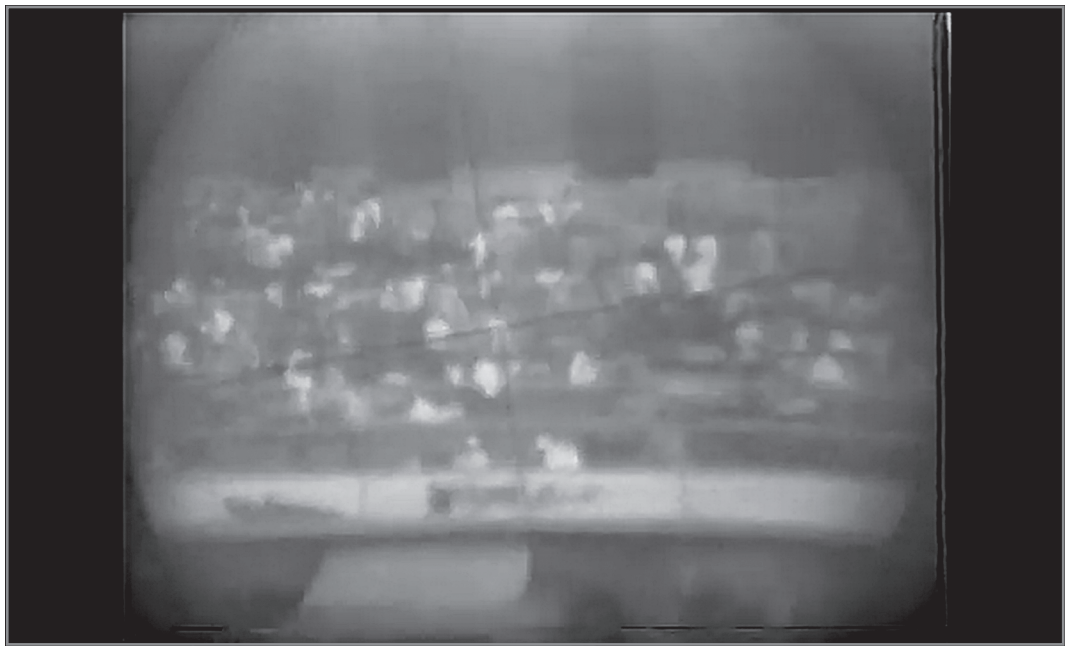
✣ Attica, Prison riot

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

summer of 2006. Upon his arrival, Steve was accompanied by a female friend. During our conversation, he inquired if, as a French speaker, I had seen "A Prophet" (2009). When I responded negatively, he discreetly turned to his friend and said in a low voice, "I am embarrassed."

Several years later, I met Maja Oeri, the President of the Laurenz Foundation, at a dinner organized in honor of Theaster Gates following his performance at the Kunstmuseum Basel with The Black Monks of Mississippi in 2018. I had been invited to the performance by Pamela Kramlich after encountering her at the Art Basel art fair. At the performance, I sat next to prominent figures such as Jacques Herzog and Pierre De Meuron, and Maja Hoffman. Near the performance's end, Pamela introduced me to Maja Oeri, who warmly welcomed me. We later dined together, and I had the opportunity to converse with Theaster Gates. One of his guests commended me as an intellectual as I was wearing glasses. The following day, I visited his exhibition and performances at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst. I also returned to the Schaulager and experienced the retrospective of Bruce Nauman.

Still from video "Riot/Uprising" (2023) showing a helmeted figure seen from behind, arm lifted in a pointing or signaling gesture before a blocky building facade. The monochrome image is veiled by blur, dust specks, and faint frame edges, its gestures read through the murky, collapsing surface of worn tape.



Still from video "Riot/Uprising" (2023) showing prisoners in Attica Prison seen from a rifle sight, distant stands packed with small white-clad figures behind bars. A foggy, out-of-focus lens, soft halos and tracking lines smear bodies into a pulsing grey field, the crowd dissolving into the grain and flutter of deteriorated video.

Still from video “Riot/Uprising” (2023) showing prisoners in Attica Prison clustered around a raised platform in the yard, with ladders, railings, and hanging sheets or tarps forming a rough shelter. The washed-out greyscale image is riddled with noise, dropouts, and jitter, so that the scene appears partially swallowed by the decay of the video itself.

Still from video “Riot/Uprising” (2023) showing a blurred crowd of helmeted figures in greyscale, partially obscured by horizontal bands of static and a thick green bar at the top; warped, rippling lines make the scene barely legible, foregrounding the decaying analog video signal as much as the gathering itself.

[ARTIST’S REMARKS]

February 28, 2023

In “Making a Killing: On Race, Ritual, and (Re) Membering in Digital Culture” (2017), Tonia Sutherland explores the implications of circulating digital records that document the deaths of Black Americans, focusing on the complex intersections of race, technology, and memory.

Sutherland investigates how these digital artifacts serve both as a space for communal mourning and a platform that may perpetuate racialized violence.

Methodologically incorporating critical race theory and digital culture studies, she examines how digital permanence impacts the communal practices of remembering and the potential for achieving social justice through the lens of the “right to be forgotten.”

Sutherland’s work is pivotal, not only for its insightful analysis of how digital media serves as an arena for racial discourse but also for its interrogation of the ethics surrounding digital records of trauma.

I found her research contributing significantly to understanding the societal and cultural dynamics at play in the digital memorialization of Black deaths. This article challenges me to reconsider how digital spaces mediate race and memory and the potential they hold for re-scripting narratives of race and violence.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

March 1, 2023

In "Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice," Sutherland delves into the concept of archival amnesty to explore its implications on transitional and restorative justice among African American communities.

Sutherland's research argues that archival practices often erase or marginalize certain historical narratives, particularly those involving Black Americans, which impacts current social and legal justices. She connects this omission to a broader pattern of systemic racism in archival processes, positioning archival amnesty not only as an archival failure but as a societal one that hinders truth and reconciliation efforts.

Sutherland critiques traditional archival methodologies and advocates for a more inclusive archival practice that recognizes and preserves the narratives of communities typically underrepresented in historical records. She proposes a reconceptualization of archival work that supports the restoration and healing of affected communities.

Sutherland's comprehensive analysis, supported by contemporary case studies and theoretical insights, makes a compelling argument for the re-evaluation of archival standards and practices in order to more truthfully reflect the diversity of historical experiences and promote justice.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

March 7, 2023

My relationship with cinema is complicated. On the one hand, I am passionate about cinema and the potential of storytelling to change the world and influence people's identity formation. I have watched thousands of hours of films from Akira Kurosawa to Naoki Urasawa's adaptations.

I received an education in the history of cinema at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris where I learned about Jean-Luc Godard, Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni, Alfred Hitchcock, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, and Chris Marker from a phenomenological perspective as well as André Bazin's history of cinema and Bresson's realism.

On the other hand, I have a profound aversion to the politics of cinema which functions very much like any other capitalist industry. The ways film producers work like curators or censors, constantly preventing a film to be realized in its most poetic and aesthetically advanced form; the funding process which relies at least in France and Sweden in large part on state funding is great, but again who decides who gets funding and who does not functions similarly to what gets into the archives and what does not.

I understand that France has still not fully dealt with its colonial pasts, but I am surprised that the national film board

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

censored the work of Chris Marker and Alain Resnais for several years (Statues Also Die (1977) for example), and refused several of Jean Luc Godard's projects. All these exclusionary processes pushed me to adopt an experimental approach to cinema which led me to make films with archives and rely more on the editing table than on film funds.

I wish it could change, but my patience with producers is very limited. Even when filming instead of working with archival footage, my way of doing cinema is small, modest, and do-it-yourself (bricolage). For example, in 2014, I bought two plane tickets to China, brought a friend and some basic recording equipment, and made a film about a remote beekeeper performing a ritual, resulting in "YuYu" film.

I am interested in early experimental films that break from mainstream script-based filmmaking, such as "Le film est déjà commencé?" (1951) by Maurice Lemaître and "Traité de Bave et d'éternité/ Venom and Eternity" (1951) by Isidore Isou. These films activate spectators and abolish the storytelling norms of cinema. Maurice Lemaître expanded on traditional cinema by manipulating physical film stock and incorporating elements of live performance. His innovative approach, coined "syncinéma," transformed film screenings into interactive happenings, involving audience participation and blending disparate visual and auditory elements to challenge conventional narrative structures.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

Poem Johnson's "Riot/Uprising" stands as an example of how contemporary art can harness archival materials to critique and investigate structures of power. This three-channel video installation interlaces historical content with technological critique, thrusting viewers into a vortex of systemic reflection on civil rights and state control, highlighted by the 1971 Attica prison uprising. Johnson's methodical use of archival distortion, through VHS glitches and sound manipulation, acts as a metaphor for the perturbation and erosion of trust in institutions tasked with governance and protection.

Employing what can be described as a "riotous editing style," Johnson amplifies the energy of the uprising, enabling the artwork to echo the fragmented and often chaotic narratives of historical resistance movements. Diverging from traditional linear storytelling, the piece disrupts viewer expectations and challenges the authoritative and unified perspective found in state-produced narratives. This approach invites a layered interpretation of the aesthetics of unrest, emphasizing how media portrayal influences public perception of resistance.

Institutionally, Johnson's work carries substantial research value for future examinations of how artists manipulate archival footage to critique the very foundation of their medium. By centering on a significant event like the Attica uprising, Johnson bridges past and concurrent discourses on justice and incarceration, making "Riot/Uprising" a reference point for discussions around the evolution and continuity of systemic challenges in American justice.

The use of obsolete technology underscores the inherent message of decay and neglect within systems of control, linking the past's unresolved issues with the present's technological advancements in surveillance and control. This work not only unveils documents of resistance but also serves as a reflective mirror highlighting society's challenges in addressing and learning from historical injustices. This makes "Riot/Uprising" a tool for understanding the dynamic interplay between technology, archival practice, and social justice, valuable for researchers and practitioners across fields of media studies, history, art, and sociology.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Poem Johnson's "Riot/Uprising" exemplifies how contemporary art can navigate and illuminate broader sociopolitical issues, creatively critiquing the mechanics of visibility, representation, and memory in a landscape dominated by digital surveillance and state power. The video manipulation exposes underlying power dynamics and biases, forcing viewers to confront the partiality and construction of what is seen, remembered, and understood in historical records. It encapsulates both the artistic methods used and the thematic examination of how visibility and perception are controlled and contested within societal and media contexts.

Johnson manipulates the materiality of VHS technology, using obsolescence and glitch aesthetics to disrupt authoritative narratives and expose the distortion of historical events by institutional forces. This method mirrors the artistic strategies of Taiwanese artists Tehching Hsieh and Chen Chieh-Jen, who explore themes of endurance, surveillance, and the rewriting of sidelined histories. Hsieh's durational works challenge the limits of freedom under systemic pressures, paralleling the psychological intensity in Johnson's depiction of the Attica uprising. Chen Chieh-Jen reactivates forgotten histories through staged re-enactments, resonating with Johnson's layered exploration of past injustices to critique present conditions.

The reassembly of historical narratives in Johnson's work also dialogues with Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci-Lucchi's archival reconstructions that confront colonial legacies and wars, underscoring persistent global patterns of oppression in the global South.

Together, these references situate "Riot/Uprising" within a global discourse that interrogates historical injustices to inform and animate activism.

Johnson highlights the ongoing relevance of these issues in current societal challenges. He accentuates the role of art in questioning dominant paradigms and advocating for a critical approach to understanding and potentially rectifying historical and ongoing injustices.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

"Riot/Uprising" engages with the historical context and significance of the 1971 Attica prison uprising through a transformative archival lens. Influenced by Eric Ketelaar's perspective on archives as "epistemological sites"[1] rather than mere sources, Johnson's installation exceeds traditional archival roles to probe deeper into the societal and political undercurrents embedded within the footage. By incorporating the obsolescence and peculiarities of VHS technology, the artwork reflects how historical narratives are not only preserved but are actively shaped and mediated by their formats. Through manipulating audio-visual disturbances and adopting a riotous editing style, Johnson underscores the constructed nature of archival narratives, challenging the presumed authority and objectivity typical of documentary media. Ketelaar's discussion of archives as fabricated constructs, influenced by societal technologies and the agency of archivers, aligns with Johnson's artistic strategy.

1 **Eric Ketelaar, "Archival Contexts,"** ***Archeion, 2023*****, no. 124 (September 14, 2023): 35–56.**

Historically, the adage "no documents, no history," coined by archivists Langlois and Seignobos in 1897, has anchored historiography by emphasizing the primacy of written records as conduits for historical truth. This view is now challenged by contemporary understandings which recognize history as a multidimensional and interpretive discipline. This traditional maxim assumes a neutrality in archival practices which does not exist; archives are inherently political, crafted within specific power structures and biases.

Modern archival practices and digital humanities have revolutionized both the accessibility and the variety of documents available. This expansion has subsequently redefined the concept of a "document." Acknowledging silences in the archive is crucial, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has explored[2], where gaps in documentation don't imply an absence of history but rather spotlight regions where historical narratives have been suppressed or overlooked. There is growing insistence on a more inclusive historiographical approach that appreciates diverse perspectives and embraces various mediums through which human experiences are recorded—ranging from oral histories and material culture to digital data. This approach ensures a broader, more comprehensive understanding of documented history that accommodates multiple narratives and experiences.

2 **Michel-Rolph Trouillot,** ***Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*** **(Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995).**

While documents remain invaluable to historical research, the simplistic declaration "no documents, no history" does not accommodate the complexity required in historical inquiry. A nuanced appreciation of what constitutes a document and its critical use is essential for a comprehensive understanding of history. By challenging this historical maxim, we encourage a richer, dialogue-oriented interpretation of history that is critically aware of its methodologies and truly values the multifaceted nature of human experience.

Johnson's approach resonates with the paradigm shift from viewing archives as static repositories to acknowledging them as active realms where cultural, social, and political significances are negotiated. This coincides with broader contemporary scholarly movements that aspire to redefine archives to acknowledge omissions and marginalized elements, underlining the impact of archives in shaping historical consciousness and collective memory.

Embedding the Attica uprising within this modern artistic and theoretical framework, "Riot/Uprising" emerges as a compelling intersection of art, history, and archival theory, urging viewers to reconsider the role of archives in constructing our understanding of the past.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Poem Johnson's "Riot/Uprising" lays interpretive ground for future academic and creative research. The interplay of archival footage with VHS technological aesthetics opens pathways for interdisciplinary studies, particularly in media theory, history, and art practice. Scholars can further explore how the obsolescence of media formats influences the interpretation of historical events, mirroring how societal memories are subject to decay and distortion.

Further research could integrate comparative studies with other artworks exploring state surveillance and biopower, such as those by artists like Harun Farocki or Trevor Paglen, who delve into the mechanics of control and observation. Johnson's work invites analysis within this broader dialogue, questioning how visual culture mediates our understanding of authority and resistance. Additionally, the installation's immersive, multi-channel design offers ground for investigating the impact of spatial dynamics in viewer perception and emotional engagement, pertinent to studies in phenomenology and affect theory.

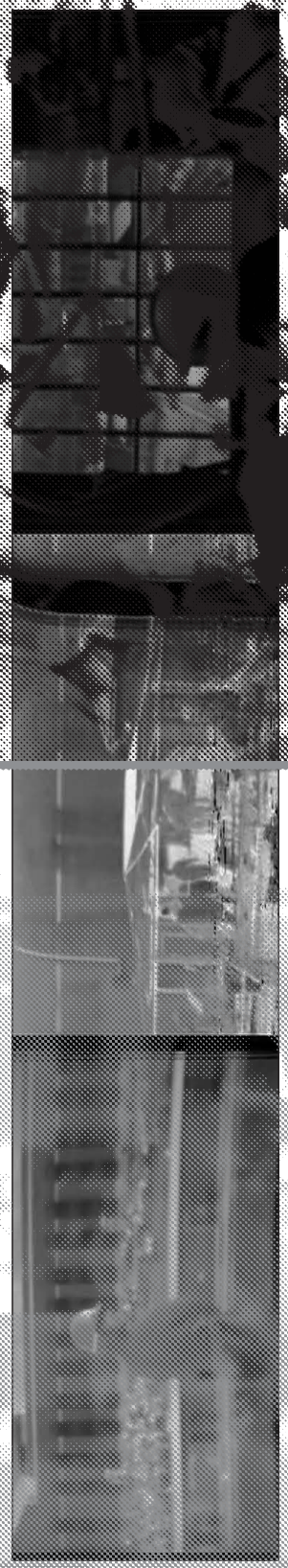
The thematic core of Johnson's work, centered on institutional violence and civil rights, aligns with ongoing discussions in social justice and could inspire collaborative projects spanning sociology, law, and visual arts. It prompts critical reflection on the mechanisms of historical documentation and its role in shaping public discourse around incarceration and human rights.

Riot/Uprising_2023_10

▷ Variable ✳ Digital file format ⊡ Found footage

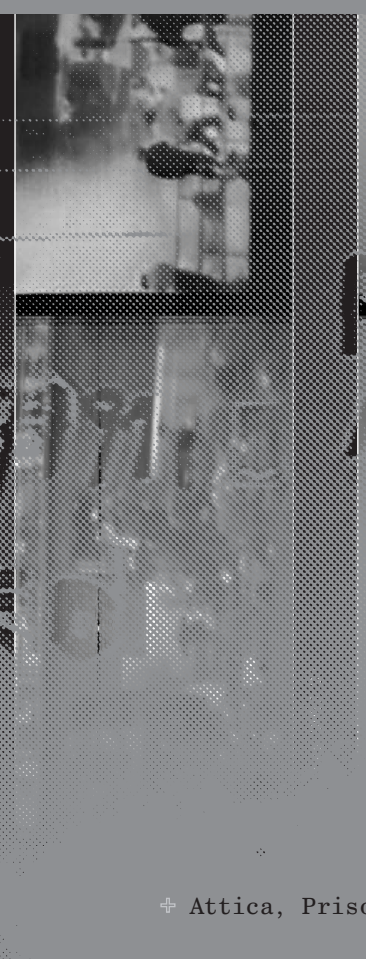
+ 2023 ✳ Video ■ PJ23VI003

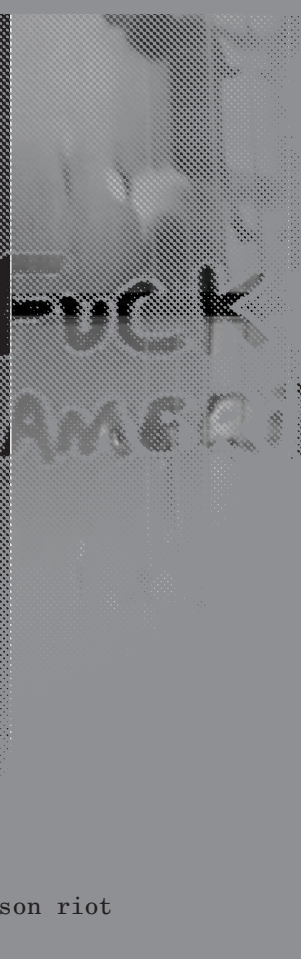
+ Attica, Prison riot



Riot/Uprising_2023_08

Variable — Digital file format — Found footage

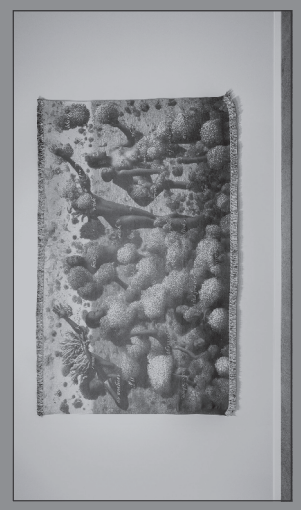




Attica, Prison riot

THE SEA IS HISTORY

“The Sea is History” (2024) is a textile series that reflects on memory, displacement, and the ocean as a living archive of the African diaspora. Woven on the Jacquard loom with cotton, wool, and polyester, the works depict hybrid figures that interlace human experience with the material and ecological worlds. Drawing on Derek Walcott’s poetry, the series integrates fragments of text into woven form, merging language and image through Afrosurrealist and Afrofuturist lenses to reconsider historical narrative, postcolonial identity, and the sensory transmission of cultural memory.



The_Sea_is_History_2024_07

▷ Variable ✲ Cotton, Polyester, Merino Wool □ Jacquard weaving

[ARTIST’S REMARKS]

January 12, 2024

I am struggling to find a language outside of the archival realm. I am caught by the regime of the archive, their demands, times, conditions and politics. I am no longer obliged to comply, and I am seating outside. I want to continue engaging with historical narratives and historiography without relying on documents from state archives.

MY OWN TERMS.

How to produce another historiography?

Always remember that “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” thank you Audre.

Saidiya Hartman comes to mind when searching for an alternative. She opened a door, still relying on the power of the archive to conceal, misrepresent and erase. Something is missing from the archival records. Their lives and stories are absent, incomplete. Her counter-historical strategy yields fruits. She makes their presence visible, filling holes in the chamber of history. She is sewing wounds, thread by thread, with fragile memory. It is written.

~~The written words and archives as currency (seeking validation) within academia.~~

✣ Derek Walcott, African diaspora

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

~~Is it a game worth fighting for?~~

Here I must interject and say that there is something about being "colored," something about the double consciousness (Paul Gilroy and "Black Skin/White Masks"); something about misfits.

I want to say trauma.

This is an emotional charge, some call it "affect". I don't like this word or the scholarship surrounding it. However, the charge can be redirected to more useful ends.

January 14, 2024

I am finding myself looking at the yarns in a textile mill in Belgium. A room full of colors, textures, and forms. Spools of different materials are looking at me. I am contemplating samples, weaves, patterns and I am engaging with their sensuality and touch; their haptic power.

I think that this is a way to heal the divide.

The yarns are from plants, animals, and minerals.

What a wonderful way to engage with time and labor.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

I am imagining a large woven structure at the bottom of the sea growing skyward; at the same time in the sea and in the sky. Surrealist.

Blue.
Blues

Shades of blue intertwine with iridescent filaments as an attractor but also as a lure.

January 17, 2024

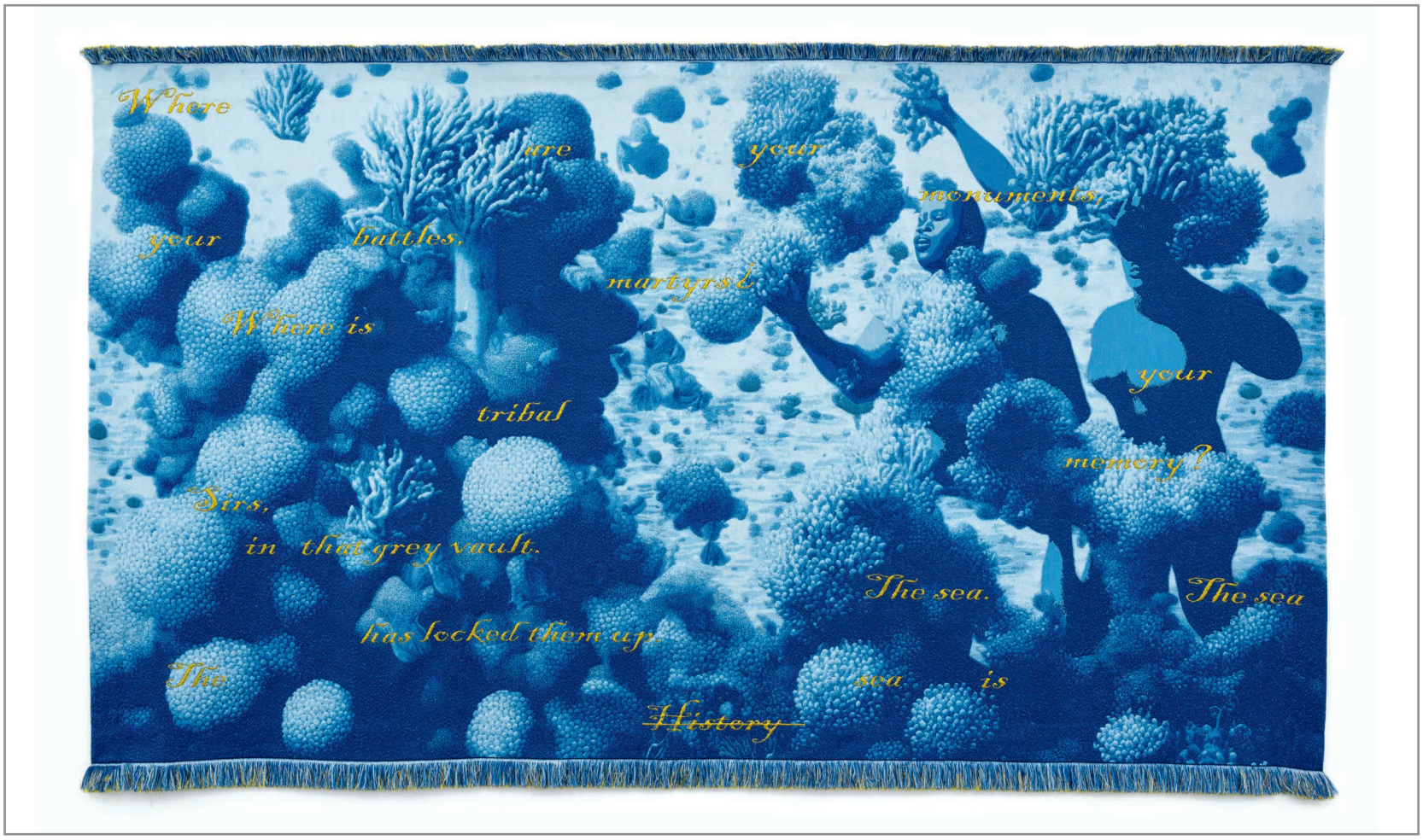
The Star

If, in the light of things, you fade
real, yet wanly withdrawn
to our determined and appropriate
distance, like the moon left on
all night among the leaves, may
you invisibly delight this house;
O star, doubly compassionate, who came
too soon for twilight, too late
for dawn, may your pale flame
direct the worst in us
through chaos
with the passion of
plain day.

Derek Walcott

Woven tapestry “Returns” (2024), 200 × 350 cm, cotton, merino wool and polyester, depicting an underwater field of coral-like spheres and submerged Black figures swimming and reaching through dense clusters. Yellow script spells fragments from Derek Walcott’s poem The Sea is History (“kept,” “submarine,” “I’ll,” “by its jewels”) drifting across the blue seafloor between bodies and reefs. Courtesy of the Bus¬chlen Mowatt Nichol Foundation.

Woven tapestry “Sea Change/Mother of Pearls” (2024), 210 × 350 cm, cotton, merino wool and polyester, showing silhouetted Black figures rising among bulbous coral forms on a deep-blue seafloor. Yellow script carries fragments from Derek Walcott’s The Sea is History (“Where are your battles,” “The sea is History,” “tribal,” and “martyrs?”) threaded between reefs and figures. Courtesy of the Bus¬chlen Mowatt Nichol Foundation



[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

January 30, 2024

Pachamama
Mother Earth
Harbor
Nurture
Flesh + Coral + Pearls
The ocean as a site of collective memory
and transformation.

March 12, 2024

I've started working with the Jacquard loom, and I keep reminding myself that this tool isn't neutral. Behind its precision is a heavy history: kids in factories, women doing long hours for little pay, and the colonial trade routes that brought in the raw materials. Every thread feels tied to those stories. But cloth also carries resistance—people have always found ways to weave survival, adaptation, even quiet defiance into fabric.

In my research, I followed Jacquard weaving across Japan, the UK, and France, paying close attention to child labor. I kept running into the same connections—cotton, wool, slavery, and even the way living things have been genetically modified for profit. It made me realize that materials themselves can tell history, maybe more powerfully than written documents. They hold the weight

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

of ancestors, of land, and of today's ecological crisis that cuts across social, political, and planetary scales.

For me, turning to textiles also feels like a way to bring back a sense of touch and sensuality I had lost in filmmaking. It's a shift in medium, but not in focus—I'm still drawn to materiality and to more-than-human worlds. In film I explored the decay of video records; now, with weaving, I'm finding new ways to handle history directly, in something you can literally hold and feel.

March 14, 2024

As I continue with weaving, I realize the work also weaves me into its fabric. My heritage is entangled in its threads. My lineage connects Benin, Togo, Congo, and France, and it inevitably shapes the language I speak through weaving. My ancestral name, Woede—from the Gen language of the Mina people in West Africa—means "one who meticulously plans for the future." It carries with it a vision of care, foresight, and responsibility to community. I think of this name as a compass. It pushes me to link memory and projection, weaving not just a record of the past but also a proposal for the future.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

March 17, 2024

While creating the collages, before I weave, I begin by cutting and assembling fragments—images, drawings, patterns—into provisional compositions. This stage is not secondary but foundational: the collage becomes the map from which the textile will emerge. Once the composition holds together, I translate it into the Jacquard loom, where threads take the place of paper and glue, and the woven structure absorbs the earlier decisions.

In this preparatory phase, I often find myself in dialogue with other artists who have pushed collage beyond surface decoration: Sigmar Polke, Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker. Each of them worked with layering as a way to interrogate history, fracture representation, and create new visual languages.

I am thinking of "When Frustration Threatens Desire" by Kerry James Marshall. The title of the painting references Paul Garon's "Blues and the Poetic Spirit" which reflects themes of desire and magical realisms present within blues music. I see layers and figures from Yoruba iconography, Haitian Voodoo "ve-ve" and Western esotericism which create a vibrant contemporary social collage. Marshall draws upon personal experiences in South Central L.A. and his research into local spiritual practices such as those at the Bombay Candle

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

Company. This work, with its serious play on the canon of art history and folk tradition, highlights Marshall's nuanced approach to African American identity and cultural representation.

This painting reclaim visibility for African American communities and reshape the European canon to include lives and stories long excluded. In my own practice, I find resonance here: a reminder that weaving, like collage, is not only a technique but a way of building presence.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

The textile series "The Sea is History" embodies a sustained research practice that expands the field of artistic inquiry into the poetics of memory, ecology, and material historiography. Conceived through the medium of Jacquard weaving, the work situates itself at the confluence of aesthetic invention and epistemological experimentation, asking how textile—one of humanity's oldest recording technologies—can act as both archive and agent of historical transformation. Within the logic of artistic research, its long-term value lies not only in its visual articulation but in its methodological contribution: it proposes a tidalectic approach to history-making that rethinks the relation between material, narrative, and temporal order.

Each tapestry—woven in gradations of indigo blue with threads of cotton, merino wool, and polyester—acts as a stratigraphic document. The interlacing of plant, animal, and synthetic fibers literalizes the encounter between organic and industrial temporalities. These tactile strata make visible the sedimentation of colonial and ecological histories embedded in global textile production. The works' monumental scale and immersive chromatic field envelop the viewer in a spatial condition that is both aqueous and archival, where histories unfold through opacity, resonance, and mutual entanglement rather than linear disclosure.

Drawing from Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea is History" (1979), the series reconfigures the ocean as an epistemic space of remembrance and metamorphosis. The woven figures—hybrids of coral and human form—embody Kamau Brathwaite's tidalectics, oscillating between submersion and emergence, ancestry and futurity. Here, the sea is not a metaphor for loss but a medium of transmission where diasporic histories are continuously rewritten. By embedding fragments of Walcott's verses into the weave, Johnson transforms the act of reading into a tactile encounter: words become texture, syntax becomes topology. The textile thus performs its own theory—one that collapses distinctions between document and imagination, between archival record and mythopoetic speculation.

In this sense, "The Sea is History" textile series advances a long-term research trajectory within artistic and postcolonial studies. It contributes to an expanding discourse on the material intelligence of textiles and the decolonial potential of artistic methodologies that engage with the archive as a site of both preservation and invention. The project models how artistic research can operate as historiographic practice: through iterative making, critical fabulation, and material thinking, it generates knowledge that is experiential, situated, and transmissible across disciplines. Its value endures in its capacity to reframe the archive—not as a static repository, but as a living sea of relations whose currents continue to shape our understanding of history, matter, and being.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

"The Sea is History" emerges within a broader field of contemporary artistic practices that merge material investigation with epistemic critique. Since the early 2000s, artists have increasingly turned to weaving, dyeing, and other textile processes as methodologies for research rather than solely as forms of representation. This turn reflects a wider shift toward material thinking, where making functions as a cognitive and critical operation that engages with histories of labor, extraction, and migration. Within this context, Johnson's practice aligns with a generation of artists who employ textile as both a site of memory and a system of knowledge production, foregrounding the medium's historical entanglement with global trade, colonial industry, and the politics of touch.

Comparable trajectories can be observed in the work of Otobong Nkanga and Igshaan Adams, whose material strategies similarly trace the intersections between ecology, body, and belief. Nkanga's use of minerals and pigments exposes the extractive economies that shape human and environmental relationships, while Adams transforms weaving into an act of spiritual cartography, mapping diasporic and queer subjectivities through beaded and knotted threads. Johnson's approach resonates with these practices yet diverges in its sustained inquiry into the sea as both material environment and epistemological agent. His deployment of the Jacquard loom—a technology historically bound to industrial capitalism and colonial textile circuits—becomes a means to interrogate how digital and mechanical reproduction systems encode power and memory.

These convergences point toward an emergent pattern in artistic research: the integration of craft-based processes with critical historiography and ecological consciousness. Rather than treating textile merely as medium or metaphor, such practices conceive it as a discursive fabric through which social, geological, and archival time are interwoven. "The Sea is History" exemplifies this turn by materializing theory through fiber, transforming the loom into a laboratory for rethinking how histories are written, felt, and sustained across generations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

"The Sea is History" series unfolds as an inquiry into the afterlives of Atlantic history and the material residues of colonial modernity. The textile medium becomes an instrument for re-examining how memory, trade, and technology intertwine across centuries. Johnson reimagines the Caribbean seascape as a site where memory and history are not preserved through linear chronology but recur in cyclical and tidal rhythms. His choice of materials (cotton, merino wool, and polyester) constitutes both a historical and epistemological statement. Each fiber carries distinct genealogies of labor, extraction, and cultural value: cotton, intertwined with the economies of slavery and plantation capitalism; wool, linked to pastoral and artisanal traditions across continents; and polyester, emblematic of petrochemical modernity and globalized mass production. Their interlacing compresses divergent temporalities into a single tactile field, where inherited systems of extraction and fabrication remain physically palpable.

The integration of Jacquard weaving situates the work within a genealogy of mechanized image-making and colonial industrialization. Developed in early nineteenth-century France, the Jacquard loom's punched-card system not only revolutionized textile production but prefigured the logic of digital computation. Johnson's reappropriation of this apparatus reanimates its colonial past while transforming it into a tool of speculative historiography, weaving counter-archives that uncover the silences and omissions shaping historical record-making.

The hybrid figures that populate the weavings (half-human, half-coral) embody a mythological ecology of survival and transformation. Through these forms, Johnson articulates a tidal temporality aligned with Kamau Brathwaite's concept of tidalectics, in which identities and histories are perpetually in motion, shaped by submersion and re-emergence. His Afrosurrealist approach transforms the sea from a symbol of loss into a generative matrix of relation, where the boundaries between body, environment, and ancestry dissolve.

By materializing this dynamic through thread and structure, the work repositions textile as a historiographic medium capable of articulating the persistence of colonial and ecological entanglements through its very form. Each woven surface functions as an act of thinking in material, where touch, rhythm, and repetition become methods of inquiry. The series demonstrates how artistic practice can operate as historical reflection, transforming fabric into a space where temporal, technological, and affective dimensions converge.

FUTURE RESEARCH

"The Sea is History" opens several trajectories for continued inquiry into how textiles function as vessels of historical and cultural memory. As woven structures that combine cotton, wool, and polyester, the tapestries operate as tactile archives where materials themselves serve as witnesses to histories of labor, displacement, and resilience. Further research

could investigate how textile materiality, through its fibers, dyes, and tactile presence, extends beyond conventional documents to form a sensorial archive of the African diaspora mediating personal memory and collective history.

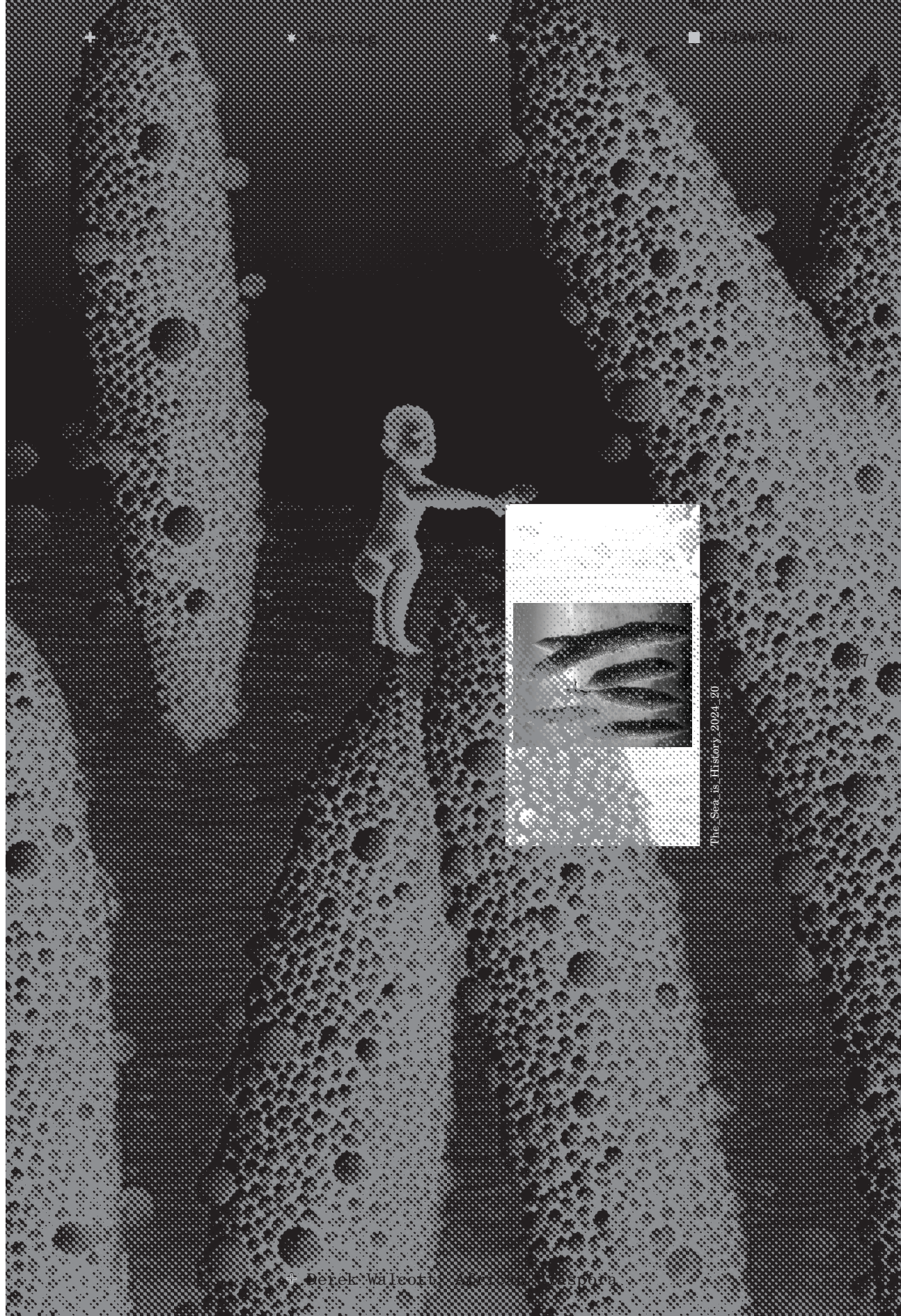
The works also invite exploration into the aesthetic operations of feeling and intimacy. Their human–coral hybrid figures, chromatic transitions, and rhythmic weaves produce an embodied language of touch that bridges the emotional and the historical. Scholarly analysis could examine how these formal elements create conditions for affective engagement, generating a multisensory mode of historical reflection grounded in texture, luminosity, and tactility.

Another direction concerns the reparative dimensions of textile art. By integrating Derek Walcott's poetics of the sea with ancestral remembrance, the series provides a framework for examining how artistic practice can facilitate healing and reconciliation. Future scholarship might situate "The Sea is History" within discourses on cultural restitution and postcolonial recovery, analyzing how textile narratives contribute to processes of mourning and renewal.

Research could examine the relation between textile practice and psychoanalytic method. Freud's recurrent metaphors of spinning and weaving link interpretation to fabrication: analysis becomes a process of making and unmaking meaning. In this framework, Poem Johnson's use of the Jacquard loom reclaims a colonial and industrial device as a site of critical reflection, where material construction parallels psychic work. The woven surface functions as an analytic field: an arena in which memory, history, and repair are enacted through the physical labor of weaving itself.

Situating the series within Afrosurrealist and Afrofuturist discourse enables a deeper understanding of how myth and speculative imagination operate as research methods. These frameworks mobilize fiction as a critical tool for revising colonial epistemologies and for envisioning futures grounded in diasporic continuity. Future research could examine how Afrosurrealist strategies expressed through textile form generate alternative models of historical knowledge rooted in material intelligence, embodied memory, and imaginative futurity, positioning artistic research as a practice through which history is re-imagined.

▷ Variable ✲ Cotton, Polyester, Merino Wool □ Jacquard weaving

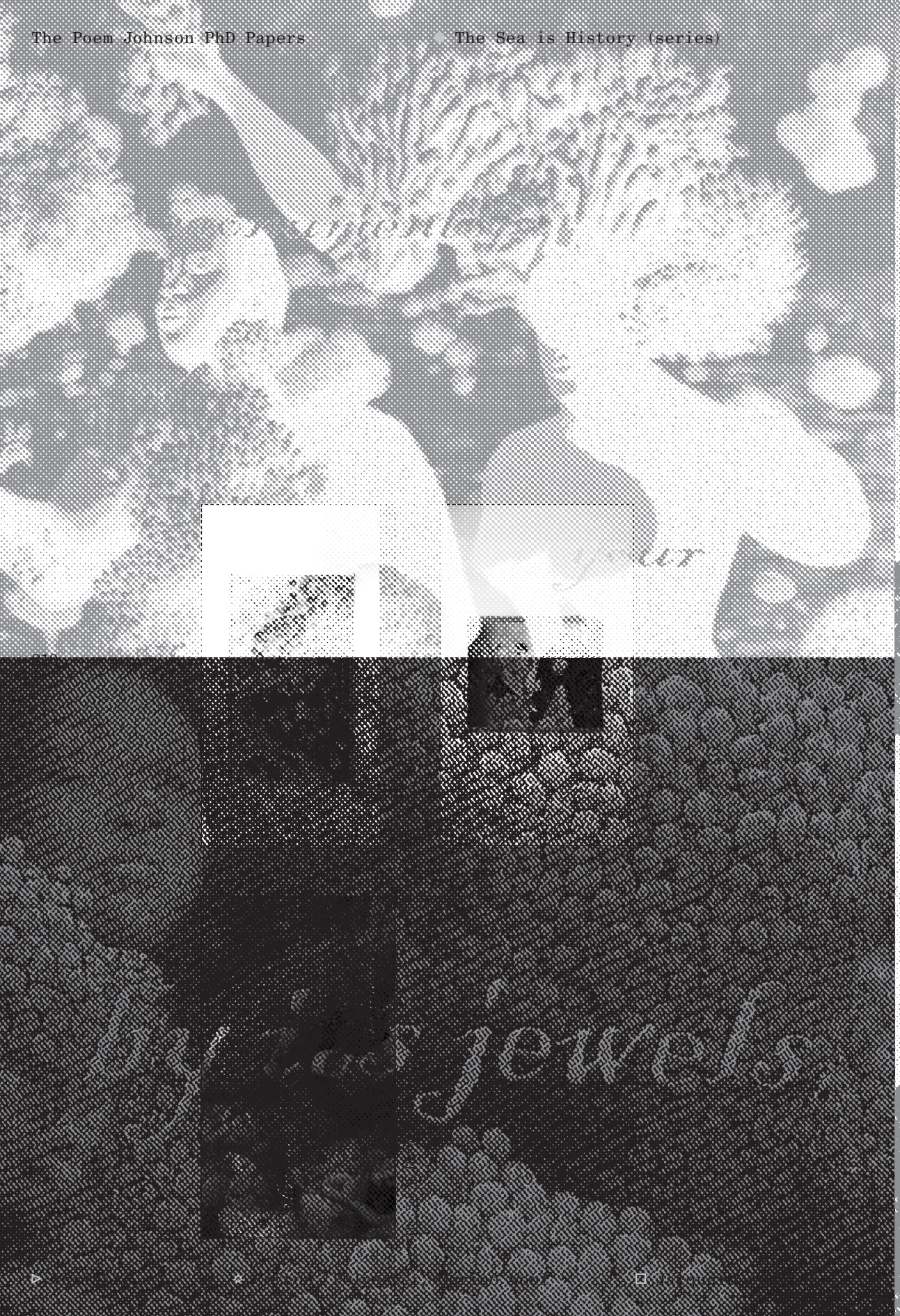


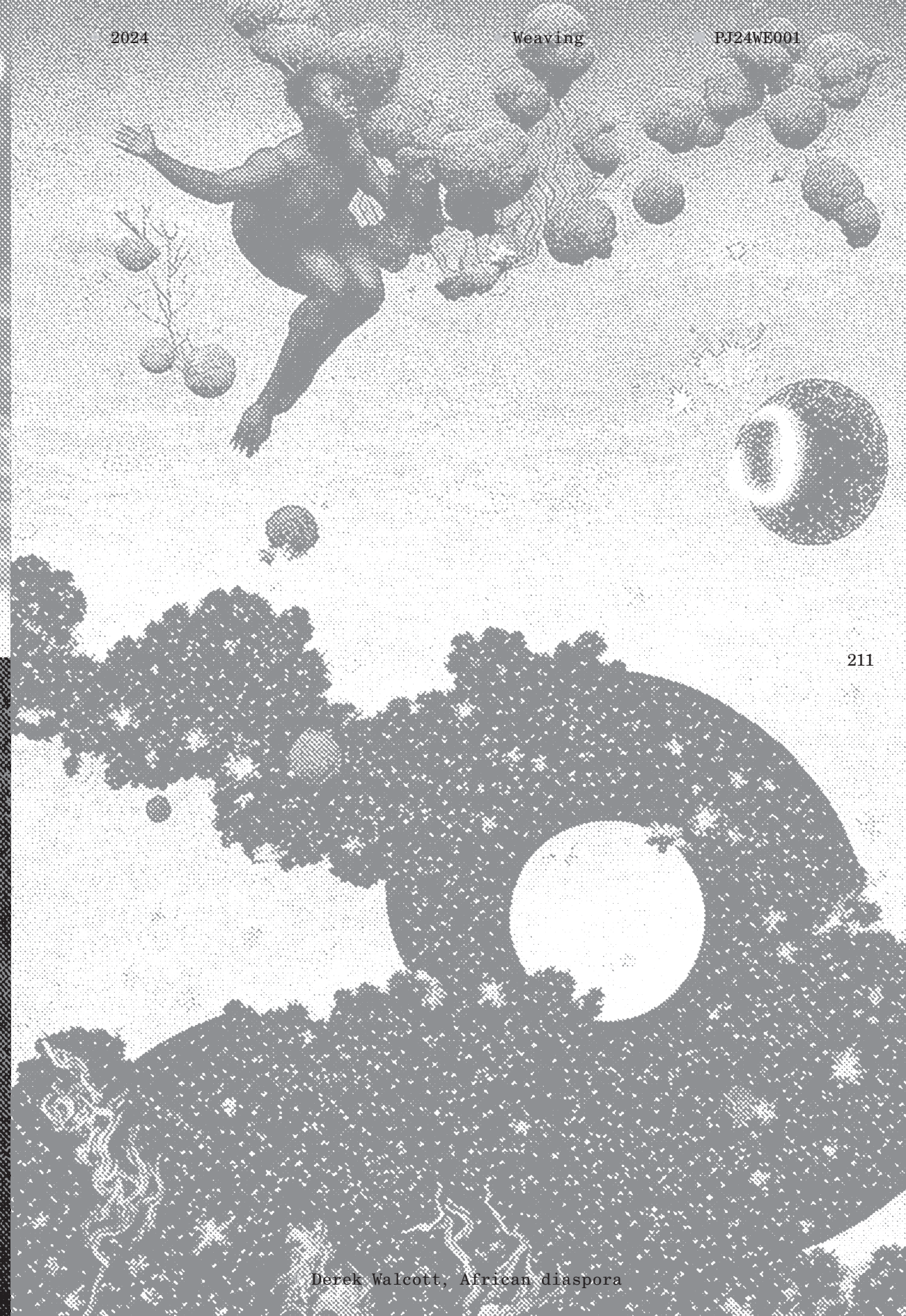
Variable

Cotton, Polyester, Merino Wool

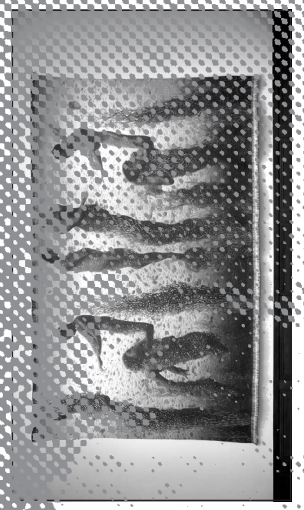
Jacq[illegible]

Derek Walcott, African diaspora



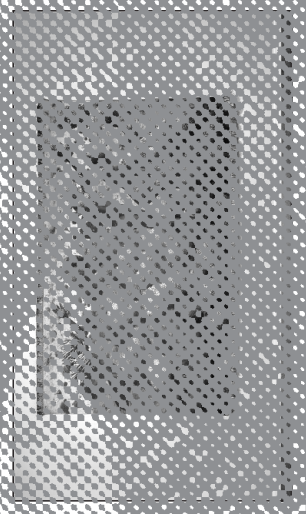


Derek Walcott, African diaspora



The_Sea_is_History_2024_06

Variable Cotton, Polyester, Merino Wool Jacquard weaving



Derek Walcott, African diaspora

SUN/SUM

“Sun/sum” (2024) is an iterative dance performance conceived as both research and rehearsal project. Created with and performed by Ama Kyei, Freddy Houndekindo, and Johanna Tengan, it explores the roots and routes of various Afrodiasporic dance forms. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the dancers gather and compose movement materials, periodically performing to expose their process and findings in a palimpsest of embodied archives. The title “Sun/sum” references the poem “Red Rising” (1982) by Kamau Brathwaite, wherein he uses the word “sun/sum” from the Akan language of Ghana, meaning soul or the origin of spiritual life.

Sunsum_2024_04

[ARTIST’S REMARKS]

May 30, 2024

I have been reading Kamau Brathwaite intensely for a few months, and I am starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel of my doctoral research.

In “Red Rising” (1982), Kamau, references “sun/sum” which is taken from the Akan language (spoken mainly in Ghana), which means soul, or origin of spiritual life.

I enjoy the cosmic depth of his poems, and at the same time, the ways in which they mantle and nurture non-linear, non-human genealogies.

I am thinking of experimenting with a time-based engine, acting as an exploration rather than a presentation. I want to mark a deliberate shift from performance as presented on a stage (pedestal), to experiencing it as an ongoing process of research and iteration.

The choreographic materials shall emulate tidalectics— ideas forming, dissolving, and reappearing in cycles that mirror the rhythms of the natural world and sustain the improvisational essence of Afrodiasporic movement traditions, particularly those of Yoruba and Gen-Mina heritage from Benin and Nigeria.

I want the constructed situation to evolve organically over

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

time, while offering new insights and experiences within each iteration:

1. The performers shall be exclusively from African descent.

2. The performers shall draw upon their own embodied archives—their ancestral memories and inherited movement vocabularies—as living material for investigation in motion, affirming a pro-Black act of cultural reclamation.

3. The performers shall seek the creation of sites of resonance, repetition, and echo within and between their movements.

June 7, 2024

Last week, I was invited to lead a workshop at Cullberg Dance Company in Stockholm. The rehearsal and artistic directors were exploring how to introduce the dancers to the idea of archives (how movement might record memory, and how performers could document or reflect on their process while contributing to a choreographer's work).

Some dancers were suspicious about theory, preferring to keep their practice intuitive. I facilitated a few sessions

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

focused on externalizing thought (finding ways to translate what happens inside the body into shared, reflective language).

For one session, I invited archivists Claudia Friedel and Joyce Lee Ann (Archival Alchemy). Joyce guided the group through exercises on accessing their "embodied archives."

At one point, dancer Johanna Tengan was invited to share her favorite dance to a Beyoncé song she'd been listening to nonstop. Joyce recognized in Johanna's movement a kind of knowledge (a living, rhythmic archive of sensation and history). That moment struck me. I realized that dance, in its immediacy, already carries the temporal complexity I've been exploring in my textile (making archives breathe and move).

From there, I continued developing collaborative dialogues with the dancers, including Johanna and Freddy Houndekindo, transforming the process into a shared space of discovery. The workshop expanded my own thinking toward a future performance piece, while also becoming a container for the dancers' personal explorations of lineage and memory.

The approach turned performance into more than representation: it became an evolving investigation, a collective act of making sense through movement.

Still from the performance “Sun/sum” (2024) at Liljevalchs Konsthall on 12 June 2024, part of “The Stockholm Cosmology” exhibition. Dancers Ama Kyei and Freddy Houndekindo wear long orange sequin coats, one leaping with arms raised as the other reaches out, framed by two blue tapestries, “Tempest” and “Sea Change/Mother of Pearls,” with a gathered audience visible.

Still from the performance “Sun/sum” (2024) showing three dancers in orange sequin coats moving barefoot across the gallery at Liljevalchs Konsthall. One dancer, close to the camera, wears a patterned cloth draped over their face, evoking Egungun masquerade traditions from Benin and Nigeria, while the others gesture in front of the large blue tapestry Tempest.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG TERM RESEARCH VALUE

"Sun/sum" extends Poem Johnson's inquiry into embodied archives, proposing dance as a living method of research rather than as a fixed work of choreography. Conceived as an iterative and process-based performance, (First generated within "The Stockholm Cosmology" exhibition at Liljevalchs Konsthall) the work unfolds through cycles of movement, conversation, and improvisation, drawing upon the embodied archives of its performers (Ama Kyei, Freddy Houndekindo, and Johanna Tengan). Their gestures emerged from Yoruba and Gen-Mina movement vocabularies rooted in Benin and Nigeria, reactivated here as evolving forms of diasporic continuity.

Across the duration of the exhibition, "Sun/sum" operated as both rehearsal and revelation. The dancers' bright, sequined garments shimmered like kinetic constellations against the deep blue tapestries of "The Sea is History," transforming the gallery into a site where movement, light, and fabric converge. Each performance enacts a tidalectic process mirroring the cyclical rhythms of the natural world and the improvisational pulse of Afrodiasporic traditions. The work's refusal of closure, its insistence on return and variation, situates it within a lineage of contemporary forms of decolonial performance research.

The long-term research value of "Sun/sum" lies in its methodological contribution: it reframes choreography as an epistemic practice of remembering and reconfiguring cultural knowledge. By foregrounding the performers' own embodied archives and inviting improvisation as inquiry, Johnson proposes a model of collective authorship that resists the fixity of the written record.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Sun/sum is situated within a well-established lineage of process-driven choreography and rehearsal-as-form, while contributing a specifically Afrodiasporic research orientation. Historically, Yvonne Rainer's "Continuous Project—Altered Daily" (1969–1970) modeled choreography as a mutable system: tasks, scores, and reconfiguration in real time (via Robert Morris). Deborah Hay's scores for attention transformed choreography into a study of perception and decision-making. Her work privileged inquiry over repetition, positioning each performer as both subject and researcher in a live experiment of movement and meaning. This genealogy establishes a precedent for Johnson's decision to expose compositional research to audiences, to privilege iteration over product, and to treat the performance frame as an epistemic laboratory.

Within contemporary Afrodiasporic performance, "Sun/sum" converses with artists who mobilize improvisation, heritage, and speculative memory as choreographic method. Relevant points of contact include Trajal Harrell (postmodernism meeting ballroom/vogue), Okwui Okpokwasili (embodied histories and communal witnessing), Nora Chipaumire (ritual, resistance, and sonic intensity), Faustin Linyekula (dance as archive of conflict and repair), Ligia Lewis (scores of affect, opacity, and refusal), and Bintou Dembélé (urban forms as decolonial ceremony). Closer to the African canon, Germaine Acogny's technique and pedagogy and the hybrid practices of artists such as Amala Dianor demonstrate how traditional vocabularies are reactivated through contemporary improvisational logics.

Methodologically, "Sun/sum" aligns with broader shifts in artistic research that treat performance as a mode of inquiry: repetition is not a means to refine a fixed result but a process through which understanding emerges. Each iteration functions as a form of analysis, revealing how knowledge takes shape through embodied practice rather than through external interpretation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

"Sun/sum" emerges from a continuum of Caribbean intellectual and artistic movements that have sought to reimagine history from within the afterlives of colonialism. At its core lies the poetic vision of Kamau Brathwaite, whose work in the 1960s and 1970s articulated a new language of historical consciousness. Writing in the wake of decolonization and the Caribbean Artists Movement, Brathwaite developed his concept of "nation language" to capture the tonal, rhythmic, and spiritual depth of the African presence in Caribbean speech. His poems, steeped in tidal metaphors and sonic repetition, proposed an alternative to the linearity of Western historiography.

The word "sunsum" appears in Brathwaite's 1982 poem "Red Rising," where it evokes renewal, uprising, and the persistence of ancestral vitality. Poem Johnson reclaims this term as both title and method, reactivating Brathwaite's cosmological poetics through dance. In "Sun/sum," movement takes the place of verse: repetition and variation unfold as choreographic equivalents to Brathwaite's cyclical rhythm and linguistic syncopation. The body becomes the living page on which history is re-inscribed, carrying diasporic knowledge through gesture, resonance, and breath.

The performance also engages a broader genealogy of Caribbean modernism that includes writers such as Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant, and Aimé Césaire, whose works situate the sea as a site of memory, trauma, and creation. Like their poetry, "Sun/sum" addresses the tension between fragmentation and continuity, locating identity within motion rather than fixed origin.

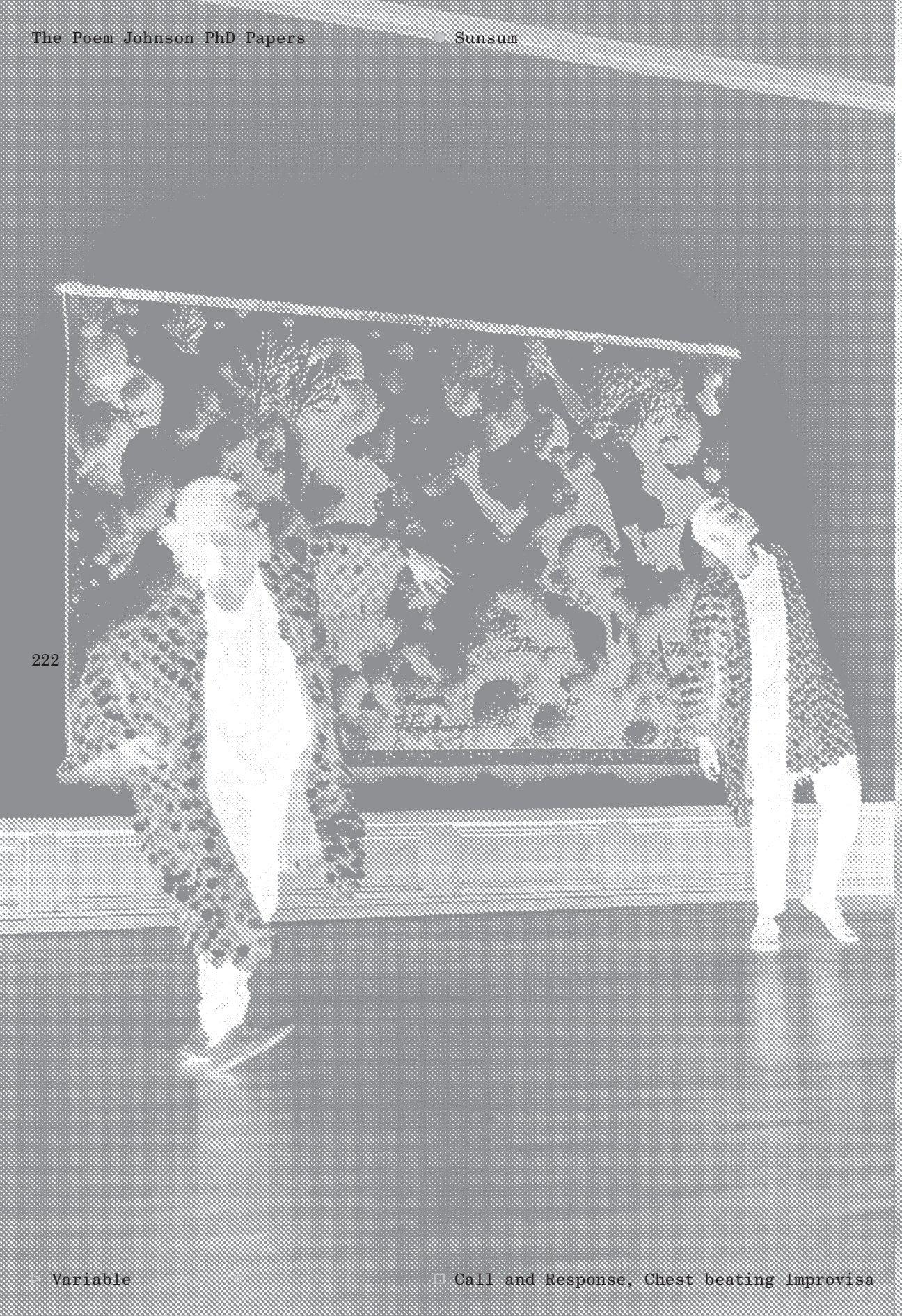
FUTURE RESEARCH

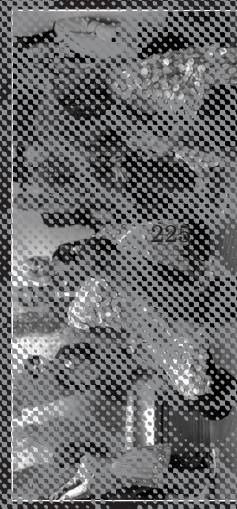
"Sun/sum" opens multiple pathways for sustained scholarly investigation, inviting reflection on its spiritual, material, and performative dimensions. As an iterative work that integrates movement, sound, and spoken word, it calls for research approaches that treat performance as a living site of inquiry—where body, voice, and matter converge to articulate diasporic knowledge.

Future studies might focus on the interrelation between voice and embodiment, examining how the performers' vocalizations extend choreographic meaning. Within "Sun/sum," breath, utterance, and rhythm function not merely as accompaniment but as corporeal language (an audible register of ancestry and transformation). Analysis through the lens of somatic and vocal performance studies could illuminate how these gestures of voice complicate notions of identity, authorship, and collective resonance in contemporary dance.

The work's spiritual and material vocabularies also warrant closer examination. Johnson's use of sequined costumes, reflective surfaces, and oceanic imagery translates intangible heritage into sensory form. Research into these material choices could reveal how costume and design mediate the sacred within Afrodiasporic aesthetics—how the shimmer of light, texture, and movement enact presence, protection, and remembrance.

Comparative and cross-cultural studies could situate "Sun/sum" within global spiritual performance traditions, tracing affinities and divergences with ritual-based or trance-oriented practices across the African diaspora, the Caribbean, and beyond. Such inquiries would enrich understanding of how Johnson's work dialogues with parallel traditions of embodiment and transcendence, while asserting its own distinct cosmology of motion. These lines of research could position "Sun/sum" as a catalyst for exploring the entanglements of identity, spirituality, and performance in contemporary art. They affirm the work's significance not only as choreography but as an evolving framework through which diasporic histories continue to move, speak, and imagine themselves anew.





✦ Variable ✦ ■ Call and Response, Chest beating Improvisation, Polyrhythmic movement, Remembrance ✦ Afrodiasporic, Kamau Brathwaite

SELECTED POEMS

Poem Johnson traces a path through soil and rivers, scars and seeds, weaving short poems that move between wound and repair, memory and renewal. Refusing a single storyline, poems follow tidal rhythms of return and variation. Drawn from oral traditions, these poems are made to be carried on the page and in the mouth. Spoken aloud, cadence and refrain keep what documents cannot hold. Across recurring images of earth and water, thread and breath, the poems circulate like blood, turning fragments and echoes into a practice of attention that keeps memory alive through repetition.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

May 19, 2025

I always start with the title. I hold a word in my mouth which unfurls into a short haiku of sorts. A short frame that I keep in front of me. I magnify that lens into what it needs to be. Sometimes, it comes with urgency, and I attempt to record the words as if they came from outside of me or beyond my conscious mind as if I was recording my dreams. There is an evanescence to these poems; they are short and tempered, embodying feelings and voicing my concerns. Although they may seem topical at first, they carry memories beyond my body, across ancestral realms. I am writing poetry as an archival experiment. Rather than storing history in fixed form, these poems move with tidal rhythms: returning, retreating, repeating, but never the same. They are fragments that hold both wound and repair, silence and resonance.

Each poem is a knot or scar in a larger fabric of memory. Writing becomes a way to test what archives cannot contain; perhaps affect, embodiment, and cyclical time.

[ARTIST'S REMARKS]

May 20, 2025

I am returning to Kamau Brathwaite. His tidalectics methodology gave me a language for what I was already sensing. History does not move forward in a straight line, but swells and recedes like the sea, circling back with difference. His words remind me that rhythm is not just sound, it is a method, a way of thinking and remembering. Derek Walcott is another voice I carry with me. His poem "The Sea is History" showed me how poetry can carry deep time without becoming brittle. He makes ruins sing, turns fragments into a chorus. Walcott's poetry taught me that language could be both wound and repair, memory and invention. Brathwaite and Walcott remind me to let the poems stay brief and porous, to trust rhythm and metaphors more than explanation. When I write, I feel their presence; one speaking of roots that drift and return, the other of seas that store memory beyond the reach of institutions.

CURATORIAL REMARKS

LONG-TERM RESEARCH VALUE

The long-term research value of this body of poetry lies in its attention to the body's utterance and flow, where language moves with breath, pulse, and rhythm. Within the framework of tidalectics, as articulated by Kamau Brathwaite, the poems embody history as a cyclical movement rather than a linear progression. Instead of offering fixed accounts, they create spaces where memory returns in echoes and resonances. This quality is especially relevant for archival studies, which increasingly recognize the limitations of repositories that claim stability, neutrality, and permanence. The poems displace such archival logics, presenting memory as rhythm, affect, and image, carried across time not by static preservation but by recurrence. Each poem is a compact site where the past is refracted through the present, producing an alternative model of long-term historical engagement: one that endures precisely because it resists closure.

As objects of research, these poems also exemplify how concentration in poetic language can secure a kind of durability. By distilling experience into compressed images (scars, yarns, seeds, and rivers) they operate as containers of memory that can be carried forward and revisited across diverse contexts. Their durability is not material but conceptual: the poems' openness to multiple readings ensures their ongoing relevance. A poem such as "History is a yarn" (2025) does not lose its value once interpreted; instead, it invites continual re-weaving of meaning, mirroring the very subject it describes. This makes the corpus significant not only to the field of poetics but also to disciplines invested in cultural memory and historiography. They are iterative research tools: they can be revisited by future readers, each encounter activating new relationships and insights.

The cycle operates through fragments, suggestive images, and cyclical returns. Knowledge can emerge from resonance rather than explanation. The repetition of key figures creates a vocabulary of recurrence that readers can trace across the sequence, forming patterns of meaning without relying on synthesis. Metaphor extends this work by transforming concrete elements into carriers of memory and thought, ensuring that each poem can function as both an individual fragment and a part of a larger fabric. In this way, the poems resist rigidity and invite continual re-interpretation, remaining provisional yet enduring. Their value lies in this openness: they do not settle into finality but keep generating new connections across time.

BROADER TRENDS AND PATTERNS

The poems can be situated within a broader constellation of contemporary practices, where fragmentation, concentration, and repetition serve as strategies of counter-memory. Across literature, visual art, and performance, artists have sought to resist inherited forms that flatten or erase diasporic histories. In poetry, figures such as M. NourbeSe Philip (*Zong!*)[1], Layli Long Soldier (*Whereas*)[2], and Claudia Rankine (*Citizen*)[3] have demonstrated how silence, rupture, and compression can serve as both methods of resistance and remembrance. These approaches link poetry to broader interdisciplinary conversations about the limits of conventional forms to register histories marked by absence, dispersal, and erasure. Within this larger field, the present cycle positions itself through concision and recurrence, trusting short forms and returning images to do archival work.

1 **Marlene Nourbese Philip,** ***Zong!*****, with Setaey Adamu Boateng, Saidiya V Hartman et al. (Silver Press, 2023).**
2 **Layli Long Soldier,** *Whereas* **(Graywolf Press, 2017).**
3 **Claudia Rankine,** *Citizen : An American Lyric* **(Graywolf Press, 2014).**

The cycle participates in two overlapping trajectories within contemporary poetics. On the one hand, fragmentation and omission have been mobilized to disclose how dominant histories suppress voices, as in Philip's fractured pages or Long Soldier's interventions into bureaucratic language. On the other hand, rhythm and recurrence have emerged as ways

to sustain continuity without reverting to closure. Kamau Brathwaite's tidalectic poetics and Dionne Brand's use of refrains[4] exemplify how repetition can serve as an ongoing practice of holding memory. The present cycle weaves these approaches together: its poems remain provisional and open-ended, yet linked by recurring metaphors that circulate across the sequence, allowing memory to return in shifting configurations rather than fixed conclusions.

4 **Dionne Brand,** ***No Language Is Neutral*** **(Coach House Press, 1990).**

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE

The historical significance of this cycle lies in its engagement with debates about how histories of displacement, colonialism, and racial violence are remembered or forgotten. Where institutional archives often claim neutrality through catalogues, records, and official accounts, these poems situate themselves in the longer lineage of diasporic and postcolonial poetics that insist on alternative modes of preservation. Their reliance on compression, repetition, and metaphor echoes oral traditions where memory is carried not in fixed documents but in refrains, chants, and recurring invocations. By working in this register, the poems align with a history of poetic forms that have often served as counter-archives for communities with limited access to institutional preservation, participating in the broader practice of cultural memory and survival.

At the same time, the cycle bears significance as a response to the specific conditions of the early twenty-first century. In an era marked by mass digitization and the proliferation of databases, these concise, concentrated texts remind us that not all memory can be captured in searchable systems. They resist the flattening effects of the digital archive by privileging resonance, and recurrence over retrieval and classification. In doing so, the poems engage with contemporary concerns about how cultural memory is shaped by technological infrastructures, offering an alternative historiographic practice that is deliberately resistant to being fully systematized. They register the tension between the abundance of available records and the continued silencing of marginalized histories, demonstrating how poetry can address both abundance and absence.

The significance of the cycle also rests in its capacity to link historical consciousness to ecological and bodily registers. The recurring figures of soil, rivers, scars, and seeds place the poems within a temporal horizon where human histories of displacement and violence are inextricably linked to the earth's own cycles of renewal and decay. This ecological dimension aligns the work with scholarly[5] and artistic efforts[6] to think history beyond the human, situating memory within broader planetary processes. By drawing connections between ancestral memory, bodily traces, and ecological cycles, the poems contribute to an expanded understanding of history: one that is neither confined to the linearity of official records nor limited to human-centered narratives. Their significance lies in this capacity to reframe the historical as rhythmic, relational, and ecological, offering new ways of imagining the past as an unfinished and ongoing field of relation.

5 **Within the scientific literature, Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber's article "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals" (***The Quarterly Review of Biology* **87, no. 4 [2012]: 325–341) has played an important role in the artist's understanding and consideration of biology; Also, Cary Wolfe,** *What Is Posthumanism?* **(University of Minnesota Press, 2010).**

6 **The video essay** *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* **(2016) has been regarded by the artist as an important contribution to the subject, as noted in his personal writings.**

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research might extend the methodological insights of this cycle into a broader investigation of poetry as an archival practice. The poems suggest that fragments, images, and repetitions are not only aesthetic features but also tools for knowledge-making. Further study could explore how these strategies resonate with oral traditions, song, or ritual, asking how rhythm and recurrence sustain cultural memory outside of institutional frameworks. This line of inquiry would deepen our understanding of how poetic form can operate as both a record and a method, not only preserving but also transforming memory.

Another avenue for research lies in examining the ecological and bodily dimensions that surface across the cycle. Figures such as soil, rivers, scars, and seeds situate memory in both natural and corporeal registers, suggesting connections between human histories and planetary processes. Future work might place these poems in dialogue with ecopoetics, environmental humanities, or medical humanities, exploring how they simultaneously register histories of violence and survival through the body and the earth. Such a perspective could show how poetry expands historiography into terrains where human and non-human forces are entangled.

There is potential for comparative research that situates this cycle alongside other poetic projects that use concentration, rupture, and recurrence as historiographic strategies. Close readings across different cultural and linguistic traditions could reveal convergences in how poets mobilize fragmentary forms to resist erasure and to articulate survival. Performance and oral delivery also offer fertile ground: spoken versions of these texts may activate their rhythmic qualities in ways the page alone cannot convey. By tracing these continuities and divergences, future research can demonstrate how poetry, in its multiple modalities, continues to offer vital practices for engaging memory and history as open, unfinished, and dynamic.

We come from soil and rivers

We come from soil and rivers.

A fistful of mud into the sky;
Meaning.
Water and earth bond.

Each grain of soil,
a reminder:
We come from ground; rivers.

Together they hold.
Be water, they say.
Shoulder to shoulder;
Sisterhood.

What rises upward
returns as rain,
soaks the soil,
and grows.

The color BLACK.

The color BLACK.
A Field.

Dance with tones.

Night.
Ink of memory.
Charcoal hand
tracing what endures.

Vessel.
Source.
Where all begins
and returns.

I, Blackness

Elixir that you desire to distill
Sprinkled little by tittle, like salt
Salt miners

Blackness
Is
Existenz

You consider Blackness as Venom
Only to realize that Blackness is
Not manufactured in a jar

I am a fermentation Diva
Dance it out
Breathe

You can't accept Blackness in its entirety
Infinite, Desirable, Joyful, Evidence of me
Evidence of us

Do not try to erase Blackness
The return of the repressed is squared
Too late, you released the monsters; ready to eat you alive

Your construction Doctors
Ourselves

Blackness is
Celestial,
Memorial,

Embodied,
Vessel
For Black Lives

Deal with it

Stigma of color

The shoulders remember
what the mouth forgets.

Drums hush in the spine,
echoes walking beside me;
Unseen.

Color is not shame;
it is gravity,
voices into DNA,
a pulse quieting the step
through fog.

walking with them,
not burdened,
but heightened.

Each breath
is centuries leaning forward,
their rhythm still alive
in mine.

A scar cannot take shape
in a body of flame;
Immolation!

Ashes of times,
Particle holds
Whisper of returns.

Rebirth—
flickers in silence,
quintessential,
ancient as star dust.

What once was Wound;
Horizon.
What once was Flesh;
Light.

A visceral recognition.

Flesh.
Sheath.
Carnation blooming—
petal as skin.

Blood.
A tide beneath,
pulse counting itself.

Stomach depths.
Quiet ferment.
Seeds dissolving
into heat.

An invisible nation,
voices without tongue,
faces without form.

This body—
many.

Microbiome.

Afrological

Afrological;
a way of standing true,
feet steady,
voice clear.

It is anchor and drift together,
roots that breathe,
branches toward friends.

No burden here,
only relations:
a circle of hands,
a rhythm shared,
a bond without chain.

Authentic as laughter,
quiet as tide,
returning,
but never the same

Hands know the weight

Hands know the weight
Clay lifted,
water carried,
stone passed from palm to palm.

They remember work
before words,
the press of seed,
the shaping of bread.

Not burden,
but measure.
Each hand holding,
each hand giving.

The weight shared
becomes lighter,
becomes song.

History is a yarn

History is a yarn,
spooled in many hands,
pulled across tables,
knotted,
untangled.

Between us—
stories whispered,
songs carried by wind,
a laugh remembered
long after the voice is gone.

Each thread holds
a touch,
a moment,
a choice.

Woven together,
not seamless,
but strong enough
to bind us,
to keep us warm.

Democracy is a debt junkie

Democracy is a debt junkie.
It borrows tomorrow
to pay for today.

Paper promises pile,
ink stains the century.

Every voice a coin,
every ballot a loan,
interest compounding
in silence.

What cannot be repaid
is carried forward,
generation to generation,
The curse disguised
as Freedom.

Probability storm

Probability storm.
Numbers scatter like rain,
unseen patterns
crossing the air.

A throw,
a dice,
Chance.

The sky folding
into dice,
the ground humming
with fractions.

Muse-ical

Muse-ical.
An idol;
standing still;
calling fire into form.

Icarus,
winged—
feather and wax.

Too close.
Too far.
A glide between wind
and blaze.

A line takes flight,
walking the air.

A voice that burns
but does not fall.

Grace.

Oversimplified Clown-Beast-Angel

Oversimplified clown,
paint cracking,
laughter stretched thin,
a face borrowed
for the show.

Beast—
breath thick,
claws hidden in dust,
hunger prowling
beneath the skin.

Angel,
wings folded,
a shadow of light,
waiting at the edge
of the stage.

Three masks,
one body.

Custodians of the Sun

Custodians of the Sun.
We stand in silence,
bodies aligned
through darkness.

Not seen,
but felt:
a shimmer across time,
a pulse between stars.

Each one holds a fragment;
Gravity, Light,
a warning flared
before the peril arrives.

Together watching,
a celestial bond,
woven.
Red rising.

The Sun.
Body of fire.
Blanket.

Future is a seed

Future is a seed,
small in the hand,
quiet in the soil.

It waits without hurry,
listening for rain,
leaning toward light
before it arrives.

Roots will come,
branches will follow,
but even in stillness
the promise is here.

"Mind Forged Manacles/Manacle Forged Minds," by Fred Wilson at Columbus Park Brooklyn, June 28, 2022 – June 29, 2023. Photo by Jakob Dahlin

FRED WILSON: IN DEPTH

By Poem Johnson

EARLY WORK AND INFLUENCES (1980s–1990s)

Fred Wilson's formation as an artist was deeply informed by his early, behind-the-scenes experience in museums. After earning a BFA in 1976, he worked in the education departments of major New York museums – including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History – where he gained firsthand insight into how institutions present (and omit) cultural histories. These roles sparked Wilson's critical examination of museum practices. In the 1980s, he began creating small-scale "mock museums,"[1] using his own fabricated artifacts and didactic labels to parody and probe the biases of institutional displays. Through these installations, Wilson underscored the notion that museum narratives are not neutral; rather, they reflect the ideologies and power structures of those who create them.

One of Wilson's first notable projects was *Rooms with a View: The Struggle between Culture, Content and the Context of Art* (1987–88), an exhibition he organized at the Longwood Art Gallery in the Bronx. In this groundbreaking show, Wilson placed the same artworks in three different simulated museum settings – an ethnographic museum, a Victorian parlor-like gallery, and a modern "white cube" art space – complete with the appropriate props and lighting for each context. The result was a vivid demonstration that context is everything: a carving or painting could appear as an anthropological artifact in one room, a precious *objet d'art* in another, or a contemporary masterpiece in the third. Viewers left *Rooms with a View* keenly aware that museum displays construct meaning. Wilson later remarked that seeing how thoroughly new contexts changed the audience's perception made him realize "it is there that those of us who work toward alternative visions…get hot under the collar and decide to do something about it."[2] The project fueled his resolve to "take on the museum" itself as his artistic medium.

Wilson continued to stage pointed interventions in the years leading up to his breakthrough in 1992. In *The Colonial Collection* (1990)[3] at a New York gallery, for example, visitors encountered African masks "blind-

1 **Lisa G. Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson* (New York: The New Press, 1994), p. 303.**
2 **Corrin, *Mining the Museum*, 303.**
3 **Wilson, Fred. *Colonial Collection*. 1990. Mixed media, Table vitrine, 48 3/4 x 86 1/2 x 26 3/4 inches (123.8 x 219.7 x 67.9 cm).**

folded" by the flags of their former colonizers and affixed with labels reading "Stolen from the Zonga tribe,"[4] a satirical twist on the euphemistic provenance labels used by museums. This installation dramatized how cultural treasures from Africa were often looted under colonialism and later sanitized in museum displays. By literally covering the artifacts' "eyes" and bluntly relabeling them as *stolen*, Wilson highlighted what traditional exhibits glossed over – the violent extraction of these objects. As he observed, conventional museum display can "anesthetize their historic importance…it certainly covers up the colonial history."[5] Such early works reveal Wilson's dual strategy of critique and recalibration, employing the museum's own tropes (pedestals, labels, dioramas) to subvert its authority and foreground marginalized narratives. *Guarded View* (1991)[6] exemplifies Wilson's early interrogations of race and visibility within the museum ecosystem. In this sculpture–installation, four headless black mannequins stand dressed in authentic museum guard uniforms from New York's top museums (the Met, MoMA, the Whitney, and the Jewish Museum). The faceless figures confront the visitor like a phantom security staff. Wilson, who had himself worked as a museum guard in college, noted the irony of the job: *"[There's] something funny about being a guard in a museum. You're on display but you're also invisible."*[7]

Indeed, museum-goers tend to "see" the art while overlooking the (often Black or brown) people protecting it. By placing the guards front-and-center as objects of contemplation, Wilson forces a reversal: the normally invisible laborers become the focal point, and their absence of heads underscores how the individuals – and their perspectives – are historically erased. *Guarded View* thus turns an institutional critique inward, exposing the racial and class hierarchies within museum staffing. This early 1990s work, along with Wilson's other pre-1992 interventions, established the template for his practice: using the language of museum display to ask uncomfortable questions about who is represented, who is marginalized, and who gets to speak in cultural institutions.

THE IMPACT OF *MINING THE MUSEUM* (1992–1995)

In 1992, Fred Wilson's ideas found full expression in *Mining the Museum*, the project that would catapult him to international acclaim and fundamentally change museum discourse. Invited by The Contemporary in Baltimore to be an artist-in-residence at the Maryland Historical Society (MHS), Wilson spent a year "mining" the MHS collection – digging through storage, archives, and exhibits – to create an installation that would, in his words, show "how museums reinforce racist beliefs"[8] by what they choose to display (or ignore). The resulting exhibition, *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson* (on view 1992–93), was a tour-de-force of institutional critique. Wilson essentially became a curator-artist: he took authentic artifacts from the museum's holdings and reshuffled them into provocative groupings, reframing Maryland's history through an honest, critical lens. Each room in the Historical Society was transformed by Wilson's interventions, which confronted visitors with the uncomfortable truths that had been omitted from the genteel narrative of Maryland's past. As curator Lisa Corrin observed, Wilson's installation appeared "at a very specific moment in American history and in the history of the museum,"[9] when calls were growing to diversify perspectives – and it delivered a shock that the museum field could not ignore.

One tableau from *Mining the Museum* juxtaposed the elegant with the horrific to powerful effect. Under the innocuous title *Metalwork, 1793–1880*, Wilson filled a display case with ornate 19th-century silver goblets, pitchers, and trophy-like vessels from the MHS decorative arts collection – and among them he placed a set of iron slave shackles.[10] The gleaming repoussé silver, crafted in Baltimore during the same era as American chattel slavery, had long been celebrated by the museum as testament to Maryland's artistry. By inserting shackles into the silver display, Wilson forced viewers to confront the violence and bondage that underlay that artistry. The polite context of "metalwork" was upended: suddenly, *who* made the wealth and at what human cost became the central question. This jarring contrast exemplified Wilson's technique of pairing "the expected with the unexpected," making the absent narrative painfully present. Throughout the exhibition, similar interventions laid bare the racial history of Maryland. In one gallery, busts of revered white Marylanders like Henry Clay and Napoleon Bonaparte were arranged facing three empty pedestals labeled Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Benjamin Banneker – Black heroes who had "zero" representation in the Historical Society's col-

4 **Corrin, *Mining the Museum*, 304.**
5 **Corrin, *Mining the Museum*, 304.**
6 **Fred Wilson, *Guarded View*, 1991, sculpture: wood, paint, steel, and fabric, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of the Peter Norton Family Foundation, Accession number 97.84a-d https://whitney.org/collection/works/11433.**
7 **Whitney Museum of American Art. "Fred Wilson: *Guarded View*." Accessed October 23, 2025. https://whitney.org/collection/works/11433.**
8 **Judith E. Stein, "Sins of Omission, [Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*]" originally published in *Art in America* 81, no. 10 (October 1993): 110–17. https://judithestein.com/1993/10/01/sins-of-omission-fred-wilsons-mining-the-museum/**
9 **Kerr Houston, "How *Mining the Museum* Changed the Art World," *BmoreArt* (blog), May 3, 2017, accessed October 15, 2025, https://bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html.**
10 **globalmuseum. "Decolonization and Fred Wilson's 'Mining the Museum.'" *Global Museum SFSU* (blog), January 4, 2019, accessed October 15, 2025, https://globalmuseumsfsu.home.blog/2019/01/04/decolonization-and-fred-wilsons-mining-the-museum/.**

lection. The visual impact was striking: the blank spaces shouted the question of why Maryland's most famous Black figures were not commemorated alongside their white counterparts. Elsewhere, in a section on childhood, Wilson placed a Ku Klux Klan hood inside a vintage baby carriage, as if it were a relic or infant's blanket. The genteel display of an antique pram gained a chilling subtext – suggesting that racism is *nurtured* and passed down through generations. By such means, *Mining the Museum* confronted visitors with history's suppressed chapters. Every juxtaposition was an ethical statement. Wilson essentially wrote new labels, brought out neglected objects, and even altered lighting and sightlines to "animate" the museum's holdings in a way that elicited gasps, reflection, and often discomfort. As one observer put it, Wilson allowed visitors to see the Historical Society's collection "in an altered light, from the stiff white mannequins in a period room…to a painting in an obscure corner…[where] suddenly a running black slave *'targeted'* by a large gun" forces you to recognize the violence glossed over by prior displays.[11]

The critical and professional reception of *Mining the Museum* was extraordinary. Debuting in April 1992 to coincide with the annual conference of the American Association of Museums (held in Baltimore that year), the exhibition was seen by thousands of museum professionals in its first weeks. Many had never encountered such a candid institutional self-critique within a venerable museum. The show immediately became the *must-see* event of the conference and generated intense discussion about diversity and revisionism in museum circles. Originally scheduled for a few months, *Mining the Museum* was extended to run a full 11 months due to popular demand. It ultimately became the most attended and talked-about exhibition in the Maryland Historical Society's 150-year history. Local visitors and first-time museum-goers came in droves, often moved by the acknowledgement of Maryland's African American history in a space that had long overlooked it. One Baltimore resident, after seeing the show, wrote that "Baltimore's streets and names will be different for me now,"[12] suggesting that Wilson's reframing had altered her very perception of the city and its history. Such responses affirmed that *Mining the Museum* had struck a chord far beyond the art world.

Critics and scholars hailed the project as a watershed. Writing in *Art in America*, curator Judith E. Stein called it "popular, influential and long-running," praising Wilson for taking "social justice as his subject and museology as his medium."[13] By expanding his "palette" to include

11 **Corrin, *Mining the Museum*, 309.**
12 **Houston, "How *Mining the Museum* Changed the Art World."**
13 **Stein, "Sins of Omission: Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*."**

real museum collections and institutional history, Stein noted, Wilson enabled a new kind of exhibition that was both intellectually rigorous and emotionally resonant. The New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman observed that after experiencing Wilson's installation, "one comes to consider everything else on view…in an altered light"[14] – meaning Wilson had, in effect, trained viewers to look at *all* museum displays with a more critical, questioning eye. Perhaps *The Washington Post* summed it up best, describing *Mining the Museum* as "an invigorating breath of fresh air"[15] that proved museums could confront even the most painful facets of history without alienating audiences. Wilson himself acknowledged that he was "mining" not just the museum's archives but also the psyche of the institution – excavating its subconscious, as it were, to reveal how "history…is an act of interpretation" and how museum displays traditionally had reflected the worldview of the powerful.[16] By revealing those hidden structures, Wilson opened the door for change.

The legacy of *Mining the Museum* in critical museology has been profound and enduring. Wilson's pioneering project has become a staple case study in museum studies courses and is frequently cited in discussions of decolonial or counterhistorical curatorial practices. In the decades since 1992, numerous museums around the world have invited artists to undertake similar collection-based interventions, explicitly inspired by Wilson's example.[17] In fact, *Mining the Museum* is often credited with launching an entire genre of institutional critique from within: artists acting as guest-curators or provocateurs to help museums re-imagine their narratives. As one analysis noted, Wilson's *Mining the Museum* "has inspired many similar acts of intervention" by later artists and curators who seek to challenge the status quo of museum displays. Beyond the realm of exhibitions, the project's influence can be seen in how museums gradually have adjusted their practices – from introducing more context about difficult histories in wall texts, to undertaking community consultations, and implementing more critical self-review of their collections. In short, Wilson's Baltimore experiment permanently shifted the expectations placed on museums. Where once museums might have claimed objective authority, *Mining the Museum* made it necessary for museums to turn the mirror on themselves. Even 25 years

14 **Michael Kimmelman. "An Improbable Marriage of Artist And Museum." In *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Doro Globus (New York: Ridinghouse, 2017), 44.**
15 **Jo Ann Lewis. "Coming out from the Shadows of History," *The Washington Post*, August 29, 1992.**
16 **Aaron Ambroso. "Museums Are Being Tasked With Radically Transforming the Way They Work. Here Are 6 Practical Steps They Can Take to Do That." *Artnet News*, September 1, 2020, https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/museum-ethics-op-ed-1904895.**
17 **Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner, "Bringing Museal Silence into Focus: Eight Ways of Thinking about Silence in Museums," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 5 (2019): 5–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1413678**

later, art historian Kerr Houston reflected that Wilson had "expos[ed] a legacy of violence, exclusion, and selective looking" that still haunts many institutions, and that "his work still inspires – but also reminds us that there is still digging to do."[18] In that sense, *Mining the Museum* was not a one-time intervention but the beginning of an ongoing process of institutional self-examination that continues in museums today.

EXPANDING THE PRACTICE (1996–2010)

After the success of *Mining the Museum*, Wilson spent the later 1990s and 2000s expanding his practice both geographically and conceptually. He became an in-demand figure in the international art world, sought after for biennials and special exhibitions where his brand of museum-based critique could be applied to new collections and cultural contexts. Wilson's underlying methodology – using the museum or archive itself as the medium – remained consistent, but the themes he tackled grew to encompass a broader global narrative of the African diaspora and colonial history. Importantly, around the turn of the millennium, Wilson also began incorporating new materials (especially Venetian glass) into his repertoire, demonstrating that his conceptual strategies could merge with more traditional art-making techniques.

In the mid-1990s, Wilson's work was introduced to global audiences through major survey exhibitions. He was included in the famously political 1993 edition of the Whitney Biennial with pieces addressing racial representation, and he represented the United States at the 4th International Cairo Biennial in 1992. In Cairo, Wilson presented *Re:Claiming Egypt*, which included his work *Grey Area (Brown Version)*[19] – a series of five plaster busts of the ancient Queen Nefertiti, each painted a different skin tone from beige to dark brown, commenting on the contested racial "identity"[20] of ancient Egyptians. This work (later shown in the 1993 Whitney Biennial) revealed Wilson's interest in how museum anthropology and archaeology often reflect colonial attitudes – a theme he would weave into later projects as well. Such international exposure positioned Wilson as a leading voice in what was increasingly termed the "second wave" of institutional critique, alongside artists like Andrea Fraser and Renée Green.

18 **Houston, "How *Mining the Museum* Changed the Art World."**

19 **Fred Wilson, *Grey Area (Brown Version)*. 1993. Pigment, plaster, and wood, verall: 20 x 84 in. (50.8 x 213.4 cm) Each bust: 18 3/4 x 9 x 13 in. (47.6 x 22.9 x 33 cm). https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/objects/5046.**

20 **Fred Wilson, "Fred Wilson's Memories of Egypt," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, November 22, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/fred-wilsons-memories-of-egypt This essay is adapted from the exhibition catalogue *Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now*, edited by Akili Tommasino (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).**

A pinnacle of Wilson's expanding practice was his selection as the official United States representative to the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003. For this prestigious commission, Wilson produced an exhibition titled *Speak of Me as I Am* (a title drawn from Shakespeare's *Othello*), which delved into the overlooked presence of people of African descent in Renaissance-era Venice. In Venice – a city historically shaped by global trade and cross-cultural exchange – Wilson again mined local collections and histories, this time focusing on art historical images of Black figures. He had observed that numerous Venetian paintings from the 16th–18th centuries include African servants, merchants, or curiosities at the margins, yet art history texts had largely ignored these figures. Wilson's Biennale project brought those marginal figures front and center. In a dramatic aesthetic shift, he collaborated with master glassmakers on the island of Murano to create a series of elaborate black glass chandeliers and mirrors in the Venetian style. These luxurious, light-catching sculptures – rendered entirely in opaque black – were installed in the U.S. Pavilion to invoke the grandeur of Venice's artistic legacy while simultaneously symbolizing the absent black presence in its history. Notably, Wilson's chandelier was the first *all-black* Murano glass chandelier ever made, startling the Venetian artisans who had *never* used black glass in that traditional medium.[21] (Murano glass chandeliers are typically translucent and colorful; the stark black was a metaphor for the visibility of Black people in Venetian history.) One could say Wilson "racialized" the decorative art of Venice to make a point: that Blackness was part of the fabric of Venetian society, however glossed over in the archives. *Speak of Me as I Am* also included historically sourced objects – for instance, Wilson displayed original portraits of 17th-century Venetian nobles in which Black attendants appear, and he produced didactic panels highlighting the biographies of actual Africans who lived in Venice (such as those enslaved or freed in Venetian households). The fusion of new artwork (the chandeliers and mirrors) with archival images exemplified Wilson's evolving strategy: he was creating his own art objects that carried a critique (the black chandeliers), not just rearranging existing ones. Critics in 2003 praised the Biennale installation for its haunting beauty and intellectual rigor. It managed to stand on its own as an art exhibition *and* as a curatorial statement about the erasure of Black narratives in European art. This project solidified Wilson's reputation on the world stage and showed that his practice could be effectively translated to non-American contexts, engaging with colonial histories of other regions (in this case, Europe's relationship with Africa and the "Moors" of Venice).

21 **Andrea Boston. "Fred Wilson's Reflection of Past and Present Draws in Visitors," *Folger Shakespeare Library* (blog), August 14, 2024, accessed October 23, 2025,_https://www.folger.edu/blogs/folger-story/fred-wilsons-reflection-of-past-and-present-draws-in-visitors/.**

Throughout 1996–2010, Wilson continued to undertake site-specific interventions in museums across the United States and abroad, each time tailoring his approach to the institution at hand. In 2006, for example, he created *So Much Trouble in the World – Believe It or Not!*[22] at the Hood Museum of Art (Dartmouth College). This exhibition was a kind of "*Mining the Museum*" using the Hood's eclectic permanent collection. Wilson combed the museum's holdings for objects that spoke to Dartmouth's own institutional history and to broader themes of imperialism and human spectacle. The resulting installation featured items ranging from a cigar-store "Indian" figure facing portraits of actual Native American leaders (commenting on stereotypes vs. real Indigenous presence), to archival materials about the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and the story of Ota Benga[23] (the Congolese man infamously exhibited in the Bronx Zoo). By juxtaposing such disparate artifacts under the museum's roof, Wilson invited viewers to draw connections between the college's collection and global histories of exploitation and display. As the Hood Museum's catalog described, Wilson "used the museum's permanent collection to shed light on the politics of museum collecting, cultural representation, and human nature," raising questions about how the past relates to the present – at Dartmouth, in the U.S., and beyond. The project's title (borrowed from a Bob Marley lyric and the Ripley's *Believe It or Not!* museum franchise) signaled the collision of real-world troubles with the realm of curated curiosities. It exemplified how Wilson had, by the 2000s, broadened his scope: he was addressing not only art museums but also history museums, anthropology collections, and even the spectacle of the museum itself as a form of entertainment.

During this period Wilson also had several mid-career surveys that reflected his trajectory. For example, *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979–2000*[24], curated by Maurice Berger, traveled to multiple venues in 2001–2003. The retrospective recreated sections of Wilson's past installations (including *Rooms with a View* and *Mining the Museum*) for new audiences, and it was accompanied by critical essays (notably by Jennifer González, who analyzed Wilson's work as "subject to display")[25].

22 **Barbara Thompson, ed.** ***Fred Wilson: So Much Trouble in the World—Believe It or Not!*** **Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2006.**

23 **Phillips Verner Bradford,** ***Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo*** **(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).**

24 **Maurice Berger, ed.,** ***Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations, 1979–2000*** **(Baltimore: Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 2001).**

25 **Jennifer A. González, "Against the Grain: The Artist as Conceptual Materialist," in** ***Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations, 1979–2000*****, ed. Maurice Berger (Baltimore: Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 2001). Also, Jennifer A. González,** ***Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*** **(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).**

This institutional acknowledgment of Wilson's career showed that his once-radical practices had entered the contemporary art canon. Yet even as his past work was historicized, Wilson pushed forward with new experiments. Around 2001, he began working extensively with glass art as a medium, collaborating with glassblower Dante Marioni. He produced a series of black glass vessels and abstract shapes – beautiful, minimalist objects that he sometimes incorporated into installations or showed on their own. Wilson noted that the color black in glass held rich metaphorical meaning: "The color black represents African American people because it's been placed on us as a representation… Of course, the color black – the absence of light – really has nothing to do with African Americans. But there's a whole other layer of meaning."[26]. In effect, Wilson brought his conceptual concerns into the realm of craft and sculpture. The glass works were politically charged in their color and context, yet ambiguous enough to engage viewers formally. They became another tool in Wilson's repertoire for exploring visibility and perception. By the late 2000s, Wilson was creating hybrid shows: for instance, an exhibition of his glass chandeliers alongside colonial-era artifacts, encouraging a dialogue between contemporary art and historical content.

Despite the variety of projects during 1996–2010, a throughline in Wilson's practice remained his commitment to "mining" hidden histories. Whether intervening in a museum in New York, Paris, or Johannesburg, he consistently aimed to reveal the unspoken stories within the archives. As in *The Art Story* analysis noted, artists like Wilson and Amalia Mesa-Bains in the 1990s "reconfigured museum collections to create startling juxtapositions that critiqued not only the museum, but also historical, political, and social structures of racial and social inequities."[27] Wilson did exactly this on an international scale, tying the movement of institutional critique to emerging conversations about multiculturalism and postcolonialism. By 2010, his work had been seen on virtually every continent – from biennials in Johannesburg (1997) and Sydney (2008) to exhibitions in Latin America and Europe – each adapted to local contexts yet echoing the same core question: "Whose stories does this museum tell, and whose does it silence?" In this way, Wilson's practice in the 1996–2010 period not only expanded geographically but also paved the way for truly global comparisons in institutional critique.

26 **Pace Gallery. "Fred Wilson." Accessed October 23, 2025. https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/fred-wilson/**

27 **The Art Story. "Institutional Critique Overview." Accessed October 23, 2025. https://www.theartstory.org/movement/institutional-critique/.**

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE AND DECOLONIAL PRACTICES WORLDWIDE

Fred Wilson's approach aligns with and distinctively contributes to the broader field of institutional critique and decolonial practice in contemporary art. Since the 1960s, artists in the U.S. and Europe have interrogated museums as embodiments of cultural power. Pioneers like Marcel Broodthaers critiqued museum classification by creating a fictitious "Museum of Eagles" in 1968, and Hans Haacke famously exposed the political economics of museums (for example by unveiling trustees' slum landlord holdings in 1971). Wilson emerged as part of the later "second wave" of Institutional Critique in the 1980s and '90s that included figures such as Andrea Fraser, Louise Lawler, Renée Green, Amalia Mesa-Bains, James Luna, and others. These artists built on earlier models but often with a new emphasis on identity, gender, and race. Like his peers, Wilson questions the authority of the museum, but what sets him apart is the way he centers the *racial and colonial dimensions* of institutional narratives. Art historian Jennifer A. González has characterized Wilson's work as part of a shift in institutional critique toward "democratizing" the museum: whereas the first generation (Haacke, Michael Asher, etc.) focused on institutional politics and economics, the second generation (Wilson, Fraser, Mesa-Bains, Luna) foregrounded issues of cultural inclusion and voice. Wilson and Mesa-Bains, for instance, reimagined museum displays to highlight racial and social inequities, tying their critiques to the multiculturalism movements of the 1990s. In doing so, they demonstrated, in González's words, that "race is a social discourse that has a visual history. The collection and display of bodies, images, and artifacts in museums…is a primary means by which a nation tells the story of its past and locates the cultures of its citizens in the present."[28] Wilson's installations practically illustrate this thesis: by altering "the visual history" on display, he shows how museums construct national and cultural narratives that have traditionally excluded certain people. Wilson operates in the same analytical space as artists like Andrea Fraser – who in *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989) performed a museum docent's absurdly elitist tour to lay bare museum rhetoric – but Wilson's interventions are less about performing the institution's voice and more about rewriting the institution's content. His strategy of literally rearranging objects provides a tangible, visual critique that complements the performative and text-based critiques of peers like Fraser.

28 **González,** ***Subject to Display*****.**

Globally, Wilson's practice resonates strongly with decolonial art strategies that emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Decolonial artists of this era sought to challenge the residual colonial biases in institutions and to recenter Indigenous or subaltern perspectives. Wilson's focus on African and African American histories situates him in a transnational network of artists addressing postcolonial memory. For example, in Latin America, the Cuban-born artist Tania Bruguera has similarly interrogated institutional power, though through a different medium – performance and social practice. Bruguera coined the term *"Arte Útil"* (useful art) and has staged interventions like *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008)[29] at Tate Modern, where she brought mounted police on horseback into the museum's Turbine Hall to perform crowd-control maneuvers on visitors. This forced museum-goers to physically experience state authority, akin to a political demonstration. As Bruguera explains, she aims to have museum audiences encounter "real life experiences" for phenomena they usually only read about – "such as being corralled by riot control police."[30] The ethos behind Bruguera's action (making museum audiences confront uncomfortable power dynamics) is in synch with Wilson's goals, though her tactics are more direct and experiential whereas Wilson's are more archival and spatial. Both, however, implicate the viewer in the institutional critique, be it by shuffling objects or by shuffling people.

Another pertinent comparison is with Latinx artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, whose 1992–93 performance *The Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* traveled to museums and festivals worldwide. In this piece, Fusco and Gómez-Peña sat inside a cage, dressed as fictitious "undiscovered" Indigenous people, and presented themselves as part of a museum display or sideshow. Many viewers believed the fiction and reacted with a mix of curiosity and discomfort. The performance directly critiqued the colonial practice of exhibiting humans (from Sarah Baartman to Ota Benga) and the audience's complicity in exoticizing others. As Fusco noted, it "sought to make visible the history of abuse, captivity and exploitation of Indigenous peoples"[31] under the guise of museum anthropology. Wilson's *Mining the Museum* had a very similar aim – to lay bare the violence behind collecting – though he did it through objects rather than embodying it himself. Both approaches are complementary: Fusco/Gómez-Peña used satire and embodiment to

29 **Tania Bruguera,** ***El susurro de Tatlin*** **#5 [*Tatlin's Whisper* #5], 2009, performance, Tate Modern, London.**

30 **The Art Story. "Tania Bruguera: Cuban Artist and Political Activist." Accessed October 23, 2025. https://www.theartstory.org/artist/bruguera-tania/.**

31 **"Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West,"** ***Wikipedia*****, last modified September 23, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Couple_in_The_Cage:_Two_Undiscovered_Amerindians_Visit_the_West&oldid=1247193251.**

decolonize the museum encounter, while Wilson used curatorial inversion. Importantly, all these artists underscore the role of the viewer in perpetuating or challenging institutional narratives. Wilson often arranges his installations so that the viewer must connect the dots (e.g. reading a label "Frederick Douglass" on an empty plinth next to a slave-owner's bust, thereby realizing the absence). This strategy parallels how Fusco's caged performance forced viewers to reflect on their own gaze. In essence, Wilson's work can be seen as part of a global conversation: artists across the world in the '90s were asking how museums could be transformed from colonial institutions into spaces of dialogue and justice.

In Europe and Africa, decolonial museum interventions have also drawn comparisons to Wilson. Kader Attia, a French-Algerian artist, has devoted much of his practice to addressing the "open wounds" caused by colonialism – both physical and epistemic. In projects like *The Museum of Emotion* (2019, London) and *The Repair* (2012, dOCUMENTA), Attia has incorporated original African artifacts, colonial-era photos, and even archival documents to critique how Western museums appropriated non-Western objects and to advocate for *"restitution"* of both objects and historical narratives. Attia's installations often simulate museum displays, much as Wilson's do, but Attia emphasizes the idea of "repair" – he juxtaposes, for instance, African masks that were repaired traditionally with images of World War I veterans with facial injuries (a metaphor for how cultures heal trauma). Both Attia and Wilson transform archival content into commentary, though Attia engages more with the literal issue of returning objects to source communities, whereas Wilson has engaged more with representing source communities in situ. Still, Attia's critique of "traditional museology" is very much in line with Wilson's earlier efforts. A review of Attia notes that his works "offer a genuine, constructive critique of modern Western systems of control that define everything from traditional museology to…" various other societal structures.[32] This could easily describe Wilson's contributions as well – except Attia, coming a generation later, has explicitly benefitted from the trail Wilson blazed in making such critique a recognized art form.

Artists like Yinka Shonibare (British-Nigerian) also share Wilson's propensity to remix colonial imagery. Shonibare is known for dressing headless mannequins in Victorian costumes made of Dutch wax African-print fabric (as in *Victorian Couple*, 1999). In 2002, he famously staged an intervention in London's *National Maritime Museum* called *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, which placed a scale model of Admiral Nelson's ship in a bottle with African-pattern sails – commenting on Britain's naval history entwined with colonialism. While Shonibare's style is more whimsical and oriented toward sculptural tableau, the underlying conceit – placing colonizer and colonized signifiers together – parallels Wilson's approach of exposing intertwined histories. Shonibare has credited earlier institutional critique works (implicitly including things like Wilson's) for opening up space for artists of color in venerable institutions.

´Alfredo Jaar, a Chilean-born artist who often addresses global injustices, provides an illuminating counterpoint. Jaar's works are less about intervening in museum collections and more about critiquing the Western media and institutional silence around humanitarian crises (such as the Rwandan genocide). Yet, there is a conceptual kinship: Jaar, like Wilson, is concerned with what is shown versus what is hidden. For instance, in *Real Pictures* (1995), Jaar presented an installation of black boxes at the Venice Biennale, each containing photographs of Rwandan genocide victims that he chose not to display, with only text on the outside – a commentary on unseen tragedies and the ethics of representation. Jaar has explicitly framed his practice as a critique of systems of information, stating that he aims to raise awareness about "sociopolitical issues that have been forgotten, suppressed, or ignored."[33] This language strongly echoes the impetus behind Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (unearthing suppressed histories in a collection), only Jaar's "museum" is the collective visual archive of the world's media. Both artists engage in a kind of moral archaeology: Wilson digs in museum basements; Jaar digs in news archives and public consciousness. Both also present the viewer with partial information to prompt critical thought (Wilson with juxtapositions that require inference, Jaar with withheld images that require imagination). While Wilson operates within the art/museum establishment to critique it, Jaar often stands outside, turning the lens on institutions of journalism and policy – yet their end goal is similar: to combat ignorance and indifference by means of art.

In summary, Wilson's practice can be seen as part of a continuum of institutional critique that ranges from the halls of art museums (Fraser, Haacke) to the streets and public squares (Bruguera, Fusco) to theoretical "museum" constructs (Attia's colonial collections, Jaar's media archives). Wilson occupies a somewhat unique niche in that continuum: he is a *museum insider-outsider*. He uses the museum's own collection and authority against itself in a way that directly anticipates and parallels decolonial ef-

32 **Fisun Güner, "Decolonising the Museum: Kader Attia at the Hayward Gallery,"** ***Fisun Güner*** **(blog), May 3, 2019, accessed October 23, 2025, https://fisunguner.com/decolonising-the-museum-kader-attia-at-the-hayward-gallery/.**

33 ***Time Sensitive*****. "Alfredo Jaar on Bringing Reality Into Focus." Podcast episode, accessed October 23, 2025. https://timesensitive.fm/episode/alfredo-jaar-on-bringing-reality-into-focus/.**

forts around the globe. His emphasis on race and history helped pivot institutional critique toward the questions of inclusion and restitution that are central in worldwide decolonial discourse today. By comparing Wilson with global peers, we see that while methods vary – from performance art to photography to social practice – there is a shared commitment to exposing institutional biases and advocating for marginalized narratives. Wilson's contribution is distinguished by its elegance and efficacy within the very space and permanent holdings of the museum, showing future generations that critique need not always come from the margins; it can happen in the heart of the institution, with transformative results.

AFRO-LOGICAL (2010–2024)

Since 2010, Fred Wilson has continued to evolve his strategies to address pressing dialogues on race, memory, and museums in the 21st century. If anything, his work has become even more pertinent in an era when calls to "decolonize" museums, confront colonial monuments, and diversify institutional narratives have gained mainstream traction. Wilson in the 2010s expanded his investigations to new historical contexts and stepped into the realm of public art, all while maintaining his core approach of unearthing hidden histories and prompting critical self-reflection within cultural institutions.

One of Wilson's notable recent bodies of work is *Afro Kismet*, which debuted at the 15th Istanbul Biennial in 2017 and subsequently traveled to London and New York. In this project, Wilson turned his attention to the history of Africans in the Ottoman Empire and in Europe, thereby extending his examination of diaspora beyond the American and Atlantic contexts. *Afro Kismet* (the title roughly meaning "African fate" or destiny) was a multipart installation that included items like 19th-century Orientalist paintings, antique maps of Istanbul, Islamic tiles, and decorative objects – all recontextualized to foreground the often-overlooked presence of Black individuals in Turkish and Middle Eastern history. Wilson's research for the Istanbul Biennial led him to the Pera Museum and other local sources, where he discovered depictions of Afro-Turks and African eunuchs in Ottoman art. By incorporating these images into his installation, he effectively recenters the narrative on people of African descent who had been part of Ottoman society (for example, as enslaved servants in elite households or as merchants in port cities). One reviewer noted that in Istanbul, Wilson "refocuses art history on the African figure," bringing forward stories that Turkish curators themselves had seldom highlighted.[34]

34 **Rachel Corbett, "'The Curators Were Shocked': In Istanbul, Fred Wilson Exposes the Black Art History Hidden in Plain Sight,"** ***Artnet News*****, October 10, 2017, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/fred-wilson-istanbul-biennial-1100798.**

In *Afro Kismet*, Wilson again used striking visual contrasts: he showed sumptuous Orientalist paintings (by 19th-century European artists) in which black servants attend white sultanas, but he paired them with historical documents about the lives of real Black Ottomans, underscoring the difference between exoticized imagery and actual lived history.[35] He also created new artworks for the installation, such as reproducing traditional Iznik ceramic tiles but inserting silhouettes of African faces into the patterns, symbolically integrating Africans into the ornamental record of Turkey. Critics in London described *Afro Kismet* as an expansion of Wilson's earlier concerns onto a "global scale," examining "the African diaspora on a global scale" by linking the histories of Venice (from *Speak of Me as I Am*) and Istanbul.[36] The project was widely praised for shedding light on a "hidden history" – so much so that one article about the London show was titled "*Artist Puts Turkish 'Hidden History' On Display*."[37] In essence, Wilson applied the template of *Mining the Museum* to a cross-continental narrative, demonstrating the universality of his approach. Afro Kismet not only engaged Turkish history but also drew connections to Europe; for instance, Wilson included maps and texts related to the African slave trade through the Mediterranean, implicating Venice and other European ports in the story.[38] By the 2010s, Wilson had become a peripatetic figure himself – mining archives in Istanbul, then reconfiguring the material for audiences in London and New York, thus educating those publics about chapters of black history outside their immediate national focus.

In tandem with such gallery-based installations, Wilson embraced public sculpture as a new avenue to foster dialogue about history and race. A milestone in this regard is his first large-scale public artwork: *Mind Forged Manacles/Manacle Forged Minds* (2022), a piece commissioned in Brooklyn, New York. Installed outdoors in Columbus Park (a telling location named after Christopher Columbus, near Brooklyn's Borough Hall), this 10-foot-tall sculpture comprises a tangle of ornate cast-iron architectural elements – fences, gates, and decorative ironwork – intertwined with figurative elements, including small sculptural busts of African faces emerging from the iron patterns.[39]

35 **Meer. "Afro Kismet." May 15, 2019. https://www.meer.com/en/54106-afro-kismet.**
36 **Natalie Sandstrom, "Black Is Beautiful: Fred Wilson at Pace,"** ***Artcritical*****, July 23, 2018, https://artcritical.com/2018/07/23/natalie-sandstrom-on-fred-wilson/.**
37 **"Artist Puts Turkish 'Hidden History' On Display." London Live, 28 March 2018.**
38 **Alan Gilbert, "Racism and Erasure in Fred Wilson's Unearthed Histories,"** ***Hyperallergic*****, August 11, 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/455019/fred-wilson-afro-kismet-pace-gallery/.**
39 **Downtown Brooklyn. "Large Ironwork Sculpture by Fred Wilson Installed in Columbus Park, Brooklyn." June 30, 2022. https://www.downtownbrooklyn.com/news/2022/large-ironwork-sculpture-by-fred-wilson-installed-in-columbus-park-brooklyn/.**

"Mind Forged Manacles/Manacle Forged Minds," by Fred Wilson at Columbus Park Brooklyn, June 28, 2022 – June 29, 2023. Photo by Jakob Dahlin

The work's title quotes a line from a William Blake poem ("mind-forg'd manacles") and plays on the idea of mental and physical shackles:

"In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear."[40]

Blake uses "mind-forg'd manacles" as a metaphor for the internalized social, political, and religious constraints that limit human freedom — chains not imposed physically but created and reinforced by the mind, society, and ideology. In creating *Mind Forged Manacles*, Wilson drew inspiration from the rich tradition of 19th-century ironwork in New York – much of it forged by African American blacksmiths, often enslaved or working under oppression – and the symbolism of chains and manacles. Placed in a public space, the sculpture directly engages with the monuments surrounding it, which include statues of historical figures like Henry Ward Beecher and Columbus himself. One critic noted that Wilson's installation "provides a bold counterbalance to the symbols of White supremacy surrounding it."[41] Indeed, standing in the plaza, Wilson's dark, intricate sculpture invites passersby to reflect on those often-unexamined monuments to colonizers and abolitionists, adding a new voice to the conversation, a memorial to the enslaved and the forgotten artisans of history. In interviews about the piece, Wilson mentioned that he wanted to acknowledge the hands that built New York and to comment on the persistence of racial oppression – the "mind-forged" manacles of prejudice that remain even after physical manacles are gone. By placing African figures within the iron lattice, he symbolically "liberates" them from anonymity and asserts their place in the historical landscape. *Mind Forged Manacles* ran for a year (2022–2023) in Brooklyn, and during that time it served as a focal point for public programs about racial history. The shift to public art in Wilson's practice shows his responsiveness to concurrent debates: as America grappled with questions of Confederate monuments and who deserves a statue, Wilson offered an artist's intervention that neither destroyed nor glorified a monument but rather added a new, corrective layer to the mnemonic landscape. It's the same impulse behind his museum works – to point toward and fill in absences – now translated to the register of public memory.

40 **William Blake, "London," in *Songs of Experience* (London, 1794).**
41 **Billie Anania, "Fred Wilson Summons Ghosts of the Past to Confront the Racism of the Present," *Hyperallergic*, September 13, 2022, http://hyperallergic.com/758330/fred-wilson-mind-forged-manacles/.**

Wilson's contemporary relevance is also evident in the ongoing discussions he contributes to in the museum field. The 2010s saw museums under increasing pressure to address their historical biases, especially in the wake of movements like Black Lives Matter. Wilson emerged as a sage voice in these conversations, often citing his past works to illustrate how far museums still have to go. He has pointed out that many museums remain "rooted in the socio-cultural eras of the past; as such these spaces embody the politics, the pain, the suffering, and the separateness characteristic of the time when the collections were formed."[42]

In saying this, Wilson emphasizes that without active efforts to reinterpret and broaden narratives, museums will continue to perpetuate outdated worldviews. This perspective carries particular weight coming from him, as he demonstrated the truth of it through *Mining the Museum*. In recent years, Wilson has been invited to speak at museum conferences, serve on advisory boards, and even produce new commissions that directly engage with institutional self-examination. For instance, he was one of the artists commissioned by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. as part of its 2024 renovation to create an installation dialoguing with the Folger's collection. His piece for the Folger, titled *"… by bad mend,"* features a large black Murano-glass mirror reflecting a famous Elizabethan portrait in the collection, accompanied by references to Shakespeare's *Othello* (a Black character in European literature).[43] In a way, it's a poetic bookend to *Speak of Me as I Am* – again merging Othello, Venetian glass, and historical images, but now for an American library context. Such projects show Wilson's continued dedication to inserting the Black presence into venerable cultural narratives (here, the story of Shakespeare and Elizabethan England) and inviting audiences to "reflect" – quite literally – on what they see.

The issues of repatriation and restitution have also come to the forefront in the 2010s, and while Wilson's art doesn't directly enact repatriation, it has certainly bolstered the moral argument for it by exposing the injustice in how objects were acquired and displayed. His works have likely influenced museum professionals who are now implementing more ethical provenance research and considering returning objects to originating communities. The Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, for example, held a groundbreaking exhibition in 2022 (*Iké Udé: Nollywood Portraits*) which began with an acknowledgement of African artworks in storage and a commitment to transparency – a gesture very much in the spirit of Wilson's advocacy for openness about museum holdings.

42 Ambroso, "Museums Are Being Tasked With Radically Transforming the Way They Work."
43 Boston, "Fred Wilson's Reflection of Past and Present Draws in Visitors."

In sum, Wilson's later work demonstrates a balance between producing new artistic interventions and serving as an interlocutor in the museum world's reckoning with its past. He has remained culturally relevant by continuously applying his critical lens to current symbols, whether re-reading Ottoman history or responding to the monument debate in America. As an artist, he keeps evolving – using new materials, engaging new geographies – but the ethical drive behind his work is consistent. In an era when museums are revising charters for inclusivity and cities are reconsidering who should be on a pedestal, Wilson's voice and vision are frequently cited, even as this remains a work in progress, fraught with contestation and ongoing struggle. This continued relevance is perhaps best captured by the fact that terms he helped popularize, like "mining the museum," are now common parlance when talking about institutional reform. Decades after his landmark Baltimore show, Wilson is still, as one headline dubbed him, the messenger of "the silent message of the museum,"[44] quietly but powerfully reminding us of the human stories beneath the official narratives.

ARCHIVAL AND MUSEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

A key aspect of Fred Wilson's practice is its engagement with the methodologies of the archive and the ethics of museology. Essentially, Wilson approaches museum collections as an artist-archivist: he sifts through repositories of objects and information, then arranges them to produce new meanings. In doing so, he exposes how the act of collecting and archiving is steeped in value judgments. His work challenges the conventional idea of the museum archive as an objective treasury, revealing instead that it reflects the biases and blind spots of those who built it.

From the outset, *Mining the Museum* was an exercise in archival interrogation. Wilson spent months delving into the Maryland Historical Society's storage rooms, pulling out artifacts that had been long ignored. In the process, he famously remarked, "What they put on view says a lot about the museum, but what they don't put on view says even more."[45] This insight goes to the heart of archival practice: absence is as meaningful as presence. Wilson has consistently drawn attention to those absences. For example, the empty pedestals for Harriet Tubman and others in *Mining the Museum* explicitly pointed to archival silence – the museum had no busts or objects to represent these Black Marylanders because past curators hadn't deemed them worthy of collecting. By making the emptiness visible, Wilson effectively performed an *archival audit*: he identified a gap in the collection and presented that gap as an artifact in itself. This strategy compels museums to confront the completeness and repre-

sentativeness of their archives. It's a challenge to the long-held notion that archives are neutral storehouses. Instead, as Wilson shows, archives are products of their time – shaped by colonialism, racism, classism, unless actively diversified. In fact, Wilson's practice often begins with him combing through catalogue records and storerooms, a phase not unlike a researcher or curator conducting an archival investigation. The difference is he uses the findings not to publish a paper but to craft an installation that embodies the critique.

Wilson also plays with the forms and conventions of archives and catalogs. He will use authentic archival labels, accession numbers, and vitrines in his installations, tweaking their content or context to lay bare the museum's framing devices. For instance, at the Maryland Historical Society he found an antiquated exhibition label titled "Artifacts of the Colonial Era" and repurposed it to label shackles and whipping posts, thereby indicting how bland terminology can mask atrocities. In *Mining the Museum*, Wilson even integrated the museum's own catalog cards and ledgers as part of the display in some cases, underscoring how the language in those records (e.g., describing an object as "gift of [a prominent white family]") often omits the perspective of those who suffered from the object's usage. In doing so, he problematizes archival description – a current hot topic in library and archive science where professionals are reconsidering biased terminology. Wilson was ahead of the curve, effectively performing a re-annotation of the archive through art.

On the museological ethics front, Wilson's work has been a catalyst for what scholar Janet Marstine calls the "new museum ethics." Marstine notes that Wilson's interventions amount to a "compassionate institutional critique"[46] that pushes museums toward values of democratic pluralism, radical transparency, and accountability. By pluralism, one refers to including multiple cultural perspectives – Wilson achieves this by inserting African American and Indigenous viewpoints into spaces that previously showcased only elite white narratives. By transparency, one means being honest about museum decision-making – Wilson models this by revealing, for example, that a whipping post was in the MHS collection all along but never shown, or that a Klan hood had been donated and

44 University of Michigan Museum of Art. "Artist Talk with Fred Wilson: The Silent Message of the Museum." September 26, 2024. Accessed October 23, 2025. https://umma.umich.edu/events/artist-talk-with-fred-wilson-the-silent-message-of-the-museum/ Also, *Fred Wilson: The Silent Message of the Museum*. PBS video, 2024. Accessed October 23, 2025. https://www.pbs.org/video/fred-wilson-the-silent-message-of-the-museum-gefcwz/.

45 globalmuseum, "Decolonization and Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*."

46 Shelley Ruth Butler, "Museums, Equality and Social Justice," *Museum Worlds* 1 (2013): 241–47.

kept in a back room.[47] Showing these hidden artifacts is a form of institutional truth-telling. And regarding accountability, Wilson's works often force museums to publicly acknowledge wrongdoing or negligence, essentially holding the museum accountable to its public. After *Mining the Museum*, the MHS could never again feign ignorance of its omissions – the "genie" was out of the bottle.

Wilson's collaborative way of working also speaks to ethical practice. In Baltimore, he worked closely with the curators and educators of the Historical Society and The Contemporary, who saw the project as a chance for institutional self-study and growth.[48] This precedent has informed museum ethics by showing that involving outsider voices (artists, community members) in curation can be an act of institutional self-improvement, not just a threat. Many museums since have adopted this model of co-curation and inviting critique from within. Indeed, listening to Wilson's talks and interviews has become something of an education for museum professionals. One commentator observed that "listening to Fred Wilson, one senses his ability to connect with differently positioned actors in the museum world"[49] – from trustees to front-line staff – and encourage them all to reflect on the "ideological apparatus" of the museum. His approachable yet incisive style has arguably made difficult conversations easier for museums to broach. Rather than accusing institutions from the outside, Wilson typically works *with* institutions to reform them, embodying an ethics of care even as he delivers critique.

In terms of archival methodology, Wilson's art underscores the importance of provenance research and complete storytelling. By highlighting, for example, that beautiful silver goblets were contemporaneous with the shackles, he implicitly encourages museums to research and present provenance (who owned these goblets? possibly slave-owning families) and to contextualize objects in a fuller historical web. Museum ethics today calls for this kind of contextualization rather than isolating objects as pure art. Wilson's work in the '90s anticipated these shifts. It's notable that now, when museums develop exhibitions about sensitive historical topics, they often cite Wilson's *Mining the Museum* in their catalog introductions as a benchmark for addressing difficult content responsibly.

Additionally, Wilson's practice engages the ethics of representation – essentially asking who has the right or authority to represent whom in a museum. In *Mining the Museum*, Wilson as a Black artist took the helm to interpret Maryland's history, stepping into a role traditionally reserved for (often white) curators. This was ethically significant: it demonstrated the value of letting members of marginalized groups speak to

their own history in the museum setting. Today, many museums strive to include community voices and guest curators for exhibitions about Indigenous or minority histories; Wilson's project was a major early exemplar of that approach.

Finally, in archival terms, Wilson's work might be seen as a form of archival activism or counter-archiving. He effectively creates a new "archive" through his installations – one composed of artifacts and labels rearranged to tell a truer story. This ephemeral archive (the exhibition) challenges the official archive (the museum's catalogue and displays) and thus serves as a form of protest and proposal. It's a protest against the narrow curation of the past, and a proposal for a more inclusive way to preserve and present history. Wilson doesn't destroy or remove items from the archive; rather, he re-curates them, which is a gentle yet powerful way of saying the archive *itself* can be redeemed with ethical reexamination.

In conclusion, Wilson's engagement with archives and museum ethics has been twofold: he unravels and critiques how archives were formed (showing the bias in collecting and cataloguing), and he envisions and enacts more ethical practices (inclusivity, transparency, accountability) through the very format of his art. His influence can be seen in the evolving standards of museum conduct – from the push for diverse collections and narratives to the emphasis on sharing authority with communities. As museums and archives continue to interrogate their colonial legacies, Fred Wilson's work stands as a guiding example of how to do so with both intellectual rigor and moral clarity. In many ways, Wilson has functioned as an archivist of silences – cataloguing absences and then filling them with meaning – and by doing so, he has helped steer both museology and archival science toward a more self-aware and just future.

IMPACT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Fred Wilson's impact on the art of curating and the practices of museums has been profound and lasting. Over four decades, he has not only produced a compelling body of artistic work but has also influenced institutional policies and inspired generations of artists and curators to follow in his footsteps. As we look to the future, Wilson's legacy offers both a blueprint and a challenge for ongoing reform in the cultural sector.

47 **Cara Ober, "How *Mining the Museum* Changed the Art World," *BmoreArt* (blog), May 3, 2017, https://bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html.**
48 **Lisa G. Corrin, "Mining the Museum: An Installation Confronting History," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 36, no. 4 (December 1993): 302–13.**
49 **Butler, "Museums, Equality and Social Justice."**

Perhaps the most direct impact of Wilson's work is the paradigm shift it created in how museums think about narrative and inclusion. *Mining the Museum* in 1992 was a watershed; its success demonstrated that confronting institutional biases could be both critically acclaimed and popular with audiences. In the years since, many museums have emulated this approach. It became increasingly common for museums to host "artist interventions" in their galleries – essentially inviting artists to *"mine"* their collections in Wilson-like fashion. Exhibitions by artists such as Fred Wilson are now cited in museum strategic plans as examples of engaging new audiences and addressing difficult content. As one scholarly source noted, Wilson's landmark work "has inspired many similar acts of intervention"[50] by artists around the world. For example, in the UK, artist Sonia Boyce curated a 2013 show at the National Gallery called *"Mining the Archive"*, explicitly referencing Wilson as she highlighted unseen works by women and artists of color. In South Africa, the Iziko Slave Lodge Museum in Cape Town reconfigured its displays in the 2000s to acknowledge slavery, an effort informed by approaches like Wilson's. Even large encyclopedic art museums, which once resisted such critique, have increasingly incorporated critical reframing: The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2020[51] reinstallation of its British Galleries, for instance, included an honest discussion of how 18th-century silver pieces were linked to colonial sugar and slavery – a connection that might not have been foregrounded without the influence of projects like *Mining the Museum*.

Wilson's emphasis on the question of whose stories are missing has slowly filtered into institutional thinking. Museum collections are now being examined with new eyes: curators are actively identifying gaps and steering acquisition policies to address those absences – be it acquiring work by Black artists, or incorporating artifacts related to enslaved peoples that were previously not collected. In some cases, Wilson's work directly impacted museum acquisition: the Maryland Historical Society, after *Mining the Museum*, began a conscious effort to collect more African American objects and documents, essentially trying to fill the void Wilson had laid bare. This is a form of policy change spurred by an artistic project. Likewise, some museums have revisited their labeling and wall text practices. Using Wilson's approach as a model, museums have started to write labels that acknowledge controversy or past omissions. It's now not unusual to see a label that acknowledge overlooked histories – a candor that was rare before Wilson showed that audiences are ready for it.

Another major impact is on curatorial practice and training. A generation of curators and museum professionals who came of age in the 1990s and 2000s cite Wilson's work as formative. The concept of the curator as some-

one who should be aware of their own biases and should seek out multiple viewpoints in exhibition-making is now widely taught. For instance, the influential book *Curatorial Activism*[52] by Maura Reilly (2018) traces a lineage of socially conscious curating and gives Wilson a prominent place in that history. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has also engaged in debates about redefining "museum" to include terms like diversity and inclusion; while not attributable to any single person, the spirit of Wilson's interventions certainly buttresses the argument that museums must be spaces of multiple perspectives and truth-telling, not just repositories of the elite. Additionally, Wilson's practice of working collaboratively with communities (implicitly, by bringing community histories in) has influenced approaches like "participatory curation," where museums co-create exhibitions with source communities – something seen in institutions from the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, The Canadian Museum of Anthropology at UBC to smaller local history museums. These approaches seek to do what Wilson did: empower those who have been subjects of museum representation to become authors of it.

In the art world, Wilson's work opened new possibilities for artists operating at the intersection of art and institution. Today, artists like Michael Rakowitz, who reassembles looted Iraqi artifacts in museum-like displays, or Camilo Godoy, who has intervened in historical society collections to comment on LGBTQ histories, are following a trail Wilson helped blaze. The artist as curator or artist as institutional critic are now accepted hybrid roles. Wilson himself, in 2020, was named to the Board of Trustees of the Whitney Museum of American Art – a sign of how far his once radical critique has come: the establishment embraced him to help steer one of its venerable institutions. On the one hand, this indicates that museums are taking his perspective into their highest decision-making levels (a form of institutional accountability, to have a voice like his on the board). On the other hand, it shows the art world's respect for Wilson's understanding of museum ethics and audience engagement.

In terms of institutional accountability, Wilson's influence is evident in the increased willingness of museums to engage with difficult history and to issue corrections or apologies for past wrongs. For example, in 2021 the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada formally apologized[53] for a racially biased exhibition from 1989 – something likely made possible because critical voices like Wilson's have been legitimized over the years. Museums are gradually moving toward what Fred Wilson implicitly asked for: honesty. As he said, museums must grapple with "the politics, the pain, the suffering"[54] embedded in their collections. This sentiment is now echoed in many museum mission statements that pledge to address historical injustices. The push for repatriation of objects to Indigenous communities (e.g., the Benin Bronzes from Western museums back to Nigeria) also aligns with the moral stance Wilson's work took – that retaining such artifacts without context or acknowledgment is part of a legacy of colonial harm. While Wilson's installations didn't directly cause repatriations, they contributed to the moral and intellectual climate that values historical justice.

Looking to the future, Wilson's career offers a few directions for continued progress. First, his work suggests that the collaboration between artists and museums will remain fruitful. Future curators may increasingly adopt artistic methodologies (imagine more theatrical or experimental display techniques influenced by artists), and conversely, artists will continue stepping into curatorial roles, especially as museums seek fresh ways to connect with audiences. Wilson's own trajectory – moving from fringe alternative spaces to leading national pavilions and now major commissions – indicates that the boundary between artist and curator will keep blurring.

Second, Wilson's impact on museum education will likely deepen. Museums may incorporate "Wilsonian" exercises into programming – for instance, inviting local students or community members to create their own *Mining the Museum* projects as a way of learning history. In fact, this is already happening: the concept of a "visible storage" or "open storage" (where museums show parts of their collection previously hidden) can be seen as an institutionalization of Wilson's idea that what's in storage matters. The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C., for example, has exhibits explicitly addressing how African American material culture was neglected by mainstream institutions, effectively continuing Wilson's narrative on a much larger scale.

50 **Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner, "Bringing Museal Silence into Focus: Eight Ways of Thinking about Silence in Museums,"** *International Journal of Heritage Studies* **25, no. 1 (2019): 5–20.**

51 **The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met's Renovated Galleries for British Decorative Arts and Design to Open on March 2, 2020," press release, accessed October 18, 2025, https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/british-galleries-2019-news.**

52 **Maura Reilly,** *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* **(London: Thames & Hudson, 2018).**

53 **Royal Ontario Museum, "Royal Ontario Museum and the Coalition for the Truth about Africa Release Reconciliation Statement and Engagement Strategy," press release, November 9, 2016, accessed October 23, 2025, https://www.rom.on.ca/media-centre/press-release/royal-ontario-museum-and-coalition-truth-about-africa-release.**

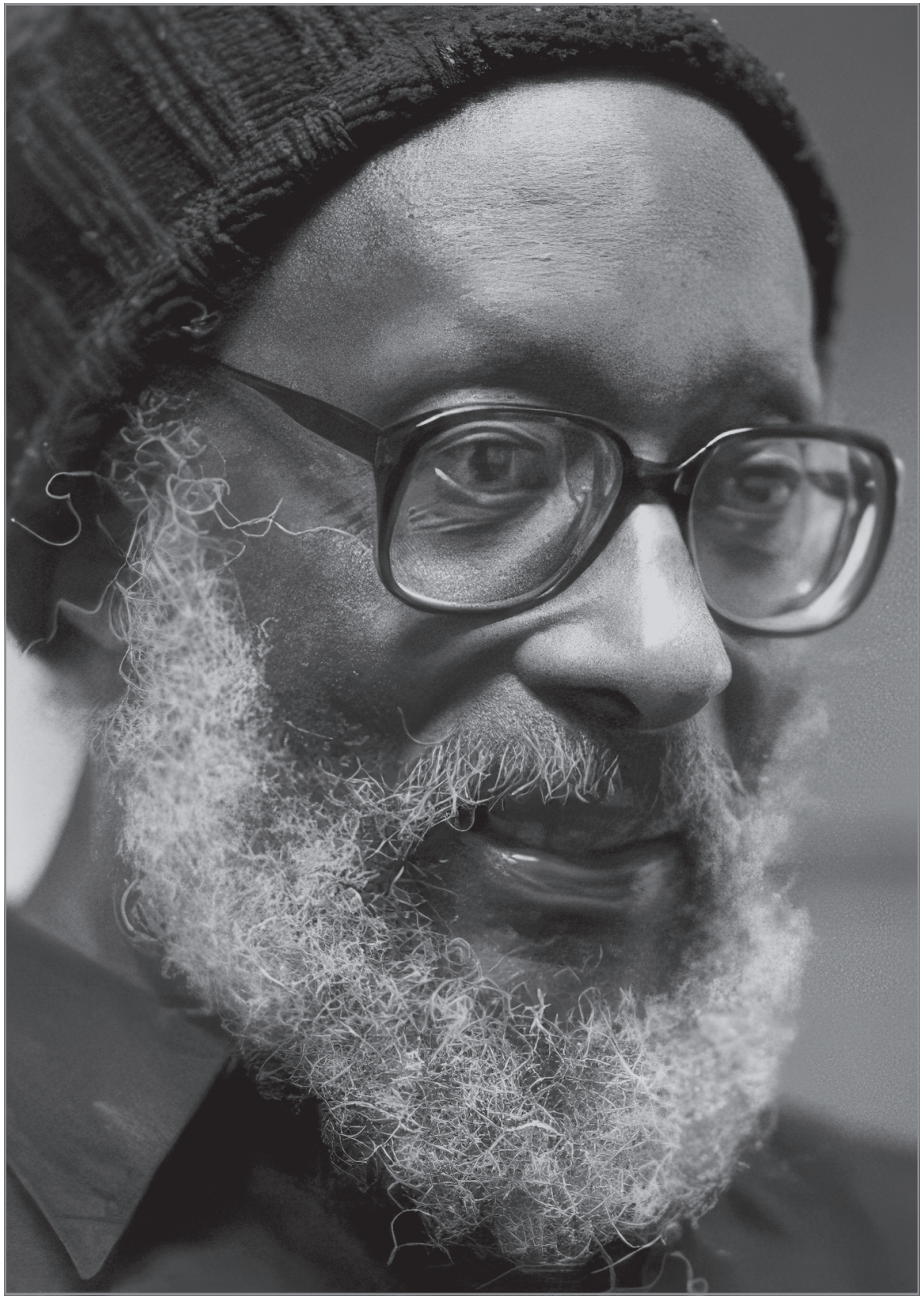
54 **Ambroso, "Museums Are Being Tasked With Radically Transforming the Way They Work."**

However, Wilson's legacy is also a reminder that the work of institutional critique is never finished. As he and others have often cautioned, there is a risk that museums co-opt critique without fully implementing change (for example, hosting a provocative exhibition but not changing their hiring practices or collection policies). Wilson's enduring challenge to museums is to not become complacent – to continue *digging*. The quote "exposing a legacy of violence…reminds us that there is still digging to do"[55] speaks to the future: issues of racial justice, representation, and equality in museums are long-term efforts. The recent rise of social justice movements has, if anything, amplified Wilson's message and given it urgency. Future directions might include more museums undergoing what one might call "Wilson-style audits" of their collections – possibly even hiring teams to specifically identify and address representational imbalances.

For artists, Wilson's work opens possibilities in the digital realm as well. The idea of mining institutional data (digitized archives, collection databases) for patterns of bias could be an arena where the next generation takes Wilson's analogue, in-person archival work into the digital space – creating artworks or visualizations that expose for example the demographics of artists in a collection over time. This would be very much in Wilson's spirit, applying creativity to hold institutions accountable.

In conclusion, Fred Wilson's influence on curatorial practice and museum accountability has been transformative. He helped museums move from being about institutional critique to being sites of institutional critique. His interventions have become case studies and his principles increasingly woven into museum policies. The future he points toward is one where museums are not static vaults of heritage but dynamic forums for re-evaluating our heritage. Achieving that future means continuing the difficult conversations Wilson started. It means museums committing to diversity not just in words but in their galleries, offices, and archives. It means supporting artists who are willing to speak truth to power, even within the museum's walls. Wilson's work, with its scholarly rigor, artistic innovation, and moral conviction, set a high bar. As we move forward, the museum field's task will be to live up to that standard – to keep the genie out of the bottle, to keep the "mining" process alive – so that museums become ever more honest mirrors of society, capable of acknowledging past wrongs and fostering healing through knowledge. In this endeavor, Fred Wilson's entire body of work stands as both inspiration and guide, illuminating a path toward a more equitable and self-aware museum for generations to come.

55 **Houston, "How *Mining the Museum* Changed the Art World."**



Portrait of Kamau Brathwaite by Beverley Brathwaite

KAMAU BRATHWAITE: ALTER/NATIVE

By Poem Johnson

INTRODUCTION

Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1930–2020) stands as a towering figure in Caribbean literature, a poet-scholar whose work revolutionized the region's literary voice. Over six decades, Brathwaite produced an expansive body of poetry and criticism that chronicles the African diaspora experience and boldly experiments with form and language. From his early days in the 1960s crafting verse influenced by Caribbean oral traditions, to the landmark publication of *The Arrivants* trilogy in 1973, through his radical "Sycorax Video Style" typography of the 1980s–90s, and into the new millennium, Brathwaite's evolution reflects a relentless quest to decolonize literature. This study traces Brathwaite's intellectual and poetic journey chronologically, examining how his themes, language, and forms developed in tandem with postcolonial thought. Key questions include: How did Brathwaite's concept of nation language challenge colonial linguistics and align with contemporaries like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the créolité movement? In what ways did his Sycorax Video Style and digital experiments transform Caribbean poetics? Furthermore, how does Brathwaite's oeuvre compare with other decolonial intellectuals—Édouard Glissant, Ngũgĩ, Sylvia Wynter, Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott—and what impact has his work had on Caribbean education and cultural policy? By engaging primary texts (poems, essays, recordings), scholarly analyses, and archival materials (including the University of the West Indies and Schomburg Center holdings and the Kamau Brathwaite Digital Archive), this analysis offers a comprehensive review of Brathwaite's legacy. The study is structured in chronological sections from the 1960s to the 2020s, followed by thematic comparisons, archival insights, and an assessment of his influence. Through this in-depth exploration, Brathwaite emerges not only as a major voice in the Caribbean literary canon but as a visionary who redefined the possibilities of language and form in the service of postcolonial empowerment.

EARLY WORK AND INFLUENCES (1960s–1970s)

Brathwaite's early career in the 1960s was shaped by personal migrations and the stirring of newly independent nations. Born in Barbados in 1930 and educated in Britain, he was steeped in English literary tradition, yet increasingly aware of its inadequacy for Caribbean expression. After studying history at Cambridge (1949–53) and encountering British

literary elites, Brathwaite felt the pull of his own heritage. He later recalled that as a young man, "I had the rhythms of John Keats in my head"[1] instead of the sounds of his native islands. This would soon change. In 1955 Brathwaite moved to the Gold Coast (Ghana) as an education officer, where he "witness[ed] Kwame Nkrumah coming to power and Ghana becoming the first African state to gain independence."[2] Immersion in decolonizing Africa profoundly affected his sense of Caribbean identity. He studied traditional West African music and oral forms under Ghanaian musicologist J. H. Kwabena Nketia, absorbing rhythms and myths that would later infuse his poetry. During these Ghana years Brathwaite's writing "flowered" – he wrote his first play *Odale's Choice* (premiered 1962 in Cape Coast), which drew on an Ashanti folktale, and he began drafting poems that bridged Africa and the Caribbean.

Returning to the Caribbean in the early 1960s, Brathwaite became a resident tutor and lecturer at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in St. Lucia and Jamaica. He soon took on a leadership role in Caribbean literary circles, co-founding the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in London in 1966. CAM brought together West Indian writers (Andrew Salkey, John La Rose, etc.) to forge a new cultural vision in the diaspora. Brathwaite was its secretary and animating force, advocating a literature that spoke with a distinctly Caribbean voice. In 1970 he founded *Savacou*, CAM's literary journal, which famously published experimental creole writings and oral poetries. This was controversial at the time – when *Savacou* printed poems in Guyanese creole and Jamaican patois, it ignited debate with traditionalists (including Derek Walcott) over the validity of dialect in literature. Brathwaite, however, championed these vernacular expressions as "nation language," not mere dialect – the genuine voice of the people shaped by Africa and the Middle Passage.

He later explained that the Caribbean person had been educated to talk about "snow … but not about hurricanes,"[3] highlighting how colonial schooling alienated colonized people from their environment and tongue. By insisting that a child write "the snow was falling on the cane fields" instead of on "the fields of Shropshire," Brathwaite made a powerful case for linguistic decolonization. In his seminal lectures (collected as *History of the Voice*, 1984), he argued that Caribbean speech – with its rhythms of Afro-Caribbean folk song, jazz, and everyday creole – was an expressive *language* in its own right, deserving of literary legitimacy. "The hurricane does not roar in pentameter,"[4] Brathwaite famously declared, meaning the iambic pentameter of English poetry could not capture the sounds and sensibilities of Caribbean experience. This rejection of English metrical norms in favor of natural Caribbean rhythms set the stage for Brathwaite's poetic innovations.

By the late 1960s Brathwaite was actively synthesizing these influences – African folklore, Caribbean creole speech, and anti-colonial consciousness – into his poetry. He completed his first three collections: *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968), and *Islands* (1969). In 1973, these were published together as *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, which immediately established Brathwaite as a leading voice of Caribbean literature. Brathwaite also pursued scholarly work during this period. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Sussex in 1968, with a thesis later published as *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820*.[5] This influential study examined how enslaved Africans and their descendants forged a new creole culture in the Americas – essentially the historical underpinning of his poetic idea of a syncretic Caribbean identity. Other essays like *Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica* (1970) and *Contradictory Omens* (1974) further explored Afro-Caribbean cultural history. These scholarly works fed directly into Brathwaite's poetry, providing it with a rich historical consciousness. Brathwaite was positioning himself as both poet and historian, fusing archival research with creative expression to reclaim Caribbean pasts. As Edward Said would note of such postcolonial authors, Brathwaite was "writing back"[6] to empire by restoring erased histories and voices. By 1973, with *The Arrivants* in hand and his theory of nation language taking shape, Brathwaite had laid the groundwork for a revolutionary Caribbean aesthetic – one grounded in "the submerged language"[7] of the folk and in the spiritual linkage between Africa and the Americas. The next step was to fully realize this vision in his poetry and public presence.

1 **Neil Genzlinger, "Kamau Brathwaite, Poet Who Celebrated Caribbean Culture, Dies at 89."** ***The New York Times*****, February 17, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/obituaries/kamau-brathwaite-dies.html.**

2 **"Kamau Brathwaite,"** ***Wikipedia*****, accessed [March 14, 2025]. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kamau_Brathwaite&oldid=1280392444.**

3 **tatiana1larina. "Kamau Brathwaite – 'Nation Language' (the End)."** ***Reading The Norton Anthology of English Literature*** **(blog), January 29, 2024. https://readingnorton.wordpress.com/2024/01/30/kamau-brathwaite-nation-language-the-end/.**

4 **Kamau Brathwaite, "History of the Voice," in** ***Roots*** **(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 265.**

5 **Kamau Brathwaite, T*he Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820*** **(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).**

6 **Further context can be found with: Edward W. Said,** ***Culture and Imperialism*** **(New York: Knopf, 1993); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin,** ***The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*** **(London: Routledge, 2002). To summarize, the authors note that most postcolonial writing has been a systematic dismantling of European representations, a counter-memory, a counter-narrative that seeks to re-inscribe the history and agency of the colonized.**

7 **Brathwaite, "History of the Voice," 262.**

THE IMPACT OF *THE ARRIVANTS* TRILOGY (1973–1980s)

Brathwaite's *Arrivants* trilogy (1973) – comprised of *Rights of Passage*, *Masks*, and *Islands* – is widely regarded as the cornerstone of his oeuvre and a watershed in Caribbean poetry. *The Arrivants* is a sweeping narrative of the Black diaspora's journey, blending history, myth, and personal voice. Each book in the trilogy corresponds to a stage in the diasporic experience: *Rights of Passage* charts the voyage from Africa to the New World and the trauma of displacement; *Masks* delves into African heritage and the spiritual search for roots; *Islands* confronts the realities of Caribbean postcolonial life and the possibility of cultural rebirth. Through this trilogy, Brathwaite undertakes what he called a "Caribbean Cosmology"[8] – to articulate the epic of New World Africans across time and space[9]. *Rights of Passage* (the first book, written in the 1960s) begins the journey in the Caribbean and the wider Black diaspora, evoking the rupture of the transatlantic slave trade and the struggle of adaptation. It opens with the powerful poem *Calypso*, in which Brathwaite envisions the islands' creation and colonial history in visceral imagery:

> *The stone had skidded arc'd and bloomed into islands:*
> *Cuba and San Domingo*
> *Jamaica and Puerto Rico*
> *Grenada Guadeloupe Bonaire*
>
> *curved stone hissed into reef*
> *wave teeth fanged into clay*
> *white splash flashed into spray*
> *Bathsheba Montego Bay*
>
> *bloom of the arcing summers …*[10]

These lines sweep from geological birth to the "wave teeth" of invasion, dramatizing Columbus's arrival and the plantation era with a bitter irony ("And of course it was a wonderful time… well-worth-your-time"). Brathwaite's use of Caribbean place names and dialect rhythms (the calypso beat) immediately signals a new poetic language. The section "Islands and Exiles" includes *The Emigrants,* which explores the journey of Caribbean migrants across multiple destinations—London, New York, Canada, and the American South. Rather than a triumphant narrative of opportunity, the poem presents migration as a harsh and disillusioning experience, marked by racial hostility, economic struggle, and alienation. The coldness of the London Underground, the Mississippi's deadly labor fields, and New York's relentless urban machinery paint a bleak picture of exile. The closing lines question the meaning of Black identity abroad, referencing Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. in a way that suggests both political awakening and frustration. In this way, *Rights of Passage* charts a trajectory from the Middle Passage to the contemporary Black diaspora, showing how history continues to scatter and unsettle Black lives across the world. Throughout the collection, African ancestral voices appear in epigraphs and allusions, linking past and present. Brathwaite's tone oscillates between elegy and indictment—mourning the losses of displacement while exposing the forces that perpetuate exile and marginalization.

In *Masks*, Brathwaite turns fully to Africa, invoking ancestral voices and reconnecting the diasporic self with its origins. In *Libation*, he names historic West African kingdoms—"Songhai, Mali, Chad, Ghana, Timbuctu, Volta, and the bitter waste that was Benin"—establishing Africa as a continuous presence. The poem follows a traditional libation ritual, offering food and drink to ancestors: "Nana Firimpong… take the blood of the fowl / drink… may you rest / for the year has come round again."

In the poem *The Making of the Drum*, Brathwaite ritualizes the creation of a drum, beginning with sacrifice: "First the goat / must be killed / and the skin / stretched." The drum is more than an instrument—it is a bridge to the divine: "a thin voice that will reach / further than hope / further than heaven." The selection of "wood of the tweneduru tree" links the drum to the land itself, transforming the African landscape into a living language: "We hear the sounds / of the rivers; / vowels of reed- / lips, pebbles / of consonants."

In the poem *Atumpan*, Brathwaite mimics the Akan talking drum's rhythms: "Kon kon kon kon / kun kun kun kun," aligning poetry with oral-musical traditions. The drum, once silent, speaks only when struck, symbolizing how cultural memory is awakened through sound. *Masks* does not simply glorify Africa—it acknowledges displacement, layering identity like a mask. By reconstructing lost voices through poetry, Brathwaite ensures Africa remains a vital, living force in the Caribbean experience.

8 **Kamau Brathwaite. "Note(s) on Caribbean Cosmology,"** ***River City: Journal of Contemporary Culture*** **16, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 1–17.**
9 **Melanie Otto. "Reading the Plantation Landscape of Barbados: Kamau Brathwaite's** ***The Namsetoura Papers*** **and Annalee Davis's** ***This Ground Beneath My Feet: A Chorus of Bush in Rab Lands,*** **" accessed March 19, 2025, https://annaleedavis.com/archive/g9os44kqby9aa1r54enqhat65dhxdh.**
10 **Kamau Brathwaite, "III Islands and Exiles: I. Calypso," in** ***The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*** **(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 48.**

Islands, the final part of *The Arrivants* trilogy, turns inward to examine the fractured spiritual and cultural landscape of the postcolonial Caribbean. Rather than a triumphant homecoming, the tone is marked by disillusionment, alienation, and the difficulty of cultural renewal. In the poem *Jah*, Brathwaite juxtaposes the cosmic and the terrestrial, as African spiritual memory and Black diasporic music—"my ten bebop fingers, my black bottom'd strut"—float within a disenchanted urban modernity where "God is glass with his typewriter teeth." The divine is distant, disembodied: "floating floating in heaven / without feet without wind."

The poem *Ananse* invokes the Akan spider-god as a cunning, watchful presence who lurks in "the tips / of our language," weaving memory and revolution. He is both feared and revered, "the many-eye'd maker, / creator, / dry stony world-maker, word-breaker." Brathwaite links the eroded spiritual memory of the Caribbean—"The gods have been forgotten or hidden"—with the loss of Indigenous cosmology and ancestral connection.

In the poem *Homecoming*, these themes converge in stark reflection. The Caribbean is portrayed not as a place of reconciliation, but as a region struggling with the aftermath of rupture—"For the land has lost the memory of the most secret places." The sea no longer connects but divides, and volcanoes "have shut their red eyes to the weather."

Rather than a return to wholeness, *Islands* presents a vision of fractured continuity, where myth, memory, and resistance flicker within the ruins. The poems speak less of resolution than of a haunted present shaped by historical loss and spiritual silence.

The impact of *The Arrivants* in the 1970s and 1980s was profound. It announced a postcolonial modernism[11] that was markedly different from European models. Here was an epic collage of reggae rhythms, patois speech, and historical narrative that broke the Queen's English open from within – comparable in importance to Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* or Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* for its cultural scope. The trilogy influenced a generation of writers and scholars by exemplifying how one could write in an ***alter/native*** voice – literature that was both alternative to the colonial canon and deeply native in sensibility. Brathwaite's idea of "nation language" gained wide currency through the 1980s thanks to his essays and the evident success of *The Arrivants*. In 1976, scholar Gordon Rohlehr noted that Brathwaite's rhythmic innovations – using drum patterns, jazz improvisation techniques, and calypso refrains – had created a new aesthetic he dubbed "island poetry."[12] This was poetry meant to be read aloud, to be performed as much as read on the page. Indeed, Brathwaite emerged in the '70s–'80s as a consummate performer of his work, often reading with musical accompaniment or intoning lines in a chant-like fashion. (Contemporaries like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mutabaruka, pioneers of *dub poetry*, owe a debt to Brathwaite's melding of oral tradition with written form.) Brathwaite would begin readings by blowing a conch shell (the abeng, a Maroon war horn) to invoke the ancestral presence. Dressed in African robes or a simple cotton shirt, "the 'abeng man' [with] barberless beard", he would stomp a leather slipper in time and let his "thumb [throb] to the inner sound"[13] of his verse. Such performances brought *The Arrivants* to life and demonstrated what Brathwaite meant by finding a "voice" for a culture that had been long silenced. In academic circles, *The Arrivants* became required reading in any discussion of postcolonial literature or Black Atlantic writing. By the mid-1980s, Brathwaite's trilogy had cemented his reputation as the most important West Indian poet alongside Derek Walcott – though the two poets represented divergent approaches, as we shall explore.

11 **Chika Okeke-Agulu,** ***Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*** **(Durham: NC: Duke University Press, 2015).**

EXPANDING THE POETIC FORM (1980s–1990s): SYCORAX VIDEO STYLE AND FORMAL INNOVATIONS

In the 1980s and 1990s, Brathwaite's work underwent a bold experimental turn. Having firmly established *what* to say – the stories and voices of the Caribbean – he became increasingly interested in *how* to say it on the page. During this period, Brathwaite pioneered an avant-garde typographic practice he eventually dubbed **"**Sycorax Video Style.**"** This distinctive visual poetics, named after Sycorax (the unseen African sorceress in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*), involved the use of varied typefaces, layouts, and digital text effects to approximate the rhythms of oral speech in written form. Brathwaite's pages began to feature bold font changes, off-kilter spacing, and calculated mis-spellings in a way that "liberates both the language and the new-Caliban vision of the poet."[14] This formal expansion was in many ways a continuation of Brathwaite's decolonizing mission: he was now decolonizing the very flesh of poetry – its printed matter – breaking the strictures of standard typography (often seen as Eurocentric) to create a Caribbean graphical aesthetic, reminiscent of Stéphane Mallarmé, yet of Afrological rhythm and structure.

Brathwaite's turn to this visual style was partly catalyzed by personal and technological changes. The mid-1980s were a turbulent time for him:

he lost his wife, Doris, to cancer in 1986 and then, in 1988, Hurricane Gilbert struck Jamaica and destroyed much of his library and archives in his home at Irish Town. As if in a tragic arc, in 1990 Brathwaite himself was the victim of a violent break-in and shooting in Kingston, an event he described in mystical terms as his own death and rebirth. These catastrophes left Brathwaite creatively paralyzed. He later recounted that "Those three incidents were so traumatic that I was not able to write anymore using my hand as I used to do. And I became a kind of granite. My fist was like stone." Desperate to continue writing, Brathwaite turned to his late wife's computer – an Apple Macintosh – around 1989. "I began to play with it and discovered Sycorax lurking in the corner of the screen," he quipped, "and that's how the whole thing started". The computer, with its word processor and fonts, became his new creative tool. Out of trauma came innovation: digital technology enabled Brathwaite to "put on the page what sound looked like," as he described his goal.[15] He named the style after Sycorax – symbolically giving voice to the silenced African woman of *The Tempest* whose magic had been appropriated by Prospero. Just as the spirit of Shakespeare's Sycorax represents submerged, marginalized knowledge, Brathwaite's Sycorax Video Style sought to make the *subtext* of oral performance visible in printed text.

To appreciate Sycorax Video Style, one can look at Brathwaite's books from the late '80s and '90s, which are as much visual art as poetry. For example, in *X/Self* (1987) Brathwaite already began loosening typographic norms, but it is in works like *Middle Passages* (1992) and the monumental *conVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (1999) that Sycorax Video Style fully blossoms. In *conVERSations* (a book-length interview transcript), the text is presented in a large 8.5×11-inch format with multiple typefaces and layout tricks on each page.[16] The main dialogue might appear in a monospaced Courier font, evoking typewriter or telex communications (perhaps symbolizing the fixed colonial text), but Brathwaite interrupts this constantly with bracketed annotations in smaller fonts, side-column notes framed by lines, and sudden shifts to bold or italics of different fonts. On one page, a reader might see a standard paragraph about *Mother Poem* and *Sun Poem*, and then a boxed aside in antique-looking Latin font or a dot-matrix Stop font imitating a fax printout. Brathwaite

12 **Gordon Rohlehr, *Pathfinder, Black Awakening in The Arrivants of Edward Kamau Brathwaite* (Tunapuna, Trinidad: University of the West Indies, 1981).**
13 **Hilary Beckles, "The University of the West Indies (The UWI) Mourns the Passing of Barbadian Poet and Academic, Kamau Brathwaite," *UWI Today*, February 2020, https://sta.uwi.edu/uwitoday/archive/february_2020/article3.asp**
14 **New Directions Publishing, "Kamau Brathwaite," accessed October 15, 2025, https://www.ndbooks.com/author/kamau-brathwaite/**
15 **Bryce Wilner, "Tongue of the Computer," *Are.na*, 2021, https://www.are.na/editorial/tongue-of-the-computer.**
16 **Wilner, "Tongue of the Computer."**

incorporated dingbat symbols from the Cairo font and his own pixelated doodle drawings, creating an interplay of verbal and visual elements. For example, the spread from *conVERSations* (pp. 238–239) showcases Kamau Brathwaite's Sycorax video style at its most experimental. On the left, Courier-styled verse unfolds in syncopated breath-lines, evoking motion and bodily vertigo. A bold, pixelated "booies" ruptures mid-text, digitally stuttering the visual field like static or sonic interference. Beneath, a compressed horizontal band functions as marginalia or echo. On the right, the name **"**Hector HYPPOLYTE live**"** appears in corrupted bitmap typography—part invocation, part digital glitch—channeling oral transmission and diasporic fracture. Brathwaite's layout mimics the spiritual drift of Black Atlantic memory: arms "vainly tryin to reach Miami," mouths "wise open." Font shifts, box frames, and spatial ruptures operate as visual tempo. Text becomes chant, tide, legal testimony. This is not merely poetry, but ritual design—a page-performance shaped by exile, vodou, and the aftershocks of history. Brathwaite's Sycorax Video Style was thus an attempt to record the dynamics of orality on the printed page. He wanted the text to have the qualities of spoken word – pauses, emphases, overlaps, and resonance. Traditional typography, he felt, was too linear and silent to capture Caribbean speech patterns. He once said that earlier Caribbean poets had been forced to suppress the noise of their culture to fit the quiet page, but he would invert that, making the page noisy.

> "From the outset (that is, from the moment creole is forged as a medium of communication between slave and master), the spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax. For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse. This must be understood."[17]

In doing so, Brathwaite was aligning with a broader shift in literature as digital tools became available. By the late 1980s, poets in various traditions were experimenting with concrete poetry, hypertext, and multimedia. Brathwaite's innovation was unique in grounding his experimentation in decolonial purpose. As scholar Jacob Edmond notes, "No other writer of that remarkable generation was more transparent to the inner process of decolonization; and no other writer among his peers was as committed to making literature align down to its very bones, down to its

17 **Édouard Glissant, "Poetics: Natural Poetics, Forced Poetics," section 2, "The Situation of the Spoken," in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 123.**
18 **Vijay Seshadri, "Kamau Brathwaite: 1930–2020," *Paris Review* (blog), February 5, 2020, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/02/05/kamau-brathwaite-1930-2020/.**

w/my nerves as I say comin & goin & my head spinnin soff/ ly &
beginnin to wet & giddy & my heart pushin hard > the daylight
of my body & swishin for the peace & darkness & the spice of
gumbo Sundaes

since i am suppose to be a poet not a coast guard cutter or
fireman or one or two others on this deck
standin by the ribs of the railins whey they was these hard
white life-savers or

booies

that we are they broders & fellow writers bound to them by all kinds of travellers cheques & the content of our character as if we didnt memember how they have put on they shoes that afternoon - bending down to their blue washicong pumps to tie the

black laces before takin us up to Jacmel to Marigot to Pétionville to scroll through the markets of Limbé & Limónade & Labasse & Petit-Goave to see wher

Hector

HYPPOLYTE *live*

tho of course they say nothin at all but juss went lobbyin
lobbyin by w/their heads up & down
in the corvée of water & they arms still
vainly tryin to reach Miami
& Judge Clarence Thomas & the US Supreme Coast &
their mouths wise open wise open & ounsi drinkin salt &
dream & the golden sound of the court like

LA CRÊTE-A- PIERROT

&

A spread from conVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey by Kamau Brathwaite. A scan of an open book double-page spread. Three boxes enclose paragraphs of text, which appear in different fonts, some blown up and pixelated, or decorative.

typefaces and orthographies, with the task of forging a new consciousness."[18] Brathwaite's "video" metaphor suggested movement and light, as if the page were a screen where text could dance and flicker, invoking the liveness of speech. In practice, he achieved a distinctive aesthetic: texts printed in dot-matrix or low-resolution font (as if output from an old computer printer), giving a rough, "handmade digital" feel – a paradox that suited Brathwaite's blend of the technological and the folkloric. He often printed out pages on his Apple StyleWriter inkjet, then reproduced the bitmapped output via photo-offset printing to preserve the exact texture. The results looked like something between a pamphlet from an ancient spirit and a futuristic code.

Brathwaite first experimented with what he later called Sycorax Video Style in *X/Self* (1987), before developing it more fully in *Middle Passages* (1992). In this work, which revisits the trauma of the Middle Passage through contemporary Black experience, the text zigzags, stutters, and chants across the page. The fractured fonts, irregular spacing, and shifts in scale function not as decoration but as a way of transcribing sound, so that the typography itself performs. In this way, the page becomes an extension of the oral tradition, carrying sonic and performative textures into print. In 1994 Brathwaite published *Barabajan Poems 1492–1992*[19], in which Sycorax Video Style typography is used to comment on 500 years of New World history. By the late '90s, his style was influential enough that younger Caribbean poets and artists took note. The Trinidadian writer Melanie Abrahams spoke of Brathwaite's pages as score sheets for voice and urged Caribbean publishers to embrace such innovation.

It is important to note that Brathwaite did not see technology as a gimmick but rather as a means to an end. For him, the computer was a tool of survival – it allowed him to continue creating after literal and metaphorical hurricanes. At the same time, living back in Barbados during what he called his "Maroon Years" (1997–2000 in a rural village called CowPastor) reconnected him with nature in new ways. In a 2005 interview, he reflected on the role of technology in his art: "So the technology started from an earlier catastrophe. And it really doesn't have a narrative connection with CowPastor. The technology, however, let us hope, might be able to sustain me through this second period of bleakness [...] What I'm really looking at is a form of radiance."[20]

19 **Kamau Brathwaite,** ***Barabajan Poems, 1492–1992*** **(New York: Savacou North, 1994).**
20 **Joyelle McSweeney and Kamau Brathwaite, "Poetics, Revelations, and Catastrophes: An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite,"** *Rain Taxi*, **December 10, 2013, https://raintaxi.com/poetics-revelations-and-catastrophes-an-interview-with-kamau-brathwaite/.**

It's fascinating that Brathwaite's late style marries high-tech *and* earth-rooted elements: Sycorax is both the spirit in the machine and the whisper in the cane-field breeze. Brathwaite himself mused on this fusion, noting that the "animistic interest in ancestors and spirits" in his work coexists with an "interest in manmade technology,"[21] and that he doesn't see them in conflict. In effect, Sycorax Video Style is where the spirit meets the silicon chip – a digital *voz negra*.

By the end of the 1990s, Brathwaite's formal innovations had expanded the possibilities for poets globally. He showed that typography can be a site of resistance just as much as thematic content. For Caribbean literature, often printed by small presses with limited means, Brathwaite's intricate designs were challenging to reproduce, but he persisted, even self-publishing via his Savacou Cooperative to maintain control over the presentation. The term "video style" has since entered the lexicon of literary criticism to describe his oeuvre, and scholars like Nicholas Laughlin and Elaine Savory have analyzed how Brathwaite's "video-lectics" create a multi-layered reading experience. In summary, the 1980s–90s saw Brathwaite pushing Caribbean poetry to embrace visual polyphony, ensuring that the nation language not only speaks but appears in its own emancipated form on the page. This set the stage for his continued experiments and dialogues into the 21st century, as he remained at the forefront of poetic innovation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: LINGUISTIC AND POETIC DECOLONIZATION IN CONTEXT

Brathwaite's work did not exist in isolation – it resonated with, informed and was informed by a broader movement of decolonial thought across the globe. In his lifetime, he engaged (directly or implicitly) in a dialogue with other intellectuals who were also grappling with questions of language, identity, and empire. Here we compare Brathwaite's contributions to those of a few key figures: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Édouard Glissant, Jean Bernabé and the créolité movement, Sylvia Wynter, Wilson Harris, and Derek Walcott. Each of these writers had distinct approaches, yet common themes emerge – notably, a rejection of colonial language dominance, a re-evaluation of local or "folk" knowledge, and experimental forms to express postcolonial realities.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Kenya) – Perhaps Brathwaite's closest counterpart in linguistic decolonization, Ngũgĩ famously advocated in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) for African writers to abandon English in favor of their mother tongues. Ngũgĩ's stance was more radical linguistically: he ceased

writing in English altogether to write in Gikuyu, arguing that language is the carrier of culture and that continuing in English means continuing the colonization of the imagination.

> "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Take English. It is spoken in Britain and in Sweden and Denmark. But For Swedish and Danish people English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians. It is not a carrier of their culture. [...] mother-tongue."[22]

Brathwaite did not go so far as to write in a non-English language (he remained an Anglophone poet), but his concept of nation language paralleled Ngũgĩ's mission in important ways. Brathwaite defined nation language as the "submerged area"[23] of dialect and folk speech in Caribbean anglophone culture – English in vocabulary but African in grammar, intonation, and worldview.[24] Both authors were pushing back against the notion that the colonial language (Queen's English) was the only valid medium for literature. Ngũgĩ literally swapped language; Brathwaite transformed the language from within, bending English to resemble creole. It's telling that Brathwaite received the name "Kamau" from Ngũgĩ's own grandmother in Limuru, Kenya, in 1971 – a powerful symbolic linkage between the Caribbean and African projects of cultural reclamation.[25] Ngũgĩ and Brathwaite also shared a Marxist-informed understanding of how language is tied to power. In *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite notes that the Eurocentric education system made Caribbean people "learn about English queens and not about their own heroes," producing an inferiority complex. Ngũgĩ similarly pointed to the colonial school that punished children for speaking Gikuyu. While Ngũgĩ looked to a future of literature in African languages, Brathwaite pragmatically worked with Creolized English – but he lent it the same political weight.[26] In essence, both insisted: our stories must be told in our own voices, otherwise psychological liberation is incomplete. Today, Brathwaite's nation language theory and Ngũgĩ's language polem-

21 **McSweeney and Brathwaite, "Poetics, Revelations, and Catastrophes."**
22 **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature," in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey; Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya; Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986), 13.**
23 **Brathwaite, "History of the Voice," 262.**
24 **tatiana1larina. "Kamau Brathwaite – 'Nation Language' (the End)."**
25 **Kamau Brathwaite | Special Collections," Newcastle University Library Special Collections blog, accessed March 25, 2025, https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/speccoll/tag/kamau-braithwaite/**
26 **Brathwaite, "History of the Voice," 259. "What I am going to talk about this morning is language from the Caribbean, the process of using English in a different way from the *norm*, English in a new sense as I prefer to call it. English in an ancient sense. English in a very traditional sense. And sometimes not English at all, but language."**

ics are often studied together as twin pillars of postcolonial linguistics. Notably, Brathwaite's naming of *Sycorax* (an African character silenced in Shakespeare) and *Caliban* (the enslaved, language-deprived figure in *The Tempest*) in his work echoes Ngũgĩ's indictment of Prospero-like cultural domination. Both writers sought to free Caliban's tongue – Ngũgĩ by switching tongues, Brathwaite by reshaping the colonial tongue.

Édouard Glissant (Martinique) – Glissant, a francophone Caribbean novelist and theorist, developed influential ideas of *créolization*[27] and *relation* that complement Brathwaite's vision. In works like *Caribbean Discourse* (1989) and *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Glissant argued that the Caribbean's diversity and mixed heritage form a powerful model for global culture – an endlessly adapting, opaque (untranslatable) creolization.[28] Brathwaite's *tidalectics* – his notion of a cyclic, oceanic dialectic as opposed to Western linear history – is very much in harmony with Glissant's view of history as nonlinear and ocean-derived. Both writers use the sea as a metaphor: Glissant sees the Antillean identity as a network of relations (like the fluid connections between islands), while Brathwaite's tidal dialectic (*tidalectic*) explicitly invokes the rhythm of tides to describe history's ebb and flow. Brathwaite coined *tidalectics* as a counter to Hegelian dialectics, that accounts for the constant motion and change of creole cultures. Glissant similarly rejected single origins or fixed identities, preferring the idea of errantry and diffusion. In terms of language, Glissant advocated for the use of creole and celebrated linguistic mixing. His concept of opacity[29] – the right of cultures not to be fully understood by outsiders – also resonates with Brathwaite's defense of nation language. Brathwaite insisted Caribbean speech had its own logic that might not always be immediately accessible to English speakers (for example, the rhythmic stress patterns or the symbology in Jamaican talk). Both authors, however, differ in approach: Glissant wrote primarily in French championing creole, whereas Brathwaite wrote in an English infused with creole. In the 1990s, the francophone créolité movement (Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant) issued a manifesto *Éloge de la créolité* (1989) explicitly building on ideas from both Glissant and (implicitly) Brathwaite. They declared "Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves creoles,"[30] urging writers to embrace creole language and métissage heritage. Brathwaite's

27 **Edward Brathwaite, "Creolization," chap. 19 in *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). Originally presented as the author's PhD dissertation, University of Sussex, 1968.**
28 **See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).**
29 **Édouard Glissant, "Transparency and Opacity," in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 111–20.**
30 **Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).**

work in the '70s–'80s had been a kind of precursor in the Anglophone sphere: he had already been valorizing hybridity and urging recognition of the African presence in New World. One can see *The Arrivants* as an *éloge de la créolité* in poetic form. In sum, Brathwaite and Glissant were intellectual kin, each articulating a theory of New World identity beyond the binaries of colonizer/colonized. It is fitting that Glissant wrote extensively on the Middle Passage and islands in a way that parallels Brathwaite's poetic treatment. Both insisted that the Caribbean experience – of transplantation, painful but fertilizing cross-currents – prefigured a globalized world. Where Glissant spoke of a global archipelago, Brathwaite spoke of the submarine unity of the Atlantic diasporas. And both would likely agree with Brathwaite's statement that "The Caribbean is really part of a whole underground continent of thought and feeling and history"[31] despite surface divisions.

Jean Bernabé and créolité (Martinique) – Building on Glissant, Bernabé and co-authors in their manifesto (*In Praise of Creoleness*, 1989) championed the creole language of the French Caribbean as the authentic expression of Antillean identity. They positioned créolité against both European assimilation and the earlier négritude movement, calling for literature that reflects the mixed, plural nature of Caribbean people. While writing in a different colonial language context, their aims mirror Brathwaite's nation language advocacy. Brathwaite had, a decade prior, already praised poets like the Jamaican Louise Bennett for writing in patois and thus capturing the vitality of folk life. In *History of the Voice*, he devotes space to Bennett's work as exemplifying nation language at its best. Bernabé's insistence that creole be used in literature is analogous to Brathwaite's push for Caribbean English (lexically English but syntactically creole) to be seen as legitimate. Both wanted to rid writers of the shame attached to local speech forms and dialects – a legacy of colonization. Brathwaite's approach was perhaps more fluid: he did not call for pure use of creole but a *fusion* in which the register shifts could themselves be artistic. For example, in Brathwaite's poem "Negus," he slides from Standard English narration to a concluding chant in Jamaican creole:

Attibon Leyba
Attibon Leyba
Omri bayipou , moi
Omri bayipou ' moi[32]

31 **Genzlinger, "Kamau Brathwaite, Poet Who Celebrated Caribbean Culture."**
32 **Kamau Brathwaite, "Negus,"** *Caribbean Quarterly* **54, no. 1/2 (2008): 39–41.**

– a seamless blending that delivers emotional punch. Both movements underscored that Caribbean reality is linguistically heterogeneous; accordingly, the literature must be heteroglossic. There were also differences: the créolité manifesto somewhat romanticizes the idea of a unified creole identity, whereas Brathwaite was always mindful of the specific African connection in anglophone Caribbean culture and the distinction between, say, Jamaican patwa and Barbadian dialect. A comparative literature essay has noted that *Éloge de la créolité* was "greatly inspired by… the cultural claims of Négritude and Antillanité"[33], and one could add, by Anglophone voices like Brathwaite's nation language theories. Indeed, by 1990 Brathwaite's essays were being cited in discussions of creole literature beyond the English-speaking world.

Sylvia Wynter (Jamaica) – Wynter, a Jamaican scholar and writer, intersects with Brathwaite in her profound explorations of culture, history, and what it means to be human after colonization. In the late 1960s, Wynter and Brathwaite were part of the same intellectual circle at UWI Mona. Wynter's early essay *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture* (1968)[34] critiqued the Jamaican establishment for neglecting Afro-Jamaican folk culture. Brathwaite enthusiastically endorsed this essay, seeing Wynter as an ally in the fight to valorize the folk. Later, Wynter's and Brathwaite's views diverged on certain points. Wynter became an expansive theorist of the human condition, arguing that after colonialism, a new conception of what "human" means beyond Western categories is needed. She challenged ideas of African "retentions" or straightforward returns to Africa, focusing instead on the *creativity* of New World cultures to indigenize themselves in new lands. In one analysis, Wynter's "adversary" was "the seminal Caribbean thinker and poet Kamau Brathwaite" regarding African retentions.[35] Wynter felt Brathwaite sometimes over-emphasized Africa (for instance, his view that Caribbean cultures draw primarily from an African wellspring), whereas she stressed the newness and hybridity of Caribbean culture – including the contribution of European, Indigenous, and other elements in a syncretic whole. In a sense, Wynter was closer to Glissant's perspective, while Brathwaite leaned toward a moderate Négritude. Despite these theoretical differences, both Wynter and

33 **Marie-Josèphe Descas, "Transgressive Identities: What Creoleness Leaves Out—Teaching and Experiencing the Caribbean,"** *CLA Journal* **45, no. 2 (2001): 176.**
34 **Sylvia Wynter,** *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Decolonizing Essays, 1967–1984* **(Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2022); and Norval Edwards, "'Talking About a Little Culture': Sylvia Wynter's Early Essays,"** *Journal of West Indian Literature* **10, no. 1/2 (2001): 12–38.**
35 **Anthony Bogues, "Sylvia Wynter Constructing Radical Caribbean Thought,"** *BIM Magazine Online*, **accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.bimmag.org/stories/sylvia-wynter-constructing-radical-caribbean-thought.**

Brathwaite worked towards decolonizing knowledge. Wynter's call for breaking the "Man vs. Native" paradigm in Western discourse complements Brathwaite's push to break the Queen's English paradigm in literature. Brathwaite's portrayal of Caribbean people in his poetry – e.g., the "nameless ancestors" guiding the living – echoes Wynter's insistence on acknowledging those whom history rendered voiceless. Both drew on interdisciplinary knowledge: Wynter on history, philosophy, and science; Brathwaite on history, anthropology, and music. In education, both were reformers at UWI who wanted a Caribbean-centric curriculum. They converged on reggae: Wynter wrote insightful essays on Bob Marley and reggae's role in expressing the submerged voice of the people, and Brathwaite used reggae rhythms in poetry like *Calypso*, imitating ska and reggae beats. Thus, even if they debated aspects of *how* to theorize culture, Wynter and Brathwaite together represent the powerful intellectual ferment of '60s–'70s Caribbean thinkers forging new paths beyond colonial epistemologies.

Wilson Harris (Guyana) – Harris, a Guyanese novelist and essayist, offers a fascinating counterpoint to Brathwaite. Where Brathwaite wrote in verse and grounded his works in folk forms and historical documentation, Harris wrote dense, hallucinatory novels (like *Palace of the Peacock*, 1960) that dive into the mystical and psychological realms of Caribbean experience. Both Harris and Brathwaite shared an interest in myth and a rejection of linear historiography. Harris criticized Western realism and linear time, proposing instead a quantum, dreamlike approach to Caribbean history – seeing time as layered and space as possessing living memory. Brathwaite's *tidalectics* parallels Harris's nonlinear time: instead of a straight line, history in Brathwaite's view moves in recurring waves, much as Harris's narratives often circle back on themselves. Both men invoke the image of the *foliage* or *land* speaking. Harris famously described the Guyanese "landscape… as an open book"[36] with an alphabet of its own. Brathwaite's poem *The Dust* or the *Namsetoura Papers* likewise treat the Barbadian landscape as containing coded histories – "tongueless whispering" that the poet must decode . Another connection is their use of non-European cosmologies: Harris drew on Amerindian and African belief systems to populate his fiction with ghostly presences and ancestral voices, similar to Brathwaite's incorporation of West African deities and ancestral spirits in poems like *Ogun* or *Namsetoura*. However, they differ stylistically: Harris's language is richly metaphorical and abstract, whereas Brathwaite's, even at its most experimental, retains a colloquial and rhythmic core. One might say Harris's decolonization is ontological, questioning reality and existence as defined by the West, while Brathwaite's is anthropological, documenting and uplifting the culture of the colonized. The two did engage each other's work to a degree – they were contemporaries in the Caribbean Artists Movement era. Brathwaite reviewed some of Harris's novels, and Harris wrote an essay praising Brathwaite's *Masks* for its evocation of the collective unconscious of the diaspora. Harris also conceived the idea of the "cross-cultural imagination"[37] – the ability to perceive multiple cultural frames at once, which Brathwaite's syncretic approach certainly exemplifies. Both saw the Caribbean artist as a kind of shaman or visionary. And both had to contend with criticism that their work was "difficult" – yet they insisted that conventional forms could not capture Caribbean reality. In essence, Harris and Brathwaite, through different media, each explored how the New World could imagine itself free from old world confines.

Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia) – The comparison between Brathwaite and Walcott is inevitable, as they are often cited as the two giants of anglophone Caribbean poetry of their generation. Interestingly, their relationship has been characterized as both collegial and adversarial. Walcott, born in 1930 like Brathwaite, shared the experience of being educated in the British tradition but rooted in island life. However, their poetic philosophies diverged. Walcott's work (e.g., *Omeros*, 1990) is known for its lush imagery, mastery of standard English verse forms, and integration of classical influences with Caribbean scenes. He was less inclined to use Caribbean creole within his poetry (though he did in plays and occasionally in poems) and he sometimes questioned what he perceived as a reduction of craft in the name of nationalistic authenticity. In a famous exchange of views in the 1970s, Walcott criticized the *Savacou* issue that published raw creole oral poems, implying that raising dialect to literature without craft was misguided. Brathwaite, on the other hand, saw Walcott's allegiance to traditional forms and "integration" into the English canon as not fully addressing the need for a new language. In *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite actually praises Walcott's ear for the music of Middle English (as in Walcott's use of *Piers Plowman*[38] reference), acknowledging Walcott's attempt to free Caribbean verse from pentameter by other means (Walcott experimented with hexameter in *Omeros*). But Brathwaite ultimately argues that Walcott's approach still "masks" the true nation language under a European poetic framework. Walcott once said, "I have no nation, only imagination" – reflecting his preference for a

36 **Otto, "Reading the Plantation Landscape of Barbados."**

37 **Wilson Harris,** ***The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination*** **(Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).**

38 **tatianallarina. "Kamau Brathwaite – 'Nation Language' (the End)."**

universalist approach. Brathwaite might counter that imagination itself is shaped by nation (or culture) and that Walcott's position risked diluting the specificity of Caribbean voice. Despite this, both poets were committed to telling Caribbean history. Walcott's *Another Life* and *The Star-Apple Kingdom* traverse similar ground to Brathwaite's narratives, but via a different idiom; taking the English language as a given to be owned and used versus a problem to be transformed. This encapsulates their difference. It is important to note that they respected each other's genius. When Walcott won the Nobel Prize in 1992, Brathwaite congratulated him, and Walcott later praised Brathwaite as a critical voice of the region. In a way, Caribbean literature benefited from both approaches: Walcott demonstrated that a Caribbean writer could command the heights of English poetic art, while Brathwaite demonstrated that Caribbean folk language could reshape poetry itself. The tension between them, often overstated by critics, actually produced a rich and healthy debate on form and language that influenced countless younger writers who could draw from both wells.

In comparing Brathwaite to these figures, one sees that he was very much part of a transnational conversation on decolonization. He engaged directly with Ngũgĩ (even visiting Kenya, as noted), corresponded with Glissant and the Caribbean Artists Movement/créolité circuits, dialogued with Wynter at The University of the West Indies, and was in creative tension with Walcott. What sets Brathwaite apart is perhaps the breadth of his project: he was simultaneously a historian (providing empirical cultural analysis), a poet (providing aesthetic innovation), and an activist (working within institutions). This polyvalent role allowed him to address decolonization from multiple fronts – scholarly, artistic, and educational. Others often focused on one domain (Ngũgĩ primarily in fiction and essays, Glissant in theory and novels, Walcott in poetry and drama). Brathwaite's melding of scholarship and poetry is similar only to Wynter's blending of literature and theory, but Wynter's creative output in fiction was small compared to Brathwaite's poetic volume. Thus, Brathwaite stands out as a synergistic figure linking practice and theory.

To sum up, Brathwaite's work can be seen as one facet of a larger prism of global decolonial literature. His insistence on the validity of creole language echoes across continents – from the resurgence of Gaelic in Ireland to the preservation of Maori in New Zealand (indeed Brathwaite cited examples of other "nation languages"). His use of oral techniques connects with African-American oral forms (one might compare his approach to, say, Amiri Baraka's jazz poems or the Blues aesthetics of Langston Hughes).

LATER WORK AND ENDURING RELEVANCE (2000s–2020s)

In the final two decades of his life (2000s–2010s), Kamau Brathwaite continued to publish and refine his artistic vision, even as he became an elder statesman of Caribbean letters. His recent works show an undiminished experimental impulse and a deepening engagement with spiritual and ancestral themes. Notably, Brathwaite's output in the 2000s includes: *Ancestors* (2001), *Born to Slow Horses* (2005), *Elegguas* (2010), and the manuscript series surrounding *The Namsetoura Papers* (circa 2004–06, distributed in small circles). Each of these works builds on earlier motifs while speaking to contemporary concerns. *Ancestors* (2001) is a significant volume that in fact gathers Brathwaite's *Mother Poem*, *Sun Poem*, and *X/Self* trilogy, reset in Sycorax Video Style. Republishing these earlier poems in a new visual format, Brathwaite effectively "re-voiced" them for a new era, demonstrating the continuity of his vision. The very title *Ancestors* suggests that Brathwaite by 2001 saw himself in dialogue with a lineage of poets, including his own earlier selves. Around the same time, he assembled *ConVERSations* (the annotated interview) which serves as a key to his influences. Brathwaite was consciously curating his legacy even as he pushed into new territory.

A high point of the 2000s was *Born to Slow Horses* (2005), which won the prestigious Griffin International Poetry Prize. This collection contains poems written in the late '90s and early 2000s, many of which meditate on contemporary events (for example, *9/11 Hawk* deals with the September 11 attacks through the metaphor of a hawk struck in downtown Manhattan, linking global trauma to personal imagery). *Born to Slow Horses* balances the personal and the geopolitical: it has elegies for friends, reflections on Caribbean history, and commentary on modern black experiences. The title itself references both a childhood anecdote and broader notions of destiny and burden. Stylistically, the book employs Sycorax Video Style typography, but critics noted it was somewhat more pared down and elegiac in tone compared to the cacophonous *Middle Passages*. One poem, *Caliban* (different from his earlier piece of that name), revisits the Shakespearean motif in a 21st-century light: Caliban now not only has language but uses the master's tools (computer, English) to curse and create. Brathwaite had honed an ability to make his poetry accessible and immediate even as it remained experimental. Some poems in *Born to Slow Horses* are almost entirely in "plain" English but with a distinctly oral swing, while others explode into visual patterns. This elasticity is arguably the culmination of what Brathwaite had been seeking: a poetry that could code-switch effortlessly, reflecting the full range of Caribbean diction.

In 2010, Brathwaite published *Elegguas* (the title playing on *elegy* and Eleggua, or Legba, the Yoruba deity of the crossroads and messenger of the gods). *Elegguas* is a collection explicitly concerned with the departed, including tributes to cultural figures and personal losses. The figure of Eleggua is apt, as the opener of ways in Yoruba cosmology; Brathwaite positions himself as a mediator between worlds – the living and the dead, the past and the present. This collection synthesizes his spiritual preoccupations: there are kumina songs (Afro-Jamaican spiritual chants), invocations of jazz greats (Miles Davis's "ghost" is referenced in *Human Nature*), and laments for historical atrocities like the Zong slave ship massacre (which is also the subject of fellow Caribbean poet M. NourbeSe Philip's work *Zong!* in which Brathwaite's influence can be felt in Philip's use of fragmented text to represent the unspeakable). *Elegguas* continues with the Sycorax Video Style formatting, but critics observed that by now Brathwaite wove the visual elements in more subtly with content. *Elegguas* and its companion volumes form a kind of extended meditation on mortality and memory, yet always with Brathwaite's trademark wordplay and sonic richness.

Brathwaite's *Namsetoura Papers* (circulated mid-2000s, later partly published in *Hambone* magazine and online) demonstrate his ongoing engagement with environment and activism. These writings responded to a very local issue: the expansion of the Barbados airport in Christ Church, which threatened a rural area of historical significance near his home in CowPastor. In *The Namsetoura Papers*, Brathwaite blends poetry, journal entries, photographs, and even an interview (with Joyelle McSweeney). The text documents how he and his wife Beverley sought to preserve the landscape (photographing old trees, mapping historical sites) and raises alarms about cultural and ecological loss. Namsetoura itself is an anagrammatic persona he adopts (perhaps related to Anansi the spider, or some Barbadian folk term) – part of Brathwaite's method of archiving the moment. This work connects to the rising field of eco-poetics and postcolonial ecocriticism, positioning Brathwaite as a precursor to today's climate-conscious literary voices. As Melanie Otto observes in her 2017 analysis, Brathwaite in *Namsetoura* is "sensitive to the 'ghosts' of the past, which bequeath stories and historicities to landscapes", and he articulates a politics where caring for biodiversity is linked to "articulating freedom" from the plantation legacy.[39] This shows Brathwaite's relevance in discussions not just of literature but of heritage preservation and environment.

39 **Otto, "Reading the Plantation Landscape of Barbados," 25.**

Throughout the 2000s, Brathwaite remained a vital presence in literary events and discourse. He split his time between New York where he was Professor Emeritus at NYU and his CowPastor home in Barbados. In 2006, he was honored with the Gold Musgrave Medal in Jamaica for his contributions. Younger Caribbean poets and academics continued to seek his guidance; he corresponded with and encouraged spoken-word poets and served as a reference point in Caribbean literary festivals like Calabash in Jamaica. His influence on Caribbean curricula became concrete by the 2000s, when works like *The Arrivants* and *History of the Voice* were included in the Caribbean Examinations Council literature syllabi and taught in universities across the region. The integration of West Indian literature into schools – something pioneers like Brathwaite and Austin Clarke pushed for in the '60s – was now largely realized, with Brathwaite's own texts often on the reading lists. In this way, Brathwaite helped shape not only *what* Caribbean students read but *how* they understand their linguistic and cultural identity. The echoes of Brathwaite's ideas are evident in policy documents and educational philosophy: for instance, the promotion of bilingual literacy in English and creole in some schools draws on the recognition he championed of creole as a legitimate language.

By the 2010s, Brathwaite's health had declined somewhat and he made fewer public appearances, but his voice was still sought in interviews. One of his last major public lectures was a transcendent reading at Emory University in 2015, where his papers are partially archived. Brathwaite passed away in February 2020 at age 89, prompting tributes worldwide. In the tumultuous 2020s, Brathwaite's work remains sharply relevant. Movements for decolonizing curricula, whether in Britain, Africa, or the Americas, frequently invoke his name and his logic. In literary studies, the turn towards Global South perspectives and orality studies finds in Brathwaite a rich case study. Digital poets experimenting with mixed media cite Brathwaite as an ancestor of electronic poetics. And as the climate crisis deepens, *tidalectic* thinking and Brathwaite's pleas to listen to the "tongueless whispering" of history in the soil acquire an urgent environmental dimension.

Brathwaite's later works and his reception in the 2000s–2020s show a figure who never ceased evolving and who continued to shine a light forward. He moved from being a rebel poet in the '60s to a sage-like griot by the 2010s – yet he maintained the same core principles throughout: that the Caribbean has something unique and valuable to say, and it must say it in its own distinct way. Many of the battles he fought – for linguistic equality, for historical memory, for cultural self-definition – are still being

fought or have taken new forms. Brathwaite provides both inspiration and a roadmap for those continuing the work of decolonization in the arts and education.

ARCHIVAL AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

Engaging with Brathwaite's oeuvre also means engaging with the archival richness that surrounds it. As a writer who straddled the line between oral and written traditions, Brathwaite left behind not just published books but recordings, notebooks, letters, and multimedia experiments. These archival materials, housed in places like the University of the West Indies (Mona), the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York), Emory University, and Brathwaite's own digital archives, offer deeper insight into his creative process and intellectual network. Exploring these resources adds texture to our understanding of Brathwaite's evolution.

One key archival trove is the Kamau Brathwaite Collection at the Alma Jordan Library, UWI St. Augustine (Trinidad), which contains manuscripts of unpublished works, personal correspondences, and drafts. Similarly, the UWI Mona campus holds tapes of Brathwaite's early 1970s lectures and readings when he was a History professor and the director of the Institute of Caribbean Studies. The Library of Congress Archive[40] of Recorded Poetry and Literature has a tape from 1970 of Brathwaite reading with commentary, where he explains poems like *Ogun* and *Jou'vert* to an American audience, effectively annotating his own work in real time. Such commentary is invaluable: it provides Brathwaite's own interpretation and shows his skill in code-switching for different listeners. A researcher listening to the LOC tape hears Brathwaite's voice – sonorous, precise, shifting between standard English exposition and lilting dialect when quoting verses – and gains a visceral sense of his oral artistry. The PennSound archive[41] at University of Pennsylvania (curated by Jacob Edmond) also hosts a collection of Brathwaite readings spanning four decades, giving scholars and fans easy access to the performative dimension of works like *The Arrivants* and *Born to Slow Horses*. These recordings validate Paul Zumthor's assertion that the *phoné* (sound) of a text is part of its meaning; hearing Brathwaite stress certain syllables or elongate vowels can reveal layers of rhythm that a silent reading might miss.

40 **Library of Congress, "Kamau Brathwaite Reading His Poems with Comment in the Recording Laboratory, September 11, 1970," audio recording, accessed May 5, 2025, https://www.loc.gov/item/95770387/.**

41 **"PennSound: Kamau Brathwaite," University of Pennsylvania, accessed May 5, 2025, https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Brathwaite.php.**

Brathwaite's personal letters and journals, some of which are preserved at the Schomburg Center in New York and at Emory, shed light on his relationships and thought development. For example, letters between Brathwaite and historical novelist George Lamming in the 1960s discuss the aims of Caribbean Artists Movement, and letters to American poet Nathaniel Mackey in the 1980s chronicle the birth of "video style" (Mackey was both a friend and a publisher of Brathwaite's in *Hambone* journal). These letters often show Brathwaite in a reflective and theoretical mode, working through ideas that later become essays or poems.

Manuscript annotations also reveal Brathwaite's vast intertextual mind. He was known to jot down citations of books he was reading in his notebooks. In margins of *Masks* drafts, he references texts like Melville J. Herskovits's *Myth of the Negro Past* (for African survivals) and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (for anti-colonial psychology). This shows how grounded Brathwaite was in both creative intuition and scholarly research. His archive is a map of a polymath's journey. We find poetry drafts interleaved with statistical notes on slave populations, or a diary entry about a dream followed by a quote from a Derek Walcott essay with Brathwaite's rebuttal scrawled next to it. Such materials illustrate the dialogic nature of his creativity – always in conversation with history, with other writers, and with the ancestral voices he felt around him.

Another intriguing archival aspect is Brathwaite's use of technology. Floppy disks and early Macintosh files containing his Sycorax Video Style font or his pixel art could be considered artifacts worth preserving (in 2018, a project at the Media Archaeology Lab[42] in Colorado studied Brathwaite's old Macintosh SE/30 to understand how he crafted his digital aesthetics). The challenges he faced – like having to find a printer to replicate dot-matrix output – are part of the history of digital literature's emergence. Archival interviews such as the extensive 1991 Hambone interview by Nathaniel Mackey capture Brathwaite explaining his philosophies in his own witty and passionate style.[43]

Archival photographs and video recordings document Brathwaite's physical performance elements. There is footage of him at the 1983 International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books in London where he blows the abeng and recites with a drummer, and video of a 1990s reading at Trinity College in Connecticut where he uses a rattle during a

42 **Brent Cox and Amanda Hurtado, *MALware Technical Report: Kamau Brathwaite & the SE/30* (Boulder, CO: Media Archaeology Lab, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2022).**

43 **Nathaniel Mackey and Kamau Brathwaite, "An Interview with Edward Kamau Brathwaite," *Hambone*, no. 9 (Winter 1991): 42–59.**

poem. Even his attire – the famed Rasta cap and flowing beard mentioned in tributes – became part of the persona that students and peers saw as a "griot." The archives of Caribbean cultural history like those at the Schomburg or British Library's SOUND collections preserve Brathwaite not just as text but as presence. To fully study Brathwaite, one must consider both the aural archive of recorded sound and the visual/textual archive. Paul Zumthor's concept of "performance textuality"[44] – that the performance and the text together create the work – is vividly exemplified by Brathwaite. The poem on the page is half the story; the performance is the other half.

Archival engagement with Brathwaite's work deepens its comprehensive analysis, allowing us to see the drafts behind the masterpieces, to hear the voice of the words, and to understand the community and context in which he operated. The archives portray an artist deeply aware of his role in history. They also ensure that future generations can continue to learn *with* Brathwaite, not just *about* him. As Brathwaite might say, the "submerged languages" of his life and work may come to light through these archives, allowing a fuller appreciation of his enormous contribution.

IMPACT AND LEGACY

Kamau Brathwaite's impact on Caribbean literature, education, and cultural policy is both profound and enduring. As we have seen, his ideas helped reshape the way Caribbean people view language and themselves. In this section, we assess how Brathwaite influenced Caribbean educational curricula, how he contributed to cultural institutions, and how his legacy informs ongoing developments in postcolonial studies and creative writing.

Educational Impact: Brathwaite was a pioneer in legitimizing Caribbean literature and oral traditions within academic settings. In the early 1960s, when he joined UWI's faculty, the study of West Indian literature was nascent. The canon taught in schools was still largely British. Brathwaite, along with peers like Edward Baugh and Kenneth Ramchand, pushed for the inclusion of Caribbean texts in university courses. By writing critical essays (e.g., his 1974 piece "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature"[45]) and developing courses, Brathwaite laid the groundwork for what is now a robust field of Caribbean literary studies. His tenure as director of the Institute of Caribbean Studies at UWI Mona

44 **Paul Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, trans. Kathryn Murphy-Judy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).**
45 **Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," *Daedalus* 103, no. 2 (1974): 73–109.**

saw initiatives to introduce folk culture, reggae music, and oral history into the curriculum. The very concept of teaching nation language or dubbing in a classroom owes much to Brathwaite. It is standard for Caribbean students to study poets like Brathwaite, Walcott, Louise Bennett, and others in high school and college – a drastic change from the 1950s. This curricular shift has had psychological and social benefits: generations of Caribbean students have been able to see their own realities reflected in the materials they study, validating their identity. As Brathwaite pointed out, colonial education taught Caribbean children about daffodils and snow, alienating them. Thanks in part to his advocacy, a child in Jamaica or Trinidad now also reads about cane fields, listen to recordings of Anansi stories, and writes essays on Caribbean history from a local perspective. Brathwaite's influence also extended to pedagogy: he championed interactive, discussion-based learning (perhaps influenced by his own appreciation of orality). He once ran a "Culture Workshop" at UWI where students would bring in poems in dialect or record elders' stories – a form of participatory education anticipating today's emphasis on student experience in learning.

Beyond literature classes, Brathwaite's work on creole Society influenced history and social studies curricula. He demonstrated that Caribbean society isn't derivative of Europe but has its own formative narrative (of creolization). Concepts like *creole society*, *plural society*, *tidalectics* might find their way, simplified, into history textbooks and sociology courses in the region. Moreover, by stressing the linkage of Africa and the Caribbean, Brathwaite bolstered initiatives for African and diaspora studies programs in the Caribbean academies. He also mentored many graduate students who became professors themselves, spreading his intellectual influence. Scholars such as Carolyn Cooper (who wrote extensively on Jamaican popular culture) and Gordon Rohlehr (who studied calypso and literature) were operating in a space that Brathwaite's generation carved out. Cooper's concept of "karaoke" in Jamaican speech and her defense of dancehall language in academe echo Brathwaite's *History of the Voice*. In essence, Brathwaite helped create an academic environment where studying and *respecting* Caribbean vernacular culture is the norm, not the exception.

Cultural Policy and Advocacy: While Brathwaite never held political office, he was consulted on cultural policy issues and lent his voice to cultural movements. In the 1970s, many newly independent Caribbean nations were figuring out their cultural policies (e.g., Jamaica under Michael Manley or Guyana under Forbes Burnham). Brathwaite's writings, like *Contradictory Omens*[46], were read by policymakers seeking to bal-

ance diverse ethnic heritages. He sometimes advised ministries of culture behind the scenes; for instance, he was involved in early discussions of Jamaica's establishment of a National Cultural Training Centre (which later became the Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts). In Barbados, Brathwaite's homeland, he was revered as a cultural icon. He occasionally wrote letters to the press or gave talks about Barbados's cultural development – for example, cautioning against tourism-driven erosion of heritage, which ties in with his *Namsetoura* activism. The Vice-Chancellor of UWI, Sir Hilary Beckles, in a tribute, called Brathwaite a "philosopher of the 'inner plantation'" who "took the words of the empire, deformed their structure, mangled and decolonized their meaning."[47] This statement, coming from a leading academic consulting Caribbean governments, shows how Brathwaite's approach to language and history penetrated leadership thought that guided policy.

Brathwaite's influence on cultural policy is also symbolic. His persona as the "Abeng-man" who invoked Maroon freedom fighters provided a template for seeing artists as keepers of the conscience of the nation. He made it expected that national events include libations to ancestors or that important speeches begin with a quote in dialect – small but meaningful shifts in protocol that honor the Afro-Caribbean presence. In Barbados, upon his death, he was given an official funeral with a cultural celebration, indicating state recognition of his contributions.

Cultural Continuity: Perhaps most importantly, Brathwaite's impact endures in the mindset he helped foster among Caribbean people: a confidence that their way of speaking and being is valid and valuable. This is evident in the contemporary cultural scene – from the rise of reggae/dancehall globally (where Jamaican patois carries the message to the world) to the literary successes of younger Caribbean writers like Marlon James or Safiya Sinclair, who freely mix patois/creole with standard forms in their writing. Without Brathwaite (and his contemporaries), this confidence might have come much later. As we look to the future, one could ask: what open questions remain in Brathwaite's project? Perhaps the role of East Indian Caribbean voices, which Brathwaite did not focus on extensively (his work was Afrocentric), or the intersection of Caribbean and continental African literatures today (given new migration patterns). How might Brathwaite's emphasis on African diasporic continuity be revisited in light of an increasingly multicultural Caribbean that includes Asian and Latin American diasporas? How can the nation language concept inform today's debates on patois becoming written standards or on bilingual education policy? What can contemporary electronic poets learn from his example about blending technology with cultural context? These are areas for potential research and exploration using Brathwaite's methods as a guide.

46 **Kamau Brathwaite,** ***Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*** **(Mona, Jamaica: Savacou Publications, 1974).**

47 **"Kamau's Abeng: The UWI Mourns the Passing of Barbadian Poet and Academic, Kamau Brathwaite,"** *UWI Today*, **February 2020, accessed May 5, 2025, https://sta.uwi.edu/uwitoday/archive/february_2020/article3.asp.**

THE END: THE BEGINNING...

In conclusion, Kamau Brathwaite's impact is multi-faceted: he transformed how literature is written, read, heard, and taught in the Caribbean. He forged a poetics of liberation that resonates beyond the region, moving the Caribbean voice from the margins to the center. Brathwaite reclaimed the voices of ancestors, of the folk, of the ocean, and even of the computer, all in service of telling the Caribbean's story in its own idiom. He has shown that from the fractures of history, one can compose a song for a total cosmos—at once local and universal. It is not enough to be free to speak with our own voices; what matters is that those voices echo, strong and enduring, across oceans of time:

The stone had skidded arc'd and bloomed into islands:
Cuba and San Domingo
Jamaica and Puerto Rico
Grenada Guadeloupe Bonaire

curved stone hissed into reef
wave teeth fanged into clay
white splash flashed into spray
Bathsheba Montego Bay
bloom of the arcing summers...

[...] And of course it was a wonderful time [...][48]

48 **Brathwaite,** ***The Arrivants*****, 48.**

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COLOPHON

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FABRICATION PROCESS
This book's silver surface is a mineral trace of vanished textiles: a littoral mineralization of what once was fabric. Each page bears the afterimage of woven forms now submerged, their textures translated into light and residue. The silver recalls salt crusts left by the retreating tide: deposits of memory, shimmer, and return. The sea's slow alchemy turning fiber into reflection, and reflection into the memory of touch.

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