

THAT I AM  
READING  
BACKWARDS  
AND INTO  
FOR A  
PURPOSE:  
TO GO ON:



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*Deconstruction . . . is not a tool or technical device for mastering texts or mastering a situation or mastering anything; it's, on the contrary, the memory of some powerlessness . . . a way of reminding the other and a way of reminding me, myself, of the limits of the power, of the mastery—there is some power in that.*  
—Jacques Derrida

In corporeal art, live performance, and the moving image, the body becomes an access point to wider social and political experiences. The performer stands in for the unrepresentable collection of bodies and experiences that constitute our lives. It is through identification with or alienation from the human figure, understood both literally as a body and as a trope, that viewers are able to destabilize methods of knowing and representing. The duty and responsibility of art that works with bodies is to make tangible the methods through which visible and readable positions are produced. One approach is through a poetic—rather than analytic—mode of deconstruction. Jacques Derrida reminds us that we are powerless but the knowledge of that powerlessness contains an aspect of power, which in turn reveals the fallibility of the forces to which we are beholden.

Periods of political crisis such as our present moment challenge the logical chain that connects the seeable with the knowable. The current administration of the United States is practicing a policy of communication that detaches truth claims from material events—a political-aesthetic strategy aimed at profoundly reordering representation. Bodies are constituted by representation, but people are participatory actors in this process. Art is a vector of resistance and an instrument of production; it forms a scene of visual information; it is both structure and content. The artist, curator, writer, and teacher Ian White engages with this instrumental imperative of art when he describes his viewership as a process of “reading backwards and into for a purpose, to go on:” It is from these words that we draw our exhibition title, through which White describes his own practice, calls on us to adopt a similar method, and also outlines the process whereby the artists in this exhibition use the body to collapse different spaces and times. In a present foreclosed by promises of a false and vague future, we remember to look backward and

through

## Artists

Julia Phillips  
Babette Mangolte  
Martine Syms  
Silvia Kolbowski  
Lorenza Mondada, Nicolle Bussein,  
Sara Keel, Hanna Svensson,  
and Nynke van Schepen  
Kevin Beasley  
Brendan Fernandes  
Steffani Jemison  
Marvin Luvualu Antonio  
Aisha Sasha John  
Park McArthur  
taisha paggett  
Tanya Lukin Linklater



Steffani Jemison, *Personal*, 2014. Digital video, color, sound; 6:39 min. Courtesy the artist

VESTIBULAR  
MANTRA  
(OR RADICAL  
VIRTUOSITIES  
FOR A BRAVE  
NEW DANCE)

TAISHA  
PAGGETT

(Lights up)

stay wild. stay feral, stay mystified. stay throwing  
fits, stay having no answers. stay  
heart-centered, stay permeable.

(Enter stage left)

stay high-low brow, stay curious, stay rioting,  
stay asking tough questions, stay unclassifiable,  
stay getting crazy looks.

(Group two go)

stay crying in public, stay out of sorts,  
stay forgetting the combo, stay with the  
ripped pantyhose and the pit-stained tees.

(Music go)

because in this new dance we  
play gravity like a pick primping its last 'do.

(Slow rise the volume)

stay visible, stay wanting more, stay addressing  
what's not there and what the  
audience isn't willing to see.

because as fish swim and birds fly, we stand against  
the pressure—up, out, off, in, for and against  
the ceaseless, creaseless pressure.

(Enter chorus)

stay fearless and momentous. stay  
unwieldy and excretory. stay oceanic. keep  
letting this piece drag on. stay humble.

because we were born with resistance in our spines.

stay chained to that fence, that tree, that railway  
track, one another. stay over the rainbow, kaleidoscopic.

(Canon go)

because we don't collapse so much as  
fold over, like prostrate  
origami tumbling through dense sky.

(Sidelights at half)

in this duet you're looking at me—the real me—and  
the air is a substance, like cherry hair gel; it disturbs  
your body enough to send it writhing toward the  
upstage diagonal and into the wings. it should elicit laughs.

stay with the senses.

(Upstage lights fade out)

stay in the nectar, the marrow. stay deep  
listening. stay daydreaming. stay being  
the last person clapping, but stay honest.

i'm up to my knees and inverted. there's a  
little room to my side to insert about four  
measures. we beat, we slide, but the ground  
could never hook us.

stay staying and stay letting go.

(Music two go)

because we don't collapse so much as bellow  
in and out, collectivity lunging into one another like  
an accordion before its next breath, and  
in these folds lies the fervor.

stay loving everyone. stay eating the veggies  
and the fruits. stay worshipping the sun. stay  
knowing the street as the open museum of  
our collective unfixable be-ings and  
the art of living as the last reliable medium. stay  
reading that heavy-weight theory shit but stay  
knowing when to put it the fuck down. stay believing in  
the classroom of your grandma, bus driver,  
neighborhood tagger, pharmacist, dog, and the song  
you can't ever stop listening to.

(Crossover)

because we don't collapse so much as bend like light.  
because we don't collapse so much as stand on the brink.  
because we don't collapse so much as collapse together—  
big bang bodies born into spontaneity.  
because, anatomically antonymical,  
resistance is what we are. because this dance did not  
happen by accident. because we are the  
we we've been bating our breath for.

(Spotlight go)

stay metaphysical. stay knowing vision is a process  
and seeing is not always believing.  
stay questioning the frame—including this one here.  
stay victorious in those psychic acro-antics,  
standing yet again and again because the ground  
is a process and our homes are mobile(s). ever, forever.

because we don't collapse so much as swim  
into the thick with-ness of pain and pleasure,  
history and memory.

stay panoramic.

a woman. a man. a refusal to be either. a child. an  
elder. an oracle. this theater. that house. age without decay.

this time i'll reach for your neck—your real neck—and i won't  
let go until the plate is clean and the music climbs to silence.

stay knowing that if they *get* this dance, there might be something wrong.  
stay knowing that if something is only to be *gotten*, we  
might all be doing something wrong.

(Music fading . . . )

in technicolor canon we rise and fall. rock. roll.

(Blackout)

"The vestibular system is a system of the body essential for spatial orientation and balance. In psychology, it explains the abilities to stand, move without falling, and focus the eyes on a single object even when the head is in motion," [www.chegg.com/homework-help/definitions/vestibular-system-13](http://www.chegg.com/homework-help/definitions/vestibular-system-13).

CONSTRUCTING  
AMBIGUITY: THE  
SCULPTURAL  
WORK OF  
JULIA PHILLIPS  
AND KEVIN  
BEASLEY

MAGDALYN  
ASIMAKIS

*To be sure, if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me. That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an effect and not yet a sign.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 10.

Composed of a waist-level bar with handgrips on either side, *Positioner* (2016) is a ceramic apparatus with an indeterminate, imaginary function. Julia Phillips, the artist, uses her own body to shape and puncture the materials before they are fired. Though one may understand the ways the individual technical parts of the apparatus are utilized, it is unclear how, and to what end, one's entire body may function within in this larger structure, causing one's cognitive recognition of the apparatus to oscillate between invitation and disorientation.

Phillips invents apparatuses that work on an imaginary level rather than a physical one. She describes her sculptures as existing in a physically passive state, which is further emphasized by their material fragility.<sup>2</sup> Her sculptures aim to take the mind to unconscious spaces where desire and power exist and to disrupt those relations. Despite the familiar shapes of the tools that make up the works and the references to bodily interaction, the functions of the sculptures do not align with the structures that govern our bodies. When encountering her finished works, one may be viscerally repelled as quickly as physically invited to interact with the imprints of Phillips's body. This phenomenological destabilization is generative for Phillips, who notes "the negative space in my objects is what I intend to be the site for the unsaid and unshaped," prompting those who encounter the sculptures to question the relationship between the physical body and the unconscious.<sup>3</sup> Because the negative space she creates intimates physically ambiguous interactions between body and structure, the mind is necessarily turned to question the structures, how they may or may not support the body, and in turn where the limits and potentials of power in this relationship are located.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Phillips, "Introducing the 2016–2017 Artists in Residence," *Studio: The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine*, Winter/Spring 2017, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Phillips, "Julia Phillips," Columbia University School of the Arts, Visual Arts Program, 2015 MFA Thesis Exhibition, <http://arts.columbia.edu/visual-arts/2015/thesis/julia-phillips>.

The fluid on the floor tiles, for which there is no visible source, refers to the bodily interior. The remnants of fluid that recur in Phillips's works, as well as the use of the artist's body to mark and impress the sculptures, explore and question the power dynamics between the dominant penetrator and the penetrated, as outlined in psychoanalytic theory.<sup>4</sup> By referring to both the interior and exterior of the body and the unresolved relation between the two, Phillips explores the agency in being the penetrator or penetrated and, more broadly, tensions between inside and outside, interiority and exteriority, and the politics of the body. While psychoanalysis considers the body more directly, Phillips indexes the body in her sculpture in order to think broadly and abstractly about identity, social structures, and post-coloniality as constructs to be penetrated or disrupted. Phillips cites Angela Davis, who describes social realities such as white supremacy as seemingly

<sup>4</sup> See Diane Elise, "Unlawful Entry: Male Fears of Psychic Penetration," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 11, no. 4 (2001): 499–531.





Julia Phillips, *Positioner*, 2016. Glazed ceramics, metal screws, metal structure, partly glazed ceramic tiles, 44.1 x 24.4 x 30.7 in. (112 x 62 x 78 cm). Private collection; courtesy the artist and Campoli Presti, London/Paris

impenetrable, but which become malleable when they are penetrated.<sup>5</sup> Phillips mobilizes the concept of penetration in her work through direct references to the body—her own footprints and mouth holes, for example—and extends this idea into post-colonial thinking by dismantling the structures that govern the body via sculpture. Her artistic strategies work on both a physical and conceptual level to disrupt the ideological constructs around identity and the body. For example, the idea of “regulation,” explored in the work *Regulator* (2014), can be understood as governing the space between bodies both in a physical sense and in a broader social and psychic sense. Ideology codes gender, race, sexuality, and class identities in ways that regulate the movement, behavior, production, and freedom of bodies. By drawing on constructed physical and unconscious orientations of the body, Phillips points to the spaces where structures of power and control are formed, as well as to their limits and their potential for disruption.

As historically constructed subjects, we are conditioned to adhere to identity categories by ideological systems of coding defined over time by dominant ideals.<sup>6</sup> The structures that govern the body are multiple and entrenched. In the history and context of these structures, the marked body has been defined by its variance from the unmarked body.<sup>7</sup> It is from this difference that colonial concepts such as the “other” were developed. This distinction between marked and unmarked bodies is rooted in a vocabulary of signification that defines the “other” as a fixed, unchanging being that is at once foreign yet completely visible and knowable.<sup>8</sup> At moments such as the present, when state control of marked bodies, based on essentialist identification, intensifies, the arbitrary nature of these classifications and assumptions of fixed identities becomes increasingly legible. The gaping holes created by this distorted categorization of people provide spaces for the abject body—which exists in “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” spaces outside of established identity categories—to disrupt the fixity of those categories through active ambiguity.<sup>9</sup>

In Kevin Beasley’s *Untitled* (2015), the artist reconfigures a pair of gray Levi’s jeans by reorienting them upside down, unstitching the inseams of both legs, and filling them with polyurethane foam to create a single, cylindrical column. Resin stains drip down from the top of the sculpture and debris from the artist’s studio is visible throughout. The established function of the jeans causes the viewer’s body to respond viscerally to the foam that fills them, expands, and seeps out at the base of the sculpture by imagining it as their own body. However, one cannot understand the foam as a surrogate body because Beasley’s narrow molding of the sculpture prevents movement of the legs—and they are oriented upside down. As the eye moves up to where the ankles would be, the perception of physical space for accommodating the human body diminishes; these are no longer jeans as we understand

5 Julia Phillips, interview with Deborah Anzinger et al., “IN: Black Female Subjectivity,” New Local Space (NLS), livestream, December 11, 2016, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDdzHTuIVVg>.

6 Stuart Hall, “The Rediscovery of Ideology,” in *Culture, Society, and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1983), 71.

7 See Brooke Holmes, “Marked Bodies: Gender, Race, Class, Age, Disability and Disease,” in *The Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 159–83.

8 Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question,” in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. Frances Barker (University of Essex: Department of Government, 1983), 23.

9 Kristeva, 4.



Julia Phillips, *Regulator*, 2014. Partially glazed ceramics, metal stand, screws. 44 x 25.6 x 19.7 in. (112 x 65 x 50 cm). Courtesy the artist and Campoli Presti, London/Paris

them. The oscillation between visual recognition of the filled garment and consciousness that a familiar embodied relationship has been blocked, as well as the incompleteness of the figurative sculpture, all destabilize viewers' mastery over bodily orientation. This process divorces the jeans from their ascribed function and suggests that objects and beings may exceed dominant understandings of fixity.

Beasley's sculptures are made of mass-produced objects indexical to the body. His work manipulates the contact between the physical, live body and culturally specific material products such as housedresses, hoodies, and Air Jordan sneakers. The artist carefully considers the spaces in which these garments are and were active: *Untitled (meeting)* (2016) is made of housedresses that Beasley purchased from a storefront in Harlem where the women in his family would shop. The garments in this context are



Kevin Beasley, *Untitled*, 2015. Polyurethane foam, resin, gray jeans, underwear, studio debris, 47 x 17 x 20 in. (119.4 x 43.2 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York



tied to the body's visibility as well as its habitation and negotiation of community and domestic spaces, which are complicated by the redeployment of the clothes as sculpture. Beasley also uses his own body and various adhesives like resin, tar, and polyurethane foam to shape the clothing. This process reactivates the objects and proposes alternative embodied relationships between structure (in this case, clothing) and individuals (artist and viewer). The duration of Beasley's sculpting process is dependent on the length of time required before the adhesive hardens. During this time, the relationship between body and materials alters: from the materials habilitating the body to the artist intervening and reshaping the garments' function. These instabilities and transitions work together to trouble the bodily constructions of visibility we orient ourselves around and to speak to larger potentialities of the body.

By engaging with the abject, Phillips and Beasley interrogate constructions of visibility and they gesture to possibilities outside the codification of fixed identity categories, pointing toward hypothetical, indeterminate, embodied relationships.<sup>10</sup> Both Beasley and Phillips defamiliarize and repurpose objects, creating new apparatuses with ambiguous functions. Their work complicates the concept of fixity on which the colonial othering and categorizing of marked bodies depends.<sup>11</sup> Beasley does so by retooling and reanimating bodily objects and Phillips by exploring psychic power dynamics that manifest through the body. The doubling back and questioning that occurs in both practices can be understood as something larger than troubling physical relationships in space. Questioning the limits and potential of an object by imagining alternative functions for its physical form mirrors structures of identity formation. What is essential and what is imposed? The artists point to the impossibility that physical appearances equate to fixed subjective identity formations. By exploring the ambiguity of the abject and using the indexicality of their own bodies in their processes, Beasley and Phillips establish a parallel between the forms in their work and the politics of the body. These works convey that the modes of categorizing physical bodies are not absolute but a result of history.

In advance of their assembly, the parts that make up both Phillips's and Beasley's works inhabit spaces of neutralization for varied periods of time. In Beasley's studio, one encounters mass-produced objects fabricated to protect the body—clothing, car seats, and shoes, often dipped in resin, which renders their original function null. These objects are placed carefully yet tentatively around the studio where they idle in the space, their function neutralized until the artist reactivates them in alternative ways. Though Phillips plans her sculptures in advance of their physical materialization, the component parts, often tools, that will comprise future works remain functionally indeterminate both prior to and after their assembly. Her studio is a meticulous, operating-room-like display of molds of her mouth, hands, and feet alongside spikes, metal rods, and hinges that have yet to

10 On the social sense of the outside, Stuart Hall writes, "To be outside the consensus was to be, not in an alternative value-system, but simply outside norms as such: normless—therefore, anomic." Hall, 62.

11 Bhabha, 18.



Kevin Beasley, *Untitled (meeting)*, 2016. Resin, housedresses, 70 x 21 x 17 in. (177.8 x 53.3 x 43.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photo: Jean Vong

be assembled, their functions individually and collectively uncertain. There is an evident tension between the potentials of these tools and their powerlessness in these decontextualized positions. In a later interview, Jacques Derrida described deconstruction not as a technical device for mastery but as a reminder of the limits of power and the memory of powerlessness.<sup>12</sup> This can be a generative framework for understanding Phillips's and Beasley's practices, not only in the way they question agencies and structures, but also in the way they imagine potential alternatives as a result. These artists' works do not defamiliarize mundane objects exclusively in order to disorient those who encounter their sculptures. By repurposing objects, as in the case of Beasley, or appropriating their form, as in the case of Phillips, the artists consider the arbitrariness of these objects' assigned functions. By stripping down the object, freeing its form from imposed structures, their work reveals the powerlessness of the identifying categories that make sense of these objects.

In moments of political urgency it is counterintuitive to resist direct reactions and choose instead to reflect on history and the constructs that preceded the present. This pause contrasts with the social acts of resistance that are necessary for progress, particularly in moments when bodies are endangered by aggressive state control. Beasley and Phillips acknowledge pausing and rerouting as ways of accessing and activating unconscious spaces to question the structures around which we orient ourselves. They defamiliarize the component parts that make up their works, destabilizing the traditional distinction between figural and phenomenological sculpture. It is in this space that they explore the limits of power and question structures that govern the body. In considering the futility of the identities, systems, and orders imposed on objects and bodies, Beasley's and Phillips's works question structures of visibility and essentialist identification. Their works inhabit a space both physically and conceptually ambiguous that troubles the power of the works' component parts and collectively proposes alternative positions that counter fixity. The works do not languish as composite constructions of powerless parts: indexed to both the artist's and viewers' bodies, the sculptures implicate those with whom they share space, disorienting assumptions. In so doing, they disrupt the fixity of bodily identification and locate the ambiguous body as a site of the present.

<sup>12</sup> "Deconstruction, from that point of view, is not a technical device for mastering texts or mastering a situation or mastering anything; it's, on the contrary, the memory of some powerlessness . . . a way of reminding the other and a way of reminding me, myself, of the limits of the power, of the mastery—there is some power in that." Jacques Derrida, quoted in Elisabeth Weber, "Passages—From Traumatism to Promise," in Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : Interviews 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 385.



Martine Syms, *Notes on Gesture*, 2015. Digital video, color, sound; 10:30 min. Image © the artist.  
Courtesy Video Data Bank ([www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org)) and School of the Art Institute of Chicago

WHEN  
IDENTITY IS  
PRESENTED AS  
A CATEGORY  
OR A SET OF  
CATEGORIES,  
I TRY TO  
REMEMBER  
IT IS ALSO A  
POCKET

PARK  
MCARTHUR

When identity is presented as a category or a set of categories, I try to remember it is also a pocket. It is expandable, like the bottomless velvet bags used at magic shows. Folded over and doubled onto itself, this pocket of identity can also be used when performing a trick in public. From the perspective of an audience, the pocket looks like a pocket—it has an interior and an exterior. But from the perspective of the pocket itself, the pocket is everything: interior and exterior but also ulterior. Cinched together as it also falls slack, it is open to being turned out.

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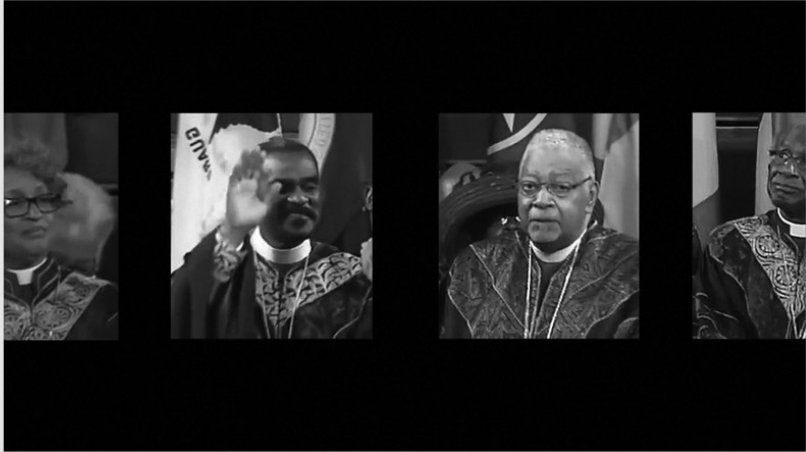


```
20 AUD YEA$::[::::~H]
21 OBA      [†by $ do]ing$ that/ $we °exp$ress $ god's gr̃ace $
oba      $RH up--$stroke-$2strokes$stroke-$RH up$RH down-----$
cle      †stands up----->
aud      °stands up--->>
22 AUD &[APPLAUSE APPLAUSE APPLAUSE APPLAUSE APPLAUSE APPLAUSE APPLAUSE]
23 CLE [YE[AH::]
24 CLE [YEAH:[:]
25 AUD [YEA::[::::~H]
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Following pages: Lorenza Mondada, Nicolle Bussein, Sara Keel, Hanna Svensson, and Nynke van Schepen, *Obama's Grace*, 2016. Three-channel digital video, color, sound; 4:02 min. Courtesy the artists





```
5 OBA [surrou]:*nding reverend *pinckney
oba ->*looks down----*looks L-----*looks down-->
6 AUD *THAT'S RI::[:GHT]
7 OBA [and th]at bible study gro+up*
oba ->*looks L-----*looks down-->
cle +...-->
8 AUD [<(0.6) applause+ (0.5) applause+ (.) applause* (0.7) applause+]
9 AUD [<(1.9) YEA::[:H]]
cle .....+RH blesses-----+,,,----->
oba ----->*looks R----->
```



```
11 OBA [regA:r]dless of the color of their ski:n/
12 AUD &[applause applause applause applause applause applause&
13 AUD [YEA::[:H]]
14 OBA [or the sta:tion into which they were bo:rn]
15 AUD &[applause applause applause applause applause applause&
16 CLE [that's [right/]
17 OBA [and to d]o: what's necessary/
18 AUD &[applause applause applause applause applause applause&
19 OBA [to make opportunity (0.4) rea:l (0.3) for e:very ame:rican
20 AUD YEA$::[:H]]
```



# EVENT SCORES FROM THE GLOSSARY OF INSISTENCE

TANYA LUKIN  
LINKLATER

Suk  
A human being. Afognak dialect: the S is pronounced SH. It sounds like shook but with a shorter o.  
Perhaps we shake. Or past tense, we shook. When are we shaken?

*An Event Score for Indigenous Epistemologies (Eber Hampton)*

A person enters and reads

Then	The audience listens but does not look
Then	The audience looks only to follow with its body
Then	The audience's body turns to the east
Then	The audience holds its heart
Then	The audience listens but does not look

*An Event Score for Haunting (Eve Tuck)*

A person enters and reads

Then	The audience remembers relentlessly
Then	The audience feels no ease
Then	What can decolonization mean other than the return of stolen land?
Then	What must it feel like to be haunted?

*An Event Score for Maria Tallchief, Dylan Robinson and Helen Simeonoff*

A person enters and says

Then                    The museum or gallery exerts a force in its looking.

Then                    The look of a choreographer is like an everyday structure that exerts a force on the body of a dancer.

Then                    Our bodies exert a force.

Then                    Our objects exert a force.

Then                    When does our bodies’ force exceed the look of a choreographer?

Then                    When does our objects’ force exceed the look of the museum or gallery?

*An Event Score for the Epistemic Violence of Translation (Edgar Heap of Birds)*

- 1.     A person enters and speaks in Alutiiq
- 2.     A person enters and speaks in Alutiiq
- The audience listens

*An Event Score for Afognak Alutiit 1*

An Alutiiq person enters and says

Our memory marks Afognak.

Afognak marks us.

*An Event Score for Afognak Alutiit 2*

An Alutiiq person enters and asks

Then                    What are we tethered to?

                              What holds us together?

Then                    How do we endure?

*An Event Score for Afognak Alutiit 3*

An Alutiit person enters and says

When I am home on our island I sense that the land  
exudes grief.

Then

This feeling.

Then

Many of us have left the land of our ancestors perhaps  
because the grief becomes unbearable.

*An Event Score for Afognak Alutiit 4*

An Alutiit person enters and tells a story about Afognak.

The audience listens

Then

Someone tells a related story.

And so on. And so on. And so on. And so

Suk  
A human being. Afognak dialect: the S is pronounced SH. It sounds like shook but with a shorter o.  
Perhaps we shake. Or past tense, we shook. When are we shaken?



Silvia Kolbowski, *Like a Clap of Thunder*, 2013–15. Digital video loop, color, silent. 9:43 min. Courtesy the artist  
 Following pages: Silvia Kolbowski, *A Few Howls Again*, 2008–09. Digital video loop, color, silent; 9:13 min. Courtesy the artist

Those who hold positions of power and condemn stone-throwing and arson but say nothing about the bombs in Vietnam, or the terror in Persia, or the torture in South Africa, are hypocritical proponents of nonviolence.

*From Protest to Resistance, 1968*

Ulrike Meinhof



They declared war on me to avoid their own conflict.





AWKWARD,  
BACKWARD,  
SCATTERSHOT  
RESISTANCE:  
ON STEFFANI  
JEMISON'S  
*PERSONAL*

JARED  
QUINTON

Steffani Jemison's short video *Personal* (2014) opens with a young Black man walking slowly, deliberately backward. As background details come into focus, the setting of his rather awkward procession is revealed to be a basketball court. Jemison's lens lavishes attention on the few details it makes available to us: the folds in the man's t-shirt, the subtle torques and contours of the body it obscures and outlines. The ambient soundtrack suggests busy city streets somewhere off in the distance. A glint of natural light dances off his earring.

Then something changes. In the next shot, the same man walks through the same location in the proper direction, forward. The frame catches two shirtless Black boys at an idle moment during a pickup ballgame. Soon he walks into the very same shot that opened the video, revealing that our introduction was not what it seemed: the actor had not been walking backward, but rather Jemison had reversed the direction of the recording. Spliced together in direct montage, these two framing shots present the themes of repetition and disjointed temporality at the heart of *Personal*, and focus on the body moving through urban space as a prime agent of disruptive disorientation.

At this moment in history, political battles are waged on the terrain of individual bodies, people of color navigate public urban space under constant bodily threat, and those very public spaces are subjected in turn to the slow creeping violence of redevelopment. Through their subtle manipulations of orientation, pace, direction, and movement, the men in Jemison's video direct our awareness toward the physical and ideological structures that constrict and direct their movement. Backwardness and awkwardness become symbolic gestures of resistance.

The scene continues and is the first of three vignettes that together make up the six-and-a-half-minute video meant to be played and viewed in a loop. The surroundings—parked cars, a chain-link fence, a housing project towering on the horizon—locate the action in Brooklyn. The sound of a Mister Softee ice cream truck plays softly in the background, perhaps a block or two away. The protagonist walks backward through a cluster of more young Black men playing with a football on the basketball court. They continue undisturbed. The sequence of throwing and catching reassures us we are watching a scene in forward motion, though we are never quite certain. Indeed, when some cars rush by in reverse a few frames later, we realize the temporal orientation of the work has been switched yet again, though exactly when and where is not clear. As the casual game unwinds in reverse, our protagonist sustains his slow, somber march forward and away from the camera and the players, an illusory act of volition and temporal disobedience.

Jemison originally created the video for *Crossing Brooklyn*, a 2014 survey exhibition of Brooklyn-based artists presented by the Brooklyn Museum. Curators Eugenie Tsai and Rujeko Hockley scoured the borough for artistic practices that, in their words,

“engage the world” and “aim to have an impact beyond the studio and the museum.”<sup>1</sup> In this context of grand ambitions—those of both the curators and, in some cases, the artists themselves—Jemison’s video struck an understated note. *Personal* takes the premise of the exhibition at its most literal: it shows us men crossing Brooklyn. The seemingly simple act of a body navigating urban space introduces themes of social progress and economic marginalization, while offering a poetic suggestion of what individual resistance to such conventional logics might look like.

In the second segment, a slightly older, heavier-set Black man—one of three Brooklyn-based professional actors who responded to Jemison’s casting call—meanders in front of a mural of Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama. Dressed in baggy blue clothing, the man’s countenance and casual pacing suggest the stasis of waiting or biding time or even killing it. Behind him, Mandela’s portrait hasn’t been quite filled in; the skin on his hands and half of his face show the white of the underpainting. Obama’s image is more fully realized: a compelling if potentially unintended nod to an idea of “racial progress.” This effect is complicated when Jemison yet again interrupts the temporal flow of the scene and a trio of impeccably dressed Black women walks backward across the sidewalk, one of them with a young child in tow. Pacing slowly to and fro as he always has been, the movement of the new protagonist seems undisturbed by this reversal, much as the women seem uninterested in his presence. He walks backward once more in front of Obama, then Mandela, then reorients himself and heads towards the scene’s left edge.

This man’s simple movements forward and backward in front of the exultant, slightly faded iconography collapse multiple senses of progress: temporal, spatial, historical, ideological. As novelist and critic Ben Lerner argues briefly, the scene “invalidates the notion of ‘racial progress’ that these icons are intended to suggest, while also making us aware of the distinct orders of temporality in the frame—mural time, video time, historical time.”<sup>2</sup> Occupying and traversing the space of a sidewalk in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the actor’s body and its perplexing movements force this temporal collapse to take place. Lerner’s ultimate reading of the video invokes the exact historical time and place in which Jemison made it: the summer when Black Lives Matter was born. “Jemison’s work is open enough to allow a wide range of responses,” he continues, “but it seems worth noting that I couldn’t help but see the man in front of the mural as another potential Eric Garner,” referring to the Staten Island man who was killed while being put in a chokehold by New York City police. His alleged offense had been selling loose cigarettes without a permit while loitering on a sidewalk not dissimilar to this one.

Lerner’s mention of police brutality suggests how Jemison’s video, by foregrounding the movement of Black male bodies through urban space, invokes the broad systems of racial inequality and racist violence that often bear most prominently

1 “Crossing Brooklyn: Art from Bushwick, Bed-Stuy, and Beyond,” *Crossing Brooklyn*, curated by Eugenie Tsai and Rujeko Hockley, Brooklyn Museum website, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/crossing\\_brooklyn/](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/crossing_brooklyn/).

2 Ben Lerner, “Looking Back on 2014,” *BOMB Magazine*, December 11, 2014, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/14021210/looking-back-on-2014>.



Steffani Jemison, *Personal*, 2014. Digital video, color, sound; 6:39 min.



on African American neighborhoods. But Jemison also conjures an awareness of resistance and self-determination by individuals and local communities in the face of such forces. The neighborhoods in which she shot *Personal*, Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights, share the footprint of historic Weeksville, an early settlement of freed slaves founded by James Weeks in the early 1800s. The very same summer on the very same streets where Jemison shot this video in 2014, a collaboration between the Weeksville Heritage Center and public-art nonprofit Creative Time paired four African American artists with four local organizations to create temporary social-practice interventions meant to tap into the area's rich histories of Black cultural production and self-determination. For one, sculptor Simone Leigh turned Stuyvesant Mansion (the former home of New York's first Black obstetrician gynecologist, Josephine English) into the *Free People's Medical Clinic*, a hub for alternative healthcare services—yoga classes, herbalism workshops, doula consultations, HIV screenings—intended for the local community and modeled on the Black Panthers' health clinics. Nearby, textile artist Xenobia Bailey organized a long-term crafting and installation project in collaboration with students at the historic Boys and Girls High School, the building upon which the Mandela mural is painted. The day *Personal* debuted at *Crossing Brooklyn*, the four temporary Weeksville installations entered their penultimate weekend less than a mile away down Eastern Parkway. By centering self-care, art-making, and even survival as radical acts of resistance, these projects form a poignant context for the video, illustrating the fact that the Black men who walk through Jemison's shots do so not simply or idly but potentially at great peril. Even as part of an everyday routine, the work suggests, occupying and moving through these spaces are radical acts.

The final scene of the video is set in Fulton Park, just across the street from the high school. The third protagonist walks a purposeful circle around the monument to Robert Fulton, once, twice, three times, four. The jarring fade to black before he begins each new loop heightens our awareness that we are watching something edited and unreal; yet each short scene unfolds with the seemingly deadpan objectivity of a surveillance camera. The direction switches and passersby begin to stream briskly backward across various corners of the plaza, yet the man keeps his solitary pace, maintaining a slow forward motion out of step with everything around him. Beyond the spatial or emotional, Jemison introduces us to a form of temporal alienation that is somehow even more haunting, disconcerting. The man gazes at the statue of Fulton, the inventor of the steamboat and a founding father of global capitalism, whose ship was the first public works to connect Brooklyn and Manhattan. Though his park is a cozy, leafy green, Fulton gazes out of the frame and into the world that has developed around it: high-rise condos of glass and steel sprouting up in downtown Brooklyn, high-rise housing projects



Steffani Jemison, *Escaped Lunatic*, 2010–11. Digital video, color, sound; 7:42 min. Courtesy the artist

of brick and cement falling into further disrepair. In one final shot, the young actor disappears quickly, backward, behind the monument.

In the essay “Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness,” Lauren Berlant reads Liza Johnson's short film *In the Air* (2009), which depicts the awkward collective movement of bodies through post-industrial urban spaces, as an allegory of resistance to neoliberal austerity.<sup>3</sup> Johnson's film is set in Portsmouth, Ohio, a town whose abandonment by capital and profound lack of opportunity are written in its bleak, crumbling infrastructure. At a circus school, however, the town's disillusioned teens of all ages, sizes, and abilities learn acrobatics. Gradually the tricks and poses they learn seep into their everyday lives, interrupting the mundane motions of their afternoon jobs and building to a climax wherein all of the townspeople come together to perform a campy dance routine to the 90s club hit “Better Off Alone” by Alice Deejay. They are not *good* at these movements, but rather through their embrace of awkwardness and un-routinized gestures the people of Portsmouth stake a claim to the spaces abandoned under neoliberalism. “[They] don't have a project or program but a want in common and mobility has become literally awkward, more sideways and falling than upward,” Berlant writes. They convert the “body's humble gracelessness into a minor collective courage to refuse the gestures of self-attribution and desperate askesis that have constituted the austere wisdom of neoliberalism.”<sup>4</sup>

What Berlant locates in Johnson's film is akin to the mechanisms by which much of Jemison's work operates. Jemison espouses a form of embodied resistance within hegemonic systems—media, cities, institutions—that gestures toward their latent ideologies and resists them in small, symbolic ways. The agents of this awkward, scattershot resistance are always people, often speaking illogically or performing seemingly arbitrarily, not with the climactic camp

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Jeannine Tang for suggesting this connection.

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness,” *Supervalent Thought*, November 2011, <https://supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf>.

of the *In the Air* townspeople but rather with a subtler, more understated poetics. In *The Meaning of Various Photographs to Tyrand Needham* (2009), Jemison restages an earlier narrated video by John Baldessari as a conversation between two Black teenagers.<sup>5</sup> Scrolling through images gleaned from a Google search, Needham's literalistic interpretations of protest photos, athletes, criminals, and civil rights heroes—all Black men—defy commonly accepted historical narratives, replacing them with humorous misreadings or even, as Martine Syms has argued, deliberate denials.<sup>6</sup> In her well-known video from a few years later, *Escaped Lunatic* (2010–11), Jemison shot a parkour team running through cityscapes in Houston. As the men sprint, hurdle, and tumble through the frames, their bodies collapse the chase scene, a trope of early cinema, onto themes of contemporary mass incarceration. Yet they elude the slapstick physical clichés of the former and, as the title suggests, quite literally escape the latter.

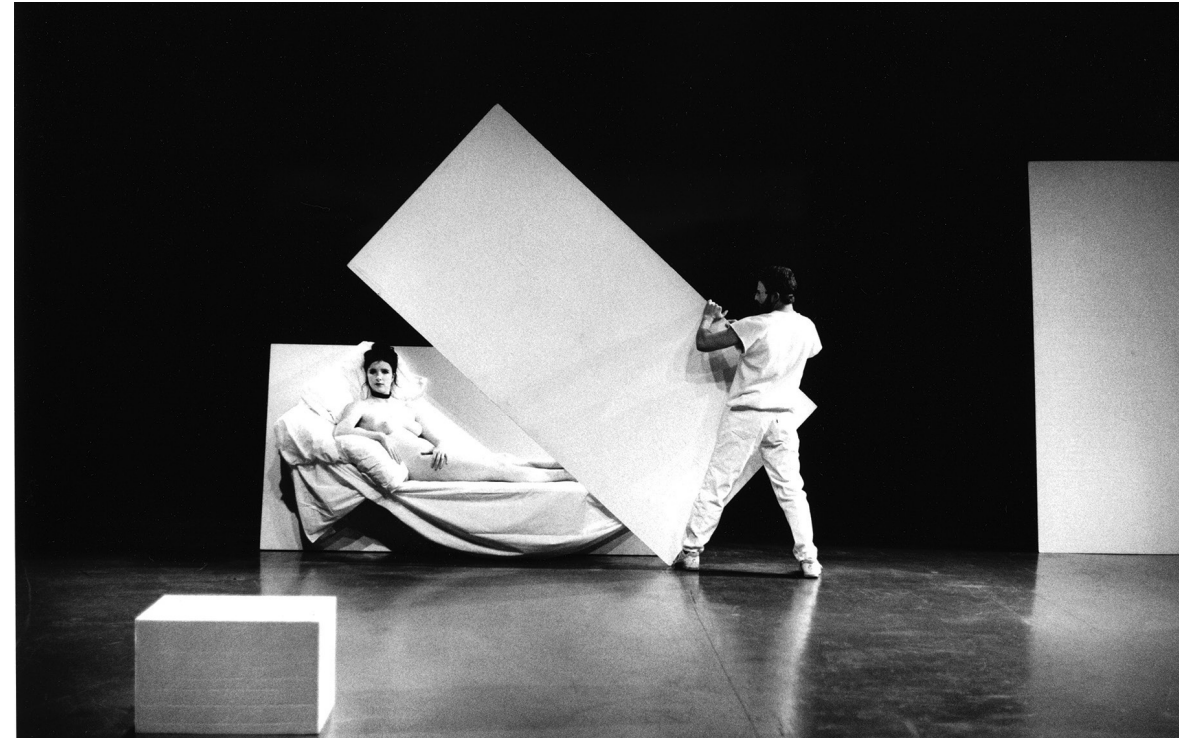
More recently, Jemison has explored these themes through work in performance as well. In 2015 she was invited to produce a work in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of Jacob Lawrence's seminal *Migration Series* (1940–41). She created *Promise Machine* (2015), a temporary walking trajectory throughout the museum's galleries that linked artists like Sam Gilliam and Piet Mondrian with Lawrence's work, on view in a separate gallery. Along this imagined corridor, Jemison staged performances with a group of musicians, who, working from a score by Jemison, played motifs drawn from R&B, creating auditory, often disruptive interventions within the gallery spaces. The mobile performers and their sounds and gestures—often discordant with the staid surroundings—created a new constellation of art-historical meanings, undermining the museum's classical modernist narrative, if only for the duration of a few short performances.

*Personal* provides Jemison's most distilled form yet of performed, embodied resistance that operates through disruption and disorientation. It is not the clumsy stumble toward post-apocalyptic collectivity of Johnson's *In the Air*, but rather an embrace of an awkward alienation, perhaps an alienation *through* awkwardness. The three men's familiar yet decidedly uncanny movements resist our attempts to understand their actions chronologically, historically, thematically, logically, in the process throwing into stark relief the often brutal realities that such decidedly rationalist, progress-oriented thinking upholds. The video creates a slippage between movement in its literal, temporal, and metaphorical senses. Viewers recognize in the living, breathing, moving bodies a key to accessing history, understanding the present, and routing an alternate path forward. Berlant says that “any artwork is at best an episode to hang a wish on.” Jemison's wishes are deliberately unclear, but if I have one to hang on this video it is for a greater appreciation of what is required of the human body—even in its simplest, most mundane gestures—to navigate the restrictions placed upon it by public

5 Baldessari's work is titled *The Meaning of Various Photographs to Ed Henderson* (1973).

6 Martine Syms, “Black Vernacular: Reading New Media,” in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 369–392.

space, communal infrastructure, and the ideologies they make manifest. With her artful manipulations of the three men's performances, Jemison shows us the radical potential for subtle interruptions to direct our attention differently—from the body to the system.



Babette Mangolte with choreography by Robert Morris, *Four Pieces by Morris*, 1993. 16mm film transferred to digital video, color, sound; 94 min. Courtesy of the artists











UNTITLED

ALEXANDRA  
SYMONS  
SUTCLIFFE

Liveness is the dominant and determining state of dance and performance. The curation of the performing arts has to reckon with liveness and, in its absence, with the memory of the event. When the performer ceases to act in space, documentary materials and ephemera bolster and reproduce the performance in the gallery or archive. There are rich and multiple theories of the relationship between the document and the event, but in curatorial practice documentation is frequently activated as a compensatory measure. The curator works to restage past-presentness to provide access for future audiences. But the focus on the presentness of performance is a partial strategy that ignores or sublimates the techniques that produce performance. The virtuosity of the performing body is neither luck nor an optical trick; the performer is a trained, mediating apparatus, the product of a practice but also of practicing.

In his essay “Performer, Audience, Mirror: Cinema, Theatre and the Idea of the Live,” the artist, writer, curator, and teacher Ian White writes, “(liveness) is not life/keness.”<sup>1</sup> This means that the live moment is not a seamless transmission from one lived experience into the realm of representation, but rather the reconstruction of the idea of corporeal experience. White’s intersecting practices as a producer, curator, and critic of live and moving arts demonstrate a more complicated and committed method for reproducing artistic process in its difficulties and obscurities. The curation of live and performance art is continuously confronted by a critical impasse: how to preserve access to a moment that is by definition and necessity fleeting? What else constitutes performance that can be rescued through curation? White’s practice navigated this impasse, cleaving its dense complications as a site of knowledge production.

At the end of his life White kept a blog that described, among other things, his relationship to his cancer treatment and with art. Blogs are often written as missives, in diaristic form, and presented with the chronologically most recent entry first. To read White’s blog today, readers start at his final entry and click back in time. If readers stop when they realize they’ve read the last post first and begin again at his first entry, they then run back through to the terminal point at which they began. In one entry that deals with Nicolas Poussin, the choreographer Michael Clark, and life with cancer, White wrote, “That I am reading backwards and into for a purpose, to go

1 Ian White, “Performer, Audience, Mirror: Cinema, Theatre and the Idea of the Live,” in *Here is Information*, Mobilise, ed. Mike Sperlinger and Josephine Pryde (London: Lux, 2016), 262.

2 Ian White, "Removing the Minus," Lives of Performers [blog], November 22, 2012, <https://livesofperformers.wordpress.com/2012/11/22/removing-the-minus/>.

3 White, "Performer, Audience, Mirror," 274.

4 Yvonne Rainer, "Statement," program for *The Mind Is a Muscle*, Anderson Theater, New York, April 11, 14, 15, 1968, available at <https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/228735/original/the+Mind+is+a+Muscle.pdf>.

5 Catherine Wood in conversation with Jimmy Robert and Ian White, "Art Now: Jimmy Robert/Ian White: 6 Things We Couldn't Do, But Can Now," Tate, Exhibitions and Events, [2004], <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/late-britain/exhibition/art-now-jimmy-robert-ian-white-6-things-we-couldnt-do-can-do-now>.

6 Wood in conversation with Robert and White.

7 "Teaching Repertoire," Pat Catterson [website], <http://patcatdance.org/teaching.html>.

on."<sup>2</sup> By imitating that statement, this essay seeks to follow the descriptive instructions of White's practice in order to readdress the possibilities for a practice of curating dance and performance that complicates normative strategies of compensation and recuperation.

### That I

"Performer, Audience, Mirror" is bookended by two proclamations. At the very start White writes, "The body is a false promise"; at the end he corrects himself by stating, "The body is a promise."<sup>3</sup> White's resolution is reminiscent of Yvonne Rainer's notoriously obstinate statement that "My body remains the enduring reality."<sup>4</sup> Rainer's individualizing resilience is provocative; everyone knows human flesh is finite, even famous artists will eventually rot. Perhaps Rainer's fantasy of endurance was an act of affirmation, a claim for the female body in the context of highly masculine conceptual and minimalist art practices. Perhaps it was a declaration of social accountability as an artist and as a political subject. The human body is the site of consequence and responsibility for politics and this is certainly what White carries forward in his essay. What does it mean to position the fallible and fatally determined body as a promise, whether it is false or sincere?

White's engagement with Rainer stretched across the multiple strands of his practice. He wrote frequently on her work as a dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker, and his blog was titled after her first film, *Lives of Performers* (1972). White also performed Rainer's choreography multiple times, and in 2009 he took part in her seminal work *Trio A* at the Museum of Modern Art with the artist Jimmy Robert and dancer Pat Catterson. Robert and White had initially worked with Catterson when she taught them *Trio A* so that they could include quotations from it in their performance *6 Things We Couldn't Do*, *But Can Now* (2004) at the Tate Britain. Robert described *6 Things* as a project focused on "How we might come to make a piece where the process was foregrounded and non-spectacular."<sup>5</sup> The work could be understood in part as pulling forward the constitutive factors of performance, such as rehearsal and cooperation, and rendering those factors as the event.

In the performances of both *Trio A* and *6 Things We Couldn't Do*, *But Can Now*, White was both curator and performer. As he

said at the time of *6 Things*, "I work mainly as a curator, and I'm interested in the way in which interpretation (always present or mediated for us by the institution or curator when we view a work of art) can be re-pitched as experience, turned into a dynamic rather than passive activity."<sup>6</sup> In both performances dynamic activity was achieved through implicating his own body, revealing its capacities and its achievements and the process of learning. The double identity of White's role as both dancer and curator advances the notion of performance not just as a cumulative event but as a technical practice dependent on systems of knowledge and organization.

Those approved by Rainer to teach *Trio A* are called "transmitters." A customary definition of *transmitter* is a mechanism that converts and reproduces. In the process of learning *Trio A*, and in the minimal dance practices of Rainer and her peers, dance is first and foremost a demonstrable technique more than it is a mode of expression. This form of dance uses quotidian, pedestrian movement and there are no virtuoso moments. Nonetheless, the pieces require skill and precision, as much as using industrial machinery or having beautiful handwriting does. In dance education the body is an instrument in an assemblage made up of other dancers, written scores, music, sets, props, and theories and histories of performance. Catterson specifies that the teaching of *Trio A* is "always combined with readings/discussion and composition assignments."<sup>7</sup> The technique of choreography is as much inside the dancer as the dancer is inside the choreography: the leg of the dancer is literally directed by the choreographer and that trained leg then produces the choreographed gesture.

In Catterson, Robert, and White's performances their bodies communicate with one another, with the present audience, and with past performances through the reenactment of technique. The body of the performer is oriented outward and exceeds its singular limitations through contextual dialogue and repeated processes. Catterson, Robert, and White are part of a lineage of performances. In their relationship to history and one another, their bodies are reproduced as de-privatized entities. The performers are not so much subjects as they are actors or components. They belong to a series of interdependencies among bodies and knowledge and media. The dancers are both obligated and supported by these

systems and as such are liberated by the promise of an externality. As unspecific as that externality might be, it is the idea of exceeding one's self that is radical and potentially emancipatory. It is the hardest condition to see or imagine. As White wrote, "It is a thing of figures. The allegorical figure is something like a vessel, an empty structure that is both a function of and subject to simultaneous orders and evacuation that depend upon each other."<sup>8</sup> The singular body is dependent, implicated, and promised.

Am Reading

In 2012 White instigated *A Shared Stage of Contingent Production* at the Berlin Arsenal. This event invited artists to work with the Arsenal's film archive and produce individual performances. White's performance *Trauerspiel 1* (2012) quoted from and focused on Walter Benjamin's thesis about German tragic drama as an allegorical mode of theater; but as White wrote in the program notes for the event, "*Trauerspiel 1* is not an illustration of Benjamin's text."<sup>9</sup> Five films were selected, including Peter Weiss's *Studie IV (Frigörelse)* (1954) and Robyn Brentano and Andrew Horn's *Cloud Dance* (1980). Interspersed between the screenings in the Arsenal auditorium, White and Ingolf Sander-Lahr performed five dances that responded to but did not replicate the films shown. White described, perhaps disingenuously, Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*; 1928) as "an expansive and complicated book that I have not read academically."<sup>10</sup> From this self-conscious and partial starting point, White's program multiplied modes of performance and representation to attempt to produce meaning between objects and materials, all the time keeping the spaces of difference and comparison open. By doing so, the performance that followed each film did not only supplement the earlier works but also complicated and diverted their meaning. In *Trauerspiel 1* the textual, documentary, and corporeal coexist not in a process of translation but as a strategy of allegory that enlarges from the discreet works—both Benjamin's text and the films—into physical space and a field of understanding. The allegorical strategy, which White borrows from Benjamin, is an unenclosed and incomplete descriptive practice that shuttles between mediums and contexts. Both performer and audience receive meaning like a bat receives

8 Ian White, "What Is Material?" in *Here is Information*, 280.

9 *Trauerspiel 1*, program notes, available at Arsenal: Institut für Film und Videokunst e.V., website, [http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/kollektion/Living\\_Archive/Prog\\_notes.pdf](http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/fileadmin/user_upload/kollektion/Living_Archive/Prog_notes.pdf)

10 *Trauerspiel 1*, program notes.

sonar waves, bent and shaped by the material they have passed through and been deflected from.

The historical function of allegory is to employ a symbolic regime to reveal a hidden truth. The allegory is not about the thing to which it refers; it is a mediating technique that has to be read and understood in context. The allegorical symbol carries with it historical, religious, and cultural weight. In White's curation of *A Shared Stage of Contingent Production*, the textual, descriptive mechanism of allegory was realized in flesh and on screen. It is impossible to index the process of the body; there is too much in excess. The ambition of technological indexical representation is also its limitation: an index can only denote movement and experience; it cannot fully reproduce it. In *Trauerspiel 1* White used multiple systems of description and representation, performing in front of and against film and text, to bring into the auditorium the ideas of Benjamin that he himself claims to have found inaccessible. *Trauerspiel 1* can be understood as a public performance of self-instruction that embraced allegory as a reproductive medium, a live education.

In his essay on allegory and material, White writes that "the bodies of previous audiences (now readers) are scripted back into the room."<sup>11</sup> The script of a play, like the score of a dance, is the system of markings that map the event and provide the tools for its reconstruction. The script is a material that refers to the play in an analogical as opposed to allegorical way, a descriptive system that is organized but not automated. There is a difference between looking, seeing, and reading but they are not confined to media. As much as you must read the script of the play you must be able to read the plot of the allegorical image. In his "Little History of Photography," Benjamin advised that in the coming decades publics must become literate in images so as to extract and produce meaning.<sup>12</sup> For Benjamin this meant evaluating the historical and ideological limits of technology, understanding method, and being able to compare systems of representation. For example, one should know that an indexical photographic image is a technological schema and not a faithful reproduction of a moment in time. Benjamin argues that we must know how we see so that we do not just look but also read. This is the crux of Benjamin's investment in the emancipatory potential of technology: it is a tool that can and should

11 White, "What Is Material?" 288.

12 Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 1931–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 507–30.

be harnessed, even inhabited. In White's curation of *A Shared Stage of Contingent Production*, the generative value of literate comparison is written across the media he uses; he, his fellow performer, and the audience participate together in the allegorical scene he produces.

Backwards and Into

The “I” implicated in White's statement that he is “reading backwards and into” is an immediate and present figure, one oriented both to the past and present in a doubled, twisted gesture, momentarily arrested. The “I” reckons with its presentness as an unstable and transitory state and acknowledges the egocentric novelty of live experience, but also looks outward to a space before and beyond itself. Both literal and a trope, the “I” is the location of a gesture that enacts a desire to connect to both the past and the future.

A performative artwork has unstable temporality and a meaning that is dependent on that instability. The moment of performance demands attention to a specific event and pauses time to create space for that attention. Arguably this is why even the most visceral or aggressive performances carry with them an air of preciousness. White refers to this atypical understanding of the moment of performance as “the evacuated present.”<sup>13</sup> Performance is the distillation of processes; the value of the live event is produced in the focus it demands through staging. While the live event or liveness is predicated on immediacy and proximity, if not intimacy, liveness is also a withdrawal from the present, an act of suspension, or an investment in temporal instability. Following this logic, the condition of performance is one of destabilization. A force that destabilizes is stronger than the formerly static object it effects. Destabilization is an agent and material of unscripted change and in performance the destabilization of time creates a precarious dialectical relationship between presence and absence, of the performing body and of the audience's attention to it.

The mechanisms used to record and exhibit events and performances are loaded with a vocabulary that collapses time and space, and conflates the event with an image or the projection of film. The print or the image is dragged out from inside an apparatus, digitally reconstituted or projected: from the inside out and forward. In White's work as a curator of film and performance, his embodiment of the material and message of prior artworks subverted this

13 White, “Performer, Audience, Mirror,” 267.

projectionist impulse. By reenacting a performance or translating recorded information into his body, White made himself accountable to the artwork. While Rainer declared her body to be eternally accountable, White's positioning of himself within his curatorial work is also a declaration of responsibility. However literal the gesture may seem, White sincerely attempts to stand closely to his work with material that belonged to other people in other times and bear responsibility for its effects. Significantly, the process of translating prior works troubles the temporalities of the medium. The reinterpretation of filmed movement into live movement is more than subjective reactivation; it is a transition from a mode of representation to a mode of performance, compressing the distancing effects of filmic representation into the live event and forcing a reckoning with the status of the contemporary. Once again the site of meaning making is compounded in White's body as it maintains two logics. One is the process of representation dependent on historical distance; the second is the immediacy of performance that produces meaning almost instantly, through gesture and speech.

Recorded images are insufficient but the body is inefficient. White's strategy was never to compensate one with another but to compare them and in doing so make accessible the experiences that recede from or exceed visibility. There is no such thing as a foreseeable future. The future is by definition unknowable, so it appears to us as monstrous in the most literal sense as an unapproachable terror.<sup>14</sup> We cannot fully see the processes in which we are ourselves entangled and which we document and comment on in the present. The immediacy of the present means analysis is often illusive; the present waits to be a past that can be reconstructed. Any image of the past will always be inauthentic, fragmented, and colored by the experiences of the present. This is because knowledge is unstable and culturally and historically defined. Orienting, turning, looking, reading backward are not a search for an originary truth but an act of will. At stake in the complicated cohabitations of representation and performance in White's work is a desire to see and know differently, which we have to remember is not only possible but a reality.

14 Jacques Derrida, “Passages—From Traumatism to Promise,” in *Points . . . : Interviews 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 386–87.



for a Purpose

What is a title: name, referent, fulcrum, canopy, or limit? Citation is an act of amputation and curatorial selection is an unavoidably violent act that wrenches objects from their contexts and histories, recomposing them in a different order. The purpose of curation is not to construct integrity for the artist or falsify intimacy between viewer and object. Rather, curating produces conditions of visibility that make knowledge sensible. It is also the job of curation and of the curator to care for and preserve ideas at the moment in which they might be receding. The citation drawn from “Removing the Minus” that forms the title of this exhibition and the section titles of this essay abruptly severs White’s original writing. After the colon at the end of “go on,” White continues: “Intro/of time and space and/as the function of something done. Love and time. It is basic.”<sup>15</sup> Melancholic and desiring, yet fortified with purpose, that sentence poses many questions. Perhaps the most intangible question asks how it is possible to orient intimate personal experience to the vastness of time. In the intersection of performance and pedagogy in White’s work, the performing body is a critical access point to that which is missing or occluded, to experiences we cannot obtain but seek to in order to solve our own problems.

White’s theory of image capture and reproduction is anti-necromantic: it is a reckoning with the conditions of presence and presentness. To quote him again, “(liveness) is not life/keness.”<sup>16</sup> Rather, liveness is an unstable process of construction with attendant methods and required tools. The performance belongs neither to the human body nor to the recording media but to the “intra-action” of the two.<sup>17</sup> The performer is enmeshed within multiple technical systems of reproduction and these systems outlast the singular body. When White writes that he’s reading “backwards and into,” he activates a pedagogical strategy of close reading and repetition that will permit a version of performance that both exceeds and resists the live moment.<sup>18</sup> By enacting White’s suggestion, one may bring forward the technicality of the performing body and reckon with its explicit historical and contextual formation.

The title of White’s posthumously published collected writing is *Here Is Information. Mobilise*.<sup>19</sup> The title is both sincere and very funny, if only it were so simple. Like the citation reproduced here,

15 White, “Removing the Minus.”

16 White, “Performer, Audience, Mirror,” 262.

17 White, “What is Material?” 281.

18 White, “Removing the Minus.”

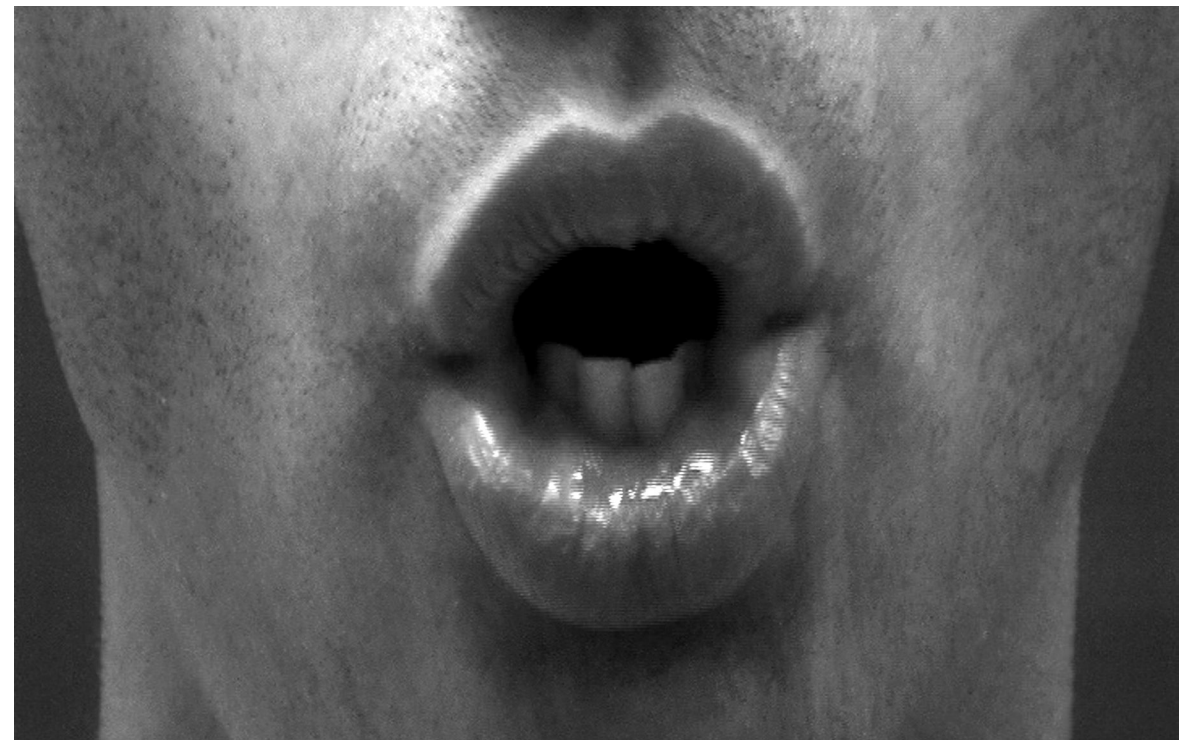
19 Ian White, *Here is Information. Mobilise*, ed. Mike Sperlinger and Josephine Pryde (London, Lux: 2016).

20 White, “Removing the Minus.”

the staccato grammar of the book title is obstinate and arresting, aware of its own mediating purpose. Embedded in the language is a grammatical, technical structure just odd enough to make the reader aware of its work and function. White’s writing might best be described as a graphic performance that incites reproduction. His is a generous, transparent, and inconsistent method that is “not a picture but a body plotted.”<sup>20</sup> Neither discreet nor private, the purpose of the body is to exceed itself and . . .

To Go On:





Brendan Fernandes, *Foe*, 2008. Digital video, color, sound; 4:30 min. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

Exhibited works

Dimensions are in inches,  
followed by centimeters;  
height precedes width  
precedes depth.

**Marvin Luvualu Antonio**

*Anti Body*, 2017  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy the artist

**Kevin Beasley**

*Untitled (meeting)*, 2016  
Resin, housedresses  
70 x 21 x 17 (178.8 x  
53.3 x 43.2)  
Courtesy the artist and  
Casey Kaplan, New York

**Brendan Fernandes**

*Foe*, 2008  
Digital video, color, sound;  
4:30 min.  
Courtesy the artist and  
Monique Meloche Gallery,  
Chicago

**Steffani Jemison**

*Personal*, 2014  
Digital video, color, sound;  
6:39 min.  
Courtesy the artist

**Aisha Sasha John**

*the aisha of oz*, 2017  
Dance at the Whitney Museum  
of American Art, June 1, 2017

**Silvia Kolbowski**

*A Few Howls Again*, 2008–09  
Digital video loop, color, silent;  
9:13 min.  
Courtesy the artist

*Like a Clap of Thunder*,  
2013–15

Digital video loop, color, silent;  
9:43 min.  
Courtesy the artist

**Tanya Lukin Linklater**

*Event Scores from the  
Glossary of Insistence*, 2016–  
Text  
Courtesy the artist

**Babette Mangolte**

*Four Pieces by Morris*, 1993  
Choreography by Robert  
Morris, film by Babette  
Mangolte  
16mm film transferred to digital  
video, color, sound; 94 min.  
Courtesy the artist and  
BROADWAY 1602 HARLEM,  
New York

**Park McArthur**

*When identity is presented as  
a category or set of categories,  
I try to remember it is also  
a pocket*, 2016  
Text  
Courtesy the artist and  
*Artforum*

**Lorenza Mondada,  
Nicolle Bussein, Sara Keel,  
Hanna Svensson, Nynke van  
Schepen**

*Obama's Grace*, 2016  
Three-channel digital video,  
color, sound; 4:02 min.  
Courtesy the artists

**taisha paggett**

*vestibular mantra (or radical  
virtuosities for a brave new  
dance)*, 2011  
Text  
Courtesy the artist

**Julia Phillips**

*Positioner*, 2016  
Partially glazed ceramics,  
screws, metal structure  
44.1 x 24.4 x 30.7 (112 x  
62 x 78)  
Collection of Juan Pablo  
Carranza and Daniela  
Carranza; courtesy  
the artist and Campoli Presti,  
London/Paris

*Regulator*, 2014

Partially glazed ceramics,  
metal stand, screws  
44 x 25.6 x 19.7 (112 x  
65 x 50)  
Courtesy the artist and  
Campoli Presti, London/Paris

**Martine Syme**

*Notes on Gesture*, 2015  
Digital video, color, sound;  
10:30 min.  
Courtesy the artist, Video  
Data Bank ([www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org)),  
and School of the Art Institute  
of Chicago, with Bridget  
Donahue

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