Productions and Events

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Shadows, Acts, and Radical Presence

Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art
Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2012);
Grey Art Gallery, NYU, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2013)

A mix of dried blood, saliva, perspiration, and inspiration paint a corner wall at the Studio Museum in Harlem—traces of a body in pain. In November 2013 artist Tameka Norris, decked in a deep red jumpsuit complemented by matching bangles and a coifed Afro, stood barefoot solemnly gazing at an awaiting crowd with a knife gripped between her lips. Exercising her teeth and tongue, Norris forcefully bit down on the metal object, at once evincing strength and anguish and producing blood and tears. The artist then proceeded to turn to the museum's strikingly bare corner wall and to color it methodically using only her body and the fluids it produced. As she dotted the wall with blood and spit markings, Norris threw into crisis the category of "action painting"—a fitting result, given that the performance emerged in part as a response to a graduate school professor's charge that she did not paint[1]—while testing her abilities to embody pain and interpellating spectators as witnesses to it.

Norris's *Untitled* (2012), which cites the traditions of body and endurance art, unfolds in the key of disobedience. A troubling vision first presented at the official opening of the exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) and activated anew at the Studio Museum's always buzzing building on 125th Street, this work brings into relief the potency of the black body in performance. Indeed, placed in conversation with the work of the other artists exhibited in *Radical Presence* who each make the body—its possibilities and its limitations—a primary element in their practices, Norris's performance and its trace also illuminate the importance of black visual artists and performance practitioners to modern and contemporary art.

The history of art, like all histories, is full of gaps, blanks, absences, and erasures. Art practices that refuse reproduction and circulation—and, correspondingly, impede absorption into the art market—are especially vulnerable to acts of willful forgetting. This is particularly true of practices that take up the body and collapse distinctions between artist and artwork, subject and object, notably, performance art practices. Indeed, the potential of performance to destabilize what art historian Amelia Jones describes as "the structures of interpretation in art history and criticism" marks it as an easy target for silencing and obscuring.[2]

Of course, often aiding and abetting in the relegation of performance art practices to the blank spaces of art history—and, to be sure, into the shadows of curatorial and museological practices—is their emphasis on liveness and ephemerality. To echo Peggy Phelan's now axiomatic proposition, what gives performance its charge is that its only life is in the present; performance, in other words, unfolds over a time that will never be repeated.[3] It is this quality, Phelan argues, that makes performance "the runt of the litter" of contemporary art. Indeed, she writes, "performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital."[4] Undoubtedly, this proverbial clog has created many challenges for artists and curators (spectators too), forcing each to think imaginatively about ways to communicate the effects of a performance long after its disappearance. As such, the longevity promised by media such as photography and video has proven seductive, especially in light of the privileging of material objects within art history and art world economies. Many artists have turned to these media to document their performances and to capitalize on the purchase of their materiality; some artists have even developed work with the explicit intent of performing its unfolding solely for the camera.

Tameka Norris's *Untitled* at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2012.
Photo: Max Fields

Black visual artists interested in activating the body in performance have contended not only with biases against embodied practice but also with structural and institutional racism. Museums and galleries are not neutral institutions. They are ideological spaces and, as such, remain prone to casting the work of black art practitioners as illegible or illegitimate to sanction—often unconsciously—investments in the project of white supremacy. As Bridget R. Cooks writes:

> Maintained by veiled rhetoric of objectivity and debates about quality, the tradition of racial exclusivity in mainstream art museums is based on a hierarchy of humanity and aesthetics in the discipline of art history traceable to one of its founders, Johann Winckelmann. . . . Winckelmann believed that aesthetics are dependent upon a natural hierarchy of race. . . . This racial bias has been a guiding principle for the basis of selecting, collecting, and exhibiting artwork in America's most renowned art museums.[5]

To be sure, the disrupting and destabilizing potential of many black aesthetic practices, coupled with their capacity to engender crises of meaning and value, has resulted in their invisibility in many arenas of the mainstream art world. If, as Nicole Fleetwood suggests, the visible black body profoundly troubles the dominant visual field, then its absence from arts institutions and critical and historical discourse surrounding black visual artists who deploy the radical presence of the black body in their work is not wholly surprising.[6]

Impressively and thoughtfully curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, a leading authority on African American art and artists and senior curator at CAMH, *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* pulls many of those artists and their embodied practices out of the shadows and casts a resplendent spotlight on their innovations. What marks *Radical Presence* as exceptional is its scope. While recent shows such as *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* (2011), curated by Kellie Jones, and *Clifford Owens: Anthology* (2011), organized by Christopher Y. Lew, gestured toward the deep engagements of black visual artists with performance art practices, *Radical Presence* provides the first comprehensive survey of performance art by black creators. The live performances and art objects featured here—video recordings, photographs, costumes, scores, sculptures, installations, among other traces of the live—span more than fifty years, from 1960 through 2012. Moreover, the thirty-eight artists exhibited claim diverse places of origin in the United States and the Caribbean.

According to Oliver, research into the career of Benjamin Patterson, the musician, visual artist, and foundational figure in the Fluxus movement, planted the seeds for *Radical Presence*. She writes:

> Patterson, who is African American and until his recent retrospective was woefully under-recognized, had become a touchstone for questioning the visibility of foundational figures within the canon of performance art. For me, finding the historical precedents—the bridges that connected one generation to another—was and continues to be an imperative. This is all the more significant for visual artists of color, who often do not see themselves reflected in the books that they read or in the curricula created around such innovative practices as performance art.[7]

Deploying what Cooks cites as the "corrective narrative" approach—one of the two primary guiding methodologies through which, Cooks argues, African American art is often curated in American art museums (the other is the "anthropological approach")—Oliver set out to re-present the invisibilized work of black visual artists like Patterson, who make central both the body and action in their practices.[8] Powerfully, she found great supporters in her colleagues at CAMH, as well as in Lynn Gumpert, Thelma Golden, and Olga Viso, the respective directors of the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, who ensured that the exhibition would be made accessible to a range of communities across the United States.

It is fitting that work so deeply inflected with a radical edge would require a diverse community of interlocutors to imagine ways to bring these intergenerational conversations to various publics. In New York City, where I viewed *Radical Presence*, the Grey Art Gallery and the Studio Museum collaborated to present the exhibition in two parts. This arrangement required viewers to move between the vital artistic hubs of Greenwich Village and Harlem to appreciate and participate fully in the breadth and depth of the exhibition. Perhaps this decision was driven primarily by a need to pool and efficiently utilize both institutions' limited resources—human, financial, and otherwise. Still, the travel between the gallery and the museum—and the many affective experiences and intersubjective encounters with live, performing bodies along the way—helped to underscore a point essential to the exhibition's recuperative work: for many of the featured artists, attending to the black body in performance often necessitated a move away from traditional institutional spaces—into the streets or to other unconventional sites.

Dread Scott's *I Am Not a Man*, Harlem, New York, 2009.
Photo: Jenny Polak

For example, the September 2009 street performance of Dread Scott,[9] *I Am Not a Man*, which is represented in *Radical Presence* by several performance stills and an object critical to the performance's unfolding, witnessed the artist maneuvering the streets of Harlem on foot. Dressed in baggy black slacks, sensible shoes, a white but-

ton down shirt, black tie, tan jacket, fedora, and spectacles, Scott undertook various actions meant to conjure the experiences of humiliation and degradation that often mark contemporary black life. The large white sign with bold black lettering reading "I AM *NOT* A MAN" that Scott carried around his neck endowed his actions with additional force. The sign recalled and inverted the now iconic slogan "I Am a Man" from the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike, a history that fellow artist Glenn Ligon would later commemorate in his 1988 painting *Untitled (I Am a Man)*. Scott's performance, in part, intended to rejoin the pervasive postracial rhetoric that emerged in the wake of the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Critically, it extended a long tradition of artists activating the body as a way to address and, in some instances, redress social, cultural, and political inequities and inequalities.

Papo Colo's *Superman 51*, West Side Highway, New York, 1977. Photo: Courtesy of the artist

President Gerald Ford's 1976 rejection of a statehood proposal for his birthplace was the galvanizing prompt for the Puerto Rican–born artist Papo Colo. In *Superman 51* (1977), documented and presented here on video, Colo raced down New York City's West Side Highway with fifty-one pieces of wood attached to his body, each bearing the name of a state or Puerto Rico. This endurance-based performance saw Colo run to the point of exhaustion. Describing the event as a "political exorcism," Colo leveraged his body as a way to register protest against the actions of the state. Remarkably, in identifying bridges between black performance artists, *Radical Presence* also reveals reverberations between practices of earlier generations, including the likes of Colo and Pope.L—who, in his various "crawl" pieces and his *Eating the Wall Street Journal* (2000), displays the body as a site of both possibility and impossibility—and their contemporary counterparts, such as Norris, for whom "endurance" similarly became a key term.

In his 2011 performance, *Communicating with Shadows: I Crush a Lot*, multidisciplinary artist Derrick Adams attempted to rework some of these reverberations as material. Adams—whose exquisite large-scale sculpture *We><Here* (2013) nearly upstaged *The Shadows Took Shape*,[10] the exhibition running concurrent with *Radical Presence* at

David Hammons's *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, Cooper Square, New York, 1983. Photo: Courtesy Dawoud Bey and Jack Tilton Gallery

the Studio Museum—took images from archival footage documenting seminal performances by artists including David Hammons and Adrian Piper and cast them in large silhouettes against a white backdrop in the series of five short performances. He then endeavored to channel the intention of the original works through performative actions: walking on paper cutouts of footprints while carrying a boom box and improvising various gestures, for example, as a way to reactivate and remix Piper's *Funk Lessons* (1982–84). In addition to calling attention to the impact of these influential artists on Adams's practice, *Communicating with Shadows* opened space to consider new ways of understanding and interpreting their original works. The digital prints capturing Adams's performances and displayed in *Radical Presence* stood out as the exhibitions' most evocative and compelling documents.

As in Adams's performance, Hammons's and Piper's shadows loom large in *Radical Presence*, though for quite different reasons. Often cited as one of the most significant innovators of Conceptual art practices, the iconoclastic Hammons's 1983 street performance *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* encapsulates most profoundly both the artist's and the exhibition's commitments to marshaling the force of the ephemeral. Hammons, standing before rows of neatly shaped and placed balls of snow in New York's Cooper Square, attempted to peddle the dematerializing objects to the public in the performance—a biting commentary on the insidiousness of capitalism, its collusions with white supremacy, and its grips on the high art world. When juxtaposed with the work of Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, and Ulysses Jenkins, Hammons's body print *Spade (Power to the Spade)* (1969)—another of the artist's works exhibited in *Radical Presence*—indexes Southern California (often overlooked in histories of performance art) as a rich site for the emergence and evolution of black performance.

Piper's performance and conceptual art practices are often celebrated as pioneering, much like Hammons's. In 1973, while an undergraduate student at the City College of New York, and later as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard, Piper, sporting an Afro wig, moustache, and sunglasses, began performing the *Mythic Being*, a male persona who carried out "street" and "life" actions in various locations. These actions

surfaced and interrogated the politics and performativity of identity. Footage from Australian artist Peter Kennedy's film *Other Than Art's Sake* (1973–74), documenting Piper's *Mythic Being* performances, had originally been included in *Radical Presence*. However, Piper requested its removal in late October 2013, writing to the curators:

> I appreciate your intentions. Perhaps a more effective way to "celebrate [me], [my] work and [my] contributions to not only the art world at large, but also a generation of black artists working in performance," might be to curate multi-ethnic exhibitions that give American audiences the rare opportunity to measure directly the groundbreaking achievements of African American artists against those of their peers in "the art world at large."[11]

As if on cue, the performance artist was once again performing: Adrian Piper qua Adrian Piper.

Piper's proposition provided an auspicious occasion for Oliver to reassert her organizing logic for *Radical Presence* and to reaffirm the exhibition's momentousness, which she did by referencing the preface to the stunning catalog that accompanies the exhibition. "This exhibition is an examination of those black artists who have dared to defy the 'shadow.' Their insistence on being afforded the liberty of being has challenged both 'the establishment' and at times their own communities since some works actually interrogate precepts of normality, historical icons, and history itself," Oliver writes.[12]

Undoubtedly, the daring impulses and insistences of each artist featured in the exhibition resonate powerfully and attest to the resistive edge of the black body in performance. But a pertinent criticism of *Radical Presence* is that, despite a robust program of live performances and events, it still could not escape fetishizing the art object. Perhaps it is impossible for any formal art exhibition, including one dedicated to celebrating embodied practices, to elude this fetishizing impulse. Nevertheless, the decisions to leave unaddressed the vigorous, evolving debates about the relationship between live performance and its documentation and to overly rely on the latter to inspire, as Phelan writes, "a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present" invites greater scrutiny.[13] I was particularly struck by how static the exhibition felt at times while moving through it: without live bodies present to activate them, many of the objects in the exhibition registered as two-dimensional or flat. The drum sculpture replete with wooden hangers and a graphic of blues woman Bessie Smith's eye representing Terry Adkins's *Matinee* (2007–13)—a homage to Smith, her music, and her sartorial elegance—was a prime example. Even still, the contributions of *Radical Presence* to expanding and enriching the history and perception of art are incalculable and unmistakable. To be sure, in and out of the shadows, the exhibition makes clear, the black body—a radical presence—always and already prompts and provokes.

Notes

1. See Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Putting the Black Body on the Line: Endurance in Black Performance," in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art Catalogue* (Houston, TX: Contemporary Art Museum Houston, 2013).
2. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 9.
3. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1992), 146.
4. Ibid., 148.
5. Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 8.
6. See Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
7. Printed in the acknowledgments for *Radical Presence*.
8. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 1.
9. Scott is also sometimes referred to as "Dread" Scott Tyler.
10. Organized by Naima J. Keith, assistant curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and Zoe Whitley, independent curator, *The Shadows Took Shape* exhibited twenty-nine artists who variously employ Afrofuturist aesthetics in their work.
11. Piper's note was appended to the monitor that had previously displayed footage of her *Mythic Being* performances in the Grey Art Gallery at New York University.
12. Oliver, "Preface," in *Radical Presence*, 10.
13. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

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