



## Review

# Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art

By Brian Karl July 7, 2015

*Radical Presence*, a survey of African American performance art curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, has come to San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> The featured works are all distillations and/or documents of performances that have ended up in, or have been adapted for, a gallery setting; an exceptionally robust program of related live performances runs concurrently. The earliest work is *Pond* (1962) by Fluxus cofounder Benjamin Patterson.<sup>2</sup> The most recent pieces date from 2015, several of them created or re-created for Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' iteration of the show.

The exhibition presents a substantial and striking set of takes on race in both the art world and society more generally. These are serious matters. That said, many of the artists adopt playful, even lighthearted approaches, often forcing visitor engagement through destabilizing strategies. "Playfulness" thus becomes a tactic akin to that of the tricksters and shamans who perform criticality in so many cultures—either in intense moments of crisis or in a more ongoing fashion. It is also similar to how masters of Zen and jujitsu trip up potentially worthy students as wake-up calls or as lessons to combat placid acceptance of the status quo.

Teaching and learning are threads running in and around much of the work. Lucid examples include *Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum* (1981), Lorraine O'Grady's photographic series documenting performances that point to the awkward realities of what is socially valued. O'Grady's *Art is...* (1983), also included, captures a self-initiated parade through city streets where she literally held a picture frame up to "ordinary" found individuals and events.

The majority of the projects, and the lessons they impart, are far from conservative in their methodologies, but rather involve various degrees of acting out. These are small but deliberately provocative affairs: bodies engaged in intimate, agonistic dramas and comic maneuvers, or making a spectacle of themselves and others through behaviors that would ordinarily seem absurd. Effective examples include an untitled performance (originally 2012, now 2015) in which Tameka Norris applied blood to a wall directly from her self-cut tongue. Beyond the witnessed, documented, or imagined image of her body's abject form awkwardly addressing the drawing surface, her expression of pain speaks to the limited tools that might be (un)available

beyond her body, either technologically (no fancy sable brush for her) or in terms of a larger culture whose value system structures restrictions and expectations, from the rigidities of education to the canons of fine art.

Another highlight is Senga Nengudi's semi-biomorphic sculptural forms made of sand and pantyhose titled *R.S.V.P.* (1975–77) and the photographic documentation of her *Performance Piece* (1978), which shows the choreographer-artist restrained by taut, stretched nylon. Both works point to issues of gender, given the contorted female forms of the artist and the other performers, and of course the iconic female-body-constraining product of modern industrial society. The residue of Nengudi's original performative actions (photographs and static sculptures) resonates particularly strongly with the original performances, and offers vitally physical testimony to the motivating force behind her ideas.

The “leftovers” (plywood, newspaper, a toilet seat, and other miscellaneous items) from Pope.L's 2015 reenactment of *Eating the Wall Street Journal* (2000) also go far in representing the work's concepts. So too does a video of the original two-hour performance, in which Pope.L, clad only in a white jockstrap and sitting on a toilet, consumed—or attempted to—the iconic newspaper of (a predominantly white) business and finance culture. All the sounds and smells and *sense* are obviously much more palpable in the live performance, where condiments such as ketchup are the prelude and part of the aftermath of chewing and spitting up. But the messiness certainly also remains in the litter that is present in the installation.

The urgent need to collect and re-present this work—not in a static archive but in a living arena—stems from the continuing conditions of marginalization, oppression, and worse that black people have suffered over so many generations, from the Middle Passage to the present moment. The examples of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray, not to mention the racially motivated mass attack recently perpetrated at Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, make this clear. That black lives are vulnerable in so many ways is demonstrated as well in the exhibition's inclusion of Dave McKenzie's video *Edward and Me* (2000), an idiosyncratic DIY reenactment of the film *Fight Club* in which the protagonist appears to be endlessly beaten up by some unseen force.

One additional underlying theme, which Cassel Oliver points to explicitly in her catalog essay “Putting the Body on the Line: Endurance in Black Performance,” is the ongoing political and social necessity of *endurance*. She makes specific mention of enduring “political disenfranchisement” (quoting Pope.L). This is physically enacted in many of the performances, in which real (black) bodies are put to absurd, even extreme, purpose or abuse. Yet beyond abjection, endurance can lead to deflection and confrontation, even hope. Jacolby Satterwhite's videos *Reifying Desire 2* (2011), *Reifying Desire 3* (2012), and *Reifying Desire 6* (2014) feature stunning blends of shape-shifting bodies, thumping music, and digitally rendered backgrounds. Despite the many effects, the artist's body really *is* present and—as Cassel Oliver's title puts it—*on the line*.

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*Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* is on view at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, in San Francisco, through October 11, 2015.

## Notes

1. The show originated at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 2012, then traveled to the Studio Museum in Harlem and Grey Art Gallery in New York, and then came to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Each iteration has varied somewhat in the featured works and their configuration.
2. Cassel Oliver mentioned *Pond* in a public conversation with the artist Carrie Mae Weems held at the opening. She called it “triggering” for her project, recalling how she once noted Patterson’s as the one black face in a photo of a group of Fluxus artists.

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