

RADICAL PRESENCE / THE SHADOWS TOOK SHAPE

Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston
 Houston, Texas
 November 17, 2012–February 16, 2013

New York University
 Grey Art Gallery
 New York City (Part I)
 September 10–December 7, 2013

The Studio Museum in Harlem
 New York City (Part II)
 November 14, 2013–March 9, 2014

The Shadows Took Shape

The Studio Museum in Harlem
 New York City
 November 14, 2013–March 9, 2014

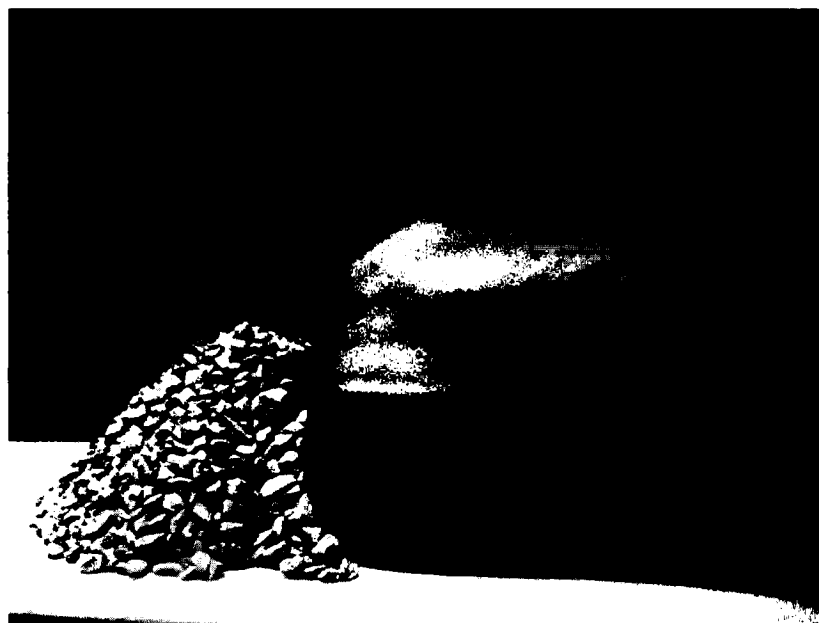
In *Pretending to Be Rock* (1993), an 11-minute video documentation of a two-hour performance action, artist Sherman Fleming, partially nude, is positioned on his hands and knees below a makeshift candelabrum. A pool of hot wax accumulates on Fleming's back, and an unnamed female collaborator in a brown unitard and harness hangs from the ceiling as water steadily runs over her from head to toe. Here, Fleming's back becomes a site of trauma, and the scene a channeled expression of the horrors of chattel slavery. But just as Fleming's black male body registers the scarring and wounding effects of bondage, it also bears the weight of the wax and, more importantly, representation—that is, expectations of blackness and masculinity. As the camera pans, audience members look on in awe, recalling the spectacles—arranged and spontaneous—that served as the subjects of lynching photography.

Fleming's performance activates tensions between the black body and the American imaginary, and sets the tone for *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, a group exhibition curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver that originated at

the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 2012. As the first comprehensive survey of performance art by black artists, *Radical Presence* chronicles work by thirty-six artists from the 1960s to the present. Presented in two parts, Part I was on view at NYU's Grey Art Gallery in fall 2013 and Part II is on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem to March 2014.

As Fleming's *Pretending* suggests, the black body as political tool and social signifier, exercises in endurance, and the place of documentation within performance art practice all figure prominently in the exhibition. *Radical Presence* asks, "What is 'black' about black performance art?" while also calling into question if and how one *performs* blackness. As Cassel Oliver notes in her exhibition catalog essay, "black visual artists have embraced expectations of blackness and performance to make something that plays on the existential nature of a historical spectacle [of chattel slavery]." But rather than reinforcing a reductive link between black cultural production and protest—black political speech as primarily didactic, for example—the works in *Radical Presence* break open easy elisions that seek to forestall the expressive qualities of black visual work.

Along with *Pretending*, both Papo Colo's *Superman 51* (1977) and Shaun El C. Leonardo's *El Conquistador vs. The Invisible Man* (2004–07) interrogate how the black male body manifests within United States and diasporic contexts. In *Superman 51*, Colo, a contemporary of David Hammons, Pope.L, and Lorraine O'Grady (to name just a few who are also featured in *Radical Presence*), drags fifty-one wooden sticks inscribed with the names



of each US state with the addition of Puerto Rico (Colo's birthplace) behind him as he runs down a deserted West Side Highway in Manhattan. The action, performed several times in response to the rejection of Gerald Ford's 1976 proposal to grant statehood to Puerto Rico, not only reveals how US nationhood

Above
 Still from *My dreams, my work must wait till after hell . . .* (2011) by Girl
 (Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh); courtesy the artists



is constructed but also who and what comprises the US (black) body politic.

Similarly, *El Conquistador vs. The Invisible Man*, performed thirty years after *Superman 51*, shows Leonardo, who is of Dominican and Guatemalan heritage, repeatedly battling the metaphor of Du Boisian double consciousness; his fictional foe is at once present and absent, visible yet invisible. What's more, Leonardo stages his wrestling match through yet another spectacular arena in which racialization occurs: sports. And according to Cassel Oliver, Leonardo's attempts to conquer his unseen opponent echo "the atrocities of the Dominican Republic's version of *limpieza de sangre* (literally, cleanliness of blood) in its efforts to erase and eradicate vestiges of blackness among its own people."² Together, Colo and Leonardo represent generational approaches to blackness and maleness through a critique of what constitutes "the nation." Other participating artists such as Coco Fusco, *Girl* (Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh), Kalup Linzy, Dave McKenzie, Jayson Musson, and Jacolby Satterwhite tackle topics that vary from black female subjectivity and queer sexualities to soap operas, cult films, and "the art world" through video, photography, 3-D animation, YouTube, and live performance.

Radical Presence is a traveling exhibition, and one incident in particular highlights the site-specificity of its New York run. Peter Kennedy's film *Adrian Piper: Becoming the Mythic Being* (8 min), included in Part I, documents Piper's transformation

into the Mythic Being, a character the artist created in 1973 to introduce issues of race, gender, and explicit political commentary into a discourse of conceptual and minimalist art in the US. Halfway through Part I, Piper requested that the piece be removed, claiming that the exhibition's focus on black performance art was narrow and reductive. In response, Cassel Oliver stated, "stigmas about blackness remain not only in the public's consciousness, but also in the consciousness of artists themselves."³ This exchange was posted in the exhibition space on the now-empty video monitor and exposes the shadows of marginalization that artists in *Radical Presence* attempt to defy but perhaps do not quite escape. Part II of *Radical Presence* coincides with *The Shadows Took Shape* concurrently on view at the Studio Museum, and Piper and Cassel Oliver's exchange emphasizes a critical relation between the two exhibitions—how each frames blackness to both liberatory and limiting effects.

Where *Radical Presence* recognizes black artists within a white-centered canon of performance art, *The Shadows Took Shape* stems from a specifically black cultural movement: Afrofuturism. Coined in 1994, Afrofuturism describes how black practitioners—from Sun Ra to Wangechi Mutu (both of whom are represented in the exhibition)—use science fiction, fantasy, and technology as a way to imagine and reimagine lost pasts and new futures for alienated "others." As such, deep space and deep water serve as thematic source material for works in the exhibition. Cristina De Middel's 2012 photographic series *The Afonauts* revisits Zambia's 1964 space program, an underfunded

Above

Still from *Pumzi* (2009) by Wanuri Kahiu; courtesy Focus Features' Africa First short film program



what types of sounds the performers were allowed to make, resulting in a mechanical chorus of “ribbits.” And a reactivation of Senga Nengudi’s *RSVP* (1975–77/2013) featured long-time collaborator Maren Hassinger, with Regina Rocke and Marya Wethers, who pulled, twisted, and dropped brown, sand-filled nylon stockings into new arrangements. At one point, each performer donned a cut-off nylon garment with sand-filled appendages and incorporated audience members into the performance-based sculpture by climbing over and among them.

As for *The Shadows Took Shape*, the show’s salon-style display at once references a history of avant-gardism and populist aesthetics. But the cluttered and claustrophobic effect also might disservice the works themselves. And

aside from Ellen Gallagher and Edgar Clejine’s *Nothing Is . . .* (2013), a 16mm film comprised of text and subtle moving images that is threaded through a hand-made harp tuned to the key of Ra and projected on a gallery wall, the exhibition obscures artists’ engagements with technological obsolescence and innovation—central tenets of Afrofuturism. Nonetheless, both exhibitions represent formidable interventions: generational arcs that expand notions of contemporary art and critical examinations of twenty-first century iterations of blackness within current art historical discourse.

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NOTES 1. Valerie Cassel Oliver, “Putting the Body on the Line: Endurance in Black Performance,” *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2013), 14, 2. *Ibid.*, 17; emphasis and parenthesis in original. 3. Valerie Cassel Oliver, in a note dated October 24, 2013 and taped to the monitor that formerly displayed Kennedy’s film.

yet optimistic venture that De Middel imagines as an exercise in self-determination for an emergent nation-state. The Otolith Group’s short film *Hydra Decapita* (2010) and Edgar Arceneaux’s site-specific installation, *Mythology of the Slave Ship Zong* (part of the 2013 series *Slave Ship Zong*) are both inspired by Drexciya, an electro duo whose name refers to a mythic subcontinent of mutant descendants of drowned slaves. In Wanuri Kahiu’s *Pumzi* (2009), the film’s heroine risks everything to cultivate life within a climate of water scarcity in East Africa, though the post-apocalyptic narrative could conceivably take place anywhere.

Though Afrofuturism foregrounds blackness, *The Shadows Took Shape* includes work by William Cordova (whose collaborative rendering of the Millennium Falcon comprises woods from Brazil, Hawaii, the Philippines, and elsewhere), Khaled Hafez, Hew Locke, Mehreen Murtaza, Larissa Sansour, and Saya Woolfalk, among others. Thus, *The Shadows Took Shape* not only troubles a relation between racial identity and artistic sensibility, but moves beyond racial specificity and national borders. With a curatorial vision that considers Afrofuturism both as a global phenomenon and as an aesthetic mode, the Studio Museum pushes the parameters of its own race-specific institutional mission.

Despite their contributions, *Radical Presence* and *The Shadows Took Shape* are not without their problems. Documentation in *Radical Presence*—from ephemera to props, scripts, videos, and a Tumblr site that features primary documents from New York University’s Fales Library and Special Collections—brings the role of mediation into view. In some ways, though, the richness of the performance documentation detracts from the artworks’ originality.

Those looking for an auratic experience or a new spin on now-canonical artworks would not have been disappointed by the series of live performances, several of which were co-presented as part of Performa 13 under the title *Three Duets, Seven Variations*. For instance, Benjamin Patterson, whose Fluxus practice serves as organizational fodder for *Radical Presence*, restaged one of his earliest event scores, *Pond* (1962). With Patterson acting as conductor, eight performers positioned around a grid set loose mechanical wind-up frogs in labeled columns meant to designate



Above
Triptych (2009/2013) by Mehreen Murtaza; courtesy the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai