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Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art

Exh. cat. Houston: [Contemporary Art Museum Houston](#), 2013. 144 pp.; 50 color ill.; 40 b/w ill. Cloth \$39.95 (9781933619385)

Exhibition schedule: [Contemporary Arts Museum Houston](#), Houston, November 17, 2012–February 16, 2013; [Grey Art Gallery](#), New York University, New York, September 10–December 7, 2013; [Studio Museum in Harlem](#), New York, November 14, 2013–March 9, 2014; [Walker Art Center](#), Minneapolis, July 24, 2014–January 4, 2015



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Girl (Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh). *My dreams, my works must wait till after hell . . .* (2011). Digital video. 7:14 minutes. Courtesy the artists.

Curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver and presented by Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* opened at Minneapolis's Walker Art Center in a festival-like manner and included two densely installed museum galleries and a plethora of performances presented in the sculpture garden. At the Walker, *Radical Presence* featured thirty-six artists—one less than the original showing in Houston due to conceptual artist Adrian Piper's public and controversial self-removal from the exhibition. Predominantly hashed out during the New York leg of the exhibition's tour, not much beyond posting the *ARTnews* article on the subject was made of the missing Piper in the Twin Cities venue.

From Jamal Cyrus's frying of a tenor saxophone on the field's patio and the unexpectedly posthumous performance of Terry Adkins's *Last Trumpet* (1995) to Trenton Doyle Hancock's meditative Mound (*Devotion*, 2013) in the Walker's Cargill Lounge and Coco Fusco's lecture/performance *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* (2013–present) in the guise of Dr. Zira, the chimpanzee psychologist who studies humans in the original *Planet of the Apes* film (1968), in the Walker Cinema, live performances spanned the duration of the exhibition and the space of the institution. Benjamin Patterson reengaged his 1962 *Pond* in the gallery where its remnants, proxies, and didactic explanation were installed. Theaster Gates's *See, Sit, Sup, Sing: Holding Court* (2012) was centrally located in the exhibition and fully utilized by the Walker throughout, bringing a variety of guests to the table to hold court, including high school students, choreographers, and Minneapolis U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, who is African American and a Muslim.

The exhibition's introductory text stated the project's goals and ambitions, which were wide-ranging and somewhat fraught (or charged) with loose ends. Noting elsewhere that she was surprised and dismayed that no full history of the subject had yet been presented, Cassel Oliver identified the endeavor as a survey of the subject of black performance in the field of visual art over

the last half century. The text was careful to assert that the work separates itself from the more abundant and popular forms of black performance such as minstrelsy, pop music, and improvisational dance, while often referencing them. The heart of the exhibition's introductory text, however, speaks to the common strains that bind the broad, intergenerational swath of artists on view:

Although the artists span three different generations, they share a number of approaches. Many make durational works that unfold over several hours or even days. Some employ everyday, transitory materials such as newspapers, food, snow, and bodily fluids. Others intervene into public spaces, from the street to the Internet, to spark interactions between viewer and performer that may range from confrontational to humorous, politically motivated to mystical. Some of the artists have collaborated with one another; others make direct reference to the work of earlier generations. Seen together, the works enable us to trace lines of influence.

Since the approaches mentioned here are the same as those of the most enduring and challenging performance art of the last half century, this statement does not single out or sequester the uniqueness of the black artists' contribution to that history, but instead places the heretofore generally missing (from art history, that is) figure of the black artist squarely in the game. Cassel Oliver does not shut down the notion that there may in fact be a distinct black voice to be heard and mined, but she does not carefully define or analyze it, leaving her first shot across the bow one of unearthing what she shows to have been a burial of the living.

The exhibition's organizing thesis that art criticism and art history unfairly passed over a particular group of individuals based on skin color and cultural affiliation looks much like the early feminist strategy of showcasing the achievements of women artists seemingly lost to history. It was this exhibition strategy that ultimately precipitated Piper's rejection of the project. In her letter requesting removal she suggested that a better strategy would have been a "multi-ethnic exhibition" that would provide the "rare opportunity to measure directly the groundbreaking achievements of African American artists against those of their peers in 'the art world at large'" (Robin Cembalest, "Adrian Piper Pulls Out of Black Performance-Art Show, *ARTnews* [October 25, 2013]: <http://www.artnews.com/2013/10/25/piper-pulls-out-of-black-performance-art-show/>). To this Cassel Oliver responded, in part: "It is my sincere hope that exhibitions such as *Radical Presence* can one day prove a conceptual game-changer" (ibid.). It is my contention that *Radical Presence* may indeed, in the end, be a game changer, though perhaps not exactly in the manners intended.

The "radical" in *Radical Presence* would seem to refer to both blackness and performance. As such, the viewer is presented with an assertive dose of corrective in the form of re-presenting the black artist within the history of performance art and also a critical strategy for the presentation of performance in the museum setting—a topic Cassel Oliver herself addresses in the exhibition's introductory wall text. The text posits, "both the live events and the art objects call attention to the possibilities and limitations of the active body, and the installations reflect some of the myriad ways in which museums have exhibited this ephemeral medium." While not calling for a new presentation strategy per se, this mention at the very least makes material the issue of the possibilities and limitations of the museum corpus for the presentation of performance art, a topic one hopes will be pondered more by curators now and going forward. Seriously addressing this question, even if seemingly an internal professional discourse, could precipitate an important "game changer" in the presentation of performance.

In her noted text *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), Michelle M. Wright posits that the modern idea of blackness as a separate consciousness was invented in nineteenth-century Enlightenment discourse. That discourse constructed a unity out of the diverse field that makes up the African diaspora and construed it as absolute other to white Western identity as understood by that culture. Significantly, the writers of this discourse were Western white men—key of which for Wright are Thomas Jefferson, G. W. F. Hegel, and Count Arthur de Gobineau. Wright asserts that there is a lineage of black voices that offered a true counter discourse to white Enlightenment versions of black consciousness, including thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Frantz Fanon who assertively critiqued the dominant discourse's construction of black identity while concurrently assuming a place at its tables. While acknowledging the power and value of this black counter discourse, Wright argues that it ultimately, in keeping with the culture to which it sought entrance, defined the center of black consciousness as male and nationalist.

Wright's model can illuminate much of the work by men in *Radical Presence*. With its spectacular offensiveness, Pope.L's ingestion and regurgitation of the *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, is an example par excellence of such coopting and critiquing of the dominant discourse. Literally eating the master's words and then spewing them back at him (in the metaphorical form of the average museumgoer) is shocking in its visceralness and dark humor. Although not noted, one thinks of Piero Manzoni

canning his own waste or John Latham eating and spitting out Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture*. Yet these cases seem tidy compared to the raucous and raunchy action performed by Pope.L—even the traces left behind in the gallery reek of it—if not literally, certainly metaphorically. Jayson Musson also digests and spits back current art theory through his invented persona, Hennessy Youngman. The persona's name references the comic, Henny Youngman, along with hip-hop culture's liquor of choice: cognac.

This, in turn, prompts the question: why are there so few women in *Radical Presence*? Even with Piper included, the ratio is 3:1, 27 men to 9 women. Is this reflective of the actual field? If so, how should we approach that history? Is this meant to announce a real lack of presence? If so, what strategy is offered for that factual void? If not, then why is there such a paltry tally? Across the field of female participants, there is a play with uncertainty and an uneasiness around the issue of identity, articulated through both savvy humor—think Fusco as Dr. Zira, the post-human ape human researcher, and Lorraine O'Grady's museum- and gallery-crashing *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* (1980–83)—and more serious reflections such as Fusco's mock documentaries *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* (2004) and *Sightings* (2004), which hinge on real-life mistaken identity cases, and Maren Hassinger's *Women's Work* (2006). Possibly one of the most perplexing and compelling works in the exhibition, *Girl's My dreams, my works must wait till after hell . . .* (2011), offers a quiet, slow video in which very little happens over the course of seven minutes. The larger-than-life-size projection is a straight and fixed anterior shot of a woman's bare torso with her head buried in rocks. Throughout, the woman's chest, seen from behind, rises and falls with a steady, consistent breath. The image of the buried head is at once startling and provocative. A reference to a classic black trope, according to Wright—the mask/veil? Or maybe this is an image of someone buried alive.

Produced by a pair of collaborating artists, Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh, neither of whom is predominantly a performance artist, this newer work's presence in the show—a self-proclaimed survey of the field—raises a number of important questions. These include what constitutes a contemporary survey, what are the parameters of performance art, and what in the end can the viewer make of the question of black performance art? While such overarching concerns lurk, the very fact that they have been posed by *Radical Presence* can be seen as a triumph. Now that this groundwork has been laid, one hopes there will be more curatorial and scholarly work on the exhibition's subject resulting in game-changing ideas that might satisfy Cassel Oliver, Piper, and so many more.

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