



# musical

NEW VIDEO ART & SONIC STRATEGIES

# thinking

Saisha Grayson



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The Smithsonian American Art Museum is home to one of the largest collections of American art in the world. Its holdings—more than 43,000 works—tell the story of the United States through the visual arts and represent the most inclusive collection of American art of any museum today.

It is the nation's first federal art collection, predating the 1846 founding of the Smithsonian Institution. The Museum celebrates the exceptional creativity of the nation's artists, whose insights into history, society, and the individual reveal the essence of the American experience.

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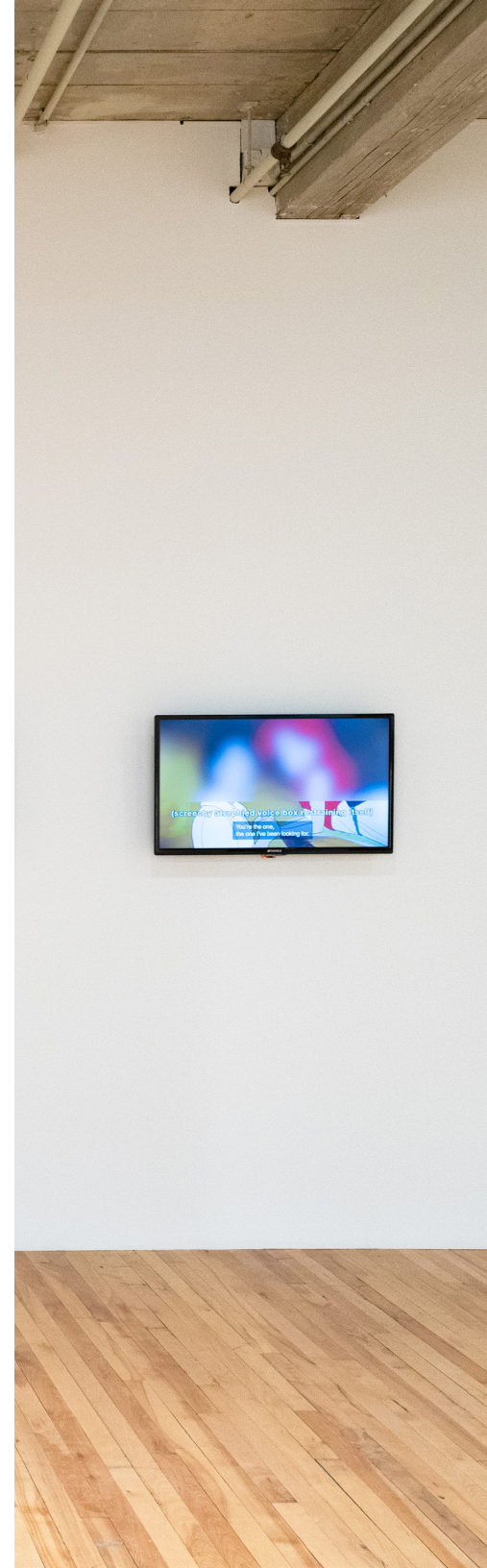
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Smithsonian  
*American Women's History Museum*



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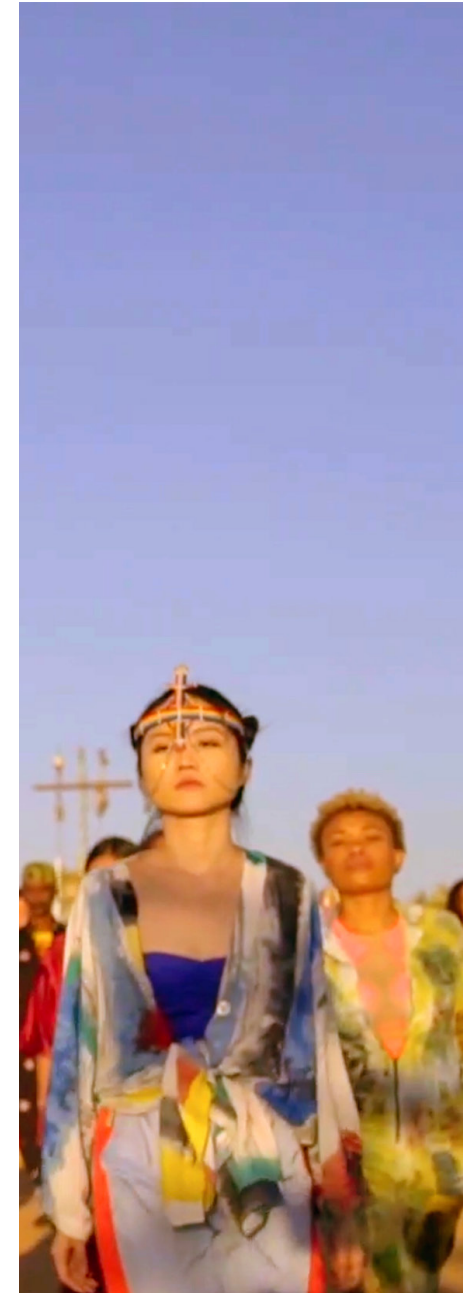
# Director's Foreword



**MUSICAL THINKING: NEW VIDEO ART AND SONIC STRATEGIES** feels particularly celebratory for the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM). With the exhibition's opening in the summer of 2023 after years of social distancing and having our third-floor modern and contemporary art galleries closed for renovation, we are excited to welcome all to this uniquely immersive exhibition. We encourage visitors to reconvene around art, share space, and move—and be moved—together. As a collection-based show highlighting new acquisitions, *Musical Thinking* also celebrates the powerful visions—and soundtracks—of a new generation of artists who bring musical strategies, insights, and references to their video productions and intermedia practices. Award-winning artists, filmmakers, choreographers, and composers ADÁL, Raven Chacon, Mariam Ghani, Martine

Gutierrez, Arthur Jafa, Erin Ellen Kelly, Christine Sun Kim, Liz Magic Laser, Simone Leigh, and Cauleen Smith are defining creators of this contemporary moment. The addition of their works to SAAM's holdings helps us engage with the complex urgencies of today with both creativity and a plurality of perspectives resonant with our diverse audiences. *Musical Thinking* marks the SAAM debut of sixteen new collection works, and most of these artists' first appearance in our galleries (save Leigh and ADÁL, whose works we have proudly featured in recent years).

As SAAM's time-based media curator Saisha Grayson signals in her introductory essay, music has been a sister art form and source of inspiration for moving-image artists for over a century. What this exhibition brings into focus is how artists working now are building on and



reorienting that tradition. They emphasize how music can serve as a communal force, a revelatory entry to shared experiences and fraught histories, and a model for collaborative and iterative creativity. While the title phrase, musical thinking, has been widely used and is necessarily redefined for each context—as Grayson does here—it is also intentionally a play on another familiar phrase, *magical thinking*. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines *magical thinking* as “the belief that one’s ideas, thoughts, actions, words, or use of symbols can influence the course of events in the material world.” For the artists gathered here, musical thinking, critical thinking, and magical thinking are connected. The creation of sonic and visual symbols, the sharing of words, images, and ideas are indeed intended to impact how we relate to and understand each other, and by extension how we act on and within the world beyond museum walls. A belief in this transformative potential—whether of materials, events, or society—subtly pervades the exhibition, which invites audiences to recognize they are the agents of change who can turn potentiality into reality. This belief is also central to the permanent-collection reinstallation that SAAM is undertaking across our building, making *Musical Thinking* a fitting exhibition to begin the rolling

reveal of our transformed third-floor spaces and collection displays as we prepare a more inclusive story of American art for 2026, the 250th anniversary of our United States.

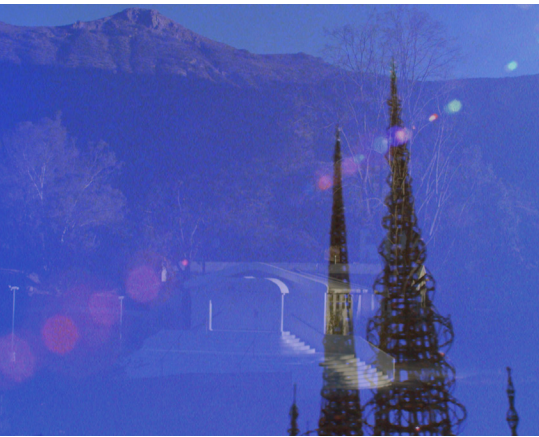
In addition to the framing introduction and postscript case studies, this digital catalogue includes a “Liner Notes” section, each entry offering a close reading of the artworks in the exhibition and how they manifest that artist’s—or artistic duo’s—approach to musical thinking. This format is inspired by the detailed insights that vinyl-album sleeves or booklets at one time provided for those eager to know more about a favorite song. Because the media artworks are all part of SAAM’s permanent collection, the digital catalogue’s format allows these entries to link back to SAAM’s webpages, where moving-image excerpts and biographies can always be found. Likewise, “Postscript as Prelude” is formulated as a self-contained text. It introduces learners of all ages to key historical moments in the development of time-based media, as illustrated through SAAM’s collection and seen through the lens of musical thinking. Yet following the media links can set these historical examples into motion, inviting website visitors to begin tracing their own journey through our holdings.



As SAAM's first open-access online catalogue, *Musical Thinking* helps the Museum realize both the integration of media art and digital publishing, and its desire to be ever more inclusive in our design thinking. Making the most of digital publishing's potential, what follows is formatted for screen readers with robust visual descriptors for all catalogue illustrations and reference images, and links to video excerpts with closed captions. Paired with the inclusive exhibition design and interpretation—which layers in multisensory audio translations, American Sign Language (ASL) videos, and verbal description stops for each gallery—the embedding of accessibility thinking into *Musical Thinking* has sparked new relationships, collaborations, and ways of working that will contribute to SAAM's goal of being equally welcoming for all audiences going forward.

Foremost among those partnerships, I wish to acknowledge the contributions of Motion Light Lab (ML2), a design studio at our local Gallaudet University, the oldest and still only

higher education institution in the world exclusively devoted to Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Grayson reached out to Melissa Malzkuhn, founder and director of ML2, to discuss how this exhibition could address Deaf audiences' relation to music in ways that enhanced the experience for a wide spectrum of our visitors. Since then, SAAM and ML2 have been collaborating on a suite of thoughtful, tailored engagements for each artwork in *Musical Thinking*, from open captions with detailed musical descriptions, to haptics that amplify soundtrack vibrations, to videos that translate interpretive texts for those whose first language is ASL. This is part of a holistic approach to accessibility that we are grateful has been supported throughout with insights, funding, and networking provided by Access Smithsonian. We extend further appreciation to the user experts with whom they connected us. We are grateful also to the feedback provided on the verbal description strategy for this exhibition.



Exhibitions like this—that leverage new interpretive approaches for site-responsive media artworks—are uniquely collaborative ventures with living artists. We thank *Musical Thinking's* illustrious roster of artists, not only for their visions and the work we are proud to now steward, but for their joyful engagement with our team from initial studio visits and acquisitions, to input on accessibility ideas, to final design review, to participating in programs and creating new performances. Not to be overlooked in terms of our gratitude are the artists' dedicated representatives, studio managers, and gallerists, as well as the estate representatives for ADÁL, who passed away in 2020 before exhibition planning was under way.

We are also thankful for the conversations this exhibition and group of artists has sparked with institutions across D.C., including our Smithsonian colleagues at Smithsonian Exhibits, who designed this catalogue; at Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, for publishing it; and at the National Museum of the American Indian, with whom we will copresent a performance by Raven Chacon. Our neighboring institution, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, a DC Public Library, cooperated on programs to coincide with the installation.

Critical support from within the Smithsonian was provided early on by the Smithsonian Accessibility Innovation Fund, which made our consultancy with ML2 and so much more possible. Funding from the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative Pool allowed us to commission performances by Martine Gutierrez and the duo Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly. Our program with Christine Sun Kim received federal support from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.

Our museum supporters from across the country were essential to expanding the time-based media collection in ways that generated the ground for this exhibition. Former SAAM Commission chair Nion McEvoy (2017-2018) and his many co-commissioners funded our acquisition of Jafa's masterpiece, and a gift from the SJ Weiler Fund underwrote the two Cauleen Smith films inspired by Alice Coltrane. We are also grateful to the exhibition lenders, New Britain Museum of American Art; RYAN LEE Gallery, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art.





The SJ Weiler Fund stepped forward with exhibition support as well. Special thanks to Nion McEvoy for establishing the Nion McEvoy Publications Endowment, which provided funds for this publication. We are grateful for major support from SAAM Commissioners Carolyn and Mo Cunniffe and David and Pamela Hornik. They are joined by generous support from Commissioners Michael Abrams and Sandra Stewart, Ed and Kathy Fries, Maureen and Gene Kim, V. Joy Simmons, MD, and Lucille and Richard Spagnuolo. Additional support has come from new and long-standing allies, including Candy and Michael Barasch, Helen and Peter Warwick, the Roger S. Firestone Foundation, the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, Victoria McManus, and Emerita Commissioner Aida Alvarez.

Finally, it is an honor and privilege to thank and work alongside the dedicated teams at SAAM who make each of our exhibitions possible. On this project, exhibition designer Stefan Gibson and AV specialist Harvey Sandler truly outdid themselves in creating installations that will transport and delight. Senior editor Mary Cleary, development officer Christie Davis, graphic designer Grace Lopez, public affairs specialist Rebekah

Mejorado, design intern Mia Navarro, interpretation specialist Kelly Skeen, web lead Alex Tyson, and so many more ensured expansive, clear communications with our wide-ranging audiences. I thank Anne Hyland, curatorial assistant, and Emma Jaromin, curatorial and accessibility intern, for helping bring this complex presentation to life. Finally, I salute Saisha for developing this idea and expanding the collection in thoughtful and compelling ways. I recall vividly our very first conversations when she was a candidate for the time-based media curator position about both the strengths of our collections and the urgent need to build our holdings to be more inclusive and relevant. This project marks an exciting next chapter for time-based media at SAAM, and an opportunity to celebrate all within our institution and beyond who are making this moment—and what is ahead—possible.

**Stephanie Stebich**

**The Margaret and Terry Stent Director  
Smithsonian American Art Museum**

MUSICAL THINKING AND  
TIME-BASED MEDIA ART—

# A Long Duet

Saisha Grayson



**When visuals are set into motion, music is often what propels them along.** During the silent-film era, in the early twentieth century, piano players added playful jingles and dramatic climaxes to enhance the storyline (fig. 1). Today, the meaning of our visual landscape—everything from nightly news to cartoons, from video games to TikTok—is affected and directed by its soundtrack. Even when there is no musical accompaniment, the language of music is regularly used to explain the power of what we see unfold in time. Art critics and audiences alike have often used terms like rhythm and counterpoint, composition and score, harmony and dynamics to discuss the creative goals and expressive effects of visuals in flux. This is not surprising, as many of the main innovators of such experimental practices were either musicians themselves or devoted music enthusiasts. This parallel knowledge—this musical thinking—helped them develop creative strategies as new technologies such as electrical lights, celluloid film, videotape, and most recently

digital imagery allowed visual artists to shape time, as well as color and form. Whether apparent in the interactions of visual and sonic layers and musically related subjects, or more subtly shaping creative process through written scores or thematic improvisation, musical thinking is at play in so much of what we see.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. Audience watches Keystone Cops movie in theater, 1920s.

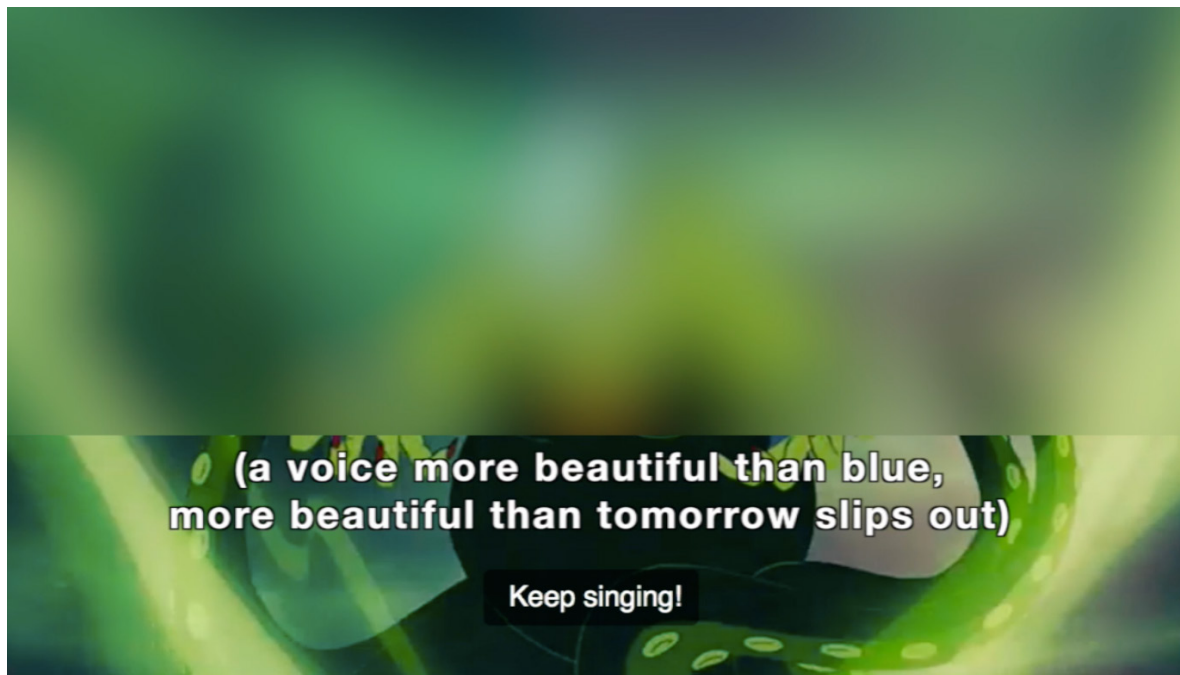
previous page: Stills from Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 (Cat. 18), a video that collages footage from silent-era films to viral YouTube videos, to reflect on Black life in America through the moving image.



Still from Cauleen Smith, *Pilgrim*, 2017 (Cat. 27), showing the ashram congregation room of spiritual leader and musician Alice Coltrane, the inspiration for Smith's recent film projects.

Perhaps because the history of music's entanglements with moving-image art is so long, or because today's videos are so consistently paired with music, the special and specific relationship between these two fields is often taken for granted. We expect a soundtrack for every viewing experience, but we ask few questions about how audio and visual interweave – not only in the final product and its impact, but also in creative processes that explicitly draw on both

disciplines' strategies and histories. How does thinking as a musician, or thinking alongside and through musical forms and figures, change approaches to the visual? What happens when videomakers follow a score, when scored performances become drawings, or when we read movie soundtracks instead of receiving them sonically? Can visual artists open layers of meaning held within a given song or sound that revolutionize how we experience them going forward?



Detail from Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, 2015 (Cat. 21), a four-channel video featuring familiar films with interpretive captions provided by Kim's d/Deaf collaborators, including actor Lauren Ridloff, whose text is seen here.

*Musical Thinking: New Video Art and Sonic Strategies* invites renewed attention to the intersections and influences of video and sound, focusing on recently made works by some of the most important voices in contemporary art today.<sup>2</sup> As the title suggests, music is more than a formal element in these works; it is a framework through which these artists understand the histories and traditions that inspire them. All privilege music as a means to explore individual and collective experiences of the United States and to connect with their audiences. Their use of musical thinking encompasses subjects and concepts, processes and production modes,



Still from Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 (Cat. 18), with magnetic close-up of singer Lauryn Hill.

and intentions for how the work will be received and experienced by music fans of all kinds. The media works presented in *Musical Thinking* are all drawn from the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM). These transformative additions bring the Museum's time-based art collection firmly into the twenty-first century, while extending a core insight recognizable in SAAM's earlier holdings—that music lent much to the development of media art. Thanks to these new acquisitions, SAAM can now trace this relationship across nearly a hundred years of American art history.

MUSICAL THINKING TODAY:

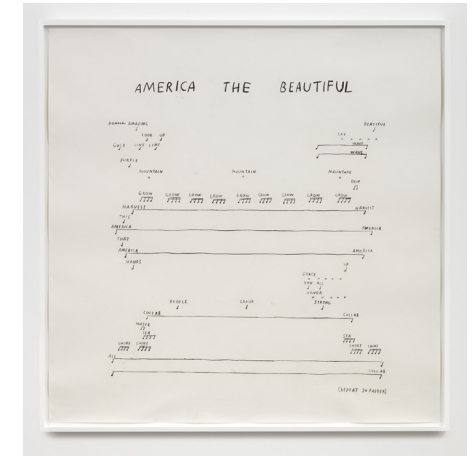
## Singing America

To explore the powerful resonances between video art and music today, *Musical Thinking* brings together a diverse array of artists who employ the strategies of musical creation—scores, improvisation, and interpretation—as well as musical styles, structures, and lyrics to amplify aspects of American life. Rich with cultural references, the works in the exhibition use music to call up memories, capture attention, provoke insight, and invite embodied engagement. Musical choices in the featured videos are integral to their meaning and impact, and their sonic dimensions help transform individual viewers into convened communities, moved together by rhythms that connect across centuries and set the pace for tomorrow.

The exhibition also celebrates the entry of these major figures in American art into SAAM's collection by debuting their work in expansive, layered, cross-media installations. *Musical Thinking* pairs video works from SAAM's collection by ADÁL, Raven Chacon,

Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, Martine Gutierrez, Arthur Jafa, Simone Leigh and Liz Magic Laser, Cauleen Smith, and Christine Sun Kim, with their related prints, drawings, photographs, sculptures, and sound art. As SAAM visitors make their way through the installation, they can see, hear, and feel how musical thinking animates these artists' interdisciplinary practices.

The development of *Musical Thinking* grew out of two simultaneous realizations. First, that some of the strongest video artworks made in the last two decades engage musical methods and histories in fundamental ways. And second, that as SAAM's media collection expanded to reflect the diversity of voices driving culture in the United States today, we could suddenly “hear” a chorus of complexity navigating harmony and dissonance. These artists' engagement with music is therefore also an invitation to consider the relationship between America's past, present, and future. Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes's declaration, “I, too, sing America,” now rings true within SAAM's collection.<sup>3</sup> In amplifying previously sidelined perspectives, these artists underscored that the song of America



Christine Sun Kim, *America the Beautiful*, 2020 (Cat. 23), a charcoal drawing that translates this patriotic standard for ASL performance.

is incomplete without them—less beautiful, as Hughes notes, but also less challenging, as suggested by the work and words of exhibition artist Arthur Jafa.

Jafa's often-quoted goal, to create a cinema that "replicates the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music," sparked another insight that grounds this show.<sup>4</sup> His statement suggests that artists today are looking to music in ways that build on, but also differ from, earlier generations. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, when time-based media was first created for an art context, artists shaping durational works drew on music as a preexisting art form that also organized experiences in time. They invoked the language and structure of music—scores, performances, improvisations. They built on decades of art theory that had elevated music as the purest creative form, with other media "aspiring to the condition of music," and celebrated the automatic association between sound and color experienced by synesthetes like Wassily Kandinsky, who translated his response to music into some of the earliest abstract paintings.<sup>5</sup> Early twentieth-century musicians like Thomas Wilfred became visual artists, creating light-based, moving color compositions that took hours or days to unfold. Following the aspirations of painters like James McNeill

Whistler or Marsden Hartley who aimed to convey motion and musicality in still images, abstract film animators like Dwinell Grant (see p. 75) turned to classical musical theory to articulate how this new art form could communicate through visual themes unfolding over time. Such "visual music" extended a dream, traceable to the Renaissance, of color organs or instruments that could translate a musical journey into an abstract, evolving visual evocation.<sup>6</sup> The first generation of video artists in the 1960s and '70s was populated by composers like Nam June Paik and instrumentalists like Steina Vasulka who used their musical training to develop this new media. In these formative decades, musical analogies helped frame film and video as high art that—like music—did not need to tell a story or have a specific subject or message to be appreciated or impactful.<sup>7</sup> They supported formal experimentation and encouraged improvising with these emergent technologies.

This urgency in early days to distinguish artistic video via its distance from video's more common uses, such as television and home recordings, has largely fallen away in recent decades. Video art of various kinds is widely celebrated and shown in galleries and museums around the world. Artists of all stripes take up this medium, often with



Still from Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 (Cat. 18), featuring Black music icon James Brown.



Still from Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019 (Cat. 11), reimagining the nineteenth-century spiritual gatherings that took place in this preserved Shaker meetinghouse.

a narrative in mind. For twenty-first-century time-based artists like those featured in this exhibition, music is something that amplifies and assists with storytelling as one of the most emotionally connective, popular means of speaking directly to audiences and acknowledging long-standing or spontaneously emergent communities. These artists do not shy away from charged subjects, including contested histories and long-forgotten traditions within music itself. Their work often has implicit or explicit messages that are intensified, rather than replaced, by musical analogies.

The artworks in *Musical Thinking* reflect on the vast cultural influence that music has had on American life and global soundscapes. They showcase how innovative forms and iconic talents inflect key chapters of the American story. Beyond selecting songs for mood or structure, these artists think deeply about the traditions and ideologies of various musical forms; the methods of composition and remixing that translate between media; and the spiritual, communal, and political purposes that music has served. Early American hymns, classical opera, avant-garde composition, Broadway musicals, movie soundtracks,



THEMATIC MOVEMENTS ACROSS

## Music Thinking

The exhibition's opening features works that use music to engage three foundational constructs of America: as migrant melting pot, as Christian settler project, and as an empty frontier. In ADÁL's cheeky *West Side Story Upside Down, Backwards, Sideways and Out of Focus* (*La Maleta de Futriaco Martínez*) (2002; cat. 4), the 1961 film musical is manipulated, as the title describes. Added to this distorted footage of scenes of white actors playing stereotyped Puerto Rican characters and white characters dancing the mambo is a new score: the Afro-Caribbean jazz of the famed Nuyorican percussionist Tito Puente and the disruptive static of a police radio. This sonic mix keeps in play the promise of cultural convergences and the real-life dangers of cultural misrepresentation.

In Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly's *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved* (2019; cat. 11), a cappella hymns sung in a Shaker community house invite audiences



to become attuned to a lesser-known strand of early American Christianity. Interpreting a choreographic score based on first-person accounts from the nineteenth century, dancers surround the singer and then make their own rhythms as their movements become more ecstatic. By reanimating the spirit that drew Shakers together, the artists consider the utopian potential of these early communities that believed in racial and gender equality. They invoke the logic of music—namely harmony—to do so.

Still from ADÁL, *West Side Story Upside Down, Backwards, Sideways and Out of Focus* (*La Maleta de Futriaco Martínez*), 2002 (Cat. 4).



Within SAAM's installation, across from the fervent dancing and peaceful pauses of that three-channel video, a single screen in a darkened room offers a counterpoint. Raven Chacon's *Report* (2001/2015; cat. 5) presents a lineup of mostly Native American and Latinx musicians in a Southwest landscape, each holding their assigned instrument: firearms of various calibers. Following a detailed percussion score written by Chacon and visible on music stands before them, they shoot into the distance. The initial firing sound of these differently scaled guns and return echoes together constitute the composition. An experiment in finding sonic value in surprising materials, this performance also offers a musical retort to the repeated presentation of the Western "frontier" as uninhabited. Instead, it is a stark reminder

that gunfire is one of the most sustained soundtracks of this land because it was taken with violence.

Other works position music as a prime example of another essential American truth: that in the face of centuries of anti-Black violence and racism, Black creative brilliance has flourished, especially in cultural traditions like music that "could be carried in [the] nervous system."<sup>8</sup>



Still from Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019 (Cat. 11).

Still from Raven Chacon, *Report*, 2001/2015 (Cat. 5).



Arthur Jafa's monumental video, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (2016; cat. 18), illustrates this tension through a montage of clips, from silent films to cell-phone footage, depicting African American triumphs and tragedies across a century. Beyond the parade of musical icons featured on-screen, and the compendium of Black music history invoked by Kanye West (now Ye)'s accompanying gospel/hip-hop track "Ultralight Beam" (2016), Jafa honors the genius of Black musical innovation through the very fabric of his filmmaking. Jafa's dense editing is polyrhythmic, and, within given clips, he plays with the frame rates and playback speeds.<sup>9</sup> These almost imperceptible alterations allow certain moments in the edit to strike with extra force, and others to be suspended between beats, mirroring the virtuosic control that Jafa thought should be adapted from Black music to define a Black cinema.

Cauleen Smith's paired videos, *Sojourner* (2018; cat. 26) and *Pilgrim* (2017; cat. 27), center on the transcendent sounds and teachings of composer, performer, and swamini Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda (1937-2007), whose experimental jazz stylings blended with Indian devotional kirtan after she founded a Hindu ashram in California in the 1970s (see p. 65). While Coltrane's songs play, Smith's camera traces connections between sites of historic resonances for Black liberation, including the Philadelphia homes of fellow musicians Sun Ra and Alice's husband, John Coltrane, and centers of art and environmental beauty across California. The power of utopic energies, seeded and still sprouting, is made explicit in *Sojourner*, as we see young women of color tune in to old radios to receive wisdom from Black women leaders across centuries.

In addition to works that take on vast swaths of history, the exhibition includes works where music becomes a vehicle for introspection,



Top left: Still from Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 (Cat. 18).

Left: Still from Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner*, 2018 (Cat. 26).

personal connection, and individual and communal expression. How we relate to music is part of how we relate to ourselves and each other, and that is also part of contemporary American life. Joyfully embodying this, Martine Gutierrez's *Clubbing* (2012; cat. 17) features the artist dancing in gauzy-gray dream space. With the help of a green screen, she appears and reappears, taking on six distinct personalities, each with their own gender performance, night-out looks, and go-to moves. Finding their own groove even when they dance in sync, the figures capture the expansive freedom for self-definition that club culture has always supported. As shown at SAAM with a light-up haptic dance floor, audiences are encouraged to join in *Clubbing*, and feel part of this welcoming community and celebrate their own many-sided selves.



impossibility of what Black women are asked to perform every day without breaking down—and how they are stereotyped or vilified when they do.

Still from Martine Gutierrez, *Clubbing*, 2012 (Cat. 17).

Through her art, Christine Sun Kim consistently draws attention to the many ways she and others in the Deaf community relate to music.

In *Breakdown* (2011; cat. 24), a single-channel video collaboration between artists Simone Leigh and Liz Magic Laser, audiences witness a vocally and emotionally shattering performance by the renowned mezzo-soprano Alicia Hall Moran. Moran's operatic aria is her interpretation of a score, assembled by Leigh and Laser, with lyrics entirely drawn from popular culture depictions of women having nervous breakdowns. Sung to empty seats in what looks like an abandoned theater, Moran's technical bravado deserves a standing ovation, but it also reflects the near



Still from Simone Leigh and Liz Magic Laser, *Breakdown*, 2011 (Cat. 24), featuring mezzo-soprano Alicia Hall Moran, whose tour-de-force performance incorporates opera, jazz, gospel, and hymns.

Rather than presuming they are outside of or disinterested in this world, Kim asserts Deaf people are highly attuned to and seek their own ways of relating to the world of sound. For Kim, this includes making artworks that challenge bone-dry movie captions that often simply state that “[music]” is playing. Her *Close Readings* (2015; cat. 21), a four-channel video work, shows what happens when these captions are reconceived as expressive opportunities for individualized interpretation, poetic reverie, pointed critique, and more by her invited collaborators. By highlighting the instrumentalization of movie music and the lyrical potential of language, her work offers insights for all who watch films and wonder how they work on us. Finding points of connection across experiences not universally shared—but suddenly powerfully felt—is something that art and music both promise, and these works make manifest.

The intricacies of these works bring us back to what we can appreciate as musical thinking beyond the appearance of musical references or sonic accompaniments. Within this show, musical thinking operates at three levels: process, content, and reception. As part of the creative process for many of the works discussed above, artists assembled scores that guided their video's form as well as structured its soundtrack. These scores might



be instrumental, as in Chacon's work; choreographic, as in Ghani and Kelly's piece; lyrical, as for Leigh and Laser's video; or textual instructions, as Kim uses to direct her collaborators. Scores invite interpretation and acknowledge the inherently fluid, cooperative, and responsive aspects of music-making, traits that for a long time were not valued in the visual arts.



Installation image (above) and detail (below) from Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, 2015 (Cat. 21), with caption by Ariel Baker-Gibbs.

Musical thinking in content encompasses having iconic musicians as subjects and great songs as accompaniment, but it does not stop there. Jafa's adaption of Black musical stylization to his editing process exemplifies the drive among so many artists to link musical content to forms of musicality that express specific cultural traditions and trace collective histories. This is apparent in *Breakdown's* pointed deployment of opera—a musical form associated with exclusionary European culture—to imbue Black women's daily challenges with the gravity of Greek tragedy. It is there in the way that Gutierrez composed her clubbing music with a specific 1970s song in mind, the feel of which is picked up in every bit of her art design and re-invokes the liberatory vibes of that era.

Finally, there is something particularly communal about musical reception. Music invites us to feel connected with those sharing the listening space, even if they are strangers, and many of these works capitalize on this dimension of music. There is a visceral sense of inclusion that emanates from Ghani and Kelly's life-size projections of Shaker singers and dancers, as if everyone in the gallery were also a potential member of this utopian project. When Smith's next-generation feminist leaders parade at the



end of *Sojourner*, the swelling Coltrane music feels like it will carry all of us into the future she envisions. These are not simply accidental effects: the point of these pieces is to imagine other ways of being in common, of connecting and moving to a shared beat, even if that takes different forms.

Music is often a way of establishing common ground; it is woven into our daily lives, our everyday spaces, and our stories of ourselves and our communities. This is also one of the reasons SAAM is organizing its first time-based media exhibition since 2015 around this theme. Opening after years of social distancing and the fraying of the social fabric,

Still from Raven Chacon, *Report*, 2001/2015 (Cat. 5).

we hope it meets a collective longing to experience art and ideas in public, together. We hope it resonates with audiences in our galleries and those engaging with the many elements we have brought online. And we believe that highlighting the power of musical thinking in this generation will create space for more interdisciplinary exchanges to come. We know this is only the next chapter in a story of America still being sung through art, music, media and each of our creative contributions.

Let's welcome the chorus.



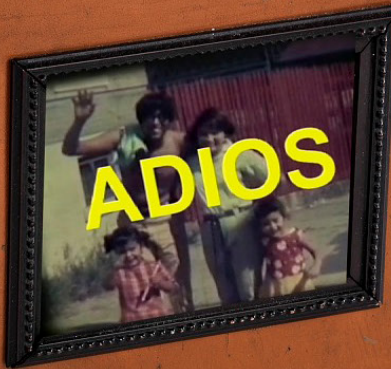
Installation view of Christine Sun Kim,  
*One Week of Lullabies for Roux*, 2018  
(Cat. 20).

LINER NOTES

# Works in the Exhibition







# ADÁL

born Adalberto Maldonado, 1948, Utuado, Puerto Rico  
–died 2020, San Juan, Puerto Rico

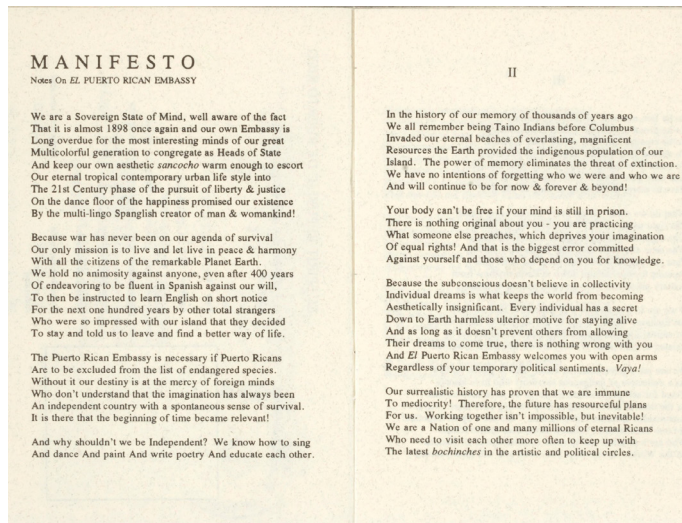
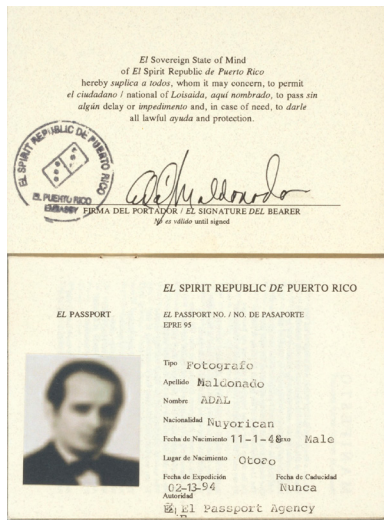
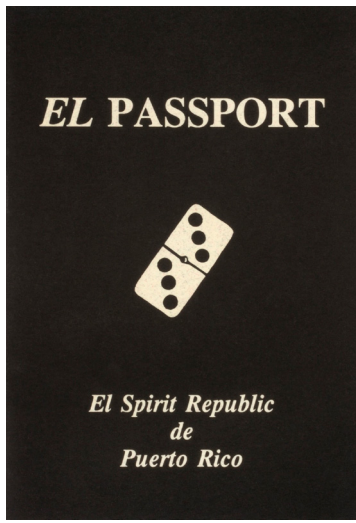
**“From the beginning...my work has been informed by the impossibility of ever achieving a definitive picture of one’s self. By this I mean that our identity is fluid and constantly evolving.”<sup>10</sup>**

–ADÁL

Previous page: Cat. 4. ADÁL, *West Side Story Upside Down, Backwards, Sideways and Out of Focus (La Maleta de Furiaco Martínez)*, 2002, suitcase, flat-screen LCD monitor, single-channel digital video (color, sound); 12:51 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2013.20.

A worn suitcase stands upright on a platform; three passports are laid out alongside it (cats. 1–4). At first glance, these might seem to be the essentials for someone’s upcoming international trip. Coming closer, the viewer finds intricate details that reveal the more complex story that artist ADÁL, who lived between Puerto Rico and New York most of his life, offers through these works. In these signature works about this “Nuyorican” (a neologism of New York plus Puerto Rican) experience, ADÁL celebrates the way music and dance are embodied cultural treasures that travel with and connect communities.

Reading the texts visible across the three passports, it is clear the complexity extends far beyond ADÁL’s personal experiences to encompass the fraught colonial status of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, an unincorporated territory of the United States. Though Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States as a colony in 1898, it was not until 1917 that its residents were granted U.S. citizenship; to this day, they remain without federal representation or a sanctioned path toward self-determination. Yet, these passports are clearly stamped as representing “El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico,” and claim to be issued by El Puerto Rican Embassy. Embassies and passports are symbols of national sovereignty; as such they proved perfect conceptual sites



for ADÁL and his collaborators to creatively critique and speculatively solve the question of Puerto Rican independence.<sup>11</sup> Beginning in 1994, ADÁL and poet and former Young Lords activist Pedro Pietri hosted random pop-up Embassy events full of song and poetry at Nuyorican cultural centers. Pietri would lead attendees in singing “El Spanglish National Anthem” (fig. 2), and ADÁL would create individualized passports, taking out-of-focus portraits and gathering personal data, to be added to the first page (cats. 1-3).

Printed at the center of each passport, a four-page manifesto by Pietri defines El Republic as “a Sovereign State of Mind,” and centers music and dance, alongside other creative and imaginative expressions, as key to claiming independence, maintaining cultural pride, and empowering self-emancipation

despite systemic oppression. It proclaims that citizens of this conceptual terrain “have proven that you can be on two Islands at the same time, Dancing to supernatural down to Earth rhythms from Solitary jukeboxes from the past, present and future!”<sup>12</sup> That so many already live this way—straddling diasporic locations, cultures, and temporal registers—proves “El Spirit Republic” to be real, even if the Embassy and passports are artistic fabrications. Creating work in this speculative mode cleverly confronts U.S. colonial power, which the artists see as seeking to make self-determination literally unimaginable. This participatory political theater, instead, invites all to cocreate other possible world orders by decolonizing the imaginary.

Alongside these passports, ADÁL’s video-sculpture directly addresses the role that

Top: Cats. 1–3. ADÁL, *El Puerto Rican Passport, El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico*, 1994, issued 2005/2012, lithography with photograph in staple-bound booklet. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 2013.19.1-.3.

Bottom: Fig. 2. Still from *El Puerto Rican Embassy performance of “El Spanglish National Anthem”*; Pedro Pietri (center) and ADÁL (left).





popular culture—especially music, theater, and movies—plays in shaping that imaginary. Embedded in the leather front of a nicked luggage case, a small flat-screen monitor plays, as promised in the title, *West Side Story Upside Down, Backwards, Sideways and Out of Focus (La Maleta de Futriaco Martínez)* (2002; cat. 4). This manipulated footage is from the classic movie musical *West Side Story*, which widely disseminated stereotypical Puerto Rican characters, mostly performed by white actors, to audiences across the United States. The all-white creative teams behind the 1957 Broadway show and 1961 film adaptation had no ties to New York City's vibrant Puerto Rican community that they casually used to colorfully update Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>13</sup> ADÁL, on the other hand, was part of the generation of Puerto Ricans supposedly depicted—those who came to the United States in growing numbers after World War II—having



moved as a teenager from the mountainous countryside of Puerto Rico to New Jersey and then the Bronx in the mid-1960s. By the 1970s, he was a force in the burgeoning downtown Nuyorican scene—a movement that explored the hybrid identities of those who straddled both cultures and celebrated the creative flourishing in music, dance, poetry, and visual arts that came from this convergence, while critiquing the imperial, colonial, racial, and class conditions that continue to impact the island and its diaspora.

Taking aim at this power imbalance, ADÁL's *West Side Story Upside Down...* treats the Hollywood footage as the moviemakers treated their fictionalized Puerto Rican community, inverting colors and values, distorting and repeating clichés, and blurring and filtering scenes until they are unrecognizable.

Stills of actress Rita Moreno, who portrayed Anita in the 1961 movie *West Side Story*, upside down and inverted, from ADÁL, *West Side Story Upside Down, Backwards, Sideways and Out of Focus (La Maleta de Futriaco Martínez)*, 2002 (Cat. 4).

ADÁL counterbalances this jumble by editing in clarifying moments. Carefully chosen documentary clips contextualize the postwar pressures that pushed Puerto Ricans to the continent, and showcase the unmistakable talents of fellow Nuyoricans, such as Latin jazz legends Tito Puente and Tito Rodríguez, Grammy Award-winning singer Brenda Feliciano, and ADÁL's regular collaborator, Pietri. Importantly, in this battle for cultural self-definition, the soundtrack is entirely theirs; the well-worn showtunes are replaced by propulsive percussion, Spanish-language ballads, spoken word, and, eerily, the crackle of police radio—a sonic layering that truly evokes New York City at night. Though ADÁL was best known as a photographer, this multimedia assemblage fits within decades of work in which he foregrounded music as exemplary of a Nuyoric culture that simultaneously carries on and reinvents traditions, recognizes roots but transcends borders, and stays true to itself while powerfully contributing to the fabled melting pot of America.



Still of Tito Rodríguez performing from ADÁL, *West Side Story Upside Down, Backwards, Sideways and Out of Focus* (*La Maleta de Friutaco Martínez*), 2002 (Cat. 4).



# Raven Chacon (Diné)

born 1977, Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation, Arizona

**“I am a listener. My belief is that sound work cannot be made in isolation. These are acoustic, conceptual responses to land; they seek to acknowledge the people who have history in those places. There is a pedagogical and a generative feedback loop within these land-based practices.”<sup>14</sup>**

—Raven Chacon

Previous page: Cat. 5. Raven Chacon, *Report*, 2001/2015, single-channel video (color, sound); 3:48 min., shown with printed score on music stand, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2020.61A-C.

The first sounds heard in Raven Chacon's video *Report* (2001/2015; cat. 5) are sheet music and flimsy music stands shaking in the wind, and then the distinct click of ammunition being loaded and locked into various-size firearms. Much as a string section tunes before a concert begins, the instrumentalists here are inspecting guns and clicking off safeties before raising their arms, awaiting a conductor's signal. Standing side by side on a dirt patch within a New Mexican landscape, the eight performers aim straight over their music stands toward wild bushes, trees, and scrub grass. Chacon, on the left side of the screen, counts the ensemble in, and a volley of shots fills the air. Watching the performers check the score and listening to the distinct rhythms, it is clear the sonic potential of each revolver, rifle, shotgun, or handgun has its own role in this arrangement. The staccato of pops and bangs, lulls for reloading, and crescendos of synced explosions are shaped by the tonality of the various calibers, their tempo for successive firings, and the precisely notated percussion line that Chacon wrote in his eight-part score. An exhibition copy of the score is spotlit on a stand in the center of the video gallery, allowing those who read music to follow along.



This video installation captures a singular, artist-directed performance in 2015 of Chacon's 2001 score of the same name. As a music student at the University of New Mexico, Chacon set out to create a composition that placed maximum constraints on Western musical parameters. He decided to use firearms as musical instruments, as they have no flexibility for composers or interpreters in controlling pitch, harmony, volume, timbre, or tuning. This leaves only structuring time—a reduction of musical components promoted by midcentury avant-garde composer John Cage and his next-generation followers, like James Tenney, with whom Chacon studied. However, unlike Cage, Chacon is not insistent that sound is just sound with no interpretive layer: "I'm getting more and more excited about writing for [percussion] because of its potential for metaphor. It's symbology that you can have inside of the

instruments themselves."<sup>15</sup> In titling *Report*, Chacon explicitly referenced not only the sound an explosion makes as it reverberates in an environment, but also the way news is shared and statistical or research summaries are delivered. Open to the "loaded," subversive, or instinctual responses the piece could provoke, Chacon also saw parallels between its compositional constraints and the societal limits that people often face: When so many choices are taken away, what other options remain but firing?

Myriad decisions related to the performance scenario, however, point to other registers for meaning making. The selection of location, instrumentalists, conductor, and presentation shape readings as to who the shooters are, what brought them to this place, and how their actions are seen: Are they defending or taking a territory? Are they hunting or

Still from Raven Chacon, *Report*, 2001/2015 (Cat. 5).



occupying? While Chacon created *Report* as “a proposition, rather than a position on the morality of firearms,” he describes its recasting of guns from instruments of violence to sonic tools as a “mechanism for musical resistance.”<sup>16</sup> In a recent interview, he added that “people of color and women performing sound . . . when there was no place for them before, is [musical] resistance.”<sup>17</sup> This recording, then, with performers of various backgrounds and mixed genders, defiantly shooting across stolen lands with instruments that evoke both colonial violence and Indigenous resistance, fully manifests that goal.

Chacon’s career itself is part of this resistance. His early encounters with music were rooted in family tradition, listening to his grandfather sing Navajo songs and learning to play piano from a neighbor. While learning Western composition and histories, he began exploring the mechanics of various instruments and foregrounding noise as part of music, and became interested in new ways in which compositions can be written, whether by using staff notation for unlikely sound-making devices or reimagining scores as visually striking graphic guides for interpretation.

*For Zitkála-Šá* is a print portfolio of thirteen graphically notated scores (five of which are on view in *Musical Thinking*). Each cream-colored sheet is a portrait or “musical transcription”

honoring a different contemporary Native woman musician.<sup>18</sup> These include odes to well-known figures, like *For Buffy Sainte-Marie* representing the folk icon and Oscar-winning composer, while others point to a new generation of artist-activist instrumentalists, like *For Laura Ortman* (2019; cat. 9) or *For Olivia Shortt* (2020; cat. 10). The visually striking yet minimally marked compositions variously draw inspiration from the subjects’ affiliated tribal symbols and philosophies, personal experiences, primary instruments, and political or aesthetic interests. This reflection on the complexity of what Native women today are navigating and how they turn their experiences into art and music is dedicated to Zitkála-Šá, a Yankton Dakota writer, musician, and educator born in 1876 in what was then the Dakota Territory (fig. 3). Zitkála-Šá’s *The Sun Dance Opera* (1913) is among the first known instances of a Native composer working with Western musical forms and notation. An accomplished violinist, short-story writer, and poet, her legacy extends beyond creative fields. Today, she is most remembered as an activist and advocate for Native peoples and women’s rights.

Beyond its in-gallery presentation, *For Zitkála-Šá* is also an ever-evolving program of songs that can be imaginatively animated in performance. Chacon’s accompanying

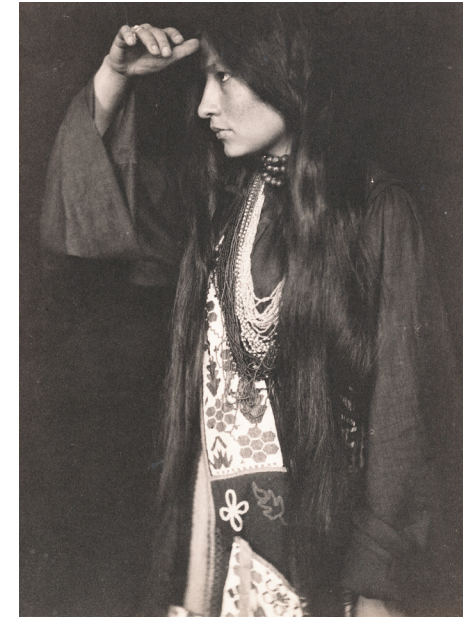
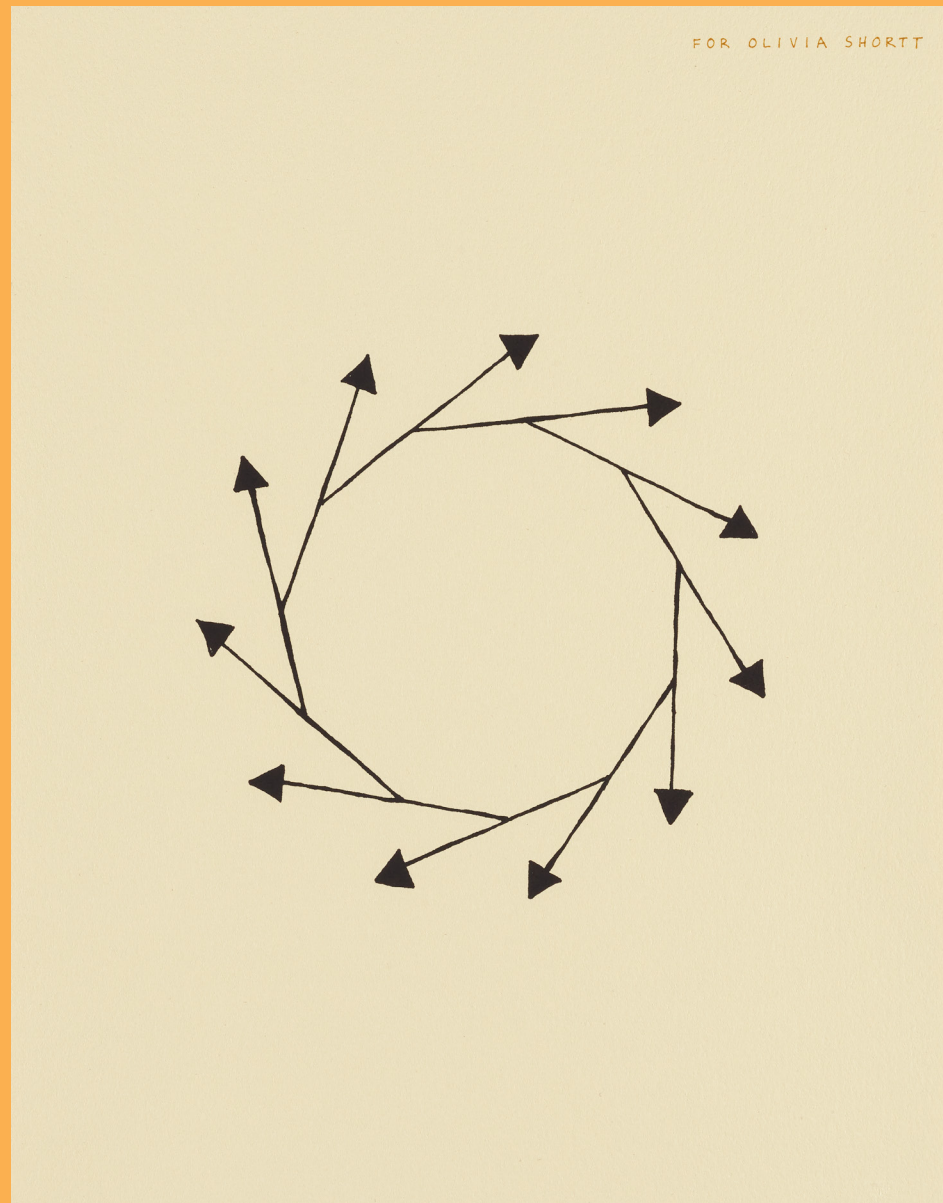


Fig. 3. Gertrude Käsebier, *Zitkála-Šá*, ca. 1898, platinum print, 6 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 4 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Mina Turner, acc. no. 287543.

instructions suggest how to read the varied graphics, while leaving abundant space for interpretive agency. In *For Olivia Shortt*, for example, each arrow extending from the circle represents an Anishinaabe teaching and cardinal direction and is to be sonically marked by a “change in timbre or effect”; what the change will sound like and how it might reflect Anishinaabe ways is determined by each activator. This facilitates cocreation across generations, with a chain of insights and inspirations that extends from the nineteenth century to contemporary leaders to future audiences. As Chacon imagines, “Everyone who encounters this set of scores is invited to perform them, to better understand where they have been and where they are headed, and to consider all the sites of conflict they are placed between.”<sup>19</sup>

Chacon now consistently works across media and disciplinary boundaries, creating videos, installations, concerts, and convenings. His scores remain central, serving as tools for such generous forms of collaboration among performers and audiences, but also with significant sites, nonhuman actors, found sounds, and natural elements.<sup>20</sup> In this way, he connects Diné worldviews and relationship models with Western classical, avant-garde, and art music traditions.



Cat. 10. Raven Chacon, *For Olivia Shortt*, from series *For Zitkála-Šá*, 2019–20, two- or three-color lithographs on Somerset Satin paper; 11 x 8 1/2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2022.7.1.12.



# Mariam Ghani

born 1978, New York City

# Erin Ellen Kelly

born 1976, St. Louis, Missouri

**“What we look for...are places that are really containers for histories where you can reconstruct from the place itself what the history was that unfolded there...and using performance and film in some way to speculate backwards from what has been left in the present.”<sup>21</sup>**

—Mariam Ghani (with Erin Ellen Kelly)

Previous page: Cat. 11. Still from Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019, three-channel video (color, sound); 23:36 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 2021.23.1.

A voice lifts in worshipful song, and a roomful of dancers comes into alignment, looking each other in the eye as they start to move in harmony. Over the next twenty minutes, in the central projection of Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly's three-channel video, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved* (2019; cat. 11), we see these performers cycle through choreographic sequences and musical expressions that are based on an unusual score. Assembled by Ghani and Kelly, the text that appears on the gallery wall (and at the end of this entry) knits together first-person archival accounts from Kentucky Shakers. Their words evocatively trace the dynamic emotional and spiritual arc of worship meetings held weekly by this community in the mid-nineteenth century; they also guide the artists' reanimation of these experiences through song, dance, and video. Using historical documents to compose a performance is a logical extension of Ghani and Kelly's multiyear collaboration, *Performed Places* (2006–ongoing). Across ten projects so far, Ghani's filmmaking and Kelly's choreography have been brought to bear on their shared investment in excavating layers of history, memory, and meaning enmeshed in specific sites. Through research that informs responsive movement, videography, and narrative structuring, their *Performed Places* activates and unlocks what is held in these



spaces and what might remain to be learned from listening closely to our surroundings.

In *When the Spirits Moved...*, the artists focus on Shaker Village in Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, the largest private collection of preserved nineteenth-century buildings in the United States. The American Shakers were a Protestant Christian sect founded by prophet Mother Ann Lee in 1774, with settlements up and down the Northeast and west into Ohio and Kentucky. At its height, the movement had around five thousand adherents living in nineteen communities organized around principles of simplicity, celibacy, pacifism, shared resources, and equality, regardless of race or gender. Seeking to create a more perfect society on Earth, the Shakers' example of utopian communalism runs counter to the settler-colonial values that would shape the

emergent United States—a representational democracy that nevertheless preserved inequality, and promoted expansion, accumulation, and individualism.

Ghani and Kelly's crisply shot and serenely paced video takes the Shaker ethos to heart and, when projected at human scale, allows audiences—perhaps unfamiliar with this chapter in U.S. history—to experience these embodied philosophies and imagine



Stills from Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019 (Cat. 11).

Cat. 13. Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *Meeting House, Morning*, from the series *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019, dye transfer print on Dibond, 20 x 30 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artists, courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York, 2021.94.3.

themselves as part of one of their transformative convenings. As described in the archival score, gatherings at Pleasant Hill's Meeting House interwove hymns, marches, and the bestowing of "blessings from heaven" that sparked individual and collective shaking (cat. 13). Assemblies could last up to nineteen hours, evolving from orderly greetings to ecstatic release and divine possession. To recapture this energy, the artists devised a daylong performance that would use repetitive movements, solo voice, and the percussive power of foot stomping and clapping to call in the same joyful spirit. As Twana Patrick, a singer who specializes in Shaker hymns, weaves among the shaking dancers, her repertoire shifts from light and airy to forcefully intoning that all "Come to Zion." This is met with heavier footfalls that hit in time with the recurring chorus, and exuberant social dances that take up more and more of the room. Patrick's singing recedes and swishing feet and clapping crowds join constant bird and wind sounds to form an environmental soundtrack that merges practice and place. As the artists reflected afterward, the Meeting House is a purpose-built "machine for making a joyful noise," its Gothic truss architecture resonating so each stomp sounds like five and a single voice sounds like a chorus.<sup>22</sup> Many hours in, the dancers form a circle, their insistent



clapping speeding up as individuals step into the center to channel and release waves of "quicken power" that spin, sway, and drop them to the floor. Suddenly, a quiet overtakes the group as they lay with heads to the center, taking in what has been received. Finally, they spread out, each occupying their own corner or crevice of architecture, molding their bodies to the door frame or bench, lost in private reverie that connects an inner landscape with its outer form.

These twelve hours are distilled in the central edit of the three-channel video, the sense of

Still from Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019 (Cat. 11).

duration and endurance preserved through the changing quality of light and increasing evidence of the group's exertion. Though their breathing becomes labored and clothing sticky, the dancers' faces are consistently aglow with intensity, moments of connection and introspection visible as they come in and out of sync. One of the dancers shared later that, in addition to spiritual uplift, he felt himself release patterns of judgement—whether about the Shakers as a sect or about how he is seen or sees himself in performance—

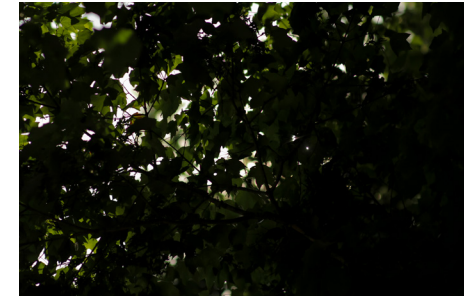
enabling him to just be in the experience.<sup>23</sup> On either side of the performance footage, mirrored video channels show static and panning shots of Pleasant Hill's rolling hills, manicured pathways, thoughtfully placed fences and walls, and simple clapboard buildings. These underscore, as the artists note, the "highly ordered patterns of movement and rituals of faith" that circumscribed Shaker life, apart from the chaotic energies unleashed during meetings.<sup>24</sup> Inspired by the highly symmetrical gift drawings Shaker women produced from divine visions (fig. 4), this structure also illustrates how everything they made—from the built and natural environment to their famous craftwork, design, and hymns—served as containers for and expression of their spirituality.

A similar symmetry is seen in the photographic series of diptychs and triptychs taken from the video. In front of these frozen and silenced images, visitors can contemplate, at their own pace, the juxtapositions set up by the artists (cat 15).

Together, Ghani and Kelly's video, performance, and photographs—and *all* they contain—offer a unique contemporary meditation on Shaker ways of being-in-common and places where we might become attuned to, and reawaken, a different set of early American values.



Fig. 4. Orville Cline (artist), Polly Reed (object maker), Western Reserve Museum (object owner), *Shaker Visionary Image*, 1935/1942, pen and ink and watercolor on paper, Index of American Design, 1943.8.13738.



Cat. 15. Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, *Triptych (Trees Above, Amanda Abandoned, and Stones Below)* from the series *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*, 2019, dye transfer print on Dibond. Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

The following text is adapted from diaries in the Shaker Village archives and is presented to viewers as an introduction to the project:

On Mother Ann's birthday the whole Society met at the Meeting House to celebrate the day. Like all Sabbaths in Shaker villages, a beautiful stillness pervaded. After the body of worshipers gathered into order, we commenced the services by one bow and opened the meeting by singing a hymn. All that were able united into ranks to step for the first song, then formed two circles for the march. At this time in a meeting it was usual to step quick and lively for two songs, sing two songs for the slow march, then two for the round dance with the circle unbroken. On this occasion the house was too crowded to march with convenience, so the dancing commenced in a promiscuous manner by the middle and young classes, and was attended with great power. The seats had to be taken out of the room to give place for the spirits to sing and dance, and the gifts and blessings of heaven were poured forth by the heavenly Orders in great abundance. We received gifts of freedom and simplicity, life and zeal, balls of love and blessing, sparks of holy fire, palms of victory, staves of strength, crowns of love, mantles and robes of wisdom, chains of union, and numerous other gifts of a similar kind, calculated to strengthen our souls and fill us with life, which continued to flow almost incessantly throughout the meeting. Sometimes when an individual would receive a bush or other emblem filled with quickening power or holy fire,

we would all unite and shake heartily. A great many were wrought upon by an irresistible power, which caused the assembly to shake and reel and toss like the trees of the forest when shaken with the wind. The involuntary exercise became so violent that we discontinued ranks and all united in the dance, and one was moved upon by the departed spirit of a female of some other Nation, and all her movements and motions seemed to prove she had lived to a very old age. There was some quiet sleepy kind of spirit took possession of Illinois Green, which caused her to sit about on the floor apparently asleep for some time, then all of a sudden she sprang to her feet and whirled and jumped about the room as tho she was affrightened into a fit. About the middle of the meeting, Emma McCormack was possessed by a spirit and lay helpless for some time, continually hollowing, then suddenly sprang to her feet and danced round the room very swiftly for a short spell. After this Emma broke out in the most melodious strains that the human mind could conceive of, singing songs new to us, that appeared to be from the Spiritual world. Much praise was danced and sung that day, and towards the conclusion we received from Holy Mother Wisdom, each one a drop of her pure love.... Some of those that were there say it was one of the liveliest meetings they were ever in.

Text adapted from:

A Brief account of the proceedings of the day, and the meeting of the Society at Pleasant Hill, Ky. December 25th, 1845. / Western Reserve Historical Society VIII A-49 June, 1847 / Spiritual journal, Pleasant Hill archives

Monday, March 8, 1852 / Spiritual journal, Pleasant Hill archives

Saturday, February 14, 1857, and March 1, Sabbath 1857 / Filson Historical Society, Bohon Shaker Collection, Volume 11 of 40, "Journal Kept by James Levi Balance, April 1, 1854–March 31, 1860"

THE LORD'S DAY, MAY 25TH / JUNE 1st [1873] / "A Journey to Kentucky in the Year 1873," Elder Henry C. Blinn





# Martine Gutierrez

born 1989, Berkeley, California

**“It’s one of my favorite things to watch people watch me. Usually people don’t recognize me in my work, I can stand alongside them as they scrunch up their nose, squint their eyes or point. It feels like I finally get to see how people internalize their perception of me, or of a person similar to me. Whether they question the gender or ethnicity of the pop-star I perform or if they don’t, both are interesting and say something about how they might interpret me as an individual irl [in real life].”<sup>25</sup>**

—Martine Gutierrez

Previous page: Cat. 17. Still from  
Martine Gutierrez, *Clubbing*, 2012,  
single-channel digital video (high-  
definition, color, sound); 3:06 min.  
Smithsonian American Art Museum,  
Museum purchase, 2021.23.2.

The satisfying clonk of a wood block keeping steady beat and the electric fuzz of synthesizer chords open the soundtrack for *Clubbing* (2012; cat. 17). A central figure, in a sparkly black dress with long black hair, coyly peers over their shoulder, and then turns to face the camera. The video cuts to another similarly framed figure in a light glittery jacket and tie with close-cropped hair, swiveling from back to front to meet the viewer with a flirtatious smile. The video’s title appears in shimmery letters before the camera pans down to find our two protagonists facing each other. As a thumping new bass line comes in, they begin dancing intently, at first maintaining a cool distance and distinct movement repertoires from the 1960s before finding synergy doing the twist. Increasingly feeding off each other, they break into mirrored choreography that has them circling, shimmying, and sliding across the dance floor. Their synced steps match the exuberance of the instrumental chorus, while their stylistic flourishes mark unique interpretations of this groove. As this section winds down, we find they are not alone. Repeating the sequence at the top, close-up shots introduce another pair of dancers, one with a beehive and striking crystal-drop earrings, and another with sideburns and a turtleneck. Pulling back to a long view reveals all four revelers sharing this surreally

abstract, silvery setting. The new couple is noticeably looser with their own bodies and more confident with each other; when the chorus returns and all leap into the interlocking choreography, their gestures are bigger and more playful. The scene suddenly feels like a party and, as often happens, we see shier attendees watching from the sidelines.

As we meet this third duo, who look noticeably similar to the previous couples, they are tentatively finding the rhythm. When the mustached figure's shoulders get too wild, their companion's attitude changes from reluctant participation to wide-eyed surprise as the music takes possession of both their bodies. Without further hesitation, they jump into the mix, six dancers now crisscrossing and boogeying down in a pattern that connects their movements but leaves plenty of room for individual expression. As the song reaches its apex, figures and faces are layered until they fill the screen with fierce, fabulous dancers staring down the viewer. The video's title appears again along with the credit, "a film by Martín Gutierrez."

*Clubbing* stands as an ode to the creativity and liberation of dance floors and their importance as places for self-discovery, interpersonal harmony, and nonconformist community building. Created in [Gutierrez's](#) final semester at Rhode Island School of



Design, the video "explores self-transformation and the intersection of fantasy and reality," as well as the cultural coding and performance of gender binaries.<sup>26</sup> (The artist's own transition adds yet another layer of fluidity to the narrative, signing past works using the forename Martín, as written in the video, later to be known as Martine after moving to New York City.) To say the film is "by" Gutierrez is an understatement. The artist is total auteur, filling every role in front of and behind the camera. Gutierrez performs all six roles, made into distinct characters thanks to hair, makeup, and costume design by Gutierrez. The original score is written by the artist, composed after watching the choreography she created and executed multiple times and shot from many

Still from Martine Gutierrez, *Clubbing*, 2012 (Cat. 17).



angles in front of a green screen alone in her studio. Splicing, compositing, and cleaning up these layers of performance, Gutierrez's skillful editing and postproduction effectively deliver on her vision, transporting viewers to another dimension where all these unique personas are believably, simultaneously moving together.

Notably, the space where this is possible is depicted as a realm apart, untethered

from physical references. The textured gray background erases any architectural or geographic markers. The glowing white floor stretches infinitely, and all edges and outlines are intentionally fuzzy, due to gauze fabric covering the lens. As if recalled through layers of time and smoke, this hazy undefinable locale explicitly evokes the idea of dance floors, and queer nightclubs in particular,

Still from Martine Gutierrez, *Clubbing*, 2012 (Cat. 17).

as utopian zones carved out from a rigid and divisive outside world. Utopia, derived from the Greek words for “no place,” always exists in this tension—defined as literally impossible to achieve, it is constantly being modeled in big and small ways by alternative communities. *Clubbing* powerfully channels feelings that emanate from discotheques around the world – the joy of digging into a groove, discovering how one’s body wants to move, on its own and in relation to others, and finding individual and collective connectivity through the music—and suggests their revolutionary potential.

Conversely, the time period referenced in Gutierrez’s art direction is clear and consistent. The mod-influenced minidresses, beehive-topped long tresses, and stylish suits and pompadours are classic mid-sixties looks, pointedly mixed with Latinx details, like a bolero-cut jacket and finely stitched brocade, that resist the whitewashing of this period in fashion history. The vamping music, inspired by R&B dance-floor stalwarts like “September” (1978) by Earth, Wind & Fire, offers an easy, smooth beat that anyone can sway to. The staging draws from formalized sixties dance number cutaways, like those in choreographer-director Bob Fosse’s movie musicals (fig. 5), and television revues like Rowan & Martin’s *Laugh-In* (1968-73), which

also featured stars in close-up, staring right out at the viewer and mugging for the camera.

Exaggerated lashes, a signature flair for mod makeup, are here taken to extremes with fully painted-on eyes that amplify facial expressivity and the overall performativity of these roles. This era is widely associated with increasing freedom to explore sexuality and assert individuality, yet how this was promoted in popular culture often reinforced expectations of a fixed gender divide and cisgender heterosexual matchmaking.<sup>27</sup> Revisiting this time with a more fluid mindset, Gutierrez celebrates identity exploration unbound by these limits.

Fig. 5. Still of Bob Fosse’s “Rich Man’s Frug,” featured in the movie *Sweet Charity* (1969).



Casting herself into roles that read as three men and three women paired up as heterosexual couples, Gutierrez points to the surface understanding of identity implied by such simplistic categories. Through the complexities of drag, what at first seems a reaffirmation of conservative gender lines and pairings becomes a kaleidoscope of queer possibility. This is something Gutierrez explores across her creative practice, in videos, photographs, performances, installations, and self-released albums and magazines that knowingly play on stereotypes and their repeated commodification (fig. 6). As she writes, "I was driven to question how identity is formed, expressed, valued, and weighed as a woman, as a transwoman, as a Latinx woman, as a woman of indigenous descent, as a femme artist and maker. It is nearly impossible to arrive at any finite answers, but for me, this process of exploration is exquisitely life-affirming."<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 6. Cover of *Indigenous Woman* (2018), an artist magazine Martine Gutierrez created in 2014 to explore the commodification of identity.



# Arthur Jafa

born 1960, Tupelo, Mississippi

**“How can we interrogate the medium [of film] to find a way Black movement in itself could carry, for example, the weight of sheer tonality in Black song? And I’m not talking about the lyrics that Aretha Franklin sang. I’m talking about how she sang them.... How can we analyze the tone, not the sequence of notes that Coltrane hit, but the tone itself, and synchronize Black visual movement with that?...I’m developing an idea that I call Black Visual Intonation.”** <sup>29</sup>

—Arthur Jafa

Previous page: Cat. 18. Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016, single-channel digital video (high-definition, color, sound); 7:25 min. Joint museum purchase with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Nion T. McEvoy, Chair of SAAM Commission (2016–2018), and McEvoy’s fellow Commissioners in his honor; additional funding provided by Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 2020.001; 2020.3.

Speaking into a news microphone, American hero Charles Ramsey shares his perspective after saving three kidnapped women. “I knew something was wrong when a little pretty white girl ran into a Black man’s arms,” he recalls, before repeating with eyebrows raised and a knowing smirk, “Something is wrong here.” This statement hangs in the air as hummed singing begins and the screen cuts to basketball fans swag-surfing at Howard University, Jafa’s alma mater, and then to a woman in her bathrobe being escorted along a hallway. Those with a visual archive of African American history in their head may recognize Black Panther leader Fred Hampton’s wife the morning after he was assassinated. Her dignified devastation is followed by black-and-white footage of young civil rights activists, arms linked, stepping in sync, full of joy as they set about changing the world. Matching their faith, Kanye West’s voice on the soundtrack sings the chorus of the accompanying song for the first time: “We on an Ultralight Beam...This is a God Dream... This is Everything.” By the time the chorus concludes, hope has been replaced by horror, as grainy cell-phone footage shows unarmed civilian Walter Scott being shot in the back by a police officer.





So unfolds the first thirty seconds of Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (LMMD; 2016; cat. 18), a seven-and-a-half-minute tour de force hailed as one of the most important artworks of the twenty-first century. The ultimate realization of the artist's stated goal of creating a "Black cinema with the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music," LMMD majestically brings together Jafa's filmic strategies and cherished subjects so the video simultaneously represents and resonates with the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of Black life in America.<sup>30</sup> Jafa composed this opus from clips across a century of moving images, found on the internet and encompassing excerpts from silent films, internet memes, documentary footage with Getty Image watermarks, and Hollywood blockbusters, as well as his own home movies and past projects as a director and cinematographer. The selection's emotional

range, like its temporal sourcing, whiplashes viewers between moments of celebration and mourning, humor and crisis, profound historical significance and everyday intimacy. Yet, it is clear that the artwork's power is found not only in this expansive, incisive content but, like Aretha Franklin's singing, in how Jafa makes these notes vibrate.

Deploying a technique Jafa termed "Black Visual Intonation," the musically derived approach to filmmaking that he proposed over twenty years ago, Jafa treats time as an unstable and malleable element. Through editing that favors "affective proximity," he draws out resonant harmonies between seemingly unrelated selections.<sup>31</sup> By manipulating the playback rate in certain clips, Jafa controls the flow of movements within the frame, more forcefully aligning them with the soundtrack while

Stills from Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 (Cat. 18) showing historical footage that oscillates between hope and horror of America's civil rights struggle in the 1960s. From left: Getty-watermarked footage of a furniture store fire during the Chicago riots, sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.; Martin Luther King Jr. in a motorcade; and Black demonstrators sitting at a counter as a white mob attempts to drag them from their seats.

extending Black rhythmic virtuosity into the visual realm. While often subtle, we can see this technique in action when, about a minute into the film, a young boy (Jafa's son Ayler) leaps along a sidewalk, floating in slow motion toward an open door. As his trajectory arcs down, he resumes normal speed to land in sync with a crunchy warped downbeat. Four minutes later, a crowd of protesters digitally morphs between stilled poses, the swelling and pulsing of their shifts matched to Chance the Rapper's syncopated lyrics.

Jafa immediately recognized the resonance between his visuals and the souring music and searing commentary of West's "Ultralight Beam" (2016), itself a compendium of Black musical innovation and talent.<sup>32</sup> A contemporary gospel and hip-hop anthem, the song features rapped verses by West and Chance, R&B vocals from The-Dream and Kelly Price, and a chorus powered by gospel singer Kirk Franklin and his ten-piece choir. Though not originally edited to match, after Jafa set this newly released song to the video-in-progress, he found it took only tweaking for them to amplify each other.



Top: Still from Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 (Cat. 18) showing Jafa's son Ayler midair.

Still from Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 (Cat. 18) featuring gospel legend Lateria Wooten leading chorus and congregants.



Crucially, at what he calls “landmark moments,” Jafa cuts away from West’s song altogether to allow original synced audio to come through.<sup>33</sup> In one such moment, a mother begs cops not to “terrorize my children”; in another, actress Amandla Stenberg asks, “What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture?” While that vision remains elusive, LMMD demonstrates exactly what an artwork based in that love looks, sounds, and feels like.

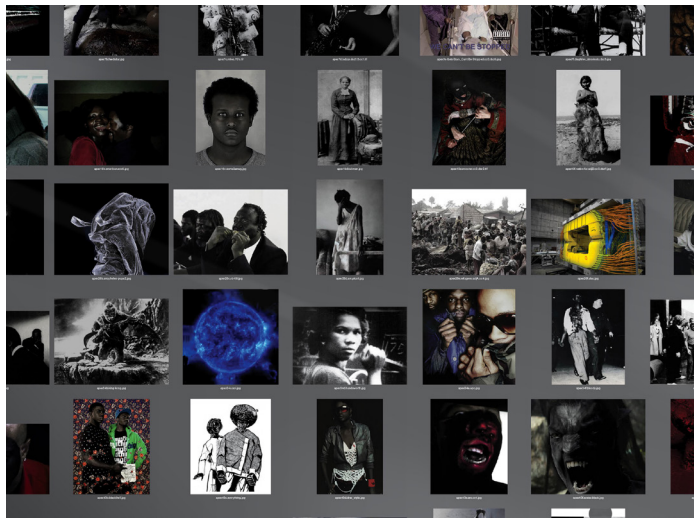
Debuting on the eve of the 2016 presidential election, LMMD was celebrated for the timely mirror it held to the role of systemic racism in shaping the United States. Yet, as Jafa has noted, the work emphasizes the continuity of this reality and is tragically, repeatedly proven relevant. One such instance came in May 2020, when the police murder of George Floyd circulated via nine excruciating minutes caught on a cell-phone video,

sparking a summer of international uprisings for racial justice. With the artist’s full support, the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden co-organized a global forty-eight-hour live, looping stream of LMMD that June, the first time the full work was made available online. In addition to ensuring the video could be part of urgent conversations in the broader world, the screening became a fulcrum for discussions with SAAM’s audiences and communities in Washington, D.C.

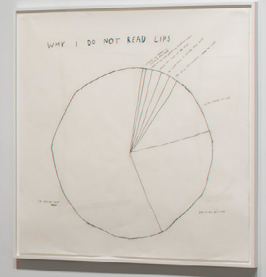
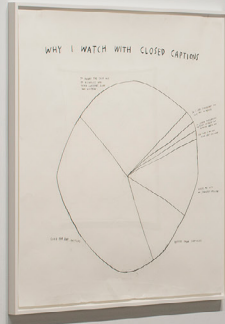
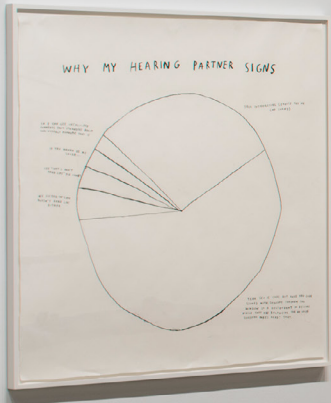
Both LMMD and the massive photographic panels of *APEX GRID* (cat. 19) stem from Jafa’s lifelong practice of compiling visual material he deems striking. As a child in Mississippi, the future filmmaker would arrange clippings into notebooks and binders, later graduating to digital images in desktop folders. *APEX GRID* displays the full content of one of these folders. Within their glossy surfaces, hundreds of images are scaled to fit, like thumbnails, into neat rows that stretch across an imposing wall. Juxtaposed with strong representation of Black musicians, album covers, and other cultural touchstones, one finds cartoon characters, African-inspired fashion, punk posturing, and a vast array of science fiction and horror references—instances of what Jafa sees as popular culture mining and managing

Still from Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 (Cat. 18), one of several included scenes shot by Jafa at his daughter’s wedding.

ideas and fears around Blackness. Jafa first shared this sequence of images and set them to techno music in his propulsive 2013 video, *APEX*. By reimagining and deconstructing them into a static, wall-based work, Jafa gives viewers an opportunity to slow down and consume the images at their own pace, to linger on singular components or draw their own subjective connections. And because the scale makes it impossible to take in the full collage and image details at once, Jafa encourages audiences to move backward and forward, left and right, creating their own affective rhythm for setting these visuals into motion.



Cat. 19. Arthur Jafa, *APEX GRID*  
 (installation view at Gavin Brown's  
 enterprise, New York, and detail),  
 2018, Epson fine print face-mounted  
 Diasec acrylic on aluminum panel,  
 105 1/2 x 352 1/2 x 2 1/4 in., Private  
 collection.



# Christine Sun Kim

born 1980, Orange County, California

**“When I started to consider sound as art, vibration was the first thing that came to mind. After a while, I realized it wasn’t enough and I needed to go beyond its materiality. I began shifting towards other aspects: idea, musicality, social currency, notation, phenomena.”** <sup>34</sup>

—Christine Sun Kim

Previous page: Cat. 20. Christine Sun Kim, *One Week of Lullabies for Roux*, 2018. Seven audio tracks, installation with bench, cushions and headphones, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2020.79.1.

A long bench stretches across the gallery, a set of headphones resting atop each of its seven colorful cushions. Depending on where a visitor enters *One Week of Lullabies for Roux* (2018; cat. 20), the earpieces might be playing field recordings of a frog-filled bog or a man imitating ocean sounds with his voice. The length might be less than thirty seconds or over eleven minutes. In all cases, though, the compositions conform to a score by artist Christine Sun Kim and shared with seven collaborators. As a Deaf parent of a hearing child, Kim immediately found herself questioning what others might take for granted: What is a lullaby? What is a healthy “sound diet” for an infant? Who decides? Intending “to be mindful of what my baby [Roux] grows up listening to,” Kim did not feel comfortable sharing the pre-recorded songs on a sleep monitor, and instead, “invited my parent friends to make lullabies for Roux based on [my] conceptual score.”<sup>35</sup> The written instructions specified no lyrics or speech, an emphasis on low frequencies, and welcomed tracks of any length that could be played on repeat, at low or medium volume, between seven and eight in the evening, to encourage sleep. Accessible by moving along seating designed by the artist to evoke a weekly pillbox, these songs are now offered to gallerygoers as daily

supplements for an otherwise frenetic and unregulated sound diet.

In this work, as in so many across her multimedia practice, Kim turns the notion that Deaf people are excluded from the world of sound on its head. Her work reveals, instead, the critical awareness, social sensitivity, and political insights that comes from navigating that world without audio as the primary guide. For example, if one sets aside the melody and focuses on the lyrics of many traditional lullabies, like “Rock-a-bye Baby,” they are surprisingly violent and not soothing at all, promising treacherous treetop falls for baby and all. Kim’s audiences are often confronted with how the status quo of a hearing-dominated society keeps us all from thinking more deeply about how and what we communicate.

The challenging yet incredibly creative terrain of translating between different expressive systems, sensory registers, and unique perspectives is at the heart of Kim’s video artwork *Close Readings* (2015; cat. 21). When one first approaches this silent piece, which plays on four monitors hung in a line on the wall, it seems all screens are playing the same material. As edited together by Kim, the twenty-six-minute sequence draws together five feature films that foreground voice, voicelessness, and agency in their plot. Despite

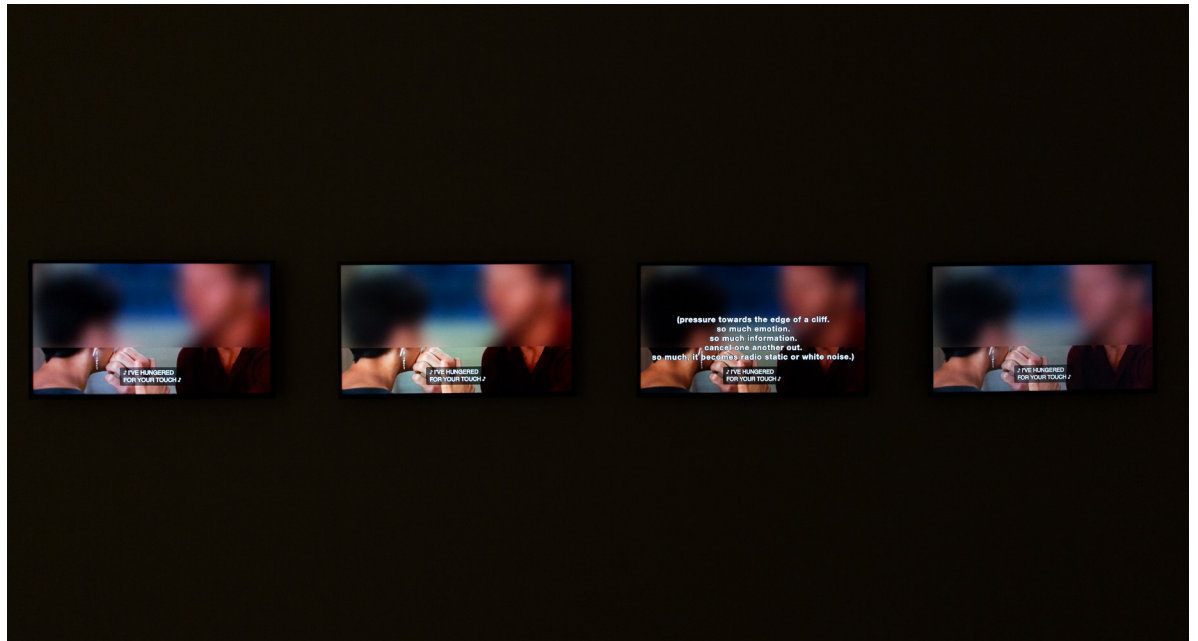


Cat. 21. Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, 2015, four-channel video (color, silent); 25:53 min., in collaboration with Jeffrey Mansfield, Ariel Baker-Gibbs, Alison O’Daniel, Lauren Ridloff. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2020.79.2.

Detail, Christine Sun Kim, *One Week of Lullabies for Roux*, 2018 (Cat. 20).

the top two-thirds of the images being blurred, many audiences will recognize scenes with the independently animate hand known as Thing from 1991's *The Addams Family*; Whoopi Goldberg translating as a psychic-medium for Patrick Swayze in *Ghost* (1990); the speechless flirtations of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989); and the deadly dictation of HAL, the mission-control computer, in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Perhaps less familiar is an intense family confrontation from the Greek art-house film *Dogtooth* (2009), which appears after *The Addams Family*.

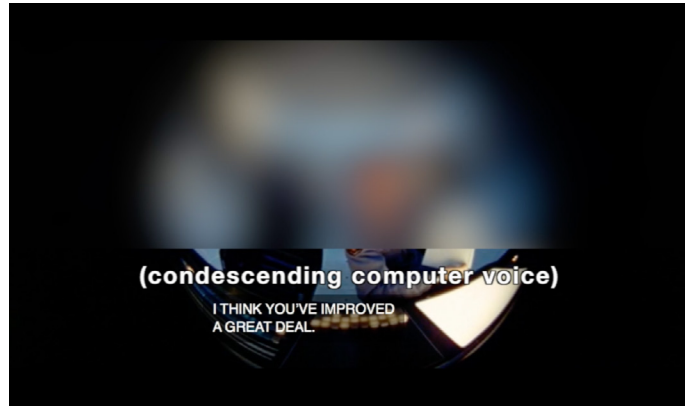
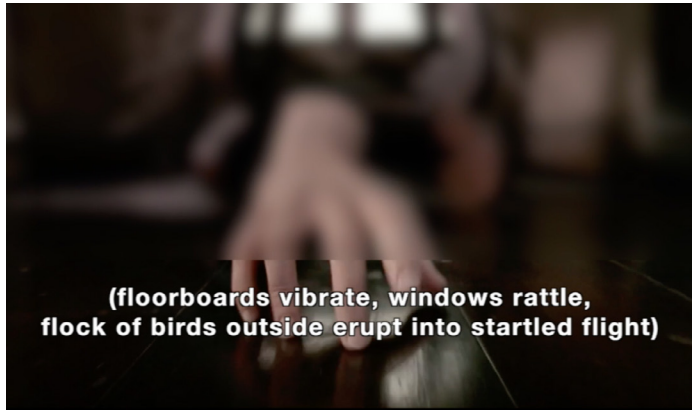
As the four channels play these clips in sync, the difference between them becomes apparent in the contrasting captions seen along the bottom of each screen. Again, working collaboratively, Kim asked four fellow d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing creatives—architect and designer Jeffrey Mansfield, writer and editor Ariel Baker-Gibbs, artist and filmmaker Alison O'Daniel, and actor and Marvel superhero Lauren Ridloff—to respond to her edit by providing their own linguistic interpretations of the given visuals and imagined audio. These individualized captions appear in bold, thick font above the closed captions that film studios created for each release. Viewers are invited to contrast the robust and evocative texts of Kim's collaborators with the paltry information shared by standard captions, as well as to observe how the writers' distinct



styles and perspectives change the impact of matching scenes. In this way, *Close Readings* highlights the highly subjective and inconsistent practice of film captioning, the significant responsibility captioners have for shaping experience, and the generally untapped possibility for captions to creatively support the filmic vision. For some movies, this might mean adding details about era, style, instrumentation, and tempo to the barely useful note that “[music]” is playing, while others might invite the poetic or humorous descriptions offered here, such as “[single breathy violin],” “[the sounds of internal struggle becoming external],” or “[music formulated to biologically stimulate our mirror neurons to trigger uncontrollable weeping].”<sup>36</sup>

Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, 2015 (Cat. 21).





Stills from Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, 2015, with captions by Alison O'Daniel (left) and Jeffrey Mansfield (right) (Cat. 21).

Kim started her graduate studies as a painter at New York's School of Visual Arts in 2006, but it was not until she redefined her creative realm and pursued a second master's of fine arts in sound and music from Bard College that she found her artistic voice.<sup>37</sup> She has since embraced her position as a sound artist who approaches this field conceptually, psychologically, and socially, rather than as a singular medium. Using everything from charcoal to Velcro, she mines parallels between musical notation and glossing, a notation system for sign language; between the way a score directs instrumentalists and she conducts American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters; and between the expressive registers of certain musical forms, like opera and anthems, and the embodied visual language of ASL.

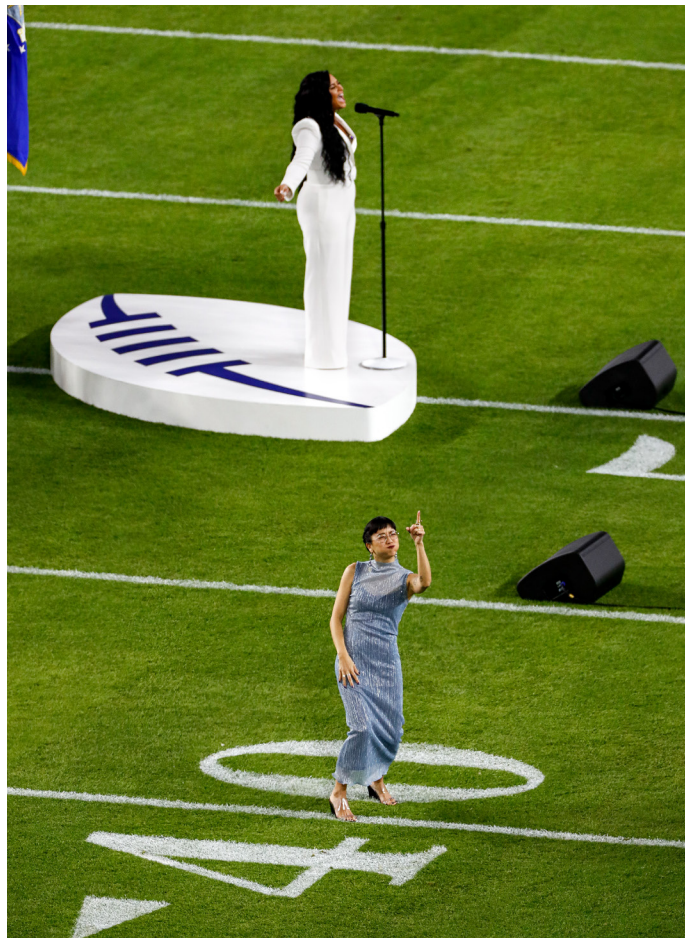
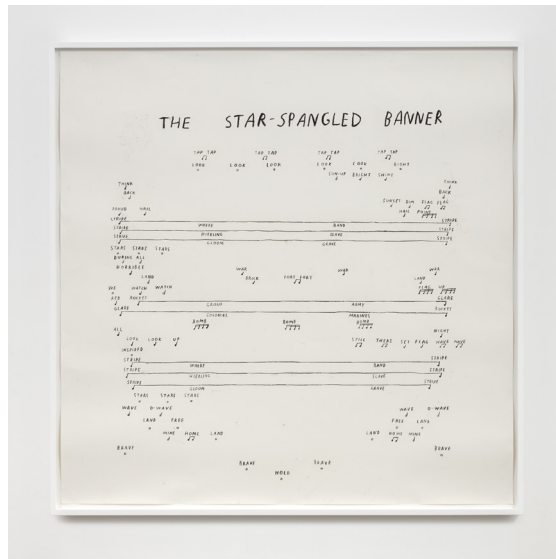


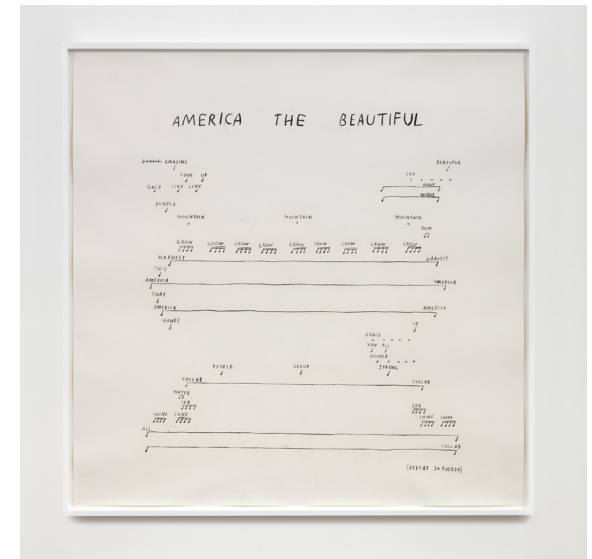
Fig. 7. Christine Sun Kim, bottom, and pop singer Demi Lovato, top, performing at the Super Bowl. Photo by Scott McIntyre.

These lines of inquiry, along with Kim's political activism, come together in the two score-based drawings (cats. 22, 23) that she made after performing as the ASL interpreter for the national anthem and "America the Beautiful" at the Super Bowl in 2020 (fig. 7).<sup>38</sup> The combination of graphic lines with punctuating notes and parsed, reordered, and spatialized lyrics show how she had carefully prepared her translation from spoken English to ASL in a way that matched the singer's rhythmic and dynamic range with her own. Her decisions about what to emphasize and how to lay out the pages comes out of her continued reflection on this moment and material, and conveys a perspective on these patriotic songs that is both hopeful and critical. In *America the Beautiful* (2020) the words "grow," "grace," "group," and "shine" make strong impressions, while in *The Star-Spangled Banner* (*Third Verse*) (2020), Kim places "hireling," "slave," "gloom," and "grave" under the four striped long notes that evoke the flag and centers "war" and "bomb," underscoring America's long history of racism and violence, present at its founding and embedded in national symbols and rituals still active today. Football player and activist Colin Kaepernick's decision to take a knee, rather than stand, during the national anthem in 2016 brought attention to the United States' unfulfilled promise of racial equality; Kim brings disability

justice into the frame, while calling out how the song itself represents the values of an enslaver, the lyricist Francis Scott Key.<sup>39</sup> Knowing that—whether belted out or signed—the songs we build community around matter, Kim's artist note for this piece (on the following page) encourages the adoption of a new anthem.



Cat. 22. Christine Sun Kim, *The Star-Spangled Banner* (*Third Verse*), 2020, charcoal on paper, 58 1/4 x 58 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase and purchase through the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2021.31.1.



Cat. 23. Christine Sun Kim, *America the Beautiful*, 2020, charcoal on paper, 58 1/4 x 58 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase and purchase through the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2021.31.2.

## Artist Statement

### July 2020

This is a notation drawing of the American Sign Language (ASL) translation of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the national anthem of the United States, which I signed during Super Bowl LIV in February 2020 in front of millions of viewers. Accepting the invitation to give such a performance was not an easy decision; however, it was vital for creating visibility for the Deaf and disabled communities in America. While I initially dissected and rearranged the anthem in a way that suits ASL and my vantage point as a disabled performer, I have since learned that Francis Scott Key, the anthem’s lyricist, actively defended the rights of slave owners, owned slaves himself, and cultivated an openly anti-Black and anti-Abolition attitude. With this information in mind, I wish for the work’s potential visibility to now be extended by highlighting the fact that Black disabled people are disproportionately targeted by the police: Half of people killed by police have a disability (David M. Perry and Lawrence Carter-Long, 2016) and more than half of Black people with disabilities will have been arrested at least once by the time they reach their late 20s (Erin J. McCauley, 2017). Systemic racism permeates American culture so deeply that it becomes a norm and it goes unchallenged, and often unnoticed — much like the country’s anthem. We must all support the movement by practicing both anti-racism and anti-ableism. Black Disabled Lives Matter.

### September 2020

The full song of “The Star-Spangled Banner” consists of four stanzas; only the first one is used for the national anthem. The following is the third stanza:

And **where is that band** who so  
vauntingly swore,  
That the havoc of war and the battle’s confusion  
A home and a Country should leave us no more?  
Their blood has wash’d out their foul  
footstep’s pollution.  
No refuge could save **the hireling and slave**  
From the terror of flight or **the gloom of**  
**the grave,**  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph  
doth wave  
O’er the land of the free and the home of  
the brave.

Upon reading all four stanzas, I found them to be heavily tainted with racism and mockery. I selected three phrases (above in bold) and placed them under the beams of the stripe notes, as if they’re part of the flag. Analyzing the text, a number of experts have suggested that “Where is that band” refers to the Colonial Marines, a group of enslaved Black Americans that fought for Britain in order to earn freedom. “The hireling and slave” is Francis Scott Key’s way of mocking both British soldiers and the Colonial Marines. “The gloom of the grave”

is perhaps his reaction to them as a slave owner, cursing both to the grave. I added this focus on the third verse in response to racial injustices that have been inflicted for centuries, and I support the growing call to replace “The Star-Spangled Banner” with “Lift Every Voice and Sing” of 1899 by J. Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson, which is considered the Black national anthem.

— Christine Sun Kim



# Simone Leigh

born 1968, Chicago, Illinois

# Liz Magic Laser

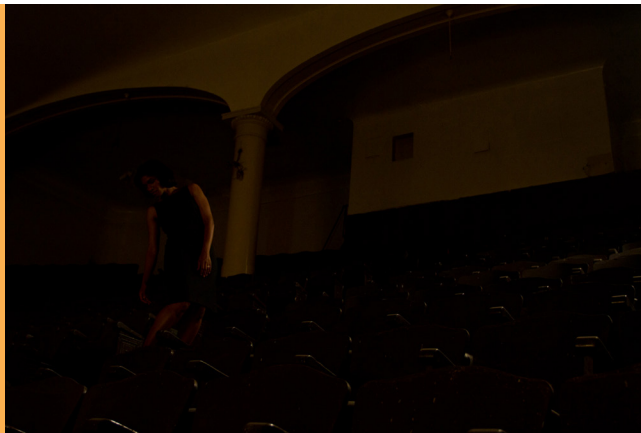
born 1981, New York City

**“We were interested in how the different representations of the female hysteric were for the most part overwrought and grotesque...It is too much for the viewer to take in – the viewer is fascinated but it eventually makes us shrink away. We worked with those cringe-worthy expressions, but Alicia [Hall Moran] performed them with such virtuosity. She can make us hear those unpalatable utterances and receive those expressions because of her virtuosic delivery.”<sup>40</sup>**

—Liz Magic Laser with Simone Leigh

Previous page: Cat. 24. Still from Simone Leigh and Liz Magic Laser, *Breakdown*, 2011, single channel digital video (color, sound); 9:00 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Samuel and Blanche Koffler Acquisition Fund, 2019.33.2.

Lights come up on a raked mezzanine of an empty old theater. Echoing footfalls precede the appearance of a woman walking down the aisle and into the frame. The camera comes closer to this Black figure in a dark, dignified sleeveless dress, as she bows her head and draws a deep breath. When the performer, renowned mezzo-soprano and artist Alicia Hall Moran, shatters the silence with a piercing cry of “Oh my God!,” the sounds and feel is of a polished professional launching into an aria at an audition. The piece quickly reveals itself as something even more complex: a musical interpretation of deep, profound emotional stress; an operatic breakdown layered with references that stretch from early Christian hymns to reality TV. Moran’s vocalization ranges from guttural depths to melodious peaks, as her face and body jerk between wildly divergent expressive states. She shifts without warning from smoothly held notes and refined posture to heartbreaking cracks, contorted limbs, and off-kilter whispers, careening between signs of virtuosic control and emotional instability. Throughout, Moran remains alone. Her experience goes without an audience save the video viewer, whom she confronts with long, sustained eye contact and a raised finger pointed directly at those she knows are out there, witnessing her pain.



*Breakdown* (2011; cat. 24) builds on a history of women's psychological breakdowns in stage and screen portrayals, and in "real life." The script, assembled by Laser and Leigh, includes sections from Amiri Baraka's 1964 play *Dutchman*, the long-running A&E reality TV series *Intervention* (2005-22), and the satirical soap opera *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (1976-77), in which characters narrate their thoughts during mental crisis. Laser and Leigh's collaboration began with shared interest in earlier citations of female hysteria, including the infamous photographs of mentally distressed patients of nineteenth-century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (fig. 8), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 feminist short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper."

These appropriated texts and poses become the libretto and choreography for Moran's tour-de-force performance. In developing the script

into the final recording, Laser and Leigh looked to Moran's artistic range and improvisational dexterity to transmute the mundane repetitive phrases and "unpalatable" shrill cries of hysteria into the musical layers that would imbue them with gravitas, heroism, and history. "The music [from seeing Alicia's shows] was the turning point in *Breakdown*, because we found very specific references for the singing style," Laser noted in a later interview, and Leigh emphasized, "I was interested in representing as many African American song styles as possible."<sup>41</sup> Within the overarching operatic frame, touches of the blues, show tunes, and spirituals come through, with one moment intentionally mimicking the nineteenth-century English hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers." On another cue, Moran's loss of words morphs into jazz scatting reminiscent of Betty Carter.

Stills from Simone Leigh and Liz Magic Laser, *Breakdown*, 2011 (Cat. 24).

Borrowing the declaration of a stressed housewife, Moran sends her voice soaring like an “Amen” to testify, “I’ve been performing myyyy whooooooole liiiii-iiife!” This rings true as a meta-commentary connecting her individual insight with societal expectations for women and Black people writ large. Deploying operatic style to align this Black woman’s emotive release with a traditionally elitist European high-art form, the video invites empathy but also demands analysis – What kinds of overwrought emotional displays are valued, and which are pathologized? Whose personal dramas are legitimized and whose are dismissed? What extra limitations are placed on women of color and their agency to express themselves? When are they recognized as being in distress and how are they treated? Further, her statement points to the mediated self-consciousness of all contemporary individuals, carefully maintaining appearances in the face of daily inequities, stressors, and pocket-sized cameras at every turn. As cultural critic Claire Barliant wrote about TV show character Mary Hartman in an essay that the two artists shared as part of their research, “the 1970s nervous breakdown seems to have mostly sprung from...an awareness of self as Audience, and of self as being under scrutiny, as a subject



under surveillance.”<sup>42</sup> With today’s heightened self-surveillance and performed realities for the camera, this pressure has only increased.

While the research-based scripting of *Breakdown* is a mainstay of Laser’s ongoing practice, which regularly assembles public texts and restages them in revealing ways, Leigh is best known for ceramic and bronze sculptures that, like this video, center Black female subjectivity in ways that simultaneously signal and protect private depths and complexities.<sup>43</sup> Shown alongside *Breakdown*, Leigh’s *Cupboard VIII* (2018; cat. 25) presents us with a striking female figure, just over ten feet tall. Her multilayered dried raffia leaf skirt is monumentally scaled, raising her torso far above audiences below. This material and grand silhouette appear regularly in Leigh’s sculptures, simultaneously referencing racist “mammy” tropes in U.S. visual culture, and innovative architectural structures

Fig. 8. Jean-Martin Charcot’s late nineteenth-century photographic studies of hysteria, taken at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, where Charcot was a medical teacher and clinician.

from West Africa. The stoneware upper body, however, is perfectly life-sized and lifelike with warm-brown arms elegantly outstretched, echoing the stance of a vocalist poised to begin an operatic performance. Balanced atop the neck, where one might expect a human head, Leigh has molded a bulbous jug, its open mouth tipped slightly forward. One of Leigh's collaborators, Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, wrote how this figure reminded her of a woman whose "songs came out of her like waves, like water spilling over a rim."<sup>44</sup> And yet, there is a silence here too—without a mouth, without a face, Leigh's monument is anonymous and expansive, encompassing many histories and giving away no identities, guarding inner worlds from public spectacle even as she gestures outwards and demands attention.



Cat. 25. Simone Leigh, *Cupboard VIII*, 2018, stoneware, steel, raffia, Albany slip, overall: 125 x 120 x 120 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Bridgitt and Bruce Evans.



**SKY** *be so big that* **SKY**  
*will learn*



# Cauleen Smith

born 1967, Riverside, California

**“I thought, if you can just listen to the way this woman [Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda] plays keyboard and literally takes us on this insane trip.... I can actually use her music to talk about these different speculations. If I’m thinking about her music as scores, because her songs are a kind of travel outwards and inward, and I make images to speak to that, then I might be doing something.”** <sup>45</sup>

—Cauleen Smith

Previous page: Cat. 26. Still from Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner*, 2018, single-channel digital video (color, sound); 22:41 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the SJ Weiler Fund, 2020.54.1.

Listening to the music and writing of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda is at the core of filmmaker Cauleen Smith's recent work. Fascinated by the sense of freedom and the collapsing of time found in Coltrane's musical oeuvre, Smith started working on projects that open from Coltrane to an expansive web of Black feminist brilliance and utopian experimentation. In two related films, *Sojourner* (2018; cat. 26) and *Pilgrim* (2017; cat. 27), Smith draws evocative parallels between Coltrane's spiritual journey, begun in the 1960s, and that of Rebecca Cox Jackson, a free Black Shaker Eldress in the nineteenth century. Smith emphasizes their relevance for the present, encouraging all to listen carefully for their wisdom reaching through the ages.

*Pilgrim* opens with a black screen, the sound of applause, and Coltrane's voice from a 1978 performance recording. She dedicates the next piece to her late husband, jazz icon John Coltrane, and begins a nonstop flow of melodic progressions up and down the keyboard as contemporary footage of the Vedantic Center, a spiritual retreat or ashram she founded in the mountains outside of Los Angeles, appears. The camera lingers over the surfaces of her plexiglass-encased organ and then moves outward to show its pride of place at the front of the congregation room, preserving and entombing her presence where she once led



Cat. 27. Stills from Cauleen Smith, *Pilgrim*, 2017, single-channel digital video (color, sound); 7:41 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the SJ Weiler Fund, 2020.54.2.

devotees in life and in song. Pulling further out, dappled sunlight plays over the ashram buildings, trees, and disciples, captured on color-saturated celluloid, while Coltrane's solo piano continues to rumble and swell.<sup>46</sup> After a brief interlude visiting Watts Towers, an art structure and community hub in southern Los Angeles, these California locations are replaced by the lush greenery and older structures of northeastern farmland. The camera plunges past a white picket fence to commune with flowers and headstones while Coltrane's playing dives to a deeper register and pounds out closing chords. In the final shot, the historic marker for this Shaker cemetery is overtaken by washes of red and gold as the soundtrack returns to applause.

A filmmaker noted for early works that aligned with Afrofuturist, speculative modes of storytelling, Smith has also always been driven by histories that resonate across time. Long obsessed with Shaker gift drawings, manifested in the mid-1800s by young women adherents during ecstatic visions, Smith was immediately struck by similarities found there and in Coltrane's mystical writings.<sup>47</sup> Though created within a community that banned all music but worshipful a cappella singing, Shaker drawings often featured small structures labeled "Heavenly Musical



Stills from Cauleen Smith, *Pilgrim*, 2017 (Cat. 27), showing Watts Towers and Shaker cemetery.



Instruments”; almost a hundred years later, Coltrane describes encountering “celestial instruments” in the astral plane. Following this connective thread, Smith found out about Rebecca Cox Jackson, whose precise accounts of floating above Earth’s atmosphere are shockingly resonant with Coltrane’s and with images taken from space a century later. From here, Smith notes, “I started thinking about women in general turning to visions and projections outside of ourselves just to live, just to be.”<sup>48</sup>

Tracing these other ways to live and be, *Sojourner* weaves together examples of “radically generous community and intentional world building” that exist across time and space and can be built on in the here and now.<sup>49</sup> These include the Fletcher Street Stables, a century-old anchor for urban Black cowboy culture; John Coltrane and Sun Ra



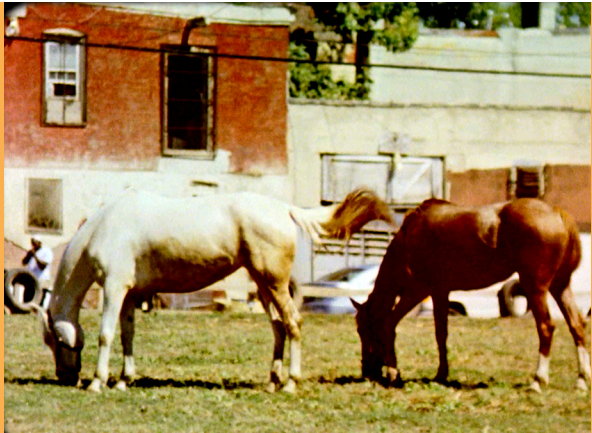
Arkestra’s respective residences; and Jackson’s Urban Shaker Community, all in Philadelphia, as well as a community art center in Chicago, a city where we also see present-day organizers calling on crowds to imagine “Freedom City.” Coltrane’s ashram, the Shaker cemetery, and Watts Towers reappear, amid other vistas that highlight California’s majestic landscape.

The soundtrack opens and closes with songs from Coltrane’s album *Eternity* (1975), where a blend of cosmic jazz, Indian devotional chanting, and church music convey her spiritual and sonic evolution. In between, the airwaves are filled with voices alternately offering Jackson’s and Coltrane’s detailed mystical visions in the first person, and the Combahee River Collective’s 1977 political manifesto on the need for Black feminism. On-screen, we see a crew of futuristically dressed, multiracial

Stills from Cauleen Smith, *Pilgrim*, 2017 (Cat. 27), showing Coltrane’s Vedic ashram, California, with the Watervliet Shaker community, New York.



Still from Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner*, 2018 (Cat. 26) of organizers of R3 (Resist. Reimagine. Rebuild), a Chicago-based activist coalition.



young women receive these broadcasts of timeless wisdom through old-fashioned radios, while marching and posing with Day-Glo orange banners. In the film's final and longest passage, they listen while exploring artist Noah Purifoy's otherworldly Outdoor Desert Art Museum, before processing through the desert to Coltrane's swelling, swinging organ. In a final pose, meant to echo a 1966 photo by Bill Ray featuring stylish Black men at Watts Towers (fig. 9), Smith's protagonists present her vision: a women-led future that is tuned into and inspired by the transtemporal, intersectional network of utopian realities her film has just traced.

After premiering a feature film right out of her master's at UCLA in 1998, Smith found increasing support for her experimental and multilayered approach in the art world, where the worlds she was envisioning could extend beyond the screen. *Sojourner* is projected in a

space with rotating disco balls and iridescent wallpaper that bounce light around the room, enveloping viewers in an intentional listening environment. Smith's multimedia installations have led to stand-alone sculptures, also often inspired by musical references, including several neon pieces that take song lyrics as points of departure. In *Light up My Life (For Sandra Bland)* (2019; cat. 28), neon letters flash between reading, "I will light up your life," a play on the title refrain from a saccharine 1970s ballad, and "I will light you up," the threat issued to Sandra Bland, a Black woman on her way to start a university job, before a Texas trooper pulled her from her car during a routine traffic stop in 2015. Bland was found hanging in a jail cell days later; the death was ruled suicide by authorities. The words in *Sunshine (for Brayla, Merci, Shakiie, Draya, Tatiana, and Bree, Riah, Dominique, ...)* (2020; cat. 29),

Above: Stills from Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner*, 2018 (Cat. 26), with scenes of (from left) the Fletcher Steet Stables, the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, and Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve.

light from the bottom to the top, building the choral repetitions of “my life” that kick off Roy Ayer’s summer classic, “Everybody Loves the Sunshine” (1976). Smith’s title offers a darker kind of repetition, recounting the names of eight trans women all killed within weeks of each other in 2020. These women dared to live in the light as their true selves. Their names are now shouted at protests affirming that their lives matter even if their deaths go unsolved. Smith uses these songs’ familiarity as a hook for considering complicity –when do you notice the violence, and when do you just sing along? Whether in 16mm films, immersive media experiences, or singular sculptures, Smith repeatedly turns to music and musicians to find points of connection and constellations of brilliance that she can follow and amplify.



Fig. 9. Bill Ray, *Young men hang out near Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers*, 1966.

Cat. 26. Still from Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner*, 2018, of women posing in Noah Purifoy’s Outdoor Desert Art Museum.



Cat. 28. Cauleen Smith, *Light up My Life (For Sandra Bland)*, 2019, neon, Plexiglas, faceted hematite, and aluminum chain, overall: 106 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 68 x 5 in. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio. Purchase through the generosity of an anonymous donor, 2020.33. Edition loaned to the exhibition by the New Britain Museum of American Art (see "Catalogue of Works," p. 110).



Cat. 29. Cauleen Smith, *Sunshine (for Brayla, Merci, Shakiie, Draya, Tatiana, and Bree, Riah, Dominique...)*, 2020, neon, MDF, paint, gold-plated chain link, 60 x 45 in. Courtesy of the artist and Morán Morán, Los Angeles.

# Postscript as Prelude:

HISTORIES OF MUSICAL THINKING  
IN SAAM'S TIME-BASED MEDIA  
ART COLLECTION





The exhibition *Musical Thinking: New Video Art and Sonic Strategies*, as its title suggests, is focused on recent artworks that merge music and video. In fact, all the pieces in the show are twenty-first-century creations. Yet, the contemporary artists featured in this exhibition are continuing a long history of visual artists looking to music as a sister art form, especially after electricity and other technological innovations allowed their work to spring into motion in the nineteenth century. This interrelationship is known to scholars, but not often shared widely or traced from its historic roots to current trends. As a prelude to the present exhibition, then, this section aims to introduce wider audiences to the role of “musical thinking” in the development of time-based media art in the United States, as well as the strength of the media art collection at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), through case studies that illustrate key moments in this journey.

Tracing this chronological arc through SAAM's collection also illuminates the intersections of American art, popular culture, and

technological experimentation as they evolved over the twentieth century. Across the case studies, one may note a shift as artists affiliate their work with different notions and qualities of music: first with classical music, idealized as a pure aesthetic experience; and then avant-garde experimental music, challenging classical music's formalities but still catering to elite tastes; and, more recently, with popular music, whose familiar references allow social critique and commentary to resonate broadly. In turning to musical forms that were (at least initially) anti-authority, from rock to punk to hip-hop, artists invoke countercultural movements not often explicitly referenced in museum art. Alongside this, we can observe an increasing interest in sound and music as creating different kinds of audience experiences, emphasizing shared, communal, or interactive reception by the 1960s, changing both expectations of how to engage with work in an art gallery and also where art might be encountered well beyond the gallery.

Previous page and below, Fig. 10. Stills from Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut, *Video Synthesizer and “V Cello” Collectibles*, 1965–71, single-channel video (color, sound); 23:25 min. Electronic Arts Intermix, NY.



This topical tour also narrates a history of artists exploring new technologies as they become available for creative tinkering. We see artists following emergent possibilities as electrical power for light bulbs and motors becomes common; as celluloid film, videotape, closed-circuit cameras and then digital video can capture the world in motion; and as analyzers, synthesizers, and computers are able to modulate, morph, recombine, and recode that reality. Perhaps it is not surprising that the creatives who defy art categories are also eager adopters of new tools. Or perhaps as changing technologies unlocked more ways of shaping time and experience, music remained a useful art form to keep in mind. Either way, musical thinking turns out to be an effective lens through which to track innovations in time-based media art.

## Thomas Wilfred's

### LUMIA AND LIGHT CONCERTS

To contemporary eyes, *Unit #86*, from the 1930 series *Clavilux, Junior (First Home Clavilux Model)* by Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968), might look most like an old television set (fig. 11). Invented decades before television became popular, though, the *Clavilux Junior* series was initially compared to a gramophone or radio by one of Wilfred's most important supporters.<sup>50</sup>

Like those earlier devices, which could bring full symphonies into an average living room, this modestly scaled instrument promised cutting-edge electrified abstract art—the art of light, or “lunia” as Wilfred called it—to home viewers. Settling in for the evening, the owner could select from several “opuses” or hand-painted color records that fit onto a rotating player hidden below the projection screen. When set into motion, the color record, combined with mechanisms that moved light bulbs and reflective shapes inside the cabinet, would bounce an array of changing luminescent forms and fluidly shifting hues onto the translucent surface above. The operator could also use a remote control to adjust “tempo of movement, color intensity and levels of brightness,” making the *Clavilux Junior* an early example of interactive media art, as well.<sup>51</sup>

Wilfred was originally from Denmark, where he was known as “Wilfred the Lute Player” for his musical livelihood. He moved to New York in 1916, seeking like-minded creatives. He was most interested in advancing spiritual matters through modern art—he saw light art, in particular, as a new and superior medium for achieving transcendent expression. Wilfred became widely known as the creator and advocate of lumia after he began giving public recitals across the United States on his



Fig. 11. Thomas Wilfred, *Unit #86*, from the *Clavilux Junior (First Home Clavilux Model)* series, 1930, metal, glass, electrical and lighting elements, and an illustration-board screen in a wood cabinet. Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum from Carol and Eugene Epstein Collection.

large-scale Clavilux organ in 1922. Received with great critical admiration, his invention capped a twenty-plus-year burst of energy in which artist-engineers in Europe and the United States sought to harness electric light to create color-organs that could play luminous color with keys like a piano. Distinguishing himself from other competitors like Philadelphia pianist Mary Hallock-Greenewalt, who invented her own light instrument to add visuals to her concerts, Wilfred insisted that if lumia was to stand on its own as an art form, it should be appreciated in silence.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, musical thinking is inseparable from this history of early twentieth-century light art, driving Wilfred's experimental impulse towards an organ-like instrument, the notation of light compositions into scores, and the initial performances into concert format. And even as Wilfred built on and broke from this trajectory with his removal of sonic accompaniment, he clearly found musical terms and analogies essential to communicating about how this new time-based visual experience should be understood and encountered. By inviting audiences to

recitals, Wilfred signaled this was an art that benefited from focused attention from beginning to end. By naming his structured pieces with opus numbers, a tradition he continued from composers like Ludwig van Beethoven, Wilfred signaled they are not random light effects, but repeatable sequences carefully orchestrated and executed with precision by the instruments he designed. Even as he rejected theories pairing specific colors and notes, Wilfred used his training in music to shape works that had distinct tempos, durations, and dynamics, and with "movements" that would spark imagination and provoke emotion over the course of the composition. Perhaps most importantly, Wilfred used language from the elevated, long-standing traditions of classical music to frame lumia as not just a popular spectacle but an emergent high art form—uniquely modern and technologically enabled but still in service of universal ideals and transcendent experiences.<sup>53</sup>

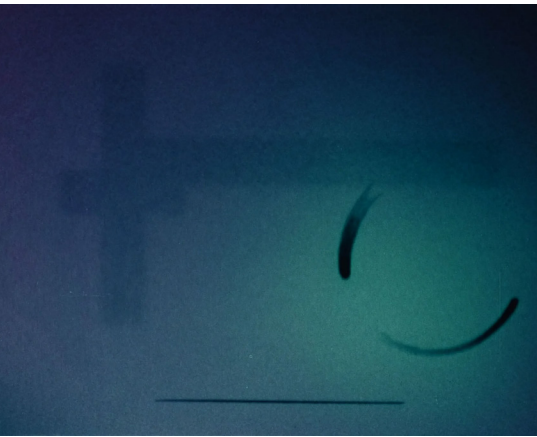


Fig. 12. Dwinell Grant, *Contrathemis*, 1941, 16mm film (color, silent); 8 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Patricia and Phillip Frost, 1986.92.36.

# Dwinell Grant

## AND VISUAL MUSIC ON FILM

The 1941 stop-motion animation *Contrathemis* by Dwinell Grant (1912-1991) is composed of over four thousand pencil drawings and paper collages (fig. 12). Grant shone various colored lights onto sequences of pages as he captured them on individual film frames to make up the eight-minute piece. When the reel is projected, the images spring into motion. Lines move back and forth. A repertoire of shapes takes up different arrangements on screen. The alternating light hues allow similar actions to replay with a different mood, creating rhythmic interplay between the abrupt changes in background color and the fluidly dancing forms. By visualizing the principles of a musical fugue, when complementary themes play out in different voices or instruments throughout an arrangement, Grant creates variety while maintaining formal cohesion over time.<sup>54</sup> While there is no audible music, we see pure musicality and compositional dynamism unfold before our eyes.

In 1935, Grant was teaching art and theater at Wittenberg College, in Springfield, Ohio, where he was born, when he first became excited about creating moving abstract art. While

designing an “experimental symphonic drama” at the school, he saw that by controlling the stage lights’ color and intensity, he could shift compositions “in time and space.”<sup>55</sup> While he was aware of Thomas Wilfred’s lumia, he saw greater potential in translating these effects from a theatrical setting to celluloid film. With this goal in mind, he moved to New York in the early 1940s. There he worked for, and received support in his mission from, Hilla von Rebay, an artist, collector, and, at that time, the first director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and what is now called the Guggenheim Museum in New York.<sup>56</sup>

*Contrathemis* puts into action the concepts Grant was developing with funding from the Guggenheim Foundation. His essays, often unfinished, sought to lay out guiding principles for nonobjective films, or those without subject matter, story, or symbols. Without these narrative goals, many of his predecessors and contemporaries in artistic animation turned to music as an alternative structuring device. Many created visuals that interpreted specific songs or compositional types, leading to the term “visual music” being applied to this vein of abstract filmmaking. Grant, like Wilfred, advocated for a looser connection with music, translating musical concepts and effects into

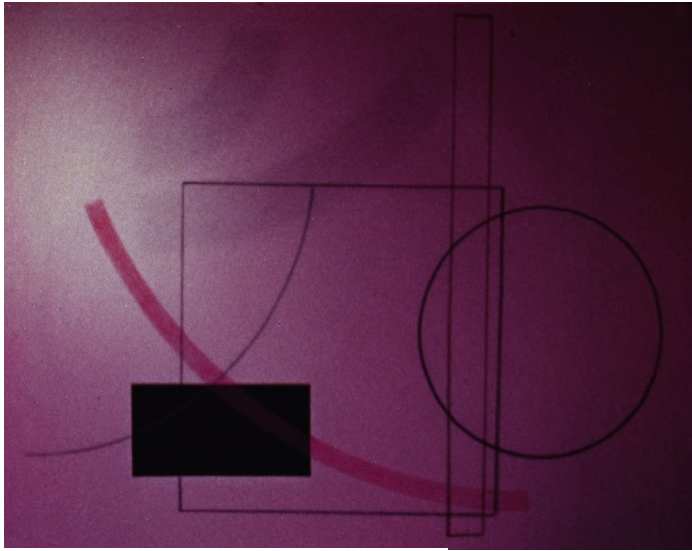


Fig. 12. Still from Dwinnell Grant, *Contrathemis*, 1941.

visual equivalents that would be experienced in silence. Still, in theorizing this “entirely new art form,” he regularly recommended music’s creative strategies and qualities—such as rhythm, melody, and counterpoint—as the basis for orchestrating a time-based visual experience.<sup>57</sup> He also suggested a notation system that, like the musical score, would allow the artist-composer to outline a piece’s key movements and have someone else perform it or in the case of animation, execute the thousands of drawings necessary for a few minutes of film.

In an unpublished essay, “The Structure of the Theme,” Grant calls for film animations

that create “a single coherent melodic line... regulated by the key and tempo of the movement.”<sup>58</sup> *Contrathemis* likely came later, after he received advice from Rebay that once a theme is started, he should “find a counter-theme.”<sup>59</sup> For Grant and his circle, the emphasis on themes rather than subject matter, in visual art as in music, carried political, as well as spiritual, intentions. Amid the animosities of World War II, Grant proposed that abstract animation could become “a visual expression of a fundamental rhythm...based on universal constants and not limited to the narrow backgrounds of a single group of people.”<sup>60</sup>

## Nam June Paik:

EXPANDING MUSIC, EXPANDING MEDIA

In 1963, a young music composition student in Germany, Nam June Paik (1932-2006), debuted *Zen for TV* in an art exhibition entitled *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television* (1963; fig. 13). Paik based this, his first visual art installation, on a “score” previously written in 1961, entitled *Sinfonie for 20 Rooms*. This process, structure, and even the show’s title conflate music, art, and technology in ways that would continue throughout Paik’s forty-plus-year career. When the “symphonic rooms” were realized, one famously featured modified televisions scattered around the floor, the first

known use of this transformative technology in a fine-art setting.<sup>61</sup> Paik altered their circuitry in various ways so that what visitors would see, and in some cases hear, was produced by the intersection of his electrical intervention and whatever was broadcasting at a given moment.<sup>62</sup> In one case, he simply decided to display a defective set that compressed any signal into a thin line of electrons, like a single note held for minimalist contemplation, and named it *Zen for TV*.<sup>63</sup> This became one of Paik's signature works, and he reverse engineered the effect over the years to create multiple versions of *Zen for TV*, one of which is among the many works by Paik in SAAM's collection.

Paik's early training in and expanded notion of music would inform his boundless intermedia experimentations wherever it might appear and whatever form it might take. Born in Korea, Paik left to study music composition first in Japan and then in Germany. There, he engaged with new thinking about avant-garde music. Paik was inspired by the Zen-informed approach of American composer John Cage, who refuted the distinction between music and noise, and deployed chance in his compositions so the same score would sound different at each performance—for example, by playing radios tuned to whatever was broadcasting at a given time and place. Following from this, Paik started to develop



his own form of “action-music,” in which found sounds and recorded texts, surprising bursts of activity, and chance interruptions or audience responses came together to make chamber evening performances that defied definition or expectations.<sup>64</sup>

After his studies, Paik moved in 1964 to New York. The following year, Paik got his hands on one of the first portable videotape cameras, making what is believed to be one of the first works of video art while driving across town.<sup>65</sup> This kicked off a period of

Fig. 13. Nam June Paik, *Zen for TV*, 1963, 1976 version, manipulated television set (black and white, silent); Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Byungseol and Dolores An, 2006.20.

exuberant experimentation for Paik and an expanding circle of “visual” artists—also influenced by Cage and often associated with the international art movement known as Fluxus—who embraced multimedia, multisensory practices, including video, television, film projections, slide shows, and musical and mediated performances to create embodied and durational experiences. These were presented not just in art galleries but at music venues, industrial lofts, repurposed barns, college campuses, and unexpected public places like random sidewalks or commuter ferries.

Upon landing in New York, Paik also forged a creative partnership with performance-art cellist and intermedia festival organizer Charlotte Moorman. Moorman, too, had broken with her classical music training after being introduced to Cage’s experimental scores. Together Paik and Moorman disrupted serious music conventions with sexuality, humor, and advanced technologies, such as closed-circuit video cameras and wearable TV monitors. In an iconic photograph of their performance, *Concerto for TV Cello & Videotapes* (1971), Moorman is seen wearing Paik’s *TV Glasses* as she plays his newly invented *TV Cello* (fig. 14; see also fig. 10).

The *TV Cello* consists of three television monitors, encased in plexiglass, sized and



Fig. 14. Peter Moore, *Charlotte Moorman (Performing N.J. Paik’s “Concerto for TV Cello & Videotapes” (1971) at Galeria Bonino, New York, November 23, 1971)*, 1971, silver gelatin print, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift from the collection of Barbara and Howard Wise, 2020.2.6.

stacked to mimic the shape of a cello. In various combinations, the screens show recorded performances by Cage and singer Janis Joplin, and a live feedback loop of Moorman playing the *TV Cello* in infinite regression. As she bows and plucks the amplified strings that run up the sculpture's front, the sounds are translated into electronic feedback that distorts the video signal of this responsive instrument. Through this work, Paik and Moorman explore the many ways that musical performances, or any live experience, can now be captured and mediated, thanks to portable video cameras and instant playback. These devices promise intimacy, becoming extensions of Moorman's body and zooming in to Joplin's expressive face. But they also create distance and distraction, making it hard for the viewer to focus on one place, performance, or person when presented with so much media at once. Experiencing this work in the 1970s offered an insightful glimpse of the future, when so many now record and broadcast their own self-performances via smartphones that are constantly in hand.

In addition to inspiring score-based installations with televisions and multimedia concertos that merge performer and screen, Paik's musical thinking shows up in the content and creation of his single-channel video art as well. One of his best-known videos, *Global Groove* (1973; fig. 15) opens with a voice-over

stating, "This is a glimpse of a video landscape of tomorrow when you will be able to switch on any TV station on the earth."<sup>66</sup> Paik mimics this imagined future-channel-surfing by abruptly editing between clips that convey different cultural expressions, primarily in the form of music and dance, from around the world. Starting with American tap dancers shaking a leg to a rhythm-and-blues medley, he includes a long stretch of Moorman playing the *TV Cello*, as well as a Korean percussion performance and a ceremonial song and dance from Nigeria.<sup>67</sup> Writing about an earlier project that similarly cut between the Beatles and musical interludes from Japanese TV, Paik argued that such video juxtapositions "demonstrate the togetherness of mankind by showing successively two kinds of music from two kinds of continents."<sup>68</sup>

Throughout *Global Groove*, images are subject to colorful, dizzying, and disorienting visual effects. These distortions were controlled by his newly invented Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer, developed with Japanese engineer Shuya Abe starting in 1969 (fig. 16). Describing his goal for this visual instrument, Paik stated, "I wanted a piano keyboard that would allow me to edit seven different sources [in] real time."<sup>69</sup> Like color-organ inventors at the turn of the twentieth century, Paik (and others

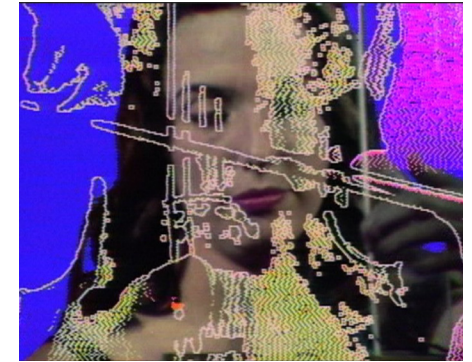


Fig. 15. Still from Nam June Paik, *Global Groove*, 1973, single-channel video (color, sound); 28:30 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift to the Nam June Paik Archive from the Nam June Paik Estate, NJP.1.VID.303.

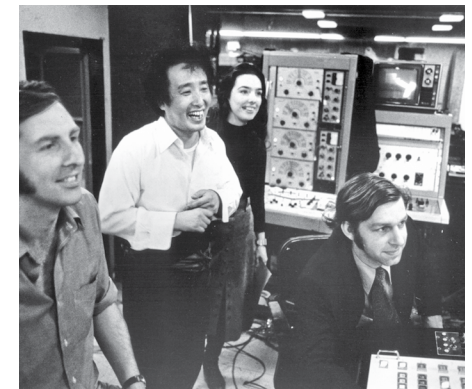


Fig. 16. From left: Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, and John Godfrey work on the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer at WNET's TV Lab studio in New York City.



designing early video synthesizers in the late 1960s) looked to their audio equivalents. The resulting psychedelic effects were often used to make dreamy “visual music,” frequently paired with evocative soundtracks to offer a complementary, transporative sensory immersion.<sup>70</sup>

Paik’s hope that both TV and music could foster intercultural understanding shows up decades later in his global satellite broadcasts of the 1980s, which switched between studio performances in the United States by pop stars David Bowie and Laurie Anderson and international music acts from France, Japan, South Korea, and elsewhere. The monumental *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii* (1995; fig. 17), on view in SAAM’s galleries, combines 336 TV monitors and 575 feet of colored neon tubing to form a map of America. On the screens within each state’s brightly lit borders, Paik assembled content related to each location’s character. Through the cacophony of fifty competing channels, a few songs emerge in their entirety where Paik incorporated golden-age movie musicals to represent Oklahoma (*Oklahoma!*), Missouri (*Meet Me in St. Louis*), and Kansas (*The Wizard of Oz*). Even within his adopted country, he knew that nostalgic music bound some people together, while for others it marked divergent tastes, identities, and exclusionary affiliations.



## Steina Vasulka’s *Violin Power*

### AND RETHINKING THE RECORDING STUDIO

In the single-channel video *Violin Power* (1970-78), the artist, Steina Vasulka (born 1940), is seen playing a violin (fig. 18). As the video progresses, another activation becomes clear: in playing the violin, she is also playing with the video’s visuals, producing interference and oscillation between multiple perspectives that match the vibrato from her bowing. For this mediated performance, Vasulka stood between two cameras feeding images

Fig. 17. Nam June Paik, *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii*, 1995, fifty-one-channel video installation (including one closed-circuit television feed; color, sound); custom electronics, neon lighting, steel and wood; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 2002.23.

in a closed-circuit to facing monitors, so she could see herself live from divergent angles. Vibrations from her instrument were picked up by microphone and transmitted to a frequency shifter, which spread the horizontal lines that are the basis for any video image, and a keyer, that combined the two video inputs, as well as a Rutt/Etra Scan Processor, in which magnets pull at the horizontal video lines to distort the image. The combined, modulated result was projected and recorded to produce the final video artwork.<sup>71</sup>

This creative layering of technology, instrumental performance, re-mediation, and fluid visual effects perfectly exemplifies what musicians like Vasulka brought to the first generation of experimental video art. A conservatory-trained string player like Moorman and an immigrant to the United States like Paik, Vasulka became a force in New York's cultural scene within years of arriving from her native Iceland in 1965. Though she had a prestigious position as a violinist with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, she and her husband, Czechoslovakian-born Woody Vasulka, saw New York as where they could build a creative life together. While they came to be known as a video art duo, Steina always foregrounded her musical roots in discussing



this path: "My background is in music. For me, it is the sound that leads me into the image. Every image has its own sound and in it I attempt to capture something flowing and living. I apply the same principle to art as playing the violin: with the same attitude of continuous practice, the same concept of composition. Since my art schooling was in music, I do not think of images as stills, but always in motion."<sup>72</sup>

Fig. 18. Steina Vasulka, *Violin Power*, 1970–78, single-channel video, (black-and-white, sound); 10:04 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Ford Motor Company, 2008.21.12.



Fig. 18. Still from Steina Vasulka, *Violin Power*, 1970–78.

This orientation toward thinking in terms of musical processes and principles can also be seen in the groundbreaking arts space the Vasulkas cofounded in 1971. The Electronic Kitchen, soon after renamed The Kitchen, was initially premised on the notion that artists working with electronics, whether video or audio, increasingly needed access to multiple forms of expensive equipment to produce their work.<sup>73</sup> Like a music studio, The Kitchen was to be a shared resource where artists could spend time with these machines to complete a given project or jam with fellow creatives to see what unexpected results might come from the mix of talent and technology. This behind-the-scenes creation morphed

into more public-facing experimentation and presentations. Within a year, The Kitchen became an important alternative to pristine white galleries or formal concert halls, a place where the visual and sonic, performance and installation could be experienced without artificial divisions between art forms or rigid expectations for audience behavior.<sup>74</sup> The Kitchen was among a wave of artist-led institutions that ensured time-based practices could flourish and, in so doing, remade American art as an emphatically intermedial conversation. It continues to be a leading cultural force today.

## Cloud Music

### AND CHANCE COMPOSING WITH VIDEO

*Cloud Music* (1974–79), a sound/video installation by Robert Watts (1923–1988), David Behrman (born 1937), and Bob Diamond (born 1946), showcases another way that video was conceived of as a compositional device (fig. 19). Rather than focus on the musicality that visual effects or video content could convey, the collaborators who built *Cloud Music* saw the potential of the video camera to create music directly. By reading the environment as an open score, the camera becomes the piano player rather than the keyboard.



Fig. 19. Robert Watts, David Behrman, Bob Diamond, *Cloud Music*, 1974–79, hybrid sound/video installation with custom electronics, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2013.<sup>64</sup>

When set up in the gallery, *Cloud Music* consists of a video camera pointed out a window and upwards so that clouds move across its field of vision. A specially designed video analyzer reads six points within this sky, marked by crosshairs on a connected monitor, for changes in light intensity as clouds cover and reveal the sun. These shifts translate into electronic voltages of related intensity that are sent to an electronic music system, which converts the information into six harmonic notes that play out of six loudspeakers placed near the window and monitor. Like an old-fashioned self-playing piano, which pushes down keys in response to punched holes across a rolled-up score, this configuration turns dark and light patches in the sky into dynamic chord progressions. Unlike early twentieth-century punch-scores that produced recognizable tunes, this composition is written entirely by nature and sounds different every time.

This outcome fits the goals of many artists influenced by John Cage. Since the 1940s, Cage had been inviting chance operations to guide his musical notations and random elements from the real world to shape their sonic outputs. Watts was a key figure in the Fluxus movement, an international, interdisciplinary network that included Paik and Moorman and built on Cage's ideas. Artists associated with Fluxus emphasized



Fig. 19. Robert Watts, David Behrman, Bob Diamond, *Cloud Music*, 1974–79.

the creative process, fluid experiences, and the artistic potential in the everyday, rather than precious objects or polished products. A signature part of Fluxus practice was the writing of “event scores.” These simple text instructions would reframe common gestures or actions as artistic performances—*Cloud Music* extends this to include reinterpreting the weather.

As a transplant from Iowa to New York, Watts missed having uninterrupted views of wide-open sky, and so began to incorporate the sky, clouds, and other natural elements in his art from the 1960s onward. To realize his “poetic idea of listening to the clouds,” Watts enlisted skilled technological partners who shared his creative range and references.<sup>75</sup> David Behrman was an electronic music



Fig. 19. Robert Watts, David Behrman, Bob Diamond, *Cloud Music*, 1974–79.

pioneer who worked with Cage and knew Paik; Bob Diamond was a systems and video engineer who contributed both to NASA's Apollo systems and Paik's experimental studio setup at New York's WNET-TV (Channel 13).<sup>76</sup> Perfecting the system took several years, and they showed versions of the work starting in 1974, with its ultimate configuration first appearing at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1979.<sup>77</sup> On reflection, Behrman notes that while *Cloud Music* depends on 1970s video and circuitry to translate natural phenomena into sounds, "in spirit the project might be close to the old outdoor wind and water driven musical instruments of Southeast Asia and Polynesia."<sup>78</sup> By embracing the

environment as a collaborator and fluctuating information from the outside world as a compositional element, *Cloud Music* connects to these musical traditions. It also leads to current experiments in time-based art, in which real-time data is processed visually and sonically to imaginatively reflect on an ever-changing ecosystem.<sup>79</sup>

## Dara Birnbaum

### AND THE ART/MUSIC VIDEO

**A siren goes off, a multiplicity of repetitive fiery explosions fills the screen immediately followed by a woman in seventies business attire, spinning and exploding over and over again until she finally transforms into her alter ego, Wonder Woman.** This is the start to *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79; fig. 20), a celebrated video artwork by Dara Birnbaum (born 1946). In a whirlwind five and a half minutes, the viewer takes in a supercut of the popular TV show followed by a closing karaoke-style sing-along, with rolling text on-screen, of the lyrics to *Wonder Woman Disco*, as performed by the Wonderland Disco Band (1978, Hippopotamus Productions). Full of sexual innuendos and sensual oohs and ahhs, the scrolling lyrics encourage viewers to affirm "I am wonder . . . wonder woman," but also promise to "shake my wonder-maker" as

the main expression of those powers. In this early work of video appropriation, Birnbaum shows, in her words, “the possibilities of manipulating a medium already known to be highly manipulative,” and using television’s own techniques to analyze, critique, and ultimately “to talk back to the media.”<sup>80</sup>

To do this in a pre-VCR era, Birnbaum pirated this footage directly from network sources with help from friends on the inside. She then edited it to isolate and repeat the core actions of every episode, but otherwise left her choices of imagery from the show unaltered. As she wryly observed, cutting back to this “abbreviated narrative—running, spinning, saving a man—allows the underlying theme to surface.”<sup>81</sup> Wonder Woman’s transformation is revealed as purely superficial—her appearance and storyline still orient toward male fantasies, whether she is serving men as an attractive secretary or sexy superhero. An icon of feminist critique, this video is a prime example of appropriation art that addresses the impact of mass media on individual identity. It also kicked off a wave of video remixing that paralleled the rise of DJs remixing records in the 1970s and ’80s. Like the early hip-hop DJs that isolated and prolonged recognizable instrumental “breaks” from popular dance tracks, Birnbaum’s approach leaned into the familiarity of her material and the satisfaction



of rhythmic repetition—though her goal was to draw attention to recurring patterns rather than dance to them.

Birnbaum studied architecture in college. After graduating from Carnegie Mellon University as the only woman in her class in 1969, she worked at Lawrence Halprin and Associates, a renowned architectural firm, but increasingly gravitated toward visual art, studying painting before discovering video as a medium in the mid-1970s. After learning through the Nielsen ratings that the average American watched some seven hours of television daily, she came to see it as “the architecture of the day . . . [that it] defined the way that we were living and the way in which we occupied public and private space.”<sup>82</sup> With this interest in how and where people absorb culture, Birnbaum

Fig. 20. Still from Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978–79, single-channel video (color, sound); 5:50 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Ford Motor Company, 2007.33.10.

wanted her rebuke of mass-media stereotypes to reach wide audiences in unexpected ways. *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* was first shown in the storefront windows of a downtown hair salon, before screening as a kinescope at The Kitchen in a film festival and on a public-access TV station, programmed opposite CBS's time slot for *Wonder Woman*. It also appeared at the Mudd Club, a live-music venue, and on massive video-walls (among the first in the United States) at the Palladium, a famous New York nightclub.<sup>83</sup> In some ways, these presentations continued an ongoing "visual music" lineage, in which abstract light and film artists turned concerts and club events into multimedia experiences. At the same time, they point ahead to emergent forms of VJ culture, in which found and modulated video clips, full of insider references for the intended audience, are paired by the VJ, or video jockey, with songs selected by the DJ, or disc jockey.

When MTV premiered in 1981, the channel's hallmark fast-moving editing, playful transitions, often repetitive clips, and short format had already been pioneered by Birnbaum, Paik, and other artists who dared take up pop-culture video on its own terms and remix it to their own ends. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Birnbaum was among the artists commissioned for MTV's *Art Break* series in 1987.



Fig. 20. Stills from Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978–79.

# Dan Graham's

ROCK MY RELIGION, AND MUSIC  
AS THE MESSAGE

Artist Dan Graham (1942-2022) created Rock My Religion (1982-84) as an extended video essay on the subject of music itself (fig. 21).

It traces a certain kind of musical ideal, one that fosters ecstatic embodied experiences, through historical connections that Graham theorizes and illustrates in this hour-long presentation. An artist who analyzed the relationship between capitalism and culture across media, Graham was also a published rock critic and devoted punk rocker and hardcore fan. His interweaving interests coalesce in *Rock My Religion*, as he insightfully links economic shifts, religious impulses, and identity formations from the 1700s to the 1980s. Interestingly, the same Shaker philosophies and rituals that are important touchstones for two works in *Musical Thinking* are Graham's starting point. He saw Shakers' renunciation of heterosexual marriage and uplifting of alternative communal values as a direct response to the soul-deadening work of the Industrial Revolution. Their emigration from England to the United States in the eighteenth century established an American tendency to counter modern alienation with momentary liberation

through euphoric dance and song. With this theory, Graham connects frontier preachers speaking in tongues and Native American ghost dancers, as well as 1950s teenagers' frenzied shrieks around Elvis, hippies finding collective frequencies, and hardcore punk fans sweating it out as one.

Graham's argument is laid out via voice-over and exemplary musical selections, paired with on-screen scrolling texts and footage of resonant sites, artworks, and performances. While his references range widely, the rough quality of the video and sound, the shaky camerawork, choppy edits, and dissonant juxtapositions are all indebted to Graham's preferred music of his time. A punk aesthetic rules, aggressively resisting a polished, easily digestible product. Graham's confrontational approach underscores his message: we as "cultural consumers" are implicated in building such an individualistic society that any "yearning for communalism free from sexual and economic competition" can only be briefly satisfied by revival meetings or mosh pits.<sup>84</sup>

*Rock My Religion* is Graham's most direct engagement with music as the primary subject of his art. His early minimalist conceptual art projects in magazines, and his later sculptural pavilions – abstract constructions of metal, mirrors, and glass that one can walk within



Fig. 21. Still from Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion*, 1982–84, single-channel video (color and black-and-white, sound); 55:27 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Ford Motor Company, 2007.33.14.



and look through—would seem to have nothing to do with music when first encountered. Yet, Graham is explicit that he was “influenced in my art by structures I found in rock music.”<sup>85</sup> His magazine projects move through sequences of formal repetitions that Graham related to the seriality of early twentieth-century composers, like Karlheinz Stockhausen (who also influenced Cage and Paik). His architectural forms encourage awareness of being framed and looked upon while simultaneously looking through the glass at others. This dynamic was one he regularly commented on as a rock critic, writing that one is always “aware of your relationship to other spectators and other people in a group situation” in these venues.<sup>86</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, as scholar Kodwo Eshun writes in his book-length analysis of *Rock My Religion*, this work points to an overriding belief Graham held about the relationship between art and music in his time:

What was important to grasp about avant-garde art, Graham insisted, was the seriousness that it bestowed upon rock. Without an awareness of the sustenance that artists had drawn from

rock, without a realization of the elevated role that rock culture had played within artistic thinking, it would not be possible to understand what had made art avant-garde in the 1970s and '80s. *Rock My Religion* suspended the hierarchies that rock cultures and art worlds continually tried to resurrect—it melted them into shared states of intensity, attitudes, gestures, performances, parties, scenes and cliques. By doing so, it rewrote art history as rock history.<sup>87</sup>

This shows how differently musical thinking operated for Graham’s generation of media art makers. As discussed, in the early 1900s, analogies to classical music allowed early innovators in time-based media, like Thomas Wilfred and Dwinell Grant, to mark their abstract compositions as high art. By the 1980s, with video an established tool for visual artists, Graham used the medium to explore how popular music and art could break down elite cultural barriers together.



Fig. 21. Still from Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion*, 1982–84.



Fig. 22. Still from Stephen Vitiello, *World Trade Center Recordings: Studio View*, 1999–2011, single-channel video (color, sound); 11:47 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Frank K. Ribelin Endowment, 2015.16.

## Playing in Every Key

By turn of the twenty-first century, any and all of the above approaches to weaving music and moving image production together were embraced by artists working in the United States. Even a quick review of pieces from the early 2000s in SAAM's collection shows artists expansively playing with formal experimentation as well as cultural

commentary and storytelling. Their approaches are disparate and at times diffuse, but show how musical thinking, training, and inspiration continued to infuse video art as it became a more prominent, visible presence in contemporary art spaces around the world.

Stephen Vitiello (born 1964), a sound artist extending the lineage of Cage and Watts, added a video camera to an array of contact microphones to capture sounds and sights out of the top-floor window of his aptly titled *World Trade Center Recordings: Studio View* (1999–2011; fig. 22). Vitiello was encouraged to take up video by none other than Nam June Paik, who asked him to document a month of Fluxus performances in 1994. When Vitiello explained he was a musician, not a video artist, Paik replied, "It'll make you a better musician."<sup>88</sup> As Vitiello notes, it ultimately pointed him toward a more interesting, blended practice in which sound and visuals tune audiences into the experiences of a given architectural space.

Rico Gatson (born 1966), an artist who makes photocollage odes to Black musical icons of the twentieth century, also uses video software to collage existing footage into kaleidoscopic effects that move to the music. *Jungle, Jungle* and *Gun Play* (fig. 23), both 2001, pair percussive, appropriated

soundtracks with distorted scenes from old movies to undermine their racial encoding—the first using a colorized version of *King Kong* (1933), the second intercutting the blaxploitation film *Foxy Brown* (1974) and the spaghetti Western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). Discussing the works on paper, but equally resonant with the videos, Gatson points to parallels between his art and the rhythmic geometries and disruptive patterns of jazz, explaining, “I think about visual time, visible time...I’m thinking about improvisation, about how the eye moves and the potential for some sort of impact on the viewer.”<sup>89</sup>



Fig. 23. Still from Rico Gatson, *Gun Play*, 2001, single-channel video (color, sound); 2:35 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2015.7.1.



Cory Arcangel (born 1978) was studying classical guitar at Oberlin Conservatory of Music when he first got access to high-speed internet, beginning his journey to becoming a visual artist engaged with computer culture and creative coding. In *Beach Boys/Geto Boys* (2004; fig. 24), Arcangel creates a split-screen juxtaposition of the two existing music videos to make his commentary. The resulting new work merges the sounds while contrasting the looks of two similarly named but wildly dissimilar “boy bands,” provoking observations about what has changed and what stays the same within pop culture. This is a video equivalent of the “mash-up,” a form of remixing individual songs that became widespread in the early 2000s, as digital tools allowed home DJs to knit together unlikely, often ironic, musical pairings that cross decades and genres.

Fig. 24. Still from Cory Arcangel, *Beach Boys/Geto Boys*, 2004, single-channel video (color, sound); 4:13 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Ford Motor Company, 2007.33.5.

Takeshi Murata (born 1974) continues to push the boundaries of digital media. His *Monster Movie* (2005), set to propulsive drum and bass breaks, is a contemporary blend of the “visual music” tradition of early experimental animation and more recent appropriation tendencies (fig. 25). In Murata’s work, rather than just remixed, the source material is digitally manipulated, morphed, and pixelated. The psychedelic distortions abstract the B-movie monster of the title so it is only occasionally recognizable within the brightly colored, blurry trails that flow across the screen and seem to express rhythm and tonality more than anything else.

In other ways, the impact of musical thinking on contemporary art is expansive, subtle, and part of pervasive changes that rippled out from but can no longer be pinpointed as explicitly or exclusively tied to music. As previously noted, the inclusion of sound-rich media works and live performances that take time to absorb opened art spaces to very different kinds of attention and engagement, and fostered a range of immersive and dynamic experiences. The embrace of open, participatory scores as conceptual artworks, with instructions that someone else (or something else) might enact and outcomes that the artist shapes but does not completely control, radically altered understandings of



Fig. 25. Still from Takeshi Murata, *Monster Movie*, 2005, single-channel video (color, sound); 4:19 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2013.71.

what an artwork can be and how it is formed and experienced. Writ large, this means that crafting a fixed, singular artwork is now just one option for artists, who often make pieces that are ever evolving, exist in many versions, and rely on audience and environmental input or further interpretive decisions to be realized. At SAAM, this means that some works of video art in our collection are not edited, singular files that we can replay exactly the same each time, but are more like scores that get set into motion when we reinstall them. In their interactive installation *Text Rain* (1999; fig. 26), artists Romy Achituv (born 1958) and Camille Utterback (born 1970) embed a video camera in a wall pointed at gallerygoers; it reads their bodies as dark against a light background. This allows those bodies to appear to “catch” letters as they fall in a video projected on the facing wall. This participatory artwork is responsive to its setting, much like *Cloud Music* (see p. 82), except the clouds are now humans, and their movements impact lines of poetry rather than chord progressions. Once visitors understand the machine-vision mechanism, they can “play” the piece, improvising in response to what the artists are sending their way.

For *whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir* (2009-11; fig. 27), Eve Sussman (born 1961) and her artistic think tank, the Rufus Corporation, created a specially designed computer



program that sequences and joins thousands of original film clips and sound files from an artist-provided digital library. Though the “Serendipity Machine,” as she calls the program, uses metadata tags to organize and shuffle its selection, the sequence and combinations are unique each time it is played. Such relinquishing of control over the final arrangement of a piece is most associated in the United States with Cage and his Fluxus followers, but it is also a central way of working for so many artists today. These artists and works are not explicitly musical in form or content, but they flourish in

Fig. 26. Romy Achituv, Camille Utterback, *Text Rain*, 1999, interactive digital installation, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the American Art Forum, 2015.14.

a creative landscape that has been abundantly seeded with musical thinking for more than a hundred years.

The artists discussed in this section, as well as those featured in *Musical Thinking*, are also creating work for a broader culture transformed by the digitization of both music and video content. Artists raised on MTV are drawing on digital tools, file sharing, and mash-up culture to make their own musically driven visual statements. Millions who have used YouTube playlists to listen to their favorite musicians and access peer-to-peer downloads to find rare releases, are mining such online resources to provocatively collage a world at once opened and flattened by the information flows of the internet. And the inescapability of social media has many rethinking performance for the camera and how we project ourselves in the world. Across the board, twenty-first-century artists are responding to and making work within a global attention economy where short-form videos dominate public and private life and massive media installations fill prominent urban spaces and contemporary art institutions alike. Musical thinking will remain a critical way to navigate, create, and connect in this context—exploring dynamics of chance and improvisation in media composition and performance; pirating and remixing



commodified culture to release new energies and imagine other world orders; raising up or resurrecting musical figures, philosophies, and sonic legacies that can now resonate across global networks; and building communities that can feel copresent across time and space. We cannot predict the full scope, complexity, and nuance of how music and media art will interact, but we can certainly look forward to tracking the call-and-response and ensuring this creative interplay continues to be well represented in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection.

Fig. 27. Eve Sussman, Rufus Corporation, *whiteonwhite:algorithmic noir*, 2009–11, two-channel digital cinema installation, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2014.43.

# Notes



p. 5: Brian Vandenberg, “Magical Thinking,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/science/magical-thinking>.

1. While “musical thinking” came to me as an appropriate term and title to signal what is distinct about the way today’s media artists engage music through their work, I found the phrase has a rich interdisciplinary history. A note in *The Spectator* (London) from 1828 muses on how compositions in certain keys spark different associations as a kind of musical thinking; another, from 1883, encourages soundlessly thinking through tone, as one silently thinks through words, to develop musical ideas. While these early instances speak musician to musician, the phrase goes on to be used by philosophers, musicologists, ethnologists, anthropologists, and psychologists to address various cultural and cognitive phenomena, from Hegel’s aesthetics to computer algorithms. Online, one now finds business consultancies and early-education products that encourage applying “musical thinking” to the office or nursery. Because

there is no standard definition across these uses, and because here it relates to a very specific approach to time-based art-making where it appears to be newly applied, I have laid out my meaning in the context of this exhibition without seeking to square uses of the term across time and disciplines. See “That Keys Influence Musical Thinking,” *The Spectator*, November 15, 1828, 313, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/that-keys-influence-musical-thinking/docview/1295155091/se-2>; and E. H. Turpin, “On Musical Thinking,” *Musical Standard* 25, no. 993 (August 11, 1883): 84–85, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/on-musical-thinking/docview/7262430/se-2>.

2. This exhibition builds on historical considerations of sound and art, such as *Sons & Lumières: Une histoire du son dans l’art du XXe siècle* at Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 2004, and *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music since 1900* at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 2005, as well as contemporary snapshots, like

## Notes

*Soundings: A Contemporary Score*, at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2013; and joins a current wave of museum shows inviting sound-based or -inspired works into their galleries. The specificity here of music rather than sound, and video as the primary lens through which this interaction is explored, adds to this field, as does the focus on what American artists today are saying through this convergence. See "Suggested Reading" in this publication.

3. Langston Hughes, "I, Too," *The Weary Blues* (New York: Knopf, 1927). In the poem, Hughes concludes: "They'll see how beautiful I am/ And be ashamed—/ I, too, am America."

4. Arthur Jafa and Tina M. Campt, "Love Is the Message, The Plan Is Death," *e-flux Journal*, issue 81, April 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126451/love-is-the-message-the-plan-is-death/>.

5. See Judith Zilcer, "'Color Music': Synaesthesia and Nineteenth-Century Sources for Abstract Art," *Artibus et Historiae* 8, no. 16 (1987): 101–26.

6. Importantly, as will be discussed in "Postscript as Prelude" in this publication,

both Wilfred and Grant sought to translate experiences and themes but not specific notes or musical pieces, and wanted their visuals to be appreciated on their own terms, in silence. For more on the history of color music into visual music, see William Moritz, "The Dream of Color Music, And Machines That Made It Possible," *Animation World Magazine*, issue 2.1 (April 1997), <https://www.awn.com/mag/issue2.1/articles/moritz2.1.html>.

7. For more details on this history, see "Postscript as Prelude" section in this publication.

8. Jafa and Campt, "Love Is the Message."

9. Aria Dean, "Worry the Image," *Art in America*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/worry-the-image-63266/>.

10. Connor Brooke, "An Interview with Adal Maldonado on the Identity of Photography," last updated December 10, 2012, Business 2 Community, <https://www.business2community.com/travel-leisure/an-interview-withadal-maldonado-on-the-identity-of-photography-0352780>.



## Notes

11. The concept for El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico and Embassy was first put forward in 1979 by Eduardo Figueroa, another Nuyorican cultural activist, who died in 1991. Honoring this important idea, ADÁL and Pietri re-inaugurated the Embassy in 1994. See Timo Schrader, *Loisaida as Urban Laboratory: Puerto Rican Community Activism in New York* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 125–44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvxkn522.12>.

12. Pedro Pietri, “El Manifiesto: Notes on El Puerto Rican Embassy,” El Puerto Rican Embassy, <https://elpuertoricanembassy.msa-x.org/index.html>.

13. The 1957 Broadway musical was adapted for the big screen again, in 2021, directed by Steven Spielberg from a screenplay by Tony Kushner. While Spielberg and Kushner engaged an advisory council to address earlier inaccuracies and avoided the white-washed casting from the 1961 film version, the remake was criticized for not having Puerto Ricans at the helm, still not having Puerto Rican leads or an authentically portrayed community, and perhaps most

importantly, continuing to invest in powerful white directors and screenwriters instead of supporting Puerto Ricans to tell their own story on their own terms. For one take, see Andrea González-Ramírez, “West Side Story Can’t Be Saved,” *The Cut-New York*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.thecut.com/2021/12/west-side-story-is-not-for-puerto-ricans-like-me.html>.

14. “Raven Chacon: Artist Statement, December 2021,” Foundation for Contemporary Arts, <https://www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipients/raven-chacon/>.

15. “Raven Chacon: Fluidity of Sound,” *SoundLives*, episode 16, interview by Frank J. Oteri for New Music USA, June 8, 2022, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/raven-chacon-fluidity-of-sound/>.

16. Raven Chacon, “SAAM TBMA Artists Questionnaire-Video: Report,” SAAM conservation files.

## Notes

17. "Performing Sound: An Interview with Raven Chacon," American Academy in Berlin, <https://www.americanacademy.de/performing-sound/>.
18. Raven Chacon, *Raven Chacon: For Zitkála-Šá*, New Documents, 2022, 8, <https://new-documents.org/books/for-zitkala-sa-raven-chacon>.
19. *Raven Chacon: For Zitkála-Šá*, 9.
20. Chacon's 2021 composition, *Voiceless Mass*, which won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize in Music, drew together the historic resonance of a cathedral pipe organ and the Thanksgiving holiday, the quietude and cries of life during COVID-19, and an ensemble dispersed throughout an audience. For more on this groundbreaking selection, see Javier C. Hernández, "The Pulitzer Prize Winner That Emerged Out of a Time of Quietness," *New York Times*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/arts/music/raven-chacon-pulitzer-prize-music.html>.
21. Mariam Ghani, "Creating with Mariam Ghani + Erin Ellen Kelly: Part One," panel discussion hosted by Speed Art Museum, October 19, 2020, video, 4:50 mins., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqm-wo0VEIs>.
22. Ghani, "Creating with Mariam Ghani + Erin Ellen Kelly."
23. Phillip Velinov, "Creating with Mariam Ghani + Erin Ellen Kelly: Part Five," panel discussion hosted by the Speed Art Museum, December 17, 2020, video, 5:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zw7SwOkoMvc>.
24. Mariam Ghani, "When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved," artist's website, <https://www.mariamghani.com/work/1288>.
25. "Marie Tomanova's Conversation with Martine Gutierrez," *Ravelin*, accessed July 2022, <https://www.ravelinmagazine.com/posts/marie-tomanovas-conversation-martine-gutierrez/>.

## Notes

26. Martine Gutierrez, "SAAM TBMA Artist Questionnaire-Video: Clubbing," SAAM conservation files.

27. Cisgender describes a person whose gender identity and expression corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth. The growing use of this term reflects increasing awareness that sex, the cluster of biological characteristics that are used to mark a baby as male or female (even though they might have characteristics that blur this as a binary), is not the same thing as gender, which is the internal understanding a person has of themselves and how they relate to socialized and innate experiences of living in the world as a man, woman, or gender nonconforming or nonbinary person.

28. Martine Gutierrez, introduction to *Indigenous Woman* (New York: Ryan Lee Gallery, 2018).

29. Arthur Jafa, "Black Visual Intonation," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 267.

30. This mantra is repeated in almost every interview Jafa gives and is cited in most writings on his work. For one rich recent contextualization, see Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 79.

31. The artist, quoted in Megan O'Grady, "Arthur Jafa in Bloom," *New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/14/t-magazine/arthur-jafa-in-bloom.html>. As Jafa notes in this interview, the term "affective proximity" was coined by John Akomfrah, another artist whose media works evocatively juxtapose resonant images that speak to colonial history from the perspective of a Black British citizen.

32. This song's release, and Jafa's selection of it, predates West's engagement with presidential politics and later controversies. In early 2016, his primary public image was as a critically acclaimed and globally recognized music star.

## Notes

33. Antwaun Sargent, "Arthur Jafa and the Future of Black Cinema," *Interview Magazine*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/arthur-jafa>.

34. Jeppe Ugelvig, "Sonic Identity Politics with Christine Sun Kim," *Discover* (blog), *DIS Magazine*, January 20, 2016, [http://ghebaly.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Kim\\_2016\\_Dis-Mag.pdf](http://ghebaly.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Kim_2016_Dis-Mag.pdf).

35. Christine Sun Kim, "SAAM TBMA Artists Questionnaire-Audio: One Week of Lullabies for Roux," SAAM conservation files.

36. Captions by Alison O'Daniel, Ariel Baker-Gibbs, and Lauren Ridloff respectively.

37. Ann Friedman, "Christine Sun Kim: On What Listening Looks Like," *The Gentlewoman*, issue no. 24 (Autumn-Winter 2021), <https://thegentlewoman.co.uk/library/christine-sun-kim>.

38. For the artist's reflections on this experience, including the fraught politics of accepting this invitation and the frustration afterward on finding that the broadcast cut away so much that her ASL interpretation was barely visible for home viewers, see Kim, "I Performed at the Super Bowl. You Might Have Missed Me," *New York Times*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/opinion/national-anthem-sign-language.html>.

39. For a discussion on Key, see Christopher Wilson, "Where's the Debate on Francis Scott Key's Slaveholding Legacy?," *Smithsonian*, July 1, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/wheres-debate-francis-scott-keys-slave-holdinglegacy-180959550/>.

40. Andrianna, Campbell, "Collaboration 'Breakdown': A Conversation with Liz Magic Laser and Simone Leigh," in *Collaboration and Its (Dis)Contents: Art, Architecture, and Photography since 1950*, ed. Meredith A. Brown and Michelle Millar Fisher (London: Courtauld Institute of Art, 2017), 130.

41. Campbell, "Collaboration 'Breakdown,'" 129.

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42. Claire Barliant, "From a Waxy Yellow Buildup to a Nervous Breakdown: The Fleeting Existence of Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," *East of Borneo*, October 10, 2010, <https://eastofborneo.org/articles/from-a-waxy-yellow-buildup-to-a-nervous-breakdown-the-fleeting-existence-of-mary-hartman-mary-hartman/>.
43. In 2022, Leigh brought this committed focus to the 59th Venice Biennale as the first Black woman to represent the United States in this international art exhibition's 125-year history. For more on her presentation, and the symposium she co-organized centering Black female brilliance across creative fields, see "Simone Leigh: Sovereignty," <https://simoneleighvenice2022.org>.
44. Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, "Artist Unknown, Vessel Possibly for Water," in *Simone Leigh: Luhring Augustine, September 8 - October 20, 2018* (New York: Luhring Augustine, 2018), 20.
45. "Rhea Anastas in Conversation with Cauleen Smith," in *Cauleen Smith: Give It or Leave It*, ed. Kristi McGuire (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2019), 43.
46. Interestingly, Arthur Jafa joined Smith to shoot 16mm footage at the ashram, serving as cinematographer for this part of his friend's project. "Rhea Anastas in Conversation with Cauleen Smith," 41.
47. Sally L. Kitch, "'As a Sign That All May Understand': Shaker Gift Drawings and Female Spiritual Power," *Winterthur Portfolio* 24, no. 1 (1989): 1-28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1181214>.
48. "Rhea Anastas in Conversation with Cauleen Smith," 39.
49. "Cauleen Smith Imagines a Black, Feminist Utopia," video, 4:54 mins., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/cauleen-smith-imagines-a-black-feminist-utopia-2/>.
50. Keely Orgeman, "A Radiant Manifestation in Space: Wilfred, Lumia, and Light," in Orgeman et al., *Lumia: Thomas Wilfred and the Art of Light* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 2017), 24.
51. Orgeman, "A Radiant Manifestation."

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52. Kenneth Peacock, "Instruments to Perform Color-Music: Two Centuries of Technological Experimentation," *Leonardo* 21, no. 4 (1988): 404-5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1578702>.
53. For more on Wilfred and his circle's association between transcendent experiences and abstraction in art, see Andrew R. Johnston, *Pulses of Abstraction: Episodes from a History of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), and Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and Other Arts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).
54. Kristian Moen, *New York's Animation Culture: Advertising, Art, Design and Film, 1939-1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 132, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27931-8>.
55. Moen, *New York's Animation Culture*, 128.
56. Rebay was an early advocate of Wassily Kandinsky's musically inspired abstract paintings, which are key foundations for the Guggenheim Museum's collection, and encouraged the modern artists she cultivated in New York to attune themselves to music's spiritual and formal relevance for creative work across media. For more on her work, and this circle, see *The Museum of Non-Objective Painting: Hilla Rebay and the Origins of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009).
57. Moen, *New York's Animation Culture*, 118.
58. Dwinell Grant, "The Structure of the Theme" (unpublished essay, dated 1944-48), 35, box 2, folder 5, Dwinell Grant Papers, 1930-1988, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
59. Moen, *New York's Animation Culture*, 132.
60. Moen, 134.
61. See Tomas Schmit, "Exposition of Music," in Nam June Paik and Wulf Herzogenrath, *Nam June Paik: Werke 1946-1976* (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1977), 70; and the original score for *Sinfonie for 20 Rooms*, reproduced in John G. Hanhardt et al., *Nam June Paik* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982), 88.

## Notes

62. In this first show, that would have been the signal from the only television channel in Germany, which only broadcast for four hours a day, likely the reason the exhibition was open at later times in the day. See “Nam June Paik: Exposition of Music - Electronic Television,” Medien Kunst Netz (Media Art Net), accessed June 23, 2022, <http://mkn.zkm.de/works/exposition-of-music/?desc=full>.

63. Hanna Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 78.

64. Musically notated scores, textual instructions for action-music events, and other music-related ephemera can be found in the Nam June Paik Archive (NJPA), a collection of his papers and the contents of his final studio, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. For more on NJPA, see <https://americanart.si.edu/research/paik>.

65. Holly Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28.

66. “Global Groove: Nam June Paik and John Godfrey,” Electronic Arts Intermix, accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.eai.org/titles/global-groove>.

67. Marina Isgro, “Video Commune: Nam June Paik at WGBH-TV, Boston,” *Tate Papers*, no. 32 (Autumn 2019), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/32/video-commune-nam-june-paik>. More specifically, this cultural collage moves from R&B singer Mitch Ryder’s “Devil with a Blue Dress On” (1964), to the Korean dancer-choreographer Sun Ock Lee performing as a Korean shaman or mudang, to excerpts from an ethnographic film shot by Percival Borde in Nigeria.

68. Isgro, “*Video Commune*.”

69. Peter Sachs Collopy, “Video Synthesizers: From Analog Computing to Digital Art,” *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 36, no. 4 (October–December 2014): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1109/mahc.2014.62>.

70. Collopy, “Video Synthesizers,” 74.

71. Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery*, 29.

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72. Rogers, 28.

73. "Steina and Woody Vasulka: Biographical Chronology (1937-1969)," Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology, 2001, [https://www.fondation-langlois.org/e/collection/vasulka/archives/chrono\\_cadre.html](https://www.fondation-langlois.org/e/collection/vasulka/archives/chrono_cadre.html).

74. "Vasulka: Biographical Chronology."

75. Janine D. Randerson, "Cloud Music: A Cloud System," *Proceedings of the 19th International Symposium of Electronic Art (ISEA2013)*, ed. Ross Harley, Laura Fisher, and Kathy Cleland, 2.

76. Randerson, "Cloud Music," 2; Robert Watts, David Behrman, and Bob Diamond, "Cloud Music," in Peter Weibel, Woody Vasulka, and Steina Vasulka, *Eigenwelt der Apparatwelt: Pioneers of Electronic Art*, ed. David Dunn (Santa Fe, NM: The Vasulkas, 1992), 152–53, [http://www.vasulka.org/Kitchen/PDF\\_Eigenwelt/Eigenwelt.htm](http://www.vasulka.org/Kitchen/PDF_Eigenwelt/Eigenwelt.htm).

77. Watts, Behrman, and Diamond, "Cloud Music," 152.

78. Watts, Behrman, and Diamond, 153.

79. Mike Maizels, "The New Geography: Earth Music and Land Art, Version 2.0," *Art Journal Open*, October 15, 2014, <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=5319>.

80. Dara Birnbaum, "Talking Back to the Media," in Patti Podesta, *Resolution: A Critique of Video Art* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1986), 52.

81. Alex Greenberger, "Changing Channels: Dara Birnbaum's Televisual Art Comes into Focus," *ARTnews*, March 27, 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/icons-dara-birnbaum-9973/>.

82. Dara Birnbaum, "My Pop: Dara Birnbaum," *Artforum International* 43, no. 2 (October 2004), <https://www.artforum.com/print/200408/dara-birnbaum-7663>.

83. Dara Birnbaum, "The Individual Voice as a Political Voice: Critiquing and Challenging the Authority of Media," in *Women, Art, and Technology*, ed. Judy Malloy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 137.



## Notes

84. Quote comes from Graham's on-screen *Rock My Religion* text: "There is an unresolved conflict between Puritan individualism and a yearning communalism free from sexual competition."

85. E. C. H. de Bruyn, "'Sound Is Material': Dan Graham in Conversation with Eric de Bruyn," *Grey Room*, no. 17 (Fall 2004): 113.

86. Dan Graham and Jeff Wall, *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 148.

87. Kodwo Eshun, *Dan Graham: Rock My Religion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 195.

88. Stephen Vitiello, "Stephen Vitiello and Steve Roden: The Space Contained in Each," interview by Steve Roden, *Bomb Magazine*, October 1, 2013, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/steve-roden-and-stephen-vitiello/>.

89. Siddhartha Mitter, "Black Lives Shine in Rico Gatson's New Show," *Village Voice*, July 11, 2017, [https://feldmangallery.com/assets/pdfs/Gatson\\_selected-Press.pdf](https://feldmangallery.com/assets/pdfs/Gatson_selected-Press.pdf).



# Catalogue of Works in the Exhibition

All works are in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, unless noted otherwise. Dimensions are presented in inches; height precedes width and depth. Entries marked with an asterisk (\*) are not illustrated.

## **ADÁL**

born Adalberto Maldonado, 1948, Utuado, Puerto Rico-died 2020, San Juan, Puerto Rico

*El Puerto Rican Passport, El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico: Adál Maldonado*

1994

lithography with photograph in staple-bound booklet

closed: 5 x 3 1/2 in.

open: 7 x 5 in.

Gift of the artist, 2013.19.1

Cat. 1

*El Puerto Rican Passport, El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico: Luciana Alexandra del Rio de la Serna*

1994, issued 2012

lithography with photograph in staple-bound booklet

closed: 5 x 3 1/2 in.

open: 7 x 5 in.

Gift of the artist, 2013.19.2

Cat. 2

*El Puerto Rican Passport, El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico: Koki Kiki*

1994, issued 2005

lithography with photograph in staple-bound booklet

closed: 5 x 3 1/2 in.

open: 7 x 5 in.

Gift of the artist, 2013.19.3

Cat. 3



## Catalogue of Works in the Exhibition

*West Side Story Upside Down, Backwards, Sideways and Out of Focus (La Maleta de Futriaco Martínez)*

2002

suitcase, flat-screen LCD monitor, single-channel digital video (color, sound); 12:51 min.  
14 x 20 x 7 in.

Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2013.20

Cat. 4

### **Raven Chacon (Diné)**

born Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation, Arizona  
1977

*Report*

2001/2015

single-channel video (color, sound); 3:48 min.;  
printed score, music stand

Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2020.61A-C

Cat. 5

*\*For Ange Loft, from the series For Zitkála-Šá*

2020

lithograph on paper

sheet and image: 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Museum purchase through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2022.7.1.1

Cat. 6

*\*For Candice Hopkins, from the series*

*For Zitkála-Šá*

2020

lithograph on paper

sheet and image: 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Museum purchase through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2022.7.1.5

Cat. 7

*\*For Joy Harjo, from the series For Zitkála-Šá*

2020

lithograph on paper

sheet and image: 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Museum purchase through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2022.7.1.10

Cat. 8

*\*For Laura Ortman, from the series*

*For Zitkála-Šá*

2019

lithograph on paper

sheet and image: 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Museum purchase through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2022.7.1.11

Cat. 9

## Catalogue of Works in the Exhibition

*For Olivia Shortt*, from the series *For Zitkála-Šá*  
2020

lithograph on paper  
sheet and image: 11 x 8 1/2 in.

Museum purchase through the Julia D. Strong  
Endowment, 2022.7.1.12

Cat. 10

### **Mariam Ghani**

born New York City 1978

### **Erin Ellen Kelly**

born St. Louis, Missouri 1976

*When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*  
2019

three-channel video (color, sound); 23:36 min.  
Museum purchase, 2021.23.1

Cat. 11

\**Diptych (Bend in the Wall and Theresa at the  
Door)* from the series *When the Spirits Moved  
Them, They Moved*

2019

two dye transfer prints on Dibond  
each/overall: 20 x 30 in.

Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

Cat. 12

*Meeting House, Morning*

from the series *When the Spirits Moved Them,  
They Moved*

2019

dye transfer print on Dibond  
overall: 20 x 30 in.

Gift of the artists, courtesy of RYAN LEE  
Gallery, New York, 2021.94.3

Cat. 13

\**Triptych (Two Houses, Two Shadows, Ashley  
Fallen to the Floor, and Last Cow in the Field)*  
from the series *When the Spirits Moved Them,  
They Moved*

2019

three dye transfer prints on Dibond  
each/overall: 20 x 30 in.

Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

Cat. 14

*Triptych (Trees Above, Amanda Abandoned,  
and Stones Below)*

from the series *When the Spirits Moved Them,  
They Moved*

2019

three dye transfer prints on Dibond  
each/overall: 20 x 30 in.

Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

Cat. 15

## Catalogue of Works in the Exhibition

### *\*Benched #1*

from the series *When the Spirits Moved Them, They Moved*

2019

dye transfer print on Dibond

overall: 20 x 30 in.

Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

Cat. 16

### **Martine Gutierrez**

born Berkeley, California 1989

#### *Clubbing*

2012

single-channel digital video (high-definition, color, sound); 3:06 min.

Museum purchase, 2021.23.2

Cat. 17

### **Arthur Jafa**

born Tupelo, Mississippi 1960

*Love is the Message, The Message is Death*  
2016

single-channel digital video (high-definition, color, sound); 7:25 min.

Joint museum purchase with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Nion T. McEvoy, Chair of SAAM Commission (2016-2018), and McEvoy's fellow Commissioners in his honor; additional funding provided by Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 2020.001;

2020.3

Cat. 18

#### *APEX GRID*

2018

Epson fine print face-mounted Diasec acrylic on aluminum panel

105 1/2 x 352 1/2 x 2 1/4 in.

Private collection

Cat. 19

## Catalogue of Works in the Exhibition

### **Christine Sun Kim**

born Orange County, California 1980

#### *One Week of Lullabies for Roux*

2018

seven tracks; sound

Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2020.79.1

Cat. 20

#### *Close Readings*

2015

four-channel video (color, silent); 25:53 min.

In collaboration with Jeffrey Mansfield, Ariel Baker-Gibbs, Alison O'Daniel, Lauren Ridloff

Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2020.79.2

Cat. 21

#### *The Star-Spangled Banner (Third Verse)*

2020

charcoal on paper

overall: 58 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 58 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.

frame: 60 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 60 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.

Museum purchase and purchase through the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2021.31.1

Cat. 22

#### *America the Beautiful*

2020

charcoal on paper

overall: 58 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 58 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.

frame: 60 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 60 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.

Museum purchase and purchase through the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and through the Julia D. Strong Endowment, 2021.31.2

Cat. 23

### **Simone Leigh**

born Chicago, Illinois 1968

### **Liz Magic Laser**

born New York City 1981

#### *Breakdown*

2011

single-channel digital video (color, sound); 9:00 min.

Museum purchase through the Samuel and Blanche Koffler Acquisition Fund, 2019.33.2

Cat. 24

## Catalogue of Works in the Exhibition

### **Simone Leigh**

born Chicago, Illinois 1968

#### *Cupboard VIII*

2018

stoneware, steel, raffia, Albany slip

125 x 120 x 120 in.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

gift of Bridgitt and Bruce Evans

Cat. 25

### **Cauleen Smith**

born Riverside, California 1967

#### *Sojourner*

2018

single-channel digital video (color, sound);

22:41 min.

Museum purchase made possible by the

SJ Weiler Fund, 2020.54.1

Cat. 26

#### *Pilgrim*

2017

single-channel digital video (color, sound);

7:41 min.

Museum purchase made possible by the SJ

Weiler Fund, 2020.54.2

Cat. 27

#### *Light up My Life (For Sandra Bland)*

2020

neon, MDF, paint, faceted hematite, and  
aluminum

78 x 48 in.

New Britain Museum of American Art, 2021.3,

General Purchase Fund

Cat. 28

#### *Sunshine (for Brayla, Merci, Shakiie, Draya, Tatiana, and Bree, Riah, Dominique...)*

2020

neon, MDF, paint, gold-pleated chain link

60 x 45 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Morán Morán,

Los Angeles

Cat. 29

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