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HUEY COPELAND

BABEL SCREENED: ON RACE, NARCISSISM, AND THE PREDICATION OF AMERICAN VIDEO ART

YOU HEAR THE ARTIST before you see him sitting before a white wall. His eyes are closed, his expression is focused, and for almost the entirety of the video's thirteen minutes, his mouth is full, stuffed with a microphone whose cord loops tautly around his neck [FIG. 1]. Every now and then—around minutes four, six, nine, and eleven—he pauses to clear his airways and to wipe away the spit pooling on his gray T-shirt. In the process, he removes the microphone that so amply registers his breathing, choking, and yelping even as its physical presence and burps of feedback occlude his speech. Except in these intervals, for the duration of the performance the artist signs with exasperated hands, “I am talking to you,” a deictic utterance that points up the conditions of enunciation as much as anything else. Repeatedly confronted with such a straightforward yet obfuscated declaration, enjoined to witness such a disturbing but mesmeric scene, you can hardly help but wonder: just what is being said here by not saying, and why must it be said in this particular way?

A few things are for sure: Dave McKenzie is the artist in question and this work, *Babel*, first enacted in 2000, has since become a touchstone of his conceptually based practice. Although he has formatted the piece as a single-channel DVD that sutures one viewer at a time into its heart-stopping circuitry, he continues to enact it in front of live audiences, who must work hard to maintain an emotional distance from the sight of a spastic black man who comes close to falling apart before their very eyes and seems to risk electrocution at every moment.¹ Like much of the Jamaican-born U.S. artist's work, the digitally recorded version of *Babel* considered here models a view of history in which the differential effects of subjection position his body not as a marginalized object, but as vital locus through which to chart the networks of desire and consumption, liberation and disenfranchisement, violence and filiation that shape the modern social field.

It is just such concerns that animate this essay, which aims to articulate how the vicissitudes of racial terror have shaped the production and reception of American art, above all, work in performance and video. McKenzie's practice offers a fitting vehicle for this endeavor thanks to its rare wedding of discursive complexity and kind-hearted solicitousness. For regardless of the form his work takes or the site in which you encounter it, Dave wants somehow to be with you: in your wallet as a card for noting enemies in the case of his *Shit List* (2004) [FIG. 2]; on your mantel as a bobble head cast in his own image as demonstrated by *While Supplies Last* (2002) [FIG. 3]; or as a *Self-Portrait Piñata* replete with candy (2003) [FIG. 4], hanging in the gallery and awaiting the instant when your taste for sweets gets the better of your political pieties. Each of these darkly humorous interventions is characterized by an extreme generosity as well as a lightness of touch that, in taking its measure from the artist's body, serves to make visible otherwise unremarkable occurrences by cross-wiring them with the libidinal economies of black death and their inextricable relationship to the production of white pleasure.²

In so doing, McKenzie engages and recasts what Jacqueline Goldsby calls “the cultural logic of lynching,” which “can be understood as an articulation of the social world's organization at any given point in time,” whether the victim in question is a very real Henry Smith, murdered in 1893 by a white mob numbering in the thousands, or a televisual Clarence Thomas, persecuted almost one hundred years later in the course of his Supreme Court appointment.³ Unlike these men, the artist has not, to my knowledge, ever been accused of sexual impropriety, yet his *Shit List*, *While Supplies Last*, and *Self-Portrait Piñata* variously bear the imprint of an infernal American tradition as well as its modes of

1
Dave McKenzie
Still from *Babel*
2000
Video
13 min., 48 sec.



2
David McKenzie
Shit List
2004
Printed cards
2 x 3½ inches each



3
Dave McKenzie
While Supplies Last
2003
Sculpture and event



4
Dave McKenzie
Self Portrait Pinata
2002
Papier-mache and crepe paper

5
Emmett Till in casket
1955
Used with the permission of the
Chicago Defender



6
Thomas Allen Harris
Still from *Black Body (A Work in Progress)*
1992
Video
5 minutes



identifying targets, procuring souvenirs from victims, and gathering an expectant crowd eager for the delectation of riven black flesh. In every instance, forms of contemporary kitsch are shadowed by darker narratives of capitalist consumption.

Babel is doubtless the most pointed of the artist's works to date to court the specter of torture, summoning images of lynched black male bodies whose mouths have been crammed with their own castrated genitals. The video does not, of course, precisely replay these scenarios: as the artist himself is quick to emphasize, the cable around his neck is far from a noose and at the end of the piece, he removes the microphone, unwraps the cord, and covers his eyes, as if to shield himself both from the trauma of his own actions and the fact that he must live to almost die another day.⁴ Like Demetrius Oliver's 2004 self-portrait in a lather of ketchup and chocolate frosting [PAGE 153]—modeled after *Jet* magazine's 1955 photographs of Emmett Till's horrifically disfigured face [FIG. 5]—*Babel* makes clear the extent to which lynching has been internalized as the future death toward which African-American masculinity necessarily tends. The black male body, both practitioners know, is always already available for public consumption, perennially haunted by the threat of murder, policing, and dismemberment even within the safe confines of the studio.⁵

Cast in this light, McKenzie's performance can be situated within a long lineage of artistic responses to the spectacular dereliction of African American subjectivity, from Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's sculptural homage to a pregnant *Mary Turner: Silent Protest Against Mob Violence* (1919), to Pat Ward Williams's emotional analysis of torture images published in *Life* magazine, *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock* (1986). Arguably more to the point is *Babel's* rhyming with a range of post-civil rights performative works intent on figuring the juridical and corporeal dispossession of black male being, perhaps best emblemized by the 1970s body prints of David Hammons, the 1980s street crawls of William Pope L., and more recently, Thomas Allen Harris's 1992 video *Black Body (A Work in Progress)* [FIG. 6]. In this five-minute tape—shot in black and white with a fish-eye lens and set to an avant-jazz soundtrack—Harris depicts the gyrations of a nude figure trussed up with wire while a female narrator recounts incidents of sexualized abuse and a litany of brightly colored words defining the black body flashes across the screen.

In each of these cases, an artist stages African American men's exposure to acts of violence issuing from within and beyond the frame. I would argue, however, that McKenzie's

7
 Stills from *Hand & Mouth*, from the series *3 Adaptation Studies*
 1970
 Super 8 film, b&w
 3 minutes

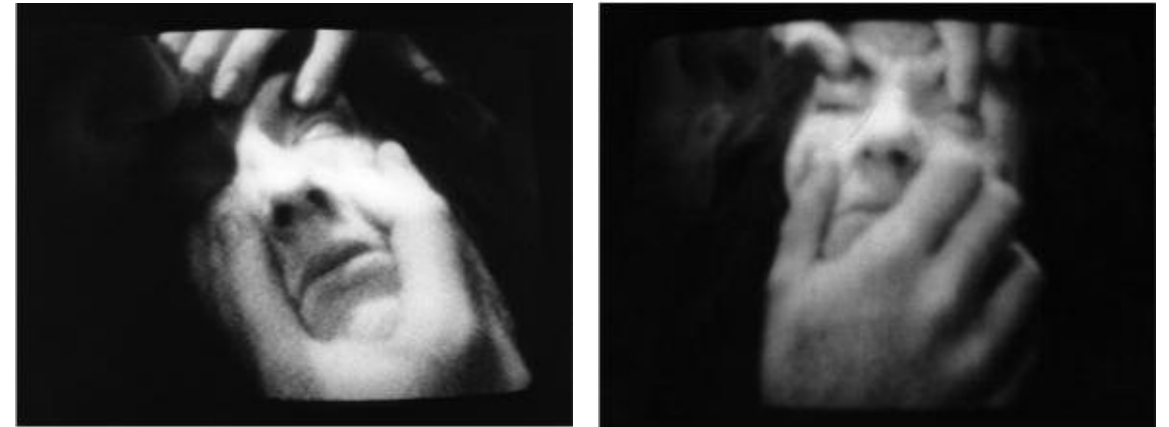


aesthetic means resonate just as strongly with the many strands of endurance performativity that marked the emergence of video art as a genre. Of particular import is the practice of Vito Acconci, whose 1970 work *Hand & Mouth* records the artist's repeated attempts to swallow his fist until halted by his gag reflex [FIG. 7]. Like such early pieces, *Babel* tightly trains its lens on a lone actor in a neutralized space, capturing failures of communication, stunts gone awry, bodies at their wits' ends. These characteristics, along with video's ability to trap its subjects between camera and monitor in a closed loop of self-regard, have done much to shore up Rosalind Krauss's contention that the medium is undergirded by an "aesthetics of narcissism," which effectively centralizes the artist while aggressively recruiting viewers presumed to be otherwise in thrall to television's surer pleasures.⁶

For Krauss and her most astute critics, Acconci's videos provide the case in point, and none better than *Centers* (1971): in this work, the artist unwaveringly points his finger at the camera, and by extension his audience, for twenty-three long minutes. Yet few commentators have reckoned with how deeply the rhetoric and economy of Acconci's narcissism and of video art itself seem to rely upon whiteness as a *lingua franca* to do their work. This observation holds true even within later performance documentation that is critically attuned to the visual production of race. Whether the footage features erstwhile masseur Thomas Johnson neurotically confessing his preoccupation with *What a Black Man Feels Like* (2004) [PAGE 130], or theorist Shannon Jackson coming to grips with the ironic privileges and perils of her own *White Noises* (1993) [PAGE 128], the performance of whiteness, if not the vision of non-black skin, remains central to video's ability to secure the authority of its practitioners and the attention, if not the composition, of its publics.⁷

Consider, then, the changes rung upon Acconci's oeuvre by the artists Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, who remade several of his seminal pieces in 1995—not, however, in New York art spaces but in a Los Angeles mansion, and starring smooth, gym-toned models rather than the hirsute aging body of the artist himself. The resulting tape, *Fresh Acconci*, features a black man in several re-performances and in two iterations of the 1972

8
 Vito Acconci
 Stills from *Pryings*
 1971
 Eisner & Lubin Auditorium, NYU, Live performance with video
 Videotape from the performance, b&w, sound
 20 minutes
 2nd participant: Kathy Dillon; Camera-person: Bernadette Mayer



9
 Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy
 Still from *Fresh Acconci*
 1994
 Video, 45 min, color, sound
 Video still courtesy of Paul McCarthy and Hauser and Wirth

IO
Howardena Pindell
Still from *Free, White, and 21*
1989
Video



II
Elizabeth Axtman
Still from *American Classics*
2006
Video



work *Pryings*, their source's attempt to open the tightly shut eyes of his collaborator Kathy Dillon [FIG. 8]. In Kelley and McCarthy's first interracial restaging of this Acconci work, the black male is the actor, wrestling in a hot tub with a white man [FIG. 9]; in the second, he is acted upon, laid out in bed next to a white woman.⁸ In each instance, the psychic, sexual, and political valences of the scene and of the original tape shift drastically: once straightforward performances about the mechanics of intersubjectivity become scrimms on which the phantasms of race and the predication of what theorist Frank B. Wilderson III titles "the structure of U.S. antagonisms" are forcefully projected.⁹

Taken together, Acconci's originals and the remakes of them begin to suggest the constitutive realities and discursive structures that African American video artists have for decades indicted to biting and hilarious effect. In Howardena Pindell's foundational 1980 account of the everyday mechanics of racial prejudice, *Free, White and 21* [FIG. 10], for example, the artist plays both her earnest black self and her blithely dismissive white counterpart. In her 2006 work *American Classics* [FIG. 11], Elizabeth Axtman further multiplies such voicings, lip-synching speech fragments that Hollywood cinema has placed in the mouths of its "tragic mulattoes." Through their ventriloquizations of whitened subjectivity, Pindell's and Axtman's performances index the ways in which video art has time and again figured forms of narcissism, coupling, and relation that can be imagined only within the embrace of a society from which dark citizens have been summarily ejected.

This makes a certain sense, especially if we delve deeper into Wilderson's ground-breaking work. He argues that relationality is impossible for the black subject given his political ontology as the corpse on which white civilization unfolds.¹⁰ Thus, when McKenzie turns the camera on himself, the gesture is one caught up not in the dialectic of narcissism and aggressivity, but of being dead in the world and being cast out of it altogether. In recording his attempt to speak, the artist provides a metacommentary on his own structural location and insists on differentiating between actual corporeal exposure and its aestheticized impersonation in the work of 1960s and '70s body artists. On this

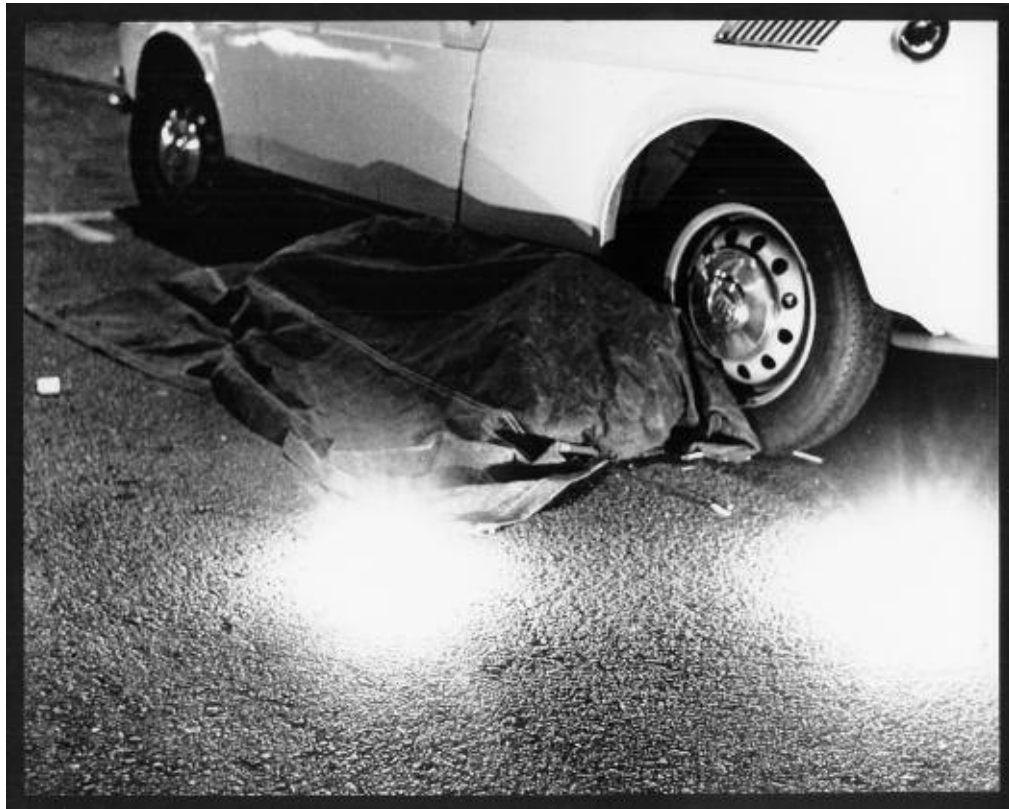
score, the performances of Chris Burden provide the most salient examples, since they time and again asymptotically approached the conditions faced by black subjects on the ground, and nowhere more poignantly than in his 1973 work *Dead Man* [FIG. 12]. To execute the piece, the artist lay on a Los Angeles freeway under a tarp, looking like nothing so much as a young man of color, the demographic category then, as ever, at greatest risk of homicide.

In fact, the murder rate in Los Angeles increased 84% during the 1970s, in part, due to the escalation of gang violence in black and Latino communities, which was luridly described and perniciously stoked by local media coverage.¹¹ In response, the Chicano collective ASCO would offer their own staged corpse in *Decoy Gang War Victim*—a performance captured in a sumptuous color slide delivered to and broadcast by local television stations in 1974 [FIG. 13]—which was meant to "generate a pause in the violence" and "to rob newspapers of their daily list of victims."¹² The aim and end of Burden's performance one year earlier were markedly different: according to the artist, when the police arrived on the scene of *Dead Man*, he was promptly arrested and eventually charged with "false emergency."¹³ In the end, his greatest fear in confronting the LAPD was of juridical persecution rather than of continued bloodshed or of corporeal disintegration, worries a world apart from those of the average black man. Over the course of the decade, African Americans in Los Angeles were 5.6 times more likely than whites and 2.4 times more likely than Hispanics to be the victims of murder, statistics that would receive harrowing visual affirmation some twenty years later in George Holliday's videotape of the Rodney King beating.¹⁴

Connecting these episodes in a single gesture, McKenzie's video articulates the gulf separating the non-black subject's performance of vulnerability and the black body's constitutive grounding within it, much as it interrogates the fabric of racialization that tints every African American speech act.¹⁵ As such, *Babel* both points to the stifling of black voices in dominant accounts of recent artistic practice and parodies our nation's incessant demand for black faces that offer much in the way of sound and fury but little direction for resistive struggle. In contrast to contemporary politicians, preachers, and MCs, McKenzie stops himself up, illuminating how technologies of transmission, always liable to reduce their subjects to aphasic disorder, can easily become weaponized obstacles when trained on black sights.¹⁶ What his performance reveals, in other words, are the limits of the sayable within American political and artistic discourse, which are always underpinned by the silence of its most violently negated class of citizens, dark figures fixed in their bodies and denied access to the performative at almost every turn.¹⁷ To cite Wilderson, the transhistorical condition of the Black is not only one of "absolute captivity," but also constitutes a "state of virtual noncommunication within official culture."¹⁸

All of which makes McKenzie's desperate attempts to talk to you that much more incisive—since he does, in fact, speak: his performance indexes only to undo what Michael Hatt has termed "the substitution of the gestural for the verbal" that undergirds acts of racialized violence.¹⁹ By using American Sign Language, the artist refigures black folks' storied attempts to make themselves visibly legible as conscious subjects, even as the perception of their bodies and the cries that issue from them vituperate against such agency.²⁰ Indeed, McKenzie's muffled sounds are in and of themselves a means of communication if understood in light of Edouard Glissant's theorization of black utterance: "Since speech

12
Deadman
 Chris Burden



November 12, 1972
 Riko Mizuno Gallery, Los Angeles, California

At 8 p.m. I lay down on La Cienega Boulevard and was covered completely with a canvas tarpaulin. Two fifteen-minute flares were placed near me to alert cars. Just before the flares extinguished, a police car arrived. I was arrested and booked for causing a false emergency to be reported. Trial took place in Beverly Hills. After three days of deliberation, the jury failed to reach a decision, and the judge dismissed the case.

Relic: canvas tarp
 Folded: 1 x 15 x 10 inches / Open: 53 x 70½ inches
 Case: 9¾ x 19½ x 14½ inches
 Collection: Adam Sender, NY

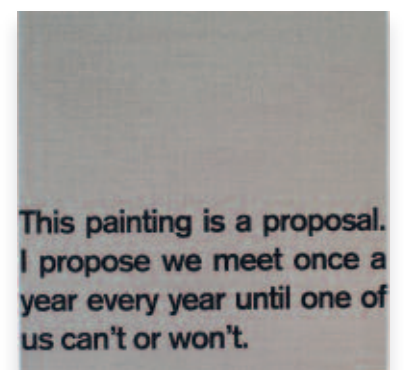
13
 Asco
Decoy Gang War Victim
 1975
 Performance



was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme sound.”²¹ For the black subject, Glissant would say, “din is discourse.”²² McKenzie’s noise and body can therefore be read as the metaphorical grounds on which the Tower of Babel, the oppression of Babylon, and the human itself have been erected in the modern West.²³

For his part, the artist performs what Wilderson maintains is vital to any black radical practice of the image, a coupling of “real violence” “with representational ‘monstrosity,’” that would allow “Blacks [to] move from the status of things to the status of... of what, we’ll just have to wait and see.”²⁴ As intimated by his painting *Proposal* (2007) [FIG. 14], in which he asks that you meet him for a date, McKenzie is content to see what unfolds at a later time, even as his work models a transformation of representational orders and enables rethinking of the all-too-white historiography of mainstream video art, which, for forty years, has refused to properly countenance the presence, or even the image, of African American subjects.²⁵ Like ontological violence, such haunted expectations of a future that may never arrive are part and parcel of what it means to be a black subject in the modern world, ever suspended in the interstices of representation and always slowed down by the impositions of racial time.²⁶ Luckily, Dave is happy to wait for you.

14
 Dave McKenzie
Proposal
 2007
 Acrylic on canvas
 16 x 16 inches



I thank Emilie Boone and Rashida Bumbray for their assistance in researching this essay and Janet Dees, Eve Meltzer, Karen Reimer, Steve Reinke, and Krista Thompson for their helpful comments on previous drafts of it.

¹ See Aaron Moulton, “Chicago: 40000,” *Flash Art*, June 2006, 72, for one audience’s attempt to “feign an unaffected cool” in the face of McKenzie’s performance.

² See David Marriott, “‘I’m gonna borer me a Kodak’: Photography and Lynching,” in *On Black Men*, 1–22 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), for a thoroughgoing analysis of these dynamics.

³ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 26–27.

⁴ Dave McKenzie, in discussion with the author, September 30, 2004.

⁵ Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African-American Men’s Literature and Culture, 1775–1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 33. See also *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000), an important book and exhibition that featured nearly one hundred images, which freshly brought the history of racialized violence into view for a broad swathe of audiences.

⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 50–64. See Anne M. Wagner, “Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence,” *October* 91 (Winter 2000): 59–80, for a brilliant reframing of Krauss’s essay in light of the politics of aggressivity, viewership, and artistic reception circa 1970. See David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 188–89, for an even more pointed critique that aims to debunk Krauss’s theoretical framework altogether. Although I concur with both of these assessments, particularly their desire to bracket the reach of narcissism as an aesthetic condition, as I hope to show, actively working through the limitations of the concept still has much to teach us about the production of difference within the visual field and the historiography of video as a cultural discourse. See Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, “Real Bodies: Video in the 1990s,” *Art History* 20.2 (June 1997): 185–213, for a like-minded effort.

⁷ See Bryant Keith Alexander, “Black Skin/White Masks: The Performative Sustainability of Whiteness (With Apologies to Frantz Fanon),” *Qualitative Inquiry* 10.5 (October 2004): 647–672, for a compelling account of how racial privilege is enacted and reproduced.

⁸ Such recastings, it is worth noting, have continued apace: in his 2006 video *Studio Visits: Patty Chang*, for instance, African American performance artist Clifford Owens enjoined the Asian American practitioner named in the work’s title to assume Acconci’s role in a twenty-eight second send-up of *Pryings*.

⁹ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56–7.

¹¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Homicide—Los Angeles, 1970–1979,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 35.5 (February 7, 1986): 61.

¹² Harry Gamboa Jr., “L.A. Stories: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Artforum*, October 2011, 246. Also see, C. Ondine Chavoya, “No-Movies: The Art of False Documents,” in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, 199–200 (New York: International Center of Photography distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003). For a more recent engagement with the figure of the artist as corpse, see Jonathan Monk’s 2007 hyperrealist sculpture *Deadman*, which wears Burden’s face but transposes his figure from ’70s L.A. to present-day Iraq.

¹³ See Chris Burden, *Documentation of Selected Works 1971–1974*, video transferred to DVD, Electronic Arts Inter-mix, for the artist’s commentary. Also see Frazer Ward, “Gray Zone: Watching Shoot,” *October* 95 (Winter 2001):

114–130. My reading of *Dead Man* is meant to rhyme with and ultimately depart from Ward’s analysis of the most seminal Burden performance, *Shoot* (1971), in which the artist took a bullet fired by a friend. Although Ward importantly places this work in the context of the Vietnam War and its media representation, in so doing, he casts the primal scene of American violence as occurring elsewhere rather than at home and again leaves the white artist’s body racially unmarked.

¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Homicide—Los Angeles, 1970–1979,” 61. See Elizabeth Alexander, “‘Can you be BLACK and look at this?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden, 90–110 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994); as well as Huey Copeland, “Outtakes,” *Art Journal* 67.4 (Winter 2008): 20–32, for accounts of artistic and vernacular responses to King’s assault.

¹⁵ Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 49–50.

¹⁶ Two artworks seem especially relevant on this score: Richard Serra’s video *Boomerang* (1974), in which the artist Nancy Holt’s speech into a microphone almost immediately returns to her via headset, resulting in considerable disorientation; and Mel Chin’s *Night Rap* (1994), a sculpture in the form of a police nightstick whose handle the artist transformed into a black dildo and whose tip he replaced with a microphone.

¹⁷ Michael Hatt, “Race, Ritual, and Responsibility: Performativity and the Southern Lynching,” in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, 83 (London: Routledge, 1999),

¹⁸ Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 64.

¹⁹ Hatt, “Race, Ritual, and Responsibility,” 80.

²⁰ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Face and Voice of Blackness,” in Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940*, ed. Christopher C. French, xxix–xliv (San Francisco: Bedford Arts Publishers in association with The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990).

²¹ Edouard Glissant, “Cross-Cultural Poetics” (1973), in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash, 124 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989).

²² *Ibid.*, 123.

²³ Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 208. “Babylon” refers to the Rastafarian moniker for the unjust social order as presently constituted.

²⁴ Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 66.

²⁵ To take two texts virtually at random from the chronological endpoints of the discourse, neither *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), nor *100 Video Artists*, ed. Rosa Olivares (Madrid: Fundación ICO, 2010), make mention of a single African American practitioner. There are, of course, exceptions as well as a compelling discourse on black video practice, though the latter exhibitions, texts, and artworks are rarely addressed in analyses of the genre as such. In particular I think of: Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women Film and Video Artists* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Leslie King-Hammond and Lowery S. Sims, *Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum: Installations, Performances, and Videos by 13 Afro-American Artists* (Baltimore: Maryland Institute, College of Art, 1989); Erika D. Muhammad, *Race in Digital Space: Artists’ Video, Audio, CD-ROM, Internet and Sound Projects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2001); Patrick Ogle, *Facets African-American Video Guide* (Chicago: Facets Multimedia, 1994); Valerie C. Oliver and Andrea B. Brownlee, *Cinema Remixed & Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2008); Reginald Woolery and Deirdre Scott, *Too Black, Too Strong! An Exhibition of Video and Works on Paper Organized by Reginald Woolery* (New York: Artists Space, 1988); and Philip Mallory Jones, *Icono Negro: The Black Aesthetic in Video Art* (Long Beach, CA: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1989).

²⁶ See Kara Keeling, “In the Interval,” in *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, 27–44 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” *Public Culture* 11.1 (1999): 245–268.