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INSTALLATION

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waves surge across the screen. The installation, then, depends equally upon an evocation of something akin to the Black Atlantic (a “[James] Turrell while you’re chained in the bottom of a boat”) and a refusal of it, a refusal of the delimiting violence of blackness’s periodization or spatialization in the wake of the Middle Passage.

The horizon is simultaneously a locatable site and an unknowable distance, and our sensorial perception of that divide. This set of associations maps onto the complex relationships among city, neighborhood, gallery, and film installation at play in *AGHDRA*. The unknowable conditions of the black hole, toward which the event horizon pulls one unceasingly and unstoppably, come to represent a suspension of the historical and material conditions imposed in and on this world, forged of colonial conquest and the Middle Passage. Jafa’s *AGHDGA* extends to the very limits of the possible the conditions of perception, time, and space, continually framing the distant horizon as at once a *site* and a *sight* toward which one is pulled, an embodied and perceptual compulsion redolent with hope and the sublime terror of the unknown.

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**BLACK JOY/WHITE FRAGILITY.** By Joy Mariama Smith. Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. October 21, 2021.

Occupying a small but central gallery on the main exhibition floor of Rotterdam’s Kunstinstituut Melly, Joy Mariama Smith’s provocatively titled *Black Joy/White Fragility* brought a queer urban nightlife edge to the institution’s fall 2021 program. As a movement artist, educator, and activist, Smith has spent the last decades cultivating a practice rooted in radical Black traditions of refusal and care, which sits at the intersections of art, pedagogy, performance, design, and club culture. In *Black Joy/White Fragility*, these elements come together as a performance installation that unsettles the general stasis of the arts institution.

In the installation, the props and lighting of a club environment merged with the pedestals and spatial arrangements of an art gallery: crystals and natural oils took their places atop stands as a mixing board, speakers, and subwoofer stood below the gallery’s monumental arched window. In the back corner, a simple neon sign shone in fuchsia pink with the words: “Black Joy.” The soft curves of the cursive lettering and the glittering refraction of

the disco ball suspended in the center of the room stood in contrast to the hard shadows of the window’s wrought iron details, counteracting the sharp points of the metalwork with an ephemeral sparkle and a nominal reminder of Black joy. Together with a few strategically placed color LED stage lights, these light-and-shadow plays created a flickering cinematic effect that pulsed with the creeping (sub-)bass of Smith’s techno music playlist (featuring Seven Angels, KILLA, Sophie Ruston, and DJ NEON QUEEN). Literally shaking the bean bags in painter Iris Kensmil’s adjacent gallery of portraiture with deep sonic pulsations, Smith’s installation was something that could be felt before it was legible as something “to be heard.” Starting from a place of resonances, then, *Black Joy/White Fragility* worked through vibrations, which cut across visual, architectural, and other boundaries. The artist described this in conversation with me as “trying to heal, trying to vibrate the building.”

The link between healing and vibrating says much about the dramaturgy of the performance that activated Smith’s installation. On four days throughout the month-long run of their project, the installation was closed to museumgoers and reserved for a community of QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color) performers, including Sharlan Adams, Esther Arribas, Ieva Barsauskaite, Carly Rose Bedford, Mohamed Boujarra, Devika Chotoe, Dandelion Eghosa, Antonella Fittipaldi, G, Ahmed El Gendy, Ciro Goudsmit, Annick Kleizen, Isabel Kwarteng, Parisa Madani, Mini Maxwell, Anthony Nestel, Emanuel Oladokun, Auro Orso, Ada M. Patterson, Roberto Peréz Gayo, Estrelx Supernova, June Yuen Ting, and Michael Ludwig Tsouloukidse. The performers could dance, rest, or converse with one another as they pleased. In this occupation otherwise, the installation took on a double presence: it was an architecturally scaled social sculpture and a site of convening.

Working in and against the spatial cues of white (cube) space, it moved beyond contained abstract notions of language and action, and into the infrastructures of the building where it inverted patterns of racial segregation, confusing both the directionality of the gaze (who was seeing whom?) and exclusionary door policies (visitors and allied white performers could only encounter “the club” from outside the doors of the gallery). And within this expanded social sculpture, a site of convening was carved out, holding space open for the community of performers to gather and share time. What “gathering” meant remained an open invitation: performers could dance together in the installation or dance autonomously with wireless headphones. They could also leave the gallery and move through the art center’s circulation spaces (entryway, book-





Performance documentation of Joy Mariama Smith, *Black Joy/White Fragility* (2021), Kunstinstituut Melly (Rotterdam). (Photo/video: Lavinia Pollack, courtesy of the artist, Kunstinstituut Melly, and Hartwig Art Foundation.)

shop, halls, stairways, and elevator) with their wireless headphones. Donning oversized and often hand-altered neon T-shirts designed by Smith with inscriptions like “Hard Femme,” “Stop Acting White,” or “Queer Energetic Household,” they were immediately recognizable as a community of performers, but without an expected precondition of always acting together.

In turn, as a viewer, I was also free to move as I wished, setting the pace for what would constitute my “encounter.” I spent a great deal of my time in the Iris Kensmil bean bags feeling the bass of Smith’s DJ set and occasionally catching glimpses of the performers as they moved in their environment. In these passing moments, I stayed attentive to rhythms and the choices of the performers: before even entering the art center, I encountered performer Mini Maxwell from the street-facing bookshop window—what Maxwell later described to me as a personal commitment to always attempt to bring the outside world in. Other performers, though, spent their time in the interiors, ecstatically activating familiar infrastructural passageways with their mere costumed presence, if not also the throb, thump, and pump of their bodily gestures. When I descended from the top floor to exit the building, there was a

moment in the lift when I could see a performer at every level. One was stretched casually across the handrail on the second-floor staircase; two others were framed in the corridors leading out from the elevator’s door; and on the ground floor, another’s frame stood like a glowing neon beacon in the modestly ornate circa-1870s entrance.

As an installation being performed, *Black Joy/White Fragility* traced its own fugitive edges; and as a performance being installed, it emplaced microsites for resistance. Alongside shared “onstage” time, Smith also facilitated ongoing spaces for “offstage” conversation among the community of performers to unfold. Both in the installation and the digital spaces outside of it, there was room for the challenging questions that the work was raising personally and structurally. Moreover, the offstage performance schedule formed a non-rigid ecosystem for the work, requesting that performers commit to at least three hours of performing anytime during opening hours on one of four performance days. They could stay longer and move or rest as they pleased. Centering communication and/as performance of a community-organized system of accountability, these loose parameters and foregrounding of care labor expanded the edges of what constituted

“the performance” and redefined where the critical pedagogical exchanges were taking place. If *Black Joy/White Fragility* was a spatial-political proposition conceived for, although not delimited to, Kunststituut Melly, it was one meant to be considered by Smith and the community of performers together. Reciprocally, visitors were asked to practice respect. With a strict no-photography rule in place, Smith rejected the impulse to capture the experience. Come, witness, tune oneself to the resonances, and learn.

Installation art has long been a primary site of aesthetic and pedagogical investigation for Smith, given its emphases on situatedness and positionality. They have consistently used it to push against the ostensibly inclusive universalist claims of cultural spaces, from the white cube to the black box, the dance floor to the dark room. Across installation as well as other performance and workshop forms, their practice remains committed to naming without centering the racialized, classed, and gendered spatial-relational politics that would discipline QT-BIPOC bodies in both psychic and material ways. The contested field of naming is also a thread connecting Smith’s interests to the site: Kunststituut Melly, which until early 2021 was known as the Witte de With Contemporary Art Center, has been one of several flashpoints in public debate around structural racism and the ongoing presence of colonial legacies in the Netherlands.

Within this charged context, Smith’s work at the (blurry) edges of legibility and illegibility, transparency and opacity, visibility and invisibility, inside and outside, and solitude and collectivity are a gently pulsating provocation. The movements called upon, from the micro-gesture to the macro-composition, traverse the field of the sensible, calling in capacities to witness that which has been foreclosed from this field by epistemologies of ignorance—namely, Black joy. If this is what *Black Joy/White Fragility* might offer for audiences, for the community of QTBIPOC performers, it affords the time and space to collectively trace their own fugitive edges within the fragile framework of white innocence at an institution like Melly by way of a double refusal: refusal to be siloed by the racism and colonial dispossession upon which that framework is built, and refusal to perform collectivity, community, or care in rigid, singular, or univocal ways. It is somewhere in this “edge work,” with all of the gestures of unsettling binary codes of knowability it performs, that Smith’s “choreographic repertoire” comes into focus. “Trying to heal, trying to vibrate the building” becomes a repertoire of resonances based in embodied principles of restorative and transformative justice. Across its sonic and spatial, psychic and material, affective and infrastructural meanings, *resonance* here is meant in its most ex-

panded senses: resonance connects the corporeal and the institutional; it is the impulse for movement and change and the demand to shake reified structures out of their torpor; it is the belief that healing happens in vibrations and pulsations that can be felt, even if not yet fully heard.

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#### TELEPATHIC IMPROVISATION (2017).

By Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz (Boudry/Lorenz). *Witch Hunt*, Hammer Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. October 22, 2021.

Entering a small, unlit room with black walls and carpet, audience members hovered around the edges of a short black stage at the Hammer Museum to view the film installation, *Telepathic Improvisation* (2017) by artist duo Boudry/Lorenz, known for installations that reimagine normative approaches to historical narratives and spectatorship. With its own dimly lit stage, the world of the film mimics the dark walls and floors of the installation space, thinning the boundary between the audience and the film and setting the stage for an experiment in telepathy. To begin the film, which is looped, a performer (Marwa Arsanios) dressed in a vermilion jumpsuit walks to the center of the stage, which is bare and set to look like the backstage of a production. Arsanios—an artist, filmmaker, and researcher whose work concerns gender relations, collectivism, urbanism, and industrialization—is framed by a line of downstage lights, a guitar, and a white motorized unit. Looking into the camera, she addresses the installation’s audience: “You are attempting inter-group, or interstellar telepathic transmission, following the 1974 score, *Telepathic Improvisation* by Pauline Oliveros.” While she is speaking, performance artist MPA, whose work explores how the social and the political impact the body; Ginger Brooks Takahashi, who creates collaborative project-based feminist and queer works; and Werner Hirsch, a freelance artist, dancer, and drag performer (sometimes also known as Prince Greenhorn or Antonia Baehr) walk on set, dressed in shades of red and white, with Arsanios and MPA in jumpsuits. Audience members are instructed to close their eyes and telepathically send actions to the performers, which include the four human beings as well as the guitar, lights, and motorized units. When the performers receive the action, they enact it. To illustrate that actions are being sent to and received by nonhuman subjects, onscreen stage lights flicker