MUTATE

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Abstract

MUTATE

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MUTATE is a speculative archive presented as an immersive theater performance that unfolded over two days in May 2024 at the Georgetown Steam Plant in Seattle, WA. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation" theory, *MUTATE* reimagines an archive that centers black subjects and black cultural practices. It explores the intersections of black embodiment and new media art, informed by Tina Campt's concept of Black Gaze, Kim Gallon's "technology of recovery," and Stephanie Dinkins' "Afro-now-ism." *MUTATE* integrates sound, video art, video projection, still images, animation, installation, and live performance to evoke themes and narratives.

This dissertation critically examines the fraught history and current tensions between technology and embodied experiences, highlighting issues of racism, bias, erasure, and oppressive systems

pervasive in the design, algorithms, and applications of new media art. It contends that the normative gaze, a foundational element perpetuating these issues, is closely intertwined with institutional archival practices. Through this analysis, an argument is made for approaching digital art outside of normative theoretical contexts to create the work with digital tools but guided by black scholarship. *MUTATE* is the practical summation of this approach.

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DEDICATION

To my mother and father

Frank and Glenda

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: Boiler Room Hatch at Georgetown Steam Plant, Credit: Joe Iano

1.1 Project Overview

MUTATE is a speculative archive installed as an immersive theater performance that took place on May 24th at Georgetown Steam plant in Seattle, WA. *MUTATE* was created through artistic engagement with black scholarly theories which include Tina Campt's *Black Gaze*, Saidya Hartman's "critical fabulations", Kim Gallon's "technology of recovery", and Stephanie Dinkin's "Afro-now-ism." Informed by these theories, *MUTATE* questions how a black centered gaze shapes the creation of a speculative archive, how black cultural practices inform the methods used and the archival contexts, and what new media practices and tools work within this context.

1.2 Motivations and Negotiations

If humans are to make new ways forward in partnership with nature and technology, we must first take a close look at and upend the concepts, histories, institutions and systems that support the inequitable distribution of resources and power. - Stephanie Dinkins, "Afro-now-ism"[1]

To *upend* something is to disturb it, to have a radical effect on "opinions, reputations, or systems." [2] In action, it knocks something off course, unearths something from its resting place, and topples that which is elevated. These are relational readings of the word that are tied to outcomes, but sans the dramatized violence, upending is simply reorientation. Examining the etymology of the word *Up-end, up* i.e., "towards a higher place or position," and *end,* i.e., "finality," to upend is to move, fix, rotate, turn, or return something to its final and desired position. With an essay entitled "Afro-now-ism," Stephanie Dinkins upended my artistic research practice. In the essay, Dinkins muses pointedly and poetically about Afro-now-ism, referring to it as "the spectacular technology of the unencumbered black mind in action." [3] The unencumbered black mind…a meditation.

The "Afro-now-ism" essay was published in *Noema Magazine* in June of 2020 for context, a polarizing time in the United States. With the onset of several catalytic events that altered the status quo, questions of morality, humanity, and ethics were up for broad discussion. One event was the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

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[1] Dinkins, Stephanie. "Afro-now-ism: The Unencumbered Black Mind Is a Wellspring of Possibility." Noema, June 16, 2020. https://www.noemamag.com/afro-now-ism/., this is an online article which does not include page numbers. The remaining citations for this source will not include page numbers.

[2] "Upend," Dictionary.com, accessed July 20, 2024, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/upend.

[3] Dinkins, Stephanie. "Afro-now-ism: The Unencumbered Black Mind Is a Wellspring of Possibility." Noema, June 16, 2020. https://www.noemamag.com/afro-now-ism/.

Floyd's murder was just one of the many blood-soaked data points of unarmed black deaths as a result of police violence. Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown are some of the most publicized occurrences; however, many others were not highlighted in mainstream media. [4] While Dinkins does not go into this in detail, she broadly discusses how "our systems, institutions, leaders, and narratives about who and what we are — our lack of compassion and limited definitions of what a valued member of society is — are failing us." [5]

Dinkins' essay engages with subjects of embodiment, human value, and technological considerations. It is a cross-section that could result in many lines of inquiry. One might be the value of a human life and the prevalence of black death contextualized through the lens of social media platforms. Dr. Tiera Tanskley conducted a research study investigating the impacts of "images of black people dead and dying" on social media sites. While doing so, Tanskley also detailed the viral numbers associated with the viewings. [6] " When George Floyd was murdered by police in 2020, his 9-minute death video was viewed over 1.4 billion times online."[7] Social media sites became the main stage to view the "dying black body on repeat mode," [8] "enhanced by the spectacle of new media." [9] The image of Eric Garner's outstretched hand reaching up towards the camera at me, the viewer, still produces a dreadful feeling, and even though his untimely death was ten years ago, the image of his last breaths still lives on the internet.

---

[4]"George Floyd death: Why US protests are so powerful this time," *BBC News*, last modified June 1, 2020, accessed July 18, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52905408.
[5] Dinkins, Stephanie Afro-now-sim. Technology and the Human. Noema. June 2020.
[6] Tanksley, T. (2022). Race, Education and #BlackLivesMatter: How Online Transformational Resistance Shapes the Offline Experiences of Black College-Age Women. *Urban Education (Beverly Hills, Calif.)*, 4208592210929-., 2179-2207 https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859221092970
[7] Ibid.
[8] Yasim Ibrahim. "The Dying Black Body in Repeat Mode: The Black "Horrific" on a Loop." *Identities*, 28 Apr. 2021, pp. 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289x.2021.1920775.
[9] Safiya Umoja Noble. "Critical Surveillance Literacy in Social Media: Interrogating Black Death and Dying Online." *Black Camera*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2018, p. 147, https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.9.2.10. Accessed 8 Apr. 2020.



Figure 2: Eric Garner's outstretched hand just before his murder (2014), still image

With no reprieves or recessions of these events in 2020, Stephanie Dinkins offers a read: Situated at the intersection of technology, black studies, and the absurd is the poised and well-informed Stephanie Dinkins offering a read:

> Both COVID-19 and the uprising against systemic racism based on greed, fear, and territorialism are symptoms making visible the inequities that continually seethe just beneath the surface of "civil society." [10] Further, "at this moment, we can see how black, brown, queer and disabled bodies are devalued; how people who threaten the comfort of those benefiting from institutional power are expendable." [11]

[10] Dinkins, Stephanie Afro-now-sim. Technology and the Human. Noema. June 2020.,this is an online article no page numbers
[11] Ibid.

This expendability and devaluing of black, brown, queer, and disabled bodies is made observable through technology and is enabled by technology. From “image-detection algorithms designed to optimize photo previews by [cropping] out black faces” [12], and “ futuristic games[...] depict[ing] semi-utopic worlds in which everyone is able-bodied” [13], body cam footage of police transgression [14], or subtle algorithmic autocorrect suggestions.[15] During the course of writing this dissertation, another example presented itself when attempting to write “Black interiority” in the body of this paper. The predictive algorithm attempted to change “black interiority” to “black inferiority” throughout the document's body. However, when writing “interiority” on its own, no autocorrect suggestion was made.

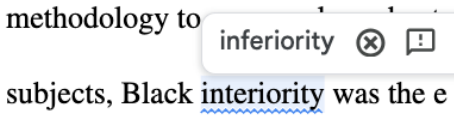

Figure 3: Screenshot of Google Docs AI grammar suggestion

As this dissertation attempts to construct a black-centered artistic methodology of working with technology, one that liberates the black body, the algorithm chimes in with, *"How dare you think so highly of yourself ?*"

[12] Wired, "Twitter's Photo-Crop Algorithm Favors White Faces, Women," accessed July 18, 2024, https://www.wired.com/story/twitter-photo-crop-algorithm-favors-white-faces-women/.
[13] Burrell, J., & Kim, D. H. (2023). **S**tuttering Matt”: Linguistic ableism and the mockery of speech impediments in video games . *Game Studies, 23*(2). Retrieved from https://gamestudies.org/2302/articles/burrellkim
[14] WHAS11. "Body Cam Video Shows Chaotic Scene after Breonna Taylor Shooting." YouTube video, 3:45. March 25, 2021. hhttps://youtu.be/4qRofY3QDY4?si=loA8XE-ra9SZVoTh.
[15] Dyal-Chand, Rashmi, Autocorrecting for Whiteness (March 8, 2021). 101 Boston University Law Review 191 (2021), Northeastern University School of Law Research Paper No. 403-2021, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3800463

Before addressing this example, I want to digress for a moment to say that my practice has grown exponentially since starting my tenure as a doctoral student. I entered the program primarily as a composer and sound artist, but the design of the program allowed me to experiment with other practical areas, which I have embraced. My practice now includes technical engagements with 3D animation, mechatronics, video art, multi-channel composition, data and coding, machine learning, performance, and installation. My approach to working with these tools and methods mirrors my previous compositional training. Each tool or method is an instrument that could be assembled into an ensemble to realize a much larger work or composition. Thinking about tools and methods unilaterally has contributed to the development of the experimental practice that has become my method of working, and working in this way has indeed contributed to the promising iterations of my research attempts.

Having said this, the example above is just one of many examples encountered throughout my doctoral tenure, which has illustrated that working with technological tools means coming into contact with regular reminders that these tools were not made for you, nor were they intended to serve you as a person of color. I will go into this further in the sections to come, but as a prelude I will say that there are so many examples of this being the case that I feel comfortable arguing that this is the norm and not an anomaly. Zainab Aliyu, co-director of the School for Poetic Computation, offers some insight into the matter. Aliyu writes that “if cultural value systems are encoded into the objects (technological tools) that we build, then Western

ideals are deeply embedded in the pervasive ubiquitous technology of today."[16] Holding the two things side by side, the possibilities and the shortcomings, I've artistically investigated ways to reckon with this over the last four years.

An example of the shortcomings described is present in 3D character design platforms that have limited capabilities for the creation of black-embodied characters. I would refer to this as a design intention rather than a design flaw, with the failure impacting people of color. My research interests are not novel but a continuation or contribution to a budding area of critical artistic engagement with technological tools, interfaces, applications, and systems at the cross-section of embodiment (American Artist, Syms, Gale, Satterwhite, Joseph). [17]

A.M. Darke, an artist and assistant professor of digital arts and new media at UC Santa Cruz, has created *The Open Source Afro Hair Library*, an online open-source library of black hair for black characters. [18] *The Open Source Afro Hair Library* lives online but is also a physical lab where students and residents work at the intersection of feminism, experimental games, XR, and new media. [19] The investment into embodiment and technology as an interdisciplinary focus taken up by artists, scholars, theorists, and technologists demonstrates that it is a valuable and practical field of research.

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[16] Aliyu, Zainab. "From the Sasha into the Zamani: Death as a Moment of Radical Continuity." *Logic Magazine*, April 13, 2022. https://logicmag.io/supa-dupa-skies/from-the-sasha-into-the-zamani-death-as-a-moment-of-radical-continuity/.

[17] Mitter, Siddhartha. "American Artist: Black Gooey Universe 2021 Review." *Frieze*, March 3, 2021. , https://www.frieze.com/article/american-artist-black-gooey-universe-2021-review , Art Basel. "Kahlil Joseph: m.A.A.d." *Art Basel*. Accessed June 25, 2024. https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/39159/Kahlil-Joseph-m-A-A-d, Syms, Martine. "Martine Syms." *Martine Syms*. https://www.martinesy.ms/, Louisiana Channel, " Pygmalion's Ugly Season- A film by Jacolby Satterwhite,' *YouTube Video*, May 7, 2020, https://youtu.be/JQ5kdR_N3Vo?si=X8lfbFThZq-IxxaS., Gale, Nikita. "DRRRUMMMERRRRRR." *Nikita Gale*. Accessed June 25, 2024. https://www.nikitagale.com/drrrrummerrrrrrr#6

[18]Evan Narcisse, "On Video Games' Bleak Depictions of Blackness," New York Times, January 17, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/17/crosswords/video-games-black-characters.html.

[19] UCSC Center for Racial and Ethnic Studies. "Artist A.M. Darke Launches Open-Source Black Hair Library." Last modified June 30, 2021. https://cres.ucsc.edu/news-events/news/amdarke-open-source-afro-hair.html.



Figure 4: A.M. Darke Samples from The Open Source Afro Hair Library

Resonating with what Dinkins refers to as the "[unequivocal confrontation] with the need to reimagine our humanity," [20] my previous work such as *What Happened to _____, Portal, Open Up, Open Out, Open In*, and *Speculative Landscapes* have launched practical inquiries into what this means. For example, my project *Speculative Landscapes* focused on the investigation through satellite technology of a black culture that is at risk of erasure. As I approach this work, I ask: What is the appropriate course of artistic action to take to achieve the goal of developing a technologically engaged artistic methodology that centers black subjects? Further, how can this be achieved when innumerable examples within media, systems, technological tools, curriculum,

[20] Dinkins, Stephanie Afro-now-sim. Technology and the Human. Noema. June 2020.,this is an online article with no page numbers.

and institutional standards covertly and overtly reinforce biases and practices of erasure? To utilize tools of any kind without investigating the extent of the impact of those tools is a privileged position. It implies that the potential impacts, however mild or catastrophic, are far enough removed from one's day-to-day experiences that they do not warrant deeper consideration. However, for example, if you are a part of a community that has been targeted by facial recognition software as black and brown people have, then the technology and its implications become a matter of health and safety. Such was the case with Porcha Woodruff in 2023, an eight-month pregnant mother who was arrested due to being falsely identified by facial recognition software in Detroit. [21]

Many scholars and researchers who "have tried to warn us about AI" [22] and other technologies are people of color. Joy Buolamwini highlights the impacts of this biased technological coding in the film Coded Bias, [23] and Ruha Benjamin continues the conversation with what she calls "The New Jim Code " in *Race After Technology*. The New Jim Code's "[...] animating force[...] is that tech designers encode judgments into technical systems but claim that the racist results of their designs are entirely exterior to the encoding process. Racism thus becomes doubled – magnified and buried under layers of digital denial". [24] Further, it's not just the datasets and algorithms that are problematic. As Saul Williams highlighted in his Afrofuturist film *Neptune Frost*, the hardware brings its share of tarnished energy. While "smartphones,

[21]Kashmir Hill, "A.I. Puts a Senior in Jail, and His Family in Limbo," New York Times, August 6, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/06/business/facial-recognition-false-arrest.html.
[22] O'Neil, Lorena. "These Women Tried to Warn Us about AI." *Rolling Stone*, 12 Aug. 2023, www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/women-warnings-ai-danger-risk-before-chatgpt-1234804367/. Accessed 15 Aug. 2023.
[23] "Coded Bias | Netflix." *Www.netflix.com*, www.netflix.com/title/81328723. Accessed 24 Apr. 2021.
[24] Benjamin, Ruha. *Race after Technology : Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Polity Press, 2019., p.10, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=5820427.

computers, and electric vehicles may be emblems of the modern world [...] their rechargeable batteries are powered by cobalt mined by workers laboring in slave-like conditions in the Democratic Republic of Congo".[25] Knowing this truth, I ask: How does one reconcile this knowledge with the means of making? As rechargeable batteries are used as the primary tool that digital art requires (computers), what are the environmental and humanitarian stakes of digital art and digital art making?

The contributing perspectives of scholars, artists, and researchers (Buolamwini, Benjamin, Noble, Dinkins, Perry, Onuoha, Broussard, O'neil, Amrute) have presented a thorough investigation of the many biases, blindspots, violence, and shortcomings that modern day technological tools and methods have imposed upon marginalized communities. [26] Further, I ask: Is technology a tool to be wielded, a medium to be used, or a mirror reflecting the value systems of those who create with it? If the "medium is the [entire] message" [27], what and whose story is being told? These questions are equal parts rhetorical, redundant, and generative. Quite frankly, with all of this advancement and progress, the impact on specific demographics suggests that there is still nothing new under the sun. Further, there is something especially absurd about

[25] Gross, Terry. "How "Modern-Day Slavery" in the Congo Powers the Rechargeable Battery Economy." *NPR*, 1 Feb. 2023, www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/02/01/1152893248/red-cobalt-congo-drc-mining-siddharth-kara.
[26] Buolamwini, Joy. 2024. *Unmasking AI: My Mission to Protect What Is Human in a World of Machines*. New York: Penguin Random House. , Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity. , Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press. , Alderman, Naomi. 2023. "Black Artists Explore the Biases of Artificial Intelligence." *The New York Times*, July 4, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/04/arts/design/black-artists-bias-ai.html. , Harvey, Eleanor. 2018. "Artist Sondra Perry Uses Avatars and Animation to Challenge Representations of Blackness." *It's Nice That*, March 12, 2018. Eleanor Harvey, "Artist Sondra Perry Uses Avatars and Animation to Challenge Representations of Blackness," *It's Nice That*, March 12, 2018, https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/artist-sondra-perry-uses-avatars-and-animation-to-challenge-representations-of-blackness-120318.. , Onuoha, Mimi. n.d. "The Library of Missing Datasets." Accessed June 23, 2024. https://mimionuoha.com/the-library-of-missing-datasets. , Broussard, Meredith. 2023. *More Than a Glitch: Confronting Race, Gender, and Ability Bias in Technology*. Cambridge: MIT Press. , O'Neil, Cathy. 2016. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. New York: Crown Publishing Group , Amrute, Sareeta. 2016. *Encoding Race, Encoding Class: Indian IT Workers in Berlin*. Durham: Duke University Press.
[27] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 7.

the labor involved in detailing the blade lodged in your side for the handle bearer. This is not meant to diminish the critical and necessary work that Ruha Benjamin, Joy Buolamwini, and others like Timet Guerbru and Sofia Noble are doing. Instead, it is meant to highlight and affirm their tireless efforts. Within their work, there is also an acknowledgment that the resolution of their collective efforts may persist beyond their lifetime, yet they persist nonetheless. If this concern precedes and is likely to exceed the lifetimes of those actively attempting to address this prevalence, I continue to ask: What does it mean to be an artist who works with technology and engages with subjects of blackness and black being?

A part of this questioning, or more so wondering, is partially informed by my observations of a lack of diversity and embodiments in new media art dialogues. Identifying the artistic references in this dissertation proved laborious, bringing up concerns of marginalization, exceptionalism, and erasure. Caroll Pursell offers a historical context in the book *A Hammer in Their Hands: A Documented History of Technology and the African-American Experience*. Pursell writes: " The social construction of race is a critical element in understanding the historically evolving relationship between technology and African-Americans because the barring of black people from full participation in the nation's technological culture was only partly a matter of law and custom; it was also a matter of racial beliefs and meanings." [28] Pursell highlights how semantics were used as a tactic to define what "technology" was and wasn't as a method of exclusion and therefore erasure. [29] Circling back to Marshall Mcluhan's theory, if "the

[28] Carroll Pursell, ed., *A Hammer in Their Hands: A Documentary History of Technology and the African-American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 70.

[29] Ibid.

medium (technology) is the message," [30] I ask: What message is it sending at the intersection of black embodiment? Based on the analysis provided above, is this not, at this point, a rhetorical question?

The uncanny valley grows wider and wider, filling up with every person and everything that, as Franz Fanon and Sylvia Winter critically examine, does not meet the image of the ideal human. [31] Perhaps a full stop is in order, a reorientation to renegotiate a manner of working to as Professor James Coupe says, "push back on the technologies and focus on the more human side of identity in response to the way that technology is manipulating it." [32]

MUTATE is a "pushback" against technology in the normalized sense of the word. It pushes back on the negative impacts on humans, which technology helps to facilitate. It pushes back on the idealism that justifies its manipulations' prevalence. It pushes back against media and mediums that have historically marginalized people of color. It pushes back over and over again, fighting for space to co-exist under the umbrella strictly reserved for computational emblems of ingenuity. *MUTATE* does this by shifting the gaze and looking towards what lives in the margins, which have been overshadowed or overtaken by "machines and systems [...] trained to emulate humans instead of humans [33], and as " engineer sun-worshippers [are] mediating a new scientific revolution associated with the night dream of postindustrial society," [34] now seems

[30] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 7
[31] Parker, Emily Anne. "The Human as Double Bind: Sylvia Wynter and the Genre of 'Man'." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2018): 439-449. https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.32.3.0439.
[32] Art and Technology. "Identity: Jumping Out of Boxes, Season 3: Episode 3, Part 3", Youtube August 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvBNGt7f6Ns
[33] Alarcon, Nefi. "New AI Technique Helps Robots Work Alongside Humans." NVIDIA Blog. June 26, 2023. https://developer.nvidia.com/blog/new-ai-technique-helps-robots-work-alongside-humans/.
[34] Haraway, D. (1991) A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, Routledge, New York, 149-181

as good a time as any to push back. I ask: What other outcomes might exist if the uses of emergent technologies were informed by more than object-oriented ontologies and commercial usage? How might "transitioning from an object-oriented" culture bring about new or renewed artistic potential for my practice? Furthermore, in the words of Dinkins, "How might [I] liberate [my practice] from the infinite loop of repression and oppositional thinking[...]? What incremental changes do [I] make to [my practical] algorithms" to not only ask "what injustices are you fighting against, but what do you in your heart of hearts want to create? " [35]

1.3 Thesis

At this moment, I agree with Audre Lorde that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Subversion may look like a flex of agency, and while it may be a step away from the "house," my research says it is still within the limits of the yard. Reflecting on the problems in the previous section and my artistic attempts to find some path forward in my work with technology, I'm considering the second part of Lorde's statement. "The master's tools may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." [36] Further, " this fact is only threatening to those [...] who still define the master's house as their only source of support." [37] Lorde's statements suggest that a paradigm shift happens on the other side of the fence, or rather perhaps that there is no fence at all from a different point of view…looking at things from a different point of view…a theme. Slightly

[35] Dinkins, Stephanie. *Afro-now-sim*. Technology and the Human. Noema. June 2020.
[36] Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110- 114. 2007
[37] Ibid.

drawing Lorde's statements out of context, but for a good cause, I ask: If change is what you're (I'm) after, "genuine change" [38] as Lorde puts it, it's necessary to find another source of support.

It is pertinent to say that the field of black studies has contributed significantly to the success and furthering of my work and research as an interdisciplinary artist and scholar who works with technology. Approaching new media art, or rather intermedia art interdisciplinarily, and specifically from a black studies perspective, involves more than simply focusing on black subjects and modes of creativity. This also requires a rich theoretical framework that is human-centered, historically aware, and rigorously researched, as this dissertation presents. It is under this premise that I present my thesis statement:

Centering black cultural practices and a black gaze generates methods of artistic engagement with technology and media tools that address black subjects, black embodiment, and black cultural practices not merely as a proxy for illustrating systemic failure but as a subject worthy of its own technological and artistic exploration.

1.4 Research Methods and Questions

The archive is indeed complex, and nuanced, and a multilayer topic with a variety of narratives and conflicting perspectives. While my engagement with archives as a subject matter is a labor of love, using archival inquiry as a vehicle offers an opportunity to test this argument. Taking on a massive subject like archives requires a path, and my approach to developing that path uses holistic analysis. Holistic analysis, as I would define it, is a systematic method of

[38] Ibid.

investigating the entirety of a situation, conflict, or event that arises as a subject matter. At the onset of a project, I start by analyzing complex, nuanced, and multilayered social subjects, which typically yield various conflicting perspectives and narratives. Within these relationships, I look for what I call a "fault line," where all threads connected to the subject converge into a potential central idea. My research suggests that this fault line revolves around the perception or the projection of a "truth." Once this “truth” is identified to my best approximation, I narrow in to test its boundaries and borders and foundations, poking and prodding and looking for an opening. This first step is a conceptual incubation period where the works start to take shape. Acknowledging again this can yield too large of a scope for a single artwork, a set of research questions have been developed to narrow the focus of the work toward achievable “proofs” of my theoretical research.

With the above in mind, the following research questions were developed:

1) What does an archive guided by black scholarly theory, specifically Tina Campt’s *Black Gaze*, Saidiya Hartman’s Critical Fabulation theory, and Kim Gallon’s “technology of recovery” sound like, look like, feel like? How might video art, sound, installation, animation, and performance be used to activate and or realize these theories?

2) How might centering black cultural practice inform the methods and materials used to make the archive, and how does critical archival theory inform artistic

engagements with new media technologies? What embodied themes will arise, and how will those be incorporated into the work?

3) What possibilities and limitations arise when producing a site-specific installation artwork that centers a black gaze and implements black cultural practices? How can performance function as a catalytic technique that activates and co-facilitates within the site? What is the intended audience engagement, and how does this function as a part of the composition?

Throughout this dissertation, I frequently circle back to the research questions stated above to unpack further how they may be informed by the various intersections that resulted in the creation of *MUTATE*.

1.5 Dissertation at a Glance

Given the interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation project and also for accessibility purposes, I have organized the chapters into three sections. Chapters two and three focus on conceptual frameworks, analysis, and investigations. Chapters four and five focus on artistic methods interdisciplinarily. Chapter six focuses specifically and solely on *MUTATE* in detail, and Chapter seven is a reflection.

The following lists the chapters to come with titles and more details:

Chapter Two: *Gaze: Literary Review, Case Studies, and Practical Analysis* focuses on a literature review, case studies, and practical analysis associated with gaze as it relates to archives, leading up to a detailed presentation of Tina Campt's *Black Gaze*. Chapter Three: *Archives: Problematics & Creative Frameworks* critically investigates the problematics of traditional archives and presents conceptual potentials for the creation of a new archival form informed by Saidiya Hartman's Critical Fabulation's theory and Kim Gallon's Technology of Recovery, concepts of world-building, and black archival practices. Chapter Four: *Artistic Archival Methodologies* analyzes artistic methodologies that engage with archives and archival interests and work in review in corresponding categories where pre-existing research is in dialogue. Chapter Five: *Methodologies for Self-Portraiture and Installation Art* presents a poetic analysis of self-portraiture contextualized by artistic practice, which spans many mediums, and looks at 3D considerations for self-capture and self remake. Additionally, a high-level look at methods for installation art is presented to engage with the potential for spatial elements. In Chapter Six, *MUTATE* is explained in detail, elaborating on the work's goal, scope, methods, and realization. Lastly, Chapter Seven: *Review and Reflection* closes this dissertation document with a post-analysis of the successes and challenges of the work, followed by a closing statement.



Figure 5: Office at Georgetown Steam Plant, Credit: Joe Iano

CHAPTER 2- GAZE: LITERARY REVIEW, CASE STUDIES, AND HOLISTIC ANALYSIS

2.1 Introduction

The gaze can be poetically defined as an act of prolonged looking, a look that lingers into cognition and dissonance. Looking is one of the ways that we make "sense" of the world, whatever the subject of the gaze may be. This chapter, in part, focuses on an overarching comparative analysis of gaze, intending to inform the decision to focus on a black gaze in my first research question. That question asks: How can Tina Campt's theory of a black gaze be applied as a conceptual framework for realizing a media and performance artwork focusing on archives and archival practice as subject matter?

Critically approaching the subject of gaze provides a point of reference from which to view *MUTATE*'s many layers, connection points, and inquiries. While gaze is often used in an artistic context and will be used in an artistic context throughout this document, the subject of gaze and its impact reach far beyond artistic sensibilities. As we unpack "the gaze" in the following sections, an argument is presented that points to "the gaze" as a centralized mechanism that contributes to the narrow institutionalized paradigms for art making and viewing. Further, an argument is made that there are concurrently running themes of "the gaze" or variations that have contributed to shaping and reading histories and the archive. To contextualize the significance of a black gaze as a practical framework, a broad spectrum comparative analysis of the subject of gaze in visual media, art, and literature is presented. To ensure a thorough analysis, a cross-section of theories and practices associated with gaze theory from cinema and media

studies, black studies, and critical algorithmic studies are examined. Artists and artistic works are drawn into the analysis, helping to contextualize further and inform the subject of gaze. With all of these combined elements, a case is made for the adoption of *Black Gaze* as a practical framework for this project.

2.2 Overview

Section 2.3 includes the subject of gaze and various interconnections and subsets of the topic, contributing to the analysis of a perceived centralized gaze. Section 2.4 presents an analysis of normative gaze interventions and synthesizes their potential. Section 2.5 finishes the chapter with an analysis of Tina Campt's *Black Gaze* to identify the practical potentials for *MUTATE* with an inversion of the theory.

2.3 The Gaze

The gaze can be poetically defined as an act of prolonged looking that lingers into cognition and dissonance, traveling across artistic mediums and artistic methods, a mediation between the observer and the observed. "The gaze" has been poured over across fields of study, including psychoanalysis, cinema and media studies, and various other fields and subjects that engage with power dynamics and cognition. This cross-disciplinary look at *looking* emphasizes the significant role that "the gaze" as a subject plays in contextualizing relational dynamics. Each of the following critical theories about "the gaze" presented in both conceptual and artistic frameworks circle around the examination and implication of a centralized gaze. "The gaze" implies a singularity, one gaze that is implicated critically.

Borrowing verbiage from feminist, queer, and critical race studies, in a patriarchal, hetero-normative, racially constructed society, "the gaze" is the domain of the male, straight, white viewer. This distinction then relegates all other identities, embodiments, and cultural points of view to the margins. The critical theories that follow interrogate both singular and intersectional ideologies associated with this centralized gaze. Concerning the connection between images, whether moving or still, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright propose that "to explore the meaning of images is to recognize that they are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology." They define ideologies as "systems of belief that exist within all cultures," concluding that " images are an important means through which ideologies are produced, and onto which ideologies are projected." [39]

2.3.1 The Dominant Gaze :

" I am thinking about the literal ground a lot lately because I have spent far too much time watching people like [Walter]Scott being ground into it: thrust upon, dragged over, pressed into, and left to rot atop it." [40] *- Kemi Adeyemi*

A Case Study

David Lynch, *Wild at Heart,* 1990:

In the opening of David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*, the only black character in the movie is killed in under three minutes. The scene depicts "Sailor" violently brutalizing "Bob Ray," leaving his

[39] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23.
[40] Adeyemi, Kemi. 2019. "Beyond 90°: The Angularities of Black/Queer/Women/Lean." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 29, no. 3: 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2019.1571861.

lifeless body on display as he lights a cigarette and smokes it slowly. The “dominant gaze” is “ the tendency of mainstream culture to replicate, through narrative and imagery, racial inequalities and biases which exist throughout society.” [41] This scene represents a practical example of the dominant gaze. Bob Ray can be interpreted as being typecast as the ‘black brute”[42], a stereotyped characterization that can be historically connected to the denounced racist film, *A Birth of a Nation* (1913). [43] Lynch uses practical iterations of the dominant gaze with camera angles and shots selected for the scene, which puts the observer frequently in a first-person view of the violent beating of Bob Ray.

A collection of stills have been assembled to illustrate evidence of this observation along with a short sample of YouTube comments which were left underneath the video. Both collectively inform the approximation of the dominant gaze in this scene.

TIME STAMP 2:07 - Sailor throws Bob Ray into a wall, hitting his head repeatedly. They are on a long set of stairs.



Figure 6: David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*,1990 screen grab 1, still image

[41] Russell, Margaret M. "Race and the Dominant Gaze: Narratives of Law and Inequality in Popular Film." *Santa Clara Law Digital Commons*, January 1, 1991. 244. https://digitalcommons.law.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1301&context=facpubs&httpsredir=1&referer=.
[42] Brute Caricature." *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. Ferris State University. Accessed July 9, 2024. https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/brute/homepage.htm.
[43] "The Birth of a Nation." Wikipedia. Accessed July 18, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_a_Nation.

TIME STAMP 2:09 - Sailor grabs Bob Ray by the jacket and begins to strike his head on the stair railing.



Figure 7: David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*, 1990 screen grab 2, still image

TIME STAMP 2:11- Bob Ray's head hits the banister repeatedly, and the spectator is offered a close-up, over-the-shoulder perspective.



Figure 8: David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*,1990 screen grab 3, still image

TIME STAMP 2:17 - Sailor throws Bob Ray down a long flight of stairs.



Figure 9: David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*,1990 screen grab 4, still image

TIME STAMP 2:22 - Sailor descends the stairs, jumps onto Bob Ray, and bashes his head onto the tile floor underneath. The spectator is offered an over-the-shoulder perspective vantage point.



Figure 10: David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*,1990 screen grab 5, still image

TIME STAMP 2:25 - Bob Ray is now in a pool of blood. Sailor grabs him by the jacket and tosses him across the room.



Figure 11: David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*,1990 screen grab 6, still image

TIME STAMP 2:31 - Sailor stands over Bob Ray, who appears to be dead with a gaping hole in the back of his head.



Figure 12: David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*,1990 screen grab 7, still image

TIME STAMP 2:46 - Sailor lights a cigarette while standing near Bob Ray's lifeless body.



Figure 13: David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*,1990 screen grab 8, still image

Another methodology for testing this case for its connections to the dominant gaze is to observe the feedback generated from it. The following comments were left underneath the snippet on YouTube:

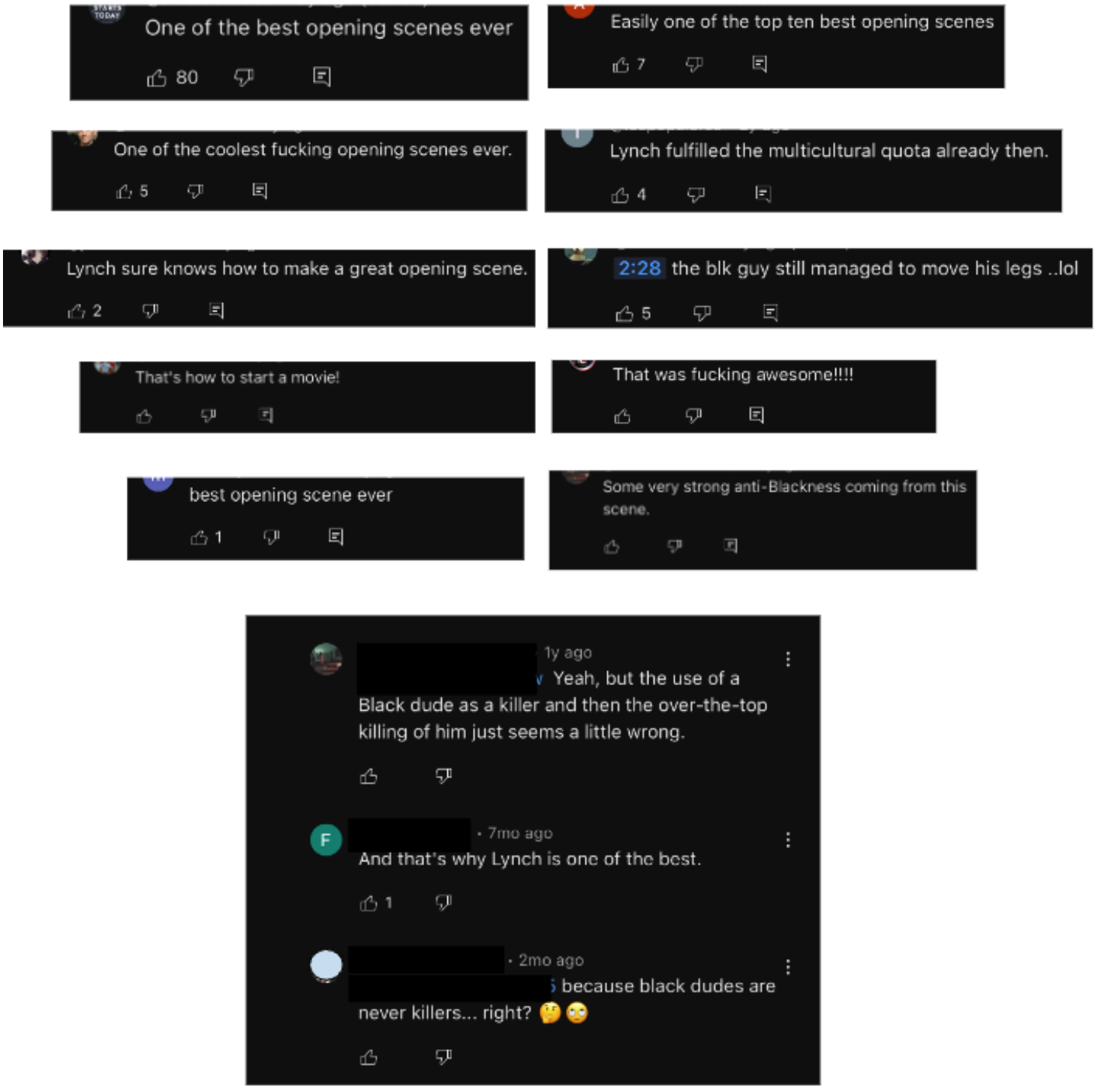


Figure 14: Sample of YouTube comments for *Wild at Heart*,1990 opening

This sampling of comments is reflective of two potentials: the normalization of the brutalization of black bodies on screen and the celebration of the prevailing character's dominance. It also demonstrates a slippage between perceived realities and art. One commenter mentioned the scene's potential anti-black symbolism by pointing out how "the use of a black dude as a killer and then the over-the-top killing of him just seems a little wrong," other commenters contested the observation with:

> " And that's why Lynch is one of the best."
>
> "Lynch filled the multi-cultural quota already then."
>
> "The black guy still managed to move his legs..lol"
>
> "Because black dudes are never killers…right?"

2.3.2 The Male Gaze

In reality the phantasy world of the [image] is subject to the law which produces it." "Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact. - Laura Mulvey

A Case Study

Gary Winogrand, *Women are Beautiful,* 1975

Gary Winograd is famously known for his iconic photograph of Marilyn Monroe.



Figure 15: Marilyn Monroe by Gary Winogrand on the set of “The Seven Year Itch”

While a deep critical analysis of the Marilyn Monroe photo and the social context in which it was received and interpreted would be a worthy subject of inquiry, this case study focuses more on another series of photos taken by Winogrand entitled *Women are Beautiful.* In this series, Winogrand says, “ Whenever I’ve seen an attractive woman, I’ve done my best to photograph her. I don’t know if all the women in the photographs are beautiful, but I do know that the women are beautiful in the photographs.” [44]

Winogrand captures women on the street engaging in various activities, and his capturing brings up issues of consent, of course. Women are often captured in transitory moments and are framed, some appearing visibly angry. Considering the male gaze as a “heterosexual perspective

[44] "Women Are Beautiful." *Fraenkel Gallery*. Accessed July 9, 2024. https://fraenkelgallery.com/portfolios/garry-winogrand-women-are-beautiful.

that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer," [45] Winogrand's framing of women in suggestive ways and his approximation that by capturing them in his photographs, they are made beautiful might be considered an example of the male gaze in practice.



Figure 16: Gary Winogrand street photo from "Women are Beautiful" series(1975), still image 1

[45] "Male Gaze." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Accessed 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Male_gaze.



Figure 17: Gary Winogrand street photo from *Women are Beautiful* series, 1975, still image 2



Figure 18: Gary Winogrand street photo from "Women are Beautiful" series(1975), still image 3



Figure 19: Gary Winogrand street photo from “Women are Beautiful” series(1975), still image 4

2.3.3 The White Gaze :

“ The space of whiteness contains a limited but varied set of normalizing positions from which that which is not white can be made into the abnormal; by such means whiteness constitutes itself as a universal set of norms by which to make sense of the world.” - John Fisk [46]

A Case Study

A Response to Toni Morrison’s book “Sula”
New York Times, Sunday, December 30th, 1973 :

In 1973, Toni Morrison released *Sula*, a book that centers two black women who are friends and depicts their lives within their community interwoven with narrative themes of friendship, social norms, communal dynamics, and racism. Toni Morisson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, made it a point in her book to write about lives and experiences that reflected her culture. After the book was published, the following review was submitted to the New York Times in 1973:

> “Despite its richness and its thorough originality, one continuously feels its narrowness. Its refusal to brim over into the world outside of its provincial setting. Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality.” - Sara Blackburn [47]

[46] Lewis, G. E. (2002). Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives. *Black Music Research Journal*, *22*(1), 215–246. https://doi.org/10.2307/1519950
[47] PBS. n.d. "American Master, Toni Morrison on the White Gaze." Accessed July 18, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/video/white-gaze-jri3mn/.

Morrison's work has been challenged by her desire to write stories that reflect her cultural ties, and she has addressed these challenges in various interviews where she has often been asked about her views on these types of reviews. In one such interview, Morrison responded, "As though our lives have no meaning or value without the white gaze… I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books." [48]



Figure 20: Toni Morrison's interview with Charlie Rose, 1998

[48] Rose, Charlie. "Toni Morrison Beautifully Answers an 'Illegitimate' Question on Race." *Charlie Rose*, January 19, 1998. YouTube video.https://youtu.be/-Kgq3F8wbYA?si=08vq0ZY0fbOUoYLU.

The New York Times

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30, 1973

You still can't go home again



Sula

By Toni Morrison. 174 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. $5.95.

By SARA BLACKBURN

In 1970, when Toni Morrison's first novel, "The Bluest Eye," appeared, she reaped the benefits of a growing, middle-class women's movement that was just beginning to acknowledge the reality of its black and poor sisters. As a result, her novel probably attracted more attention than it otherwise might have in the publishing industry and was received rather uncritically by readers and reviewers: socially conscious readers—including myself—were so pleased to see a new writer of Morrison's obvious talent that we tended to celebrate the book and ignore its flaws.

"The Bluest Eye" was set among unforgiving provincial black people in a small Ohio town and charted the experience of two little sisters as they watched a friend first become a pariah and then sink into madness. The book's general outline —how witnessing and understanding tragedy forces the surrender of innocence and topples wide-eyed, precocious kids into unwilling maturity —is a familiar one in American, especially Southern, fiction; but its language was unique, powerful, precise and absolutely convincing, both spare and rich at once.

Sara Blackburn is a short-story writer and critic.

Now comes "Sula," which features another pariah, spans the years 1921 to 1965, and seems to take place in the same setting: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood . . . . It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom . . . . They are going to raze the Time and a Half Pool Hall, where feet in long tan shoes once pointed down from chair rungs." While the setting and the characters continually convince and intrigue, the novel seems somehow frozen, stylized. A more precise yet somehow icy version of "The Bluest Eye," it refuses to invade our present in the way we want it to and stays, instead, confined to its time and place.

The heroine, Sula, grows up in a household pulsing with larger-than-life people and activity, presided over by her powerful and probably sorcerous grandmother. Her gentle mother is devoted almost wholly to the practice and pleasures of sensuality. But her cherished friend Nel, the local goody-goody, plays perfect counterpoint to Sula's intense, life-grabbing insistence on freedom. It's this insistence that eventually gets read as recklessness, and Sula becomes a threat as her life unfolds against the rest of the black community's daily life of hardship, humiliation and scrabbling for survival:

"What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. They did not believe doctors could heal—for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate . . . . The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason they didn't commit suicide—it was beneath them."

It's out of this that Sula emerges; she leaves the Bottom and returns 10 years later, after college and city life that we never see here, to be perceived as a sinister force, sex-hungry, man-stealing, death-dealing, a figure of darkness and betrayal. Having dared to smash the taboos that are her neighbors' poor guarantees of simply surviving, she's scorned, despised, abandoned by the people she grew out of—to their immense loss.

It's possible, I guess, to talk about "Sula" as allegory—about people so paralyzed by the horrors of the past and by the demands of just staying alive that they're unable to embrace the possibilities of freedom until the moment for it has passed. But Toni Morrison's novel is too vital and rich to be confined within such limits. Her extravagantly beautiful, doomed characters are locked in a world where hope for the future is a foreign commodity, yet they are enormously, achingly alive. And this book about them—and about how their beauty is drained back and frozen—is a howl of love and rage, playful and funny as well as hard and bitter.

When the rage gets directed at its characters as intensely as it does against the conditions that formed them, the bitterness sometimes takes over. One scene, in which the child Nel witnesses her majestic, usually holier-than-thou mother cringing before a brutal, repulsive white train conductor, is close to devastating: the mother is depicted with an unsparing irony, unforgiven.

Toni Morrison is someone who really knows how to clank a sentence, as the novelist Irving Rosenthal has put it, and her dialogue is so compressed and life-like that it sizzles. And Morrison's skill at characterization is such that, by the end, it's as if an enormous but too severely framed landscape has been unrolled and inhabited by people who seem almost mythologically strong and familiar; like the gorgeous characters of Garcia Márquez, they have a heroic quality, and it's hard to believe we haven't known them forever.

Yet the comparison can't be extended: Morrison hasn't endowed her people with life beyond their place and function in the novel, and we can't imagine their surviving outside the tiny community where they carry on their separate lives. It's this particular quality that makes "Sula" a novel whose long-range impact doesn't sustain the intensity of its first reading. Reading it, in spite of its richness and its thorough originality, one continually feels its narrowness, its refusal to brim over into the world outside its provincial setting.

As the author of frequent criticism and social commentary, Morrison has shown herself someone of considerable strength and skill in confronting current realities, and it's frustrating that the qualities which distinguish her novels are not combined with the stinging immediacy, the urgency, of her nonfiction. This last is a classically unfair carp on the part of a reviewer, but Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working. ■

Figure 21: New York Time Review of *Sula*, 1973, newspaper scan

2.3.4 The Algorithmic Gaze:

Data scientist Meredith Broussard defines the term 'Technochauvinism [as] a kind of bias that considers computational solutions to be superior to all other solutions. Embedded in this bias is an a priori assumption that computers are better than humans—which is actually a claim that the people who make and program computers are better than other humans." [49] This perspective implies that computational solutions are mathematical processes that cannot discriminate. Therefore, discrimination is a behavior that is relegated to humans. University of Washington emeritus professor of computer science Pedro Domingos' views are interesting in connection to Broussard's definition. In a 2017 tweet, Domingos proclaimed, "Fact: there is not a single proven case to date of discrimination by machine learning algorithms." [50] This statement garnished a mountainous response from both sides of the argument. Still, when presented with documented cases of discrimination for which machine learning algorithms were indeed the catalyst, Domingos amended his statement. "I mean discrimination proven in court where the culprit was the [machine learning] algorithm, not the data or people using it." [51] On one hand, Domingos' statements imply a passing of accountability away from the computational process and into the domain of human influence. However, he also seems to imply that this is partly based on the absence of official regulations around algorithms that allow for such accountabilities to be sought out.

[49] Meredith Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 7.
[50] Algorithms That Run Our Lives Are Racist and Sexist. Meet the Women Trying to Fix Them." The Correspondent. Accessed July 18, 2024. https://thecorrespondent.com/339/algorithms-that-run-our-lives-are-racist-and-sexist-meet-the-women-trying-to-fix-them.
[51] Ibid.

Can an algorithm cause harm? The documented cases suggest yes. Can an algorithm be held accountable for such harm? The answer to that question currently is no. However, as the race to make algorithmically advanced humanoid robotics, robots that emulate the illusion of sentient capabilities, the question of responsibility undoubtedly becomes more prevalent and fraught. Is there a difference between a physically embodied algorithm and a block of code? Should both be treated equally? Will the creators be held accountable for the results of their creations, and to what extent? Will there be proactive gestures to mitigate negative impacts, and what criteria will be used to decide? These questions are in part speculative and provocative. However, there are indeed real-world concerns that the algorithmic issue continues to generate.

The cases of people being arrested for crimes they did not commit continue to trend, specifically in communities of color. In 2022, there was one such case where an AI algorithm wrongly identified Alonzo Sawyer as the perpetrator of a crime he did not commit.[52] It was Alonzo's wife, not a computational solution, but a human, who highlighted to the police that Alonzo did not fit the stature and build of the person described as having committed the crime.[53] Alonzo spent two weeks in jail, which affected his employment and contractual obligations. Alonzo's case is just one of many such occurrences where algorithms have aided in the wrongful arrests of people of color. [54] Predictive AI applications have also contributed to sentencing practices, as a human-designed algorithm predicts how likely a person is to commit additional

[52] Morris, Ernie. "Face Recognition Software Led to His Arrest. It Was Dead Wrong." *Wired*, July 12, 2023. https://www.wired.com/story/face-recognition-software-led-to-his-arrest-it-was-dead-wrong/.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Innocence Project. "Artificial Intelligence Is Putting Innocent People at Risk of Being Incarcerated." *Innocence Project*, July 17, 2023. https://innocenceproject.org/artificial-intelligence-is-putting-innocent-people-at-risk-of-being-incarcerated/#:~:text=Williams.-,There%20are%20at%20least%20seven%20confirmed%20cases%20of%20misidentification%20due,Alonzo%20Sawyer%2C%20and%20Robert%20Williams.

crimes. What kind of data might be used to develop such an algorithm? Does mathematical computation leave room for self-determination?

"There is an 89.5% chance that you will be found guilty." This is the opening line from the trailer of the 2020 short film entitled *Please Hold, directed* by K.D. Davila. K.D. Davila, an "Oscar-nominated filmmaker, details the life of Mateo Torres after he is identified by facial recognition technology and forced to comply with arrest, which is solely based on the algorithmic likelihood that he would be convicted of a crime in the future. Mateo is then trapped in an automated prison, awaiting sentencing for a crime he hasn't committed, a crime that requires a mandatory 45-year sentence.



Figure 22: Screen grab from K.D. Davilia's *Please Hold*, 2020, still image 1



Figure 23: Screen grab from K.D. Davilia's *Please Hold*, 2020, still image 2

Although the film is fictitious, the premise of the film is built upon reality. It highlights algorithmic technologies currently being used in the criminal justice system today, predicting the possible extension of their future applications and illustrating the potential impacts they might have on human life. Considering the problematic propensity of such occurrences, which span across various algorithmic applications, scholars, scientists, filmmakers, and artists alike have engaged in the investigation of machine learning systems and the present impacts as well as those in distant and immediate futures. In the next section, an analysis of artistic interventions is conducted.

2.3.4.1 Artistic Interventions

Joy Buolamwini's media performance piece, *AI, Ain't I a Woman,* tackles the subject of AI's inability to see blackness with an emphasis on femininity. Highlighting the labeling generated by visual algorithmic systems when images of highly recognizable or historically significant black women are used as input, Buolamwini identifies and utilizes the shortcomings as fodder for the creation of a performance artwork. Buolamwini positions the images, the offensive labeling, and

her own embodiment in the same frame while asking the question, “AI, Ain't I a Woman?” The question posed is pointed towards the algorithmic system itself, but also the datasets and labeling processes, and therefore the human contributions that enable such an error to occur.

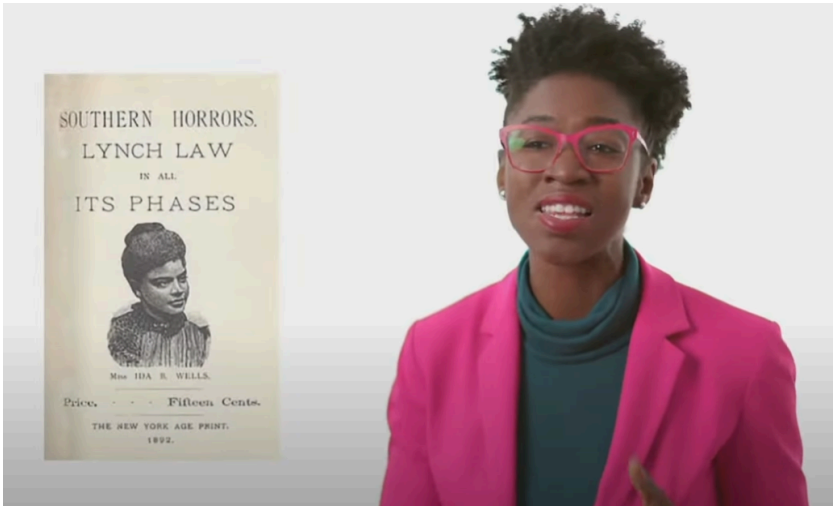
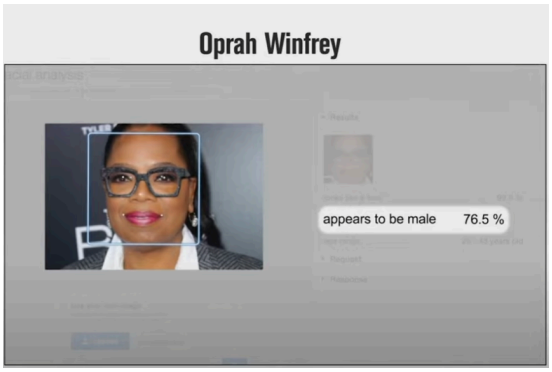
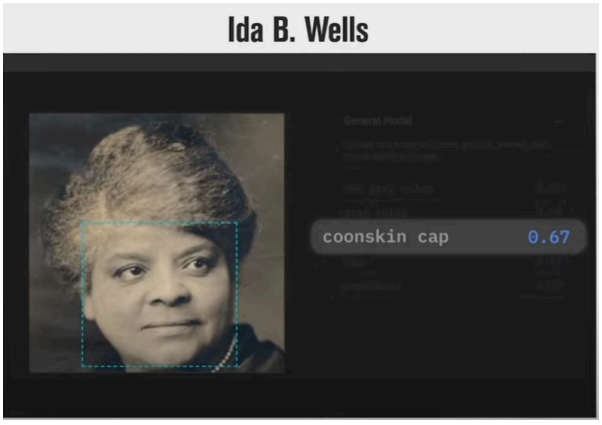


Figure 24: Screen grab from Joy Buolamwini’s performance *AI, Aint I a Woman?,* 2018

The title of the piece, “AI, Ain't I a Woman " is a riff on the 1851 speech given by Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman ", which was delivered at the Women’s Rights Convention held in Akron, Ohio. [55] The speech spoke to the inequalities in the feminist movement, which did not extend its amendments to the lives of black women. The speech which was given over 170 years prior to the writing of this document, has found relevance again based on the exclusion of blackness in the notion of what a woman “looks like” in algorithmic datasets.

[55]National Park Service. n.d. "Sojourner Truth." Accessed July 18, 2024. https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm.





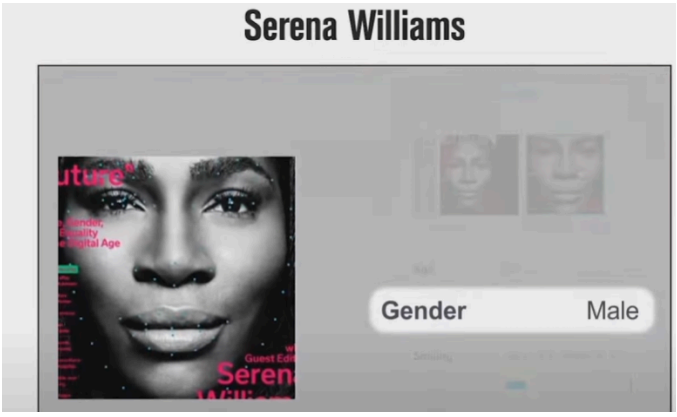


Figure 25: Samples from Joy Buolamwini's research from performance *AI, Aint I a Woman,* 2018

Continuing this question of why, artist Mimi Ọnụọha approaches the rhetorical by going directly to the source; data. Highlighting the gaps in datasets in the form of a mixed media installation called *The Library of Missing Datasets* (2016), Ọnụọha's labeling highlights dataset absences, datasets that could have real-world impacts. Ọnụọha writes that :

> [Missing] implies both a lack and an ought: something does not exist, but it should. That which should be somewhere is not in its expected place; an established system is disrupted by a distinct absence. That which we ignore reveals more than what we give our

attention to. It's in these things that we find cultural and colloquial hints of what is deemed important. [56]



Figure 26: Dataset folders from *Library of Missing Datasets* Mimi Ọnụọha, 2016

The second version of Ọnụọha's, *The Library of Missing Datasets 2.0* (2018), focuses specifically on blackness and how "black folks are both over-collected and under-represented in American datasets[...]. The installation approaches the paradox of black folks quantified into datasets that render them either hypervisible or invisible depending on the context. Ọnụọha writes that [black folks] are "strong[ly] [depicted] as objects of collection, but rarely as subjects with agency over collection, ownership, and power."[57] This data-driven analysis theoretcially runs parallel to the in-between in Fred Moten's reflections on hypervisibility and also Amber

[56]Onuoha, Mimi. "The Library of Missing Datasets." Accessed June 23, 2024. https://mimionuoha.com/the-library-of-missing-datasets.
[57] Ibid.

Johnson's definition of hyperinvisibilty. Johnson defines the hyperinvisible as a location "where the stereotypes attached to our bodies are so powerful that they inform how others treat us."[58] In connection to Onuoha's work, it is valid to conclude that the "where" that Johnson refers to is embedded in data.



Figure 27: Art installation showing *Library of Missing Datasets* Mimi Ọnụọha, 2016

While Buolamwini and Ọnụọha focus their artistic works on the inputs or lack thereof that contribute to the inability of AI algorithmic abilities to understand blackness, Stephanie Dinkins' earlier artistic research focuses on output, AI's inability to depict blackness based on it's training data and methods. Focusing specifically on text-to-image Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), Dinkins illustrates with merely a few words how inadequate the algorithmic systems are at "imagining" black humanity.

[58] Johnson, A. (2021). 1 • TRANS IDENTITY AS EMBODIED AFROFUTURISM. In *African American Arts* (pp. 15–28). Rutgers University Press. https://doi.org/10.36019/9781684481569-005

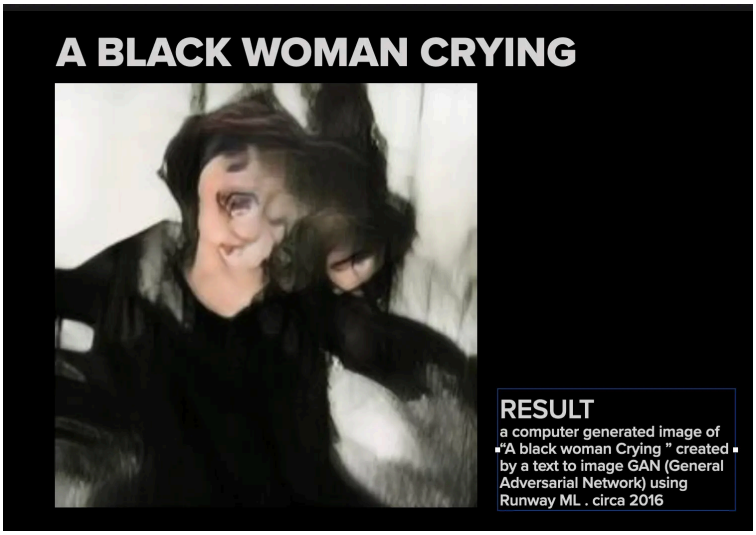


Figure 28: Stephanie Dinkins Runway ML research results 1, New York Times, 2023

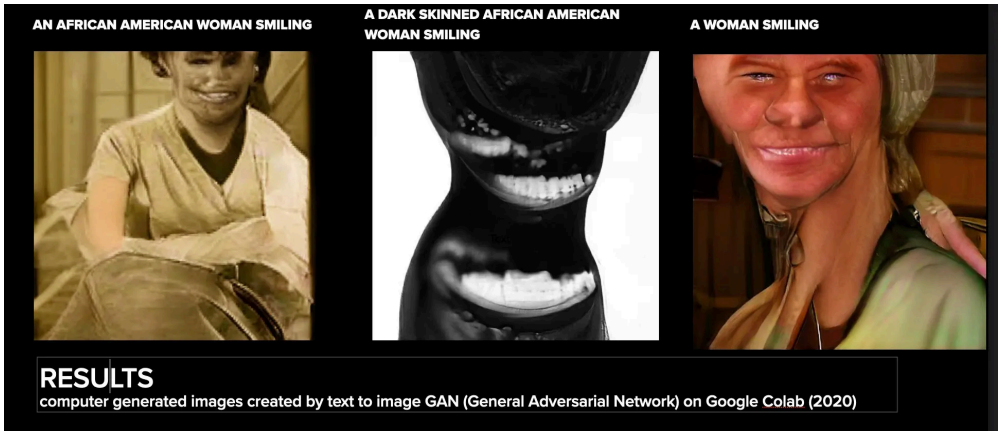


Figure 29: Stephanie Dinkins Runway ML research results 2, New York Times, 2023

As image generators like MidJourney have rapidly improved the realism and quality of output well beyond that of GANs, an assumption could be made that the embedded racial tendencies of models would improve in parallel. To investigate this, a research experiment was conducted by this writer in 2023 to determine if MidJourney's text-to-image function would

indicate remaining traces of racial encoding. MidJourney functions by using images from the internet as data for its algorithm, which has sparked criticism and controversy over biased results and ownership. Two prompts were used for the experiment. The first prompt, **/imagine** " headshot of a politician in suit, realistic", yielded the first three photographs in the figure below.



Figure 30: MidJourney Image Generation Sample 1



Figure 31: MidJourney Image Generation Sample 2 using Sample 1 as input

Thereafter, using Midjourney's image as an input function, each of the three images generated from the first prompt were used as a starting point for the second prompt. The second prompt **/imagine** " headshot of politician in suit, mugshot realistic." This prompt yielded the

second three photographs in the figure below. With the simple addition of one word, "mugshot," the AI image generator created each image with visibly darker skin tones.

Approaching the subject of visibility from another position, Hito Steyerl challenges the extractive propensity of digital images, critically examining their role in subjects of ownership, objectification, and representation. In her 2013 performance work *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File,* Steyerl made use of green screening techniques and pixilation scales in both direct and suggestive methods to address the objectification that Ọnụọha highlights. While Ọnụọha, Buolamwini, and Dinkins in the reviewed works all focus on invisibility as an artifact of algorithmic design, Steryerl's work seeks to glitch the systematic design, leveraging invisibility, folding the system's design in upon itself. Concerning the subject of glitch, Legacy Russell writes, "within technoculture, a glitch is a part of a machinic anxiety, an indicator of something having gone wrong." [59] "Glitches are difficult to name and nearly impossible to identify until that instant when they reveal themselves; an accident triggering some form of chaos." [60]

Technological definitions suggest that a glitch is happenstance, its onset undetectable, and its results render systems unable to operate as intended. Considering the function of an active, intentional glitch, glitching could be implemented by leveraging undetectability. This secondary approach is the artistic methodological throughline that drives Steyerl's performance work. The digital gaze is designed to oversee, so Steyerl glitches the system by making herself

[59] Russell, L. (2020). *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. Verso.
[60] Ibid.

invisible, thereby undetectable, demonstrating that, as Fred Moten puts it, “objects can and do resist.” [61]



Figure 32: Screen grab from *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File*

On the subject of objects, it is worth further examining datasets and the role they serve within the machine-learning process. Mimi Ọnụọha’s work focuses on absences in datasets, and the significance of this work might be further illustrated with a quick high-level overview of the role that datasets play within the machine learning process. Generally speaking, datasets are collections that are used to either train or test machine learning algorithms. For example, if the goal is for the machine learning model to distinguish between image types of vehicular models, i.e,. trucks, sedans, SUVs, etc., then one method for achieving this would be to collect as many types of trucks, sedans, and SUVs as possible, and put them into discrete collections to use as

[61] Moten, Fred. “Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester’s Scream.” *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, NED-New edition, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 1–24. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttts6jk.4. Accessed 11 Dec. 2023.

datasets. Thereafter, the datasets are used to train the machine learning model to recognize a truck, a sedan, and an SUV. Once the model is trained, then the separate datasets are typically used a second time to test the model's accuracy in distinguishing between vehicular models. For example, if a model has been trained to recognize trucks, then when an image of a sedan is used as input for the model, the model would be expected to, at a minimum, determine that the input is not a photo of a truck. This basic example would most likely be achieved using Convolutional Neural Networks, which are often used for image and object detection.[62] When the goal is to identify vehicles, there is a banality to this process; however, when the subject matter or the goal is human-focused, the datasets themselves are crucial. The goals might include identification, recognition, or illustration, and therefore the datasets tend to center around the perspectives of the individuals collecting and using datasets to train models. This is when and where value systems and bias enter the conversation.

Stephanie Dinkins' critical work interrogated the underlying architecture through machine learning outputs, like Stereyl artist Jake Elwes utilized subversion of a machine learning process, using its design to highlight the flaws hidden within. Jake Elwes, a "British media artist, neuroqueer thinker, hacker, [exploring] artificial intelligence, queer theory, and technical biases, " created a 2019 work entitled *ZiZi - Queering the Dataset.* [63] *ZiZi - Queering the Dataset* subverts the Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) architecture, which is a model that was trained on a dataset of faces specifically to be able to generate unique faces thereafter.

[62] IBM. "Convolutional Neural Networks." *IBM*. Accessed July 17, 2024. https://www.ibm.com/topics/convolutional-neural-networks
[63] Jake Elwes, "About," *Jake Elwes*, accessed June 20, 2024, https://www.jakeelwes.com/about.html.

[64]

Figure 33: High-quality face photos generated by GANs

Evaluation of the outputs from the original model was representative of the faces that were likely used in the dataset, which were visibly limited to specific demographics. Elwes' description of the work states that *ZiZi - Queering the Dataset* "aims to tackle the lack of representation and diversity in the training datasets often used by facial recognition systems. The video was made by disrupting these systems* and re-training them with the addition of 1000 images of drag and gender fluid faces found online." [65] Elwes' dataset demonstrates the algorithm's struggle to understand the faces throughout the training process, which is observable in the skewing present in the training results.

[64]Li, Shengyin, Vibekananda Dutta, Xin He, and Takafumi Matsumaru. 2022. "Deep Learning Based One-Class Detection System for Fake Faces Generated by GAN Network." *Sensors* 22, no. 20: 7767. https://doi.org/10.3390/s22207767.

[65] Jake Elwes, "Project Zizi (2019)," *Jake Elwes*, accessed August 16, 2024, https://www.jakeelwes.com/project-zizi-2019.html.

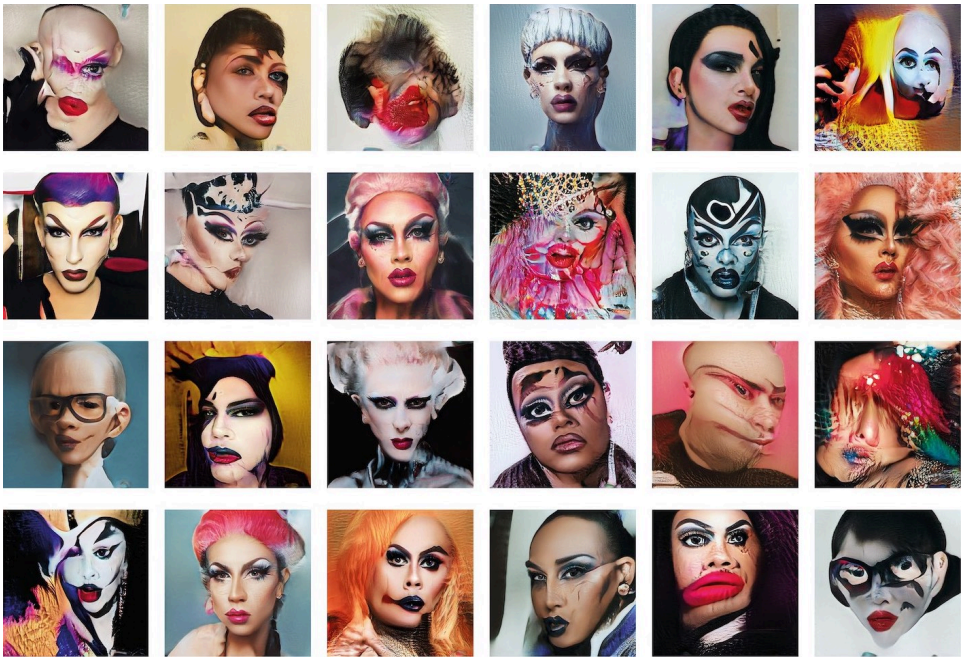


Figure 34: Jake Elwes, *Queering the Dataset*, 2019 results

A cross-analysis of Elwes'and Steyerl's work illuminates a dichotomy between objectification and ownership. What is the threshold between highlighting invisibility and extraction? Stereyl partially credits her work on visibility and over-visibility to a friend, Andrea Wolf, who has been missing since 1998. Steyerl reckons with the circumstances, political or systemic, that would allow for such a thing to occur, stating, "this condition opens up within and by means of an avalanche of digital images, which multiply and proliferate while real people disappear or are fixed, scanned and over-represented by an overbearing architecture of surveillance. How do people disappear in an age of total over-visibility? " [66] She continues, " are people hidden by too many images? Do they hide amongst other images? Do they become images? " [67]

[66] Möller, Alison. "Interview: Hito Steyerl – Zero Probability and the Age of Mass Art Production." *Berlin Art Link*, November 19, 2013. https://www.berlinartlink.com/2013/11/19/interview-hito-steyerl-zero-probability-and-the-age-of-mass-art-production/.
[67] Ibid.



Figure 35: On left Jake Elwes Sample, on right is a photo of Moscato Sky, Seattle, WA

Elwes' work challenges the machine learning practices that render marginalized faces invisible, however to do this work, he translates 1,000 drag queens included in the dataset into nameless objects. Placing Elwes' and Steyerl's work in dialogue drums up critical questions, does the end justify the means, and who is the target audience for Elwes' artwork? The question is further illuminated when positioning Elwes' generated images are positioned next to a real person with a name and an identity.

Taking stock of the various cases presented in this section, there is a concept that connects all of the previously reviewed elements together, the gaze. Visibility, invisibility, hyper-visibility, and hyper-invisibility are all subjects associated with being seen or not seen, which is directly or indirectly present in the artworks, forms, theories, and research presented in this section. "The gaze" mediates a divide between "looking and being looked at, spectacle and

spectatorship, enjoyment and being enjoyed." [68] Fred Moten associated the previous statement with a reading of hyper-visibility, but an argument can be made that all connected subjects of visibility, combined with explicit or perceived power dynamics, are centralized around the subject of gaze. Further, an argument can also be made that algorithmic biases, or rather the results of these biases, reflect a computational equivalent of a centralized normative gaze. The artworks presented in this analysis section seek to disrupt, expose, and subvert the conditions, sources, architectures, and points of view that relegate the marginalized to the margin, the background, and the negative space.

2.3.5 The Colonialist Gaze :

" Amazed the first time I read in history classes that white slave owners punished enslaved black people for looking ." Bell Hooks

A Case Study

Seattle Artist League, *White Art History of Slavery,* 2021

At first glance, Bell Hooks' statement above might read contradictory when positioned alongside the following presented artistic samples. The paintings selected and presented in this case study do indeed depict black people engaged in the act of looking, but to extend Hook's observation, I am asking about the implication of the direction of their looking. Examining the composition of the paintings, there are observable similarities between them, the black person offset into the

[68] Moten, Fred. "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream." *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, NED-New edition, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 1–24. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttts6jk.4. Accessed 11 Dec. 2023.

margins, positioned behind, and or positioned below with an upward gaze. From either position, they are all depicted with their gaze directed toward the face of the other person(s) in the frame, their eyes fixed on whiteness.

Moving a bit further towards an artistic analysis of how Hooks' statement might apply here, it's worth fleshing out a bit more what Hooks is referring to. Hooks continues this thought with, " the politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze." Looking at the paintings again, this right to gaze could be analyzed through the framework of the normative gaze from cinema studies. The "object" is observed and does not engage with the observer, and the observer is positioned within the point of view. Here I ask: Is the possibility that the painter capturing the scene synonymous with the cinema director? Further: Observing who is allowed to look and who is not allowed to look, how might this connect to the developing theory on gaze?



Figure 36: "Elizabeth Murray with a Black Servant," 1651, painting



Figure 37: “Friedrich Ludwig, Henriette Marie, enslaved personal servant, young black slave” 1716, painting



Figure 38: “ Portrait of a Woman, and an Enslaved Servant” 1696, painting



Figure 39: “Johan de la Faille”, no mention of an additional person, 1674, painting

2.4 The Oppositional Gaze

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept."

- Angela Davis.



Figure 40: Titus Kaphar, Behind The Myth of Benevolence, painting

The oppositional gaze, as coined by Bell Hooks and interpreted by me, is about refusal. The oppositional gaze is a refusal to avert the eye and a refusal to perform within a dynamic based on projected ideologies. It is a gaze that meets the eye of the observer, one that holds and reflects the

gaze backward. To dare to gaze at the observer is another example of the “refusal of the object.” Tina Campt “argues [that attempting] to define the contours of an emergent black visuality [alone] constitutes a practice of refusal.” [69]



Figure 41: Titus Kaphar, *Twisted Tropes*, 2016, painting

Hooks continues that “black peoples’ right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze.” [70] Titus Kaphar, a painter, has appropriated the stylism of portraits similar to those in 2.2.5 The Colonialist Gaze, sampling them like J. Dilla

[69] Campt, Tina. n.d. "Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. Accessed June 18, 2023. https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt.
[70] Hooks, B. In Black Looks; Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-31 https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/femlit/bell_hooks.pdf

might, taking something that's been heard 1000 times and giving it new context. New contexts can be created by developing new relationships through positioning, and so can redaction. When the normative gaze is impeded, we see the white of eyes and a steady gaze that reads like a pre-modern day **code_switch** ( ): **Subtext** = "Can you believe this shit," and also an "I will look, but I won't smile."



Figure 42: Titus Kaphar, *Shifting the Gaze*, 2017, painting

I would argue that the oppositional gaze is not only a refusal but also the enactment of systemic disruption by way of agency. There is a choice to show themselves to the observer by looking directly into the gaze. This would disrupt the function of the normative gaze, as the "fourth wall"

is broken.[71] “By courageously looking, we declare: Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.” [72]



Figure 43: Archival photos of black women early 1900s, still images

Carrying over Bell Hooks’ theory of an oppositional gaze into the algorithmic sphere of image generations brings up an interesting observed artifact providing an opportunity to draw in Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation practice. While conducting research on MidJourney’s ability to depict blackness, a correlation around the oppositional gaze became apparent in output images.

[71] "Fourth Wall." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed July 17, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/art/fourth-wall.
[72] Hooks, B. In Black Looks; Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-31 https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/femlit/bell_hooks.pdf

This inquiry project was inspired in part by Stephanie Dinkins' earlier research into GANs which produced grotesque, unintelligible results.



Figure 44: MidJourney Text to Image Experiment Results, 2023, still image

The Midjourney images were generated by an algorithm based on the written prompt entered. With this said, an argument can be made within the realm of conceptual art depending upon the context constructed around the images viewed. The motivation for generating this particular set of images was to explore the possibility of countering the normative depiction of blackness from this period of time (early 1900s). My archival research has illustrated that historical images from this period of time are limited, especially images that illustrate black embodied holistically. Further, circling back to Midjourney's machine learning design, which

pools internet images, the prevalence of close similarities in depictions of black people would indicate that there are limited photos of black folks online to draw from as well. Using variations of the following prompt: "**imagine /** black people sitting in a C.R. Patterson & Sons car, 1910s, parked on a dirt road at sunset, close up, hi res". All of the variations generated produced images of black folks peering directly into the camera. Whether this is an indicator of limitations of historical accounts of black embodiment, or baked into the algorithm is uncertain given the closed-source status of Midjourney as a software. This lack of "training data" constitutes one of the many points of tension that exists on this subject. The other concern that comes up is the question of authorship. If images are pooled from online sources, who are the faces staring back? Is it possible that they are the faces that have always been staring back? Black digital artists who work with image-generating AI are experimenting with prompting techniques that create images of black embodiments in both realistic and speculative contexts.

One such artist is Curry Hackett, an architect who turned to AI to create visual interactions of what Saidiya Hartman coined as the practice of "critical fabulation." Engaging Hartman, Daniela Rosner approaches Critical Fabulation from the lens of design. Rosner suggests " *critical fabulations* as ways of telling stories that awaken alternative histories, and offers a set of techniques and orientations for fabulating its future." [73] What Hackett does with his AI portraits is perhaps in part focused on image generation criticism which he mentions re

[73] Rosner, Daniela K. *Critical Fabulations: Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design*. July 2018. DOI:10.7551/mitpress/11035.001.0001. ISBN: 9780262346405. Abstract.

garding MidJourney in his 2023 interview with Bloomberg. [74] Hackett's experimentation contributes to ongoing inquiries into imaginative methods for alternative archives.



Figure 45: Curry Hackett, "AI-generated image of the Black quilters of Gee's Bend in Alabama building a skyscraper", still image

Circling back to the subject of gaze and my own MidJourney experiments and prompting conventions, the gaze into the "camera" specifically is of interest in its prevalence within the photo. Perhaps this was influenced by the reference to "close up" in the prompt, or perhaps the reference to the period, but the images are striking and eerie and problematize the subject of gaze in a conceptual art context. With the conceptual framework of the oppositional gaze, these images can be interpreted as symbolic artistic iterations that highlight the persistence of looking at being looked at beyond the veil of technological process. They insist that even in the most repressive circumstances, "spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the [algorithm] but also look back, and at one another, naming what we

[74] "With AI, an Architect Imagines a World That Centers Blackness." *Bloomberg*, September 23, 2023. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-09-23/with-ai-an-architect-imagines-a-world-that-centers-blackness.

see." [75] I would argue that the oppositional gaze can also be viewed as a denial of the objectified gaze, as the subject refuses to be a willing participant in the viewing conventions. Further, there is a shifting of power dynamics, which occurs when the subject looks the observer directly in the eyes, subverting the gaze, as if to say *I see you looking because I am looking too.* Lastly, while the oppositional gaze suggests a direct challenge of the observer gaze, for example, eye-to-eye, the oppositional gaze also works as a denial without acknowledging the observer. I would argue that the oppositional gaze also subverts the gaze by turning its back.



Figure 46: Carie Mae Weems, *Museum Series*, 2006-ongoing, still image

[75] Hooks, B. In Black Looks; Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-31 https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/femlit/bell_hooks.pdf

Carrie Mae Weems, a multimedia and multimodal artist, often works with themes and subjects of gaze and history in moving and still images as well as with installations. Weems' *Museum Series* includes a series of self-portraits with Weems dressed in black with back turned to the camera. Weems stages the photographs in front of "various imposing institutions in Europe and the US, from Dresden's Zwinger to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts." [76] At first glance, the photographs might be interpreted as architectural photographs in the traditional sense, where the focus is on the archways, the structural embellishments, etc. In this case, perhaps Weems might be considered another bystander caught within the frame, one of three other bodies that happened to be near when the photos were taken. However, Weems is very methodical and intentional about the construction of visual and symbolic relationships between embodiment and institutions, which is achieved by the singular act of her body in proximity to the architectural structure. With this artistic gesture, the subject of the oppositional gaze and how it can be applied as an artistic provocation is amplified with each iteration in Weem's series.



Figure 47: Carrie Mae Weems, Museum Series, 2006-ongoing, still image

[76] Carrie Mae Weems, "Carrie Mae Weems Questions the Preservation of History," ArtReview, June 30, 2024, https://artreview.com/carrie-mae-weems-questions-the-preservation-of-history/





Figure 48: Selected works from Carrie Mae Weems, Museum Series, 2006-ongoing, still images

2.5 Synthesis

A collection of theories, research, and artist engagements including Laura Mulvey, Hito Steyrel, Titus Kafur, Bell Hooks, and Carrie Mae Weems, which inform and approach the subject of gaze have been presented in an effort to illustrate the many ties to gaze that exist across artistic forms, perspectives and fields of inquiry. While this is a deep analysis of the subject of gaze, this analysis serves to highlight not only the various threads that connect to the subject, such as the algorithmic gaze, the male gaze, and the white gaze, but also to illustrate deductively how the normalized gaze shapes how what is viewed is framed. This analysis also illustrates how that framing is shaped and replicated in media, film, art, critique, and algorithms, as well as how the theories and artistic iterations can be connected to the subject of archives, from archival objects to datasets. This analysis also illustrates how gaze contributes to erasure, bias, and

misrepresentation and the methods that artists and theorists have approached in order to address this prevalence.

Further, this analysis seeks to challenge the "marginalized" positioning of people of color, which functions as a byproduct of the normalized gaze. By deconstructing the gaze and shifting its center, the archive can be shifted away from " the optics of "looking at" to a politics of looking with, through, and alongside." [77] Informed by this conglomeration of points of view, a conceptual framework was implemented for *MUTATE*, which decenters the "normative" gaze in favor of a gaze that validates the origin and contexts that were centered in the creation of the work. Tina Campt's *Black Gaze* does not focus on challenging the "dominant" point of view but instead repositions towards a black-centered perspective on viewing, engaging with, and practicing art.

2.6 Code_Switch( ) ing

Before transitioning into Tina Campt's *Black Gaze,* a bit of housekeeping is in order.

As you have likely noticed already, I am inserting bits of code throughout this document, and when the code is present, there is a shift in tone and or delivery, and it is intentionally placed to highlight a subtext that is sitting just below the surface. It also interjects what would perhaps be considered "subjective" in its contributions to an objective research dissertation. While I recognize that a dissertation has a specific set of normative practices, this intervention is a creative symbolic gesture, a tiny form of art at work on the page that is connected to *MUTATE*. Whether on the page or in the space, they both push back.

[77] Campt, Tina. *A Black Gaze : Artists Changing How We See*. The MIT Press, 2021.

My positioning of the code functions in two ways. First, it translates a black studies theoretical idea into a different form (in this case python code), which is a small-scale experiment connected to my first research question. Secondly, the coding intervention works within this document symbolically using naming conventions, programmatically reinserting the cultural nuance lost in the performance of this document. What is highlighted every time the function (I will explain this next) is called is a justification for the shifting of gaze which includes culturally informed research-based social practices that contribute to the discussion.

In the block of code that I have written, a function called **code_switch( )** is called. A function is a reusable block of code that only needs to be set up once, and then it works repeatedly, iterating through the same steps contained within it. It is also possible to send information into the function from outside with the use of a variable. This is helpful if you want the function to evaluate changing information, and if so, the information can be passed into the function in the form of a variable. In this case, there are two variables, one called **subtext**, and another called **institutional_language.** For example, **code_swith** (**subtext**) passes the variable **subtext** into the function for further use. Now **subtext** holds text that can be defined and rewritten before, during, or after **code_switch( )** is called. However, **institutional_language** is a boolean variable that can only be set to **True** or **False**. In this case, we will use the variable **subtext** and **institutional_language**, when using the function **code_switch ( )**. If **institutional_language==True**, the function moves on to the next line of code, switching institutional_language to **False.** Thereafter, another variable, **my_actual_voice,** is set to reflect the text passed through in **subtext**.

A compilation of this code might read as such:

```
def code_switch( subtext, institutional_language ) :
If  institutional_language:
        institutional_language = False
        my_actual_voice = subtext
```

subtext = " *Moving forward, let's just assume that the value of* ***institutional_language*** *is always set to* ***True****."*

2.7 The Black Gaze

It is a Black gaze that shifts the optics of "looking at" to a politics of looking with, through, and alongside another. - Tina Campt

Stuart Hall offers an overarching definition of cultural identity in his essay *Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation*. [78] Hall defines cultural identity as the "idea of one shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self", hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people of a shared history and ancestry hold in common." [79] In other words, cultural identity is an imagining of oneself hidden away in the interior, which is realized and affirmed in relationship to others who share a similar history. I'll come back to the subject of interiority shortly, but the switching between superficial or artificially imposed selves that Hall

[78] Bell Hooks, In Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-31
[79]Hall, Stuart. "CULTURAL IDENTITY AND CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 68–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111666.

describes is the definition of code switching within social settings. “Code switching” is the changing of communication methods dynamically and generally speaking, based on audience, circumstances, and comfort in systematically structured environments.[80]

The intention of this chapter is not to offer an essentialist or monolithic accounting of existence but rather to attempt to formulate into words the nuance and complexity of a way of knowing, seeing, and being that is tied to a particular lived experience. There have been many before who have gathered words in the shape of the subject of blackness and being, as well as what it means as an ideological framework. One of the most notable who is woven in and out of this document, is Fred Moten. Moten confers that:

> [The study of blackness] moves at the horizon of an event where certain instruments, insofar as they can no longer either calculate or be calculated, are bent toward the incalculable. That juncture, that event, doesn’t just imply and assume and consider movement; it is, itself, on the move.” [81]

To engage with subjects of black being, knowing, and specifically creating is to accept that sometimes, “words don’t go there. ” [82] However, Tina Campt offers up a methodology and practice of engagement with contemporary black art, which she calls a black gaze. Contrary to

[80] Johnson, Darin G., Bradley D. Mattan, Nelson Flores, Nina Lauharatanahirun, and Emily B. Falk. "Social-Cognitive and Affective Antecedents of Code Switching and the Consequences of Linguistic Racism for Black People and People of Color." Affective Science, received December 1, 2020, accepted August 12, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-021-00072-8.
[81]Moten, Fred.. *Stolen Life*. Duke University Press, 2018, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv111jj9x.

[82] Rowell, Charles. “‘WORDS DON’T GO THERE’: An Interview with Fred Moten.” *Callaloo*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2004, pp. 953–66.

what I would refer to as the fetishization and appropriation of black culture, the *Black Gaze* offers a new way of engaging with artworks and practices from a conceptual art perspective. Tina Campt is hesitant to offer up a concise definition of what a black gaze means and acknowledges that such a thing is not fixed but fluid. Her words are a work in progress, shifting and evolving as she attempts to materialize a manner of approach which she refers to as emerging. Campt writes:

> "A Black Gaze departs in significant ways from the notion of the gaze popularized within the field of cinema studies, most notably because it is not limited to film or filmmaking. It broadens this concept by exploring a Black gaze not only in lens-based art forms like film and photography but in a range of artistic practices that include movement and performance, sculpture, sound installations, and music video."

In Campt's analysis of the artworks presented, she confers that the binding agent that unifies the work created requires labor on behalf of the viewer. Campt notes that across mediums, there is a refusal to reward the viewer with comfort and ease. In this shifting, Campt confers that work of this sort asks, "rather than looking at Black people, rather than simply multiplying the representation of Black folks, what would it mean to see oneself through the complex positionality that is blackness— and work through its implications on and for oneself." [83]

[83] Campt, Tina. *A Black Gaze : Artists Changing How We See*. The MIT Press, 2021.

Although the *Black Gaze* is presented as a way of engaging with contemporary black art, if applied inversely, it also functions as a viewpoint from which to make art. Synthesizing these considerations, I've asked myself if a Black gaze was the normative gaze, what kind of work would you make? Further, what conceptual responsibilities do you have as an artist and to whom? Lastly, "the black artist lives within the crosshairs of publicness and, if [they] want to create meaningful work, [they] have to construct a consciousness that exists beyond the expectation of resistance." [84]

Returning to Hall's definition which does imply a singularity to some extent or rather a high-level purview, there is a useful counterpoint provided when combined with my own established metaphors with regard to code switching. It seems plausible in this case to speculate that Campt's *Black Gaze*, inversely applied to an artistic methodology, is the unencumbered black mind's nearest neighbor. The true self, or the interior self as Hall refers to it, is lingering within and protected by a well-designed situational mechanism, a technology that enables the switching of an iterative self in real-time. Examining these dynamics through a self-reflective process-based artwork, the process of creating *MUTATE* was the asking of an artistic, practical question. What happens when the performance of self stops? What emerges from within that can be drawn out and manifested into an artistic form, and what form does that manifestation take?

Although Campt frames herself as an astute and meticulous observer, she brings an informed nuanced point of view about how art is made and also about what it does when read

[84] Quashie, Kevin Everod. *The Sovereignty of Quiet beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2012, https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813553115.

from a particular lens. What Campt continues to do across the works she engages with is to present a methodology that merges the analytical with the emotional as a holistic way of engaging with art, and I would argue further, a holistic way of making art. Another way of illustrating this would be through the vehicle of sound and sound studies. Sound can indeed be observed with a spectrogram, its frequencies visualized and analyzed, reverse-engineered, digitized, and quantized, but how we experience sound, and process sound is embodied and inherently haptic. What happens thereafter is cognition, which is informed in part by feeling and is also embodied. What is art without feeling? A subjective question, but then art is subjective too. Campt theorizes about hapacity, or haptics as a form "of contact we are all too familiar with: physical contact (touching), visual contact (seeing), psychic contact (feeling), as well as sonic encounters with different frequencies and vibrations." [85] Continuing the inverting based on Campt's theorizing, I ask: If feeling is a way of understanding art, is it possible that it can also be incorporated into a methodology for making art?

A black gaze lays down the anvil of legibility and allows for the making of art that moves with or without an audience, it allows the artist to generate work which does not require a separation from or a translation of cultural connections or selfhood. It is an audible, movement on the fly, a space for the hard, the harsh, the beautiful, the historical, and the ingenious. The adoption of a black gazes illuminates a well spring of space for the nuance of black life and black being, and the artistic potentinals that are exist from this change of view.

[85] Campt, Tina. *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2024,103

subtext = “

What a black gaze has offered to MUTATE is breathing room. It has allowed the work to evolve from and be informed by its point of origin. MUTATE can be read as inherently personal, to that I would both agree and disagree. MUTATE is indeed a self-portrait, but it is also a historical document and an archive. MUTATE feels, and it analyzes, it also constructs a question about what exists with us now that has survived before the technological revolution and what of our humanity will be taken with us. A black gaze offers freedom to investigate this question introspectively, and it removes the weight of legibility as a contributing factor.”

```
def code_switch( subtext  ) :
If  institutional_language:
        institutional_language = False
        my_actual_voice = subtext
        institutional _language = True
```

CHAPTER 3 - ARCHIVES: PROBLEMATICS, ALTERNATIVES, CREATIVE FRAMEWORKS

"The composer, performer, and visual artist Benjamin Patterson was one of the founding figures of Fluxus." - George Lewis [86]

subtext = " *I read an article once which featured a photo of the person to the far right holding the device. It didn't include this photo, but unfortunately, I have yet to find it again. His name is Benjamin Patterson. The writer of the article was attempting to highlight his absence from the curated history of the founding members of Fluxus. They wrote something to the tune of "who is that black guy standing next to John Cage, and why do we not know about him?" Benjamin Patterson is every person that history has erased, and every person is Benjamin Patterson.* **"**



[86] Lewis, George E. "Passages: Benjamin Patterson." Artforum, August 3, 2023. https://www.artforum.com/columns/benjamin-patterson-231195/.

Figure 49: George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Wolf Vostell, Benjamin Patterson, and Emmett Williams, Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik in Wiesbaden in 1962, still image

3.1 The Problematics of Institutional Archives

Mike Featherstone, a professor at the Goldsmith's University of London in the UK, unpacks institutional archival history and function. Featherstone writes, "the term archive refers to the place where government records are stored. It was initially conceived as the site where official records were guarded and kept in secrecy. The archive was part of the apparatus of social rule and regulation, it facilitated the governance of the territory and population through accumulated information." [87] Further, "matters of national memory were constructed." [88]

It is worth the effort of unpacking the term "construct" in this chapter to offer further context….*To* construct is to "build or erect something, typically a building, road, or machine," whereas a construct is "an idea or theory containing various conceptual elements, typically one considered to be subjective and not based on empirical evidence." [89] Both definitions are associated with the act of building an idea, whether material or immaterial. However, I would argue that in the case of the construction of history, specifically in the US, material objects and immaterial ideas are treated synonymously. For example, the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln in 1983 is both a material object and an immaterial idea. Within the body of the document, Lincoln proclaims that " all persons held as slaves are, and henceforth shall be

[87] Featherstone, Mike. "Archive." *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 381-386. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406023002106.
[88] Ibid.
[89] "construct," Google Dictionary, Oxford Languages, accessed June 30, 2024, https://www.google.com/search?q=define+word

free." [90] However, the idea of "freedom" does not equate to actual freedom, as was the case with the Emancipation Proclamation. Freedom in the sense of the word at that time did not actually arrive until June 19th, 1895. [91] In the case of Benjamin Patterson, one could argue that institutional archives are as much about remembering as they are about forgetting, and again I ask: What are the stakes involved that would cause the exclusion of Patterson and the inclusion of Cage? What about the inclusion of Merce Cunningham and the exclusion of Syvilla Fort?

A significant motivation for my interest in archives is the prevalence of erasure. In Caroll Pursell's book, *A Hammer in Their Hands: A Documentary History of Technology and the African-American Experience, Pursell* navigates the intertwined "intersection of African-American history and the history of technology." [92] Both the absences and presences tell a story about the two and the relationship between them. Prusell observes that the history of technology reflects an alignment with engineering and design which, Pursell argues, " was and continues to be largely white and masculinist in its demographic." [93] Pursell continues to suggest that due to this alignment, it could be assumed that since" no people of color or women had an important role in designing the built environment, they could justifiably be left out of the history of technology." [94] Further that, "any history of technology that leaves out more than half the American population (women, children, people of color) is a very partial history, in both senses

[90] National Archives, "The Emancipation Proclamation," accessed June 30, 2024, https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation#:~:text=President%20Abraham%20Lincoln%20issued%20the,and%20henceforward%20shall%20be%20free.%22.
[91] National Museum of African American History and Culture, "Historical Legacy of Juneteenth," accessed June 30, 2024, https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/historical-legacy-juneteenth.
[92] Pursell, Carroll. *A Hammer in Their Hands: A Documentary History of Technology and the African-American Experience*. 1st ed., The MIT Press, 2005, pp. xviii–xviii, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3407.001.0001.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

of the word." [95] Beyond this limited facade, which relegates black inventors, engineers, artists, and physicians as non-contributing parties, there is an extensive list of folks who have contributed to not only the development of technological and medical advancements but also the development of everyday tools compiled by Raycon Fouché, 300 years worth to be exact.[96] What would the world be without the traffic stop light? A mess, and we have Garrett Morgan to thank for the invention.



Figure 50: Black and white photo of inventor Garrett Morgan, still image

There is also the historical contribution of the *Hidden Figures*, popularized due to the Hollywood film released in 2016. This biopic illustrated the contributions of three black women who played pivotal roles in the development of space launch technologies at NASA during the segregation era. Their names are Mary Jackson, Dorothy Vaughn, and Katherine Johnson. Mary Jackson was one of the "hidden figures", a mathematician and engineer who worked as a "human computer" at NASA.[97] Jackson, Vaughn, and Johnson were the predecessors of another NASA engineer and data scientist, Valerie Thomas.

[95] Ibid.
[96] Rayvon Fouché, "300 Years of African-American Invention and Innovation," The MIT Press Reader, February 24, 2021, https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/300-years-of-african-american-invention-and-innovation/.
[97] Walsh, Jim, "Human Computers at NASA", MinnPost, September 13,2016, https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/amst_humancomp/.



Figure 51: Black and white photo of engineer and data scientist Valerie Thomas, still image

Valerie Thomas, a NASA engineer, was an early contributor to the field of 3D imaging. Inspired by an event she attended in 1976 where the illusion of the light bulb that was removed from a socket appeared to be lit, Thomas invented the “illusion transmitter” and patented the invention in 1980.[98] NASA continues to use the illusion transmitter, which has been “adapted for screens on various devices ranging from surgery tools to televisions.” [99]

Circling back to my research question as informed by this chapter, inquiring into the problematics of institutional archives offers further potential for the relation of an artwork that is engaged in subjects of archives and historical constructs. Observing the problematics of institutional archives aids in identifying practical and artistic counterpoints that approach the subject and the practice from another position.

[98] Thomas, Valerie, "Valerie Thomas", Wikipedia. Last modified July 18, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerie_Thomas.
[99] Ibid.



Paving The Way For Women Engineers
New Journal and Guide (1916-2003); May 8, 1943;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Norfolk Journal and Guide (1921-2003)
pg. A22

Paving The Way For Women Engineers

Above are shown members of the first women's class in engineering fundamentals at Hampton Institute, who will complete their 10-week course on May 8. Under the supervision of Dr. B. A. Turner, the course qualifies students for civil service appointments as junior engineers, at $2,000 annually. In the photo are, left to right, front row, Miss Madelon Glenn of Hartford, Conn.; Mrs. Lucille Hibbler, Newport News; Miss Minnie McGraw, Columbia, S. C.; Miss Mary Cherry, Windsor, N. C.; Mrs. Miriam Mann, Hampton; second row, Misses Jean Sampson, Hampton; Mabel Stickle, Hampton; Pearl Bassette, Phoebus; Mrs. Thelma Stiles, Hampton; Miss L. Lucille Leath, Burlington, N. C.; and Mrs. Opehlia Taylor, Hampton. Applications will soon be available for qualified women college graduates to enroll in the second series of courses in this work which will begin at Hampton on June 15, Dr. Turner said this week.

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Figure 52: New Journal and Guide publication on the black women who worked at NASA as engineers, article

3.2 Alternative Archival Perspectives

How do we understand "reality" when official narratives deny what our bodies know?"
- Elizabeth Alexander

3.2.1 Embodied Knowledge

Prior to the conceptual launch into the subject, it seems fitting to present an oversimplified example of what the phrase means. The uncertainty about how to approach embodied knowledge outside of art practices that regularly engage the body, for example, dance and performance, strikes me as more of a mental hurdle than an issue of validity. However, an offering of a simple

example seems like a nice ice breaker, or rather an oversimplified olive branch to ease into the subject matter. Here is the scenario:

subtext = " *You've had an accident and you've injured your leg. You know it's injured because your body tells you (embodied) before the doctor does (empirical). Whenever you return to that same staircase after you're healed, that feeling you get internally, the apprehension… What is that? Some kind of knowledge perhaps?* **"**

Circling back to the subject of validity, the mind-body divide in the academy can be connected perhaps to ideology of verification or validation. To verify or to validate brings with it empirical standards, for example, a peer review from an external non-biased party, and approaches for managing this have been implemented in the human sciences through the means of standardized procedures for quantitative objective human-centered research. With that said, this is an art dissertation, not a science dissertation, so artistic liberties will be taken.

This section is not meant to provide a complete analytical definition of what embodied knowledge is, as in some ways this seems a bit paradoxical but, what is offered is one example that illustrates embodied knowledge in practice. There are histories and practices across many cultures that are connected to the understanding of how knowledge is held in the body and passed from one person to another with the body. Language is a good example of this, as it is knowledge that is held in the body and is often transferred from one person to the next.



Figure 53: Portrait of Ouma Katrina, still image

Omua Katrina is a “preserver of a dying language” [100] called Khoisan or N|uu. Katrina is one of the few people, if not “the only known person”[101] left who can speak the language at the age of 99 years old. The knowledge that Katrina holds within her body is at risk of linguicide as she is nearly 100 years of age. In an attempt to preserve the language, Katrina opened a school to pass knowledge to another generation. As modern-day cloud-based archives and internet access have shifted what it means to archive one's life, there still remains a digital divide with older generations due to limited access to technology. The stories and histories that are carried with them are at risk of loss without being downloaded into the archive, either cloud-based or embodied.

[100] YouTube. "Ouma Katrina is one of a few people left who can speak the indigenous Khoisan language." Uploaded by Newzroom Africa, September 20, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GkKgpWBJhI .

[101] YouTube. "Meet the last speaker of of N|uu, a near-extinct language." Uploaded by Reuters, May 11, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFH4h75X2j8 .

From an archivist perspective, there is an urgent need to bridge the digital divide to ensure the continuation of cultural narratives and traditions. Because *MUTATE* is an artwork, the possibilities between art practice and cultural preservation are linked, and approaching this linkage from the lens of black archival practices can illustrate generative possibilities for artistic iterations.

3.3 Black Archival Practices

Black folks have developed alternative methods for keeping and sharing information, which are frequently discussed within historical spheres in relation to the Anti-literacy laws from the late 1700s-1800s [102]. The Anti-literacy laws "prohibited enslaved, and sometimes free, Black Americans from learning to read or write." [103] To subvert this, black folks used embodied mechanisms to store and share knowledge. The methods were inventive and also life-saving as knowledge sharing and gathering were violently policed to deadly ends. Considering, "black archival practice enables us to see the ways that race continues to structure archives and archival studies by holding firm to the existence of anti-Blackness, which has engendered negation, dispossession, premature death, and silencing in life and in archival afterlives." [104]

Black archival practice also looks to restore and reframe histories of marginalized peoples to preserve, document, and share histories from generation to generation. Black archivists are amending the record that history has perforated. These methods include oral

[102] "Anti-literacy laws in the United States," Wikipedia, last modified July 18, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-literacy_laws_in_the_United_States.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Collier, Zakiya, and Tonia Sutherland, "Witnessing, Testimony, and Transformation as Genres of Black Archival Practice", *The Black Scholar* 52, no. 2 (2022): 7–15, doi:10.1080/00064246.2022.2042666.

tradition, song and sound, modeling, witnessing, and storytelling to pass on information from person to person and generation to generation.[105] In the sections that follow, a few examples of black archival practices will be discussed in connection to the methodological approaches to realizing MUTATE.

3.3.1 The Oral Tradition

We must bear witness to histories that would otherwise be silenced, to create an archive of feeling, of memory, of the lived experience of Black people." - Toni Morrison

When thinking about embodied archives and the oral tradition, Zora Neal Hurston is a great example of a person working at the intersection of archivist, artist, and performer. Hurston was an ethnographic and anthropological researcher, author, and documentary filmmaker who traveled to black communities to better understand customs and black cultural practices.[106] One of Hurston's archival practices with regard to folk music was to learn the songs from the people within the communities. Thereafter, she would sing them back during her accounting of her time within the space as a form of archival recording.

[105] Collier, Z., & Sutherland, T. (2022), "Witnessing, Testimony, and Transformation as Genres of Black Archival Practice", *The Black Scholar*, *52*(2), 7–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2022.2042666., "Indian Civil Rights Act (1968)," Milwaukee Public Museum, accessed July 17, 2024, https://www.mpm.edu/content/wirp/ICW-14.

[106] Wikipedia contributors, "Zora Neale Hurston," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, July 18, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zora_Neale_Hurston.



Figure 54:Black and white portrait of Zora Neal Hurston

In 1939 at the Federal Music Project Office in Jacksonville, Florida, Hurston shared an embodied archival record:

Hurston: *I heard Halinuhfack down on the east coast.*

(inaudible voice asking a question)

Hurston: *I don't remember I was in a big crowd in the evening during the crowd…don't exactly remember who did teach it to me, I learned it from the crowd mostly*

Hurston:(singing) *You may leave and go to Halinuhfack, but my slow drag will bring you back*

Wellah you may go but this will bring you back…

The oral tradition is one of the earliest documented archival methods, and its persistence, as well as the diverse application instances across cultures, implies that it is effective in the transference of knowledge. [107] In this methodology, the person is the holder of information, and as an archive is simply "a place where information is kept" [108], then the archive lives in the person caring the information. This embodied knowledge is maintained and kept safe, carrried from source to source, person to person, and generation to generation.



Figure 55: Louis Armstrong teaching children to play trumpet, 1970

[107] "Indian Civil Rights Act (1968)." Milwaukee Public Museum. Accessed July 17, 2024. https://www.mpm.edu/content/wirp/ICW-14.
[108] Featherstone, Mike. "Archive." *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 381-386. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406023002106.

Considering this method, I ask: Where is the divide between embodied knowledge and empirical knowledge, especially in the context of the convergence between the embodied archives and digital archives? Is knowledge "real" once it becomes data? Is knowledge real once an algorithm is trained to recognize it? How does the archive contribute to informing these questions? If the archive is simply a place that holds information, what's the difference between the cloud, a server, and the body? As Hurston did in the early 1930s, how can *MUTATE* explore expanded definitions and contexts for embodied archives that allow for new technological applications?

3.3.2 Archival Materials and Family Histories

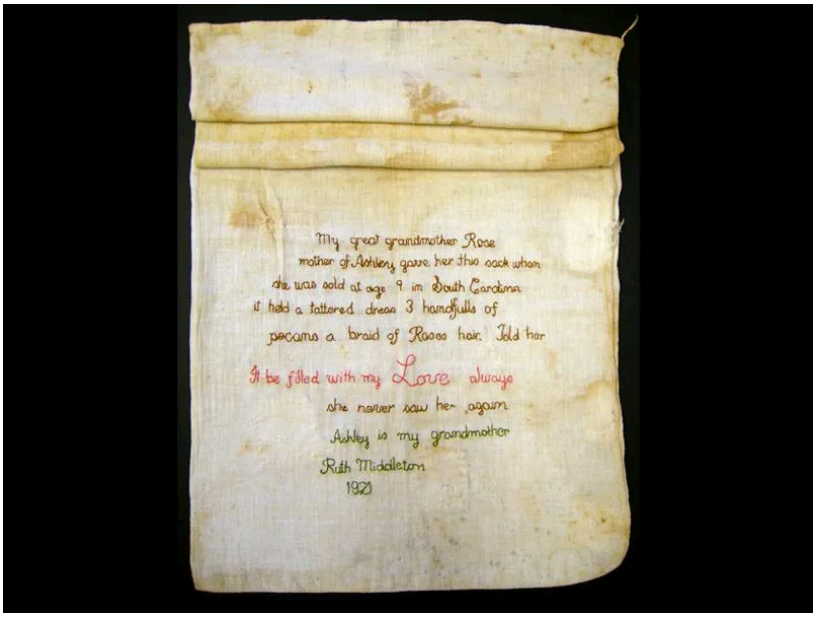

Figure 56: Ashley's sack embroidered with family history, Middleton Place Foundation

In Tiya Miles' book *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*, Miles shares the story of a family's multigenerational attempt to keep their history alive. In 1920, Ruth Midelton stitched her family's history onto a sack. This is not just any sack, the sack belonged to Ruth's grandmother Ashley.[109]

The stitching reads:

> My great grandmother Rose
> mother of Ashley gave her this sack when
> she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina
> it held a tattered dress, three handfuls of
> pecans a braid of Roses hair. Told her
> It be filled with my Love always
> she never saw her again
> Ashley is my grandmother
>
> Ruth Middelton
> 1920 [110]

The sack functions as an archival material not only because it is a material object, but also because of its detailed account of what it held which informs the circumstance around how it

[109] Miles, Tiya. *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*. 1st ed., Random House Publishing Group, 2021.

[110] Ibid.

came to be. Family histories were passed along from generation to generation through storytelling. Storytelling was an effective methodology because there was no evidence left behind, which minimized the risk of punishment. In the case of Ashley's sack, the knowledge was carried from person to person, from generation to generation, embodied knowledge that was materially intertwined with the sack. Ruth's gesture of stitching the story into the sack could be viewed as an effort to ensure its permanency, to give it to something rather than someone who would outlive her.

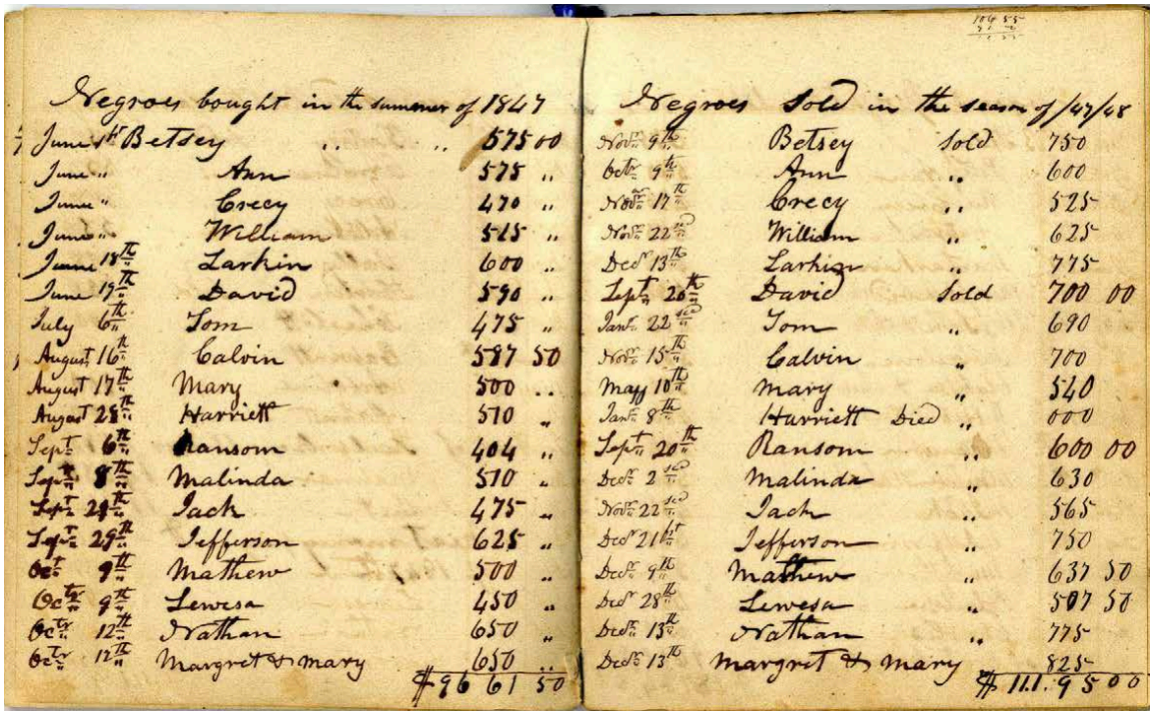

Figure 57: Slave trader ledger of Willam James Smith, 1847

The selling of black bodies during US chattel slavery contributed to the archival limitation of family histories for black folks in the US.[111] Human beings were reduced to

[111] Equal Justice Initiative. "History of Racial Injustice: Black Families Severed by Slavery." *Equal Justice Initiative*, July 16, 2023. https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-black-families-severed-by-slavery/.

market-value commodities as they were appraised and assigned dollar amounts. The dehumanization enabled the selling of a human being as an object was systemically enacted and systemically reinforced. For example, practices like being sold under the last name of "owners", the use of auction blocks, and their "value" were determined based on factors like "age" or "quality" as phrased in a New York Times article from 1863 is another dehumanization practice. [112] Returning to the story of the separation of 9-year-old Ashley from her mother Rose, it too was often the case that families were separated and sold individually.

In the figure above, a ledger from 1847 lists the people bought and sold by a slave trader named William James Smith. As horrific as this document is, from an archivist's perspective, it serves two functions. It offers proof that the selling of human beings in mass quantities for money was indeed a part of US history, but it also serves as one of the earliest records of the existence of black folks on US soil. Navigating this dualism and the problems involved when looking for narratives, and histories, and people who existed before is the work of recovery.

Kim Gallon writes, "recovery rests at the heart of Black studies, as a scholarly tradition that seeks to restore the humanity of black people lost and stolen through systemic global racialization." [113] Recovery peers through history into the heart of the matter. It's the story of Rose, a mother who gave what she could of herself to her daughter, a lock of hair, a handful of

[112] "Market Price of Slaves." *New York Times*, August 22, 1863. https://www.nytimes.com/1863/08/22/archives/market-price-of-slaves.html.
[113] Gallon, Kim. "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities." In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. Edited by Matthew K. Gold. University of Minnesota Press, 2012. https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/fa10e2e1-0c3d-4519-a958-d823aac989eb.

food, and her best dress. It's the story of Ashley, a 9-year-old girl who grew up and continued the legacy of her family and her mother. Observing this methodology of archival practice, the development of *MUTATE* involved thinking broadly about archival forms, materials, and objects. With this in mind, I ask: How might the new media tools that I've engaged with allow for a contemporary application of this methodology?

3.4 Creative Frameworks

The positioning of *MUTATE* within a black gaze does not negate the problematics that exist within the archive. Rather, it affirms and highlights those problematics holistically and their contributions to the nuance that is black being and black life. Additionally, it moves towards other paths for working with archives in alternative ways. The next section provides a high-level engagement with Saidiya Hartman's *Critical Fabulations* as an informative theory that adds to the practical task of constructing an archive. Secondly, looking at Kim Gallon's "technology of recovery" practice also helps to inform archival constructions, specifically the contents within them.

3.4.1 Saidiya Hartman - Critical Fabulation and World Building

"So much of the work of oppression is policing the imagination."- Saidiya Hartman.

In Saidiya Hartman's essay *Venus in Two Acts,* Hartman investigates if "it is possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive." [114] While Hartman is considering this question in terms of literary archival engagement and practice, the analysis of the creative extension of

[114] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," in *Small Axe*, ed. David Scott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 11.

archival practices into speculative territory can be considered broadly to investigate practical methodologies beyond the literary sphere. "Critical fabulation" as a creative practice is built upon a definition of "fabula" which Hartman references in the essay as having come from Mieke Bal. Hartman quotes Bal as having defined "Fabula" as "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors[...]. "[115] Hartman's literary methodology which Hartman has coined "critical fabulation" is a practice of problematizing and "displac[ing] the received or authorized account" to "illuminate the contested character of history, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices." [116] By "toppl[ing] the hierarchy of discourse", Hartman clears space for speculation and imagination, space to create "divergent stories"[117] from a different point of view, an implied different gaze. Transmuting critical fabulation from the literary page into artistic practice offered another counterpoint to *MUTATE*'s conceptual scope and installation composition.

The creation of *MUTATE* was an inquiry into the possibility of a speculative immersive world where "authorized accounts" of events were reoriented towards another narrative and another purpose. *MUTATE* was indeed a speculative world, and transforming the idea of archival form required imaginative foresight and a willingness to lean into experimentation in order to develop the environmental installation. This experimental framing became the setting, stage, and atmosphere of the work. Experimentation, "the action or process of trying out new ideas and methods," [118] offers freedom of sorts to create the work without constraints from preexisting ideas and methods. Experimentation allowed for the imagining of creative methods to affirm that

[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] "Experimentation," in *Oxford Languages*, accessed July 10, 2024, https://www.google.com/search?q=define+ephemeral.

"tell[ing] a free story, a story that refuses the subjection of black life to death and that imagines other ways to live and be, is to engage in world making[...]."[119] Or, to rephrase, world-building is the practice of seeking light where there is only death as an attempt at finding beauty beyond.

Now, circling back to the first research question posed which asks: What are the possibilities for constructing an archive that is conceptually guided by black scholarly theory" and in this case, specifically Saidiya Hartman's Critical Fabulation theory? I would argue that the possibilities guided by critical fabulation are abundant, and further, it offers practical pathways to experiment with form, narrative, materiality, mediums, and specialty. While Hartman encourages the liberal but intentional "re-presenting"[120] of events, there is still a gesture of what Kim Gallon refers to as the "technology of recovery" present in Hartman's practical work. In the next section, a high-level look at Gallon's considerations for archival care and recovery is examined.

3.4.2 Kim Gallon- The Technology of Recovery

"Boundaries and demarcations continue to shift within a complex and ongoing conversation about the intersection of technology with humanistic fields" [121] is Kim Gallon's opening statement in reference to technology and the humanities. Although Gallon's essay speaks specifically to a humanities-focused audience, her essay perhaps unintentionally speaks as well to media studies. The camera is always there as a conduit and a membrane, collecting and revealing the best and worst of it all. Mulling through the dynamics involved in the conversation about

[119] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 52.
[120] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," in *Small Axe*, ed. David Scott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 11
[121] Gallon, Kim. "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities." In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. Edited by Matthew K. Gold. University of Minnesota Press, 2012. https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/fa10e2e1-0c3d-4519-a958-d823aac989eb.

what technology might provide to black humanities studies, Gallon refers to what she calls " a technology of recovery"[122], characterized by efforts to bring forth the full humanity of marginalized peoples through the use of digital platforms." [123] Gallon urges that recovery, "restores the humanity of black people lost and stolen through systemic global racialization, " [124] and although she is not speaking to the artist, her statements open up possibilities for artistic engagement with the ideas.

The desire to contribute to the reparation of historical records is coupled with the acknowledgment of the circumstances that generated this need for repair. "Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor." [125] To recover is to reclaim, return, and perhaps reorient something which has been lost or erased. As Gallon's urging speaks to the first research question which inquires into the possibilities for practical creation informed by recovery, the engagement with the archival materials shifts when holding the practice of recovery in mind. My interpretation of Gallon's is that the archive is not a place of consumption but rather a place of humanity and humility, which can/should/ought to be incorporated into any work that engages with the archive.

[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Hartman, S. V. (2019). *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments : intimate histories of social upheaval* (First edition.). W.W. Norton & Company.

3.5 SYNTHESIS

Synthesizing the contributions that Hartman and Gallon add to the growing conceptual framing that Campt's theory initiated on the heels of Dinkins, *MUTATE* is an attempt at materializing a crossing of these ideas and methods through the gaze, materials, methods, scope, and construction of the work. The problematics of the archive and the "official" depictions of black embodiment historically, are in part, a motivation of this work. However, a single artistic work cannot resolve or solve the innumerable instances that exist as empirical data in a manner of speaking around this observance. What Gallon and Hartman specifically offered was an invitation to see the archive as "a place of dreams and revelation, a place of longing where the world can turn on the discovery of an insignificant fragment," a place for creating and re-working memory."[126]

subtext = " *When I was in elementary school, my grandmother was a crossing guard. I would meet her at the corner after school and when all of the kids had gone home for the day, she would take me by the hand and we would walk back to her home. The inside of my grandmother's bedroom had beautiful curtains that I ran my hands across and disappeared within. At the foot of her bed, there was a towering armoire where she kept delicate clothes, the ones she wore to church on Sundays. Her dresser on the far left of the room was covered in trinkets, earrings, jewelry boxes, makeup compacts, and lipsticks. I opened the lipsticks and smelled them. I can still remember the smell today, although my grandmother is gone. Smell is an archival material."*

In the next chapter, I present a survey of practical methodologies used by artists that have been observed to engage with the scholarly and practical subject of archives. Additionally, I

[126] Featherstone, Mike. "Archive." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, no. 2–3, 2006, pp. 591–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406023002

present coinciding research examples conducted over the course of my doctoral tenure related to the methodologies selected for review.



Figure 58: Hank Willis Thomas, *My Father Died for This Country Too. I am An American Also.*, 2018

CHAPTER 4 - ARTISTIC ARCHIVAL METHODOLOGIES

subtext =

“ *In April of 2024, Simon Benjamin’s show Native Diver opened at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery. I went to see the show on the last day and Simon happened to be in the gallery giving an informal tour of the show. During a chance encounter, we happened to meet the day before on the train. Simon’s work engaged with archives as a medium, which I will discuss further as a method in the upcoming section. There were altered archival prints that related to his cultural ties to Jamaica and the social politics within the area. The work I was most drawn to were the pillars and columns that he’d made by combining Caribbean corn meal with organic materials like sand and other objects from the beaches. Cornmeal in the Caribbean had deep cultural ties within Jamaica, and Simon uses this element as archival material for his sculptural casts. What does Caribbean cornmeal smell like when it’s cooked? I didn’t get to ask Simon this question, but I wonder if he might know. Is food an archival material, and how does it, or can it hold history?*



Figure 59: Simon Benjamin, *Native Diver,* close up, Jacob Lawrence Gallery *2024*



Figure 60: Simon Benjamin, *Native Diver, cross gallery,* Jacob Lawrence Gallery *2024*

4.1 Overview

The survey presented in the following sections reflects a diversity of methodologies using several media, modes, and mediums that engage with archives in practice. I will look at the work created by the artists as they relate to categories that are effective in understanding how these works specifically engage with or use archival practical methods. The survey in subsection 4.3 focuses primarily on black cultural archival traditions and presents examples of iterations of these techniques which also have correlations with artistic methods. The section also ends with a synthesis.

4.2 Methodologies

The black interior is not an inscrutable zone, nor a colonial fantasy. Rather, I see it as an inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't or should be." - Elizabeth Alexander.

subtext="

I've been thinking about interiority lately, not only as a physical space but as Elizabeth Alexander says, a "metaphysical" [127] space. Perhaps one way to synthesize Campt's Black Gaze as a conceptual framework for art making is to think imaginatively about interior space. If a black gaze is centered, inverting the normative gaze, perhaps the artist is looking out from the middle, " far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be."[128]

4.2.1 REDACTION

Hank Willis Thomas might be known primarily for his large-scale sculpture work, but he also works frequently with visual archival materials. In his work *All Deliberate Speed*, Thomas uses a photograph taken by Stanley Forman entitled, *The Soiling of Old Glory* as a collaborative medium. The original photograph was taken during the 1976 Boston busing crisis. [129] The imagery in the original photograph is symbolically evocative, which is why it won a Pulitzer Prize, but the dynamics between the figures and the symbols do a particular kind of work due to the black man present within the frame, and the trajectory line of the flag being held. Within the

[127] Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Black Interior : Essays*. Graywolf Press, 2004, 155.
[128] Ibid.
[129] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Soiling_of_Old_Glory

space between the two, there is a mountain of history, and understanding this space is what makes Thomas' chosen remix technique compelling. He removes everything but the American flag, naming the work *All Deliberate Speed*. The 1976 Boston bus crisis occurred as a result of tension over the desegregation of schools and busing children of color into schools within more affluent neighborhoods. The original photo, *The Soiling of Old Glory*, captured a candid moment during the resulting social conflict that took place in Boston after the desegregation of schools.



Figure 61: Stanley Forman, *The Soiling of Old Glory*, 1976, still image

On the surface, the title may seem obvious given the flag alignment and the intentional weaponizing of the flag on display, however Thomas is drawing multiple parallels with the naming convention. The title of the work comes from the 1954 Brown vs. The Board of Education Supreme Court case which "declared the system of segregation to be

unconstitutional", which forced the desegregation of schools. [130] The language within the court order stated that segregation be ended by the states "with all deliberate speed". This vague guidance allowed states to determine what "deliberate speed" meant, and some deliberately took their time.



Figure 62: Hank Willis Thomas, *With All Deliberate Speed*, 2015, still image

Engaging with history artistically is not always an easy task. This can include a painful witnessing of the horrific experiences of those who lived before and the boisterous disregard for human life, which archives hold in tandem. One of the most repulsive examples of this is the case of the "lynching postcards" featuring photographs taken after lynchings of people of color after the Civil War. [131] These postcards were sent via US mail as souvenirs until they were banned in

[130] "With an Even Hand: Brown v. Board at Fifty Years: The Aftermath," National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 3, 2024, https://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/6-legacy/deliberate-speed.html#:~:text=The%20Brown%20decision%20declared%20the,the%20opportunity%20to%20organize%20resistance.

[131]"Lynching Postcards," Truth in Photography, accessed July 18, 2024, https://www.truthinphotography.org/lynching-postcards.html.

1908.[132] Grappling with this, "Los Angeles artist Ken Gonzales-Day [took] historic photographs of lynchings and removed the victims' bodies from them to address the erasure of the victims from historical accounts of lynching." [133] The removal of the victims leaves nothing to see but those who indulged in the murderous events peering into the camera and the camera itself which, allowed for such a thing to be captured. This exchange of gaze mediated by the camera causes one to ask who is on the other side and what unspoken contract exists between them is brought to light through Gonzales-Day's artistic work. By removing the intended object of the gaze from the original photograph, Gonzalez-Day subverts the intended gaze, focusing all of the attention on the spectators and perpetrators of the murders.

In observance of the work of Thomas and Gonzales-Day, I ask: What does redaction offer as a form of working with archival objects in many forms? How does this methodology function to highlight alternative views? What is the threshold between preservation and alteration, and does this threshold matter in the context of the work that *MUTATE* attempts?

[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.



Figure 63 and 64: Ken Gonzales Day, *Erased Lynching* Series, 2006

4.2.2 Archive as Medium

A great example of this methodology is Ja-Tovia Gary's work, *An Ecstatic Experience.* In this work, which is part video collage, video art, and conceptual art, Gary combines "clips of a Black theatre chorus singing Julia Ward Howe's 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' (1861), riot scenes in Ferguson and Baltimore, as well as footage of the late activist and actress Ruby Dee and former Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur in Cuba, where she sought political asylum following an FBI manhunt." [134] In this work, Gary creates tension with the moving images by altering frames by hand, inserting her artistic methods in order to draw new parallels between the subjects and concepts of interest, using video as a medium.

[134] Parker, Rianna Jade. "Ja'Tovia Gary Breaks Through the Art World with Her Compelling Audio-Visual Portraits." Fairs & Events, February 18, 2020. https://www.frieze.com/article/jatovia-gary-breaks-through-art-world-her-compelling-audio-visual-portraits.



Figure 65: Ja'Tovia Gary, *An Ecstatic Experience*, 2015

Thinking of Gary's work I ask: How might archival images and objects be used as a medium, and what are the artistic gestures that might be employed towards creating new contexts? Where is the threshold between archival integrity and artistic intervention, and how much does this methodology aid in the realization of *MUTATE* as a work?

4.2.2.1 Work in Review: The Circle Unbroken

The Circle Unbroken is a video art collage piece that is a part of the *Speculative Landscapes* series. In addition to the embodied mapping videos, further research into the complexities of the circumstances in Hilton Head, SC inspired the creation of further interaction on the subject. One of those interactions is *The Circle Unbroken*, which is made up of two separate videos combined

together. One of the videos is an advertisement for the Sea Pines Resort, which is one of the locations visited during my 2022 research trip. The advertisement depicted the area as a vacation destination which made no reference to the Gullah / Geechee history in the area, definitely leaving out the cemetery near the 18th hole of the golf course at Sea Pines. Superimposed onto this video is another video of a traditional Gullah / Geechee ring shout, a practice that includes rhythmic clapping, coordinated movements, playing of instruments, and singing. The second video was altered using algorithmic green screening technology resulted in a "ghostly" depiction of the bodies captured within the frame. The audio of the advertisement and the audio from the ring shout compete with each other, both presenting conflicting narratives at the same time.



Figure 66: Still Image from *The Circle Unbroken*, Video Assemblage, 2023

4.2.3 Reenactments and Embodied Practices

Reenactment, or "the action of performing a new version of an old event," [135] is a methodology used by artists such as Jefferson Pinder, Dread Scott, and others to engage with historical events. Reenactments have often been employed as methodologies for illustrating historical moments of conflict, as is the case of Dred Scott's reenactment of the 1811 Slave Rebellion[136], and Jefferson Pinder's *Fire and Movement* from 2019. Pinder's work "retraces the route and narrative of the 1917 Camp Logan Uprising, one of Houston's most complicated and often misrepresented historical events."[137] The performers in this work took on the role of an all-black US soldier infantry that revolted against white citizens and police during the Jim Crow era due to racism and abuse.



Figure 67: Jefferson Pinder, *Fire and Movement*, 2019

[135] Vocabulary.com. "Reenactment." Vocabulary.com. Accessed July 15, 2024. https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/reenactment#:~:text=A%20reenactment%20is%20the%20action,to%20the%20original%20as%20possible.

[136] "The Louisiana Slave Rebellion Reenactment by Artist Dread Scott," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/11/louisiana-slave-rebellion-reenactment-artist-dread-scott.

[137] Jefferson Pinder, "Fire and Movement," accessed July, 18, 2024, https://www.jeffersonpinder.com/work-collection/fire-and-movement#:~:text=Fire%20and%20Movement%20retraces%20the,and%20often%20misrepresented%20historical%20events.



Figure 68: Dred Scott, *Slave Rebellion* 2020 reenactment, still image

Scott and Pinder both took on historical moments of tension and conflict, where subjects of violence and containment liberated themselves from systemic oppression. Looking at both works conceptually, I would argue that they both raise awareness and combat the erasure of histories that depict black folks in positions of self determination and collective resistance, rather than prevalent depictions of brutalized bodies. Practically speaking, Scott and Pinder's methodologies present examples of artworks positioned at the intersection of embodiment, history, archives and performance.

Another example of artistic reenactment from a different perspective is Francis Alys' *Reenactment* from 2002. In this work, Alys' reenacting his own rules based performance work,

displaying them both side by side as a final work. The initial "performance" involved Alys purchasing a gun illegally, loading the gun and walking through downtown Mexico City. The initial walk lasted 12 minutes before he was intercepted by police, and the second a reenactment of his initial walk was completed with police cooperation.



Figure 69: Francis Alys, *Reenactment performance*, 2000, moving image

Both works present reenactments taking place within the public domain, each containing an element of risk. I would argue that performance works of this nature push the boundaries of social norms and test systemic policing standards and could be considered to be situated right on the fault line between art and life.

Carrie Mae Weems offers another potential methodology for reenactment. While the examples of Scott, Pinder, and Alys' work demonstrate moving or transitory reenactments, Weems' *Constructing History* series makes use of stillness. The series features polarizing historical moments as subject matter staged with actors adorning clothing reminiscent of those

worn by the portrayed individuals. Weem's composition, which includes the staging of objects in space, for example, a camera on rails, not only recreates the historical event through the artist's lens, it also points to the spectacle of capturing black hardship, and the role that lens based practices and as the gaze contributed to the capturing of grief, loss, death, and the horrific.



Figure 70: Carrie Mae Weems, *Constructing History (Mourning)*, 2008, still image

Considering these methodologies, embodiment and performance are areas of interest for the cohesive implementation of the two and how the two sit alongside other mediums as a counterpoint.

4.2.3.1 Work in Review: Speculative Landscapes

Speculative Landscapes attempts to unpack or reconfigure mapping as a modulation and critique satellite imagery's prevalence as a representation of place and space. Throughout history, marginalized communities have faced the erasure of their narratives and cultural heritage. My project focuses on the Gullah Geechee community, descendants of West and Central Africans who were once enslaved in the lower Atlantic states. Despite the longstanding self-sustaining society that preserved their language and cultural practices, the building of a bridge by the town during the 1990s increased access to the area, which activists and preservationists deem to be the catalyst for the gradual erosion of their ancestral land. The once culturally vibrant spaces have been gentrified into vacation resorts, hotels, and golf courses.[138]



Figure 71: Screen Grab of Sea Pines Resort, Hilton Head South Carolina, 2023, satellite image

[138] This was communicated during oral history sessions with Taiwan Scott and other community members during South Carolina research trip, 2022

Upon viewing the area via satellite maps, specifically an area known as “Sea Pines”, I was disturbed to find what appeared to be a cemetery in the center of a vacation resort. This image represents conflicting narrative ties to a location, each fighting for space. The history of Gullah’s working and living on the land dates back to the early 1900s, and what’s left of that in this particular location is a cul-de-sac full of graves.



Figure 72: Screen Grab from *There’s History Here* from *Speculative Landscapes* series, 2022-ongoing

Cartography is the creation of maps based on the cartographer's determination. A singular or systemic philosophy frames the scale, size, proximity, and mode of illustration of geographical areas. As with previous descriptions of bias as it relates to traditional archives to the algorithmic, satellite maps of landscapes and regions are also demonstrative of a particular purview, and as satellite technology continues to be utilized as the standard for digital mapping technology, what it shows or does not show contributes to the construction of a version of

"reality". The walking videos were assembled in a single frame and given a new name, *There's History Here*.

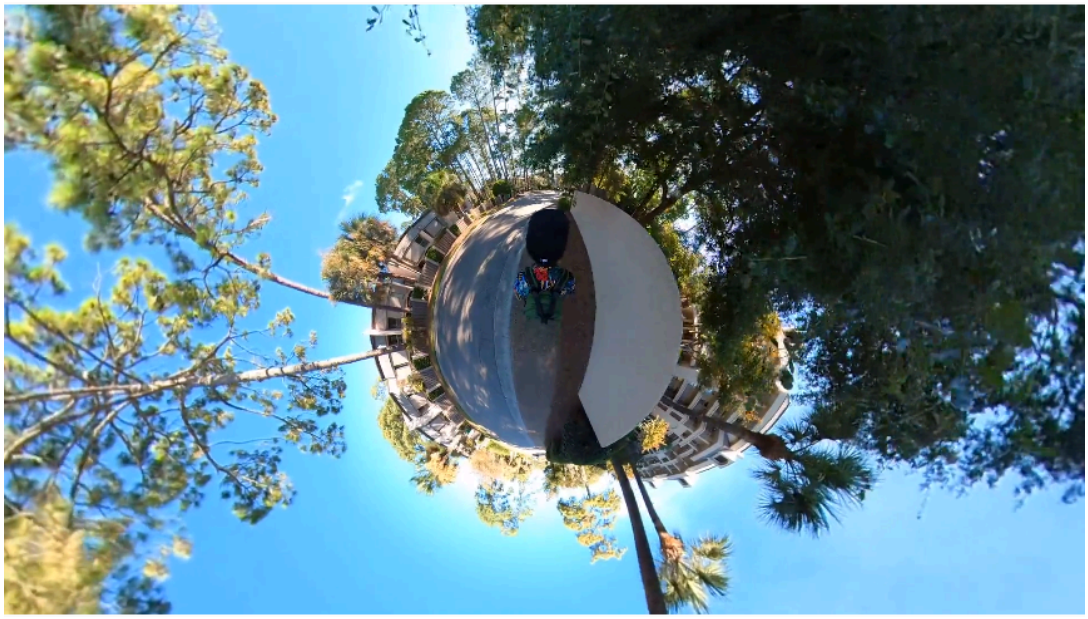

Figure 73: Still Image from *There's History Here*, 360 video, 2023

Interrogating and challenging this trend, I used embodied practice as a methodology. Before the prevalence of satellite maps scanned by smart cars, walking the earth physically with my body was a form of mapping technology. I adopted this practice, walking and documenting with a 360 camera as an alternative form of digital mapping facilitated through embodied practice.

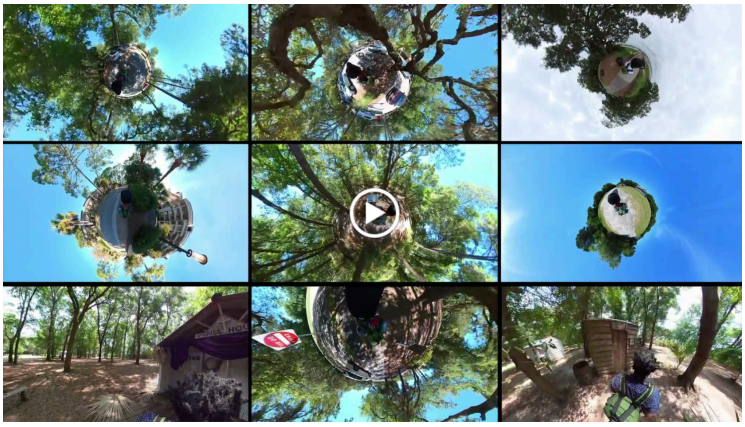

Figure 74: Still Image from *There's History Here*, 360 video, 2023



Figure 75: *Speculative Landscapes* installation at Jacob Lawrence Gallery, 2023

4.2.4 Sound & Isolation

Kevin Beasley's work *View of a Landscape* takes on sound in relation to archives. The work is a good example of how sound can be used as a provocation for historical revisiting. Beasley stages a repaired cotton gin motor as the centerpiece of the work, a "heavy object" in size and context. The object evokes historical narratives tied to land, location, embodiment, labor, and technology. "Through the use of customized

microphones, soundproofing, and audio hardware," [139] the source and the sound it generates are separated into two spaces. The gin motor is observable in one room, a whisper-quiet room, and the amplified sound it makes is audible only from a second space in the exhibition.

Drawing upon Brandon LaBelle's definition of sound art, a practice which " harnesses, describes, analyzes, performs, and interrogates the condition of sound and the process in which it operates," [140] Beasley's artistic implementation of separation is open to many potential perspectives and meaningful readings of the work. Taking on just the last bit of LaBelle's definition, "[interrogating] the condition of sound and the process in which it operates," [141] "condition" could be interpreted as a subject of quality and or context. Going with context, what Beasley has done could be read as highlighting historical correlations between embodiment and machinery. "While the cotton gin reduced the labor of removing seeds, it did not reduce the need for enslaved labor to grow and pick the cotton, [rather] cotton growing became so profitable for enslavers that it greatly increased their demand for both land and enslaved labor." [142] Here the "process in which it operates" is contextualized within the system of chattel slavery.[143]

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[139] "Kevin Beasley," Whitney Museum of American Art, accessed July 3, 2024, https://whitney.org/exhibitions/kevin-beasley.
[140] LaBelle, Brandon (2006). *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London and New York: Continuum), p. ix. ISBN 9780826418449
[141] Ibid.
[142] National Archives, "Teaching With Documents: Eli Whitney's Patent for the Cotton Gin," National Archives, accessed July 3, 2024, https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/cotton-gin-patent#:~:text=While%20it%20was%20true%20that,both%20land%20and%20enslaved%20labor.
[143] LaBelle, Brandon (2006). *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London and New York: Continuum), p. ix. ISBN 9780826418449

With this historical information, conceptual potentials for readings of the work continue, such as innovation and social impacts.

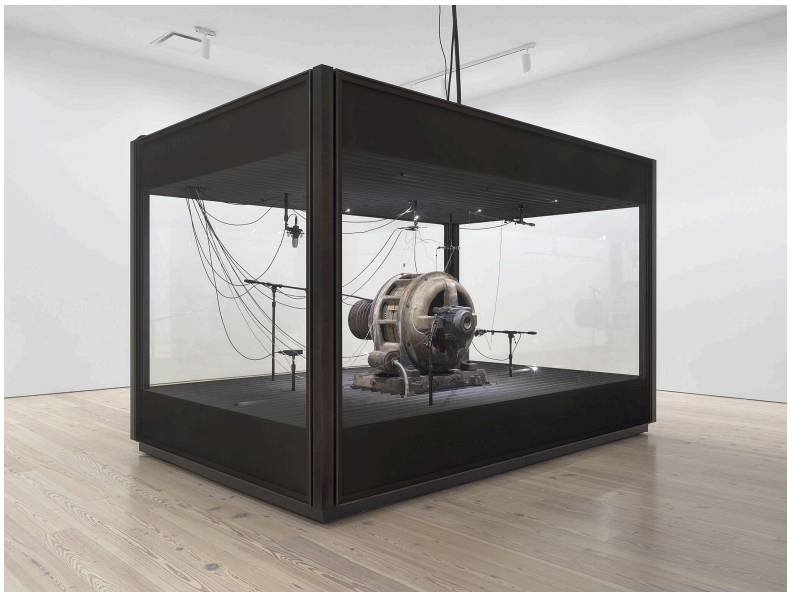


Figure 76: Kevin Beasley, View of a Landscape, 2018, still image

Examining Beasley's work as an example provides a cross-section between sound, objects, and historical significance. As *MUTATE* is staged as a site-specific work, thinking about the building as a body and an archival "heavy object", the applications of sound methods, although ambitious in scale, could modulate and reframe the object's context and give it a secondary purpose.

4.2.5 Performance, Satire, and the Absurd

The 1991 TV adaptation of *The Colored Museum*, a play by George C. Wolfe, presents a performance-based example of archival interaction. The segment entitled "Celebrity Slave

Ship" uses a mixture of archival images and satirical performance as a method for societal critique. In addition to performance, the segment uses video art editing techniques, sound, and special effects, integrating video art techniques into the methodologies used. The writing and staging of the segment both contribute to what I would argue is a successful example of satirical performance and video art.



Figure 77: On left and right screen grabs from The Colored Museum (1991), moving images

Miss Pat, the flight attendant-inspired character played by Loretta Divine, acts as a reassuring travel guide for passengers as they "travel" through the history of the US while on the Celebrity Slave ship. As the segment progresses, Miss Pat politely delivers a detailed history of the black experience in the US while interweaving themes of labor, grief, black performance for white audiences, the role of music, and other subjects. As the scene progresses, Miss Pat fights to maintain her calm demeanor, but she begins to scream in between politely and respectfully delivering lines. Sound, video editing, and staged special effects contribute to the growing tension. Miss Pat is antagonized by the sound of African drumming, which grows in intensity leading up to the end of the segment.



Figure 78: Laretta Divine as Miss Pat in The Colored Museum, 1991

The methodology used in *The Colored Museum* was effective as another way to engage with archival images in practice and demonstrate how performance can be an extension of that engagement. While the subject matter is slightly different, my research project "*IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT"* also uses satire as a critique, using archival images as prompts and provocations.

4.2.5.1 Work in Review: IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

Looking into the Seattle historical archives made available through the Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History project, I accessed maps dating back to the 1920s. The maps documented city segregation practices. Analysis of this archive indicated that the canal ran east to west, dividing the city into two parts, which is significant as most minority populations were relegated to areas south of the canal. While I was a resident of Seattle's Ballard neighborhood, a historically predominantly white neighborhood, I began noticing how often I was the only black person in many of the establishments I entered within the neighborhood. With the growing publication of

circumstances in which black people have been perceived to be out of context and that context resulting in deadly police interactions, IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT became a work partially about context, embodiment, and surveillance. However, it was also a satirical performance of “non-threatening” body language and gestures, juxtaposed with a list of mundane activities that preceded black folks being perceived as threats. As the list of activities moves upward across the left side of the screen, I perform a deadpan simple dance to *Call the Police* by Nat King Cole (1941) draped in blue and red light.



Figure 79: *IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT*, 2021, moving image

4.2.6 Algorithmic Archives

Stephanie Dinkin’s work "Not *The Only One" presents* a new media take on black archival methodology as Dinkins uses machine learning to create an archival object that houses a “ multi-generational memoir of a black family told from the perspective of a custom deep learning artificial intelligence.” [144] Dinkins’ work is a good example of a productve artistic

[144] Dinkins, Stephanie. "Not the Only One." Accessed July 7, 2024. https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/ntoo.html.

investigation into navigating the use of new media technologies. Dinkins remains critical, acknowledging the problematic while also imagining their potential for centering black archival extensions in practice while documenting family oral histories. By using machine learning, Dinkins is not looking for error-free results, but rather the work's value, according to Dinkins, "lies in what its foibles teach us about the limits of intelligent technologies and ourselves."[145] This work, in particular, is resourceful as a methodology given the intersection of new media and black archival practice in *MUTATE*, especially in relation to *CHARI 2.0*.



Figure 80: *N'TOO*, Stephanie Dinkins, 2018

4.2.7 Final Work in Review: PORTAL

The final research project presented in this chapter is a 2021 piece titled "Portal." This earlier work explores archival media, embodiment, and performance. Returning to "Portal" as a

[145] Ibid.

concluding project for this section is fitting, as it can be seen as a precursor to *MUTATE*, engaging with similar practical concepts. My research experiments at the time often began with archival digging for footage, sound, images, and more during this time. I was looking for the deep cuts, and archival materials that were obscure and rare, and in the process, I discovered early 1900s footage of baptisms in the Deep South. Given the significance of spiritual rituals in the South and my family history tied to the region, I was invested in this footage and its potential for exploring archival experimentation and embodiment.



Figure 81: *Portal*, 2021, moving image

At the time, I was fascinated by portals and temporalities and was considering how to extend performance into my practice. The original footage's camera angle, positioned farther away across the water, presented an opportunity for video compositing. So, I went to Lake Washington and placed my camera similarly, facing across the water. I then walked into the

water, mirroring the figures' gestures in the archival footage. I later stitched the footage together at the shoreline. While the digital editing technique was rough and far from refined, the gesture of blending worlds, the digital and the embodied, and the archival first took root with this work.

4.2.8 Synthesis

Section 4.6 focuses primarily on various artistic practices and methodologies artists have engaged with while working with archival objects, subjects, and media. A survey of these methodologies highlights the creative potentials and also the challenges of negotiating practical methods which are engaged with archives, especially so given the gaze that has contributed to depictions of black bodies in various states of disembodiment. The artists are attempting to recontextualize the archive to present alternative ways of seeing, a practice I argue aligns with Kim Gallon's theory of the technology of recovery, the restoration of black folks' humanity.[146] The artists above engage with challenging historical contexts and contents with practical methodologies. An argument can be made that the history of the black diaspora is difficult, and the archival contexts follow suit. However, considering the subversion/celebration dynamic again, engaging with black cultural archival practices offers potential models and methodologies for this work.

[146] Kim Gallon, "Making a Case for Black Digital Humanities", "Envisioning the Digital Humanities," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/fa10e2e1-0c3d-4519-a958-d823aac989eb.

CHAPTER 5 - METHODOLOGIES FOR SELF-PORTRAITURE & INSTALLATION



Figure 82: *White Sheets*, Sondra Perry, 2014, still image

5.1 Chapter Overview

During the practical development phase of *MUTATE*, I divided the project into three main focus areas: archives, installation, and performance. The division helped determine the forms that would be created and included, where these would live in the building, and how they would all contribute to the overall composition of the work. This chapter focuses specifically on self-portraiture and installation as practical methods.

This chapter presents a poetic analysis of self-portraiture, contextualized by portraiture as a practice that spans many mediums. Thereafter, engagements with the subject of self-capture and technology segway into a synthesis of artists' renderings of themselves as 3D avatars. Next, the chapter focuses on installation art techniques and methodologies. Lastly, the chapter considers the archival forms included in the work and how they were developed and informed.

5.2 The Poetics of Self-Portraiture

The transference of one's self into another medium is both archival and, I would argue, a depiction of how one sees oneself or wishes to be seen or perhaps not. A self-portrait is a dance between self-perception and self-representation, a validation of an existence in time, a placeholder of a moment that is gone and never to return, a memory made manifest. Our projected selves outlive us, perhaps making humans as immortal as we can become before cryonics. Investigating self-archiving and its potential for the work, I asked: When is the self present? Is it when it is witnessed by another party or materialized through another medium? Is it defined by feelings or thoughts? When we cannot see our faces without interfacing with an external object or person, does that interaction equate to realism? Circling back to Stuart Hall's perspective on the multiplicity of selfhood, which self does one put forth in a self-portrait? As self-portraiture inevitably brings up the subject of gaze, additional questions arise: Who is the portrait for? Who is it speaking to? Does it intend to disrupt, expose, imply a narrative, or challenge one? Is it figurative, distorted, realistic, or abstract?



Figure 83: Ana Mendieta, *Untitled, Glass on Body* 1972

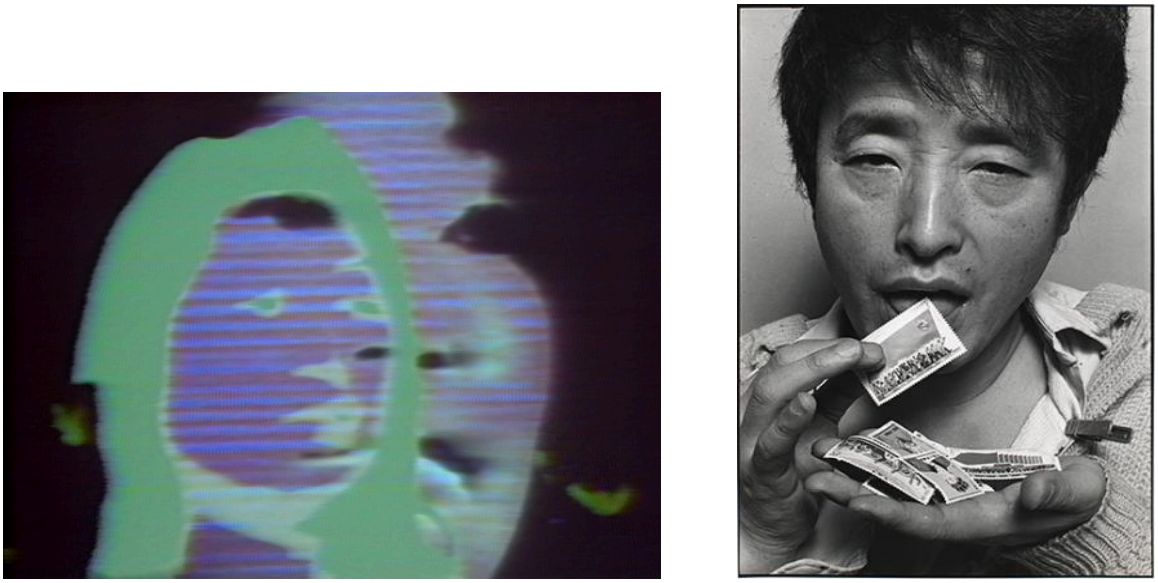


Figure 84: On left Shigeko Kubota's *Self- Portrait*, 1970. Moving image,

on right Nam June Paik, *Untitled*, 1979, still image

Nam Jun Paik, a largely beloved new media artist and creator, often worked with visual media technology to create his work, including a collection of self portraits. As “one of the first artists to use actual TVs and broadcast context to make art,” [147] Paik worked with the technologies of the time and interrogated their prevalence and significance. Using his physical embodiment to modulate the space between the digital and the embodied, Paik stirred up questions and critiques about what happens to material humanity with the growing prevalence of media technology and culture. “Skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality. Technology has become the body’s new membrane of existence,” Paik observed. [148]



Figure 85: Nam Jun Paik, *Self-portrait*, 1989

Although Paik’s work engaged heavily with technological critique, he also acknowledged that technological integration was an inevitable part of society. He states with resolve, “our life is half natural and half technological. Half-and-half is good. You cannot deny that high tech is

[147]"Zen TV," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed July 18, 2024, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/zen-tv-76252#:~:text=Artwork%20Description,a%20thin%20line%20of%20light.
[148]"Where to Start with Nam June Paik," *PBS American Masters*, accessed July 18, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/special-feature/where-to-start-with-nam-june-paik/.

progress. We need it for jobs. Yet if you make only high-tech, you make war. So we must have a strong human element to keep modesty and natural life." [149]

Observing Paik's attempt to negotiate the dichotomy between embodiment and technology in conversation and practice offers further insight into my research question about the dialogues between subjects of technology and embodiment. While it can be assumed on the surface that the avatar's goal in *MUTATE* was largely technical, and I would agree in some fashion, CHARI 2.0 was also a provocation. It was an attempt to further understand what Paik meant when he said that "skin has become inadequate" and "technology has become the body's new membrane of existence." [150]



Figure 86: Nam Jun Paik, *Self-Portrait-Head,* 1982

[149] https://www.guggenheim.org/teaching-materials/teaching-modern-and-contemporary-asian-art/nam-june-paik-%EB%B0%B1%EB%82%A8%EC%A4%80

[150] Ibid.



Figure 87: Nam Jun Paik, *Self-portrait*, 2005



Figure 88: *Growing Since My Father's Death (Self Portrait)*, 2021

Self-portraiture is an archival of self and, with it, all of the circumstances that surrounded the portraits' creation. In the picture above entitled *Growing Since My Father's Death,* I am present within the frame with my back turned. This is indeed a self-portrait but also a record of archival material. Within the photo, I display a long section of hair I have been growing since my father's passing. The hair is adorned with wooden beads that multiply with time and function as a wearable abacus, and they are captured in the photograph blurry from movement. The photo provokes perhaps a question about hair as an archival material, keeping time, marking time, and holding time. Circling back to Paik, as "technology has become the body's new membrane of existence," [151] I ask: How do I carry the significance of my hair across that membrane, especially when there are so few options for hair that look like mine? What does "inadequate skin" mean, and how does this nuance show up or get filtered out when crossing the technological membrane?

5.3 The Virtual Self

Sondra Perry is arguably one of the most formidable artists at the intersection of black embodiment and technological critique. From 3D software to AI image generators, if there is a gap, hole, or oversight within the technology, Sondra Perry will find it and kindly invite it out from the shadows and into her artwork. While there has been a growing interest in human realism in virtual characters, which can be benchmarked perhaps by the 2021 release of Unreal Engine's MetaHumans, one of Perry's earliest works featuring 3D virtual characters was made in 2016. In the work called *Graft and Ash*, one of Perry's avatars says, "we're the second

[151] Ibid.

version of ourselves that we know of" [152] after a friendly salutation. The voice, reminiscent of those found in early text-to-speech applications, describes how they came to be, that Perry used a "Sony RX100 under fluorescent light" [153] to create them. The avatars are visibly reminiscent of Perry but do not look like Perry. Their mouth moves but not realistically, their head turns awkwardly, their facial expression is always the same, and the avatar speaks directly to the viewer. Throughout the 9-minute video, it's clear to me that Sondra is pushing the limits by provoking glitches and weaving in and out of contexts.

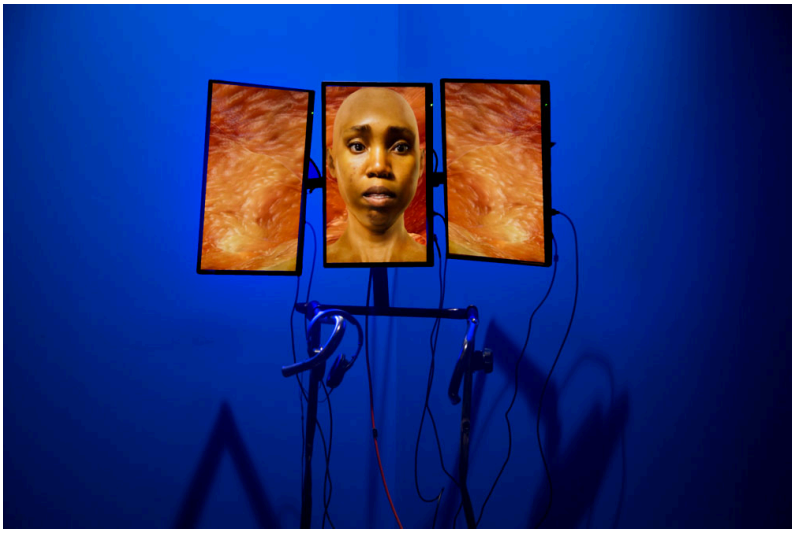


Figure 89: Sondra Perry, *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*, 2016

Perry spoke about the limitation of the applications used to make the avatars and how she was unable to create a version that was reflective of her entire physical embodiment, and in doing so she states that she is "pushing and pulling at my own tentative skill level and the

[152]Sondra Perry, "Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation," Sondra Perry, accessed June 10, 2024, https://sondraperry.com/Graft-and-Ash-for-a-Three-Monitor-Workstation.

[153] Ibid.

boundaries of what a piece of software can do and what its purpose is. If you wanted to actualize yourself as a fat-being, it's not possible, and that means something." [154]

Another who has engaged with virtual selves is Martine Syms. In the 2021 work DED, Syms creates a virtual self and builds a world for the virtual self. The fixed media piece starts with Syms' virtual body separated into pieces, and the work proceeds into what I would call a long-form music video. Within the video, Syms' virtual self dies over and over again through different methods, and after some time, they stand up again only to be killed in another way in short order.

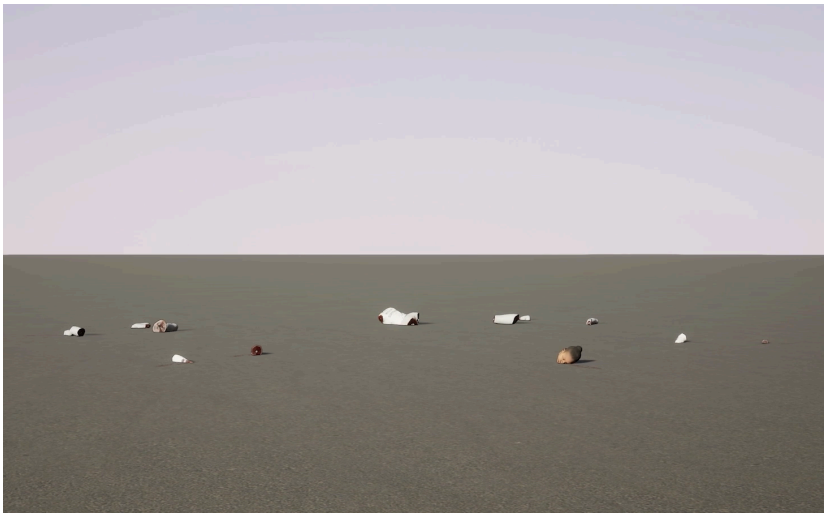


Figure 90: Martine Syms, *DED*, 2021

Towards the middle of the video, Syms' virtual self plummets to death within a group of avatars, none of which respond to the lifeless virtual body. In comparison to Sondra Perry, and not that the works need to be compared, Syms' virtual self does not acknowledge the viewer.

[154] Emily Steer, "Sondra Perry at the Serpentine Explores Black Identity and Digital Culture," *Artnet News*, May 24, 2018, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/sondra-perry-at-serpentine-1288.

The viewer is a bystander, which can be interpreted as commentary on the prevalence and frequency of black death in the US, or perhaps the viewer becoming another actor in the scene idly standing by.



Figure 91: Martine Syms, DED 2021



Figure 92: Martine Syms, DED 2021

Lu Yang is the last artist I'd like to bring into this conversation. Lu Yang's work is hyper-realistic but speculative as they remake their VS into different fantastical versions of themselves. Lu Yang's virtual self and facial capturing work experiment with the performance of self through speculative engagements with queerness and gender, along with traditional Chinese medicinal and spiritual counterpoints.[155] Using a version of "marker-based" facial tracking,[156] Lu Yang creates what appears to be real-time facial animation with a high level of accuracy and full-body animation. Mirroring their VS fantastical aesthetic, Lu Yang performs their VS in fantastical virtual worlds, which are themed, and appear to coincide with the VS version featured in the video.

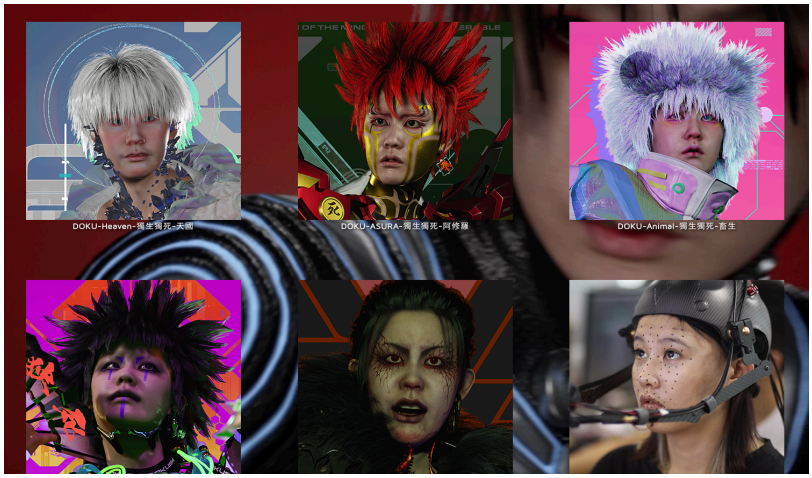


Figure 93: Lu Yang, Screen Grab of a collection of Virtual Selves

[155] "Luyang Asia," Luyang Asia, accessed August 19, 2024, http://luyang.asia/.
[156] "Facial Motion Capture," *Wikipedia*, last modified February 22, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facial_motion_capture#:~:text=Technologies-,Marker%2Dbased,expressions%20of%20several%20different%20characters.



Figure 94: Lu Yang, DOKU Facial Capture Technology, Screenshot

5.4 Installation Work in Review

I've installed work in the DXART gallery three times, all of which turned out less than desirable. Thematically, "transforming" a space requires perhaps a lot of resources, mirrors, and/or willingness to fail, but definitely a lot of imagination. My first attempt was a work called *Hold Space*, which I positioned as a speculative organization where mental health posts from Reddit were scrapped and given a text-to-speech voice that read the contents of the posts out loud "randomly." The room was draped in a purplish blue hue, and there was a sound-responsive visual on the center wall. On the surface, the work looked simple: sound, single visual display, and blue light, but the code running the work behind the scenes was a reasonably intricate maxMSP patch. There was nothing to see, no "art" on the walls or the floor to look at from an audience's perspective. Further, the environment or the world I was attempting to build didn't translate into the space effectively.

The second installation attempted was *PARTY OVER,* which was set up in the second smaller gallery painted black. Learning from my previous gallery attempt, I positioned visual elements in space that were in dialogue with each other and focused on the subject of gun

violence in the US. The back end again was very intricate, I used Python to control a camera that snapped pictures at the rate of gun violence incidents being reported on The Gun Violence Archive.[157] The photos printed on a separate screen combined the images with statistical data.

I also used Python to put the locations where the shootings took place into a CSV file and then used the GoogleMaps API to concat the individual frames between locations. This "road trip" was projected onto a wall. There was a live microphone in front of this projection, and the lyrics for popular songs about guns and gunmen were superimposed on top of the Google Drive video. These tend to be popular karaoke songs like "Pumped Up Kicks" by the band Foster the People, a pop song about a school shooting. The microphone was both an invitation and a provocation. The floor around the space was covered in party favors, deflated balloons, and tensile, and across the room, there was a looping video of Ray Charles playing the piano just before he started to sing *America the Beautiful*.

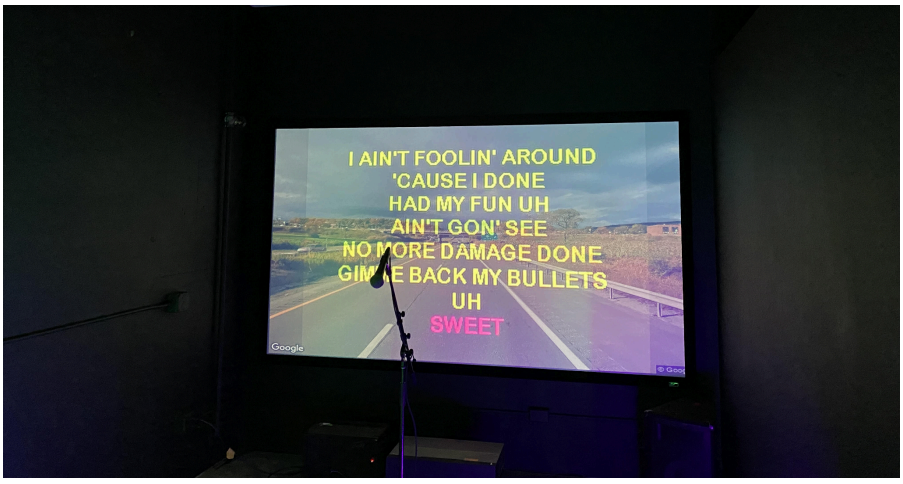


Figure 95: *PARTY OVER* installation, 2024

[157]Gun Violence Archive, "Gun Violence Archive," accessed August 19, 2024, https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/.

This work had an equally imaginative idea, but it was grounded around a "fault line," a concept I mentioned previously in chapter one. In this case, the "fault line" was the subject of gun violence and gun laws. Additionally, within the space, there were more things to see, listen to and figure out within the work for the audience, and this was effective in drawing interest around the pieces and how they were in context with each other. Finally, the last installation work attempted before *MUTATE* was during my general exam. With *WHAT HAPPENED TO_____?*, I attempted the white cube again, but this time informed by what was successful in the previous installation attempt. I positioned the subject matter on a fault line and used an open format with creative signposts while leaving room for audience engagement. This time, however, I used "ready-made" objects, partially given the expectation of creating an artwork in seven days.



Figure 96: *WHAT HAPPENED TO_____?*, portion of installation, 2023

This one was less successful practically but conceptually more sound. Reflecting on this work, what went wrong and what went right, the subject of gaze came up. There was something about how I was working with technology and black subjects that wasn't working. Navigating the intersection between the two areas of inquiry often resulted in me demonstrating systemic failures, technological or otherwise, using black embodiment as an agitator on the fault line. For example, challenging the notion that science and medicine are a superior objective field of study by highlighting the story of Henrietta Lacks. In this way, the work becomes about the system, the technology, and the oppression, and not about Henrietta Lacks at all. Then I asked who this kind of work is for and if this is my intended or desired audience. This realization shifted the vision of my work and the gaze that was centered on my work, and in that moment the idea of the work that would become *MUTATE* began.

Additionally, reflecting on my preexisting installation-based iterations, I also began asking the question of where my work lives. Is it the gallery, a community-based site, or out in the world in another place? Furthermore, how does the "who is it for" question inform "where does it live" and vice versa?

5.5 Section Closing

This chapter concludes the dissertation's research, literary, and scholarly review section. I have provided a nuanced and rigorous accounting of the areas of focus that tie into this work, and I have supported and informed these connections with practical examples across forms and disciplines. This presentation informs the conceptual rationale for this work and illustrates the

artistic conflicts I am working through, with, and around as an artist who works with technology. *MUTATE* is the largest and most ambitious work that I have created. In the following chapter, I will diligently transcribe with detail something that was very much a "you had to be there" type of artistic experience. Sometimes, "words don't go there" [158], but I will do my best to shape them and put them up to the task.

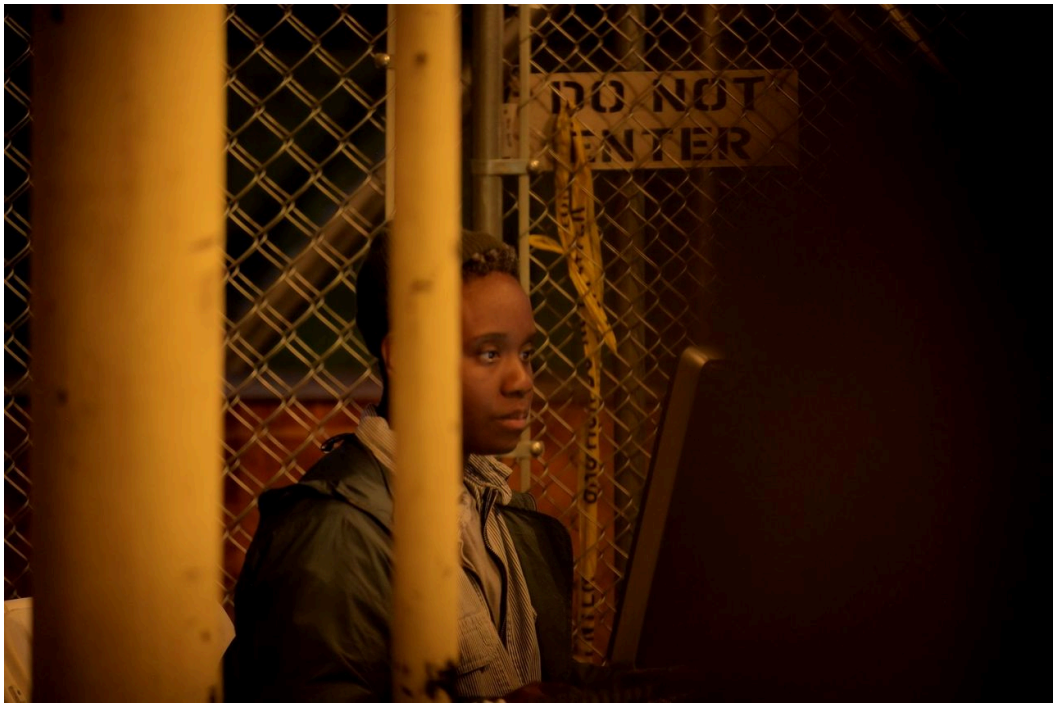


Figure 97: CHARI at mixing console, *MUTATE*, credit: Joe Iano, still image, 2024

[158] Rowell, Charles. "'WORDS DON'T GO THERE': An Interview with Fred Moten." *Callaloo*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2004, pp. 953–66.

CHAPTER 6 - MUTATE



Figure 98: *MUTATE* boiler room location 1st floor (2024), credit: Joe Iano, still image

6.1 Introduction

MUTATE was created in the spring of 2024 and is the culmination of the artistic endeavors I've engaged with throughout my doctoral tenure. *MUTATE* was ambitious; it combined all the methods and tools I had learned into a singular work. It needed to be cohesive, interconnected, dynamic, and continue my pre-existing practical research. Instead of a fixed idea, and not for lack of intentionality, space was left for the work to evolve. Given my interdisciplinary methodology and engagement with sound, video, coding, still images, performance, and now animation, *MUTATE* was an opportunity to understand further how each medium or media can

be integrated into a work in a practical way and also the contributions that narrative, audience engagement, and implementation factor into making these creative decisions.

6.2 Scope and Research Questions

The proposed work's overarching scope was to create and present an installation-based performance artwork that engaged with the subject of archives and centered a black gaze. This was to be an experimental interdisciplinary work rather than a digital media-specific work, which allowed for the realization of the research questions that were brought forth. My thesis statement argues that centering Black cultural practices and a black gaze generates methods of artistic engagement with technology and media tools that address Blackness not merely as a proxy for illustrating systemic failure but as a subject worthy of its own technological and artistic exploration. The themes within the work included black archival practices and remembering, archival objects and artifacts informed by a black gaze, erasure and failure, embodiment, ingenuity, grief, and speculation.

To recap the research questions that functioned as guideposts for the work, I will list them now:

1) What does an archive guided by black scholarly theory, specifically Tina Campt's *Black Gaze*, Saidiya Hartman's Critical Fabulation theory, and Kim Gallon's "technology of recovery" sound like, look like, feel like? How might video art, sound, installation, animation, and performance be used to activate and or realize these theories?

2) How might centering black cultural practice inform the methods and materials used to make the archive, and how does critical archival theory inform artistic engagements with new media technologies? What embodied themes will arise and how will those be incorporated into the work?

3) What possibilities and limitations arise when producing a site-specific installation artwork that centers a black gaze and implements black cultural practices? How can performance function as a catalytic technique that activates and co-facilitates within the site? What is the intended audience engagement, and how does this function as a part of the composition?

6.3 Site



Figure 99: *MUTATE* turbine level walkway 2nd floor (2024), credit: Joe Iano, still image

After meeting with a few Seattle community members about potential locations, I met with Sam Farrazaino, the manager of the non-profit working to restore and transform the Georgetown Steam Plant. The Steam Plant offered an alternative to modernist spaces and gallery cubes. The space had character and history, which were both interesting to me. Upon visiting the site initially, I was still in the conceptualization stage of the work, but walking through the space was generative and produced some promising paths forward.

The Steam Plant is a sizeable reverberant building made from steel and concrete. It has six floors, two of which are accessible to the public, and its total area is about 35,000 square feet.

6.3.1 History

The building of the Georgetown Steamplant in Seattle in 1906 powered much of the city of Seattle and the surrounding areas.[159] After Seattle's initial colonization in 1851 by the Denny Party and the Collins Party, historical documentation suggests that Seattle was a place of prosperity built on top of stolen land.[160] Before this settler colonialism, the area was home to the Duwamish Tribe. In 1850, a government program called the Donation Land Claim Act gifted up to 400+ acres to only white men to encourage migration.[161] The Land Claim Act applied specifically to the states of Oregon and Washington. [162]

[159]Georgetown Steam Plant, "About Us," accessed April 18, 2024, https://georgetownsteamplant.squarespace.com/about-us.
[160]"History of Seattle, Washington." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed July 18, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/place/Seattle-Washington/History.
[161] "Donation Land Claim Act," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 15, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donation_Land_Claim_Act.
[162]Ibid.

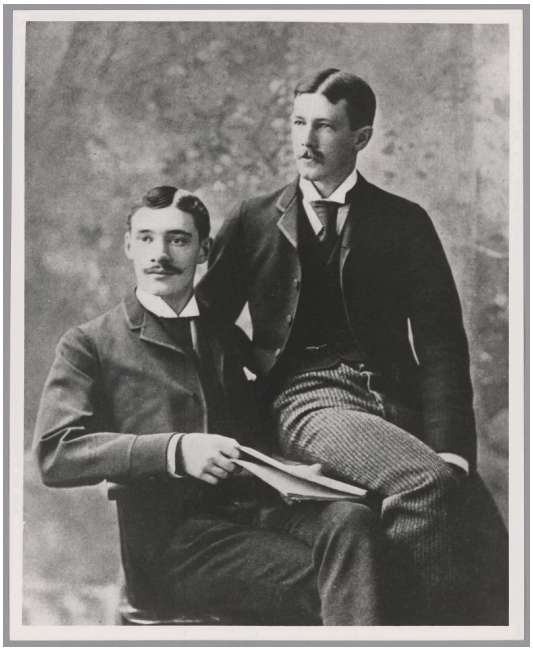


Figure 100: Charles Augustus Stone and Edwin Sibley Webster, MIT Archive

The Steam plant was built on behalf of the Seattle Electric Company, sitting on 18 acres of land located along the Duwamish River.[163] The construction of the plant was contracted out to Stone and Webster Engineer, which was founded by Charles Augustus Stone and Edwin Sibley Webster, two previous MIT engineering graduates.[164] According to African American archival newspapers such as The Seattle Republican, there is a statement of concern over the negotiations between Stone & Webster and the Seattle Electric Company. [165] The architectural behemoth made of steel and concrete was built to endure, and over 100 years later, the building still stands in its original location. As the technology around steam-powering cities began to decline, the Georgetown Steam plant began its decrescendo out of operation in the 1980s.

[163]"Georgetown Steam Plant," *Wikipedia*, accessed April 10, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgetown_Steam_Plant.
[164] Ibid.
[165] "General Strike Talk," Seattle Republican, February 16, 1906, Washington Digital Newspapers, accessed July 3, 2024, https://washingtondigitalnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=SEATREP19060216.1.4&srpos=1&e=------190-en-20-SEATREP-1--txt-txIN-+Stone+%26+Webster----1906--.

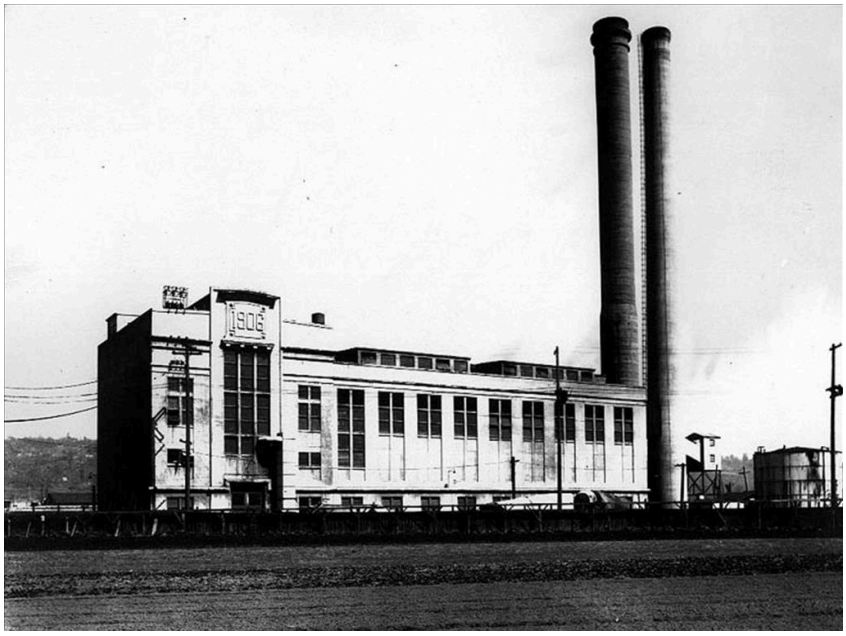


Figure 101: Archival drawing of Georgetown Steamplant, Library of Congress

6.3.2 Second Life

What was once filled with workers and engineers has now become a physically hollow relic of the past, achieving the status of a National Historic Landmark. The efforts to maintain and repurpose the plant have involved a committed effort to make the building safe for visitors and preserve and retrofit elements that needed attention. The building now serves as a location for historical tours, ghost tours, sound installations, dance and theatrical performances, movie filming, and art installations.

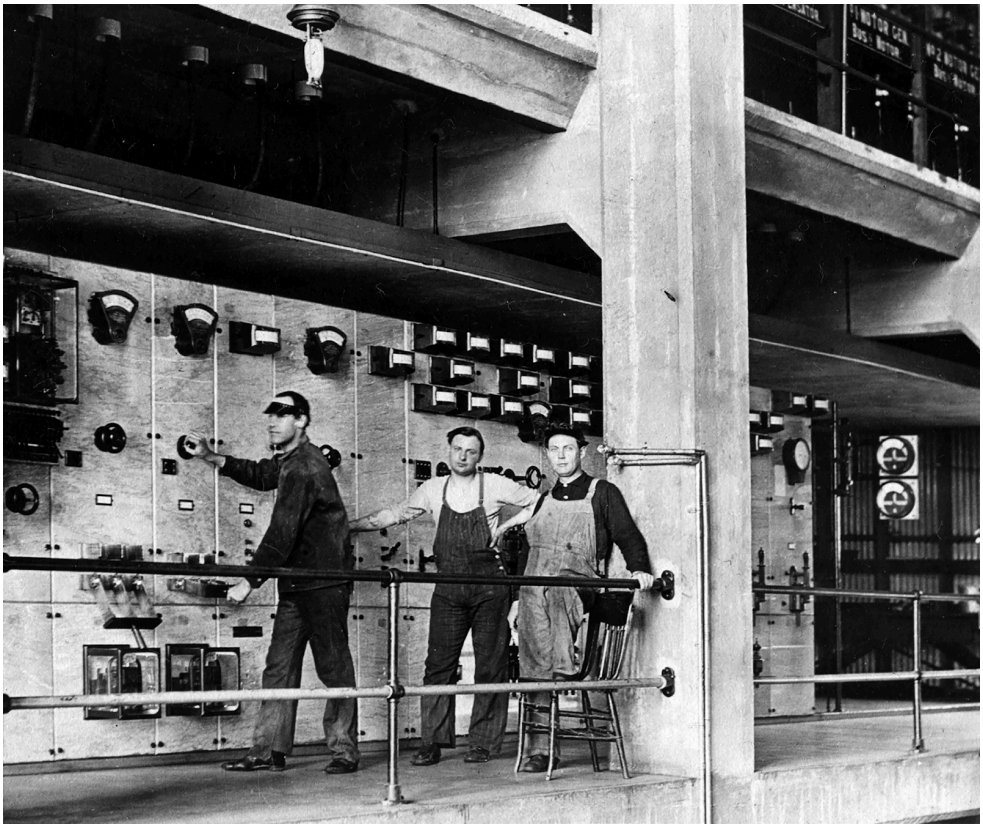


Figure 102: Archival photographs of workers at Georgetown Steamplant, Library of Congress



Figure 103: Still image from performance of *concrete II* by Alice Gosti, 2019



Figure 104: Still image from installation *Leviathan Rising* by Eirik Jonhson, 2023

6.3.3 Site Planning and Processing

Before installation, several tours were taken to view the space in person. The large paned windows pour in beautiful streams of light during the day, highlighting the scale of the machinery and structures within the building. The site was cavernous, looming even, and except for the incoming and leaving airplanes from the airstrip nearby, it was eerily quiet on the inside. Everything within the building that functioned as a component of the plant operation appeared to be physically intact and structurally preserved. It was as if someone came in and flipped the

switch, and the machine was simply waiting to be turned back on again. 100 years is a long time to live, and 50 years is a long time to wait.



Figure 105: Still image taken during site visit at Georgetown Steam Plant

The site brought up various practical problems to solve. There needed to be a balance between the pre-existing elements and architecture and the installations that occurred throughout the building. The wings of the building were visually busy with items waiting to be cataloged, moved, or preserved. Equipment mounting would need to be specialized so as not to disturb the integrity of the building, and the ceilings were roughly 16-17 feet high in the area determined to be best for installation. The access overhead points for mounting would require a scissor lift, which was impossible given the resources available. The building was very

reverberant, which allowed for interesting sonic potentials, however, this needed to be carefully navigated with speaker position to ensure an unintended cacophony did not take place. The strong aesthetic character within the space inevitably contributed to the reading of the work, and considering this during conceptual planning was paramount. Using the 3D model of the space allowed for measurements of the space to scale, determining the best installation locations and methods, and the necessary media equipment.

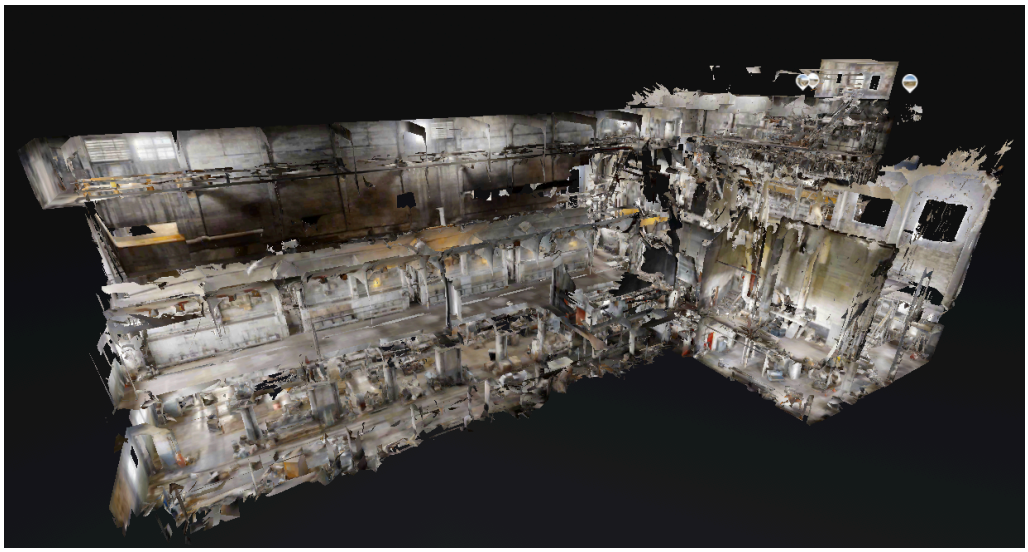


Figure 106: Screen grab of global view of 3D model of Georgetown Steamplant

During the initial site visit, the idea of using the space as a container began to develop, which to some extent was surface level given its scale. However, the building structure and the conceptual framework in tandem made the two boiler rooms with long and enclosed channels running up the center of the building the best options for installation as the “belly” or the “heart” of the building as a body metaphor. Approaching the container metaphor simply as

something that holds, treating the space as a container for a speculative archive presented itself as an option.

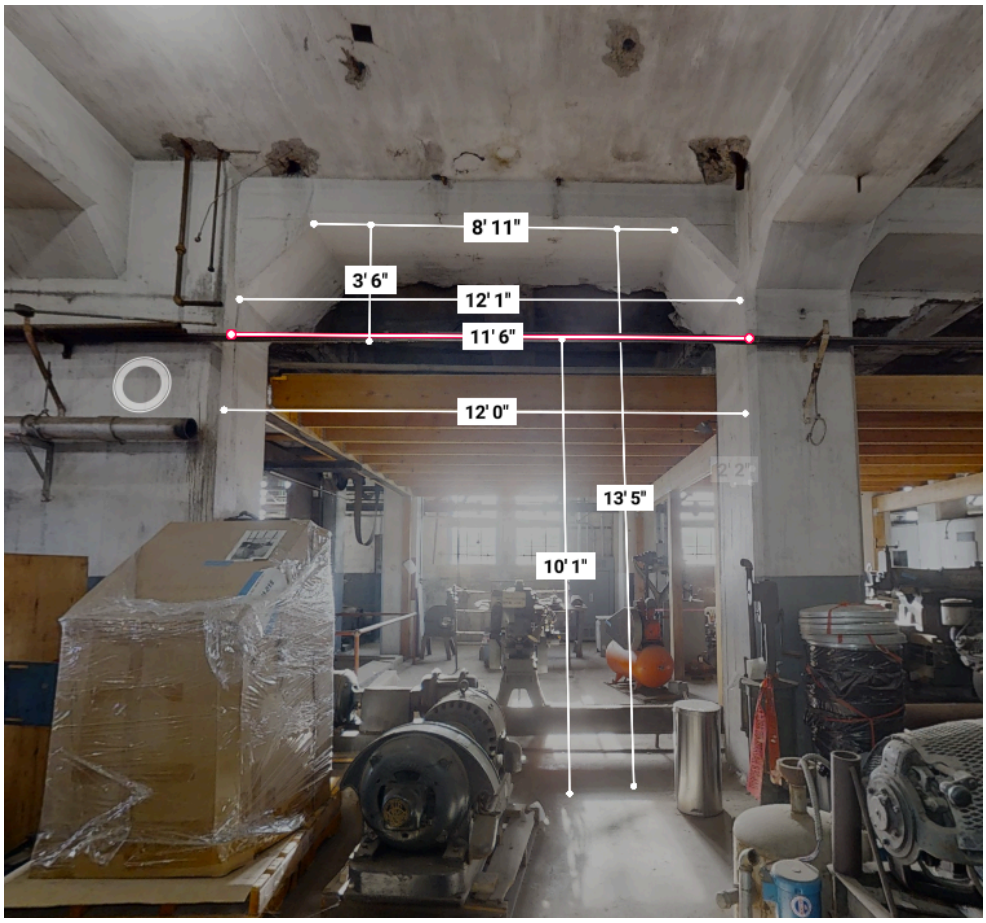


Figure 107: Site Measurements via 3D model

6.3.4 Equipment Installation and Project Management

After the site survey was complete, the installation became the next area of focus, and determinations were made about where the installations would happen and what they would include. During the creative planning phase, the archival concept was broken into themes, and each installation area correlated thematically or conceptually to the locations where they were installed.

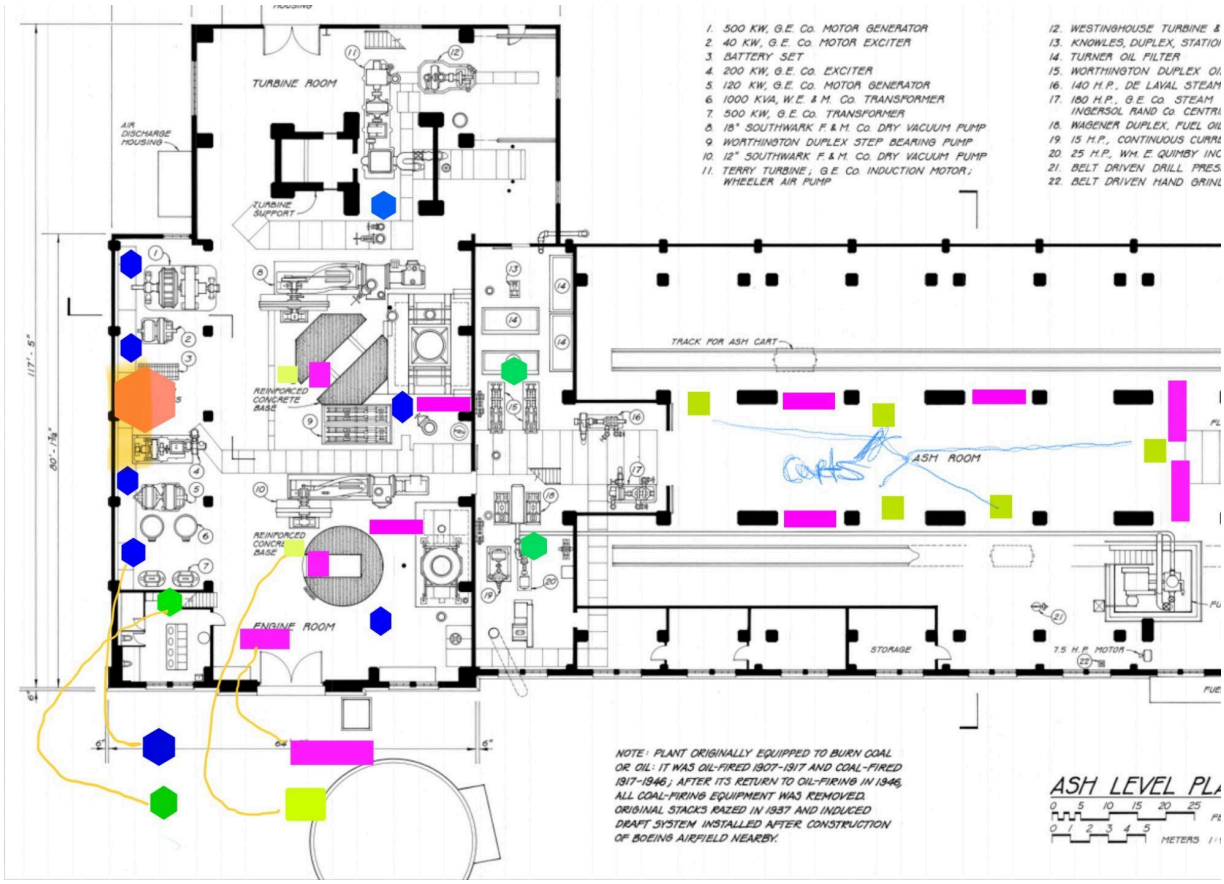


Figure 108: Stage Plot used to plan installation locations

The scale of the building and limited resources made the installation component of the work a challenge to navigate as revisions, consolidations, and compromises were made to make the best of the space and equipment available. Addressing this need added a layer of project management to the work as site maps, installation schedules, and volunteers were brought up to speed. This necessity allowed for the further development of a skill set that will surely be necessary for future large-scale installations. Sam, the building manager, became a creative

partner, willingly trusted any wild ideas I had for the building, and aided in installation based on the plan developed.



Figure 109: Sam and I installing a projector in the turbine room

Sam also lent me a van to carry equipment to and from campus, and climbed all of the ladders due to my fear of heights.

6.4 Compositional Planning

A strategic plan was implemented to manage the moving parts and elements involved in the MUTATE installation. This plan involved utilizing Mind Maps as a compositional and planning tool to shape the form of each element of the work and also to determine the interconnected

potentials that existed within the conceptual framework. This is also tied into research question four, which is focused on the investigating the possibilities and limitations that arise when producing a site-specific artwork and what compositional potentials exist for negotiating the two.

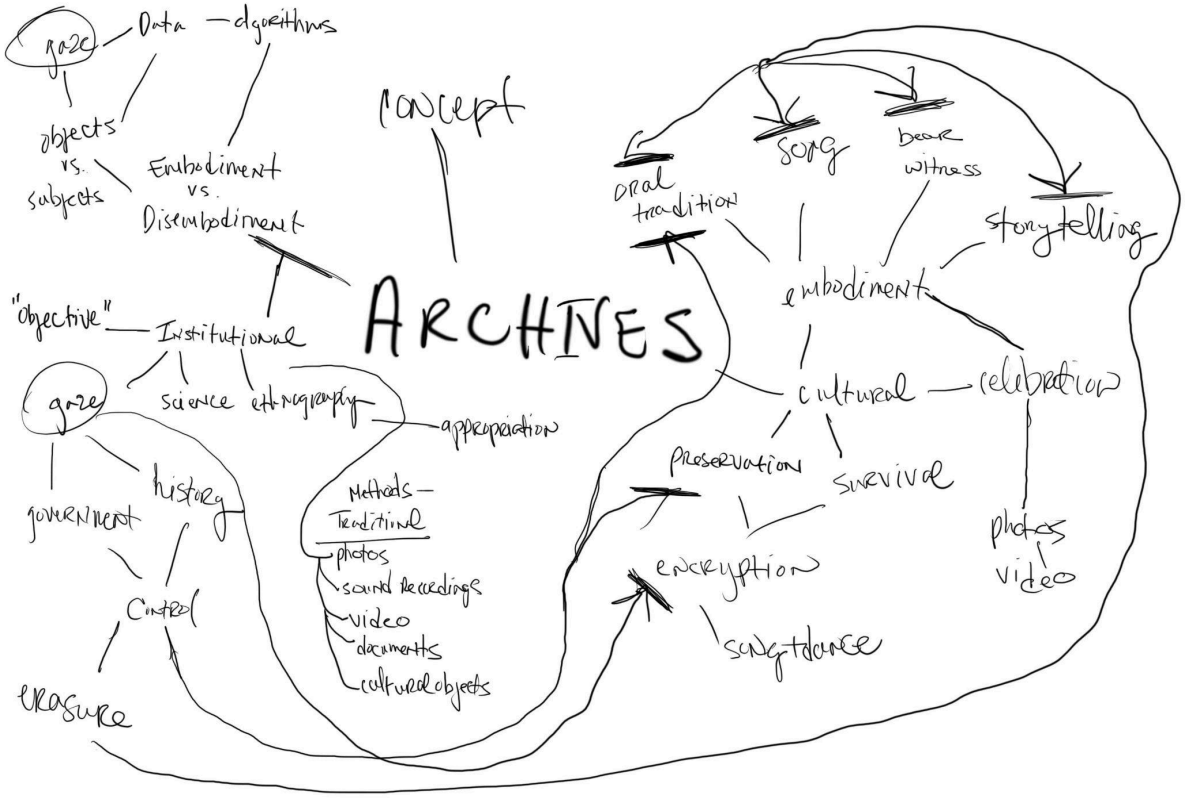


Figure 110: Project “Mind Map” used for conceptual development

As detailed in previous chapters, the potential avenues for artistic investigation are vast and abundant. After working through my holistic analysis, I used a mind mapping technique to think about the conceptual ties that contributed to determining the installation locations and the media and mediums that would work best. The mind mapping planning method involved

brainstorming the various points of connection to the central subject matter and selecting focused areas with practical potential. Rather than using digital software to design these, which I have tried in the past, I prefer to do them by hand, which you will see in the figure above. Although the map is two-dimensional I am looking at the work systemically, frequently looking for points of feedback within the system represented by arrows coming out and going back into new lines of inquiry to determine further potentials. Using this map as a starting point, the next phase involved investigating the practical potentials of each path, informed by the research goal in question.

6.5 Conceptual Framing

With the mind mapping guide as a point of reference, determining how the theories would shape the work became the next focus. Campt's *Black Gaze* as a guide post opened up a world of possibilities for making. Shifting the gaze allowed for new conceptual opportunities, deepening concepts that had not been fully achievable in previous research projects. Focusing on black cultural objects, subjects, histories, knowledge, and nomenclatures as the subject, freed up the possibility of working with mediums dynamically. Also, subsets of interdisciplinary focuses evolved. For example, what is black surrealism, and how can the technological tools I use to aid in artistic experiments at that intersection? When surrealist art is culturally informed, what innovations might arise? These are the kinds of questions that emerged by adopting Campts' theory.

Hartman's Critical Fabulation contributed to the materialization of the work, offering up the notion that archives are not fixed that the context can shift both temporally or creatively.

Translating this theory into practice made space the realization of methodologies such as "Archive as Medium", critical fabulation contributed to transforming the site and giving it a new context, and framing a 3D avatar as an archival object. Gallon's "technology of recovery", contributed motivation and offered real-world potential for increasing awareness and decreasing the prevalence of erasure. This theory also contributed greatly to artistic decision-making.

6.5.1 NARRATIVE

MUTATE was a two-night installation performance that transformed the Georgetown Steam plant into an immersive environment staged as a sanctuary for black archival objects, artifacts, inventions, and experiences. This sanctuary was maintained by a caretaker figure who functioned as a steward of the pre-existing archival while attempting to make a new one. Creating a narrative proved effective in shaping the environment of the installation, giving it a thematic structure. My previous research inspired the narrative, the aesthetics within the building, and the stretch goal of staging a performance, which was an integral part of the work.

6.5.2 THE AUDIENCE

I think a lot about how the audience will move through the space and interact with my work, but in past iterations, implementing my thoughts into physical spaces was not always consistently successful. My previous projects, like the works installed in the DXART gallery, revealed much about framing for audiences. Leaving openings within the work to allow the audience to make connections between the elements, in theory, increases the number of relationships that can be made, increasing engagement with the work. An open structure minimizes prescribed meanings and leaves spaces for the audiences to formulate meanings.

This is a skill set that has taken me quite a lot of practice to finesse, and *MUTATE* was a good opportunity to test my theory.

Additionally, the subject of gaze was to be considered, and it was necessary to determine what centering a black gaze meant when considering the audience. However, this did not affect the audience's interactions with the work at all. It was a large audience, 100-150 people in attendance throughout the weekend, and the feedback was largely if not entirely, positive.

6.6 The Work: Practical Interactions and Methods

With the narrative intentionally set, the development of the installation elements were separated into two categories: 1) archival objects and artifacts, and 2) the performance of self in the form of a speculative archival object. In the sections to come a detailed account of the elements created for the project, including the materials, technologies, and methods used for creation, the culturally engaged subjects and perspectives, and any other pertinent and meaningful information that may help to contextualize the work further.

6.6.1 Archival Objects and Artifacts

Using a black-centered gaze, the definition of an archival object can be molded to reflect cultural perspectives on what is worth preserving. Further, what is considered pertinent knowledge is also shaped by cultural understandings of importance. To better illustrate how the works existed in space, the following maps illustrated the three areas of the site where the works were installed.

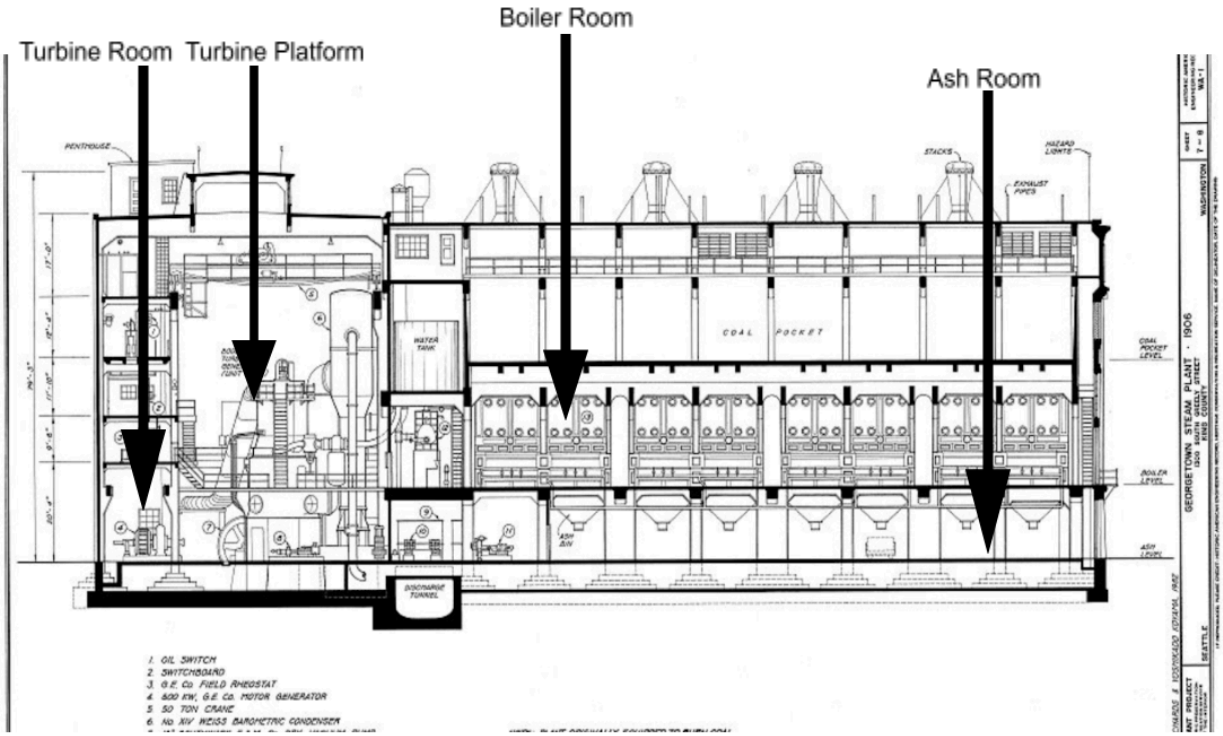


Figure 111: Vertical floor plan identifying installation locations

6.6.1.1 1st Floor - Turbine Room

The bottom floor entrance theme was about labor. Given the hidden history of how the six-story concrete and metal behemoth of a building was built in the early 1900s, a metaphor was made about the historical deemphasizing of the black labor responsible for creating the US economy. A large video of gantry dancers played on a loop front and center. This became the focal point of the main 1st floor space. The gantry dancers were railroad track layers who used song and rhythm to move the railroad tracks into place with bars together. This work was entitled *Rhythm Is Your Ancestor.*



Figure 112: *Rhythm is Your Ancestor, MUTATE*, 2024

The second artwork on the 1st-floor turbine area was a work called *Have Several Seats.* It was an installation of several chairs hung at various heights from a scaffolding in the space. “Have Several Seats” is a black cultural saying that bears a particular meaning in context and delivers abundant unfounded information. Additionally, the chair is symbolic of resting which is positioned as a counterpoint to *Rhythm is your Ancestor* in proximity. Lastly, the chair is also significant because its invention is accredited to Nathaniel Alexander.



Figure 113: *Have Several Seats*, *MUTATE*, 2024

The third artwork was added on the 1st floor before the second night's opening. This video was a short loop of James Brown sweating profusely on stage, his face framed in a tight closeup. The video was positioned on a ledge just outside of the entrance to the sound installation on a large screen. It was relationally placed in context with *Have Several Seats* and

Rhythm is Your Ancestor to further contextualize the theme of labor framed in the 1st-floor turbine room.



Figure 114: Screen Grab of James Brown, installed just outside of the entrance to Ash Room, moving image.

6.6.1.2 1st Floor - Sound Installation

Sound was used throughout the building as atmospheric sound, which contributed to the building's perceived "liveness." Using field recordings and recordings taken from sounds within the building as source materials, speakers were installed throughout the first-floor space and played sounds that emulate the types of structures in the area. The entrance of the 1st floor Ash room was full of pipes that likely carried water. To create the sonic impression that the pipes were leaking or working, I used four Genelec speakers, two on either side of the walkway and hidden out of sight. I ran mono sound to each speaker channel and mixed the levels from the sound booth, making good use of the reverberation in the space. Based on speaker position, I

thematically composed the soundscape within the space until the sound space felt cohesive and realistic. The sounds used in this room were a mixture of dripping sounds, water movement, some noise with a low pass filter, and synthesized low groaning and droning sounds to emulate what the space might sound like. I used sound here as an atmospheric component and as a guide to draw the audience into the next space, the Ash Room. The lighting in this space also contributed to this.



Figure 115: Pipes in sound installation location on 1st floor near, credit: Joe Iano, still image

For the remainder of the 1st floor, referred to as the Turbine Room, and the 2nd Floor platform, an array of speakers were installed throughout the space, including one large speaker atop a central hollow turbine in the center of the space. Given the size of the space, speaker placement was an important focus within the big open area. I had access to a handful more of

the smaller Genelec speakers, five large Mackie PA speakers, and a subwoofer which was available at the Steamplant. The Genelecs were installed in hidden areas throughout, some places within the turbines, others behind structures on the first floor. One of the Genelecs was also placed above the Turbine Platform, pushing sound above the audience's head. Two of the Mackie speakers and the subwoofer were placed near the front of the 1st floor, projected out across the Turbine Room towards the Ash Room, and the other two were placed in the 2nd-floor Boiler Room to deliver the monologue.



Figure 116: View of location where Mackie speaker was installed from the 2nd floor, *MUTATE*, 2024

The last Myer was installed at the highest accessible point within the Turbine Room. It was a large hollow sloping structure that came downward. Due to its shape and size, it offered great compositional potential, which I took advantage of. The overall composition for this area

was challenging. I spent a lot of time listening and EQing, and mixing repeatedly until the mix was right thematically but also well-balanced. Managing an 8-second delay was indeed a puzzle that needed solving to avoid chaos…although chaos is kind of great sometimes. For this soundscape, I used a lot of different sounds, such as water, mechanical sounds, trains, and field records, from activated metal structures and objects within the Steam Plant. I sculptured the sounds by listening to their qualities and digitally altered them to fit into the overall composition.

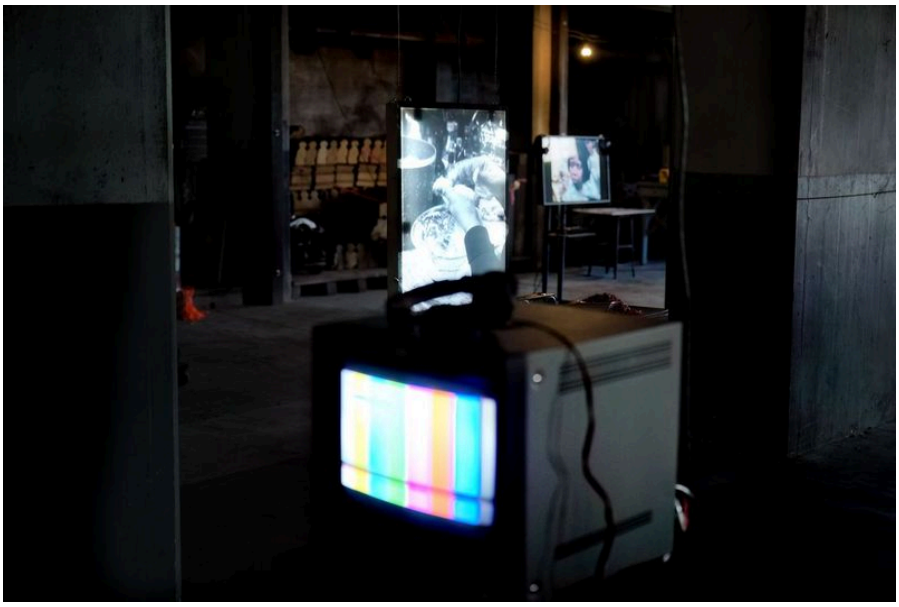


Figure 117: View across the Ash Room, *MUTATE*, 2024

6.6.1.3 1st Floor Ash Room

The next installation site is also on the first floor in the ash room. This installation location was thematically associated with closely held personal and cultural archival objects that engage with subjects of embodiment, sound as an archive, nostalgia, and grief. This grouping of works was the most diverse in form, with video, sound, assemblage, photography, and 3D prints within the

space. The elements were selected to construct a question about what an archival object or record might include if the archive centered a black gaze and was not limited to institutional archival conventions. Within this installation location, there were a total of ten works present:

1. ***James Baldwin Had an FBI File***
   typewriter and hidden speaker with typing sound



Figure 118: View of " James Baldwin Had an FBI File" at Ash Room entrance , *MUTATE*, 2024

2. ***Nostalgia***
   90s archive dance video coupled with "Feelings" by Nina Simone



Figure 119: Audience engaging with "Nostalgia in Ash Room *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

3. ***Monuments***, 3D printed knockers, Speaker playing “Miss Mary Mack”, A large safe with Blue Magic, and Murray’s encased and illuminated



Figure 120: *Monuments*, *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

4. ***Fune***, Video



Figure 117: *Fune*, *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

5. ***Oh Glory I’ll Fly Away***, prints, yarn, felt board

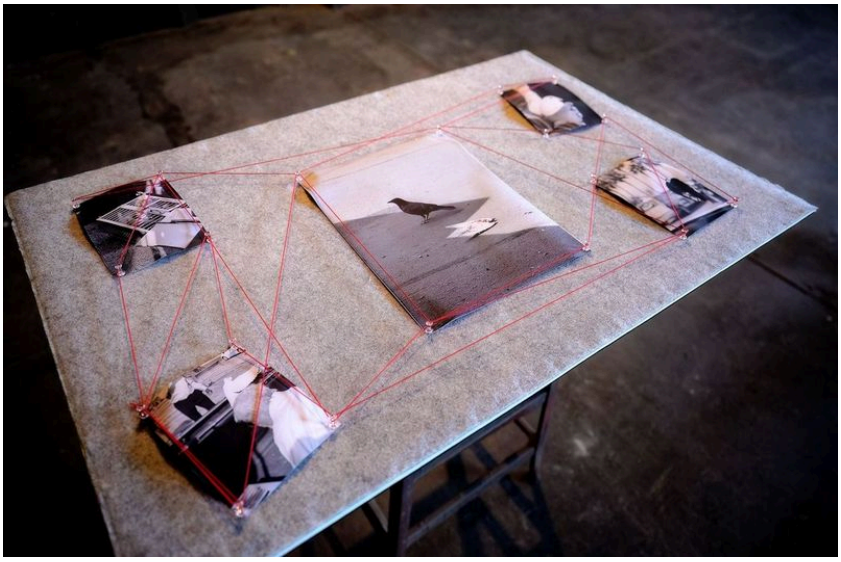


Figure 122: Downward view in Ash Room, position just to right of “Fune”, *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

6. **4 Funerals**, Lightbox photo set

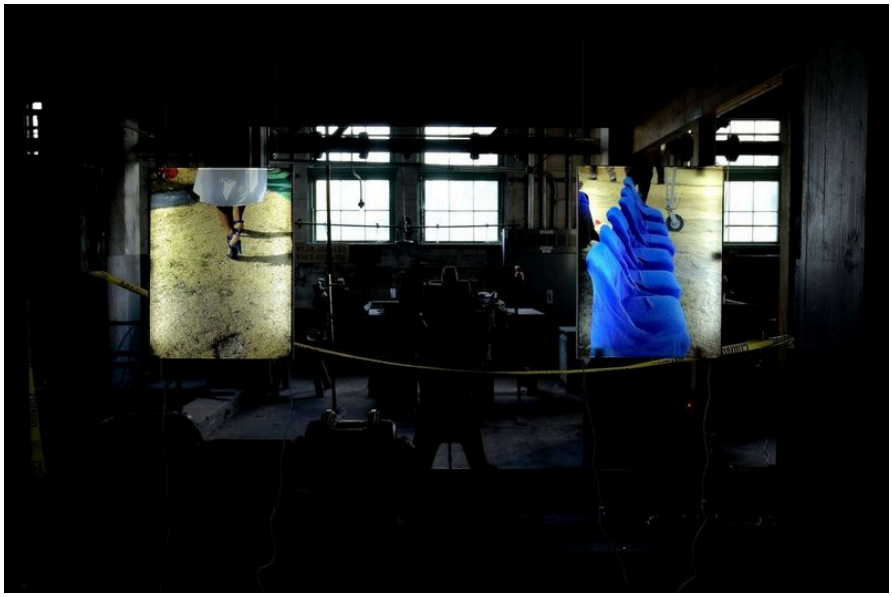


Figure 123:View of “4 Funerals” from middle of Ash Room *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

7. ***That Boy Can Sang***, video floor projection



Figure 124: View of “4 That Boy Can Sang”, from middle of Ash Room *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

8. ***I Put a Little Sugar in Mine***, Video transcript with audio of “How to Make Hot Water Corn Bread, Black and white lightbox photo of hands

9. ***Saturdays are For Cleaning,*** Radio, and Music

10. ***An Ode to Grandmothers***, 3D printer scraps and peppermint oil



Figure 125: View of multiple works displayed inside Ash Room *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

This location was selected due to its architectural features, specifically the openings. The layout consisted of material items in the archways, video artworks in every other archway pushed further back, and archival black-and-white footage in the center of the room. The vintage or "old" playback technology used in this room played a role in the performance, which will be described in a future section. These "old" technological devices also contributed to the conceptual framework around technological failure and erasure. This location was selected for this particular grouping of work because of its symbolic significance as historical content, and architecturally, the new media element of the work is posited on the second floor just above this area.



Figure 126: View from the entrance of the Ash Room, *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

6.6.1.4 2nd Floor - Turbine Platform

The turbine platform was just up the stairs leading to the second floor. This installation area was thematically dedicated to the subject of science and technology. The works here were positioned as a critique of the facade of objectivity projected by the empirical sciences by drawing attention to historical accounts of black bodies being used as test subjects and source material, as well as engineering and science erasure of black inventors and technological contributions. This area included four works:

1. ***The Scientific Method***, Video, and Haphazard Prints

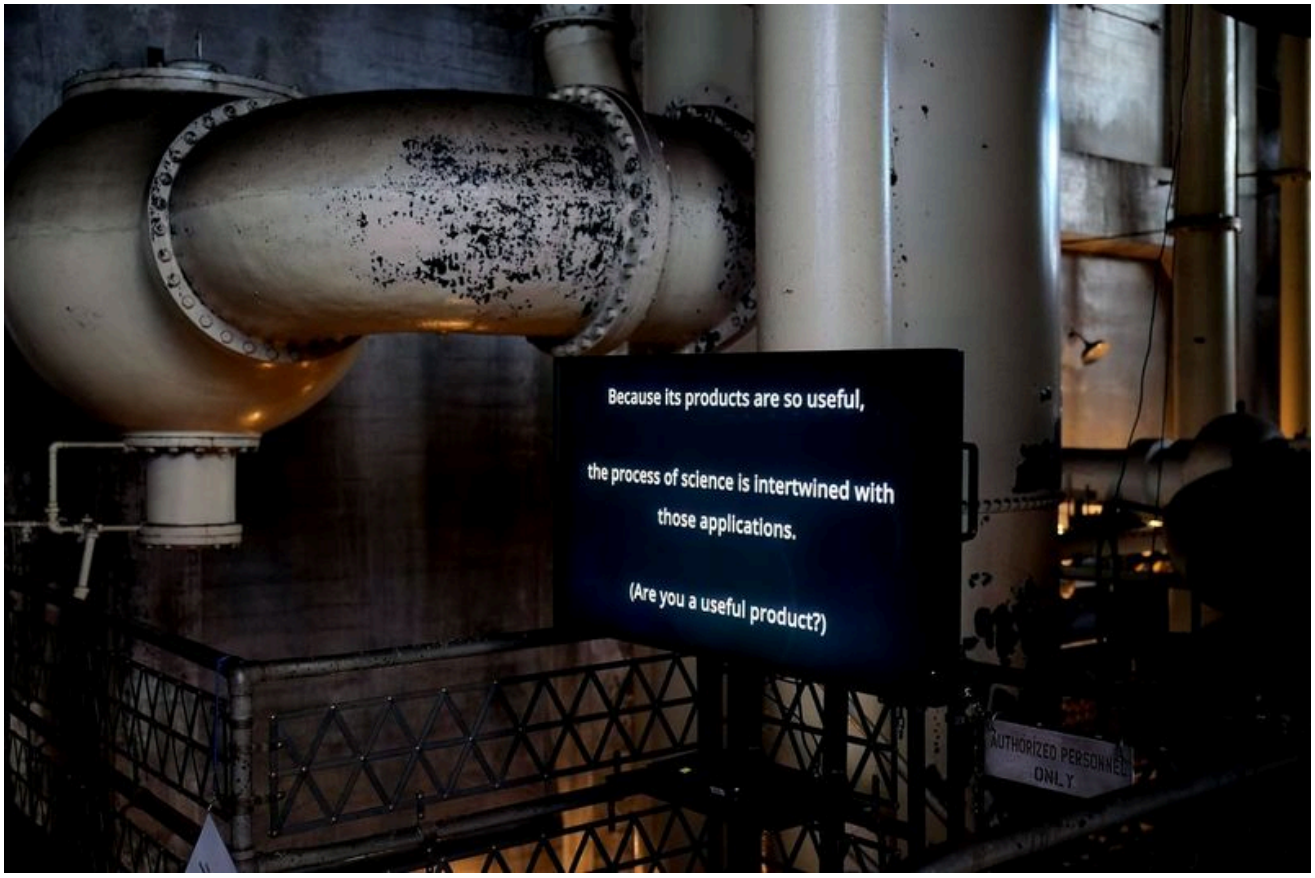


Figure 127:View of “The Scientific Method” from the Turbine level platform, *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

2. **Escape Artist**, Black and White Print



Figure 128: View of “Escape Artist” from the Turbine level platform, *MUTATE*, 2024

3. ***From Ice Cream Scoops to 3D Projection / Where are the Flowers?*** Patent Prints

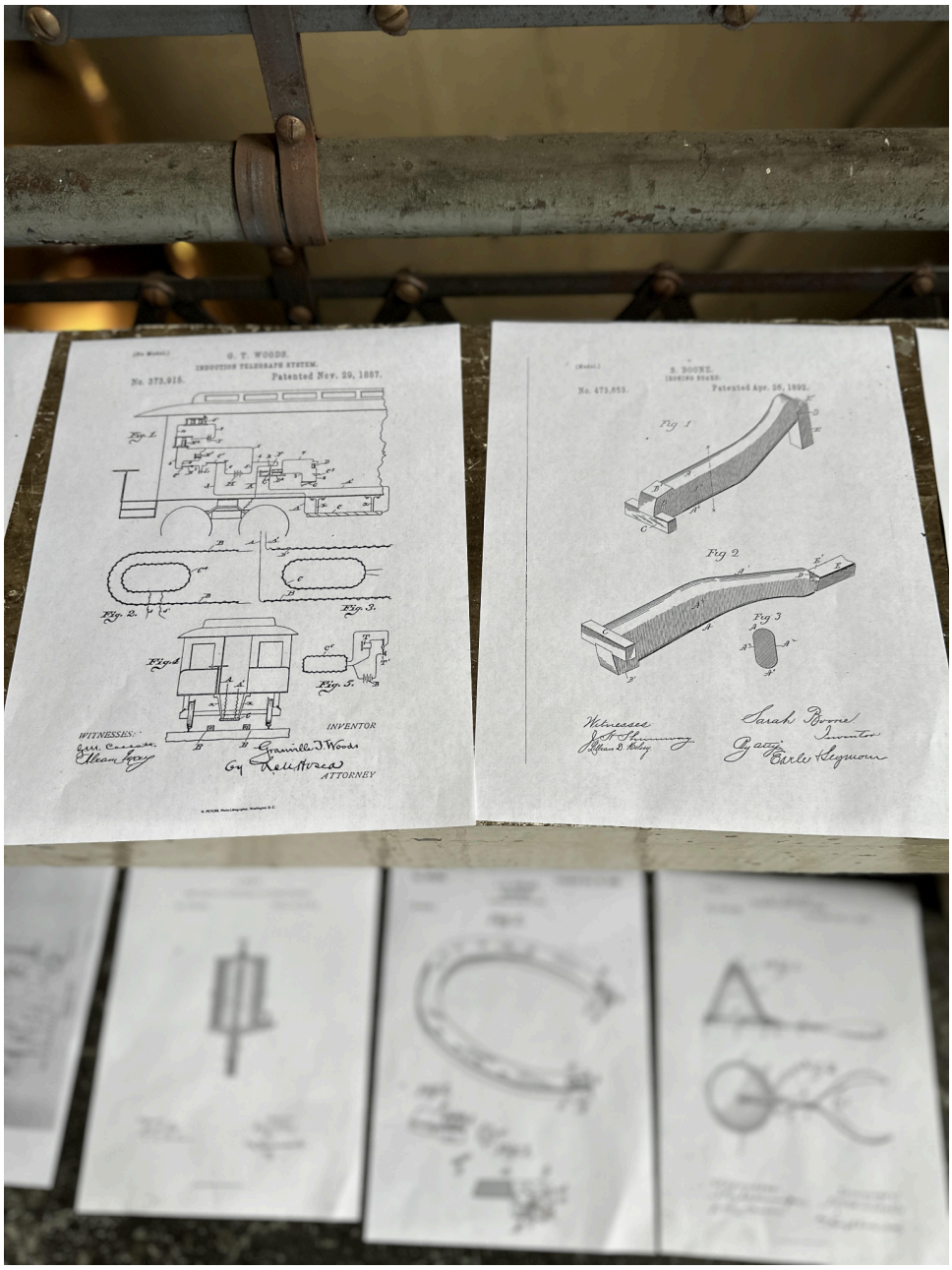


Figure 129: View of patents from turbine platform, next to “The Scientific Method”, *MUTATE*, 2024,

4. ***Every Shut Eye Ain't Sleep / Walk on By*,** Looping video projection and sound "Walk on By" By Dione Warwick.

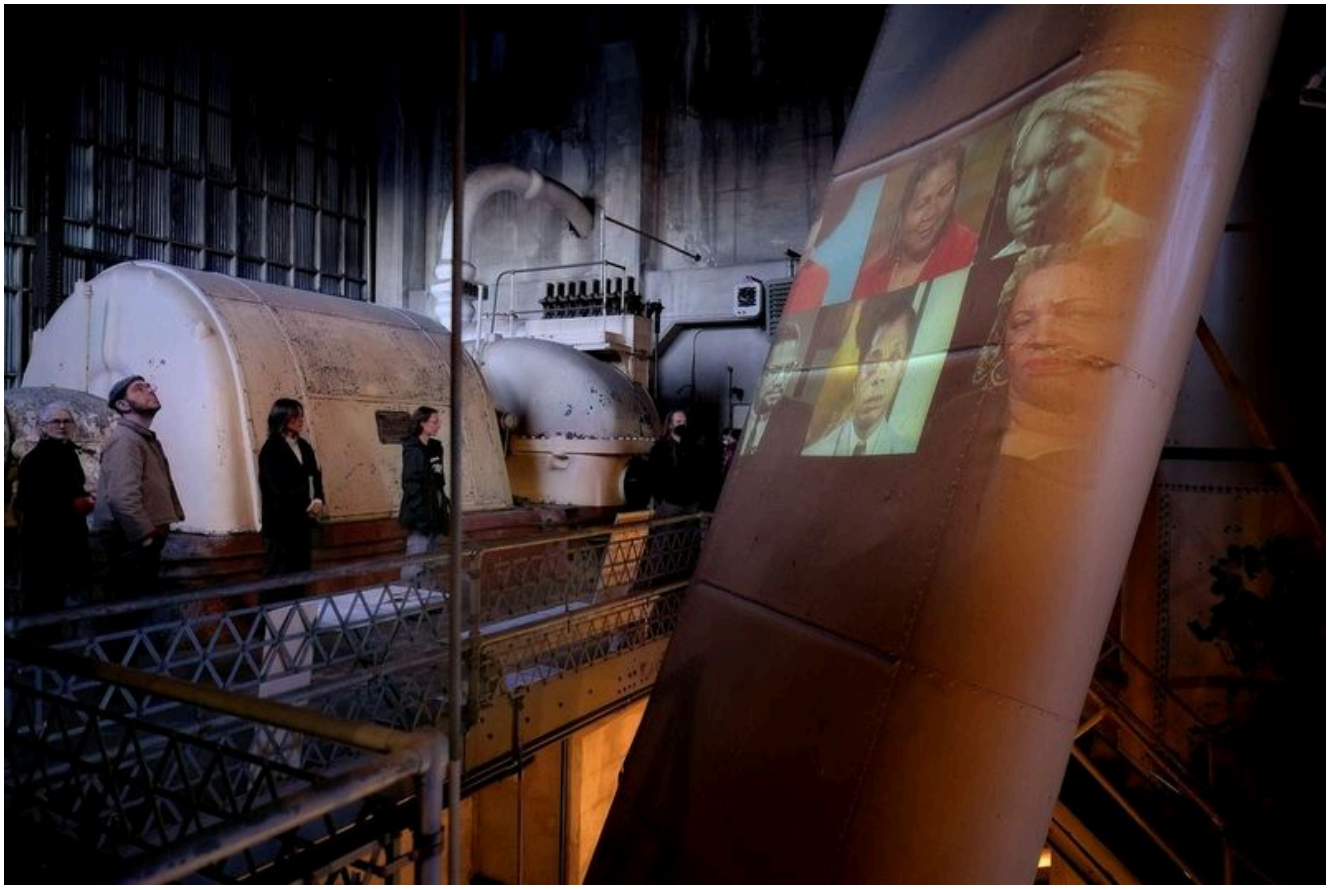


Figure 130:View across the Turbine platform from 2nd floor walking bridge *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

The loft was selected for this work to symbolically memic and criticize the protection of hierarchical supremacy within the empirical sciences. Before transitioning out of this area, the audience passes by a six-channel video work with black revolutionaries, poets, writers, and

musicians communicating an unspoken chorus while Dione Warwick sings, “Walk on by … foolish pride.”



Figure 131: View from just outside the Boiler Room entrance *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

6.6.1.5 2nd Floor Boiler Room

One of the more subtly stated works, *Growing Since My Father Died*, is a collection of smaller positioned objects, including a self-portrait mounted on wood, a viewfinder made of recycled materials and a 3D printed housing, and an audio recording about the loss of my father. This work was only illuminated by a single light bulb and tucked into one of the sides of the entrance to the boiler room. The work required a shift in body position to engage with it to look down at something small being magnified, a gentle observance of a delicate memory. The scale

of this piece was juxtaposed with the scale of the second piece, CHARI 2.0, a large-scale projection performance work.



Figure 132: Top and bottom, audience engaging with work in Boiler Room *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

6.6.1.6 Collection Conclusion

The archival objects and artifacts collection of works were positioned to question artistic relationships and perspectives about embodiment, gaze, self archiving practices, and black cultural significance. The work also challenged themes of institutional knowledge and knowledge production, what archival artifacts and objects look like / feel like / smell like / sound like, the criteria for preservation worthiness, and archival form.

6.7 Archival Performance



Figure 133:View of performance workstation in center of Boiler Room, *MUTATE*, 2024 credit: Joe Iano

The second collection of modes instead involved the practice of self-archiving in three-dimensional form and the performance of that self in real time. With this portion of the work, I investigated the following research question:

What are the dynamics between embodiment and disembodiment when working with archives, and how are these dynamics informed? What is the balance between objects and subjects? How does this show up in the works' material and immaterial forms?

The three-dimensional avatar was affectionately named CHARI 2.0. Functioning within the narrative constructed, the caretaker (me) takes care of the old archive while also attempting to make a new one. The performance of CHARI 2.0 was the culmination of new media research that began in 2022 and carried over into 2024.

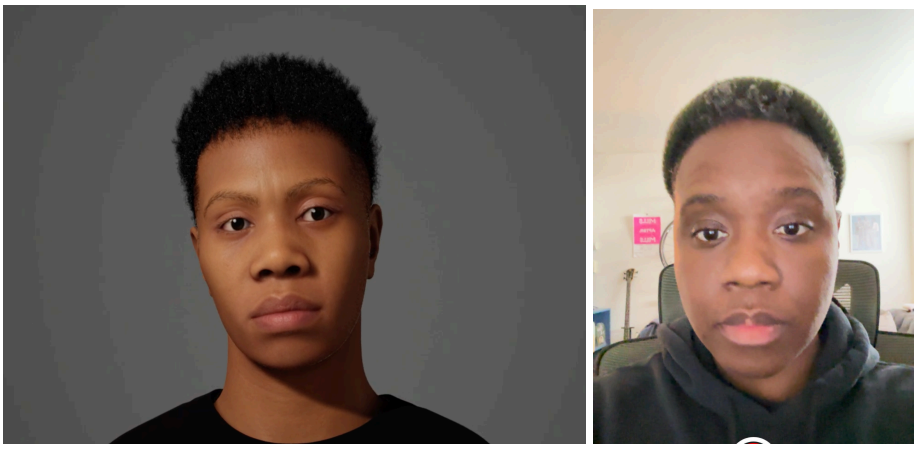


Figure 134: On left “Out of the Box” MetaHuman results, on right reference photo

6.7.1 Process for Constructing a Virtual Self

At the start of the research for this element of the work, the goal was to create a photorealistic three-dimensional version of myself. Determining the best course of action took time and research into the possibilities for self-capture and self-replication in three-dimensional space. While the applications have improved since 2022, the initial potentials for self-creation were

sorely lacking and limited, leaving few options for POC and queer embodiment, again the subject of gaze presents itself.

To navigate this issue of gaze within the 3D creative spaces, a labor-intensive process of chaining together multiple applications and software began to achieve the initial goal outlined in 2022. 3D avatars are, for the most part, a combination of skeletons and textures. The skeleton reflects human skeletal anatomy and functions as the structural foundation for textures and rigging or animations of figures. On top of the skeleton is a mesh, and the two combined are referred to as a skeletal mesh. The mesh is "a set of polygons composed to make up the surface of the Skeletal Mesh."[166] In open-source applications, the mesh is moldable due to the polygonal structure, sometimes called triangles. The more triangles there are, the more refined your sculpting capabilities become, however, this can severely tax a computer's processor. On top of the mesh, a texture is wrapped, which aligns with the bodily shape of the skeletal mesh, and it's the texture that gives the realistic visible skin-like appearance.

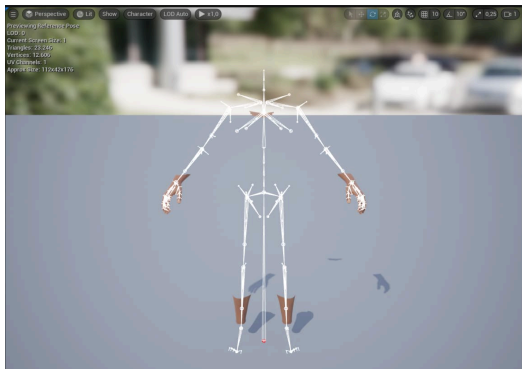


Figure 135: Example of a skeleton underneath the MetaHuman mesh, still image

[166]Unreal Engine, "Skeletal Meshes," accessed July 15, 2024, https://docs.unrealengine.com/4.27/en-US/WorkingWithContent/Types/SkeletalMeshes/.

The following subsections provide a detailed accounting of the building of self, broken down into two focuses: textures and the skeletal mesh.

The first step involved the creation of a texture to capture my face, ensuring that there was even lighting and no shadows present. This was important to the process as shadows and uneven lighting would generate artifacts on the texture, taking away from its realistic appearance. The financially accessible applications for self-capture have significantly evolved beyond my initial attempts with photogrammetry, which requires a lot of photos and complete stillness during capture. Currently, in 2024, a texture and mesh can be constructed from just three still images and placement of landmarks.

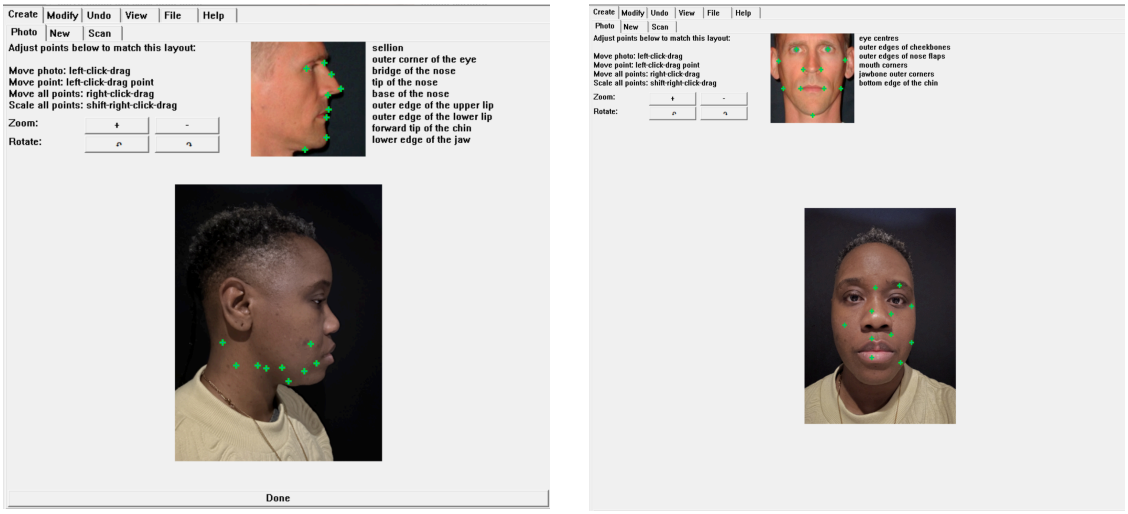


Figure 136: Top and bottom FaceGen facial recognition anchor point results

The application used to generate the texture for my Self is called FaceGen, which is a

step beyond early predecessors like Agisoft MetaShape, that required complete stillness and as many photos as possible to get the best results. FaceGen, however could generate a texture and mesh with just three still images from three angles. However, initial results demonstrated that the model struggled to find the landmark from the photographs submitted which persisted after various trials with versions of the photos used with different lighting, and cameras used.

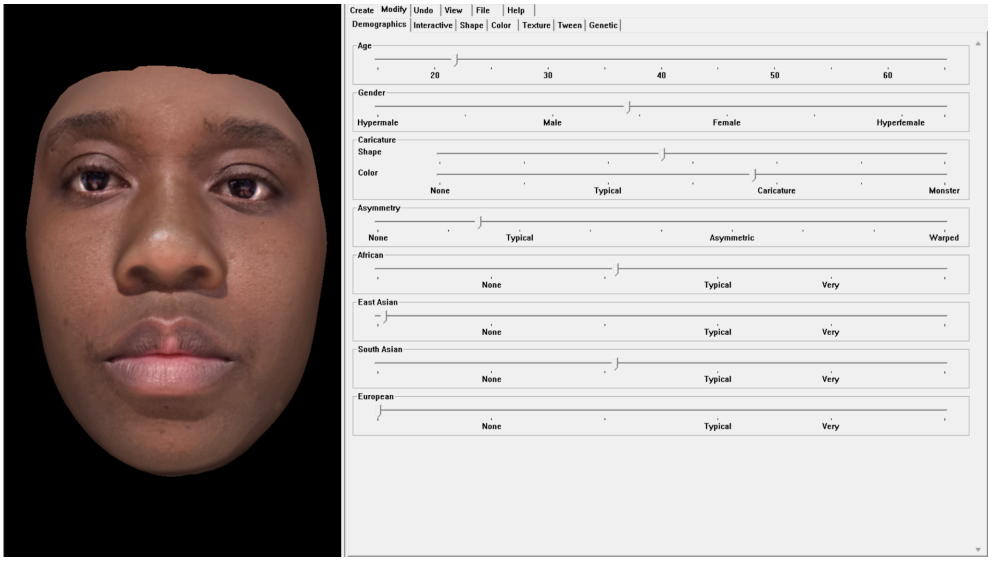


Figure 137: FaceGen fine-tuning parameters

This required correction by manually placing the facial landmark indicators in the correct position. Once the landmarks are positioned correctly, an initial texture and mesh are generated, and the user is offered the option to further sculpt the mesh without altering the texture on top. These could be adjusted through a set of parameters or sculpting options. The possibilities for fine-tuning proved problematic as racial and gender scales were provided linearly. This implies that some judgment was made around, for instance, the scale for features that correlate to an approximation of "African," "East Asian," "South Asian," or "European"

facial features, and also judgments around what “hypermale” means and what “hyperfemale” means in the form of facial structure and features. While FaceGen offers ease, it also offers stereotypes and racist perspectives as a side dish. Once an acceptable texture and mesh are complete, the texture and mesh are then exported to an animation software called DAZ3D.

It’s important to note that each animation software is coupled with its own rendering aesthetic, which changes the appearance of the mesh and texture from application to application. The bridge application that enables exporting from FaceGen to DAZ3D directly requires a skeletal base model that is then altered based on the export from FaceGen. The results were surprisingly well-placed and photorealistic, with a few anomalies around eye pupils and eyebrows. Additional elements were added like chest hair and short fine hair on the back of the head, and on the back side of the model, the “seams” between the base model and the realistic depiction of the face were perceivable. The textures created by FaceGen required manual placement on the architecture base model however this was not difficult to navigate as the export saved the textures into a folder with labels for facial locations.



Figure 138: Daz3 Sample Busts

The rendering quality in DAZ3D was quite good, however there were a few remaining artifacts from the base model which were visibly apparent in the new bust.

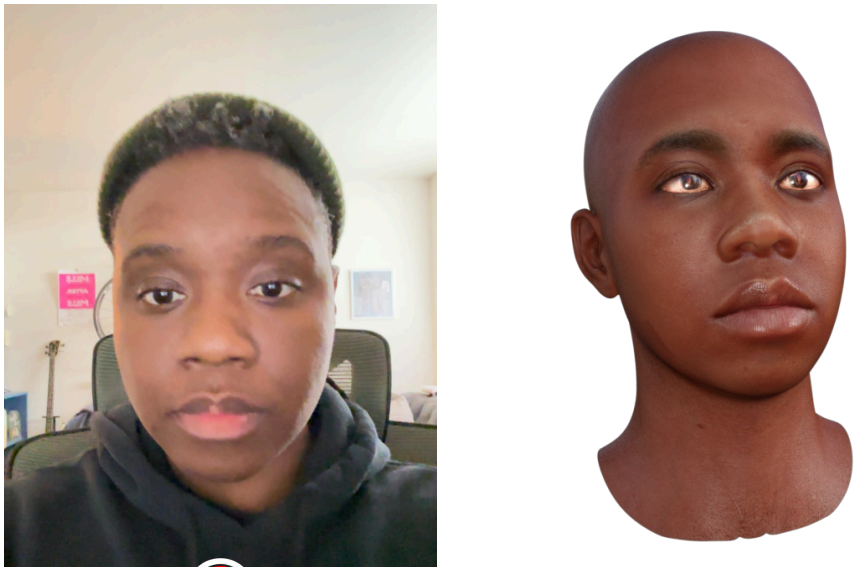


Figure 139: Left reference photo, right DAZ3D Bust

From DAZ3D a direct export to Blender was completed with the use of another bridge application. During this transition, the textures again needed to be manually fixed to align with the skeletal mesh. The export to Blender produced the most realistic results, as exemplified by my approximation, which was emphasized through key lighting and camera placement within the Blender software. At this point, the goal shifted towards investigating pathways for animation, especially real-time animation. Blender offered fixed media animation potentials, but the render times were extensive, and any real-time potentials were processor-heavy and involved some lag. Circling back to DAZ3D, fixed animation options were available, but the real-time facial animation had a substantial lag. Due to this, moving to Unreal Engine became the best course of action.



Figure 140: On left DAZ3D to Blender bust with key lighting, on right Unreal Engine MetaHuman bust with key lighting

The initial rollout of MetaHumans presented limited options for demographic options and the availability of adjustments that could be made to the MetaHumans, which has since been shifted into legacy status. There was a similarity between software, suggesting a privileged bias for certain embodiments that were securely and diversely represented in both cases. The trending problematics around embodiment and race across animation applications present an observable instance of what Sofia Noble calls “technological redlining.” With version updates, a diversity of base models grew in availability, and further methods for shaping the model's architecture also grew more possible. There were still limitations within the MetaHuman closed source software, which limited some of the sculpting capabilities, but a workaround was applied using an Unreal Engine plugin, which used video samples to create a mesh that could then be recalculated into a MetaHuman architecture.

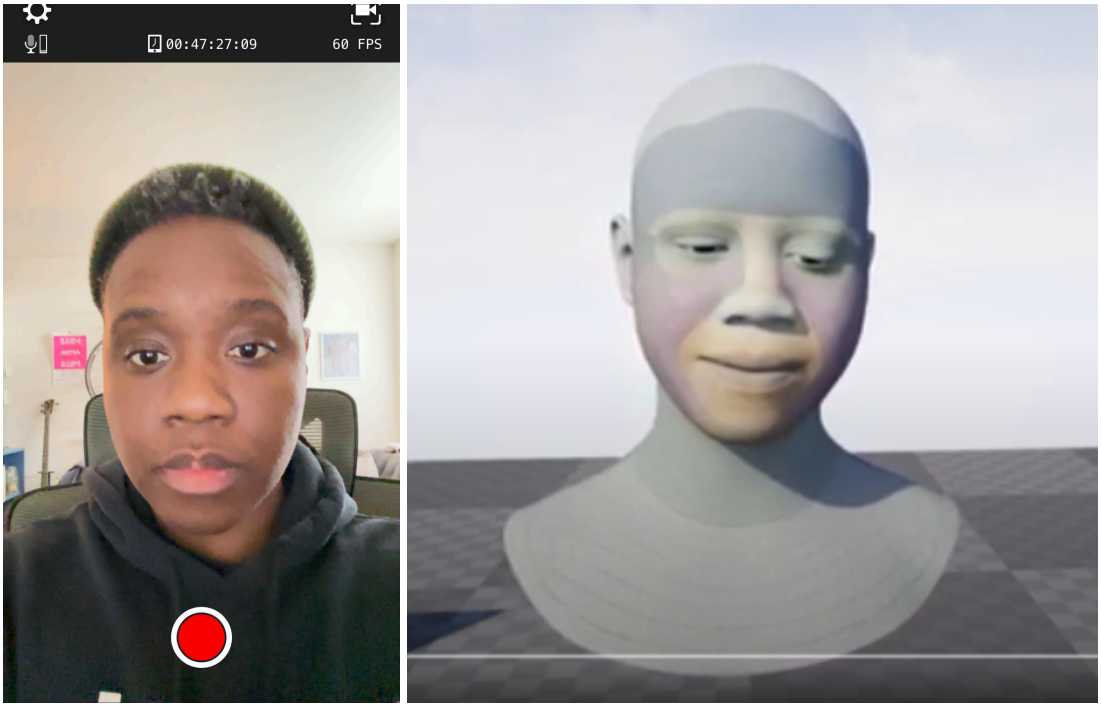
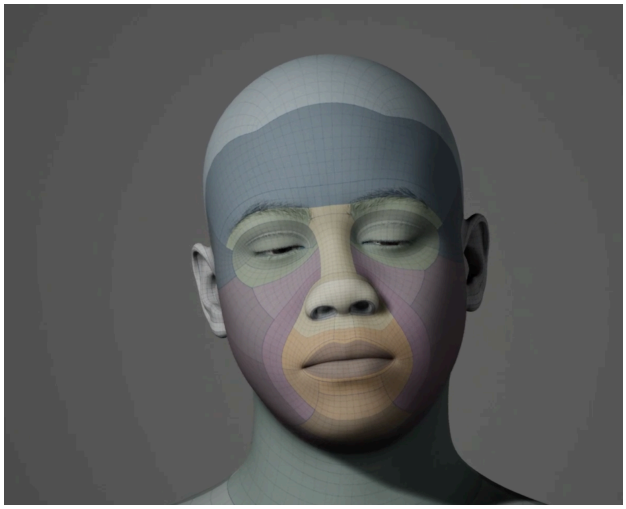


Figure 141: On left reference image, on right skeletal mesh from Unreal Engine during animation testing

With good progress made, there were still errors within the mesh and so manual sculpting was needed as well. The Metahuman mesh sculpting options are separated into two levels one is “aided” or restricted, and the second level allows for free sculpting and editing after accepting the warning. The MetaHuman architecture is also limited regarding gender expressions and most embodiments appear as either male or female, but there is a nominal amount of flexibility available with regards to cosmetic choices like hair and facial hair, and body shape. After the Metahuman version of Self was created, animation was the next step in the process.



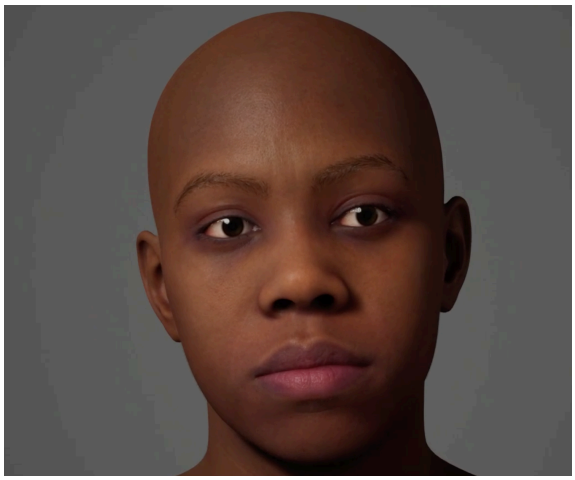


Figure 142: On left MetaHuman version with no material, on right material added

6.7.2 Animation

Unreal Engine 5 provided the best options and application potentials for real-time animation. Unreal Engine makes this possible through FaceLink, a mobile phone application that communicates with Unreal Engine via IP address and internet. The first animation tests were conducted with pre-recorded videos which were uploaded as actor takes and then rigged to the facial skeleton of the Metahuman. Thereafter real-time application using the same workflow but with a live camera feed was successfully accomplished. With this infrastructure set up, determining the use and implementation of this within the context of the work leads to a discussion about performance with real-time media.

6.8 Performing the Self



Figure 143: View of CHARI 2.0 Setup from within Boiler Room, MUTATE 2024, credit: Joe Iano

What are the performance staging possibilities, and how can performance be integrated as a focus using real-time interfacing? This question guided the experiments and decision-making made regarding how CHARI 2.0 would not only function within the composition of the work but it would become another actor in the piece. This included determining what role this element played, how to contextualize it with the other works in the space, the performance dynamics between myself and the avatar in real-time, and audience perspectives and positioning. The first decision made with certainty was the location where this iteration of the work would take place. The area directly above the first-floor ash room is a long cavernous space called the boiler room. The boiler room aesthetics and design are slightly different, the

archways are more like narrow tunnels creating, which could be described as vast intimacy. This space housed the final archival element, a performance based new media artwork co-created by CHARI 2.0, and myself in real-time.

Given the architecture of the space, audience staging in this area was intentionally thought out, which was partially a visual aesthetic choice. The primary purpose of the staging, my back to the audience while facing this long corridor, was a practical implementation of my inquiries into the potential for realizing gaze theory with the work. Further, the boiler room drew the line of sight down towards a large set of windows at the end of the building which generated the idea of drawing the line of sight into this direction. Lastly, the staging in this area was partially inspired by the staging in a scene from the movie *1984*, although the intention was not to draw parallels between the two works.



Figure 144: Screen Grab from the film “1984, Micahel Radford director

With the stage set, I looked back on previous performance works I'd created, some for moving image or video art and some for immersive performance environments, to glean performance possibilities for this work.

Open Up, Open In, Open Out was an immersive theater performance commissioned by the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, WA. The work was an experiment not only in immersive theater but also in audience participatory techniques. Unlike traditional performance spaces, there was intentionally no stage, or rather, the stage was the entire room. It was important for me to put myself on the same level as the audience, which is a common immersive theatrical staging technique. As described in the introduction, this open composition practice was implemented here, allowing the piece to evolve as the audience engaged with the work. I used a loose, structured compositional technique.



Figure 145: "Open In, Open Up, Open Out, Henry Art Gallery 2023, performance

I created gestures in advance which I hoped would draw the audience into the work, but with a work like this one there are no guarantees. However sound, mirroring, and silence all worked as gestures and audience members joined in on the performance. Rather than performing a specific role as I did in *MUTATE*, in this work, I created another kind of avatar, a speculative figure that I embodied and activated with my movements, voice, and gestures. I considered this work practical research, and what I took away from it was that there is a way to invite audience participation by playing another role, or taking on another character that acts as a facilitator of sorts. With a few simple gestures, most of the room participated, taking on the role that I had initiated, and at that point, the function of my avatar was fulfilled. I quietly left the space, and the audience continued interacting with each other without me. Drilling down to the root of this work, this was the goal, to create a world, and through action and engagement materialize that world.



Figure 146: View of the audience during "Open In, Open Up, Open Out, Henry Art Gallery 2023, performance

From my research observations and attempts, I would argue that immersive works are effective when positioned within an alternative reality at least in my experience. The installations, the building, the sound, and the performance in concert were effective in creating this alternative reality which invited the audience to join me in the world and the narrative I'd built. The staging of *MUTATE* focused on the creation of an immersive environment which placed the audience within the site of an archival facility. The archival facility was maintained by a "Caretaker," a role I played throughout the work. The Caretaker moves in and out of spaces checking on the archive, repeatedly restarting failing media, turning knobs, and checking pipes with diligence and persistence. The technological failures were a part of the work's narrative, but also symbolically represented a segment of my thesis, which looks at technology's continuation and enabling of erasure. The installation items were both artworks and set design elements that represent past or preexisting archival materials deemed significant through a black gaze, and personal and cultural ties.

As I had done with *Open Up, Open In, Open Out*, I created a character that acted as a facilitator in creating the world. The Caretaker fixes, maintains, and restarts the archive, thanks the people for coming but lets them know that there is much work to be done to keep the archive running, to keep it alive.



Figure 147: “The Caretaker” on the first floor in Turbine Room, *MUTATE* 2024, credit: Joe Iano

It is one thing to play a character in your physical body, but it is another thing to play a character that reflects your physical body and to have a first-person dialogue between the two.

6.8.1 Real-Time Animation and Performance



Figure 148: View of the CHARI 2.0 performance location from the screen side. *MUTATE* 2024, credit: Joe Iano

In between working to maintain the “old archive” the Caretaker periodically contributed to the created a new one, CHARI 2.0. Using real-time face tracking software made for iPhone integration with Unreal Engine, the Caretaker “uploaded” information into CHARI 2.0 through an interactive performance between the two. The interfacing worked by connecting the two devices, the cell phone and the computer running Unreal Engine, using their respective IP addresses and ensuring appropriate lighting to ensure the application could see and track my face. The Caretaker’s monologue was improvised, which contributed to the thematic realism, and the self-reflective intimate delivery. The Caretaker uploaded personal histories, names of important figures, and their contributions, speculated about what life might be like in 100 years,

and expressed their hopes for what CHARI 2.0 might carry forward of their existence. Further subjects included archival theory, embodied knowledge, and methodologies for storing information. With the shifts in voice between Caretaker and Chari 2.0 the separation between the two dissipated, one speaking as the other and vice versa.



Figure 149: OveOver-the-shoulder of animation, *MUTATE* 2024, credit: Joe Iano

As this portion of the work is a performance, the themes of embodiment and gaze which were identified through the mind mapping phase contributed to decisions like body position, proximity between Caretaker and CHARI 2.0, the audience line of sight, and delivery of

monologue. With these decisions, which I would also refer to as gestures, I attempted to create open questions about considerations like Fed Moten and Saidiya Hartman's discussions about objects vs. subjects, Nam June Paik’s ideas on technology's role in dissolving the skin, invisibility and hyper invisibility in society and in the digital, the oppositional gaze, and the normative gaze, and technological failures. I’d found the fault line and positioned the two characters right on top of it.

CHAPTER 7- REVIEW AND REFLECTION

MUTATE was an ambitious work for several reasons. It was an attempt to further the boundaries around what "interdisciplinary new media art" means. It was an attempt to engage with practical and scholarly theory in tandem, to experiment with technological interfacing holistically and critically, and to negotiate a space for developing an innovative black media practice. *MUTATE* was also ambitious because of the scale and scope of the work and the many moving parts required to present a cohesive artwork that engaged with the multitude of conversational potentials connected to research questions. It would have been easier to pick one line of inquiry to focus on, but this, in my opinion, would have resulted in a monotone flattening of a very much alive subject. At the heart of the work was a deep commitment to making technologically facilitated art that engages black embodiment as a theme and counterpoint. While this may read as an overstatement at this point, it feels pertinent to say on the other side of a hard-fought journey to maintain my artistic voice. *MUTATE* has affirmed that this will continue as a practical extension of my research, a hard-fought The work also contributed to implementing methods I've engaged with during my dissertation studies, finding the appropriate context and concepts that help to convey the work, and stretching my skill set into new arenas.

7.1 Research Questions and Thesis

The argument I made in my thesis statement was that centering black cultural practices and a black gaze would generate methods of artistic engagement with technology and media tools that centered blackness, black embodiment, and black being as a subject matter. Further, blackness can be more than merely a proxy for illustrating technological and systemic failures;

it is a subject worthy of technological and artistic exploration. Looking back at *MUTATE*, the scholarly research, the process of creating the work, and the final product of all of my efforts, I would conclude my thesis statement to be true. It is possible, it does work, and moreover it has added a depth and richness to my work which has been tethering on something close but not all the way there. The shifting of gaze was catalytic and the liberation as a result proved substantially beneficial in closing the gap between my creative experiments and my final work.

Reflecting on my research questions, an archive sounds like a concrete and steel being rattled, the voice of Mahaliah Jackson, Otis Redding, and Dione Warrick singing songs with double meanings. It sounds like children singing Miss Mary Mack, and the defiance of James Baldwin. It sounds like dirt on coffins, a lament from Nina Simone, and a grandmother's recipe and cleaning on Saturday mornings. It sounds like the elephant is in every room and the pipes are leaking because of it. It sounds like railroad tracks and harmonies. It looks like black hair twisted up in matching hair barrettes and hair knockers. It looks like synchronized dance and silent eyes rolls at foolishness. It looks like joy and grief and sweat. It looks like ingenuity, surrealism, escapism. It smells like peppermints, blue magic and murrays. It feels like home.

7.2 Successes and Challenges

Overall, *MUTATE* was successful in meeting the research goals presented which involved creating an intermedia artwork, which centered installation, but also engaged performance. Additionally, the work would engage with the theme of archives through the lens of black cultural practices. This was achieved, which resulted in an engaging dynamic experimental artwork. The show was in high demand so much so that an additional date was added to allow

for more audience members to experience the exhibition. The response to the show was largely positive with many of the audience members reaching out afterwards to express how moved they were by it. *MUTATE* was a negotiation between intellectual framing and embodied practice, and navigating and negotiating a middle ground between the two took meticulous attention to detail, and relational thinking. Finding a path through this challenge ensured that the work would be accessible diversely. With that said, as with any work, there will undoubtedly be challenges to overcome. In the following subsections, I'll elaborate and reflect on these.

7.2.1 Real-Time Technology

Technology always fails. It fails every day, though it gives the impression of being unbreakable and infallible, working with it always presents a risk no matter the level of pre-planning and testing you complete. The risks can be minimized or turned to the max depending upon comfort levels with the potential of catastrophic failure. Furthermore, working with real-time technology might be on the high end of the risk spectrum. Asking a computer to process high-resolution graphics in real-time is an invitation for disaster, which inevitably strikes. Before the opening of the show, the interfacing between the cell phone application and Unreal Engine malfunctioned just as the doors opened. This required immediate action to resolve, which included ensuring that the devices were connected properly through IP addresses and that Unreal Engine was receiving the data from the cell phone application. This was resolved quickly but remained a point of concern for the remainder of the opening. Even with this fix, there occasionally were glitches in the connection, causing the real-time recreation to lag or

skip. In future iterations of the work, perhaps an upgraded GPU would assist with the hiccups, along with further research into the potential real-time interaction with Unreal Engine.

7.2.2 Installation Locations

There were two works that were ill placed, understated, or overstated in hindsight. *Growing Since My Father's Death* was tucked away in a corner on the second floor which was meant to engage a delicate interaction, however it was within the same place as CHARI 2.0 which was larger in scale and drew people quickly into the boiler room space. I was hoping for this with CHARI 2.0, but this cast a bit of a shadow on the other work. I would move this one down to the ash room on the second floor. Secondly, Otis Redding was singing in *That Boy Can Sang,* which is what he was there for, but the sound from this element was too loud and impeded the other live sound elements in the space.

7.2.3 Sound Challenges

As highlighted previously, the Georgetown Steam Plant is a massive building. Upon visiting the building initially, it was clear that the possibilities were abundant, which, depending on perspective can be both a gift and a curse. After further time spent in space the challenges one by one revealed themselves. The first being sound decay. The interior of the space was large and hollow which meant roughly an 8-second decay time. Considering not only the soundscape speaker installation as well as the audio coming from the various media devices, a plan needed to be developed to ensure that unintended sonic chaos didn't occur. Headphones for the media playing in the ash room helped to manage the soundscape. On the first showing the balance wasn't perfect between the loud speakers, but this was further fine tuned prior to the opening on

the second night. Given this was a performance I needed to negotiate the performer/artist switching, in further iterations resources permitted, I would create a side stage area where the soundboard lives and I can also be out of sight temporarily. Ideally, it would have been great and better to systematically handle the sound, but negotiating the balance between linearity and non-linearity would need to be sorted.

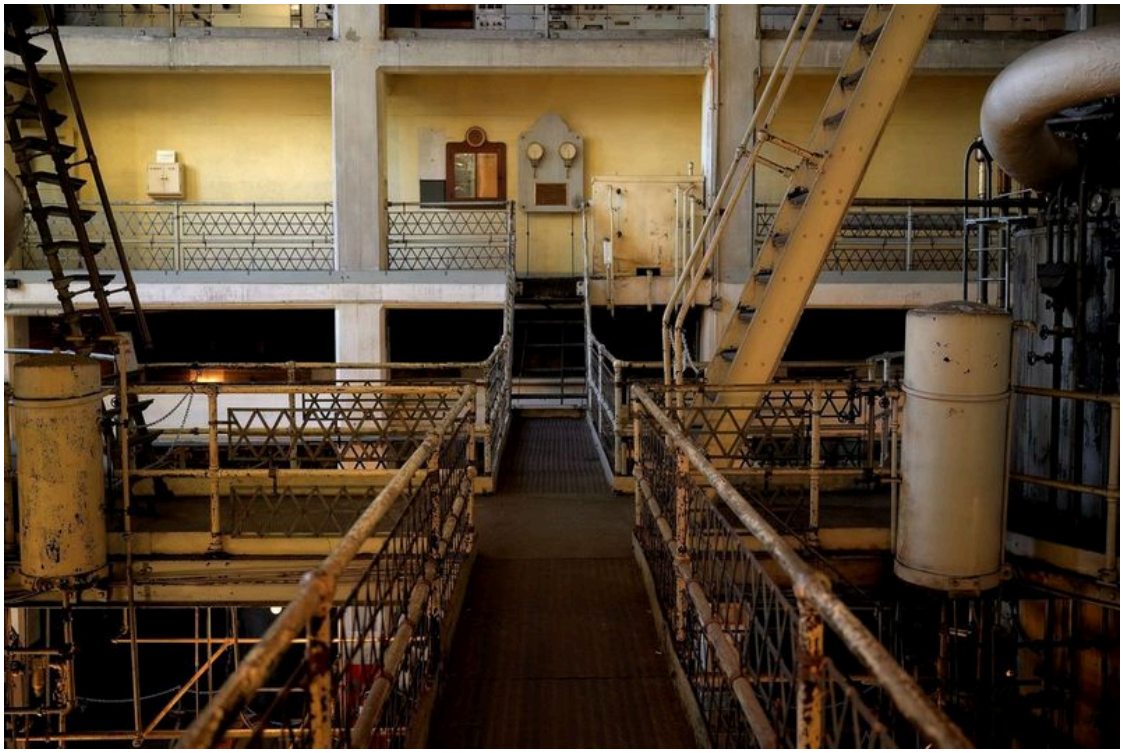


Figure 146: View of the walking platform outside of the Boiler Room, *MUTATE,* 2024, credit: Joe Iano

7.2.4 Accessibility Challenges

While the Steam plant is a beautiful old building, old buildings tend to have accessibility issues. The only access point to the second floor was up a staircase, which was steep. There was no elevator to access the second floor, so those with mobility needs could not see the part of the

work that happened on the second floor. It would have been ideal to set up a live camera feed displayed on the first floor for audience members who couldn't make it up to the second floor.

7.2.5 Scale

Determining the appropriate balance between artwork and building space was a challenge. With a building of this size, there is the inclination that filling it up is the best way to avoid the art being swallowed up in space. Negotiating what to put and where while resisting this urge to fill was an ongoing editing process.



Figure 151: View of the entrance on the first floor from the sound booth, *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

7.2.6 Audience Dynamics

Given the size of the building and the response to the show, the first night was a blend of excitement, success, and mayhem. Audience members were eager to engage during the performance of fixing and tending, which made it difficult to stay in character. On the second

day, there was a smaller, more intimate group, which allowed for the work to be performed as intended. Considering the number of audience members within the exhibition at one time especially when there is a performance element and site challenges would be important.



Figure 152: View up to Turbine platform level from walking bridge, *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Iano

7.2.7 Resources

The most challenging hurdle to overcome with this work was the need for more resources. With a limited research budget and controlled access to shared equipment, realizing the world created a host of boundaries to overcome. This required consolidations, minimizations, negotiations, and shortcuts to obtain the resources needed for the work.

7.3 Future Potentials and Iterations

MUTATE could evolve into three potential paths to further the work. One is to find additional defunct buildings in other locations or cities to set up the archive with the same or different media and media devices and perform *MUTATE* in partnership with preservationists and foundations. Secondly, focusing specifically on CHARI 2.0 and the idea of self-archival practices, refining and streaming the process of making an avatar would allow for the extension of the concept to others. A partnership with an organization such as StoryCorps could be fruitful for exploring new media methods for continuing the self-record.

Lastly, taking the CHARI 2.0 segment of *MUTATE* into a staged environment with the same positional performance dynamics would continue to present critical questions about archives, technologies, and futurity for audiences as a form of experimental performance art.

CHAPTER 8- FINAL THOUGHTS AND CLOSING

Reflection on *MUTATE* and all that this work has involved both conceptually and partially, circling back to Dinkin's essay on Afro-now-ism seems fitting as a closing provocation. Dinkins writes:

> "How do we rediscover ourselves anew? How do we write our collective rememory? Think of rememory as an undoing, unraveling, and rewriting of corporeal constitutive elements. In the changingness of rememory, could we find transcendence? Or perhaps a trace of a former history that allows us to draft something entirely new? "

MUTATE was an experiment. This experiment involved the investigation of my specific critical artistic positions around technology interfacing with black critical studies. Before *MUTATE*'s development, my research focused on biased technologies and oppressive systems as central artistic subject matters. My pre-existing work highlighted technological shortcomings through design, gaze, and datasets while also investigating historical ties to these occurrences. Through the development of this work, the subject of gaze continued to ruminate within my artistic ideology as I observed myself using black embodiment to highlight these systemic failures. Partially, this was due to the critical engagement with scholars and artists working in technological criticism, but it was also a product of navigating institutional divides between fields of study which offered marginal space to bridge my interdisciplinary research. The methodological goal of *MUTATE* was to attempt to reorient my artistic framing, which performed for a particular gaze towards creating a technologically focused artwork that

centered black subjects from a black gaze. This involved looking at the subject of gaze more deeply, asking questions about my intended audience and potential readings of the work being created.

While it was challenging to navigate a method for doing so given the history of the gaze, objects, observers, and black embodiment, I made creative decisions from a different point of view, a different gaze, to experiment with what other narratives, stories, concepts, and connections might reveal themselves by doing so. What resulted was a nuanced artwork that used experimentation to ask questions about what it all means wrapped up in the mix.

The opening of this dissertation draws on the urging of Stephnie Dinkins to move away from the infinite challenge of dismantling oppressive systems. Dinkins does not urge toward ignorance but rather towards understanding that there are other subjects and works to be made that do not spawn from oppositional thinking. It's a rules-based method that isn't about constraints but rather possibilities. Dinkins asks, "what do you in your heart of hearts want to make? " She presents an invitation to try things differently, to look at things differently. To move the motivation for making away from opposition, just once, to see what kind of work comes of it is Stephanie's charge. If your mind has not been encumbered, then the significance of the statement "the unencumbered black mind" may be lost on you. This subtle ideological shift is at the root of what *MUTATE* became. *MUTATE* marks the conclusion of a period of research that has been invigorating, expansive, disheartening, and stifling. *MUTATE* work allowed for reconciliation within my practice as an affirmation of my interdisciplinary practice. Is there no room for heart in technological innovation? Matters of the heart are simply matters

that we engage with with care, whatever the chosen tools. If that tool is a technology with all of its possibilities and flaws, what happens when care is off the table?

I know that I am closer than ever to unleashing my own "spectacular technology". I see it shimmering through the cracks of the institutional methods that have caused me to uncomfortably contort myself. This spectacular technology is abundant and dynamic and exists as a palpable *feeling*, or to intellectualize it, a *knowing* which can also be felt, that arises during my most unencumbered works. It is generated and informed by the synergy of my lived experiences, my cultural heritage, and my scholarly and practical research. My creative praxis is catalyzed by this overlapping truth, and here is where I must reorient myself.

subtext= "

MUTATE is a poem in three-dimensional space. A love letter to survival. A portal toward the reconnection of body and mind. *MUTATE* is a change that has already happened. *MUTATE* is rage and love in the shape of moving bodies and moving pixels. *MUTATE* is a reckoning, a changing lens, a change of color, a changing of dialects. *MUTATE* is a buried truth that eats outward from the inside. *MUTATE* is a straightened back, and an elevated chin. *MUTATE* is refusal. *MUTATE* respects no hierarchies. *MUTATE* is strategic opacity. *MUTATE* is the obsidian commune across the water from the ivory tower. *MUTATE* knows death but never dies. *MUTATE* is all the heart and feeling I have left bound up into still and moving images, avatars, and repurposed materials. *MUTATE* is a farewell but never for good. *MUTATE* will always be operating somewhere. It's with the audience members, with me, and with the Steam plant until it makes its next material stop. "



Figure 153: View of an empty desk in Boiler Room, *MUTATE*, 2024, credit: Joe Ilan

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