



Emily Martin

Notes on Black Video: 1987–2001

In this darkened room, there is nothing for me to see. The plot in this darkness revolves around recognition, but this recognition is always a mistaken identity

- Tony Cokes, *Fade to Black* (1990)

Curated by media artist, Philip Mallory Jones, *Icono Negro: The Black Aesthetic in Video Art*, a unique exhibition of its kind then and now, was presented originally at the Long Beach Museum of Art from June 24th – July 23rd, 1989. The three works featured in the show, Lawrence Andrews' *An I for An I* (1987), Tony Cokes' *Black Celebration* (1988), and Jones' own *What Goes Around/Comes Around* (1986) substantiate the underlying thesis of the exhibition which took the position that "a Black sensibility in video art, as in other forms, is distinct and definable, and it is in the work of the artists that we find out what it is."¹ Curatorially, *Icono Negro* was helped realized by critics, curators, and artists such as, Coco Fusco, Kobena Mercer, and James Briggs Murray, who all provided insight into the exhibition's focus on an emerging Global African diasporic video aesthetic, sensibility and Black cultural practice.

Since *Icono Negro*, the presence of expansive exhibitions and programs covering black video and moving image work generally have been sparse, with exhibitions such as *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the*

Moving Image Since 1970, co-organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta in 2007 through 2009 being one of great note within a scarcity. The exhibition laid out a comprehensive, concentrated historical and aesthetic framework for experimental black moving image production (by women/femme artists), a necessary carving out of the general history and canon of moving image work.

Notes on Black Video: 1987 – 2001 as a program recognizes the historical importance of addressing, specifically through the collection of the Video Data Bank, the presence of black videomaking as an essential, yet under examined facet of the history of the video medium with special consideration to the period in which video experiences great expansion and rapid aesthetic development alongside an increasingly complicated mass media and televisual landscape. In response to the nature of *Icono Negro*, this program that although presents itself as a thematic survey of black videomaking, is an attempt to reexamine the desire to define and create an undeniably discernable practice of black video making with significant consideration given to historical context, aesthetic, and concept. Reflecting on this program of work, the thesis of this essay institutes that the definability and specific characteristics of black video

from this period and onward remain in a space of indefinability, non-site/site, being/non-being, nothing/something, or in reference to the writing of Anaïs Duplan, the *black space*.² The *black space*, a title/term left undefined explicitly in the text by Duplan could be understood as the void space within the frame and beyond it, full of potential. In consideration of the *black space*, Duplan addresses such possibility:

What if, instead, we asserted that all black art is, inherently, risky – and discover what a critique of non-ontology itself looks like? By beginning with opposition as the primary text in response to which the avant-garde propagates, we open up possibility for a newly non-ontological body of creative works. This approach, a kind of "communication after refusal" decentralizes a white socio-racial meaning-making framework by naturalizing the idea of opposition, rather than marginalization. This opens up for black artists a new, local margin in which to propagate what has yet to be seen.³

Through utilizing and encompassing the *black space*, the works featured in this program demonstrate a practice of early (and continuous) black videomaking that intuitively relies on discursively approaching the mass image, structures of meaning/knowledge, and the limitations of perception and what it seeks to render definable and concrete, through

¹ Randolph Street Gallery Exhibition Brochure

² In this essay, the term *black space* is a reference to the title of and thinking surrounding Anaïs Duplan's *Blackspace: On the Poetics of an Afrofuture*.

³ Duplan, 23.



An I For An I, Lawrence Andrews (1987)



Black Body, Thomas Allen Harris (1992)

the amorphous, fluid perspectives present in the intersectional black American experience. The defined/undefined nature of black video is an engagement with and leaning into the in-flux and adaptive demands of experiencing the conditions of blackness, specifically in the American context.

Such work from 1987 – 2001 including Lawrence Andrews' *An I for An I*, Thomas Allen Harris' *Black Body* (1992), Leah (Franklin) Gilliam's *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* (1995), Tony Cokes' *Fade to Black* (1990), and Art Jones' *Love Songs #1* (2001) are considered within the historical context of the period in which we can highlight the rise in mass incarceration, the increasing documentation of police brutality in the media (Rodney King), a solidification of hip-hop and rap cultures, and the political and social aftermath of the demise of the black power movement (and proceeding black liberation efforts) and its impact on black communities, social structures, and cultural production. Popular visual culture of the time and now, contains a multitude of histories embedded into the minutia of the mass image that is fluctuating between both references to and depictions of black visual culture and a Frankensteined amalgamation of what blackness is, should, and must be in order to fortify whiteness, both fictionally and in the news. This point connects to the question of historical context and image production (both mass and

individual) by suggesting that regardless of any explicit or textual address to these histories, both internalized visually and experientially, the video work of this period (or of any period for that matter) cannot be separated from them. The histories of experiencing blackness and existing as black find their way into the image and text in ways that extend from the easily recognizable to the purely, undefinable abstract sense of what it means to create images while existing as black. It is the mass media image and specially video and television that as mediums greatly support and fuel the innerworkings of such things.

The development of video art as understood alongside the history of television and the development of digital mass image production and distribution, collapses the intimate perspective of the video artist and their visual production with the referential aspects of the video medium to the mass image and its wide-scale consumption. The works in this program were selected because they acutely navigate the intimate video image and perspective while addressing and often appropriating the mass video image or popular visual culture in general. Video used by artists acts as an intimate confessional that is aesthetically and communicatively referential to the mass medium of television. For black videomakers, this relationship of intimate/mass provides a visual and textual terrain in which they can encounter and

dissect the problem of representing blackness and what blackness is or said to be. Again, referring to the *black space* element of this visual practice directs us to an impossibility of definable representation and a problem of perceiving blackness and communicating/receiving what it is.

Chronologically starting out the program, Lawrence Andrews' *An I For An I* heavily utilizes the expansive intertextual capabilities of video to dissect the cultural and ideological implications presented through popular visual culture sources such as appropriated scenes from *Rambo* (1982) and pornography. Alongside such media, Andrews incorporates found, original, and doctored footage broken up and manipulated through split screens, geometric isolated frames in black space, and other various video effects. The visuality of this video works in unison with its layered and carefully orchestrated audio to make essential connections between meaning presented by visual images and meaning presented by sound, which both insist upon each other, unloading excessive messages concerning violence and sex as they overlap with Andrews' own embodied footage. Commencing by disclaiming that the work is "directed and produced by our culture", *An I for An I* connects the intimate video of Andrews' body experiencing and suggesting violence alongside the dominance of the mass image of gratuitous violence which



Sapphire and the Slave Girl, Leah (Franklin) Gilliam (1995)



Fade to Black, Toney Cokes (1990)

seamlessly flows into the pornographic image, melding both bodily pleasure and pain. The black space of the larger frame is broken into pieces and peeks through various smaller frame formations throughout the majority of the work making its presence grounding and ever present. Quite literally, *An I for An I* is a work residing in the *black space* of the video frame in which Andrew's discursive examination of insistent cultural messaging seeps into this zone of nothing and the amorphous unrepresentable. The presence of Andrews' black male body receiving violence, which in the end is shown to be done by his own hands, asks who am I in relation to these cultural images, what do they insist about the perception of my bodily image, and how do I intercept this and make meaning of myself and this body without further harm?

Continuing this questioning of the being/non-being and the embodied aspects of blackness as it is concerned with perception, Thomas Allen Harris' *Black Body* navigates the cultural and ideological impositions and assaults upon the image and physicality of the black body. The naked black torso distorted, contorted, and bound uncomfortably by wire is displayed up close in front of a gritty brick background. Superimposed text across the screen in poetic writing details all the things the "black body is..." aided by the audio, consisting of a

monologue and a mixed soundtrack of haunting and subtle electronic and traditional music. The monologue, voiced by a woman, details a depressed and confusing bodily experience and the event of the narrator's castration which is explained through interweaving descriptions and mentionings of the vagina and the penis rendered non-specific and agender. Embodiment from the perspective of the narrator is totalizing yet undefinable. The castration narrative is mixed with bodily associations to the narrator's experience of and perception on life, themselves, and their surroundings all of which are nightmarish and hard to discern. Messaging on the screen communicates all the things the black body is: style, history, beauty, despised. *Black Body* uses the layering aspects of video and sound to collide the many meanings assigned to the black body, a site and non-site that evokes anxiety, fear, envy, desire, and loathing. It continues the questioning presented by *An I for An I* concerned with the space of blackness that gets excessively filled with contradictory and confused meanings, leaving those that embody this site/space/body disoriented and desiring to reconstitute what the perception of blackness and the black body means, done through restorative and critical mediums such as video.

Leah (Franklin) Gilliam's video noir, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl*, takes a

similar approach to the question of identity based upon perception while also engaging with how these issues play out in the urban space. Gilliam's video references the 1959 British crime drama, *Sapphire*, in which two detectives investigate the murder of a young woman who they believe to be white, but then discover is a lighter-skinned black woman passing as white, leading them to navigate the tense and complicated racial landscape of London's Hampstead Heath neighborhood. Layered with other genre-based pop culture references, *Sapphire* is jammed together with nods to Raymond Chandler's Detective Marlowe and *Shaft*. Traversing a disorienting and non-descript urban landscape (stated to be Chicago), Gilliam's *Sapphire* is a racial chameleon played and represented by several different women throughout the video in various wigs and costumes. The audio of the video plays into this malleability of identity as it is perceived by listing the many colliding descriptions of who Sapphire is, "She's a radical, Latina performance artist. She's a Canadian-Jewish Naomi Campbell." Mixing fast paced editing and constant setting shifts, *Sapphire* reuses to ground itself while collaging sources of found and original footage that often blend into one another, sometimes blurring the line between what was shot by Gilliam and the appropriated and found image. Sapphire in the video is on the run from shifting detective and law enforcement figures



Love Songs #1 (Over Above), Art Jones (2001)

who establish a further sense of panic, anxiety, and confusion in the jumbled narrative. In connection to work of their contemporaries, Gilliam also employs the use of text, bookmarking parts of the video using singular words such as networks, buildings, and open spaces. *Sapphire* presents a maze of images and meanings evoked by the details of the video's various settings and characters, but in the end, Gilliam's *Sapphire* finds herself trapped and alone in the enclosed space of a city apartment with a nod to the history of displacement and isolation black communities have faced at the hands of urban and city planning.

In a similar mode as Andrew's *An I for An I*, Tony Coke's *Fade to Black* marks a substantial moment in the program and the history of black video it addresses with a usage of the video medium that breaks down the meaning and site of the appropriated cinematic image and popular film reference. Coke utilizes the room of the black space (while still leaving some of it bare) to display a reel of appropriated film footage from films such as *Taxi Driver*, *Jailhouse Rock*,

Carmen Jones, and *Do the Right Thing*, often from either climatic or opening sequences. Appropriated footage is broken up by text, both superimposed below the footage and occasionally taking up the whole frame with various statements such as one in the opening, "You've probably seen this film before."⁴, written by Cokes and Donald Trammel with the epilogue text lifted from Malcolm X. Above the appropriated footage lists non-corresponding tiles and years from early American films that specifically incorporate race and the black subject on screen such as *Birth of a Nation* and many other films utilizing minstrelsy. Throughout the work, the black spectator is prompted to navigate their own misplaced and unseen position on screen and beyond. A narrator speaks on the means of interpellation (hailing) upon the individual and mundane, anecdotal racism carefully mixed with snippets of music from artists such as Public Enemy and NWA. Cultural and ideological questioning through video and sound remixing characterize this work that details the problem presented upon the black spectator and individual and their

reaction to minimizing and invalidating anti-black ideology and rhetoric. The voice of interpellation insists itself throughout the video pushing the narrator to question their experience as a black and unseen, yet marked. Through the words of Malcom X, the video intends to leave the black viewer aware of the methods and calls of interpellation in an anti-black world and perhaps leaves room for possibility to redetermine what black is in consideration of and beyond/within the endless confines of the screen.

Intricate and varied mixing and sampling of video and sound extends to the work of artist, Art Jones, in *Love Songs #1*. In the spirit of the VJ, the final work featured in the program includes three musical pieces: *Blow #2*, *Nurture*, and *Over Above*. *Blow #2* takes heavily pixelated, lagging appropriated footage of scantily-clad women shooting guns in the desert and turns it into the background image for a jarring, yet hypnotic lyric video for the Delfonics classic, "Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)". Jones furthers this culture jamming and remixing in the cartoonish work, *Nurture*. Set to the tune of Ol' Dirty Bastard's 1996 song "Brooklyn Zoo", *Nurture* visually mixes trembling video footage of Bronx Zoo animals with animated animal talking heads. Almost hidden within the video, a quote from Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* appears on screen momentarily: "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day."⁵ Despite the at a glance playful nature of this video, the inclusion of this quote points to a sentiment brewing underneath or maybe in plain sight, one that speaks to the non-ontological experience of blackness, a predetermined body. Concluding with another quote from Fanon⁶, *Nurture* leads in to the final work in the trio, *Over Above*. The more contemplative and still work of the three, *Over Above* combines the perspective from an airplane window viewing documentation shot from the view of a bus widow of the beating of

⁴ Could be considered in the same family as Lawrence Andrews' "directed and produced by our culture".

⁵ Fanon, 93.

⁶ "I wept a long time and then began to live again."

Thomas Jones by the Philadelphia police on July 12, 2000. Set to Cibo Matto's "Sunday Part II", *Over Above* is a melancholic tonal shift, addressing both the immediate, intimate, and readily available witnessing of police brutality and the removed, distant perspective of the secondhand spectator, a collapsed perceptive that takes different form for the black spectator of such events. The first two works flow into the finale of the trio, building an awareness of the capabilities of mixing popular music and video to replicate or play with the conditions of blackness as a positionality, one that is lyrical, destructive, devastating, exorbitant, and delightful. Fanon's words included at the end of *Nurture*, "I wept a long time and then began to live again" reemerge although unsaid, unseen, and unheard as the video closes out.

Perhaps leading off of the sentiment behind *Icono Negro* and its thinking around defining the black video aesthetic, this program of works through a different perspective, reflects on the exhibition's effort to "define parameters of a new genre, international and intercultural, which is fluid and in a state of self-discovery." It instead calls attention to these works' refusal towards essentialization and concrete definition, rendering identity, narrative, setting/site, temporality, and self, untethered and in the nebulous yet, promising *black space*.



An I For An I, Lawrence Andrews (1987)

Note from the Programmer

As a writer, researcher, and arts administrator focused on the moving image and theories and philosophies concerning blackness, I'm often thinking of ways to combine these interests in my work. Moving image presents a unique field of potential in thinking about blackness and working closely with the collection at the Video Data Bank as both a researcher and arts administrator has really cultivated some of my thinking present in this essay. Through my work in the field and academia, I've taken notice of a glaring lack of focus on early black video work that is integrable to understanding the history of the moving image (and of course video specifically). A crucial part of my practice is to examine and attempt to rectify such things including and beyond the content of this program and essay. The works featured in *Notes on Black Video I* hold very closely to my own experiences and ways of seeing the world and envisioning something different. My thinking in this essay and beyond has been greatly inspired by these artists and of course, by the words of writers from Fanon to DuPlan. Thank you.

Bibliography

Brownlee, Andrea Barnwell, and Valerie Cassel Oliver. *Cinema Remixed & Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970* Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2008.

Copeland, Huey. *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Duplan, Anaïs. *Blackspace: On the Poetics of an Afrofuture* Boston: Black Ocean, 2020.

Fanon, Frantz, Richard Philcox, and Anthony Appiah. *Black Skin, White Masks* New edition. New York: Grove Press, 2008.

Harris, Thomas Allen. "On Becoming Me: 1980s NYC Arts and Culture Through a Queer Lens." *Black Camera : the newsletter of the Black Film Center/Archives* 10, no. 2 (2019): 136–148

Jones, Philip Mallory and Randolph Street Gallery. *Icono Negro: The Black Aesthetic in Video Art*. Chicago: Randolph Street Gallery, 1989.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break : the Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Swenson, Jill Dianne. "Rodney King, Reginald Denny, and TV News: Cultural (Re-)Construction of Racism." *The Journal of Communication Inquiry* 19, no. 1 (1995): 75–88.

Warren, Calvin L. *Ontological Terror : Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Welbon, Yvonne, and Alexandra Juhasz. *Sisters in the Life : a History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. Print.

William L. Solomon, and William S. Solomon. "Images of Rebellion: News Coverage of Rodney King." *Race, gender & class (Towson, Md.)* 11, no. 1 (2004): 23–38.

VDB Collection Research

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/art-jones-interview>

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/warrington-hudlin-interview>

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/cyrille-hipps-interview>

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/tom-poole-interview-0>

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/danny-tisdale-interview>

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/michele-wallace-interview>

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/pat-ward-williams-interview>

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/adrian-piper-what-follows>

<https://www.vdb.org/titles/viewpoints-video-envisioning-black-aesthetic>