



**LEEDS  
ARTS RESEARCH  
CENTRE**

**COVERS**

**DR HAROLD OFFEH**

# OUTPUT INFORMATION

Title:  
Covers

Output Type:  
I – Performance

Venue(s):  
The Studio Museum, Harlem; Live Art Development  
Agency, London; New Art Exchange, Nottingham;  
MAC VAL, France; Museum of African Diaspora, San  
Francisco

Year of first performance:  
2014

Research Groups:  
Curating  
Participatory Practice



## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION STATEMENT**

Covers asks what happens when iconic images are translated into bodily form. If icons are created by turning body into image, Offeh produces new iconicity by turning image into body. By re-enacting album covers of black singers from the 1970s and 80s, Offeh embodies their nostalgic mystique, his static, durational tableaux caught between image and object. A research tool for producing embodied understanding of the construction of images, Covers began with Grace Jones's *Island Life*. As the video shows, her famous 'arabesque' pose disintegrates under Offeh's re-enactment, fatigue setting in as his body resists being placed at the service of an image. Evolving through commissions from The Studio Museum, Harlem (2014) and the Live Art Development Agency, London (2015), in 2017 a video series of Covers was developed for the touring exhibition, *Untitled: art on the conditions of our time*, New Art Exchange, Nottingham. One of the videos appeared in the exhibition *Tous, des sangs-mêlés* (MAC VAL, France, 2017), a comprehensive survey of cultural identity featuring 60 artists, reviewed in French national newspaper *Liberation*. Artforum's Jeanne Gerrity described Offeh's contribution to *The Grace Jones Project* (Museum of African Diaspora, San Francisco, 2016) as 'a humorous one-minute video of the artist [re-creating] the physically impossible pose Jones adopted'. This exhibition saw 20 artists explore Jones as an icon who changed perceptions of race and gender, Offeh contributing to a panel discussion chaired by curator Nicole J Caruth. Covers explores how the gendered, racialised body operates within popular culture. According to New York Times critic Holland Cotter, Offeh 'beams himself down for the camera as a long-limbed and lithe disconaut Grace Jones'. However, by using his body to recreate images, he doesn't so much venerate as reify their iconicity, these abstract symbols of cultural capital made more real, their pictorial premium enfolded.

GG

The most moving and touching is undoubtedly the video of Harold Offeh: in his bathroom, in balance and naked, the artist tries to mimic the pose of Grace Jones on the cover of the album *Island Life*. Deconstructing the cliché of the black sculptural woman with the oiled body, it also explodes the partitioning of the genres. Another way to mix.

Clémentine Mercier, *Libération*, 18 June 2017 (translation from French original)

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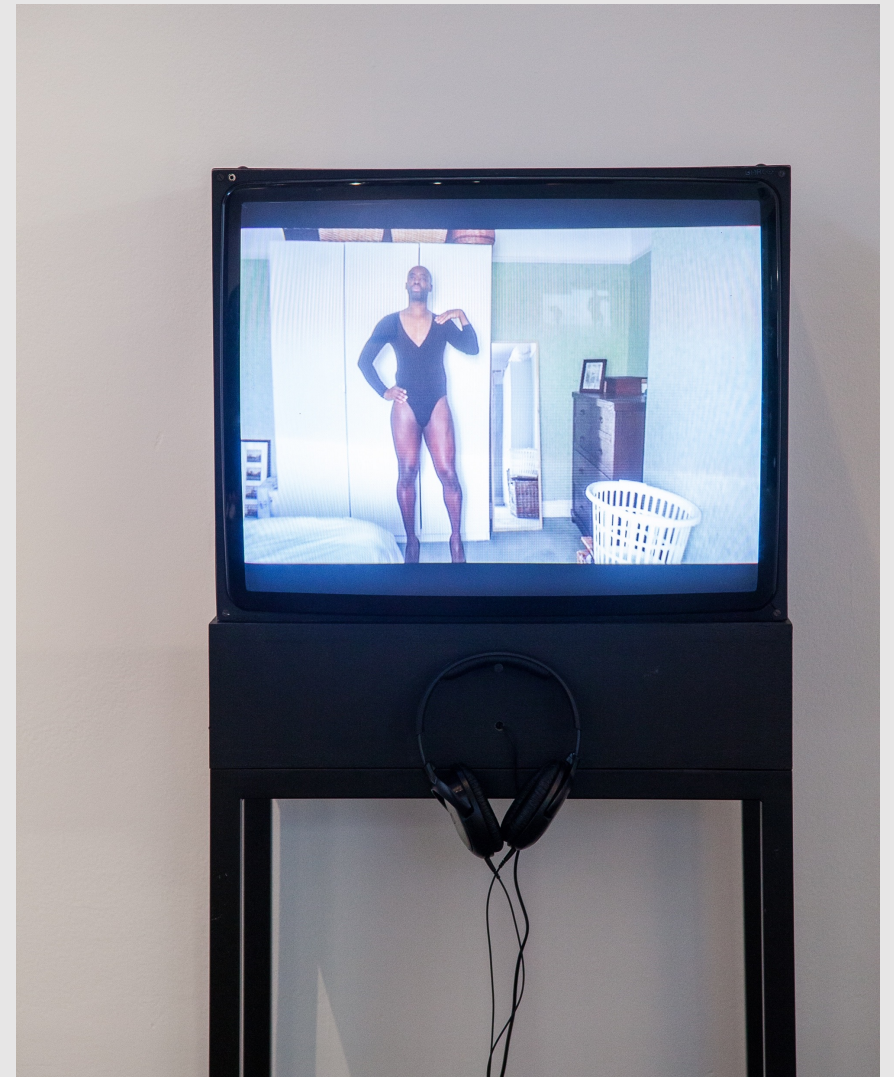
Harold Offeh beams himself down for the camera as a long-limbed and lithe disconaut Grace Jones.

Holland Cotter, 'The Shadows Took Shape' exhibition review, New York Times 14 Nov 2013



Images: Covers Playlist, Video Installation, New Art Exchange, Nottingham, 2017

Photos: Courtesy of Bartosz Kali



Images: Covers Playlist, Video Installation, New Art Exchange, Nottingham, 2017

Photos: Courtesy of Bartosz Kali



Images: Covers Live, Performance at Queers Traces, MAC, Birmingham, 2015

Photos: Courtesy of Open Aperture UK





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Images: Covers Live, P! Gallery,  
New York, 2016

Photos: Courtesy of Suzanne  
Mooney



Images: Covers Live, P! Gallery, New York, 2016

Photos: Courtesy of Suzanne Mooney



Image: Covers Live, P! Gallery, New York, 2016

Photos: Courtesy of Suzanne Mooney



Image: Covers, (After Betty Davis, They Say I'm Different, 1974), 2013

Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Image: Covers, (After The Rolling Stones, Exile on Main Street 1972), 2013

Photo: Courtesy of the artist



# APPENDIX

# AUDIO & VIDEO DOCUMENTATION

Tous, des sangs-mêlés (All mixed-bloods) Exhibition at MAC VAL, France, 2017

<https://vimeo.com/214649780>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/DépartementduValdeMarne>

Untitled: art on the conditions of our time at New Art Exchange in Nottingham, UK, 2017

<https://audioboom.com/posts/5510577-free-thinking-the-influence-of-the-british-black-art-movement> (From BBC Radio 3, Free Thinking Interview)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LC-LFTuxM4>



# AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

## UNTITLED: art of the conditions of our time, New Art Exchange, Nottingham. Comments from Visitors Book 13 January – 19 March 2017

**13.01.2017**

A most interesting and varied art work, very uplifting and good for the heart.

**14.01.2017**

Powerful and challenging. Thank you, artists, for your work.

Powerful, visually stunning work, thank you.

Very good, powerful work.

Interesting!

Very Interesting, we will be returning again.

Will be re-visiting with friends.

**15.01.2017**

Great to be here!

Dramatic and Interesting, worth a second visit.

**16.01.2017**

Some honourable work. I was really impressed by Phoebe Boswell.

**18.01.2017**

Very nice.

Exciting, thought provoking exhibition.

**19.01.2017**

Very beautiful work.

**20.01.2017**

A conflict of dislocated memories.

Excellent work of art.

Breath taking, beauty everywhere.

Loved these, thank you, it was excellent.

Great, emotive exhibition – loved it.

Will be coming again.

Came from Southampton for the show, completely worth it.

**23.01.2017**

Loved the diversity of the exhibition

Wonderful exhibition – worth coming down from Cambridge

I liked the film on the two screens.

**26.01.2017**

Amazing exhibition.

Powerful and wonderful exhibition. Thank you.

**30.01.2017**

Amazing will be coming back.

# AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

**UNTITLED: art of the conditions  
of our time, New Art Exchange,  
Nottingham.  
Comments from Visitors Book  
13 January – 19 March 2017**

**30.01.2017**

Amazing will be coming back.

**01.02.2017**

Brilliant and moving.

**02.02.2017**

Fantastic Show – Thank you

**07.02.2017**

Fantastic exhibition – so worth the trip from NYC. Great, thank you.

**08.02.2017**

Interesting!

**09.02.2017**

Really enjoyed the exhibition, there was some great music too.

**10.02.2017**

Glad we visited – thoughtful work.

Great show!

Interesting and enjoyable.

**12.02.2017**

Enjoyed the variety of this exhibition, I especially liked Barbara Walker's

work.

**13.02.2017**

Good compliment to Nottingham Gallery shows.

**16.02.2017**

A great show – struck by Blandy and Barbara Walkers work.

Excellent work.

Enjoyed the exhibition a lot, have been inspired to do some of my own work.

**28.02.2017**

Interesting exhibition, also nice to have books to look through.

**03.02.2017**

Great Show, especially Barbara and Harold.

**18.02.2017**

Wonderful, thank you.

Brilliant exhibition.

**20.02.2017**

Fantastic, well drawn exhibition.

I think it is very good and unique.

Wonderful, very enjoyable. Thank you.

# AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

**UNTITLED: art of the conditions  
of our time, New Art Exchange,  
Nottingham.  
Comments from Visitors Book  
13 January – 19 March 2017**

**20.02.2017**

Fantastic, well drawn exhibition.  
I think it is very good and unique.  
Wonderful, very enjoyable. Thank you.

**23.02.2017**

Thought provoking and creative.

**24.02.2017**

When will we begin to express.  
Thought provoking and creative.

**26.02.2017**

Loved Barbara Walker's portrait 'attitude'  
Time for less navel gazing. We can be aspirational, we can think  
bigger.

**03.03.2017**

Wonderfully skilful work, especially Phoebe Boswell  
& Barbara Walker.

**08.03.2017**

Thought provoking especially Phoebe Boswell  
Incredible! Bring these shows to York, would be  
highly appreciated

**09.03.2017**

Interesting and I like the combination of video and fine arts.  
Very cool.

**10.03.2017**

Different!

**13.03.2017**

Brilliant.

**15.03.2017**

Very capturing.

**18.03.2017**

Complex and thought provoking.

# REVIEWS & ARTICLES

Gargett, Sophie, 'Exhibition Exposition: UNTITLED at New Art Exchange', (Nottingham: Experience Nottinghamshire, 15 February 2017) <http://news.experiencenottinghamshire.com/exhibition-review-untitled-at-new-art-exchange>

Masterson, Piers, 'UNTITLED: art on the conditions of our time', (London, this is tomorrow, 16 March 2017) [www.thisistomorrow.info/articles/untitled-art-on-the-conditions-of-our-time](http://www.thisistomorrow.info/articles/untitled-art-on-the-conditions-of-our-time)

Burrows, Wayne, 'A Q&A with... Larry Achiampong, artist exploring the Black diaspora', (Newcastle/London: a-n, 26 January 2017). [www.a-n.co.uk/news/a-ga-with-larry-achiampong-artist-exploring-the-black-diaspora](http://www.a-n.co.uk/news/a-ga-with-larry-achiampong-artist-exploring-the-black-diaspora)

Anon., 'Four artworks that explore what it meant to be Black and British in the 1980s', (London: Free Thinking Show, BBC Radio Three Website. 20 January 2017) [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5mMhfBSwXtsyDYS4K6Rz3v9/four-artworks-that-explore-what-it-meant-to-be-black-and-british-in-the-1980s](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5mMhfBSwXtsyDYS4K6Rz3v9/four-artworks-that-explore-what-it-meant-to-be-black-and-british-in-the-1980s)

Anon., 'UNTITLED: art on the conditions of our time', (London: Contemporary And, 14 January 2017) [www.contemporaryand.com/exhibition/untitled-art-on-the-conditions-of-our-time/](http://www.contemporaryand.com/exhibition/untitled-art-on-the-conditions-of-our-time/)

Brady, Poppy, 'African diaspora artists' work outside the frame', (London: The Voice Online. 29 January 2017) <http://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/african-diaspora-artists%E2%80%99-work-outside-frame>

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Gallarate, Sofia, 'Five art shows to see this week: Whitechapel Gallery, New Art Exchange and more', (London: Royal Academy, 13 January 2017) <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/ve-art-shows-to-see>

[this-week-13-19-jan](#)

Free Thinking show, BBC Radio Three, 'The influence of the British Black Art movement', (London: Wed 18 Jan 2017, 10pm) [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b088jl62](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b088jl62)

'Ben Affleck, Untitled in Nottingham, V&A news, Lord Snowdon remembered', Front Row, (London: BBC Radio 4, 13 January 2017) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b087pfb4>

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Mercier, Clémentine, Tous, des sangs-mêlés (All mixed-bloods) Review of (In French) at MAC VAL (Paris: Libération, 18 June 2017) [http://next.liberation.fr/arts/2017/06/18/brassages-en-revue-au-macval\\_1577674](http://next.liberation.fr/arts/2017/06/18/brassages-en-revue-au-macval_1577674)

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Cotter, Holland, The Shadows Took Shape exhibition review, (New York: The New York Times, 14 Nov 2013) <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/arts/design/the-shadows-took-shape-at-the-studio-museum.html>

Cren, Julie & Lamy, Frank. Tous, des sangs-mêlés Exhibition catalogue, (Val-de-Marne: Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, August 2017)

Oyer, Tyler Matthew, 'Now + Then: A Conversation with Harold Offeh' (Los Angeles: tir journal, April 2016) <http://www.tirjournal.com/6968735/then-now-a-conversation-withharold-offeh>

**21 April 2016 – tir journal**  
**'Now + Then: A conversation**  
**with Harold Offeh' Tyler**  
**Matthew Oyer**

**Tyler:**

So where do you come from?

Laughter

**Harold:**

Where do I come from?

**Tyler:**

Mars?! Well, tell me some autobiographical information, and how that's led to you make the work you will present at The Museum of the African Diaspora.

**Harold:**

It's interesting moving out of London because I think my identity is really tied in and tied up with London. I was born in Ghana, in Accra. I moved to the UK when I was about two or three. Basically all my formative life has been in London. I moved to Cambridge a couple of years ago and I realized how much London has shaped me, having grown up and gone to school there. I've lived in north, south, east, west... the whole dynamic of the city is in my being.

I went to an ordinary state school in north London. There were lots of second generation immigrant students. There were refugee kids from Somalia; kids would just be dumped, never having spoken English. I had amazingly dedicated teachers, particularly on the art side. The teachers were invested in the young people's welfare so there were amazing transformations. I think that's why I've always been committed to teaching. I had really great drama, art, and music teachers. It gave me an unquestioning embrace for the arts. Thinking about it now, especially after speaking with others who have this ethnic minority background, it's difficult to negotiate going into the arts as a profession. I think my mum was pleased that I was alright academically, so she never said I should be a

doctor or a lawyer. She was surprised I did so well. One dilemma I had was between going to drama school or to art school. I remember my art teacher saying that in art school I could do almost anything, that it was an open space, an open platform. So naïvely I went to art school.

**Tyler:**

Where was that?

**Harold:**

I went to university in Brighton. It's a seaside town on the English coast, like 50 miles outside of London. I went there because Brighton is like a smaller, English version of San Francisco. It's known for being a queer city. It was a safe space so I was like, I can go there and come out.

**Tyler:**

And explore what that means...

**Harold:**

Exactly. Brighton has a rich history of alternative lifestyles... hippies, dirty sex weekends, things like that.

**Tyler:**

And poets!

Laughter

**Harold:**

Yes, all the clichés!

It was an opportunity for me to experience this lifestyle, this openness. I was in a program that was very 1970's.

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It was critical theory and art practice... the osmosis of the two. It was difficult at the time to negotiate as a nineteen-year old having a four-hour seminar on Foucault and then have to go build something with wood. It had pros and cons. Looking back now, it was a great experience, but at the time it was difficult and challenging. The program had a bad 70's hangover in terms of having an all white male faculty, apart from a few interesting visiting artists.

**Tyler:**

What were you making?

**Harold:**

It was the mid 1990's. I was making installation, working with tape slides. I was into 90's trip hop like Portishead and Tricky... but noir-ish, torch songs...

**Tyler:**

So theatrical?

**Harold:**

Really theatrical. The installations were different layers of slides, slides of diseases and diseased bodies projected onto figures, naked bodies, myself. There were monologue voiceovers. They were naïve. Then I discovered video art. It was freeing. People like Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Adrian Piper... So I started roaming around with a video camera. I made one work in the local public library where they had this scanning camera that was for blowing up text for partially sighted readers. You put something under the camera and it would project it on a monitor. I put parts of my body under the camera. I recorded the monitor. I'm not sure how I got away with that.

Then I set up video salons for galvanized communities, where we could screen our works together. I got involved with the LGBTQ

society. There was a lot of activist energy, militant even. I went straight from art school into an MFA program at the Royal College of Art. I was admitted in the photo program, which was a bit weird. Now they have a performance program but back then they didn't. You had to choose sculpture, painting, photography, or printmaking and I didn't know in which domain I belonged, coming in with a video and performance practice. I felt like an imposter. The majority of the students were hardcore photographers.

**Tyler:**

Invested in the history, language, materiality of photography...

**Harold:**

I felt like I was just messing around! But what was great is that the Royal College is really a design school. All my friends were in fashion and ceramics. I liked it so much that I got an extra year by working in the student union doing advocacy, running events, planning trips, and inviting speakers.

**Tyler:**

Where in London is the RCA?

**Harold:**

It's in Kensington, in West London. Where the embassies are. It's posh. It's in a privileged setting... ladies who lunch.

**Tyler:**

CalArts is in Valencia, which is this bourgeois suburb of Los Angeles. There are a lot of Mercedes Benz with rhinestone license plates... like Paris Hilton clones, fantastic plastic style. Then there's the freaky art school, which was there before most of the town, as it is now, was developed. It's funny. The town thinks the art students are monsters and the art students think the townies are monsters.

**21 April 2016 – tir journal**  
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**Harold:**

I like that tension – two weird worlds in parallel!

**Tyler:**

What were you making at RCA?

**Harold:**

Lots of video. I've always been interested in drawing references from popular culture. It's my strategy for using myself as material. I've realized I'm a frustrated historian. That makes me interested in archives and archiving – the depositories of history both within canonical institutions like museums and within popular culture spheres. I use myself to negotiate these materials and structures.

I did this piece called Smile. I held a smile for 35 minutes while listening to Nat King Cole's version of the song Smile. The lyrics were written by Charlie Chaplin and are very instructional. I was thinking about Allan Kaprow's instructions...

**Tyler:**

You were queering the delineations between proper art performance and pop music. Like campy Kaprow! The gesture is a serious task on the body.

**Harold:**

My practice feels out of kilter, specifically in the UK. There's this moment in the 1980's when artists were exploring body politics, identity politics, and cultural representation while looking to implement institutional change and reform. When I was in school it was all YBA like Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin... artists with a whole different agenda that was a reformulation of British identity with global pop culture.

There was a rejection of identity politics and theory. It was uncritical. Very much about a gestural, punk attitude... but completely white washed. There were artists like Steve McQueen and Chris Ofili who were successful at the time, but most of the work seemed disconnected from what came before it and what interested me... artists like Sonia Boyce and Keith Piper. I felt the work I was making was not located within the dominant conversation at that time.

It seems there is a younger generation now, artists in their twenties, who are returning to these issues with an overtly activist agenda. It isn't about getting trashed and making a lot of money. I'm excited really. I think in the next five years we will see amazing artists come from the UK.

**Tyler:**

You've contextualized your work within this UK scene, but so many of your artistic references are American. Can you talk about that?

**Harold:**

Certainly. Within my work there are overt references to American popular culture. That's partly from being a victim of American cultural imperialism and that American culture has become a lingua franca, almost universally shared. My current ongoing series Covers looks specifically at American soul and R&B records from the 1960 – 1980's. I treat it like an archival project. I'm interested in how the album covers are illustrative formats that represent an identity and promote a brand. The album covers are a microcosm of the broader political landscape. What you get within this period of American history is a negotiation of identity presentation.

For example, I do this Betty Davis album cover They Think I'm Different. Davis is dressed like a Barbarella figure in a space suit with a huge collar and rods.

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She looks fierce with a big afro. It's very Afrofuturist. There's an appropriation of Sci-Fi and outer space, a negotiation of sexual identity, the figuration of her body for the camera, her address to the camera. I'm interested in how these African American women present themselves to the camera, where the gaze falls, how they are framed... their stares.

For me it's always about the image. I've been going to record shops and looking online and coming across these artists I don't know. I then negotiate the music, the album cover, the context of the artist, and their biography. In the case of Betty Davis, her tempestuous marriage to Miles Davis has overshadowed her career, almost to the point of erasure. The use of my body with the idea of a re-enactment is a kind of marker, a human Post-it note.

This practice has evolved. Initially I would restage the album covers in my studio, apartment, or other domestic spaces. I would try to recreate things like the Grace Jones' Island Life pose as a photograph. I then translated them into durational moments, recorded as videos. The videos are what I'm showing at MoAD in San Francisco. Recently I've presented them as live works where I'm performing the images for an audience. I was thinking about iTunes cover flow and how a performance can be like a playlist. I assume the pose for the length of the title track while the album cover art is projected. It's about inviting the audience to look at the image. To look at me. Look at the image.

**Tyler:**

You ask the audience to experience the transference between the still icons and the body, your body, in space. What draws me to album covers is their highly crafted, beautiful iconographic qualities. In some cases they are our saints. They are fantastical and captivating. They leave impressions. Their lyrics become mantras. They become a utopia that we look toward.

I've started collecting vinyl and realizing musicians do not make

album art with the same intensity as they did pre-CD. People who weren't huge stars had incredible badass album covers that still pull me in. They are like paintings. They become a fantasy, which makes me think about your choice to perform them. You take the image and show the effects of it on the body and mind. The then/now and here/there co-presences resound.

**Harold:**

There's a pedagogical imperative — a reconnection with history. My project is influenced by Sonia Boyce's Devotional, which is a collective history project that invites audiences to name black British female singers from now to the 1920's. People always come up with someone new because the archive is incomplete. I saw the show a few times and it always brings up forgetting and memory as aspects of history. It shows how art can be a marker or catalyst for collective memory.

Another strategy with the work is the notion of self-creation. Kodwo Eshun calls it mythopoesis; self-mythologizing. People like Sun Ra and George Clinton. I'm reading this book that radically theorizes Sun Ra's life from a queer perspective; (Tim Stüttgen IN A QU\*A\*RE TIME AND PLACE Post-Slavery Temporalities, Blaxploitation, and Sun Ra's Afrofuturism between Intersectionality and Heterogeneity)

<http://www.b-books.de/verlag/quare-time/index.html>

it's super exciting. Within queer and ethnic minority narratives, this notion of identity formulation or self-mythologizing as a radical political strategy for visibility is important and vital.

**Tyler:**

I have a project that is similar in approach to your Covers called Calling All Divas. In it, I create a seemingly arbitrary chain of queer, feminist, intergenerational inspirations as material or task for performance.



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They can be actual people or fictional, living or dead, and my relationship to them can be actual or imagined. The first one was me performing as Kembra Pfahler in her Karen Black drag, reciting Karen Black's interpretation of Portia's monologue from Julius Caesar. It was originally a performance for camera but I've performed it live a number of times. What brings our work together is how we use our body as site for archive. As queer bodies and minority bodies, the histories we have been given are often difficult or violent to identify with because they are white supremacist, patriarchal, misogynist... those histories need to be unarchived from our bodies. People like Sun Ra or Grace Jones who were able to invent and obscure their entire persona and history queered the idea of a given history and an established, stable archive. Archives are fucking arbitrary so why can't Calling All Divas and Covers be archiving with alternative agendas?

This conversation ties into the black radical imagination and the queer radical imagination. The dominant culture does not allow us to live our fantasies, so we must create small windows where they can be manifest, no matter how fleeting.

**Harold:**

Absolutely.

**Tyler:**

This is why working in series is key for us. The more the series is realized the more spaces that are opened and references that are networked. My friend Litia Perta calls it coalition building. The series reinforces our actions and intentions.

**Harold:**

One thing I often do is to apply narratives and the politics of the other to the straight white male body. It's one reason I'm endlessly fascinated by Vito Acconci's work... for me it's an exploration into

the psychology of the American man. Some of the positions he assumes really try to interrogate his role in broader society... I know he's doing architecture stuff now... but even that is like the apotheosis of white male egotism... bigger bigger!

Laughter

# EXHIBITION LEAFLET

From 30 April to 3 September 2017

4 pm

Organized by all the collaborators in the organization of the event, these encounters are free of charge and open to all audience on Sunday, 30 April, 7 May, 14 May, 21 May, 28 May, 4 June, 11 June, 25 June, 9 July, 27 August and 3 September

"De quoi j'me mêle?"

Series of lecture-debates

The Ficthre collective of architects has designed a space for encounter, dialogue and debate in the heart of the exhibition. Singular voices will speak up to share opinions as well as personal and collective experiences around the exhibited artworks with the audience.

Sunday 7 May

4 pm

Visit by Julie Crenn and Frank Lamy, curators of the exhibition

Saturday 20 May — Long night of museums

7 pm, 8 pm, 9 pm, 10 pm and 11 pm

Performance

Société Réaliste, *Universal Anthem*, 2013-2014

7 pm

Performance

Esther Ferrer, *Questions aux Français*

9 pm

Performance

Tsuneko Taniuchi, *Micro-événement n°6 bis / Fast Food / Sushi-Merguez*

8 pm

Projection

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Ismyrne*, 2016  
Coproduction of the Jeu de Paume, Paris and Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah.  
Galerie In Situ — fabienne leclerc, Paris.

Saturday 24 and Sunday 25 June 2017

3 pm – 6 pm

2€ per participant and per day  
Information and registration:  
reservation@macval.fr / +33 (0)1 43 91 64 23

"ACCENTS, BARBARISMES,  
MA LANGUE EST UNE CHIMÈRE"  
Writing workshops for adults,  
hosted by writer Célia Houdart

Young audience

Saturday 20 May 2017

3 pm

Parents and children from 5, free of charge  
Information and registration:  
cdm.macval@macval.fr / +33 (0)1 43 91 14 64

"Atlas"

Artist book workshop hosted  
by Sophie Della Corte

Around the exhibition

Audioguide

Guided tour by the curators of the exhibition.

Free, available at reception upon request

Exhibition catalogue

248 pages, 100 reproductions, texts in French and English, 16,5×23 cm, 19 €. Texts by Julie Crenn, Alexia Fabre, Frank Lamy and the team of public programmes.

Guided tours

Guided tour included in admission ticket on Wednesday at 3 pm, Saturday and Sunday at 4pm.

CQFD (Ce Qu'il Faut Découvrir)

Documentation booklet comprising images and literary, scientific, economic and political texts to widen the scope of interpretation of the exhibition.

Free, available at reception upon request or downloadable from the museum website

Documentation center

A team of librarians is here to help you explore your experience further through a selection of reference works.

Free access from Tuesday to Friday  
12 pm to 6 pm and Saturday from 12 pm to 7 pm  
cdm.macval@macval.fr / +33 (0)1 43 91 14 64

MAC VAL thanks its partners:



# Tous, des sang-mêlés

Curated by Julie Crenn and Frank Lamy, assisted  
by Julien Blanpied and Ninon Duhamel

# English

Exhibition from 22 April  
to 3 September 2017

All, mixed-bloods

# EXHIBITION LEAFLET

Identity is in crisis. This statement seems to run through time and history. And the questions remain the same. Who are we? How do we define ourselves? In regard to what? To who? To The Other? What defines us? What connects and separates us? How do we build a cultural identity and from which elements? How do we represent it? How do we talk about it? In the midst of a campaign period as well as an unstable and hardly reassuring political context, "Tous, des sang-mêlés" (*All, mixed-bloods*) investigates the inherent issues of what cultural identity<sup>1</sup> means. With this exhibition, our goal is to think together, confront our point of views and subjectivities in order to bring forward analysis and interrogations through critical and plastic proposals, as well as foster encounter and dialogue. The exhibition explores various notions like those of territories, frontiers, maps, nations, communities, belonging, languages, flags, skin color, stereotypes, symbols and traditions. Each time, these notions are put in perspective with History, the way it is told as well as its many visual, sound and material transcriptions. These notions take part and enrich our thinking of the *common good*, tackled without amnesia or hypocrisy.

This exhibition therefore stands as a critical and sensitive reaction to outdated, reactionary, communitarian and contemptuous discourses of fear, hatred, exclusion and isolation. It gathers the works of 60 French and international artists who, their own way, tackle the topics of (private or collective) History, memory, archives, translation, excavation or restoration. Each visitor is invited to have his own experience and write his own story through a multi-faceted exhibition that features photography, painting, installation, video, and sculpture as well as other media. Here there are no directions or hierarchy, since the exhibition on the contrary intends to offer a critical, poetical and metaphorical walk through issues that both enrich and taint our history. The cohabitation of artworks creates gaps, which, according to François Jullien, are the places where invention, critical judgment and politics happen<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, while our selection of artwork raises the question of how to live together, of the common good, and of what connects us, it also has a look at the violence of colonial history, at segregations as well as other forms of exploitations. In that regard, we refuse all right-minded, naïve and utopic approach. "Tous, des sang-mêlés"

(*All, mixed-bloods*) takes the risk of confronting history, its discourses, its memory lapse and its translations to better grasp the current situation and try to understand a collective desire to withdraw into one's community and defend an identity became national. We choose dialogue, melting pot, frictions, prospection, differences and interbreeding over the communitarian temptation,

universalism, a prevailing feeling of guilt and dangerous moralistic values. Achille Mbembe wrote that "we are all passers-by", moving individuals and groups. We are all *passers-by*, migrants, mixed-race, hybrids, foreigners, works in progress, and *related* beings. *All, mixed-bloods*.

Julie Crenn and Frank Lamy

#### Works of:

Soufiane Ababri, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Adam Adach, Nirveda Alleck, Francis Alÿs, Giulia Andreani, Fayçal Baghriche, Sammy Baloji, Raphaël Barontini, Taysir Batniji, Sylvie Blocher, Martin Bureau, Ali Cherri, Claire Fontaine, Steven Cohen, Bady Dalloul, Jonathas De Andrade, Morgane Denzler, Jimmie Durham, Ninar Esber, Esther Ferrer, Karim Ghelloussi, Marco Godinho, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Mona Hatoum, Maryam Jafri, Katia Kameli, Jason Karaindros, Bouchra Khalili, Kimsooja, Kapwani Kiwanga, Will Kwan, Lawrence Lemaana, Mehryl Levisse, Violaine Lochu, Melanie Manchot, Lahouari Mohammed Bakir, Kent Monkman, Malik Nejmi, Nguyen Trinh Thi, Otobong Nkanga, Harold Offeh, Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga, Alicia Paz, Adrian Piper, Présence Panchounette, Pushpamala N, Athi-Patra Ruga, Zineb Sedira, Yinka Shonibare MBE, Société Réaliste, Tsuneko Taniuchi, Erwan Venn, James Webb, Sue Williamson, Chen Zhen

Space for dialogue and documentation created by Ficthre

<sup>1</sup> The title of the exhibition is a reference to the book by Lucien Febvre and François Crouzet *We are all mixed-bloods*, published by Albin Michel in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> JULLIEN, François. *Il n'y a pas d'identité culturelle*. Paris : L'Hermès, 2016.

## MAC

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#### Opening hours

From Tuesday to Friday, 10 am–6 pm. Saturday, Sunday and holidays, 12 pm–7 pm. Admission closed 30 min before museum closure. Closed on 1 May and 15 August.

## VAL

Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne

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[www.macval.fr](http://www.macval.fr)



**PRESS RELEASE**

**MAC**

Press Release

# « Tous, des sang-mêlés »

“All, mixed-bloods”

Group show

From 22 April to 3 September 2017

Opening on Friday 21 April 2017, 6:30pm

Curators

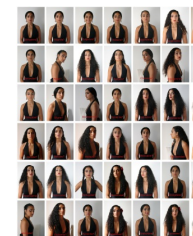
Julie Crenn and Frank Lamy

Assisted by

Julien Blanpied and Ninon Duhamel

Musée d'art contemporain  
du Val-de-Marne

**VAL**



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The Val-de-Marne Contemporary Art Museum is happy to present a group show entitled “Tous, des sang-mêlés” (“All, mixed-bloods”) around the universal and burning issue of cultural identity. This original proposal echoes previous curatorial projects conducted by the MAC VAL over the last few years.

In tune with the current world affairs, this exhibition explores the notion of cultural identity through various artistic visions and experiences: what is our common denominator? How do we build a shared culture in spite of more and more diverse/opposite origins? Those are some of the current global issues. Under the patronage of French historian Lucien Febvre and his book *We are all mixed-bloods: a manual on the history of the French civilization* (1950), and that of Stuart Hall, founding father of *Cultural Studies*, this exhibition highlights the fictional dimension of the concept of cultural identity. Our curators have build an exhibition around different proposals that raise questions and shed light on what relates and sets us apart, on transfer of knowledge and future, on power and resistance, on individuals and communities...

Through the voice of about sixty international artists and around one hundred artworks, the exhibition investigates the topics of cultural, national and sexual identities. They all revolve around the notion of being, yet some are obvious, others bring up –often passionate, always political- debates, and others call up memories of the past, sensitivity, experiences, and existence itself, from survival instinct to the notion of living together.

The works gathered in this exhibition tackle these topics from a real-life standpoint in a spirit of exchange and dialogue. If cultural identity is a fiction, artists have different ways to interpret, investigate and question it...while taking distance with the –all too reductive- identity perspective. How do we shape ourselves in regard to our tongue, territory, family, History, story, and stereotypes? The exhibition proposes several elements to establish a common ground on which alterities could develop together and in regard to one another.

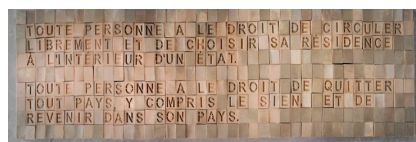
Through the story, sensitivity, words and commitment of artists from all horizons, ages and nationalities, each visitor can grow his own understanding of the notion of “Identity”. Set up in the very heart of the exhibition, “De quoi j’m e mêle?” offers a space of encounters, debates, reading and relaxation all throughout the duration of the show. Its goal is to take time to think together or individually about the issues raised by the exhibition and the reality of today’s world. Singular voices will speak up to share opinions as well as personal and collective experiences. These encounters organized by everyone who collaborated in the organization of the event, are free of charge and open to all audience on Sunday, 30 April, 7 May, 14 May, 21 May, 28 May, 4 June, 11 June, 25 June, 9 July, 27 August and 3 September at 4pm.

*Detailed programming on the museum website*

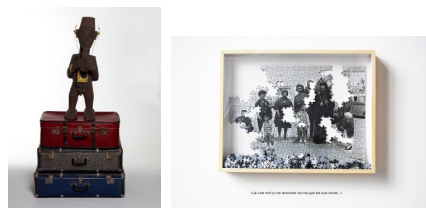
# PRESS RELEASE

With artworks by:  
 Soufiane Ababri, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Adam Adach, Nirveda Alleck, Francis Alys, Giulia Andreani, Fayçal Baghriche, Sammy Baloji, Raphaël Barontini, Taysir Batniji, Sylvie Blocher, Martin Bureau, Ali Cherri, Claire Fontaine, Steven Cohen, Bady Dalloul, Jonathan De Andrade, Morgane Denzler, Jimmie Durham, Ninar Esber, Esther Ferrer, Karim Ghelloussi, Marco Godinho, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Mona Hatoum, Maryam Jafri, Katia Kameli, Jason Karaïndros, Bouchra Khalili, Kimsooja, Kapwani Kiwanga, Will Kwan, Lawrence Lemaona, Mehryl Levisse, Violaine Lochu, Melanie Manchot, Lahouari Mohammed Bakir, Kent Monkman, Malik Nejmi, Nguyen Trinh Thi, Otobong Nkanga, Harold Offeh, Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga, Alicia Paz, Adrian Piper, Présence Panchounette, Pushpamala N, Athi-Patra Ruga, Zineb Sedira, Yinka Shonibare MBE, Société Réaliste, Tsuneko Taniuchi, Erwan Venn, James Webb, Sue Williamson, Chen Zhen

Space for dialogue and documentation created by Ficthre



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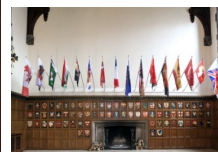
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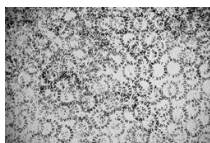
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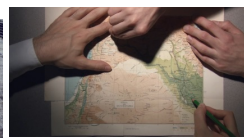
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Image captions :

1. Ninar Esber, *Arlésienne*, 2005. Series of 42 self-portraits, 15 x 21 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Imane Farès gallery.
2. Kimsooja, *Bottari truck - Migrateurs*, 2007. 16/9 HD silent color video 9'20". Collection MAC VAL - Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne. Photo © Jacques Faujour.
3. Lahouari Mohammed Bakir, *HOMELAND*, 2011. Diasec photographic prints, 90 x 60 cm. FRAC Poitou-Charentes Collection. © Adagp, Paris 2017. Photo © Lahouari Mohammed Bakir.
4. Karim Ghelloussi, *sans-titre (passagers du silence)*, 2011-2014. 16 real-size people, resin and mortar, variable dimensions. © Adagp, Paris 2017. Photo © Karim Ghelloussi and Circonstance galerie.
5. Taysir Batniji, *L'homme ne vit pas seulement de pain #2*, 2012. Article 13 from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights carved on Marseille soaps, 81 x 253,5 x 4 cm. Marseille-Provence production 2013, Ateliers de l'EuroMéditerranée. View of the exhibition  *Ici, ailleurs*, Friche la Belle de Mai, Marseille 2013. Courtesy of the artist and the galleries Sfeir Semler & Éric Dupont. © Adagp, Paris 2017. Photo © Clémentine Crochet.
6. Présence Panchounette, *Bateke (Walkman)*, 1985. Patinated wood, wire mesh, cardboard suitcases, Walkman, 158 x 80 x 55 cm. MAC VAL Collection - Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne. Acquired with the support of FRAM Île-de-France. Photo © Marc Domage.
7. Morgane Denzler, *Ceux qui restent 2*, 2012. Digital printing on puzzle, 52 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the Bendana Pinel Art Contemporain gallery, Paris.
8. Melanie Manchot, *Perfect Mountain*, 2011. HD stereo sound color vidéo, 9'36, photographs. Credit: Photographs courtesy of PHOTOSTUDIO TITLIS, Tony & Fränzi Camenzind.
- © Melanie Manchot. © Adagp, Paris 2017.
9. Martin Bureau, *Hommage à sa Gracieuse Majesté*, 2008. Cast iron and aluminum leaves, bas-relief, tondo, 57cm x 3,5cm. Photo © Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (MNBAQ), Patrick Altman.
10. Will Kwan, *Flame Test*, 2009. Series of 36 flags, dye on Duralux fabric, aluminum pole, variable dimensions. The Art Museum University Collection, Toronto. Installation view, Justina M. Barnicke gallery, Toronto, CA, 2009. Photo © Toni Hafkenscheid.
11. Jimmie Durham, *Aphrodite Unchained*, 2014. Marble, resin, ceramics, variable dimensions (approx. 150 x 150 cm), unique artwork. Courtesy of the artist and the gallery Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels.

12. Marco Godinho, *Forever Immigrant*, 2012. Stamping ink, variable presentation and dimension. Courtesy of the artist. Photo © Marco Godinho.
13. James Webb, *There's No Place Called Home*, 2004. Audio speakers: variable dimensions, infinite duration. Courtesy of the artist and the gallery Imane Farès.
14. Chen Zhen, *Round Table*, 1995. Series of 29 chairs, round wood table, engraved wooden discs, metallic structure, 180 x 550 cm. Centre national des arts plastiques collection, stored at the Musée national d'art moderne / centre de création industrielle, Paris. © Adagp, Paris 2017 / Cnap / 15. Bady Dalloul, *Discussion Between Gentlemen*, 2016. Video, map from 1920, pencil, 9'30. Video stills © Bady Dalloul and Untlithen.
16. Mona Hatoum, *Projection (velvet)*, 2013. Silk velvet and still bar, 97 x 162 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the White Cube. © Mona Hatoum. Photo © Stefan Rohrer / Kunstmuseum St Gallen.
17. Bouchra Khalili, *The constellation n° 5*, 2011. FRAC Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur collection. Screenprint on BFK Rive, mounting on aluminum, wooden frame, glass case, 62 x 42 cm. © Adagp, Paris 2017.

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**Julie Crenn and Frank Lamy**  
**Curators**



Cren, Julie & Lamy, Frank, Tous, des sangs-mêlés Exhibition catalogue, (Val-de-Marne: Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, August 2017)

conscience. The impression of the levelling of natural resources and bodies, a subject often metaphorically represented by this artist, reminds us of the industrial exploitation of nature but also of human beings. *Currency Affair & War and Love Booty* was Nkanga's response when the Welkulturen Museum in Frankfurt asked her (along with other contemporary artists) to create a work that would shed new light on the museum's ethnographic collections. The title reminds us of the original function performed by the objects she chose: currency or booty in matters of love and war, they are weapons, cult objects, objects for exchange and prestige in the traditional societies of Nigeria (her home country). Nkanga utilises the visual codes of conjuring to parody and critique the purportedly rational codes of Western collections. This work activates a historiographic critique of museums that links their appearance in Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the development of colonisation. Thus, while Nkanga readily uses the working methods of the researcher or archaeologist (documentation, archives, the study of a territory's history and geography), she does so the better to subvert them and produce representations of the world charged with a symbolism that is at once sensorial and critical. (M.G.)

## Harold Offeh

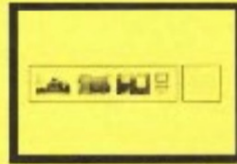


*Covers: Arabesque (After Grace Jones, Island Life 1978), 2016*

In his videos and performances Harold Offeh questions the notions of representation and identity by playing out and re-playing references from popular music, art and films, all with great humour and mockery. *Covers* is a series of performances, photographs and videos in which the artist recreates album covers from the 1970s and 1980s that play on gender and race stereotypes: *Grace Jones's Island Life* (1985), *The Ohio Players' Honey* (1975) and *Pinkadelic's Maggot Brain* (1971). In the video here, *Covers: Arabesque (After Grace Jones, Island Life 1978)*, Offeh tries to strike the pose on the famous cover of the Grace Jones compilation album *Island Life*, released in 1985. The iconic image of this totemic figure of pop was created by Jean-Paul Goude, her companion at the time, using the technique of cut and paint. The idea was to produce a plausible illusion. The result was first published by *New York* magazine in 1978. In a perfectly normal bathroom, Offeh tries to hold the impossible and unnatural 'arabesque' pose struck by Grace Jones for the whole duration of her song *Slave to the Rhythm*. He manages only for a minute, then

collapses. This pathetic attempt is at once a homage to Jones and an attempt to deconstruct the stereotypes represented in and by the song. The image of the black, 'panther' woman with her oiled body is fetishized. Exotic, powerful and sensual, yet totally shaped and manipulated by one of the most influential advertising creatives of the 1980s and 1990s, Offeh revisits this image of the black body, endowed with an innate sense of rhythm that becomes a burden, in the light of the concept of blackness as elaborated in post-colonial studies. By playing on the collective unconscious and the enduring fantasies of Western imperialism, he opens up other forms of self-representation, which draw here on the power of images. (S.A.)

## Daniela Ortiz and Xosé Quiroga



*General Joan Prim i Prats, from Estat Nació, part 1 series, 2013*

Using writing, actions and questioning, Daniela Ortiz produces work that consists in tracking and amassing information. Taking a particular interest in the study of colonialism and immigration policies, she articulates a

reflection on the writing of history and questions commemorative practices. Addressing similar themes, Xosé Quiroga conceives protean artistic projects with a strong activist dimension, shedding light, for example, on the dire situations in migrant camps and in prisons, or exploring post-traumatic situations. The two artists work together regularly, exploring societal issues linked to frontiers and the integration or exclusion of populations. They regularly use the city – its architecture, its monuments, its celebration of national holidays – as a space of research where they can question the construction of official narratives.

*Ejercicio #1 Fotografía Historia* is a series belonging to the *Estat Nació* project. Based on a set of protocols, it systematically presents assemblages of black-and-white photographs relating to written documents. The artists select places steeped in memories of Spanish colonialism in South America, picking out names of streets, public establishments and statues, and then connecting them to a text relating the historical events of the period. For *General Joan Prim i Prats*, Ortiz and Quiroga tracked down representations of Joan Prim found in Barcelona and Reus, thereby generating a catalogue of places where the memory of this figure is activated. Joan Prim i Prats (1814–1870) held a number of political positions in Spain. As captain-general of Porto Rico he played a military role in the country (which was a Spanish colony until 1898) and wrote a 'Black Code' in 1848. Ortiz and Quiroga confront the glorifying national myth with facts and viewpoints that call into question the official discourse. Confronting a use of public spaces that has to do with the common and with accommodation, they focus on those spaces where

Cren, Julie & Lamy, Frank, Tous, des sanges-mêlés Exhibition catalogue, (Val-de-Marne: Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, August 2017)



Cotter, Holland. *Going Beyond Blackness, Into the Starry Skies. 'The Shadows Took Shape,' at the Studio Museum.* New York Times, 14 November 2013.



*"The Shadows Took Shape," a new show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, features Derrick Adams's reconstruction of the giant head of the Great Oz from the all-black 1978 film version of "The Wiz." The exhibition explores the interdisciplinary cultural movement called Afrofuturism.*

One day in the late 1930s, Herman Blount, an African-American music student in Alabama, had an unusual experience.

Beings from Saturn picked him up and carried him off to their planet.

"They had one little antenna on each ear," he later recalled. "A little antenna over each eye. They talked to me."

What did they say? They told him to forget school and start making music on his own, that the world was falling apart and that people needed to hear what he played. He took their advice. To compress a long story, he started composing and playing a highly unorthodox way-beyond-freestyle jazz. He formed a symphonic-size band. He made himself robes and crowns and called himself Sun Ra, said he had always been Sun Ra, and that outer space had always been his home, always would be.

Did he make this all up? Did he believe it? Who cares. Sun Ra revolutionized contemporary music. He gave African-American identity a new, loose, utopian way to go. And he inspired an interdisciplinary cultural movement called Afrofuturism, which is the subject of a fabulous exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

The show's title, "The Shadows Took Shape," is a phrase from

a Sun Ra poem. And the musician himself, who died in 1993 at 79, is represented by archival souvenirs: a ballpoint pen drawing for the cover of the 1960s album "Other Planes of There"; his annotated copy of a 1950s religious tract called "Let God Be True"; and a photograph of him by Charles Shabacon, in which he seems to have a high-beam headlight for a face.

The show isn't really a historical survey. The name Afrofuturism came into use only in the early 1990s. And some of the figures closely identified with it early on, like the musician George Clinton and his Parliament-Funkadelic bands, and the science fiction novelist Samuel R. Delany, are here only secondhand. Both appear in a fast-moving, eye-zapping 1995 film called "The Last Angel of History," along with the writers Octavia E. Butler and Ishmael Reed; the musician Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky; and the African-American actress Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Nyota Uhura on the original "Star Trek."

The director of the film, John Akomfrah, was born in Ghana and now lives in London. And it is through his presence, and that of a handful of other artists from Africa, Asia and Europe, that Afrofuturism, often pegged as purely an African-American movement, is revealed to be a global phenomenon, with a stellar band of young artist-devotees.

What's appealing about it now is what was appealing about it to

### 3 March 2014 — Art in America 'The Shadows Took Shape' Miriam Atkin

John Akomfrah's 1996 documentary *The Last Angel of History* begins with a man standing in a flooded, sun-filled trailer park narrating the legendary tale of blues musician Robert Johnson's life. Johnson is said to have traded his soul for the spirit of music at a crossroads in Mississippi; he died in 1938 at age 27. From this myth, the narrator derives an image of Black redemption: "If you can find the crossroads... if you can make an archaeological dig into this crossroads, you'll find fragments, techno-fossils. And if you can put those elements, those fragments, together, you'll find a code. Crack that code and you'll have the keys to your future."

'The Shadows Took Shape', which borrows its title from a poem by the renowned jazz musician Sun Ra, is an exhibition about channeling technological visions not toward commodity culture — the standard beneficiary of scientific ingenuity — but toward a release from present constraints into a broadly self-determined future. Studio Museum assistant curator Naima J. Keith and independent curator Zoe Whitley have collected over 60 works by 29 international artists around the concept of "Afrofuturism", a term coined in 1994 by theorist Mark Dery to indicate an aesthetic mode that intermingles pan-African concerns with science fiction and fantasy imagery. Nodding to the reigning influence of Sun Ra's 1972 mytho-satirical sci-fi film, *Space Is the Place*, the show gives much attention to the moving image. As a whole, the film and video program, including works by Akomfrah, Wanuri Kahiu, Wangechi Mutu, the Otolith Group and Larissa Sansour being screened sequentially in the downstairs gallery, provides a useful, essayistic background to the show's theme.

In the main space are paintings, collages, photographs, sculptures (some with film and video elements) and installations. Some pieces have a technophilic slickness: for example, Derrick Adams's enormous wood and aluminum robot mask (*WE>*, 2013), Mehreen Murtaza's photo collage composed of Western consumer images and Pakistani religious iconography (*Triptych*, 2009/2013), and Saya Woolfalk's psychedelic video-and-sculpture installation with a soundtrack by DJ Spooky (*Life Products by ChimaTEKTM*, 2013). Elsewhere, the curatorial category is invoked more obliquely. Edgar Arceneaux's *Slave Shi Zong* (2013) includes acrylic renderings of frothy sea waves spliced with Detroit news clippings, all affixed to a gallery wall painted with an oceanic blue-gray wash. The installation indirectly alludes to the sci-fi myth, invented by Detroit-based techno group Drexciya, about an aquatic black race descended from castaways of the titular 18th-century slave ship. Kira Lynn Harris's minimalist cityscape, *Prism, Mirror, Lens II* (2013), comprising wood planks and reflective silver Mylar arranged against a wall, suggests the

contours of an alien city via sharp angles and dappled light.

The prevailing implication one takes away from other works is that for people of color, resourcefulness lies in an aptitude for pageantry. Sun Ra utilized the signs and symbols of Egyptian mythology in order to tailor a new aesthetic identity for African Americans in the 20th century. His fantastical persona demonstrated the make-believe quality of racial identity while suggesting modes of creative self-determination for the advancement of the black race. Calling upon Sun Ra's theatrical legacy, Harold Offeh plays dress-up in his color photo series *Covers* (2008–13). The photos show Offeh imitating black recording artists (George Clinton, Grace Jones, Betty Davis) in poses from their album art. He thus inserts himself into various historic creations in the realm of black self-invention. Akomfrah's film *Memory Room* (1997), a darkly whimsical take on talking-head-style documentary filmmaking, examines the significance of the wig in black culture. The film narrates, via dramatic monologues performed by a variety of actors, personal acts of revolt against the social pressure to conceal or tame kinky hair — an example of enforced play-acting for the perpetuation of white norms. William Villalongo's photo collage, titled *Sista Ancesta* (E.Kelly/D.R. of Congo, Pende), 2012, fuses images of a Congolese mother-and-child figurine and Ellsworth Kelly's 1964 painting *Orange Blue I*. The painting obscures the upper part of the mother's face, except for two cutout eyeholes, which allow her to peer out of the Kelly piece like a mask. In these works, race is aligned with costumery. Is the disguise a tool of oppression or a means to redemptive self-transformation?

It is Cyrus Kabiru who most explicitly demonstrates the liberating function of racialized pageantry. His 'C-STUNNER' series, a lifelong project consisting of masks made from detritus found in his native Nairobi, subverts the culturally enforced masquerade of stereotyping. *Nairobi Baboon* (2012) and *Rat* (2010), surrealistic animal masks assembled from tooled silverware, perforated scrap metal, glass beads and plastic bottle caps, present androidlike metallic curves and flourishes. He thus takes the racial signifier of the African mask and subjects it to scrutiny, disassembling and then creatively reconstructing it. His resourcefulness is a means of resistance: in fabricating an identity from the environmental stuff of his own singular experience, he rejects mass opinion of what he — as a black man — is.

## **1 October 2013 — Ebony ‘Black Alt. What is Afrofuturism? Has Janelle Monae become a poster girl to a movement that started way back wit Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney and Lt. Uhura?’ Michael A. Gonzales**

As a kid obsessed with fantasy, I often travelled to different dimensions. Whether transported through the pages of a Marvel comic book, the glowing glass teat in the living room that projected images of Star Trek, or the silver screen while staring at Logan’s Run, the future always seemed much more interesting than the drabness of the present.

Yet, as a young Black boy enthralled by various speculative fictions textual or visual, there were very few representations of folks like myself in these imagined landscapes. Logan’s Run featured no Black folks and, with the exception of Star Trek’s commutations expert Nyota Uhura (actress Nichelle Nichols), there were very few folks of color either as characters or as creators.

A few years later, when a funk-obsessed cousin introduced me to the cosmic soul of George Clinton’s crazed bands of musical misfits Parliament and Funkadelic, the concept of brothers and sisters in space traveling to different planets on the Mothership Connection became a realistic fantasy.

In addition to the aural sci-fi P-Funk was putting down, Clinton and company were also imagining a future with an African-American president, way back in 1975 on “Chocolate City”. Years before Barack Obama became a two-term president, the P-Funkers were already contemplating splashing black paint on the White House.

While Clinton’s cosmic adventures and alternate histories didn’t have a name back then, nowadays they’d be considered part of the Afrofuturism canon. Named by writer Mark Dery in his influential 1994 essay ‘Black to the Future’, the term Afrofuturism has become a cultural catchphrase to describe the world of tomorrow today in music, art, theater, politics and academics. Yet depending on whom you talk too, the definition of Afrofuturism often differs from person to person.

“That’s because people are trying to draw hard lines around what can be somewhat fuzzy stuff,” says esteemed cultural critic Greg Tate. As one of the early definers of Afrofuturism a decade before it was properly named, Tate’s essays on Black science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany (Tate’s essay ‘Ghetto in the Sky’), George Clinton (‘Beyond the Zone of the Zero Funkativity’) and cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson (‘Dread or Alive’) were groundbreaking texts that served as a map towards discovering pathways

of Black thought towards future-shock ideas.

In Afrofuturism: The World of Black Science Fiction and Fantasy Culture, author Ytasha L. Womack cites Tate and Dery’s pioneering writing while simultaneously building on and extending the journey. Incorporating autobiography, academic study and information about numerous Afrofuturist practitioners (including Sun Ra, Octavia E. Butler, Janelle Monae and W. E. B. Dubois), the writer brings us in on “the cosmic ground floor” and proceeds to propel the reader into the stratosphere.

“Afrofuturism bridges so many aspects of our culture, from African mythology, art and hip-hop to politics, comic books and science,” Womack says. “The name serves as an anchor from which we can build ideas and expanding our minds.”

Artist John Jennings, who supplied Afrofuturism’s stunning cover, met Womack through a mutual friend and bonded over shared ideas of aesthetic. “Afrofuturism is not just science fiction based, but also about imagining different spaces of creative thought that doesn’t put you identity in a box,” says Jennings.

A tenured arts professor in the visual studies department at SUNY Buffalo, he’s currently adapting Octavia E. Butler’s seminal Kindred into a 230-page graphic novel. “Much of Afrofuturism borrows from the past to define the future. It’s the perfect portal to explore spirituality, technology and building new worlds.”

In addition to his numerous gigs, the prolific Jennings is also the co-creator (with Stacey Robinson) of Black Kirby. Paying tribute to the co-creator of superheroes like the Fantastic Four, Captain America and Thor, the traveling art show re-imagines the dynamic work of comic book artist Jack Kirby through a Black lens. Several images from the series appear as interior illustrations in Afrofuturism.

Beginning in November, the Studio Museum in Harlem will present a major Afrofuturistic art exhibit dubbed The Shadows Took Shape. With a name like a Lee “Scratch” Perry song, the show features the work of Wangechi Mutu, Laylah Ali, Sanford Biggers and Derrick Adams. Curators Naima J. Keith and Zoë Whitley commissioned 29 artists working in a wide variety of media, including photography, video, painting, drawing, sculpture and multimedia installation.

**1 October 2013 — Ebony ‘Black Alt. What is Afrofuturism? Has Janelle Monae become a poster girl to a movement that started way back wit Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney and Lt. Uhura?’ Michael A. Gonzales**

New York City-based artist Derrick Adams, who’s been into science fiction since watching Dr. Who and Star Wars as a kid, is recreating the giant metallic head of Richard Pryor’s title character in *The Wiz* as his contribution to the upcoming Studio show. For Adams, the 1978 film starring Diana Ross and Michael Jackson serves as the perfect Afrofuturist touchstone and inspiration.

“From the way the elements of time-travel to the blues and jazz infused in the soundtrack to the way the characters speak, *The Wiz* uses escapism and fantasy to discuss bigger issues,” says Adams. “The same is true for the concepts of Afrofuturism.”

The late artist Rammellzee, who died in 2010 at the age of 49, was Afrofuturistic before his time. Beginning his career as a New York graffiti kid in the 1970s, he also rapped on the 1983 hip-hop classic *Beat Bop*, and was close friends with artists Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fab 5 Freddy and Lee Quiñones.

Ramm also created infamous otherworldly costumes, mind-boggling manifestos and wild-styled paintings that are highly sought and collected.

“It was like he stepped into one of his graffiti pieces and emerged with a different kind of knowledge,” says Oakland writer D. Scott Miller, the scribe behind the *Afro-Surrealist Manifesto*. “For him, graffiti served as a device for interdimensional travel, and those are the ideas reflected in his work.”

A fan of poet Henry Dumas and singer/songwriter Nina Simone (two artists he believes monumental in the Afro-Surrealistic movement), Miller’s ideas are also presented in the pages of *Afrofuturism*.

While much of Afrofuturism might sound highbrow, writer/ musician Greg Tate, who currently teaches an Afrofuturism class at Brown University, is quick to point out that the discipline isn’t just regulated to the ivory towers and art-houses. “There is also a street element to Afrofuturism that should not be forgotten,” Tate states. “From RZA to Kool Keith to Grandmaster Flash shopping at Radio Shack, to drug dealers in the ’80s walking around with beepers, all of that is also a segment of Afrofuturism.”

Although the ideas and theories of Afrofuturism are still growing wild as

weeds, steadily morphing with each new creation, Ytasha Womack says, “I totally believe Afrofuturism can be used as a tool of empowerment to embrace our culture as we push past limitations.” Indeed, as the Afrofuturist movement continues to flourish, the future is now.

## 11 December 2013 – Hyperallergic 'Who Controls the Past: highlights from The Shadows Took Shape at The Studio Museum' Chase Quinn

One part a literary subgenre of sci-fi, pioneered by the likes of Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler, and one part cross-cultural, interdisciplinary aesthetic movement, Afrofuturism – a term coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in his 1994 essay 'Black to the Future' – can be tricky to describe.

The Studio Museum in Harlem's current exhibition, *The Shadows Took Shape* includes a diverse range of 29 artists, featuring painting, sculpture, photography and video, all comfortably drawn under Afrofuturism's spacious umbrella. Drawing on Afrocentric imagery, cultural references, experiences and concerns, Afrofuturism as articulated in *The Shadows Took Shape* seems as much a cross-cultural political statement on historiography as it is about conceptualizing the future.

When you first approach Derrick Adam's wood and aluminum sculpture *WE><HERE*, created for *The Shadows Took Shape*, you might very well wonder if you are encountering art or artifact. The sizable sculpture puts in mind the colossal stone heads of the ancient Olmec civilizations that, dating back as far as 900 BC, prove, some have argued, with their broad noses and thick features, that Africans were in fact the first settlers of the new world. Unsurprisingly, this theory, which challenges hegemonic Western historiography, is highly criticized within the academy. Thus, Adam's sculpture situates itself comfortably as a prime example of Afrofuturism's thematic focus on what we might call "re-creation narratives" where by Western institutions, historiography, and values are deconstructed, refracted, and retrofit to form an alternative history, and imagine futures that aren't limited to the dictates of the dominant culture.

Adam's sculpture is, in fact, a replica of the giant figurehead Richard Pryor's all-powerful wizard in the musical and film production *The Wiz* uses to mediate his communication with the people of Oz. Produced in 1974, *The Wiz* recasts the story of *The Wizard of Oz* (the classic novel written by L. Baum and musical popularized by Judy Garland) as an urbanized fantasy and "black metropolis" where Dorothy is a 24 year old black school teacher from Harlem, played by Diana Ross. The set design, story line, and musical score are all influenced by a distinctly African American cultural perspective, offering the perfect metonym for Afrofuturism's resistance to institutionalized story models.

Wayne Hodge, *Android/Negroid #11* (2012).

Similarly, Wayne Hodge's haunting collage series *Android/Negroid #11* "seeks ... dual meanings that arise when disparate historical materials are fragmented and recombined." In this example, the materials or references being refracted are drawn from old science fiction magazines and minstrel show advertisements, reconstructing the black self in the image of a cybernetic android. Paired in the title with the term *Negroid*, Hodge insists we meditate on what it means to be human at all – a discourse that requires remembering America's legacy of slavery that categorized black people as subhuman and denied them legal and social personhood for over 300 years.

It could also be argued, as Tricia Rose points out in an essay that has resonance here – exploring the futuristic aesthetics appropriated by Afrofuturist musicians like Afrika Bambaataa – that the adoption of robotic features "reflect[s] a response to an existing condition: namely, that [black people] were labor for capitalism [and had] very little value as people in...society." This interpretation would satisfy the implicit comparison being made between the designations *Android* and *Negroid*, both of which suggest something less than human, something liminal.

If we take Rose's analysis a bit further, Hodge's collages might also represent a subversion of the very historical inequalities being referenced, whereby assuming robotic body armor "identifies [the subject] as an alien" and where, Rose says the subject "[can] master the wearing of this guise in order to use it against [their] interpolation."

We find another challenging but deeply moving piece in the video installation by Edgar Clejine and Ellen Gallagher. Entitled *Nothing is*, this 16-millimeter film also draws on the genre's insistence on the connection between the fragments of the past, present and future, but adds yet another layer of complexity by suggesting that these states can shift at any moment in time, so that the past can become the future and the future can dissolve into the past, like the changing states of the elements.

This is accomplished through a morphing image that changes shape with the shift of light accompanied by text that describes the various states of water – solid, liquid, gas.

**11 December 2013 –  
Hyperallergic 'Who Controls the  
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As a foreboding percussion builds, added to these is the potential, under the right conditions, for steam to ignite into flames, conversant, perhaps, with James Baldwin's brooding essay 'The Fire Next Time', and reminding us that all things – social movements, political identities, elements – are essentially on the brink of transition, or destruction. This piece draws its title from a 1970's album of the same title by Sun Ra, the jazz, cyber funk musician, and visionary who is the source of inspiration for the exhibition.

With a lighter touch, Rammellzee's tableaux of marker on board depict brightly colored robotic figures and complex futuristic byways of space travel. Beyond their obvious techno-cultural affinities, the drawings bear out the strong relationship between Afrofuturism and its representations in and connection to music and specifically Hip-Hop culture. Rammellzee's B-boy bricolage, as Mark Dery puts it in *Black to the Future*, and his background as a New York graffiti artist, aligns Afrofuturism's vision of the future with the avant-garde and futuristic stylings we see employed by artists like Missy Elliot and Janelle Monae, as well as the popularization of the vocoder to distort and synthesize black voices in Hip Hop and R&B music.

If the Studio Museum in Harlem's ambitious show is missing anything, it is music. Not only inspired by the jazz musician Sun Ra but also referencing the strong musical representations of the genre throughout the exhibition's literature, live performance or track recordings (even music videos) would have added an extra layer of density, another point of access for understanding this complex aesthetic sensibility to which music seems utterly essential. Nonetheless, with its focus on the retelling of history, the challenging of institutional narratives through Afrocentric visions of the future, the images that make up *The Shadows Took Shape* ensure that the revolution will be digitized.

**16 March 2017 – this is tomorrow 'UNTITLED: art on the conditions of our time New Art Exchange, Nottingham 14 January – 19 March 2017' Piers Masteron**

UNTITLED provides a number of guilty pleasures and does not try to hide its cheeky side. Opening with Harold Offeh's video Covers Playlist (2016), in which a slightly over the hill man works on his disco diva moves, the show manages to maintain that identity politics can be playful as well as a serious subject. Beside the video is a fanboy selection of album covers featuring the stars of the 70s and 80s, which are often restaged by Offeh in his performative, gender-reversing makeovers.

A theme of UNTITLED is the assimilation of once racialised and transgressive imagery by the mainstream culture industry. Michael Jackson has a walk-on part in Appau Junior Boakye-Yiadom's sculptural installation PYT (2009), his shoes suspended by colourful balloons. Since his death, Jackson's controversial personal life and the serious crisis that his ambivalence towards his own imagery presented for American Pop culture has been erased. Along with Offeh's album covers, PYT introduces the theme that black identity remains conditioned by a pressure to perform and conform to renewed stereotypes.

The projected film Imitation 34/59 (2013) is a reminder of the extent that some barriers remain resolutely in place. The artist NT merges clips of the original black and white film Imitation of Life (1934) with the soundtrack of the 1959 remake starring Lana Turner. We only see and hear a brief clip of the key scene where the character of Peola (Freda Washington), attempting to pass for White, denies recognising her Black mother Delilah (Louise Beavers). The sequence succinctly conveys the crisis of a Black identity internalising racism, as set out in Frantz Fanon's Black Skin White Masks, and NT drives home how little attitudes had changed little by the time of the 1959 remake, or – considering the whitening up of Michael Jackson – even by the 2000s.

NT's other films South more (2014) and Moore into you (2016) also evoke feelings of disappointment and melancholy, by presenting a Henry Moore sculpture standing in its Council estate as a metaphor for successive governments' failure to deliver on the egalitarian promises of the 1960s and the end of Empire. Fanon identified Modernism's fixation with 'the other' with the worst excesses of European colonialism. This complex interchange is illustrated simply and brilliantly in the display of Cedar Lewisohn's woodcuts. Lewisohn has worked as a curator of graffiti art for Tate Modern – another instance of 'the other' being made consumable –

and leafing through the sheets of woodcutting, the extent of what he calls 'cultural cannibalism' is clear.

The scheduling of UNTITLED coincides with The Place is Here at Nottingham Contemporary, which showcases the work of Black artists, writers and thinkers from the 1980s. UNTITLED features a dozen artists who mostly began exhibiting after 2000, yet there are plenty of comparisons to draw between the two shows. Kimathi Donkor's stunning Under Fire: The Shooting of Cherry Groce (2005) taps the same history painting vein as Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman's works of the mid-1980s. By installing Cherry Groce into the cannon of martyrs and heroines, Donkor presents the continuing struggle to claim representation.

History is also revised by Barbara Walker in The Big Secret VI (2015), a reworking of an archive photograph of one of the Indian brigades that fought for the British Empire in the trenches a century ago. It is a moving elegiac image to a lost generation whom, as Walker points out, the British establishment deliberately 'whited out' from history. Walker's Polite Violence III (2006) shows a stop and search form produced on her son by West Midlands Police, a shocking document of continuing institutional racism. The work's position, near Donkor's depiction of the Cherry Groce shooting, reinforces the message that artists still have an essential social function to remain watchful of continuing injustices.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is Phoebe Boswell's Tramlines (2015), an epic 'sign of the times' drawing made during a residency in Gothenburg. It could be the preparatory cartoon for a vast town hall mural. Though presented as an unfiltered observation of scenes along a regular commute through the city, it is carefully composed to display a sequence of civic spaces, and the aspirations of the good society are represented by a series of allegorical figures. The various strata of social groups occupying the same physical space appear isolated in their own experience of dislocation. Boswell's inclusion of the abandoned boats of contemporary human traffickers and the Mediterranean refugee crisis connects her masterful piece to the representation of the Middle Passage of the Black Atlantic and a broader sweep of British art history. It is a story that demands to be properly retold.

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La plus pathétique et touchante est sans doute la vidéo de Harold Offeh : dans sa salle de bains, en équilibre et nu, l'artiste tente de mimer la pose de Grace Jones sur la pochette du disque *Island Life*. Déconstruisant le cliché de la femme noire sculpturale au corps huilé, il fait aussi exploser le cloisonnement des genres. Une autre façon de se mélanger.

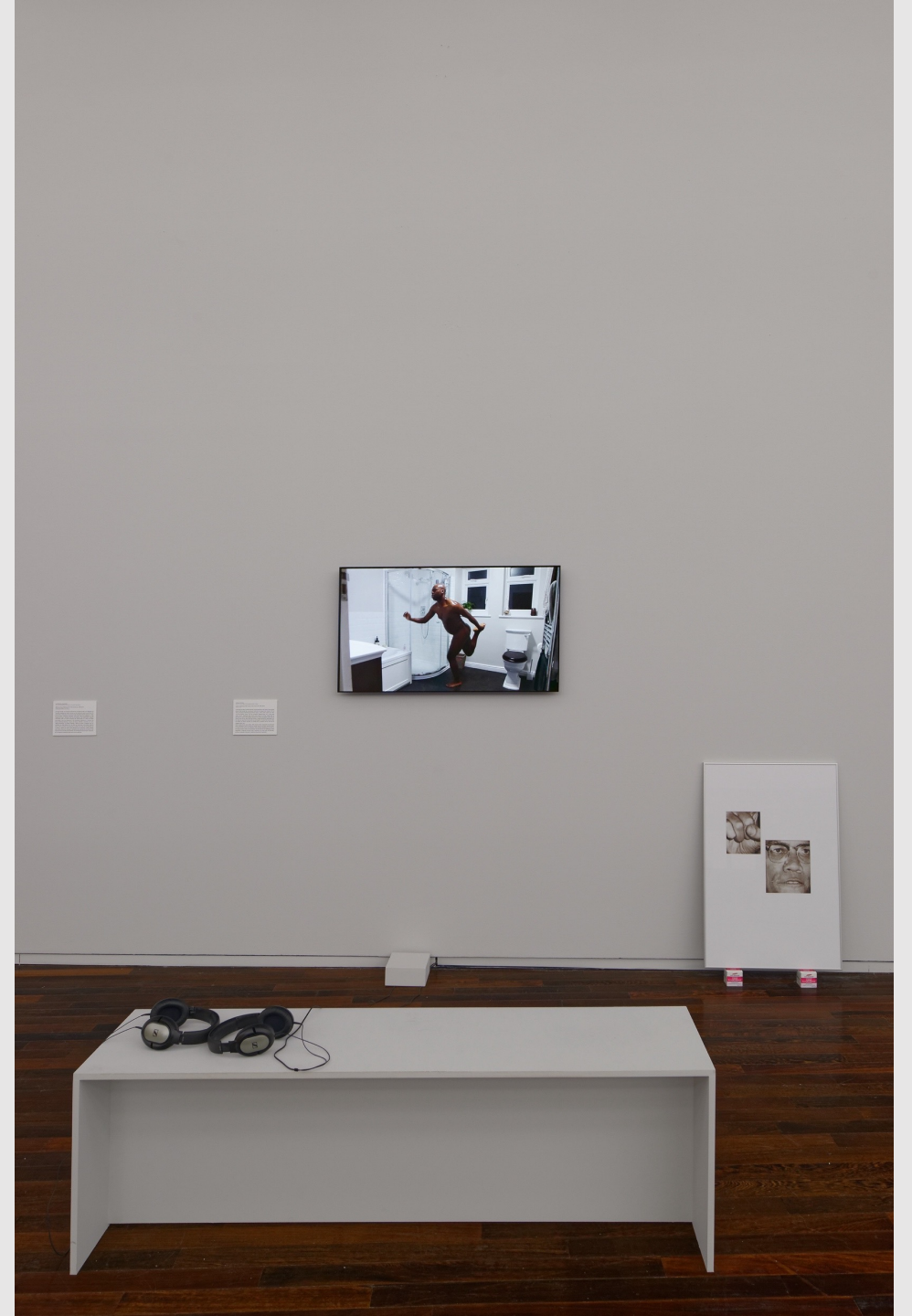
The most moving and touching is undoubtedly the video of Harold Offeh: in his bathroom, balanced and naked, the artist tries to mimic the pose of Grace Jones on the cover of the album *Island Life*. Deconstructing the cliché of the black sculptural woman with an oiled body, it also explodes the partitioning of the genres. Another way to mix.

**August 2017 — Tous, des sangs-mêlés (All mixed-bloods), Exhibition Catalogue MAC — Museum of Contemporary Art Val-de-Marne, France Julie Cren and Frank Lamy**



Image: Harold Offeh, MAC VAL — Tous, des sangs-  
mêlés

Photo: Aurélien Mole



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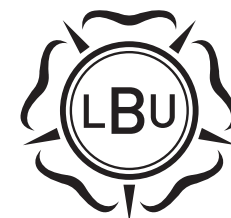
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