

# Can You Be ~~BLACK~~ and Make This?<sup>[1]</sup>

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In recent years, a number of U.S.-based artists have taken on the subject of anti-black violence in their work, bridging a rich legacy of socially-engaged art practice with #BlackLivesMatter, the latest rallying cry for black freedom and racial equity. A considerable amount of these artistic responses occurred in the final years of Barack Obama's two-term presidency, a period during which notions that we were beyond race proliferated. An uptick in fake news, misogyny, and white nationalist sentiment in the age of Trump, however, has since dispelled these post-racial notions and forced difficult discussions about the limits and possibilities of aesthetic practice. This backdrop has energized some of the most pressing controversies concerning art and visual representation in the long first decade of the twenty-first century, an era defined by hope and change on the one hand, terror and anxiety on the other.

Ongoing racial antagonisms within and beyond the art world, namely the lack of racial equity in the museum field along with the rapid reproduction and circulation of images of black death, have further exacerbated the link between aesthetics and politics. On this front, present-day black and non-black artists such as Kara Walker, Dana Schutz, and Sanford Biggers have grappled in various ways with how the past comes to bear on the present and art's capacity to mitigate racial trauma. Taken together, recent art by Walker, Schutz, and Biggers articulate a set of ethical questions artists, curators, and critics face when presenting complex formulations of blackness for public consumption, political action, and institutional change. Who is permitted to represent blackness and in what ways? How do we account for contemporary artists' engagements with distant and recent histories of black bodily trauma and subjugation? What are the matters of race and identity *now*? In many ways, these questions are not new. So why do they persist, and what does this persistence teach us about the nature of racial progress?

Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014), Schutz's *Open Casket* (2017), and the artworks included in Biggers' solo exhibition, *Matter* (2015), constitute an expanded approach to sculpture and black figuration that animate the visual afterlives of slavery in the twenty-first century. While they speak to the ongoing case for black lives and art mattering, they also dispute staid frameworks of interpretation that cannot or will not account for the ambivalent, speculative, meandering, and irreconcilable ways of black image making.<sup>[2]</sup> Walker's monumental mammy, Schutz's abstract painting of Emmett Till's bloated face, and Biggers' heaving sculpture of Fat Albert stage difficult aesthetic encounters, from the grotesque to the taboo. In so doing, they conjure up new modes of intimacy between artists, viewers, critics, and their objects by conceptually and formally drawing together racial and sexual abjection as conditions of (black) being that stand outside sociability's 'proper' boundaries.

Since the 1960s, theories of abjection have been used to outline the limits of the body and its orifices as well as aesthetic and social conventions in contemporary art, such as the transgressive and the taboo. In the 1960s and 1970s, performance and body art involving urine, semen, saliva, feces, blood, and other bodily fluids coincided

with radical, leftist politics. With the 1982 English-language publication of Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* alongside the rise of AIDS, new ideas about feminist politics and art practice emerged, and the criminalization of homosexuality further inspired deployments of the pained, diseased, 'other' body in art to debunk cultural myths.

Drawing on theories of the monstrous in French psychoanalysis and the Lacanian idea concerning filth as the constitution of the subject, Kristeva describes abjection as the dissolution of the distinction between the self and the "other." Kristeva herself associates the aesthetic experience of the abject with poetic catharsis. In her formulation, artists repair the trauma of disease and oppression by immersing themselves in the impure process of abjection in order to protect themselves from it.<sup>[3]</sup> More than a transgression of cleanliness, however, abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules."<sup>[4]</sup> The nausea and physical recoil Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* produced at the site of an over-embodied sugar sphinx with the head of a mammy, breasts and buttocks exposed, is one example of this.



*Kara Walker, A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant, 2014. Polystyrene foam, sugar. Approx. 35.5 x 26 x 75.5 feet (10.8 x 7.9 x 23 m). Installation view: Domino Sugar Refinery, A project of Creative Time, Brooklyn, NY, 2014. Photo: Jason Wyche.*

collection of sugar cane, slowly accumulated the dismembered arms and heads of other molasses boys. The 35-foot-tall, 72-foot-long sphinx itself was monumental and nude, a stark-white female figure with the head of a mammy, a stereotype that originated in slavery. In American literature and visual culture, the mammy is typically depicted as overweight, desexualized, yet gratuitously open to the threat of sexual violence, a condition of the black female slave experience. This figuration incited criticisms claiming that Walker's installation made light of ongoing racial pain that stems from slavery and black women's historical and contemporary subjugation.<sup>[5]</sup> *A Subtlety* was large, sticky, and repulsive.

Many of the spectators and critics, amateur and professional, who encountered Walker's installation feared that *A Subtlety* was "recreating the very racism [the] art is *supposed* to critique," as Nicholas Powers puts it (emphasis mine).<sup>[6]</sup> Numerous blog posts and even a staged protest by black artists—an effort to flood the refinery with

For nine consecutive weekends in 2014, the sugarcoated sphinx could be seen in the defunct Domino Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Drove of people, myself included, stood in line for hours in New York's summer heat to ogle *A Subtlety* and to snap a picture of it. When I finally made it into the refinery, I was overwhelmed, not so much by the sight but by the smell. The molasses-caked walls emitted a scent so strong it was nauseating. The sphinx's "sugar babies," a cadre of resin-cast servant boys with stereotypical black features positioned throughout the looming space, were coated in molasses, melting and crumbling to pieces like the refinery's walls. Over the course of the exhibition's run, the sugar babies' baskets, historically intended for the

people of color under the banner, “We Are Here”—reproached Walker’s sphinx and its babies. But responses like these assume a direct connection between the work of art and its viewers. Here, the work of art has the power not only to master, but also to repair and redeem the historical trauma of slavery to which Walker’s work attends.

Against the backdrop of social and political antagonisms where colorblindness and anti-black violence uneasily coexist, *A Subtlety* conceptually and materially brought together blackness, slave labor, and sugar production as constitutive elements of the United States and the African diaspora.<sup>[7]</sup> However, rather than redeem the experience of slavery and its effects by creating a respectable space for racial mourning and healing, the sphinx and its babies caused revulsion, thus exceeding feelings of intense distaste and disgust. Put differently, *A Subtlety* upended art’s potential “to master,” what Leo Bersani calls, “the presumed raw material of experience,” in this case the black female slave experience, “in a manner that uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material.”<sup>[8]</sup> Walker’s installation, much like the silhouettes for which she is most known, becomes instead a force under the influence of which two phenomena—the trauma of slavery and racial redemption—are pushed apart.

Similar to *A Subtlety*, Dana Schutz’s *Open Casket* (2016) confronted viewers with a form from our collective past, a haunting articulated by an uneasy relation between race and capital in a putatively post-racial twenty-first century. Along with destabilizing how and who can account for black suffering in the public domain, Schutz’s whiteness, her gender, and the work’s subject matter threw the relation between race and capital into high relief. Included in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 2017 Biennial exhibition, *Open Casket*, which depicts the abstracted face and torso of Emmett Till in his coffin, quickly emerged as a flashpoint for criticism when *ARTnews* published artist and critic Hannah Black’s open letter to the Whitney calling for the removal and destruction of the painting. The curators of the 2017 Biennial, delayed by a year to accommodate the institution’s relocation to downtown Manhattan, sought to reflect in their selections the country’s shifting sociopolitical terrain: “a time rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics.”<sup>[9]</sup> Black and other artists’ vehement protests of *Open Casket* resurrected longstanding issues concerning the ethics of white artists representing black pain and historical trauma as well as the dangers of censorship. Artist and scholar Coco Fusco sharply reprimanded Black and others who called for the painting’s removal, outlining a short history of white cultural producers who have made art about black suffering.

Pairing *A Subtlety* with Schutz’s painting and the controversies they each spurred adds new dimensions to staid notions of identity politics in an era characterized by what cultural critic Wesley Morris has termed “the morality wars.” In the 1980s, identity politics—energized by an ethos of visibility and inclusion—came to the fore in contemporary art as a way to deconstruct oppressive social forces. Along with a focus on identity-based art, major art museums in the U.S. became preoccupied with addressing their own practices of exclusion. Prior to the 1980s, these museums rarely exhibited the work of artists who were not white, heterosexual males. By bringing artists of color, among others historically relegated to the margins, to the center of the art world, curators hoped that more visibility would afford the artists greater political agency.

The Whitney is no stranger to controversy. In April 1987, an anonymous group of feminist female artists known as the Guerrilla Girls reviewed the Whitney’s exhibition history. Staged concurrently with the museum’s 1987 Biennial exhibition, *Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney* at the Clocktower in New York City interrogated two fundamental correlations. One was a link between the Whitney Museum and its presumed position as the definitive voice of modern and contemporary American art. The other was the lack of self-reflexivity relative to the Biennial exhibition series, which continues to be marketed as the preeminent survey of the latest developments in avant-garde art

practice in the U.S. In the exhibition, the Guerrilla Girls presented a compendium of charts and graphs that outlined statistics regarding inclusion, curatorial sensitivity, and museum acquisitions along racial and gender lines since 1973.<sup>[10]</sup> One such chart titled *The Color Blind Test* revealed that the cumulative number of non-white men and women included in Biennial presentations after 1973, a year when the museum's inclusion of 'other' artists reached its peak, was just over twenty-five.<sup>[11]</sup>

Six years later, amidst the contentious culture wars, the Whitney Museum offered a response to the Guerrilla Girls and other critics of the institution's practices of exclusion. Fitted with a newly hired director, a fresh team of curators, and aspirations for making the Whitney a more multicultural institution, the 1993 Biennial exhibition was meant to showcase the museum's efforts toward inclusion and diversity. According to lead curator Elizabeth Sussman, the Biennial attempted to put pressure on looking at art "in terms of such things as class, gender, or nation," and we might add race and sexuality to this list, as "propaganda or agitprop," or as "solely political," to use the words of David Ross, the Director of the Whitney at the time.<sup>[12]</sup>

However well intentioned, the 1993 Biennial exhibition ultimately pigeonholed the groups it wished to celebrate: "black artists [were made to] speak only for blacks, women [were made to] speak only for women, and gays only for gays, bound by a constrained notion of community [and relegating] artists to cultural essences."<sup>[13]</sup> Consequently, 'other' artists were essentialized and expected to make explicitly political work. Additionally, the conceptual thrust of the 1993 Biennial ignored the possibility of artists existing in more than one of these identity categories—"black, gay, and female for example"—or whether or not these artists self-identified with such categorizations.<sup>[14]</sup>

The problem of race surfaced again when the 2014 Whitney Biennial included Donelle Woolford in its program.<sup>[15]</sup> Invented in 2005 by Joe Scanlan, a white male artist who works primarily in sculpture and collage, Woolford is a fictional black female painter and performance artist embodied most often by actress Jennifer Kidwell. Seen by some critics and artists as conceptual blackface, the Yams Collective (known formally as HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN?) withdrew from the Biennial in protest. This action was in part a response to Scanlan's piece in light of the Biennial's lack of racial diversity; upon the Collective's withdrawal, the informal tally of black artists in the exhibition dropped to eight. It was also a reaction to the museum's cultivation and perpetuation of "institutional white supremacy," as Christa Bell, a member of the Yams Collective, put it.<sup>[16]</sup>

Scanlan's *Self Portrait (Pay Dirt)* of 2003, produced two years before he created Woolford and not included in the 2014 Biennial, make the references to blackface and white supremacy all the more complex and unsettling. In the C-print, the artist smiles wildly, his face smeared with a brown substance reminiscent of mud or fecal matter.<sup>[17]</sup> What are the implications here? While role-playing, alter egos, and racial performance are not new in art and representational practices of the West, these two works raise concerns about value, privilege, fungibility, and consumption that *Open Casket* also brought to bear. Scanlan's Woolford project and Schutz's painting both contribute to a troubling lineage of white artists instrumentalizing black bodies for profit, even as they take aim at the art world's theatrical precepts and the self-sustaining essentialisms they produce.<sup>[18]</sup> Within the American context, these acts cannot be thought apart from slavery, capitalism, and ongoing struggles for black freedom and racial equity.

Furthermore, the 2014 and 2017 Biennial exhibitions occurred during the early years of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which recharged the relation between race, representation, violence, and politics that, for some, had

become passé. As a result, both exhibitions became litmus tests for measuring the corrosive effects of race relations in a putatively post-racial time. Schutz's painting in particular lay bare how power and privilege, opportunity and intention, continue to circumscribe art and its institutions, especially when it comes to the history of racial trauma in the U.S. Schutz is known for her large-scale paintings that border on the humorous and grotesque. In both impossible and contradictory situations, the figures in her paintings can be seen participating in violent or creative activities. The thematic trajectory of her practice makes her move to Till all the more puzzling. By picturing Till, Schutz claimed the events surrounding his murder and the images of his disfigured body that circulated in newspapers thereafter as shared historical memory. Alternately, for many *Open Casket* constitutes an act of cultural appropriation, another example of white interlopers taking on an aspect of African American life—specifically black death and pain—and using it for professional gain. For these reasons, the painting and its inflammation of a narrow brand of identity politics compel provocatively novel questions regarding the limits and ownership of the visual legacy of anti-blackness in the U.S.



Dana Schutz, *Open Casket*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 38.5 x 53.25 inches. ©Dana Schutz. Image courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

The title of Schutz's work reflects the decision of Till's mother in September 1955 to leave open the casket of her fourteen-year-old son, famously proclaiming, "Let the people see what I've seen." Photographs of the funeral and Till's disfigured face and body consequently became a flashpoint for the civil rights movement, which was, at least during the 1950s, a coalitional project that involved black and non-black individuals and organizations. This is the shared historical memory upon which Schutz draws. But even she, according to Klaus Speidel in his review of the debate, recognized her rationale's weakness. Understanding that the

arguments brought against *Open Casket* were based on her social and racial status as a white person *rather than the actual painting*, Schutz herself attempted to legitimize her intentions by referring back to her personal identity not as a white person but as a mother.<sup>[19]</sup> This again was insufficient. For Hannah Black and her fellow detractors, Parker Bright and Aria Dean among them, black suffering and its representations belong exclusively to black people.

Both Schutz and her critics default to issues of ownership and group membership that reproduce, as Speidel points out, the very essentialism at the center of white supremacy. In other words, "everything important we need to know about Schutz's painting is that there is a conflict between the artist's *whiteness* and the *Blackness* of the painting's subject" (emphases in original).<sup>[20]</sup> What about the painting itself? Where, if at all, does *it* diverge or offend? Given the context of Till's disfigurement, Schutz's painterly brushstrokes take on new meaning; they simultaneously reflect and obfuscate the violence of the mutilation.<sup>[21]</sup> The brushstrokes that comprise Till's face contrast the more delicate brushwork of Till's white shirt and the red rose, at once a sign of resistance and dignity, that adorns Till. The canvas's bloated surface—Till's face has been made to protrude beyond the work's flat

support base—further amplifies the material machinations and consequences of violence.

Additionally, the manipulation of the canvas, from brushstrokes to artifice, requires viewers to look closely in order to discern what is painterly effect and what is drawn from photographs of Till. Incidentally, Schutz sees this visual archive as analogous to the images of slain unarmed black men at the hands of law enforcement that circulated during the summer of 2016 when Schutz painted *Open Casket*. The painting thus draws on and physically and aesthetically obscures actual events. By viewing the work from the perspective of the act of painting rather than its result, Schutz's treatment of Till appears to repeat the act of mutilation rather than question the violence of this act. This, along with the brushwork that makes visible the artist's hand, draws our attention to the painter and her imagination, not the subject, thereby creating "an unfortunate tension," to use Speidel's words.<sup>[22]</sup> From this angle, the work *Open Casket* performs centers on Schutz as a painter, not the loss of Till or the suffering of his mother. The artist's treatment of the painting's surface—her "manner"—is thus an enactment and effect of the distance—a *position of privilege*—from which she apprehends her subject.<sup>[23]</sup> The edges of Schutz's painting, therefore, reach beyond identity politics and its default settings. It pictures the limits of shared historical memory, of cross-racial empathy, of looking to the past to explain our political present.

Sanford Biggers' solo exhibition, *Matter*, and its reception further destabilize the tenuous logics of ownership and group membership that animate both sides of the color line when it comes to representations of the black body in contemporary art. The works in *Matter* are an important meditation on the value of black bodies in the global visual imagination and the limits and possibilities of social transformation. Presented at David Castillo Gallery in Miami, Florida in December 2015 during Art Basel Miami, one of the largest annual art fairs in the U.S., the works included in the exhibition spanned a range of media—from video to fiber art to floor sculpture. Each work corresponded to one or more of three current affairs: high-profile extrajudicial killings of unarmed black men, activist responses to these killings (namely #BlackLivesMatter), and the public exposure of Bill Cosby's long history of sexual violence. These events, what Biggers calls "a continuum of dysfunction," impact how we understand the United States' self-image globally and the role of black cultural production within this project of nation making.<sup>[24]</sup> "My work is a platform [for social justice]," the artist says.<sup>[25]</sup> "The entirety of my career has been devoted to touching on aspects of African-American history and culture that aren't necessarily well known facts—instances that we don't talk about because America is in a state of racial denial."<sup>[26]</sup>

In line with this charge, Biggers' work engages tenets of science fiction, cosmology, and technology to address histories of racial inequity in a nuanced, layered way. This combination of conceptual projects, also known as Afrofuturism, is seen to bridge lost, traumatic black pasts with otherworldly, potentially reparative black futures. Afrofuturism is an aesthetic and political mode of contemporary black expression that has gained considerable currency in popular and academic discourse since its introduction in the early 1990s. During this time, the relationship between racial and technological progress—and the assumption that this relationship was a mutually beneficial one—inspired problematic visions of a raceless, placeless, genderless, and bodiless future.

Imaginings of race-free futures, or worlds in which racial difference no longer matters, abound in the predominately white genres of science fiction literature and film. Afrofuturism has been seen as a form of redress to these discursive currents. In select writings by scholars and cultural critics such as Alondra Nelson, Kodwo Eshun, Nettrice Gaskins, and Ruth Mayer, Afrofuturism is a revisionist discourse in which racialized, gendered bodies in the past, present, and future use technology to reparative ends, cosmic liberation as Shanté Paradigm Smalls puts it.<sup>[27]</sup> The success of the film, *Black Panther* (2018), along with other recent films of predominantly black casts and

futuristic themes—*A Wrinkle in Time* (2018) and *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) among them—has made Afrofuturism even more popular. These films have been lauded as path-breaking examples of black visual culture in the twenty-first century, what Brandy Monk-Payton calls an era of “televisual reparations.” In the wake of Barack Obama’s presidency, this visual media constitutes a curative desire for positive representation in response, at least in part, to the depiction of violence against black bodies in our mediascape.<sup>[28]</sup> But present-day black artists’ speculative imaginings also contest the recovery impulse that animates popular understandings of Afrofuturism. These imaginings trouble well-worn visual and literary tropes such as “the magical negro,” exceptional mutant black characters, and interstellar travel and outer space as the ideal routes to liberation.

Sanford Biggers’ work is situated here. Much of Biggers’ art reimagines black pasts violently silenced, both physically and within so-called archives of evidence, by “re-righting history,” the artist declares.<sup>[29]</sup> For him, re-righting history is at once an act of revision, restorative justice, and racial healing. *Lotus* of 2007, for example, transposes black degradation and debasement with transcendent visions of black futurity by juxtaposing slavery and Buddhism. A lotus flower in full bloom is etched into a seven-and-a-half-foot-diameter, six-hundred-pound glass disc. This Buddhist symbol of enlightenment and purity of mind and spirit, however, contains more than meets the eye. Within each petal diagrams of bodies lined up in close proximity press against each other, a hand-carved gesture that relates the space of the petal to the cargo hold of a slave ship. The design for the diagrammed bodies derives from the cross-section of a slave ship that appears in an eighteenth-century British slaving manual. A twenty-seven-foot diameter galvanized steel version of *Lotus* commissioned by New York City’s Percent-for-Art program is permanently installed on an exterior wall of the Eagle Academy for Young Men, a high school in the Bronx, New York. The Academy’s priority population includes black and Latino men from communities in the borough, a public siting that further compels Biggers’ belief in art’s reparative potential. Biggers describes his Bronx *Lotus* as “an educational piece;” “an opportunity [for students] to experience the work” and “acknowledge a past that shall never be forgotten.”<sup>[30]</sup> “It can be viewed daily as an ornate object, but upon deeper contemplation, reveals centuries of history, tribulation, and, ultimately, transcendence.”<sup>[31]</sup>

At MASS MoCA in 2012, Biggers presented *The Cartographer’s Conundrum*, a multisensory installation devoted to Afrofuturism and the work of mural painter John Biggers, with whom Sanford Biggers shares a last name and family ties. The installation consisted of a full-room environment, repurposed quilts, and a video featuring a silver-painted figure that roams various landscapes in search of inner transformation and self-discovery. Church pews ranging from the typical wooden variety to ones rendered in translucent-colored plastic ascended towards the heavens as they receded from an altar formed by a starburst of organ pipes that emanated from a pile of old musical instruments. A baby grand piano hung askew; the Lucite pews reflected the light coming through the windows to speckle the museum with bright; neon color, and sounds of the black diaspora—from Africa to Brazil—permeated the space.

Biggers’ 2015 exhibition *Matter* likewise offered a speculative view of art’s engagement with social life in its many personifications of blackness-as-matter. But *Matter* also marked a departure from Biggers’ earlier Afrofuturist works. Presented at a time when post-racial aspirations collided with anti-black animus, it staged the limits of (black) representation, even as artists, viewers, and critics clambered to define its value in “an age where black lives matter,” as Cheryl Finley and Deborah Willis phrase it.<sup>[32]</sup> From this angle, Biggers’ exhibition follows Huey Copeland’s proclamation: “If, in the words of the latest rallying cry, ‘black lives matter,’ then we must recalibrate our modes of reading, thinking, and acting in order to pay heed to the political ontology of race and to the mattering of blackness itself.”<sup>[33]</sup>



Sanford Biggers, *BAM (for Michael)*, 2015.

Left: Video still. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Right: High Polish Bronze, 19h x 5w x 5d in. Image courtesy of the artist.

unnamed victims of gun violence, the dismembered body was displayed on a pedestal in the gallery adjacent to the video.



Sanford Biggers. *Antique quilts*, Oil stick, Spray paint, Acrylic Assorted, fabrics Glitter, Tar, Silkscreen. 120h x 48w in. Image courtesy of the artist.

Biggers' colorful, psychedelic, ten-foot quilt inscribed with the word "MATTER" makes the racial valences of *BAM*'s constructed violence more complex. Biggers brings quilt-making traditions together with drawing, mysticism, and American history in the past and present, a practice typically associated with women's work and feminist craft. The quilt is sewn from several antique quilts that Biggers has been collecting for decades. Attracted to the ready-made patterns and colors of the textiles, the artist sees the quilts as evocative backgrounds for his line drawings in which he relates cosmology to the black experience. In this way, Biggers' quilts extend the work of Faith Ringgold, whose much-anthologized story quilts reframe the past and black women's roles within art and its histories. Quilts have played an important role in black freedom struggles and within genealogies of black vernacular art. During the antebellum and postbellum periods, historians believe hand-sewn quilts were embedded with camouflaged images and words used to signal safe routes to escaping slaves headed north on the Underground Railroad. Ringgold's incorporation of painted figures and landscapes surrounded by narrative text panels in her quilts insert black women characters and voices into spaces from which they have been absented, from history to portraiture's conventions to museums. Less didactic in form, Biggers' psychedelic quilt raises important questions about gender difference, artistic labor, cultural preservation, and cultural critique. The materiality of Biggers' quilt also conjures ideas of comfort and embodiment that, for black

*BAM*, the video included in *Matter*, directs us toward the urgencies Copeland outlines. *BAM* features a sculpted figure dipped in thick brown wax being shot multiple times, an act so unnerving Biggers could not execute it himself; instead his cameraman, Raul, pulled the trigger.<sup>[34]</sup> Quick camera zooms from different angles and close-up shots accompany each of the bullet wounds, heightening the jarring nature of the violence the sculpture undergoes. The sculpture's "death" is rendered in slow motion. The artist then recovered the mutilated figure and cast its remnants in bronze. Imagined as a disfigured memorial to named and

unnamed victims of gun violence, the dismembered body was displayed on a pedestal in the gallery adjacent to the video.



bodies in the U.S. and abroad, are called into question every day.

*Laocoön (Fat Albert)* extends the precarity of black life activated by the materiality of the quilt and the insurgent message embedded in its fibers. Situated directly in front of the quilt, the large, vinyl artwork appears partially deflated on the floor. In its likeness to Fat Albert, a 1970s cartoon character created and voiced by comedian Bill Cosby, the sculpture takes the form of a rotund black man with a short afro dressed in a bright red shirt and blue pants. The figure lies on its belly, arms at its sides, head turned with one ear pressed to the ground. Animated by an electric pump, the body breathes, inhaling and exhaling to the point that it hovers just above the ground before the pump quits and the work descends slowly to its initial deflated state to begin again. As the cycle repeats, the work recalls recent images and sounds of black death—namely Michael Brown’s lifeless body and Eric Garner’s inability to breathe—while the vinyl sculpture’s appearance links *Laocoön*, the ill-fated Greek mythological character, to *Fat Albert*.

The *Fat Albert* cartoon predates the moralizing ethos of *The Cosby Show*, Bill Cosby’s situation comedy of the 1980s, and his public rants about black respectability. Through *The Cosby Show*, Cosby cultivated black respectability by carefully crafting the narrative and public image for his fictional middle-class African American family. During this period, Cosby became known as the quintessential African American TV dad. The dogma of Cosby’s black respectability reached an apex in the early 2000s when he publicly and repeatedly demeaned black Americans, conveniently ignoring the realities of structural oppression and blaming black folks for being, in his view, poor, abusive, illiterate, and irresponsible.

In 2014, Cosby found himself in the media spotlight for different reasons. His history of sexual violence, long buried in silenced victims and sealed court documents, had finally surfaced, effectively obliterating his respectable public image. *Laocoön* likens Cosby’s “fall from grace” to the Greek mythological character in the Epic Cycle who was killed with both his sons after attempting to expose the ruse of the Trojan Horse. Within the context of the exhibition, *Laocoön* animates a kind of public death that, akin to *BAM*, regrettably rhymes with the numerous images of slain unarmed black men.



Sanford Biggers, *Laocoön*, 2015. Vinyl, electric air pump. 72h x 60w x 120d in.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

The title of Biggers’ sculpture also references canonical writings on art’s value within prescribed boundaries, a citation that makes explicit the artist’s academic training as well as his avant-garde sensibilities. German playwright and literary critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing initiated this discourse when he took issue with Johann Winckelmann’s interpretation of the Hellenistic-era sculpture, “Laocoon.” In so doing, he prompted a discussion about medium specificity, a defining feature of modern art discourse that Clement Greenberg elaborated centuries later. In “Towards a Newer Laocoon” of 1940, Greenberg

advances the ideas about formalism, the avant-garde, and the historical progress of painting he first put forth in his most famous essay of 1939, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."<sup>[35]</sup> In his lesser-known 1940 essay, he attempts to explain in historical terms how modern art revolted against the dominance of literature by placing new and greater emphasis on painting's material properties. Greenberg banishes illusionism from painting, the most illustrious of art forms, by insisting on the real and material plane. He writes, "A vibrating tension is set up as the objects struggle to maintain their volume against the tendency of the real picture plane to re-assert its material flatness and crush them to silhouettes."<sup>[36]</sup> In this frame, painting can only be about itself, and must be, in order to avoid contamination by other artistic mediums and traditions.

Contrary to what Greenberg terms "an embodiment of art's instinct of self-preservation," judgments about good and bad art, or a proposal for the right and wrong way to do blackness, the speculative, avant-garde matters of Biggers' exhibition point to something else entirely along the lines of denial and refusal.<sup>[37]</sup> The avant-garde, with its original links to revolution, represents a denial of social norms, a turning away from bourgeois society toward an imagined Bohemia. This utopia was seen as a sanctuary, a world apart from capitalism and the forms of (class) conflict it catalyzes, not unlike the black radical imaginings at the core of Afrofuturism and other forms of black speculative thought. "It was to be the task of the avant-garde," Greenberg explains, "to perform in opposition to bourgeois society the function of finding new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that same society, without at the same time succumbing to its ideological divisions and its refusal to permit the arts to be their own justification."<sup>[38]</sup> "Hence," he writes in 1939, anticipating his 1940 proclamations, "it was developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to 'experiment,' but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" (emphasis in original).<sup>[39]</sup>

Greenberg might appear to be an unlikely accomplice to marshal here. But his writings on kitsch and avant-garde art practice are useful for parsing the dynamics of Biggers' exhibition and its critical reception as they relate to notions of the commons. In titling his sculpture, *Laocoön*, Biggers urges us to see anew the relationship between aesthetics and politics against the backdrop of social and political upheaval. For these reasons, *Matter's* clever centering of current affairs as a window onto the limits of medium boundaries, issues of artistic and political representation, and blackness's material conditions has been lauded for its avant-garde orientation toward present-day racial violence and calls for social justice within a predominantly white art world. It has also been criticized for the very same reasons. In a July 2016 *ArtNews* article titled "Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem With Contemporary Art's Appropriation of Race," curator and critic Taylor Renee Aldridge worries about the political efficacy of art that instances racial difference and injustice. She calls Biggers' art, along with the work of Kenneth Goldsmith and Ti-Rock Moore, "lewd voyeurism masquerading as empathy...a new wave of contemporary work influenced by racial injustices, one that...is decidedly more sensational, predominantly focusing on pain and trauma inflicted upon the black body."<sup>[40]</sup>

"Artists have made systemic racism look sexy," Aldridge continues, and "galleries have made it desirable for collectors. It has, in other words, gone mainstream."<sup>[41]</sup> While Aldridge is certainly right to wonder about the material and ethical implications of representing black death in a predominantly white art space, ignoring Biggers' rigorous, subversive attention to form undermines art's potential. After all, Aldridge assigns *agency* to the objects in Biggers' exhibition, an assignment informed by the expectation that art and its makers perform a civic duty that instantiates the greater common good and advances social progress. In my view, *the work* that Biggers' work performs and likewise urges us to do is in the realm of aesthetic protocols, to heed, Huey Copeland observes, "the relevance of art-historical methods for producing interdisciplinary accounts of the world's continual unfolding and

reconfiguring.”<sup>[42]</sup> Aldridge’s dismissal constrains the possibilities for Biggers’ art to call forth a new ethics of black representation and borders on what Leo Bersani denounces as redemptive criticism, writing on art that expects it to sublimate and thereby repair traumatic experience. This form of criticism approximates Greenberg’s reproach to boundary confusion, “the translation of an extreme solicitude, an anxiousness as to the fate of art, a concern for its identity.”<sup>[43]</sup> In this case, redemptive criticism constricts what art, and blackness, can and should be. The cutting edge of Biggers’ art, by contrast, energetically throws into high relief the emergency conditions that have spurred its making, which, by the same token, threaten to obfuscate its value. In times of crisis, “demands for art to be pertinent increase with the want for strong analyses of ‘real’ conditions,” Darby English observes.<sup>[44]</sup> Likewise, “the peculiar realness of art risks fading from view. Some recent art permits deep insight into definitive elements of the present situation while concurrently challenging popular sentiment and established taste.”<sup>[45]</sup> The works in Biggers’ *Matter*, and the other artworks discussed herein, fit this latter characterization. Which is to say, the avant-garde nature of Biggers’ *Matter* is principally about, in fact deeply invested in, art’s potential but not in a reparative or reverent sense.

Beyond the show’s title, *Matter* encompassed a range of artistic mediums and materials, issues concerning the social and political weight of representation, and the troubling legacies of anti-black violence, both past and recent. In so doing, the show gave form to various modes of materiality and, taken together, represented sites of black radical becoming. By this I mean, “what a revolutionary future might look like and how we might bring this new world into being,” as scholar Robin D.G. Kelley puts it.<sup>[46]</sup> However, unlike Biggers’ explicitly Afrofuturist works, which are oriented toward recovering lost black pasts and repairing racial trauma through an exploration of nomadism and diasporic spirits, the art that constituted *Matter* approaches the future in more bleak terms. Biggers’ suite of objects embodied the speculative matters of black death.

Ultimately, Biggers’ exhibition elaborated myriad definitions of matter, from screen to cloth to bronze, while simultaneously bridging avant-garde art making practices with contemporary histories of racial violence. With matter as an organizing principle, Biggers’ exhibition nods to black physical subsistence, the activist network Black Lives Matter, and how central to American popular media and screen culture images of black death are—from unarmed black men to Bill Cosby. However, *Matter*’s cutting edge is not its reverent address, or redress, of these issues. Instead of affirming (white) notions of progress and futurity, or presenting yet another instance of black debasement for white enjoyment and pleasure, *Matter* demonstrates an alternative pathway in the impasses it stages, from bullet wounds to impossible comforts to belabored fits of air that barely rise above the ground. In so doing, it makes black death coterminous with black radical becoming, a process that approximates Gilles Deleuze’s description of becoming as a breaking from the norm, a movement that neither progresses or regresses along a series. Taking seriously the speculative matters of Biggers’ work, then, the art historical methods at play therein, and the pessimism that the “Afro” in Afrofuturism signals thus expands the possibilities of black artistic production and criticism to include visions that are not necessarily redemptive but are nonetheless radical.

All of the above works engender these possibilities. *A Subtlety*, *Open Casket*, and the work in *Matter* enliven hot-button issues, namely art’s potential to repair traumatic experiences, the “proper” way to portray blackness, and the persistent entanglements of racial and sexual otherness in the midst of social and political upheaval. They also expose the limits of race and aesthetic discourse in the twenty-first century to open up new terrain beyond a binary of trauma and reparation. Within this terrain, the works suggest that cross-racial empathy, or even intimacy, are no longer necessary or desirable for contemporary social transformation. In so doing, they trouble what we think art and art criticism can and should do *now*, enfolding the two into a conversation with racial identity and politics that

is equal to the challenges of our time.

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## Notes

1. My title is taken from Elizabeth Alexander's essay, "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7 (1994), 77-94. In the essay, Alexander examines how race-based looking relative to George Holliday's video recording of four Los Angeles police officers beating an unarmed Rodney King spurred a practical national memory regarding black bodies as sites of abjection and dangerous behavior. For Alexander, brutalized black bodies on display on television and in the courtroom stand as sites of projection for white anxieties that uphold racist assumptions and practices, for fear of what a black body *could* do, say, or mean.
2. In summer 2018, Michael B. Gillespie and Lisa Uddin organized and edited, "Black One Shot," a collection of writings on contemporary black expressive culture that models this new frontier in aesthetic criticism, which I expand in this essay. See the archive here: <http://asapjournal.com/tag/black-one-shot/>.
3. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 15.
4. Kristeva, 4.
5. For more on these criticisms, see Amber Jamilla Musser's YouTube video, "Riddles of the Sphinx: Kara Walker and the Possibility of Black Female Masochism," *New Directions in Black Feminist Studies* (February 5, 2015), [youtube.com/watch?v=ma9JmtEi7VQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma9JmtEi7VQ).
6. Nicholas Powers, "Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibit," *The Independent* (June 30, 2014), Accessed August 7, 2014, [independent.org/2014/06/30/why-i-yelled-kara-walker-exhibit#sthash.qcl1OEJB.dpuf](http://independent.org/2014/06/30/why-i-yelled-kara-walker-exhibit#sthash.qcl1OEJB.dpuf).
7. Supplements that further historicized the installation were included on Creative Time's website, which also hosted interactive components to encourage viewers to use the installation's custom twitter hashtag: #KaraWalkerDomino to create a "Digital Sugar Baby." Those writings included: Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat's *The Price of Sugar* and illustrator and activist Ricardo Cortes's *The Act of Whitening*, See [creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/](http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/).
8. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1.
9. Whitney Museum of American Art, "Whitney Biennial," (2017) Accessed February 1, 2019, [whitney.org/exhibitions/2017-biennial](http://whitney.org/exhibitions/2017-biennial).
10. See Coco Fusco's "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Thoughts about the Donelle Woolford Debate," *Brooklyn Rail* (May 6, 2019), [brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/one-step-forward-two-steps-back-thoughts-about-the-donelle-woolford-debate](http://brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/one-step-forward-two-steps-back-thoughts-about-the-donelle-woolford-debate).
11. Charles A. Wright, Jr., "The Mythology of Difference: Vulgar Identity Politics at the Whitney Biennial," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985, Second Edition*, eds. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 265.
12. Wright, Jr., "The Mythology of Difference," 278.
13. Elisabeth Sussman, "Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties," *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, Exh. Cat. (New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 14; David A. Ross, "Preface: Know Thy Self (Know Your Place)," *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, Exh. Cat. (New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 9.
14. Wright, Jr., "The Mythology of Difference," 268.
15. Ibid.
16. For an account of the 2014 Whitney Biennial and its tensions, see Jaime Shearn Coan's "How to See Black Space in Total Whiteness: taisha paggett's *underwaters (we is ready, we is ready)* and the 2014 Whitney Biennial," *TDR: The Drama Review* 61, 3 (Fall 2017), 72-93.
17. Christa Bell quoted in Ben Davis, "The Yams, on the Whitney and White Supremacy," *artnet News* (May 30, 2014), Accessed February 1, 2019, [news.artnet.com/exhibitions/the-yams-on-the-whitney-and-white-supremacy-30364](http://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/the-yams-on-the-whitney-and-white-supremacy-30364).

18. *Pay Dirt* (2003) required five years to research and develop. The exhibition title is drawn from a colloquial phrase meaning the discovery of something of value. Instead of prospecting in fields and streambeds for ready-made soil or studying commercial simulations, Scanlon tested ways to assemble the raw ingredients for soil from common consumer by-products. His investigation culminated when he transformed a gallery into a mini-processing plant that actually produced dirt. The dirt was packaged and sold to visitors as part of the exhibition.
19. Scanlan says in an email interview with Carolina A. Miranda published in the *Los Angeles Times*, "In the beginning, I saw it more as a right and obligation that I had as an artist to be willing to engage with all parts of the world, just as any novelist or screenwriter would. But I have always been aware of how fraught the power relation of myself to Donelle Woolford is. I am interested in that trouble and in seeing if it can be destabilized by taking it too far, on the one hand, but also by seeing if it can be dismantled, piece by piece." See Carolina A. Miranda, "Art and Race at the Whitney: Rethinking the Donelle Woolford Debate," *Los Angeles Times* (June 17, 2014), [latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-donelle-woolford-controversy-whitney-biennial-20140609-column.html](http://latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-donelle-woolford-controversy-whitney-biennial-20140609-column.html). In a 2010 *BOMB Magazine* interview with Jeffrey Sigler, Scanlan argues, "There is a long history of black characters created by white authors. In American literature there was contentious debate throughout the 20th century around black fictional characters. But the arguments posed by Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin were always about the quality and depth of black characters in the works of William Faulkner or Nelson Algren or Flannery O'Connor, not about whether white writers were allowed to create black characters at all. So, at this point in time, I don't understand needing permission to do it." See Jeremy Sigler and Joe Scanlan, "Joe Scanlan," *BOMB* 112 (July 1, 2010), [bombmagazine.org/articles/joe-scanlan/](http://bombmagazine.org/articles/joe-scanlan/).
20. Klaus Speidel, "Dana Schutz's 'Open Casket': A Controversy Around A Painting as A Symptom of An Art World Malady," *Spike* (March 24, 2017), Accessed March 7, 2019, [spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/dana-schutzs-open-casket-controversy-around-painting-symptom-art-world-malady](http://spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/dana-schutzs-open-casket-controversy-around-painting-symptom-art-world-malady). For an equally rich discussion of the problems Schutz's painting and its reception posed, see George Baker's "Pachyderm," *Texte Zur Kunst* (March 29, 2017), Accessed February 2, 2019, [textezurkunst.de/articles/baker-pachyderm/](http://textezurkunst.de/articles/baker-pachyderm/).
21. Speidel, "Dana Schutz's 'Open Casket': A Controversy Around A Painting as A Symptom of An Art World Malady," [spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/dana-schutzs-open-casket-controversy-around-painting-symptom-art-world-malady](http://spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/dana-schutzs-open-casket-controversy-around-painting-symptom-art-world-malady).
22. Here and in the following description, I follow and elaborate Speidel's description of *Open Casket*. Speidel's analysis rhymes with my own initial sentiments upon reading Black's letter and seeing the painting in person.
23. Speidel, "Dana Schutz's 'Open Casket': A Controversy Around A Painting as A Symptom of An Art World Malady," [spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/dana-schutzs-open-casket-controversy-around-painting-symptom-art-world-malady](http://spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/dana-schutzs-open-casket-controversy-around-painting-symptom-art-world-malady).
24. Ibid.
25. Biggers quoted in Mieke Ten Have, "Rewriting History with Sanford Biggers," *Cultured Magazine* (June 2016), Accessed February 2, 2019, [culturedmag.com/sanford-biggers-studio](http://culturedmag.com/sanford-biggers-studio).
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. See Smalls' recent writing on X-Men character Storm, presented at the 2016 Black Portraitures conference hosted by New York University in Johannesburg, South Africa. This note comes from her paper description, which can be found here: [blackportraitures.info/speakers/shante-smalls/](http://blackportraitures.info/speakers/shante-smalls/). See also Ruth Mayer's "'Africa as an Alien Future': The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, 4 (2000), 555-566 and Kodwo Eshun's "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, 2 (2003), 287-302. For newer conceptions of Afrofuturism, see *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, eds. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).
29. Thanks to Jerome P. Dent, Jr. for the scholarly collaboration that led to this reference and language.
30. Biggers quoted in Mieke Ten Have, "Rewriting History with Sanford Biggers," *Cultured Magazine* (June 2016), Accessed February 1, 2019, [culturedmag.com/sanford-biggers-studio](http://culturedmag.com/sanford-biggers-studio).

31. Biggers quoted in “New York City Percent for Art,” *tumblr* (January 22, 2015), Accessed February 4, 2019, [percentforartnyc.tumblr.com/post/108845577519/artist-sanford-biggers-lotus-is-a](https://percentforartnyc.tumblr.com/post/108845577519/artist-sanford-biggers-lotus-is-a); Biggers quoted in Taylor Renee Aldridge, “Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem With Contemporary Art’s Appropriation of Race,” *ArtNews* (July 2016), Accessed January 23, 2019, [artnews.com/2016/07/11/black-bodies-white-cubes-the-problem-with-contemporary-arts-appropriation-of-race/](https://artnews.com/2016/07/11/black-bodies-white-cubes-the-problem-with-contemporary-arts-appropriation-of-race/). Biggers explains the piece in his keynote remarks at a 2016 conference in Detroit, Michigan. Organized by *Infinite Mile*, a journal on arts and culture in Detroit, and the University of Michigan Stamps School of Art & Design, Biggers’ keynote was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit and coincided with the 2016 Art & Race Series.
32. Biggers quoted in “New York City Percent for Art,” *tumblr* (January 22, 2015), [percentforartnyc.tumblr.com/post/108845577519/artist-sanford-biggers-lotus-is-a](https://percentforartnyc.tumblr.com/post/108845577519/artist-sanford-biggers-lotus-is-a).
33. Cheryl Finley and Deborah Willis, “From the Editors: Black Portraiture[s],” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 38-39 (November 2016), 7.
34. Huey Copeland, “Tending-toward-Blackness,” *October* 156 (Spring 2016), 143.
35. Biggers, “An Artist’s Unflinching Look at Racial Violence,” *TED2016* (February 2016), Accessed March 3, 2016, [ted.com/talks/sanford\\_biggers\\_an\\_artist\\_s\\_unflinching\\_look\\_at\\_racial\\_violence](https://ted.com/talks/sanford_biggers_an_artist_s_unflinching_look_at_racial_violence).
36. Aside from *Laocoön*, other artworks in *Matter* resonate with Greenberg’s writings, especially his 1939 essay. In *BAM*, the figure’s form is derived from kitschy wooden African sculptures that Biggers’ has collected from flea markets and tourist shops during his travels. The origins and authenticity of these objects are impossible to know, a performative dislocation to which Biggers is drawn.
37. Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 566.
38. Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 564.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 5.
41. Taylor Renee Aldridge, “Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem With Contemporary Art’s Appropriation of Race,” *ArtNews* (July 2016), Accessed January 23, 2019, [artnews.com/2016/07/11/black-bodies-white-cubes-the-problem-with-contemporary-arts-appropriation-of-race/](https://artnews.com/2016/07/11/black-bodies-white-cubes-the-problem-with-contemporary-arts-appropriation-of-race/).
42. *Ibid.*
43. Copeland, 141.
44. Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 562.
45. Darby English, *To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 3.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Robin D.G. Kelley, Quoted in “Black Art Matters: A Roundtable on the Black Radical Imagination,” *Red Wedge Magazine* (July 26, 2016), Accessed November 11, 2017, [redwedgemagazine.com/online-issue/black-art-matters-roundtable-black-radical-imaginatio](https://redwedgemagazine.com/online-issue/black-art-matters-roundtable-black-radical-imaginatio).

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