

Jeffrey Kastner, “Sondra Perry: Bridget Donahue, *Artforum*, December 1, 2023

<https://www.artforum.com/events/jeffrey-kastner-sondra-perry-bridget-donahue-2023-543824/>

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REVIEWS NEW YORK

# Sondra Perry

Bridget Donahue

By Jeffrey Kastner



Sondra Perry, *couch and fern*, *GLITTER AND THE LION'S MANE*, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 1934, sofa with video screen, fern, floral foam, sound, motorized barbershop chair, urethane, acrylic, glitter, iron, lion's mane mushrooms, vinyl, PEVA. Installation view. Photo: Gregory Carideo.

Sondra Perry's comprehensively brilliant exhibition at Bridget Donahue was overwhelming in the fullest sense of the word. Brimming with ideas, moods, and modes of address, the show worked so many intellectual and affectual

vectors that it was almost impossible to fully absorb in one go. Perry dynamically congregated sculpture, video, sound, digital animation, text, and more in order to consider social and personal identity, family and comradeship, and the flimsy boundary between reality and artifice. In the process, the artist also produced a startlingly original, deeply absorbing meditation on what she has described as the “agility” of Blackness: the ways it “shifts, morphs, and embodies technology to combat oppression and surveillance throughout the diaspora.”

The exhibition’s title was a horizontal black bar, a sign of the spirit of purposeful feints and canny mischief that guided the enterprise. This nameless naming was of a piece with the whole riddling didactic apparatus deployed by Perry for the materials on view, many of which had been shown in different forms, arrangements, and contexts over the past few years in the US and Europe. The gallery checklist reflected this hybridity and strategic upcycling, aggregating more than a dozen discrete artifacts into three “works,” each appended with a time-bending series of dates—*couch and fern*, *GLITTER AND THE LION’S MANE*, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 1934; *FOIL MANE: HANDSHAKES AND HEARTBREAKS*, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 1913; and *phantom. menace. featuring OPEN ROADS and You Can Try It but I See You Comin’ Hoe.*, 2020, 2021, 2022, April 20, 2023. Every work featured a barber chair that Perry had repurposed from her studio, a former hair salon in Newark, New Jersey. *FOIL MANE*, sprouting stout human legs, was encased in the titular aluminum wrapping, while *OPEN ROADS* was overgrown with orange Plasticine that bristled with dozens of joss sticks, some of which were smoking away. The last, *GLITTER AND THE LION’S MANE*, was set inside a kind of tent made from long strips of plastic hung from the ceiling, the shaggy leonine mushrooms name-checked in the title sprouting from cracks in its black leather seat.

The overall vibe of the barbershop/beauty salon—long important centers for Black community—was extended by a wall-mounted barbershop cabinet fitted with a screen showing a short, mesmerizing video, partially created with AI image-generating software. The artist gave it several prompts, including: “Two African American men, one in his 50s and one in his late 20s, stand in the middle of a crowded barbershop and shake hands.” Beginning with a scene of Perry in the gallery, it soon morphed into a delirious looping sequence of the summoned encounters, with various Black men joining kaleidoscopically torqued and glitched hands while a belting house-mix remake of an Al Green tune played, before returning again to the IRL gallery—a kind of joyous fever dream of fellowship.

The final sector of the show contained *couch and fern*, the main element of which was a Creamsicle-colored settee that had been tipped on its side to make visible a video monitor embedded in its bottom. The screen displayed a twenty-eight-minute work depicting the view from a traveling car overlaid with subtitles from a dialogue—ostensibly between Perry and British psychotherapist Bola Shonubi—that played throughout most of the piece. The conversation, spoken by what seemed to be a group of subtly shifting, computer-inflected voices, concerned Perry’s relationship with her grandmother and their Black heritage: social, political, and economic iniquities suffered; memories lost. Though nominally centered on the analysis of a dream the artist may or may not have actually had involving a flood, as well as a trip she and her grandmother made to North Carolina in an unsuccessful attempt to locate her old home, the video was so densely and complexly layered—visually, aurally, and textually—that its narrative gist remained tantalizingly elusive, even with repeated viewings. At one point during their talk, an increasingly exasperated Perry is discussing her slow progress on a work she’d been commissioned to make about the road trip and says: “I don’t feel like I have an artwork or a story that honors anything. I don’t know what honor means in a gallery.” After seeing this show, I believe I do.

Ben Davis, "The 100 Works of Art That Defined the Decade, Ranked: Part 1", *artnet News*, December 27, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/100-works-that-defined-the-decade-part-1-1729962>

## artnet® news

### Opinion

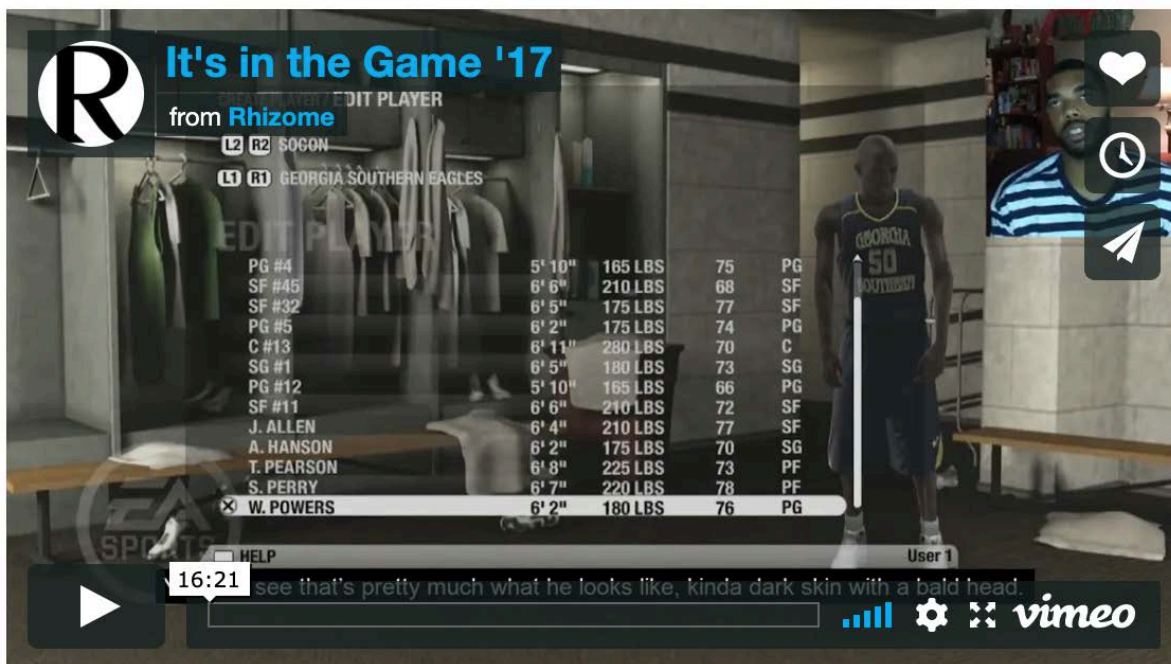
# The 100 Works of Art That Defined the Decade, Ranked: Part 1

In the first installment of a four-part series, our critic reveals his picks—number 100 through number 76—of the key artworks of the 2010s.

Ben Davis, December 27, 2019

82.

## Sondra Perry, *IT'S IN THE GAME '17* or *Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection* (2017)



The new realities of digital life and how they interact with labor, racism, aesthetics, and sense of self were major themes of the 2010s. For me, Perry's disorienting, disoriented *IT'S IN THE GAME*, which was commissioned by Oslo's Henie Onstad Kunstesenter and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, is a go-to reference drawing together all of that, partly because it is such a personal take on the subject, dealing with how her brother's image was hijacked for a basketball video game.

Seph Rodney, "Sondra Perry Offer Viewers a Drone Perspective", *Hyperallergic*, July 24, 2019.  
<https://hyperallergic.com/509611/sondra-perry-offers-viewers-a-drone-perspective/>

## HYPERALLERGIC

ART

# Sondra Perry Offers Viewers a Drone Perspective

Surveilling the landscape of Cleveland, Sondra Perry's latest exhibition *A Terrible Thing* fashions an institutional critique of MoCA Cleveland.

Seph Rodney July 24, 2019



Installation view, Sondra Perry, "A Terrible Thing" (2019) ( all photos by Field Studio; © moCa Cleveland 2019, unless otherwise stated)

CLEVELAND, Ohio —“When you are anchored, a descent is a matter of time.” So says the digitized voice that runs almost from the beginning of Sondra Perry’s “A Terrible Thing” (2019), which is described in the literature of the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, as a (roughly) 10-minute, high definition, two-channel color video with sound. The work is not really this. It’s more than a video, because the piece screens in a

space containing chrome partitions raked at an angle that mimics the skin of the Museum building in which it is installed, and, as a carefully attentive docent tells me, the door to the second channel — playing in an adjacent room — won’t open any further than its four- or five-inch aperture. It isn’t just a color video with sound because (besides the intermittent and ominous sounds of footsteps) a steeply pitched, screeching voice reads out a script throughout, and this voice hovers on the edge of comprehension. Actually, for me it dives into incomprehensibility. Because I’ve lost the upper registers of my hearing it sounds

like an alien reading a story underwater. I have to believe the museum's Gund Curatorial Fellow, LaTanya Autry when she tells me that what I am hearing in the soundtrack is language.

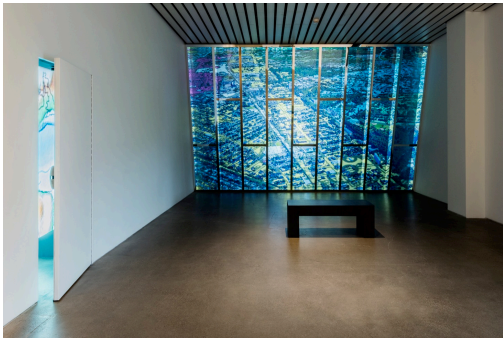


MoCA Cleveland 2019 (photo by the author)

“A Terrible Thing” really, truly exists as an experience, a mediated performance in which the artist’s props and support mechanisms — the video, the installation, the odd, scraping, computerized voice, the second channel partially hidden behind a door, the museum staff — all work together to move me in four divergent directions at the same time. The voice’s tale (I was given a transcript and there are copies made available to visitors in the gallery) pulls me down all the way to the building’s foundations, 600 feet underground. That’s where I sit for a moment, on top of, as the voice repeats: “the Chagrin Shale, a geologic formation 365 million years old.” But then the video pulls me back above ground.

The piece begins with just a map marker on a blue screen indicating “MoCA” and then takes me whirling far above the surrounding terrain of the city that’s been digitized and parceled out. From an eagle’s vantage I see roads and streets, highways and rivers, farmland and urban sprawl. They float in a sea of blue — the digital version of amniotic fluid — eventually birthing buildings, parks, waterways into clear resolution. Then the camera angles down. Now I am at street level. The computer simulations are gone, and I have a pedestrian’s view of cars and trucks passing by the MoCA building, all mirrored in the brilliantly glossy casing — an angular rock formation made sleek, modernist haven consisting of mirror-finish, black stainless steel. (In the meantime, the second channel with its limited-view has zoomed out to a telescopic view of the planet as seen from a satellite.) Yet the voice doesn’t stop speaking while both videos run. It insists on driving me further down.

I hear (or really read) about “iron ore, remains of the Cat and Six Nations of the Iroquois ... panels of ColourTex Black Mirror and the blast furnaces ... silt, fine sand, and Chagrin Shale.” I read that I am going down, “into the terrible. The terrible terror. The terrible things.” But then the artist pulls me sideways.



Installation view, Sondra Perry, "A Terrible Thing" (2019)

The drone-like movement of the video starts to skate across the landscape. I am following cars along the avenues close to the museum, or I am hovering above the computer-generated landscape like a surveyor, picking out the resources, the distinctions among the rural (at one point I see wind turbines), the residential, the municipal, the densely urban. And the voice yanks me back into history. It recounts, "The Home Owners' Loan Corporation

(HOLC), was created in 1933 as a government-sponsored corporation to help refinance homes at risk of foreclosure in the wake of the Great Depression." It goes on to say that this governmental agency created redlining maps to guide investment in the city, and that "Black and Immigrant neighborhoods were often given grades of C or D, resulting in little or no access to mortgage insurance or credit for decades." But MoCa came into existence partly "with the assistance of \$14.8 million in New Markets Tax Credits— federal income tax credits used to encourage private investment in low-income communities around the United States." (The building opened in 2012.) This transmission of evidence of the museum's, and indeed the city's origins — conflicted at the least, sordid at best — begins to construct a kind of institutional critique. Perry makes the case that the museum is founded in an effort to give back with one hand what the state had taken with the other hand in a previous generation.



Installation view, Sondra Perry, "A Terrible Thing" (2019)

So now I am being wrenched diachronically across historical timelines. And though the building is said to be a cultural and economic anchor for the surrounding communities, it exists simultaneously in relation to all these vectors: the institution on a hill, embedded in the shale of mortification, over the bones of Native Americans who might never reclaim this land as their own, stretching forward and back from a history of conscientious and

calculated oppression to one of cautious and fearful admission. The museum really isn't an anchor. It's an inflection point, a fulcrum, an axis, and the descent that Perry refers to by way of the narrator is not inevitable at all. It takes the force of the artist's will to pull the viewer in opposite directions until one starts to come apart at the seams.

The main video ends with footage shot inside the museum; the desks and personal effects of the workers come into view. The camera still hovers. One can tell that among the generic office staples of phones and chairs and white formica surfaces, there are human touches. Forward and back. I note nondescript office chairs and then markers of status and hierarchy: a Herman Miller Aeron chair. The camera continues to roam across an office layout that is open. After watching the video several times, Autry takes me up to the museum's third floor and shows me the space Perry selectively depicts. It is an open-plan space, designed to facilitate conversation and collaboration. Yet, at the same time, it is not a space which nurtures privacy or quiet. I return downstairs to the video. Forward and back, up and down. The camera's eye flashes across a sign warning of the consequences of sexual harassment, lingers on a workplace advertisement; wind (from a fan I'm told) blows silver tinsel so that it picks itself up as if almost alive. To be here is to be in several places at once. And though technological surveillance is an investigative tool that has been misused by governmental agencies to bring about the very circumstances of this building, this video uses the same instrument to reveal the city's perditions.

Sondra Perry has fashioned a way to place me in the position of a drone or the drone's operator, surveilling a landscape which I am tempted to reduce to some summary judgment. But this land, this institution, this room evades that. It wants me to stay right here, suspended, so my feet don't quite touch the ground.

***Editor's Note:*** *The author's travel and accommodations were provided by MoCA Cleveland.*

Sondra Perry: A Terrible Thing continues at MoCA Cleveland (11400 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio) through August 11. The exhibition was curated by A. Will Brown, assistant curator at MoCA Cleveland.

Martha Schwendener, "Encountering the 'New Order' at MoMA", *The New York Times*, June 6, 2019.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/06/arts/design/museum-of-modern-art-technology.html>

# The New York Times

## ART REVIEW

### Encountering the 'New Order' at MoMA

The blind spots and new possibilities of the technologies we love (and hate).

**By Martha Schwendener**  
June 6, 2019

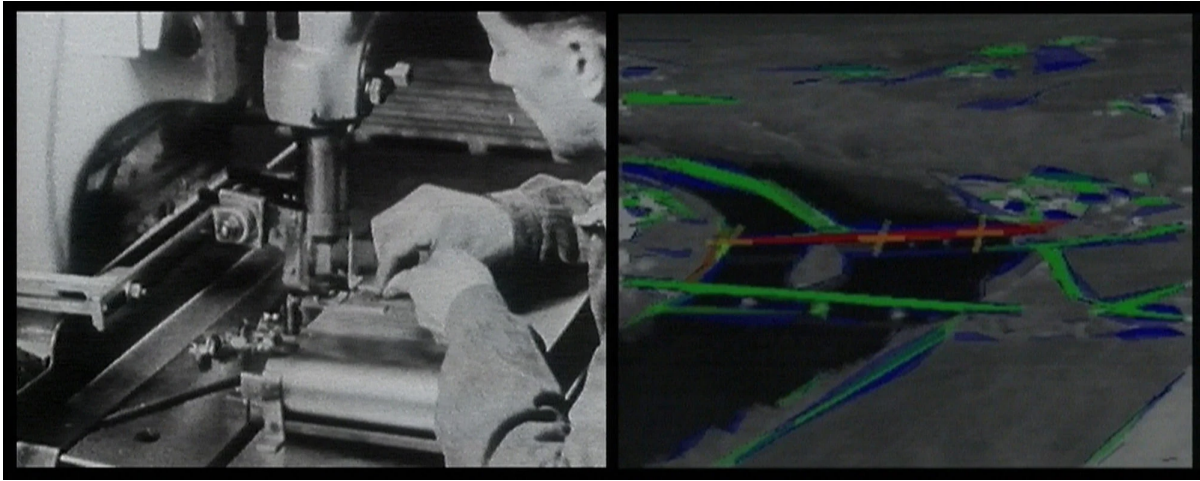


Josh Kline's "Skittles" (2014), left, and Ian Cheng's "Emissary Forks at Perfection" (2015-16) in the show "New Order: Art and Technology in the Twenty-First Century" at the Museum of Modern Art. Credit: The Museum of Modern Art; Jonathan Muzikar

What differentiates the work in "New Order: Art and Technology in the Twenty-First Century" from much of the art elsewhere at the Museum of Modern Art is that the objects here are made with technologies most of us already know and love (or hate). Flat screens, computer interfaces, video games, digital animation, 3D-printing and photography are transformed here into sprawling installations, canny video art or interactive sculptures.

The work in "New Order" is drawn entirely from MoMA's collection and organized by Michelle Kuo, who became a curator at the museum last year after serving as editor in chief at Artforum magazine for seven years. The exhibition is meant to demonstrate how much of the technology we think of as invisible — waves, wireless or abstract code — is still rooted in physical objects. And the artists, with varying success, are intent on showing us technology's blind spots and limitations, while opening up new possibilities for its use.

Much of the art here draws a line in the sand between technology's use in design and gadgetry. Some of the more compelling works consider how, for example, technology augments the human body, promising better health, longevity or happiness but rarely delivering on the promise. Josh Kline's "Skittles" (2014), a large commercial refrigerator at the entrance, is stocked with smoothies in invitingly minimalist packaging. Approaching the refrigerator, however, you see the ingredients listed and they include indigestible components like chopped-up credit cards, magazines and sneakers, or a toxic cocktail mixing cold medicine, energy drinks, pain relievers and psychiatric medications.



Harun Farocki's "Eye/Machine I" (2001), a two-channel video installation re-edited to single-channel video.  
The Museum of Modern Art

Around the corner, you can jump on two exercise machines and activate Sondra Perry's workstation videos that show her avatar, as well as digital images of J.M.W. Turner's "The Slave Ship" (1840). The juxtaposition injects a discussion of the black body in the African diaspora that's often missing in many technology forums.

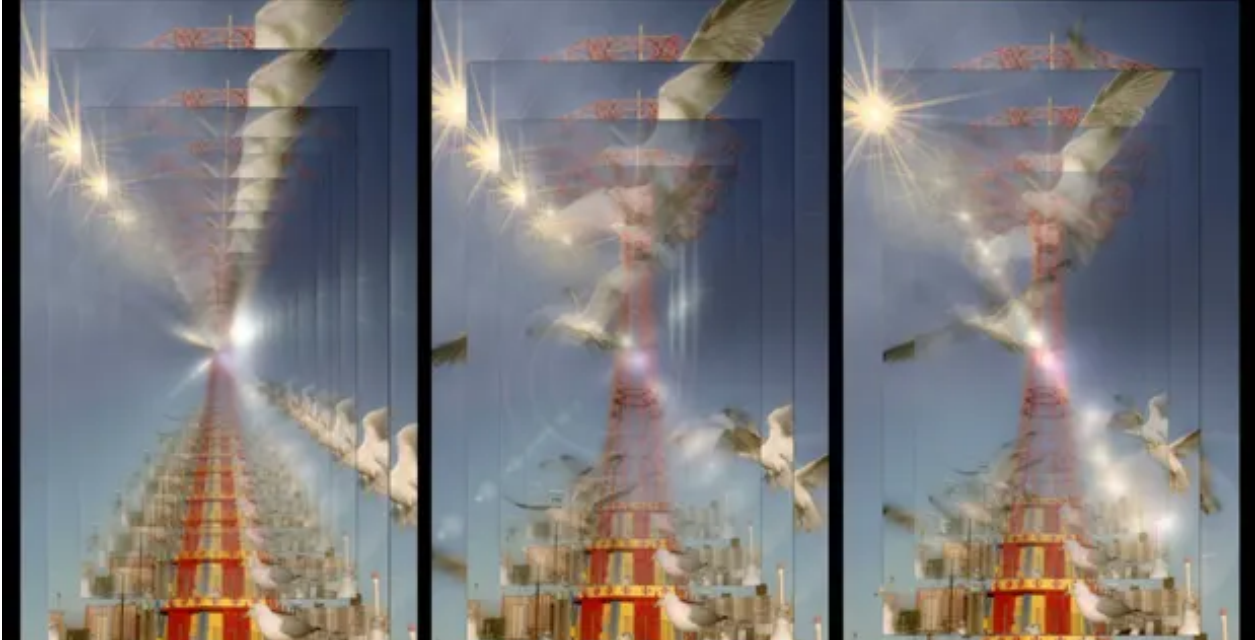
Beyond that is Jacolby Satterwhite's neo-psychedelic, gay- and sex-positive animation featuring candy-colored bodies dancing and morphing into other beings, as well as Anicka Yi's somewhat less successful series of vitrines with nickel-plated pins rusting in a bath of ultrasonic gel, simulating human blood. (Ms. Yi's videos, not on view here, engage more effectively than her sculptures with biotechnology and its effect on all species.)



Tabor Robak's "Xenix" (2013), a seven-channel video, displays comically banal details like the weather and the contents of a refrigerator.  
The Museum of Modern Art

Franni O'Toole, "New Order at MoMA review: artists chart a world in motion", *The Guardian*, March 21, 2019.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/21/new-order-at-moma-review-artists-chart-a-world-in-motion>

# The Guardian



## New Order at MoMA review: artists chart a world in motion

**Museum of Modern Art, New York** The uses, abuses and future of technology since 2000 are explored in an exhibition of Louise Bourgeois holograms, cyborg exercise equipment and lab art

**Franni O'Toole**

Thu 21 Mar 2019 09.39 EDT

**T**o think computers were not supposed to make it to the new millennium. MoMA's New Order: Art and Technology in the 21st Century never mentions the Y2K bug, although perhaps it should have. The 21st century has never been without the strange panic with which it began.

Presenting art made between 2000 and 2017, New Order starts in the immediate aftermath of Y2K, which turned out to be no big deal. While the old order was manufactured and full of junctures, the new order desires seamlessness. Generations have integrated industrial and postindustrial technologies into their lives. The old order was built; the new order is born.

New Order takes care to remember its ancestors.



Josh Kline's Skittles, 2014. Photograph: Jonathan Muzikar/The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The science of technology is perhaps most obviously scientific in the realm of healthcare - an industry that is the subject of Josh Kline's *Skittles*, in which a fridge of smoothies bottled feature enticing ingredient labels (Mr Clean, money order, medical scrubs, french fries, toilet paper, latex gloves, phone card, pennies). In the next room, Sondra Perry's exercise equipment installation is also about lifestyle, labour, and the mindless exploitation of our bodies. Visitors are encouraged to ride the machines, experiencing fitness as a luxury the same as the fine arts. "What time is it?" Perry's avatar wonders on one of the bike's screens. "Sondra only asks because [pause] you are in a gallery and it's the middle of the day ... how many jobs do you have?"

Imagining how objectively technology experiences the world, Leslie Thornton's *Luna* is a kaleidoscopic video of the Parachute Jump amusement ride - which began as a military experiment - on New York City's Coney Island. Time-lapsing through media from black-and-white colour film up to digital video, *Luna* is a reminder of how technology marks and dates itself. Technology's future might be difficult to predict, but its past is easy to put a finger on.

New Order's greater obsession is not where technology comes from but where we do. Josephine Pryde's *It's Not My Body XII* is an MRI image of a human embryo superimposed over a magenta desert landscape. Technology reveals what we are on the inside: during an ultrasound, mother and doctor look not at the mother's stomach but at the screen. A lifetime later, a flat note from a machine is more final than the lack of a pulse.

Before visitors exit the automatic glass doors, they pass Rodney McMillian's wall-sized work *Succulent*. Thick vinyl folds cinch around a gaping centre. There is a lot to admire in it, something sublime. This is our verification check. Cyborgs, as philosopher Donna Haraway says, are not reverent. They do not remember the cosmos.

. At the Museum of Modern Art, New York, until 15 June.

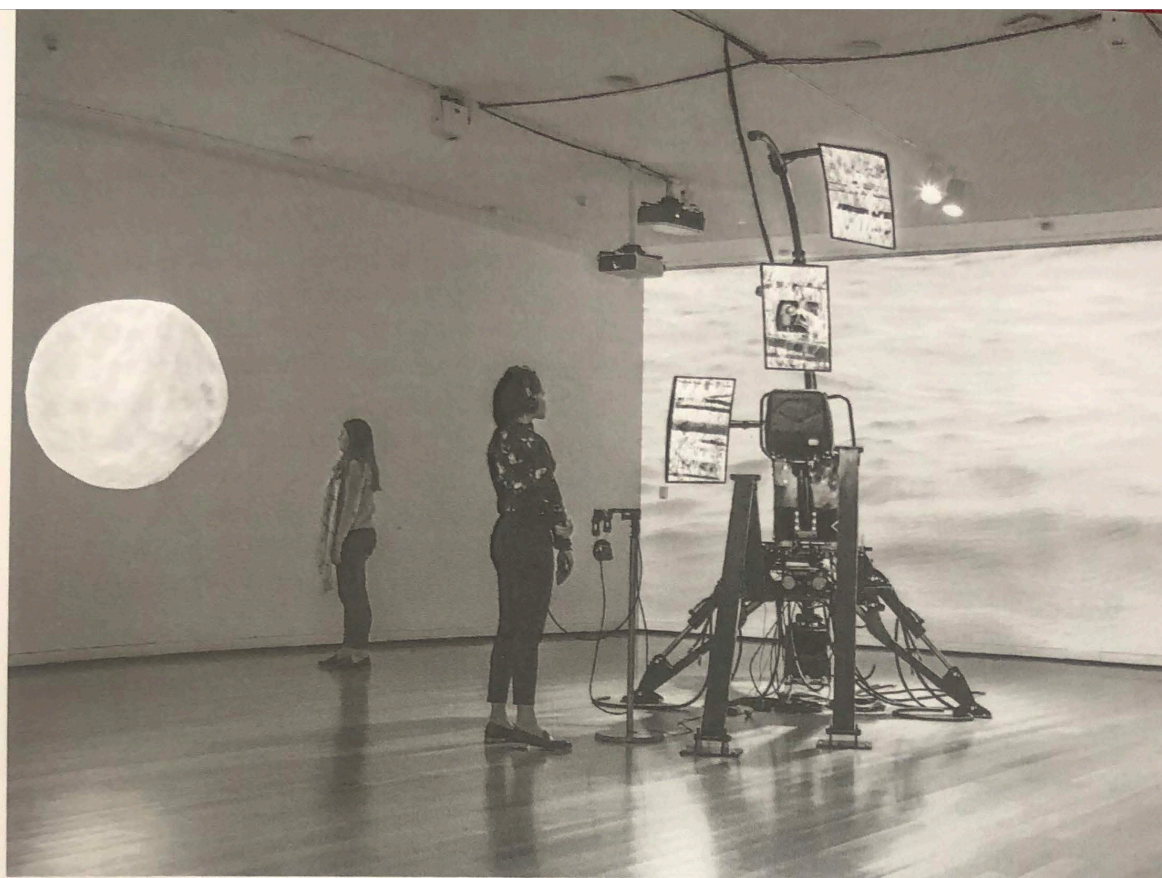
Megan Driscoll, "Exhibition Review: Megan Driscoll on Sondra Perry", *apricota*  
Volume 2, Spring 2019, 95-97.

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Sondra Perry: "Eclogue for [in]HABITABILITY," Seattle Art Museum  
(Seattle, 8 December 2017–8 July 2018)

AN ECLOGUE IS A PASTORAL POEM. Like a landscape painting, it is a representation of the countryside that has helped to construct an overdetermined, idyllic vision of humanity's relationship to nature. Rolling hills, sunny pastures, chattering shepherds—the eclogue imagines the landscape as a space of cultivation and of peaceful retreat. In *Eclogue for [in]HABITABILITY*, Sondra Perry examines who is served by such representations of nature, and what they reveal (or conceal) about our historical use of land. The installation also uses video and animation to continue Perry's investigation into the constructed spaces of digital representation. Finding echoes of the objectification of the natural environment in that of racialized bodies, both physical and virtual, *Eclogue* draws our attention to the violence such representations can inflict on the landscape and on people.

Upon entering the small gallery dedicated to *Eclogue*, visitors are greeted with soothing electronic sounds, a steady rise and fall that warmly enveloped the room but never quite cohered into harmony. The surface of an unidentified body of water is projected onto the wall opposite the entrance, the water's gray tones gently disturbed by rippling waves. On the left and right walls, a pair of digitally animated orbs float in empty space, each one pulsing and rotating to its own rhythm. These projections cycle between bright and dim phases, dramatically altering the light in the room with each shift. During the darker phase, the orbs have a mottled, reddish-brown surface that seems to refer to Mars. (The red planet is briefly mentioned in the video narration.) But it is also reminiscent of the rocky Earth landscape in Perry's video short *imakelandartnow.com* (2015), as well as the fleshy, rust textures the artist created from digital animations of her own skin for *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor*



Sondra Perry, *Eclogue for [in]Habitability*, 2017–18. Installation view, Seattle Art Museum.  
Photo Natali Wiseman.

*Workstation* (2016), in which Perry laments the difficulty of digitally rendering black bodies like her own. The visual rhyme between this earlier attempt to digitally reproduce the artist's skin and the Martian surface of *Eclogue*'s orbs alludes to the desire to seek out an otherworld where self-representation and determination might be possible. The orbs thus gesture toward both the photographic tradition of using body parts as visual metaphors for the landscape and the Afrofuturist search for a not-yet-colonized home in space. With an audible click, the waves lighten and the orbs transform into silvery masses, tiny balls now swelling out of their surfaces like metallic molecules or cancerous growths. This oscillation between dark and light continues on an indefinite loop, blending with the ambient sound to produce an environment that is strange but inviting, even hypnotic, the peaceful scene of Perry's digital eclogue.

Eclogues, however, are also defined by discourse—namely, the conversations of shepherds who cultivate the land's inhabitants—and Perry sharply shifts the tone with the dialogue in the video that makes up the literal centerpiece of the installation. A huge decommissioned backhoe, painted a sleek black, sits in the middle of the gallery, with AV cables strewn across it and three LCD monitors mounted onto it in an arching column. The center monitor looms so closely over the backhoe's seat that it threatens to knock back any would-be operator with a blow to the head, distinguishing *Eclogue* from earlier Perry installations, which invite visitors to sit on and manipulate their machines. By making it impossible to climb into the backhoe's seat, Perry refuses visitors' mastery of this piece of equipment that is, itself, a tool for mastery over the land, while preserving visitors' bodily awareness of their surroundings as they pick

up one of the pairs of headphones hanging off the machine and watch the video playing on the three screens.

The video's narration cycles through another short loop, with a digitized voice speaking in the collective first person, as "we." They introduce themselves as BK215 (these characters are also written in white across the side of the backhoe), a "leisurely and highly insured art object" that is made up of the "interstellar terraforming backhoe," monitors, and high-resolution digital stock videos of nature, taken primarily by drones. Extending across the three monitors, the video goes from dense foliage to overhead views of forests to wave-lapped shores to maps of tree-lined neighborhoods, a finger briefly appearing to move the maps in what looks like a recording of someone manipulating a touchscreen. This collection of found videos produces a selective catalogue of the ways in which we have digitally reimaged the eclogue's pastoral environment after centuries of cultivating both the physical landscape and our representations of it. Or, as the narrators intone in a low, digital drone, after centuries of "digging holes and digging holes and moving dirt and digging holes and digging holes and digging holes . . ."

In *Eclogue*, such cultivation is an act of violence. The narrators underscore this claim as they hop rapidly between topics, musing on their creator's interest in a scholar who has written about the multiple biblical meanings of the word *keli*: "vessel," "utensil," the "holy equipment" of Samuel 21:5—but also "weapon." Likewise, they reflect, the backhoe holds land, moves land, and, with all its digging, "tears new assholes" into the land. And the violence of this cultivation has been disproportionately endured by the black and brown bodies whose flesh, analogized to the landscape, also absorbs its wounds. By way of example, the narrators now turn to Perry's research into Manhattan's Central Park and Seneca Village, the historical black settlement that was seized through eminent domain and razed in order to build the park. Racialized bodies are, like the land, violently uprooted in the construction of "natural" spaces, and thus alienated both from those spaces and their idyllic representations.

Significantly, *Eclogue* finds that this violence and alienation also extend to the digital realm. Working against the idea that we can virtually transcend our identities, *Eclogue* approaches digital representation as a space of symbolic investigation rather than escape. A distorted animation of a black face speaks from the center monitor—derived, the narrators inform us, from an image of Perry's brother's face, which he loaned to the artist for BK215's "dive into representation." The verb *loan* is crucial; the avatar modeled on her brother, a basketball player, also appears in *It's in the Game '17* (2017), in which Perry explores the unremunerated use of his likeness by a major video-game company, his digital identity forcibly appropriated and circulated. Redeployed in *Eclogue*, this avatar connects the cultivation of the land to the history of exploiting black and brown bodies and labor, physically and digitally. Even space is not free here from the specter of colonial violence. The narrators wonder: If we bring our interstellar terraforming backhoes to Mars, won't we destroy the indigenous life found there, too?

Interspersed with direct addresses to the viewer, the video's narration becomes the conversation that conventionally structures the eclogue and articulates its setting, but it refuses to secure the "leisurely" environment that Perry has produced in the gallery. Rather, like the backhoe's threat to snap any would-be sitters out of the installation's warm embrace, the video's discourse on violence, construction, and destruction undermines the eclogue's idyllic vision of the land. Removing the headphones, visitors thus find themselves unsettled. Alienating its audience from the soothing landscape that had first welcomed them into the room, *Eclogue*'s dialogue demands that we, too, sit uncomfortably within the condition of "[in]habitability" that, for many, belies the promise of pastoral retreat. —Megan Driscoll

Natasha Crawford, "Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation", *21st Century Digital Art*, May 30, 2018.  
<http://www.digiart21.org/art/wet-and-wavy-typhoon-coming-on-for-a-three-monitor-workstation>

# 21st Century Digital Art

## A COLLABORATIVE SURVEY OF DIGITAL ART MADE SINCE 2000.



**MAY 30**

**Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor  
Workstation**

Using a water-resistant rowing machine filled with hair gel connected to three screen monitors, Sondra Perry's 2016 *Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation* engages the viewer's body as a component of her piece. Sequential computer-generated images of a bright purple ocean open the piece. Using the Ocean Modifier software, Perry is able to simulate and distort ocean waves. Perry's selection of purple as the ocean color corresponds to the color warning used in software indicating an error with the software.

Sondra's innovative production was inspired when she encountered JMW Turner RA's *The Slave Ship*. Painted in 1840 using oil on canvas, Turner's piece depicts slave ship Captain Zong ordering 133 African slaves be thrown overboard in exchange for an insurance claim for "slaves lost at sea." Inspired by a historic event in 1741, Perry blends digitally adapted images of Turner's painting with her purple ocean. In taking portions of Turner's sea, Perry distorts and animates the images to emulate a surface resembling skin or human flesh. The gruesome red and white imagery maintain the rolling wave motions in the purple ocean. The purple ocean is intercut with the image of Captain Zong's massacre at fixed intervals.



(Image courtesy of [Museum Fine Arts Boston](#))

*Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation* blends a variety of media and technologies to stimulate thought about modern day race and identity. Despite its initial appearance as a secondary accompaniment to the video art, the hair gel-fueled rowing machine is the connection between Perry's intended message with the viewer take away. 1619 marked the beginning of slavery in American when 20 African slaves were brought to the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia. The systematic transportation of enslaved African people by sea to the Americas and indentured servitude remained a practice throughout the 17th and 18th centuries in the American colonies. The millions of people kidnapped and forced aboard the slave ships were stripped of all freedoms and faced callousness suffering. In what appears to be a never-ending purple ocean, Perry speaks to the hopeless journey millions of people suffered through in the transatlantic slave trade, while simultaneously highlighting the inhumane conditions aboard the ships.

**She's coated the interior walls of London's Serpentine Gallery in their destabilizing roil, casting viewers deep into the horrors of the Middle Passage: the shipping triangle between Europe, West Africa, and the New World that defined the slavers' shipping routes.**

**— Judah, Hettie, 12 March 2018 In Sondra Perry's New Show, Digital Tools Make Oppression Visible**

Despite the abolition of slavery in 1865, United States society remains influenced by the legacy of slavery and deeply rooted racist sentiments. Upon trying to row on the altered machine, the chamber filled with hair gel is unusually heavy and limits all motion despite strength and resilience. In Perry's words, "These works are about efficiency culture and productivity, I land there because I'm fat and I'm a black woman—there are all of these things pulling at my flesh" (Judah, Hettie, 12 March 2018 [In Sondra Perry's New Show, Digital Tools Make Oppression Visible](#)). The hair gel is representative of both the society's resistance to change and the struggle to identify as an African American in modern US society productively. Regardless of significant advancements in the fight for equality, the black community face overwhelming barriers and their hard work often feels unrewarded. By rendering physical labor in her works, these sentiments are emulated in the overtly difficult task with little reward.

Accompanying *Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation* at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, Perry uses the same machine and structural design in *Graft and Ash for a*

(Image Courtesy of Kadist)

Tackling the subject of race in contemporary culture has been expressed through a variety of different medias. The diverse array this artistic content speaks to the multidimensional and ongoing issue of racism. Similarly addressing the topic of race and identity, Hank Willis Thomas uses conceptual photography and paint as his median. His 2013 piece *I Am a Man* was inspired by a photograph taken of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike, depicting a large group of black men holding protest signs bearing the same message. Thomas then created multiple variations of the original protest sign while adjusting the word orientation. His piece was included in the Installation View at the Baltimore

Museum of Art and reads signs that include “Am I a Man, I Am Amen, I Am 3/5 Man, I Am Many,” and more. Both Perry and Thomas use their work to discuss racial identity in the United States while speaking to the socially constructed identity often projected onto them by society. Their mediums and shared messages are subtle yet effectively conveyed. The artists’ pieces differ in their gender-focused discussions but have the same historical context fueling their messages.

Perry’s work was created in 2016 for The Kitchen before being shown at the the London Serpentine Sackler Gallery. Visitors were encouraged to pedal or row while viewing the *Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation* production. Showcasing the piece in London, in her words “the colonizers’ land,” has significant meaning for Perry in her thoughts about the Middle Passage as foundational to a lot of the significant issues for which she has concerns.

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### NATASHA CRAWFORD

Sondra Perry, Ocean Modifier, JMW Turner RA, Serpentine Gallery, Race, Identity

Tamar Clarke-Brown, "Adrift in the chroma key blues: A chat with Sondra Perry on black radicality + things that are yet to happen in 'Typhon coming on' ", *AQNB*, May 1, 2018.  
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## Adrift in the chroma key blues: A chat with Sondra Perry on black radicality + things that are yet to happen in *Typhoon coming on*

Tamar Clarke-Brown, 1 May 2018

Interviews

"I'm using this tool to create the ocean," says Sondra Perry, as we sit down to discuss *Typhoon coming on*, her first solo exhibition in Europe, running at London's Serpentine Sackler Gallery from March 6 to May 20. Keen to express the importance of understanding the materiality of the media that she — or anyone else — creates, Perry tells me she learnt her approach to film and video through a very "hands-on, process-based" educational background. We continue talking about the Ocean Modifier tool found in the Blender Software, an open-source 3D graphics toolset. "It encompasses so many things that are true and that I'm interested in," says the American media artist whose work critiques the technological reproduction of black subjects; "the ocean, ocean-as-modifier in the African diaspora, the thing that changed, or flipped everything over.'



Sondra Perry, *Typhoon coming on* (2018). Installation view. Photo by Mike Din. Courtesy the artist + Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London.

The title-work and main video projection of ‘Typhoon coming on’ is a reimagined piece from 2016, based on a high resolution scan of the 1840 J.M.W. Turner painting of the Zong massacre; an event in 1781, when the captain of a British slave vessel threw around 133 enslaved people overboard in order to collect on insurance. ‘Typhoon coming on’ wraps itself around the gallery, a marbled abstraction that in seconds becomes a rippling electric purple current all around. Walking around the exhibition, the viewer is thrown into relief, washed up against it. On first entering the space, though, a chroma key blue wall is all you see. A long, uninterrupted expanse of blue, blue and nothing but blue. It’s strange to enter an exhibition and be greeted with what looks like nothing. In the midst of this field, with no other anchor in sight, your body becomes the thing. Keenly aware of yourself, adrift in the space. What’s here is you. And as you turn your head, there is another body, Amira Gad, the exhibition’s curator, and then another, Sondra Perry, dressed head-to-toe in two-tone camo.

With these immersive installations — this one featuring throbbing flesh walls, interactive workstations and the artist’s own avatar — Perry asks us to slow down, stretch out, and zoom in on the fatal errors present in contemporary accelerated media production and distribution. When we talk, the first thing we cover is the

relationship between art and activism. Actually, no, pedalback. The first thing is the Naomi Campbell and Skepta *GQ* cover published that day. The *second* is art and activism, before carrying on to corporate colonialism, disillusionment with 'visibility,' and liberatory politics for a world in total free fall.



Sondra Perry, 'Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation' (2016). Video still. Courtesy the artist.

*\*\*Congratulations on Typhoon coming on! How has it been preparing for a UK context?*

Sondra Perry: The Turner painting was first shown at the Royal Academy, which creates this emphasis here in the UK. But also, there's a really funny YouTuber I follow called 'Evelyn From the Internets' who was here for a conference recently and she was like, 'I'm here, in the Coloniser's land...' and that's really how I feel. it's almost a homecoming for this thing that's been morphed and twisted. I am a Black American, and I understand that comes with a hypervisibility that's hard to call 'privilege,' but it's something that's very different from the context of Black people across the world. I am always trying to make work with the diaspora in mind and to think historically — you have to in order to understand what Blackness is and what Blackness means.

*\*\*What's with the blue walls?*

SP: I'm into very basic colour ideas, like the blue screen as the post-production space that is simultaneously, in my opinion, a black space or an extraterrestrial space. In post-production CGI, they usually use 'Chroma Key blue' to approximate blackness as it absorbs shadows better than a Chroma Key green would. So I'm interested in the blues. Blackness and the blues. That correlation has happened a lot in music, and of course it's happened in visual culture, but here we're talking about 'Chroma' — straight-up about black and blue being the same thing. The space of post-production being the space where the thing either has yet to happen, or it has, and everything has happened. So I like surrounding the space... it's like we have the obligation to create the images ourselves, so what are you going to do with that opportunity or responsibility and that space of the 'post'? The space of post-production is actually the space of pre-production.



Sondra Perry, *Typhoon coming on*(2018). Installation view. Photo by Mike Din. Courtesy the artist + Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London.

I'm really interested in how Fred Moten talks about blackness as phenomenological, as spatial. [Aria Dean](#) wrote a really awesome paper called '[Poor Meme, Rich Meme](#)' where she hybrids these ideas of blackness as spatial and circulation in relation to images on the Internet. I'm also really interested in this idea of blackness as a space that moves and shifts constantly, because that's the inherent nature, but I guess that's also how blackness keeps its radicality. It has to shift. It has to move. But it

also has to keep itself open to a lot of things that seem scary. We're not talking about black people, we're talking about this idea of black radicality that anyone can jump in and out of, and it's necessary for anyone to be able to jump in and out of it because it has to stay fluid. The Chroma Key post-production space is that space for me.

*\*\*What, for you, are the key problematics of the reproduction and circulation of the black image — via film, TV, video, online — and how would you for instance, give agency to the black meme?*

SP: Honestly, agency is a word that I don't know much about. I don't know if that is real or we're just deluding ourselves into thinking that agency is a thing. but as black and brown people, I wonder what we have to gain and what we have to lose from insertion in these spaces.



Sondra Perry, *Typhoon coming on* (2018). Installation view. Photo by Mike Din. Courtesy the artist + Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London.

Regarding the meme, and the assumption that this image of this person is this person... it's not that person. I think there's a problematic there that we need to think through. But the trading of blackness is highly problematic. It makes me mad. What I'm most interested in is that circulation — what it means for meaning to shift

and move. Then who is doing that shifting and moving? Then in what system is that shifting taking place? I want to talk about Instagram. I want to talk about Twitter. I want to talk about how they profit off everything. They've made a model, Capitalism 2.0, where everything we share in those spaces can be used by us. The meaning can be shifted and all of it is profitable. That's the thing that I'm really concerned about — the trading, the shifting of memes, of blackness, and who has access — in terms of race but also in terms of class. I personally don't want white people trading those things — I have to be honest — but I think there are conversations that we can have together without pointing fingers about what people can use because of their background.

*\*\*In this seeming age of black visibility, how do you regard the popularized notion of visibility equals power?*

SP: The whole concept of visibility assumes that you're not in a system that wants you dead. I think a lot of people forget that many of the places we are inserted in want to kill us — and I'm not even exaggerating. We're not supposed to be there. They put us under tremendous amounts of stress. They want us to die faster. So asking for visibility in those spaces... of course we're going to have to do it, it's necessary. But that is not the be-all and end-all.



Sondra Perry, *Typhoon coming on*(2018). Installation view. Photo by Mike Din. Courtesy the artist + Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London.

So I'm fat. I'm a fat person. There are conversations around body positivity in communities that consider themselves fat — not thick, but fat as fuck, and backlash against brands that aren't using fat models. Embedded in those criticisms is exactly the problem. Capitalism is not going to help us in this case. The reason why they use a size 12 model is because you still desire to see yourself in that way. If you think you're going to get liberation through capitalism — the system that sells you things that you desire but can never get, it isn't going to happen! I've been thinking about this specifically lately, but it's applicable to a lot of other spaces. I'm a fat black woman. The conversations around visibility don't include me at all.. that's why I'm appreciative of this beautiful ass body that I live in because at least I can have an understanding. when you bring those limited ideas of visibility into how we treat ourselves politically, that's where we get into trouble. Liberation is not happening through capitalism. There's always going to be someone left out because that's how it works.

*\*\*Not enough people seem critical of the 'self-commodify for success' model of 'making it' or to be thinking in more complex ways about how to place their bodies in relation to power...*

SP: It took a couple of years to learn how to deconstruct images more critically and be like, 'wait, this isn't cool.' So what does that mean for us? It means a refiguring of what power is, absolutely. But it also means economic opportunities for people so they don't have to be reliant on a corporation that tells you 'hey, I'm going to take an image of you and you should be thankful! You're going to be grateful!' I don't have big answers, but I think that one way is seeing people in different ways that's not through the lens of a multi-billion dollar corporation. Now I realise that there are so many ways to be seen and that being seen is not the be-all-end-all. I make things I can see. That's a whole other understanding of what it is to be a being.



Sondra Perry, *Typhoon coming on* (2018). Installation view. Photo by Mike Din. Courtesy the artist + Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London.

*\*\*How does your work deal with the problematics of technological reproduction and the breakdown that happens between the source, the source code and its circulation?*

SP: One way to think through this is to always question representation inherent in the work through the tools of production. I show my hand as editor, symbolically and also literally at points. I try to do it through the actual form as much as possible. I'm always trying to give someone's experience some room... also trying to acknowledge that I'm not making a portrait. I think a portrait always assumes a

representative clarity of some sort, so I try not to do that. You think you have an understanding of what it means to be in a certain body, but you have no idea.

It's tricky. I talk about blackness and technology, or blackness as technological a lot because our bodies, our flesh (I'll say our flesh) is technologically connected to these things that I'm talking about. Our coming over here was related to our object associations. We were machinery. We were chattel. We were production spaces. But we were also doing a bunch of other types of production; cultural production, spiritual production...I feel that this digital ghostly space of 'I saw someone today that looked like you, but it wasn't you'... is also our spiritual space...of course our images are also going to live in that space of complication as well.



Sondra Perry, *Typhoon coming on*(2018). Installation view. Photo by Mike Din. Courtesy the artist + Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London.

*\*\*Your work has this sense of un-capture-able choreography — you don't really use HD, images go off-grid, abstraction is at play, somehow. What do you find powerful about this space?*

SP: I think I'm going to have to start using some different language to talk about abstraction. I loved using the language of abstraction, but I think it's embedded. We were talking about visibility and visibility is embedded in the space that creates the

conditions in which you are visible. I think abstraction might still live in the space that creates the conditions in which you are abstracted. I'm interested in what that abstraction can be, and in a way that allows something to be experienced collectively. That's the only reason I'm interested in installation. So, surrounding a viewer with multiple screens, surrounding the viewer with narratives that move from one physical place to another physical place. In the most basic of senses, I'm just trying to get people to move around the space. By doing that you bump into someone and you have a conversation. Everything I do, I'm trying to get closer to that space where you're having an experience that you cannot have fully without having an understanding of where somebody else is literally standing. It's the reason I like working with open source software, because it was created with a multitude of hands. I love that shit!

*\*\*I want to push you a little bit more on this abstraction point, perhaps tying it to the Black Radical Tradition.*



Sondra Perry, *Typhoon coming on* (2018). Installation view. Photo by Mike Din. Courtesy the artist + Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London.

Abstraction is a lot about, 'what do I gain, what do I lose; and can I function with losing this thing? One of the texts I really love is *My Black Death* by Arthur Jafa. As I understand it, it's about wanting to be destabilised a bit, and wanting to head in the

space of abstraction, or about losing certain types of signifiers that are perhaps embedded in a capitalistic idea of representation or visibility that we're still holding on to but that might not be great for us. I feel like that piece is talking about what a good death is for some of these things we don't want to give up are. That's what I think about abstraction. What are the good deaths to fling off some of the things related to isolation for instance, that, if not an invention of capitalism, that is totally reliant on capitalism.

*\*\*Let's get speculative and talk about what it would be to exist outside of coding, outside of categories — is that what mundanity looks like?*

SP: Oooh, that's interesting. That's the thing about a pleasurable death. It should be joyous to be in the jumble space, because when you're in the jumble space, you're no longer confined by the ridiculous fake walls of the individual. You're not there alone. I think that's important. You're never there alone. You're in freefall with everyone else. That should be good. How do we make that feel good? But I also feel like that's a trap, because is that what all those white kids sharing memes are thinking? Like let's all just be together? Like, this feels great! That's a question I have because it also feels like it can be taken up by people that just want to be careless, and that's not what I'm talking about.

*[Both laugh as see a Grayson Perry 'Liberal Elite' badge in the Serpentine Sackler shop]*

SP: Isn't that funny!?! \*\*

Sondra Perry's *Typhoon coming on* solo exhibition is on at Serpentine Sackler Gallery, running March 6 to May 20, 2018.

Rosanna McLaughlin, “Sondra Perry: Typhoon Coming On”, *Frieze*, March 20, 2018.

# frieze

REVIEW - 20 MAR 2018

## Sondra Perry: Typhoon Coming On

A reckoning of dehumanized black identity at Serpentine  
Sackler Gallery, London

BY ROSANNA MCLAUGHLIN

Sondra Perry’s is an ‘un-body of work’ Arthur Jafa once suggested. At her show ‘Typhoon Coming On’ at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery it’s easy to see why. The New Jersey-born artist’s first major European exhibition is a reckoning of dehumanized black identity, as asset and digital phantasm.

The show’s title is taken from J. M.W. Turner’s painting of the British slave ship *Zong*, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On* (1840). En route from Accra to Jamaica in 1781, 133 enslaved Africans were thrown from the vessel so the crew could claim insurance on the ‘goods’ they were transporting. Sharing the title of the exhibition, a digitally modified 2018 video of Turner’s oleaginous sea is projected onto the outer walls of the gallery interior. Up close the paint look less like water, more like roiling skin. The video switches periodically to a CGI animation of purple waves, rebooting the *Zong* massacre for the present day.



Sondra Perry, 'Typhoon coming on', 2018, installation view, Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London.  
 Courtesy: Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London; photograph: © Mike Din

At the entrance to the gallery is a blue screen. A leitmotif in Perry's work, it serves as a reminder of the ease with which identity can be co-opted and narratives enforced. Perry has familial experience when it comes to digital abduction. Her show at New York's Bridget Donahue in early 2018 focused on the use of her brother's image as a student athlete by the videogame company EA Sports, without his permission.

In one of the gallery's inner chambers, I take a seat on *Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation* (2016), an exercise bike wired up to three adjacent monitors installed wraparound and close to eye level. The bike is based on 'deskercise' equipment: office furniture that enables users to burn calories while they work. Like the rowing machine beside it, its mechanism has been adapted so it is resistant to use. As I struggle to pedal, a thin, bald on-screen avatar of Perry speaks of the limitations of the software used (her 'fatness' could not be replicated, she says) and of the negative health consequences that result from believing we live in a 'just society' where people get what they deserve, and wonders whether visitors

to the gallery have benefited from colonial theft. ‘We are problems made to be fixed,’ she states, echoing the so-called moral argument for slavery, which justified industrialized barbarity on the grounds that blackness was a flaw requiring white intervention. At one point, Perry’s avatar is replaced by a rotating sphere of brown flesh: a disquieting vision of race as material.



Sonda Perry, *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*, 2016, film still.  
Courtesy: the artist and Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York

The manufacture of human deficiencies is good business, enabling markets to flourish by providing remedies. (A strategy pertinent to the gallery itself: Purdue Pharma, owned by the descendents of Raymond and Mortimer Sackler – Mortimer along with his wife Theresa give their name to the gallery – is accused of making billions of dollars from the sale of the highly addictive OxyContin and falsely advertising the opiate as non-addictive pain relief.) As the looped video *TK (Suspicious Glorious Absence)* (2018) shows, fear, too, is a profitable economy. Shot using a body camera, mundane activities such as walking down the street and entering a house are accompanied by a canned horror soundtrack. This footage is spliced together with real US news reports of enforced curfews, riot police raiding homes and advertisements for mass-surveillance technology.

On the wall behind the monitor playing *TK (Suspicious Glorious Absence)* is a projection of Perry's digitally manipulated skin, which ripples like fleshy water. Wherever you stand in the gallery you can see the sea in Turner's painting of the Zong. It surrounds the interior, switching from oil paint to CGI, establishing an inescapable context. It doesn't take long to realize that to visit 'Typhoon Coming On' is to enter into a re-enactment. This, I suspect, is Perry's point.

Sondra Perry 'Typhoon Coming On' runs at Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, until 20 May.

Laura Snoad, “Artist Sondra Perry uses avatars and animation to challenge representations of blackness”, It’s Nice That, March 12, 2018. <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/artist-sondra-perry-uses-avatars-and-animation-to-challenge-representations-of-blackness-120318>

## It's Nice That



Sondra Perry: *Typhoon Coming On*

[Work](#) / [Art](#)

# Artist Sondra Perry uses avatars and animation to challenge representations of blackness

Words by [Laura Snoad](#), [Monday 12 March 2018](#)

For her first European solo show *Typhoon Coming On*, American artist Sondra Perry has transformed the walls of the Serpentine Sackler Gallery into a seasick-inducing corridor of computer generated waves. Made using

open-source software Ocean Modi, the purple hue references the programmes colour warning, which appears when there's a problem with the simulation. Every so often the projections flick to the manipulated surface of J.M.W. Turner's 1840 painting *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, the canvas grossly deformed into an oily sludge.

New Jersey-born artist Sondra uses digital tools, like Chroma 3D blue screens, 3D avatars, open source software and found footage from Youtube, to explore different ways blackness has been presented throughout history. Her Serpentine show, which runs until 20 May, brings together four works that investigate how technology can shape or limit representation, from police surveillance systems to avatar-building software for gaming.

"When you think about technology especially within surveillance, you think about retina scans and data collecting, but a technological viewing apparatus can be a lot of things," Sondra tells *It's Nice That*. "It can be the eye of a police officer, or some type of satellite or imaging." Technology, Sondra explains, has long been used to as a tool of oppression specifically targeting people of colour. The Lantern Laws in the US, for example, required slaves to carry lanterns with them at all times so that they would be visible. "But what blackness does, specifically when you talk about the Lantern Laws, literally being darker can help you escape those spaces," she adds. "I also consider blackness as technological in a way. Blackness shifts and morphs."

*Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation* is a hair gel-filled rowing machine, kitted out with screens showing the CGI waves and distorted Turner painting that Sondra has projected on the Serpentine Gallery walls. A piece from 2016, Sondra wanted to revisit and expand upon the work for the Serpentine exhibition given the response to it when shown in New York. "The scholar Soyoung Yoon clued me in to the fact that are some stories about enslaved people that threw themselves overboard in protest, that's one of the big reasons why I'm still thinking about this work," Sondra explains. "That devastating moment and what it is to throw yourself overboard. The tension in that space [the Serpentine Gallery] is difficult, but it's been valuable for me to think about."

Skipping forward to the present day, *TK (Suspicious Glorious Absence)* is an audio-visual collage featuring Youtube found footage of police brutality and protests that Sondra discovered while trying to get a truthful read on the news. Distorted like a corrupted torrent, the piece combines images from law enforcement body camera systems and excerpts from Fox News – one presenter quips about pixelated satellite imaging, "You can't put handcuffs on any of these blobs". Behind it, Sondra has created a flesh wall, an animation of a super-modulated, highly processed image of her skin, so close-up that it becomes unrecognisable. "The flesh loses all kind of realistic render but you gain some kind of understanding of what creature-ness is or what identity means outside the label of human."

*Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation* combines an exercise bike with three 24-inch screens to simulate real-life employee workstations that Sondra found online. You can peddle – and question efficiency culture – while watching her 3D avatar espouse a monologue on productivity, success and health in something akin to a relaxation tape, soundtracked by chill out music mined from Youtube.

Ideas about health, access to welfare services for poor and marginalised people and how that intersects with net neutrality are never far from the work. “You can really see this moment where you wouldn’t be able to get to a website to access welfare, it would take 10 minutes to load, or that when applying for a job the database requires access to a higher quality internet,” she explains. “Being able to go on social media and have ‘freedom of expression’ is fine, but I’m really concerned about the things that could shorten people’s lives if they didn’t have access to them.”

The process of creating her avatar was itself an act of trying to probe and reclaim traditionally white, male spaces. “In the software that you create these avatars with, it really shows you not just the biases but also what the beliefs of programmers are,” explains Sondra. “For example there are not options for a fat body and there are all of these templates for certain phenotypes, Asian phenotypes, African, Caucasian, etc. The software already allows you to change all of the parameters needed to make a realistic avatar, so is it really necessary to have a phenotype of an African that looks a specific way, that has a certain nose?”



Sondra Perry: TK (Suspicious Glorious Absence)



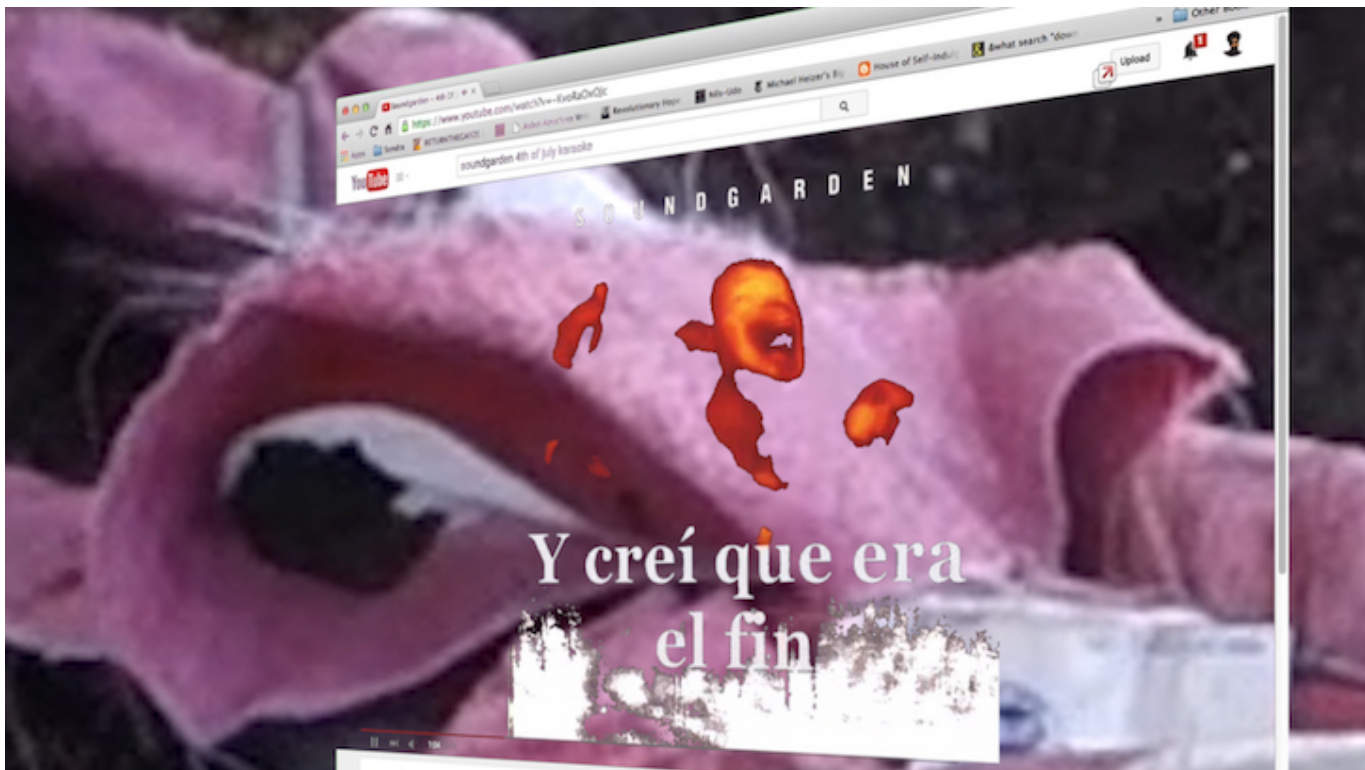
Sondra Perry: Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation



Sondra Perry: Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation



Sondra Perry: Wet and Wavy – Typhoon coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation

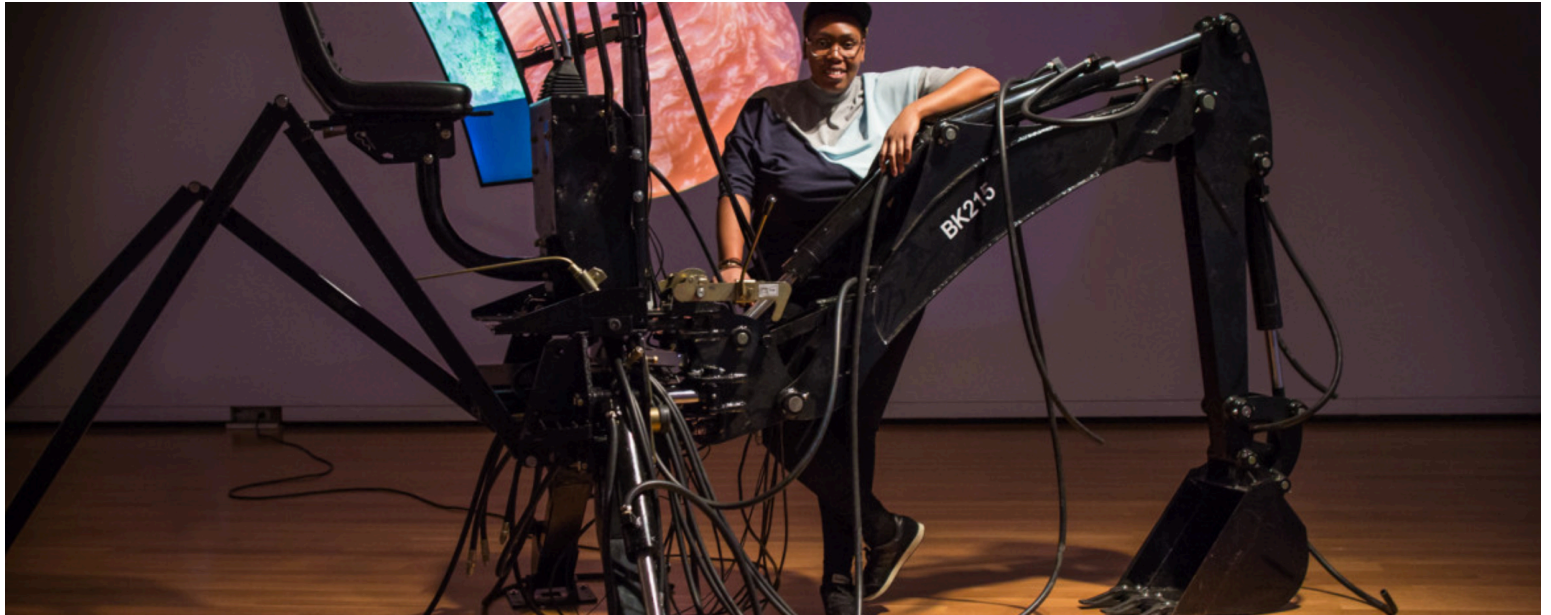


Sondra Perry: Lineage Multiple Monitor Workstation

Anna Coatman, “Sondra Perry on blackness, gender and internet culture”, *RA Magazine*, March 6, 2018.  
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**RA**

Royal Academy of Arts



## Sondra Perry on blackness, gender and internet culture

By Anna Coatman. Published 6 March 2018

The American artist is making waves on both sides of the Atlantic, including a show at London’s Serpentine Galleries this spring. Here, she talks JMW Turner, memes and burying flags.

From the Spring 2018 issue of *RA Magazine*, issued quarterly to Friends of the RA.

I meet Sondra Perry in London’s Hyde Park, in a café overlooking the Serpentine. As ducks and swans jostle on the chilly river, the New Jersey artist tells me about her plans to fill the adjacent Serpentine Sackler Gallery with another kind of water. Scrolling through her phone, she shows me the space transformed by purple-pink light, the walls rippling with digitally generated waves. “It looks pink in the photos but I’m hoping it’s more of a deep kind of purple,” Perry explains. “Purple is invasive.” This purple ocean is part of *Typhoon coming on*, Perry’s first solo show in Europe. A few years ago, she

came across JMW Turner RA's *The Slave Ship* (1840): a painting inspired by a massacre in 1781 in which the captain of the slave ship *Zong* ordered 133 African slaves to be thrown overboard so that he could claim insurance. In response, Perry created *Wet and Wavy Looks – Typhoon coming on for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016): a rowing machine filled with hair gel, attached to screens showing purple waves intercut with the Turner, which has been digitally distorted so that its surface resembles skin, or flesh.

"When I use that painting in my work, I edit out the bodies, because you don't need them when you're the body in the ocean," Perry explains. When visitors step inside the Serpentine Sackler this spring, they too will be engulfed. "I initially wanted to put this skin around the space, so it's like you're contained in my body. And then the curator suggested the ocean; I can't believe I didn't think of that!"

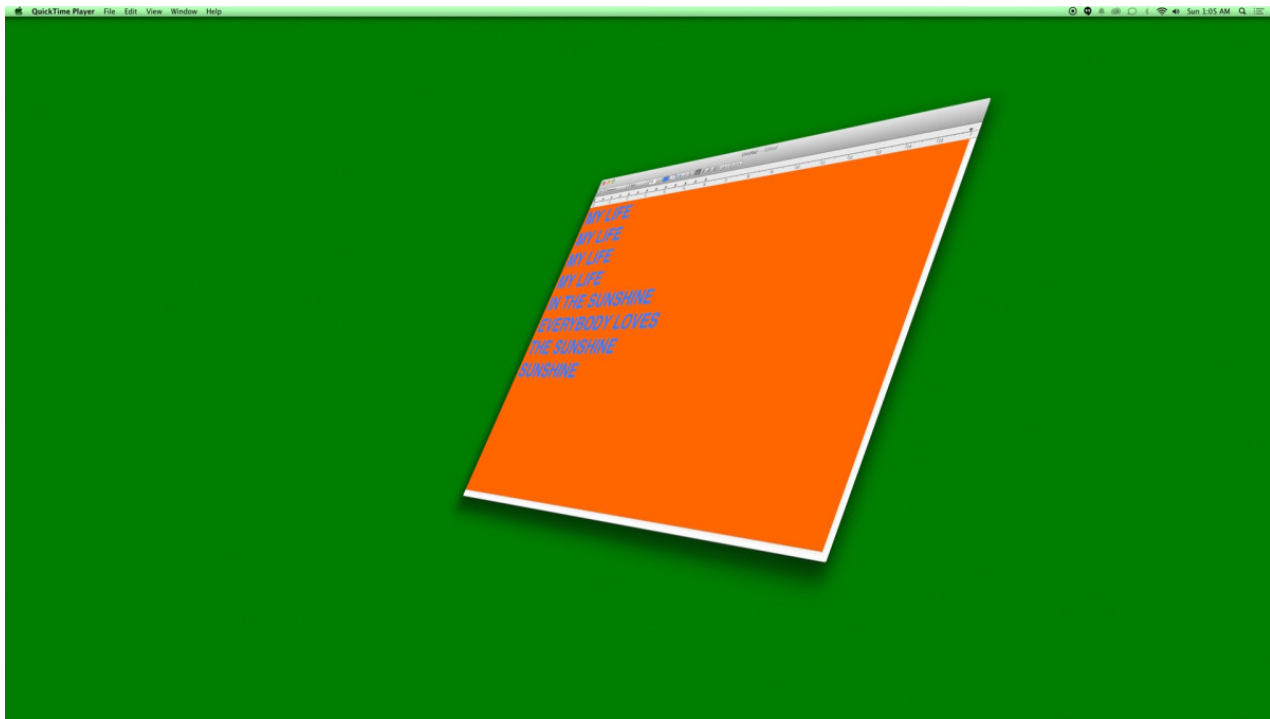
While she studied ceramics for her undergraduate degree, Perry soon discovered video. "It felt so freeing. And there was nothing to lose, at that point." When she won funding to study for a Masters at New York's prestigious Columbia University, the stakes got higher. She recalls talking to a fellow student from "a similar socio-economic background" at the time. "We'd say to each other: 'We are not people who get these things. How dare we?'"

Since graduating in 2015, Perry has shown work in a string of exhibitions in the US and Europe. The Serpentine show includes recent and new work and it's the second time she has collaborated with the gallery. In a 2016 event, she presented *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation* (2015). This moving-image piece features her family performing everyday rituals – peeling sweet potatoes and, more unusually, "un-burying" an American flag in the backyard.

Perry's family often appear in her work – partly for practical reasons, as her studio is in her mother's attic. Their role is sometimes collaborative, as with *Lineage*; the flag un-burial was initially Perry's grandmother's idea. "My grandma knows what good storytelling is because it's a fundamental part of black folks' lives: turning stories into reality. When she started saying she buried flags, I said, 'Grandma, seriously? Shall we dig them up?' I was like, 'I can't believe grandma does this.' And my mom said, 'She doesn't.'"



Sondra Perry, *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One* (Still).



Sondra Perry, Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One (Still), 2015.

At the heart of Perry's work is a celebration of the ways in which black people adapt stories – and also technologies. She is particularly interested in gender and blackness in contemporary online culture. "In 2015 videos of black people being killed by the police started appearing online," Perry recalls. "Suddenly I realised that Facebook was profiting from this; the more people watching them, the more money they made from advertising. I still have no words for it." At the same time, social media offers a fast, subversive way to communicate. "Blackness is about constant movement in order to survive. That's what a meme does. It moves, accrues meaning, loses it."

In *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016), Perry uses a 3-D avatar of herself to question the "wellness" culture prevalent today. "There's a theory that if you're a good person, good things will happen to you. But if you're African American you're more likely to have heart problems and high cholesterol; if you're a marginalised person and you believe that this world in which you are not allowed to be a full citizen is a great place, of course you're going to have stress."

Using a combination of digital software and analogue machinery, Perry's compelling work explores internet culture, while reminding us that we're still, essentially, physical bodies. "It's funny," she muses. "My mom, when she found out I was going to study art, said, 'You should be going into something computer-based.' Well, I've kind of ended up working with computers. I tell her now, 'You can't say that I don't listen!'"

Anna Coatman is Deputy Editor of RA Magazine.

Sondra Perry: Typhoon coming on, Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, until 20 May.

Laura McLean-Ferris, "Sondra Perry", *Artforum*, March 2018, 229-230.

# ARTFORUM

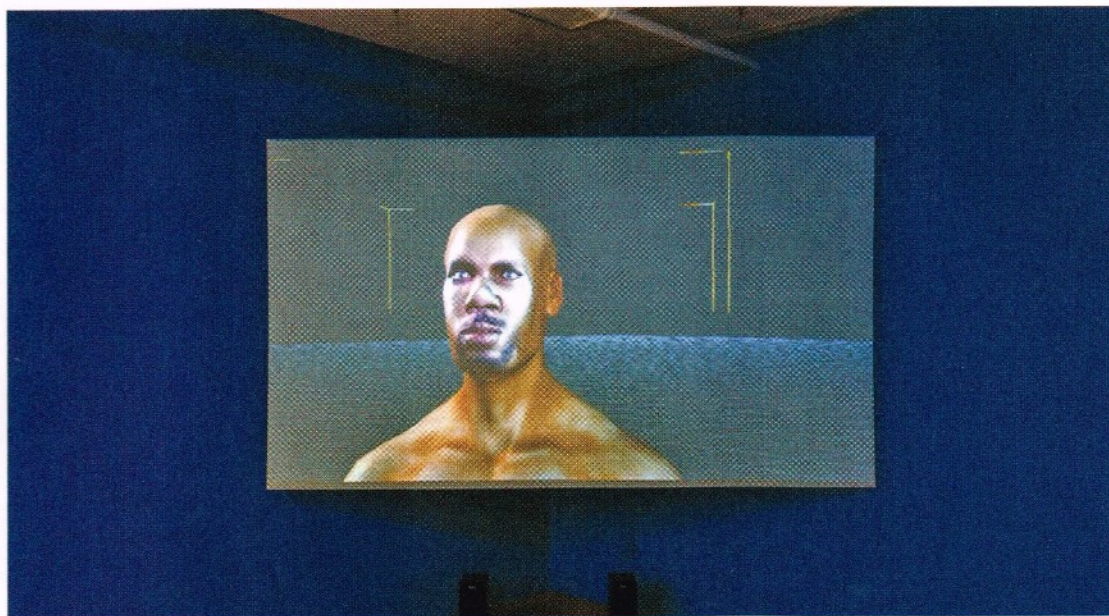
## Sondra Perry

BRIDGET DONAHUE

The words "It's in the game" are typically the aggressive opening credits of video games made by EA Sports, at least they were the last time I played one. The phrase's use in the title of a recent video by Sondra Perry, the centerpiece of her debut exhibition at Bridget Donahue, reminded us that it is only half of the original slogan, which promises a Borgesian duplication of the world of sports: "If it's in the game, it's in the game." Perry explores the implications of such doublings in *IT'S IN THE GAME '17* or *Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection*, 2017.

Playing on a loop in the gallery, which was painted that now familiar shade of chroma-key blue, the video's brilliant, central conceit continues Perry's recent tradition of using stories from her own family to reveal the ways in which blackness can function as an adaptable technology. In this case, the astoundingly allegorical tale is an account of the theft of her own brother's body. Sandy Perry was a college basketball player whose likeness and stats were used by EA Sports without his permission to create characters in a basketball video game (a class-action lawsuit was brought against the National Collegiate Athletic Association and Electronic Arts and settled in 2015, acknowledging that players had been used without their consent). Sandy, as well as his friends and roommates, are now immortalized as anonymous, selectable characters, and Perry's video documents Sandy navigating a team-selection screen in the game, while he describes the young men behind those avatars as he knew them personally.

Sondra Perry,  
*IT'S IN THE GAME '17*  
or *Mirror Gag for*  
*Vitrine and Projection*,  
2017, video  
projection, color,  
sound, 16 minutes  
21 seconds.  
Installation view.



## REVIEWS

As a sibling, Perry complicates her own role in deploying her brother, incisively acknowledging a complicated desire to upload a loved one to her work. We hear an audio snippet of her asking him to do another take, like a coach training a star athlete, as well as his pleading answer: "Sondra my whole night is, like, gone now . . . I had stuff to do." Sandy is exasperated, but good-natured: This guy was "crafty"; this one was "lights-out" (Perry asks him what this phrase means, and he replies, "If he shoots he's not missing"). Then the lights really do go out, and we see a huddle of new Sandy avatars, presumably constructed by Perry, apparently lost in a grid of dark, infinite digital space, as though severed from reality. A robotic voice relays a litany of disclaimers that would deny athletes with stolen identities rights to compensation and, we must assume, to their own image. They have been stolen, dragged, and dropped. Sandy's avatar is visible in freeze frame, high in the air, reaching to shoot a hoop—an image of grace and exertion.

While the implications of the theft of black bodies resound throughout history globally, this work also points to the theft of individuality and specialness, of skill and magic, which is pressed home in the sections that bracket this central sequence. These see Perry and Sandy exploring the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the British Museum in London, searching for objects while the Stylistics' hit "You Are Everything" (1971) plays at different speeds ("Today I saw somebody / Who looked just like you / She walked like you do / I thought it was you.") These objects included an Easter Island statue, which rotated on the screen as a chroma-blue 3-D avatar, accompanied by audio recordings of accession codes and notes about its looting by sailors who claimed it for the British Empire. It's a powerful pairing, though I would have liked to understand the heart of that analogy more deeply, or to have had it pushed harder. Within a history of destructive pillage, what is the particular nature of this or that particular theft? How do we get inside it? A series of sculptures that at first appear as black stands for screens or cameras are in fact each constructed from a Spalding Universal Shot Trainer, a practice device for basketball players that forces them to adopt a better shooting posture. Some of these were affixed with screens that played looped footage of the rendered skin of an avatar. At one moment, the screen showed us a view from inside the avatar's empty head, a reminder that the body of the avatar is only skin.

—Laura McLean-Ferris

“Sondra Perry”, *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2018.

# THE NEW YORKER

ART GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

## Sondra Perry

By painting the walls of her ingenious show chroma-key blue (used in videos as a placeholder for backgrounds added in post-production), Perry suggests that her viewers might be on camera. In other words, the way we live now, every room that we enter could become a set, whether we like it or not. In the show's central video work, the young New Jersey artist explores the dystopian predicament of her twin brother, who discovered that his animated likeness had been used as a video-game avatar, after a developer licensed the images of college basketball players without their consent. His story unfolds alongside footage of the siblings touring the Met and the British Museum. Perry superimposes spinning artifacts from the institutions' African and Oceanic collections throughout the piece, as a robot reads the colonialist details of their acquisition. Perry's lyrical, unpolished use of 3-D-modelling software, a key element of her D.I.Y.-cyborg aesthetic, lends her insights into racial politics an uncanny and timely power.

Natasha Marie Llorens, “Sondra Perry”, *Art Agenda*, January 31, 2018 <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/sondra-perry/>.

# art agenda

by NATASHA MARIE LLORENS

January 31, 2018

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## *Sondra Perry*

BRIDGET DONAHUE, New York

January 7–February 25, 2018

For Sondra Perry’s solo exhibition at Bridget Donahue, New York, all the walls are painted Rosco Chroma Key Blue. The deeply saturated color is used on television sets and in the production of special effects for movies and videogames because it contrasts so profoundly with most human skin colors. Chroma Key Blue is the obverse of the color of being, Sondra Perry pointed out to me at the opening. No human skin exists in an adjacent shade, and so it can be used as the negative space onto which context for any body can be manufactured and projected. The color of ultimate negativity, or the absence of existence.

Perry’s interest in the condition of visibility is influenced in part by Simone Browne’s *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015), which analyzes the way people of color are visualized using surveillance technologies and, through this visualization, de-humanized.(1) Browne traces the containment of blackness from basic technologies, such as branding and lantern laws, to more technically advanced forms used in contemporary policing.

Black bodies are often represented in the aforementioned visualization techniques against a ground very similar to Rosco Chroma Key Blue: one of the conditions of their visibility since slavery has been that they can be infinitely removed from their own narrative, and infinitely available for the historical demands of



white hegemonic discourse. Perry's recursive use of Chroma Key colors in the broader body of her work is a reminder that technologies of containment are composed of sometimes very simply rendered binary distinctions between the body and its contextualizing narrative, or the lack thereof.

Set against the blue non-space are modular black metal frames of human size and girth that Perry calls "workstations." The frames are made from athletic equipment, the function of which is to model defensive players during basketball practice. The forms are typically configured to have their "arms" out wide or up high to help train players to dodge and weave, like semiotic "enemies." Perry has positioned the limbs of these figures idiosyncratically and equipped each with a monitor partially masked from view with a privacy screen. On each screen, she has rendered a different fragmented view of a body in 3D, creating the impression that the frames are possessed of an uncanny interiority. They have abandoned their role as the hostile props in someone else's game. They have gone rogue against an infinite digital landscape.

On a large screen that hangs at an angle in the far corner of the gallery—like the scoreboard at a sports event—Perry draws four distinct genealogies of representation together through the video *IT'S IN THE GAME '17 or Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection* (2017). A sequence of out-of-focus family snapshots of herself and her twin Sandy as happy children in the rich red and brown color palette of the 1980s serves as background to spinning, homeless figurines rendered in the ubiquitous Chroma Key Blue; they are silhouettes of cultural

artifacts from the exhibits on Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the British Museum in London. Here the figure, not the ground, is fantasized as malleable.

There is also footage of the siblings at each museum looking at the artifacts in person as an impossibly cheerful voice gives a rendition of meaning and provenance for each thing. There is a shot of the flat space of a gray spatialization software program that allows users to plot video footage as 3D planes. But the conceptual center of the video is an image of the digital locker room and basketball court of a video game produced by EA Sports using data acquired from the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) accompanied by a video feed of Sandy Perry narrating the lives of each player whose statistics he recognizes tucked into one corner of the frame.

Sandy played college basketball on a scholarship. His likeness and vital statistics—even his own name—were used to create a videogame avatar. Neither he nor the other athletes featured in the game were consulted or remunerated, even though EA Sports paid the NCAA for their physical data, a transgression for which the players sued the NCAA in response and received a settlement. Sandy is shown scrolling through the videogame menu in which he appears and, at Perry's request, fleshes out the people these statistics are meant to represent. "This one was a great guy, on and off the court." "This other one was Polish and there was a lot of conflict between them"—Sandy utters subtle affirmations of the humanity of the digitally rendered athletes rotating slowly on screen in a simulated locker room.

The point seems straightforward: her brother's body and those of his college teammates are decontextualized before being rendered as props in space of display, a space that Perry suggests is analogous to the universal gray space of the rendering software, or the totalizing and progressive logic of "universal" institutions like the Met and the British Museum. All four pretend to represent the infinite dimension of the human being from an institutional or algorithmic perspective, and yet each is riven with ideological violence, especially in their assumed prerogative to decontextualize black and brown life without consent or negotiated justification.

Perry is working against a very long material history of objectification. Yet what is striking in the video, as in the workstations, is the degree to which a trace of being remains lodged in the decontextualized things she renders. There is enough information in the EA Sports videogame rendering of his colleagues that Sandy can recount the outlines of the lives they were abstracted from. When Sandy and Sondra Perry are in the Met in front of the Dendur Temple they can still feel that there is something deeply violent about its dislocation. A trace of that which is uncontainable about human beings persists, even in the negative space of that intense, opaque blue.

(1) Dean Daderko, "Conversations: III Suns: Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry," *Mousse*, No. 57, February / March 2017.

Will Heinrich, “What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week: Sondra Perry”, *The New York Times*, January 24, 2018.

# The New York Times



A scene from Sondra Perry's video “IT’S IN THE GAME ’17 or Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection.” Credit Bridget Donahue, New York

## Sondra Perry

*Through Feb. 25. Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, second floor,  
Manhattan; 646-896-1368, [bridgetdonahue.nyc](http://bridgetdonahue.nyc).*

Structures of exploitation so ubiquitous as to be effectively invisible are only the beginning in Sondra Perry's latest video. Called "TT'S IN THE GAME '17 or Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection," it's a brilliant bricolage of sci-fi meditations on identity, intellectual property and the digital revolution.

It opens with a 3-D rendering of a monumental statue rotating over a montage of blurry photos. The statue is Hoa Hakananai'a, an Easter Island moai looted by the crew of the H.M.S. Topaze in 1868 and presented to Queen Victoria, who presented it in turn to the British Museum. The rendering is in chroma-key blue — an ecstatic, outer-space tone that serves the same function of controlled erasure in postproduction as green-screen green. The photos are childhood snapshots of Ms. Perry and her twin brother, Sandy, who was one of the N.C.A.A. basketball players whose likenesses were pirated, just a few years ago, by the video game company E.A. Sports. The soundtrack is a slowed-down version of the Stylistics' 1971 soul track "You Are Everything."

From there, the video careens through news footage, interviews, the Metropolitan Museum's Temple of Dendur, an actor imitating a synthesized voice and too many other arenas, both real and virtual, to mention. But what ties it all together is a few candid seconds of the artist's own face, alternately gazing into and ignoring the camera as she tries to capture the evasive reality of what it means to be human now, using herself in all her particularity as an example.

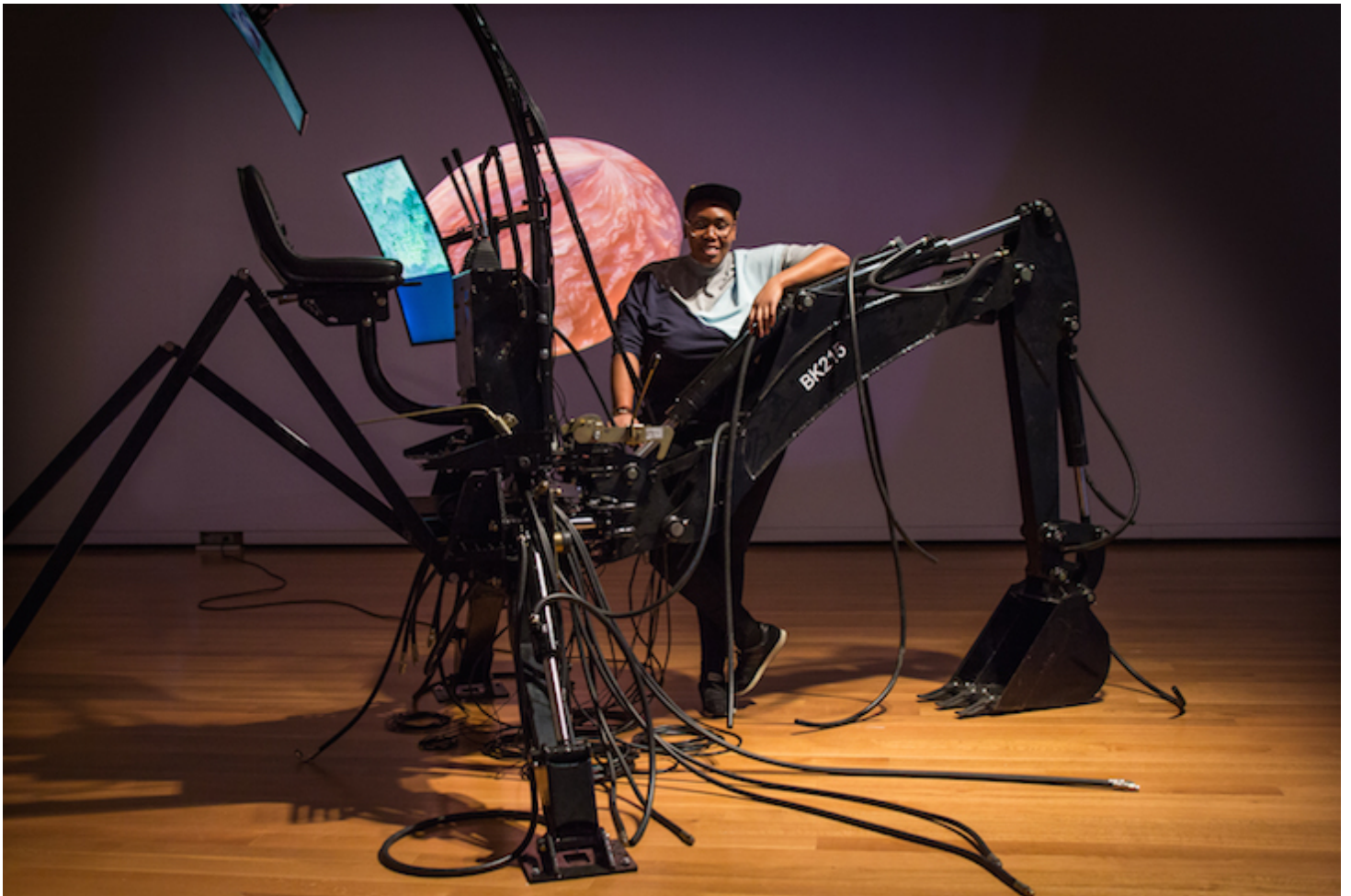
WILL HEINRICH

Margo Vansynghele, "Sondra Perry Presents Machines as Bodies at SAM", *CityArts*, December 7, 2017. <https://www.cityartsmagazine.com/sondra-perry-presents-machines-bodies-sam/>

## CityArts

# Sondra Perry Presents Machines as Bodies at SAM

by MARGO VANSYNGHELE December 7, 2017



Sondra Perry. Photo by Natali Wiseman

"You know what: I can't lie," New-Jersey based new media artist Sondra Perry says with a smile. "I *am* really interested in the multiplicity of beings." Perry's face is lit by bluish gray

and then red light emanating from an overhead projector. On the wall behind her, a large rendering of a gray 3D blob spins and twirls until it morphs into a flesh-like, donut-shaped planet Mars.

It's the day before the opening of Perry's solo show at the Seattle Art Museum, *Eclogue for [in]HABITABILITY*. While curators and photographers come and go, members of the exhibition staff are trying to ensure the wall projections and three screens on a large black backhoe, stretching out into the gallery like a metal spider, are working properly. In the middle of the bustle, Perry smiles. It's her most ambitious video installation to date, and it wouldn't have been possible without financial support from the Seattle Art Museum, which awarded her this year's Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Prize.

When I meet her in the darkened gallery, she speaks softly and fast, her ideas and sentences tumbling over each other like waves without arrest. One can find a similar sense of intellectual excitement and multiplicity in Perry's work, which consists of video screens, avatars, 3D renderings, sound, installation and Creative Commons film fragments—images from Google maps, YouTube clips, drone footage of nature. She uses computer systems to question real systems of power and representation.

Perry is only 31, but her piercingly smart work has already brought her to MoMA PS1, The Studio Museum, MoCA and The Kitchen. Thanks to the Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Prize, the artist returns to Seattle, the city where she had her first solo show in 2015 at local gallery INCA. "It's been really interesting to be back," Perry says. "I notice a massive amount of building, shifting, displacement. Not just in Seattle, everywhere. I've only been alive for 31 years, but it feels like it's all happening really fast."

**The title of your show refers to bucolic spaces and their disruption. How do you relate that to mass displacement and gentrification?**

The seed for this show comes from a story of displacement from the 1820s. Back then, there was a majority African-American village, Seneca, in Upper Manhattan. It was destroyed to make way for Central Park. I use it as the historical linchpin to understand how these things happen. Why are these places destroyed? Why are communities dismantled? And why is it replaced with an inauthentic realness? That's what a park is: a manmade piece of nature in the middle of the city for people that can afford to leisure in it. The same thing happens with gentrification. People come in to build upon the authenticity of a space.

**How can we see that in the show?**

I use 3D rendering programs to think about "terraforming," which is a term from Science Fiction referring to making environments [of other planets or heavenly bodies] suitable for life. I'm taking this out of the SF-frame to see it more broadly: We're creating habitats, but

what if there is already life? This graphics software, used by architects and city planners, is literally used to displace other people.

### **What do you do with this software?**

I've used Blender, an open-source graphics program. It has an "ocean modifier" tool that you can create an ocean-effect with. It relates to the Black diasporic experience: In the context of the transatlantic slave trade, the ocean is a literal modifier to culture, bodies, movement. I've used Blender to also create these two balls of fleshy materials on the walls. It's a highly modulated image of my skin gone through Blender and Photoshop at least 20 times to make it look like an organ, or a planet. I think of these balls as bodies.

### **How so?**

All of the machines in my installations are labor machines. I see them as bodies, as laborers. I make the "labor tools" visible as a reminder that "objects," technology, has a life—just like the people that made them. We talk about all the possibilities of technology, but most of the objects we use are not made here. Coltan [a dull black metallic ore used in electronics] is not mined here. The creation of these objects is not polluting our air here. I present them as bodies, as a reminder that there's actual people that have to do that work to survive. We discuss Artificial Intelligence and machines as "sentient beings," but that conversation should still be going on for humans.

### **In what sense?**

Slavery. Were Black women machinery that pushed out babies? Were slaves people or just machines that helped build a culture and helped destroy land in the South? So if we talk about Artificial Intelligence and ask whether these "technological beings" have rights, that conversation is not over.

### **Why are you interested in the Internet and open-source technology?**

I like the idea of using a program that you don't have to install into a system. I see it as a way to subvert the system, the computer, Internet and connectivity—which you can think of as an institution with power structures. However, institutions, however racist they are and whatever violence they enact on different types of bodies, are also porous spaces. You can find openings to move resources in and out of, to make those systems work in the ways you want them to. I'm interested in thinking about technology in the same way.

### **What are some other things you are inspired by?**

My family. I use them in my work. I also still live with them. I've had a contentious relationship with them for most of my life, but I've learned to accept and love them. I realize now that's because I always assumed things about them. I didn't know who they are. In retrospect, I was not understanding myself, and by extension humanity, as a messy thing. Now I say: *I don't know who you are and we can still share experiences and take care of each other.*

**Do you extrapolate that to society and representation?**

Yes, but it's difficult. It comes back to abstraction: What are you willing to lose? Are you willing to admit you don't understand something or someone? I was willing to lose my ego, so I gained these relationships. That's how I want to live my life. It has always been pretty shitty, but in this moment in time, I'm hyper-aware of how I'm treating people and constantly trying to treat them better. And I'm going to keep trying.

Sondra Perry: Eclogue for [in]HABITABILITY opens tonight (Dec. 7) at Seattle Art Museum, with free access to the installation and collection. Perry will give a talk from 7–8 p.m. The event is sold out, but limited spots may be available immediately prior to the program. The artist and curator will be in the gallery for a short time following the talk.

“Sondra Perry: Opening Up Through Technology and Media”, *SAMBlog*, November 30, 2017.

<http://samblog.seattleartmuseum.org/2017/11/get-to-know-sondra-perry/>

## SAMBLOG

# SONDRA PERRY: OPENING UP THROUGH TECHNOLOGY AND MEDIA

NOVEMBER 30, 2017



Artist **Sondra Perry** is the first video artist to win the Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Prize! Using a wide range of digital platforms and tools including 3-D avatars, blue screens, Chroma keys, and computer graphics software, Perry's installations and performances draw from an eclectic mix of inspiration. She is focused on how a lens can turn a subject into an object. See Perry's immersive and unique (bring your hard hat!) installation, **Eclogue for [in]HABITABILITY** from December 8, 2017 through July 1, 2018 at SAM.

*Below, Perry discusses how the internet, technology, and her personal history factor into her investigations into representations of black identity. This is taken from a talk she gave to SAM staff this February. She opened the talk with a tutorial video from YouTube on how to play an Isley Brothers song on guitar, so we will too!*



The interesting thing about this [clip](#) is that he's talking about that soaring note at the beginning of the song. That's an E Flat played backwards. In the sidebar, all of these people who have also done tutorials for this song reference this video for showing them how to play that note. This is a piece of internet archaeology that touches on my interest in the parallel; two things happening at the same time in this YouTube space. The original and the improvised other. And also, like he's amazing. He reminds me of my uncle who played guitar for lots of different people.

I spend a lot of my time on YouTube. Tons, probably too much. Not too long ago, when there were many black people dying, being murdered at the hands of police. I found this YouTube channel that was not connected to any news agency that does 3-D renderings of space travel, biology, and crimes. One of their 3-D renderings was the slaying of Michael Brown in Ferguson. I am interested in the rendering of the body, of this man in a 3-D render space. I'm interested in circulation and how these images are represented outside of the video of someone being killed. That's not what I'm interested in at all. I'm interested in how those things are able to happen.

When I was younger I read the Superman books. In the Superman Universe, the Phantom Zone is a parallel dimension that acts as a prison, an ethical one. Superman's father, Kal-El, was the Security Minister on Krypton before it blew up, of course. He created this parallel dimension that was the Phantom Zone where you could send people to be rehabilitated. In the Phantom Zone you could see what was happening in your dimension, but you couldn't interact with it. I've taken this Phantom Zone, spinning, 1980's special effect to visualize some notions of double consciousness. I'm also playing with how a video can act as a space where there are multiple perspectives. So, you're not just looking directly at an image—there are other things happening. I'm trying to encompass all these things into one really vibey piece of art.



I'm interested in video and its production spaces. In 2016 at The Kitchen in New York I created an installation, *Resident Evil*. The back is a Flesh Wall—an animation of my skin with the contrast boosted. I do this through programs used to make 3-D renderings of things. The ocean modifier I used for this is supposed to help you make a realistic 3-D rendered ocean.

This installation is where I transitioned from using the Chroma key green to the blue screen. The Chroma key is a video, film, and photo production technique that allows you to separate the foreground of an image and a background. So usually these images have a person in the foreground and in post-production you're able to take that out and replace whatever kind of background you want in there.

The blue screen became interesting to me because it's the technique you would use when you're trying to replace a background with something that's dark because of its relationship to the end of the spectrum. I like this idea of this blue space that is simultaneously a black space that is my grandmother's house, a park at night, or the Avengers destroying Manhattan. I like the collapse of all of those things and that's why I decided to start covering as much of the physical spaces I was putting these videos into in this color, that is also a space.

It's also a proposition to myself and the viewership because it is a space of production. In thinking of these colors as spaces, they are not complete. I'm trying to propose that maybe we're the ones who figure out what's happening there. It's a space of contemplation.

Have you seen *Coming to America*? This movie is really funny, but there's also a lot happening in it. You have two American men making a film about a fictional African country and there's the contrast of Black folks from the states and Black folks from the continent. I was thinking about this family of upwardly mobile Black people who make a fortune on selling other Black folks things that change their visage in order to assimilate. There's something complex about what it takes to be an upper-class, upwardly mobile Black person. Maybe you have to shapeshift. In that shapeshifting, there is this kind of grotesque thing that happens. They left a mark of themselves, like on this couch. I'd wanted to make this couch for a really long time and I finally did.

The bike is a workstation that comes with a desk. They're sold to people that work at home and want to maintain their physical health while they're working. I've been thinking a lot about these efficiency machines that do that capitalism thing. They fix a problem that is kind of inherent in these issues of overwork. People shouldn't work as much as they do, but rather than change, we make objects like this is bike machine. I made an avatar of myself that kind of serves as the Operating System and it talks about being efficient, efficiency, what that does for you. I don't primarily work in video, but when I do I like working on a multi-monitor workstation because it's a lot easier; you have your preview monitor and you have a monitor where you can edit. This set up is just a way to produce video that I wanted to mimic in the installation.

Across all of this my interest is in the possibilities of blackness related to my body and also blackness as an idea of expansion, of radicalism. These things open themselves up to me through the technologies I use and through the media I gravitate towards. The issue I find with representation is that we assume that all we have to do is figure out the right way to look and we will know what something is or know what someone is. I think that's an impossibility.

– *Sondra Perry*

*Awarded bi-annually since 2009, the Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence prize grants an early career black artist who has been producing work for less than 10 years with a \$10,000 award, along with a solo show at SAM.*

Nora N. Khan, "No Safe Mode", cover feature, *Flash Art*, v. 50, no. 316, September/ October 2017.

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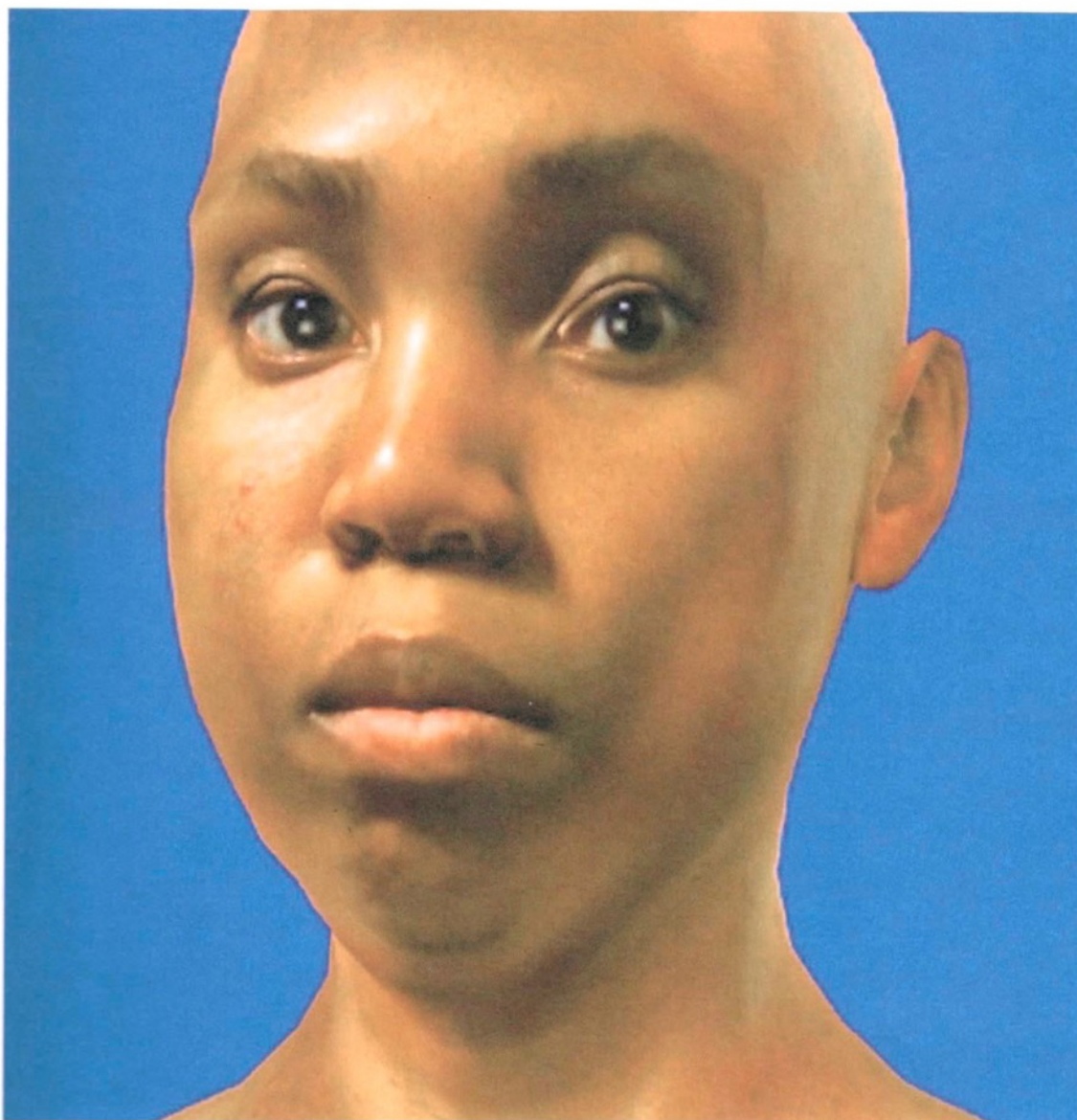
# Flash Art

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## *Artificial Intelligence*

*Human-robot interactions* / IAN CHENG / MARIO KLINGEMANN / *The AI service industry* /  
SONDRA PERRY / SAM LAVIGNE / HAROLD COHEN'S AARON / *Scenarios of automation*  
*and art* / LAWRENCE LEK / JENNA SUTELA / *Algorithmic composition* / LYNN HERSHMAN  
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# No Safe Mode

*Sondra Perry's Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*

by Nora N. Khan



"Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation," installation view at The Kitchen, New York (2016).  
Courtesy of the Artist. Photography by Jason Mandella.

Designers of technology love to propagate the myth of a just world, in which people always get what they deserve.

In erasing the messier and unsolvable elements of social experience that shape subjecthood, technology attempts to frame us as clean and uncomplicated. We become reducible, mapped by a programmable sets of traits with defined, singular meanings. Our digital choices and consumption patterns give a portrait of who we are. We are easily represented by our avatars.

It is cheaper to be a universalist, disavowing structural inequities, abuses of power, the ubiquity of classism, racism, and misogyny. It is easier, traditional, even, to just ignore what we cannot see: trauma, depression, mental illness, chronic pain. It is less agonizing to ignore how environment or oppression or historical lack of opportunities, “factors” that cannot be hacked, reworked, or re-engineered, close doors.

In her video piece *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016) Sondra Perry subtly interrogates and undoes these pervasive technological claims about our ontological position, and our being in the world, stitched into the programs, interfaces, and systems that dominate and organize our lives. Last fall, *Graft and Ash* was part of several video installations within Perry’s first solo institutional show, “Resident Evil,” at The Kitchen, New York. The piece was split across three LCD monitors that were retrofitted atop a bike workstation, painted in electric blue automotive paint.

Fading in, Sondra Perry’s avatar, her face stretched atop a speaking face template, begins to speak. She hovers before an alternating backdrop of Chroma Blue (used in blue screen animation and special effect rendering) and a close up of Perry’s own undulating skin surface in 3D (so detailed it seems to be a surging sea of gold and red and pink). She first intones the details of what we are seeing: the make of the bike workstation, the hexadecimal code of its Pantone paint, the monitor set-up, the Ocean Chill out Music for Relaxation / Meditation / Wellness / Yoga Youtube video playing in the background. Her expression is bemused and warm, searching and curious, looking down at and, it feels, deep into us. The head lolls from side to side, much as we look at ourselves in our front-facing phone cameras. Her voice is relaxing, but still performatively artificial. The viewer relaxes and is primed to be soothed.

“We’re the second version of ourselves that we know of,” she opens, her face captured from Sondra’s image, “rendered to her fullest ability,” with limits, as she “could not replicate her fatness in the software that was used to make us.” This instant friction suggests a body living off camera, off screen, forced to exist in a system that does not acknowledge one’s form as a valid type to be represented. Further, standardization of a neutral, normal, good body is ever a reflection of a dominant cultural standard; all these standards end up in code. People using these programs internalize what is neutral, and what is deviation.

That AI is not neutral, objective, or devoid of values is finally gaining widespread traction into debates about the future of AI. Perry here crucially uses AI or rather, its simulation, as a laboratory for mapping out how race and body politics are woefully mechanized. She frames technology as it allows us to dehumanize one another yet again, flattening race history and political context out in favor of a spectrum of slottable “markers” like age, class, and education.[1]

Frequently, the algorithm’s decisions are not mysterious or beautiful, but quite banal, familiar, a tool and platform for reifying inequity. That AI can now make decisions of horrifying and binding effect (who gets a job, a house, insurance), potentially locking people deeper into structural inequity, it seems imperative we question the pure, mathematical objectivity claimed by engineers who also deny white supremacy’s fundamental relationship to capitalism.

In a nine-minute performance, we learn the detailed contours of Perry’s disembodied representation. Ambient, in the background, is the unseen body, both Perry’s and the black body, generally. The avatar changes tone, clear and measured though still pleasantly neutral: did we know, she asks, that attributing success to personal characteristics instead of biased structural systems has a negative impact on the health of black people? People who “both strongly believed that the world was a just place and experienced higher rates of discrimination were more likely to experience higher blood pressure,” chronic illness, and early deaths.

What does it mean for an avatar to ask us to contend with the persistent social fallacy that trauma and oppression are not legible or real? Perry’s face does not quite fit atop the avatar template, so pieces of the substructure, the wireframe, peek through. A second eyelid glimmers at the edge of her eyes, so the effect of an uncanny mask is constant. The center, the structure, does not hold.

The avatar has slips in its “elaborate performance,” which all minorities must implicitly deploy in a racialized society. Some reviews of the exhibition suggest that the avatar “malfunctions” to tell us how it really feels: “Exhausted ... daily, with you n\*\*\*\*s all up in our fucking face.” But the breaks are intentional, revealing exactly what is on its creator’s mind. The viewer is turned to remember that these “mistakes in performance” are not shown often in real life, for fear of social retribution. Perry’s avatar notes, wryly, “We are not as helpful or Caucasian as we sound,” marking the exhaustive labor and burden of such performances.

Perry’s avatar cleverly and obliquely reveals how limited our collective imagining of the interiority of others is, by centering hidden feeling, hidden sickness. “Productivity is painful and we haven’t been feeling well,” she says. She is told she should live up to her potential, but “We have no safe mode,” she adds; existing in the world is a matter of constant risk. How to make this risk continuously legible? As in many of her works, Perry suggests a kind of brief respite in abstraction; the film cuts to a ball of her skin, rotating above a grid.

In creating a sustained contrast between who is speaking — the thrown, disembodied voice — and the violence of what is being described — erasure and denial of hidden psychological suffering — the avatar forces us to think about what we cannot see. She also makes us consider what self-care cannot heal. Facials, candles and self-soothing subbass sets on Youtube might soothe traumatic shocks, but it will take more to correct the demand to be a right and good body, meaning, smaller, sweeter, never-exhausted, chipper, light in tone, and lighter. “We are a problem to be fixed, and if we resist that problem, we will be made a problem to be fixed,” she concludes.

She doesn’t assume that the listener is complicit in these structures, asking, “How many jobs do you have? How is your body? How does your body feel inside of us?” The viewer then considers how her own body registers inside of these systems, inside of software, if at all. This is a strong embodied critique of industries that try to engineer good health through self-care. It is an even broader indictment of the core of both neoliberal ideology and conservative politics, which absents institutions, society, of responsibility for anti-black racism, police brutality, and mass incarceration, and demands victims carry their pain as a fated curse, a mark of their own moral failing, ever irredeemable.

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*[1] Bias in AI was the central theme of the AI Now Symposium held at MIT this past summer, is to be the focus of the new AI Ethics and Governance Initiative backed by the ACLU, and is on the minds of many activists in the field. The surge in focus stems in part from a recent report by Brian Resnick, which showed that artificial intelligence learns to associate “African-American” with unpleasant word clusters, gleaned from training on views delivered online.*

Soyoung Yoon, "Beware the Light: Figure Versus Ground, White Versus Black (Blue), or: Sondra Perry's Blue Room and Technologies of Race", *Millenium Film Journal*, No. 65 (2017): 30-37.





## ARTICLES

## SOYOUNG YOON

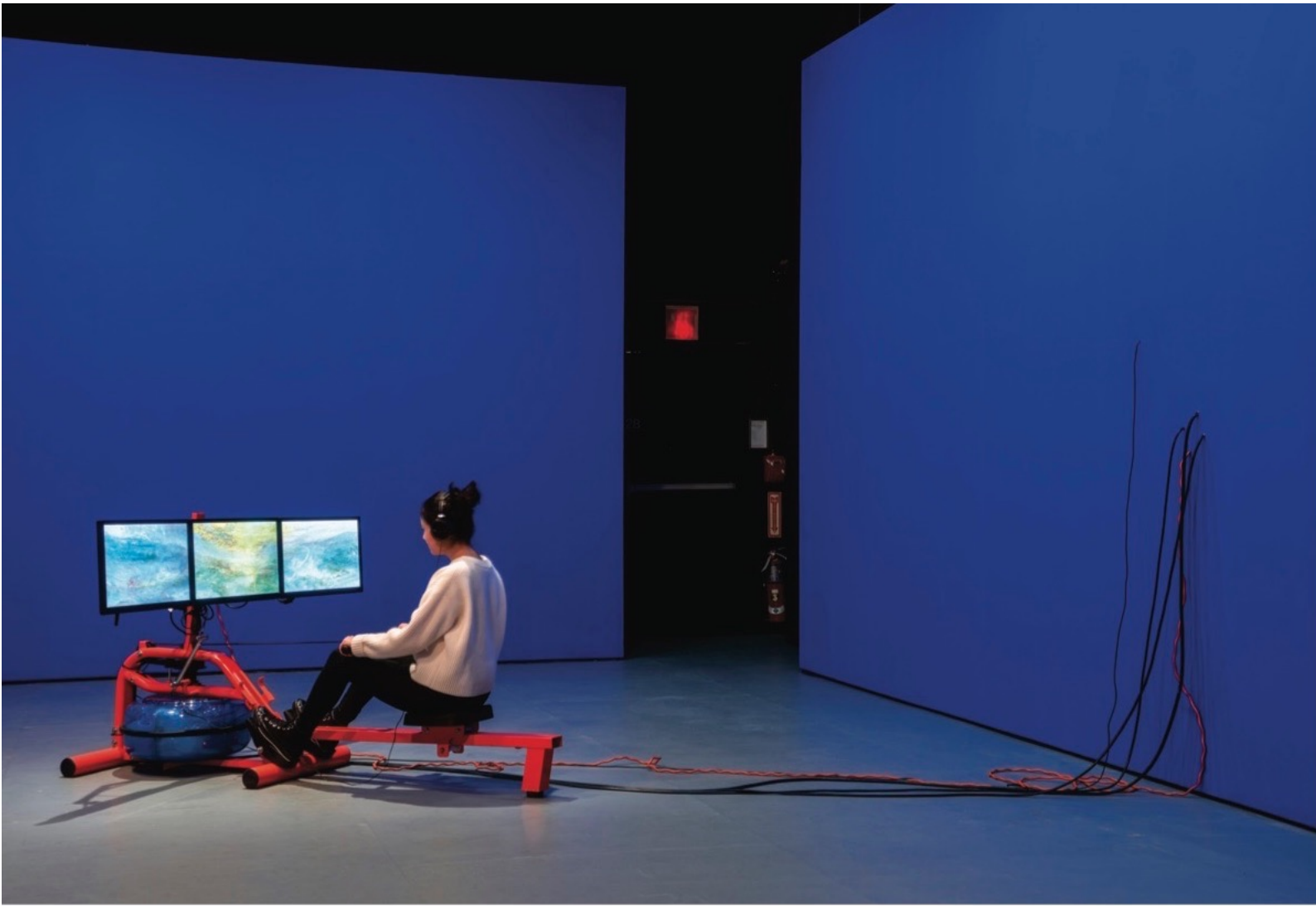
“And in the theater, I want to change my seat / Just so I can step onto everybody’s feet.”<sup>2</sup> We could argue that artist Sondra Perry offers another type of modern exhibition space to display her moving images—from the black box of the cinema theater, the white cube of the museum or the gallery, to now “the blue room.” For Perry’s exhibitions at The Kitchen in New York City (*Resident Evil*, November 2–December 10, 2016) and at the Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center in Buffalo, NY (*flesh out*, January 20–April 1, 2017), the walls of the gallery are painted a bright, matte shade of blue—precisely, chroma-key blue—citing a post-production technique primarily for removing and replacing a blue or green screen with a different background. In Perry’s “blue room,” there is also a roving Roomba vacuum-cleaner, which carries on its back a set of photocopied zines of theoretical texts. It circles the space of the gallery, moving in-between artworks and at times brushing up against or bumping into our feet. After seeing Perry’s exhibition, we might be reminded of the “rogue Roomba” that somehow switched itself on, rolled onto

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and expanded version of an essay published on-line in tandem with Sondra Perry’s exhibition *flesh out* at the Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center (January 20–April 1, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Eartha Kitt, “I Want to be Evil,” YouTube video, 3:02 minutes, posted by mrfnk on Nov. 16, 2008 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS02GeKuWQ4>, included in video for Sondra Perry’s moving image installation *Resident Evil* (2016), accessed 11 February 2017.

For further citations and references, please access <http://www.mfj-online.org/yoona-beware-notes-citations/>

Sondra Perry, *Resident Evil* (2016), The Kitchen, installation view.  
All photos by Jason Mandella, courtesy the artist.



a hot plate, and set itself ablaze. Reports spoke of the smoke damage—"everything is black"—which forced its owners out of the comforts of their home.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to the chroma-key blue of digital world-making speaks to fantasies of space travel: the possibility of positioning a subject against any background, in any place, every place, particularly amidst the darkness of the night sky or deep space. The blue screen, because of its low-luminosity, functions as an especially effective placeholder for the black void of outer space, its infinite nothingness. Perry's "blue room" then would seem to be an extension of cinema's black box as a quasi-sensory

deprivation chamber, which seeks to negate the mobility of the viewer's body and to deprive or rather suppress their sense of the immediacy of their surroundings, so as to project the viewer into the narrative space of the film on screen: "I" am "free" of the determinations of my body, as worlds move around me, for me. In the context of new scholarship returning to the problematic of the cinematographic apparatus, art historian Noam M. Elcott argues for the historical significance of "artificial darkness." As a complement to modernity's conquering of the dark with artificial light, a controlled production of darkness as technology is deployed specifically to create "spacelessness," a suspension of

Sondra Perry, *Resident Evil* (2016), The Kitchen, installation view featuring *Wet and Wavy Looks—Typhoon coming on for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016), video, rowing machine workstation, Eco styler gel.

corporeality in the theater, for the fusion of the physical space of bodies and the virtual space of images.<sup>4</sup> However, the possibilities of the blue room (or green room) technique depend upon the sharpness of the contrast between the subject in the foreground and the background, that is, upon the subject's capacity to separate and define itself as a figure *against* the ground. Subject versus Background. Figure versus Ground. Light versus Dark. White versus Black (Blue)...What then of subjectivities—and bodies—that do not seem to possess the stabilized configuration of an "I"? What then for the figure that is diffuse, diasporic, both one and many, localized in neither *a* body or *an* identity? What then of the flesh?

Recent scholarship attests to the historic instability of photographing or filming dark skin in color.<sup>5</sup> The very technology of color photography had been developed with white skin as norm, blowing out the varying tones and textures of darker skin, rendering it at times inseparable from the background, as if the illegibility of blackness was but a technical error. Technology *is* ideology. In the late 1970s, while on assignment in Mozambique, filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard famously refused to use Kodak film for its inherent, built-in "racism." In his 2016–17 retrospective exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—which coincided with Perry's own exhibitions in NY—Kerry James Marshall critiques film's norms of color calibration with a self-portrait of the artist shot under a black light bulb. The ultraviolet radiation submerges the scene in a dark blue hue that highlights his white shirt with a brilliant, fluorescent light but renders the artist's black skin even more indiscernible at first glance. The photograph compels us to look and look again, and again, to be able to grasp the lines, figures, curves, and depth, of the darkness of the blue.

At the Met, Marshall's challenge for viewers to recalibrate our ways of seeing, to shift our attention away from the reflective luminosity of whiteness, is made all the more devastating—and necessary—as *Black Artist (Studio View)* (2002) is displayed immediately adjacent to, as if facing off, another work from the same year, *Heirlooms and Accessories* (2002). The triptych of prints display three white women's faces, picked out and pointed up against a white background, by the circular, ornate frames of gold pendants. The women look back at us, as our eyes slowly start seeing—and recognizing—the faint yellow figures that emerge from the background, the whited-out bodies of two young black men hanging from a tree and the tightly-packed, respectfully-dressed, genteel white crowd gathered underneath them, the

ghosting of the infamous night scene from Lawrence Beitler's iconic 1930 photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, which circulated as a souvenir postcard, a trophy, an heirloom.<sup>6</sup> The prints body forth the deadliness of the light exploding from the photographer's flash bulb, tethering it to the complicity of the women's look, their look back at the camera, their look at us, as well as to the smiles of that initial crowd of viewers. They are all components of a scene staged explicitly as a spectacle to be seen. What then of our own looking as viewers? Also, what of the all-too-familiar recurrence of that spectacle, now illuminated not with flash powder but the blue light from our electronic devices, the pervasive glow of our television or computer screens, smartphones, video surveillance cameras? Beware the light.

In Perry's *nether* video-projection series, the chroma-key blue also appears as "the blue screen of death," an error screen that is displayed with fatal system errors or crashing of Windows computer operating systems. Through the automated voice of an avatar modeled after Perry's likeness, the video superimposes "the blue screen of death" with references to "the blue wall of silence," the unwritten code that police officers do not report on each other, via tactics of harassment, intimidation, false testimony, and silence—fatal system errors that are not so much aberrations ("a bad apple") as a constitutive necessity of the system as such. The video cuts from a newly-viral video of the Windows 95 launch to police training videos circulated on-line. The riveting awkwardness of Bill Gates dancing on-stage with his fellow chino-wearing engineers is interwoven with the hyped-up virility of police training for a raid in their military-style gear and weaponry. "If you start me up, I'll never stop." In the original source video for the Windows 95 launch, the engineers are attempting to dance along to the Rolling Stone's 1981 song, *Start It Up*. "Never stop, never, never, never stop / Tough me up / Never stop, never stop / You, you, you make a grown man cry / you, you make a dead man come..."<sup>7</sup> Both performances of technologized masculinity appear wildly, fatally out-of-synch—*what's going on?*—culminating in a punctuating series of photographs of black women killed in police custody, each photograph cutting across the chroma-key blue screen as a rotating image window.

In Perry's work, the difficult, fraught relation to the first-person singular nominative case personal pronoun "I"—as a form of political subjectivity, of narrative agency, of being—is evidenced

through the precarity of black bodies, brought (again) to national attention via the circulation of videotaped police violence as in the killing of Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, or Korryn Gaines, that followed years of prosaic surveillance, repeated stop-and-searches, relentless, arbitrary harassment for small-scale infractions. To watch, however, is not necessarily to witness, and Perry underscores the heavy price of witnessing, the weight born by those with the absolute *necessity* to record—and to share. In 1994, in view of the Rodney King video, poet Elizabeth Alexander wrote of the spectacle of black bodies in pain as a national tradition, staged primarily for and by white people. She adds, “but in one way or another, black people also have been looking.”<sup>8</sup> For Alexander, emphasis is on the function of *this* looking, how it constitutes a knowledge of violence and her vulnerability to it, the certainty of “it would be my turn next.” It is a bodily experience that comes to reside in “the flesh” as shared forms of storytelling, of history, of memory, of the lived experience of becoming, of being black in this country. “I am talking about what it is to think of oneself, in this day and age, as having *a people*.”<sup>9</sup> To assert (again) that race is a social construct is also to emphasize how race is practiced in everyday life, instilled in the body as a reflex, an instinct, a need. As part of *Resident Evil*, a centerpiece of Perry’s exhibition, there is a video playing on a television monitor on top of a piece of living room furniture. The video begins with an audio interview with Ramsey Orta, who recorded Garner’s death on video in 2014. The reporter comments on the steadiness of Orta’s hand, which remains remarkably steady, firm, unwavering, despite the distressing intimacy of the scene (“took my life from me, took my friend’s life from me”). Perry’s video ends with an audio of Gaines narrating her own impending death over Instagram in 2016. “Record everything,” we hear Gaines say to her five-year old son. This is layered over a scrolling text that recounts an episode from Perry’s own childhood, which eerily echoes the scene of Gaines’s death. The daily strain of such proximity to premature death, its utter normalcy, collapses pronouns as well as verbal tenses. That *would be* me, that *is* me.

In the *Resident Evil* video, if a walk home at night turns into the horror of stalking/being stalked, scored to excerpted soundtracks of *Alien* and *Predator*, the “evil” that awaits in the living room is none other than the glorious Eartha Kitt. “I wanna be evil, little evil me; Just as mean and evil as I can be.” In Perry’s work, there is not only the burden of the necessity to record and to share, but also the exuberance, the black joy, of

this existence through sharing. In the most recent iteration of *nether* series, after the rotating image windows of black death, the video ends with a spontaneous scene of voguing. Under the orange streetlights and the ill-at-ease looks of armed police, the protestors clap and dance in rhythm and in jubilation with the voguing dancer, as the dancer struts, poses, sashays, dips, and drops, turning with a flip of long hair and a defiant raising of clenched fist as a face-off against the police. Via her Roomba zines, Perry refers to the proposal for a new measure of virality, indeed promiscuity, for evaluating images, what the artist Hito Steyerl called the “defense of the poor image,” the image that is valued for the “velocity, intensity, spread” of its circulation, exemplified in the ludic velocity of this Roomba, appropriated as a purveyor of critical intervention underfoot.<sup>10</sup> According to Steyerl, the poor image is “a copy in motion.” Across innumerable rips, reformatting, reediting, uploads, downloads, and clicks, through the countless exchanging of hands, the quality of the image is degraded to a “hurried blur.” Emphasis is not on the poor quality of the image per se. Rather, the aim is for a new criterion of value, a different method of evaluation, for which the quality of the image is not as important as its spread, as the density and reach of its circulation—not what the image represents but its conditions of existence. The Roomba zine also references critic Aria Dean’s comparison of the circulation of the poor image, especially as memes via social media, to what the historian Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism* would describe as the collective being of blackness (“ontological totality”).<sup>11</sup> Dean underscores how the African diaspora prefigures the networked bodies and subjectivities of digital world-making, its deterritorialization and fluxes. For Dean, rather than claim the right to representation via the good image, the rich image, there is “power in a ‘poor image’ that slips through borders for those of us who are heavily policed, whom the state and other forces would like to make fixed.” Against the surveillance of black bodies and desires, she proposes, “perhaps we can make ourselves opaque, through our own serial, iterative excess.”

As part of *Resident Evil*, behind the television monitor, against the chroma-key blue wall, we also see a 3-D animation of an extreme close-up of Perry’s skin. The projection is scaled to the massive proportions of a history painting or a Jackson Pollock. The close-up presents her skin as a diffusive figure, a dispersed scattering that is also a fusing, like lava flow, rock become throbbing, heaving liquid at over 1300 degrees Fahrenheit. Perry’s



Sondra Perry, *Resident Evil* (2016), The Kitchen, installation view featuring *nether* 1.0.3 (2016), video installation (still of Tanisha Anderson).

skin, that overdetermined site for the “fact” of blackness, becomes flesh, in all its fluidity, viscosity, and sensuality of being. It spills over, spreads out and in ceaseless movement, constantly folding into and out of the background, rendering the ground itself into a figure of sorts. The ground moves, like the sea. In the video for *Wet and Wavy Looks—Typhoon coming on for a Three Monitor Workstation*, Perry animates an extreme close-up of the sea in J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting of the Zong massacre from 1781, where the British slave ship *Zong*’s captain drowned 133 slaves in order to claim compensation for these “goods” under the salvage clause of the ship’s insurance policy. (Another ten slaves threw themselves overboard in what the ship’s captain later described as an act of defiance.) Through the animating close-up, Perry draws out the texture of brush strokes, the swell and dissipation of waves, the morph, warp, mutation of the sea-as-flesh, the hurried blur.

To see videos such as *Wet and Wavy Looks* or *Ashes for Three Monitor Workstation*, we sit in rowing machines, exercise bikes, or treadmills, advertised as “workstations,” but here transformed into infernal machines from which to view Perry’s videos. The machines have ill-fitting seats, the pedals are flipped, and the effort to produce “a healthier, better you” is further impeded by Eco Styler hair styling gel, as if to underscore the fatigue—the futility—of the *desire* to be a productive subject of capital, a good subject of the state. In *Ashes*, Perry’s likeness appears as an ill-fitting avatar—“Sondra’s body type was not an accessible pre-existing template”—and its automated voice speaks of the absurd, even fatal, exhaustion of such desires, such wishful thinking. Indeed, it is the very philosophy of policing behavior (“broken windows theory”), which has been the motor for expanding the scope and intensity of the surveillance of particular communities, exposing the entire community to a harsh, punitive light, where every move, every gesture could become probable cause.<sup>11</sup> For one of the most recent plans by the City of New York to make neighborhoods safer, floodlights have been installed around public-housing units, as part of a new strategy called “Omnipresence.” Critics have pointed out the abrasiveness of the lights and their loud, continued hum, their disruption of sleep, of rest. The historian Simone Browne emphasizes the continuity of Omnipresence with eighteenth century “lantern laws” that required slaves to carry a lit candle after dark, technology-as-prosthesis: the black body as cyborg.<sup>12</sup>

“I wanna be evil,” we hear Kitt sing. We could also recall Bertolt Brecht’s description of a police chief’s fitful dreaming, where, amidst the hallucinatory fumes of fear and bad conscience, the tentative stirrings of the people are envisioned as a flood. “Once it has begun, it never ceases ... they fill everything, like water, they seep through everything, like water, they have no substance. Of course, the police throw themselves against them, of course, batons are flying, but what’s this? They strike right through the bodies...”<sup>13</sup> Brecht adds, “Such dreams have consequences.” In Perry’s blue room, we ascertain the force, the urgency of that flood.

Angelo Careri, "Formes", *Interieur*, November 27, 2017.

# FORMES

LE JEU VIDÉO EST DEVENU DURANT CETTE DERNIÈRE DÉCENNIE UN TERRAIN D'EXPÉRIMENTATION  
ET DE RÉFLEXION INÉPUISABLE POUR LA SCÈNE ARTISTIQUE CONTEMPORAINE. PORTRAITS D'ARTISTES  
QUI EN ONT FAIT UN MOYEN D'EXPRESSION PRIVILÉGIÉ.



Installation Resident Evil (The Kitchen NY, photographie : Jason Mandella — 2016)

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## SONDRA PERRY

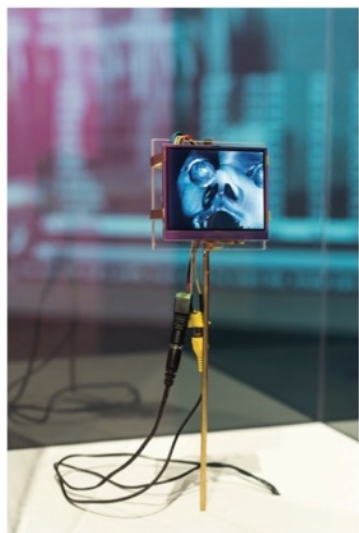
Originnaire du New Jersey et désormais basée à Houston, Sonda Perry est une artiste marquante de la nouvelle scène américaine. Son travail est axé sur les technologies et reprend certains codes des jeux vidéo. Il tourne essentiellement autour de problématiques liées à la discrimination des noirs en Amérique. Elle a récemment présenté sa première exposition personnelle d'importance, *Resident Evil*, à la galerie The Kitchen (New York, 2016).

L'art de Sondra Perry est un subtil mélange entre formes abstraites et engagement politique. Entrer dans l'une de ses expositions, c'est pénétrer dans un espace peuplé d'écrans bleus et d'étranges machines orange qui tiennent du juste milieu entre le vélo d'appartement et la borne d'arcade. Ces dispositifs — par exemple un « rameur » de salon où l'eau, dans le dispositif de résistance censé simuler la pression du courant sur l'aviron, a été remplacée par du gel coiffant — sont associés à des moniteurs où sont diffusées en boucle des vidéos qui semblent tenir à la fois du poste de contrôle et de l'instrument de torture. *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016) met par exemple le spectateur, juché sur un vélo, face à un avatar virtuel de l'artiste composé de polygones et de textures imparfaites. S'adressant au spectateur avec un ton calme et désincarné, il lui explique par quels procédés il a été réalisé et animé, avant d'évoquer une étude sociologique démontrant que les noirs américains croyant à la notion de « monde juste » (dans lequel le bien est récompensé) sont beaucoup plus sujets que les autres aux maladies chroniques. Son discours est entrecoupé d'extraits de vidéos YouTube montrant des exorcismes de petites filles noires et de nappes de textures magmatiques.

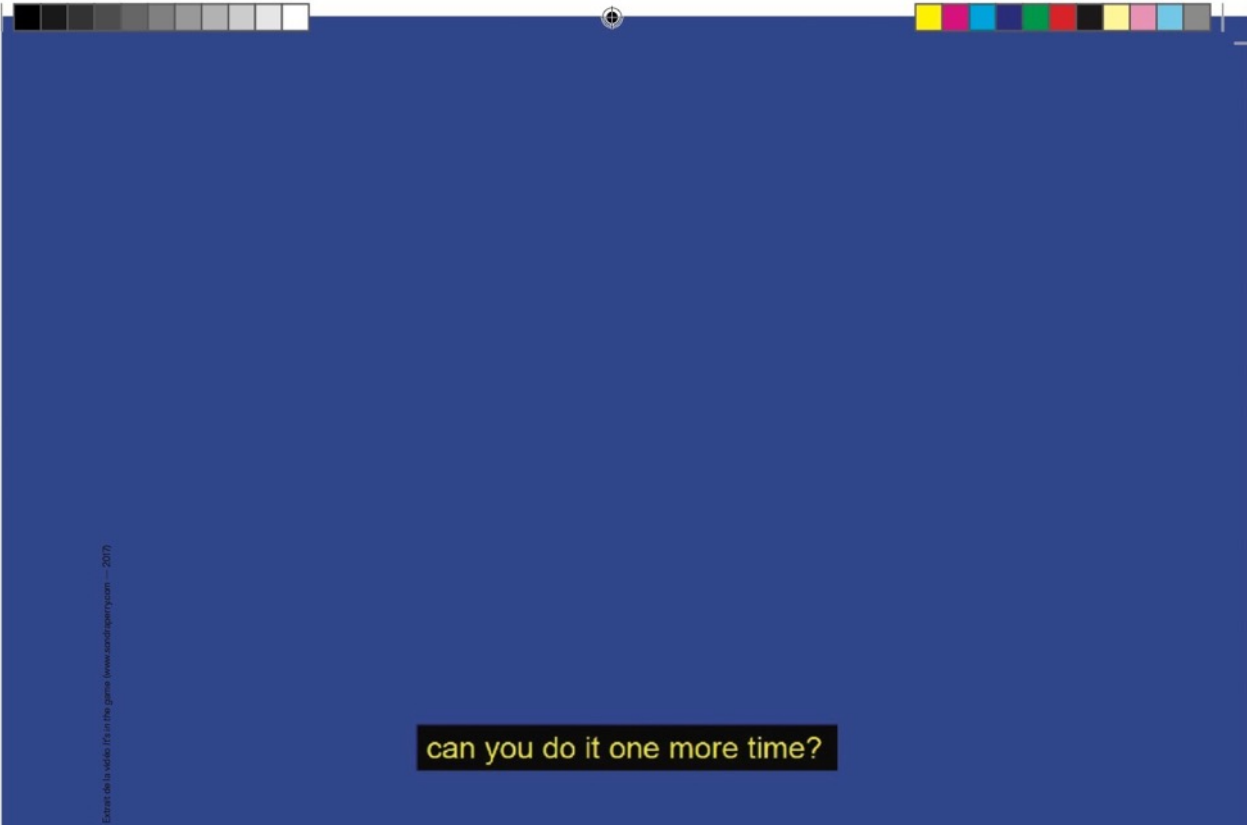
Le montage d'objets ou de corps modélisés en 3d avec des extraits de vidéos trouvées sur YouTube est caractéristique du travail de Sondra Perry. Ces éléments, souvent, « flottent » sur des fonds bleus qui évoquent non seulement les procédés de l'incrustation vidéo, mais aussi le « blue screen of death » caractéristique l'OS Windows et de ses erreurs fatales. Dans une série de vidéos intitulées *Netherrr* (2016), l'artiste souligne le fait que cette expression est également utilisée par les policiers américains pour désigner une forme de code d'honneur qui prône l'omerta en cas de comportement inapproprié de la part d'un collègue en service, comme c'est le cas lors de bavures. Une autre vidéo, *Resident Evil* (2016), présentée lors de l'exposition du même nom, développe le même type

de montage parallèle. D'un côté, des extraits d'une vidéo montrent un militant noir prenant à parti un journaliste de Fox News lors d'une manifestation suite au décès de Freddie Gray, un jeune noir mort aux mains de la police de Baltimore. De l'autre, une séquence tournée en vue à la première personne par l'artiste elle-même. Elle y sillonne un quartier résidentiel du New Jersey dont elle est originaire, désert en pleine nuit, avant de s'introduire chez ses propres parents. Avec en fond des thèmes angoissants extraits des bandes sons d'*Alien* et de *Predator*, le dispositif est une référence évidente aux itérations modernes du *survival horror*. Il évoque également le *first-person shooter*, mais aussi les caméras que portent en permanence les officiers de la police américaine sur leur poitrine durant leur service.

Le décor — un quartier résidentiel américain très banal —, filmé avec une caméra en vision nocturne, évoque en effet très précisément un certain types d'images qui circulent désormais de plus en plus à chaque nouvelle bavure policière. Par la suite, une fois introduite dans la maison de famille, l'artiste arrive dans son salon, où la télévision retransmet un clip télévisuel d'Eartha Kitt, l'une des premières célébrités noires de la chanson américaine, interprétant *I want to be evil*. Se met alors en place un jeu ironique et macabre où la « blackness », couleur de peau, devient couleur de la nuit et couleur du mal, au sein d'un dispositif qui évoque le film de zombies. Dans l'imaginaire de l'Amérique blanche, le noir est une créature presque surnaturelle et dangereuse par définition. L'artiste semble également suggérer que le « blue screen » est l'équivalent virtuel de la « blackness » : à la fois car le « blue screen of death » happe les noirs victimes de la police dans des limbes bleues d'oubli — les erreurs fatales de la police ne sont jamais reconnues et ne font qu'enclencher des redémarrage du système —, mais aussi parce que l'image fantasmée et projetée sur les corps noirs fonctionne comme une incrustation vidéo.



Installation Resident Evil (The Kitchen NY, photographie : Jason Mandella — 2016)





Extrait de la vidéo 1h30 en jeu (www.easports.com - 2010)



Un autre travail vidéo plus récent, *It's in the game* (2017), se réfère plus directement encore au médium jeu vidéo et à la question de la représentation des noirs dans les espaces virtuels. Là aussi, la méthode consiste à mettre en parallèle des procédés propres à la technologie (modélisation d'objets, création d'avatars numériques) et des « faits divers » impliquant différentes formes de discrimination. L'espace virtuel devient alors un lieu où l'exclusion sociale et politique se répercute à travers des formes en apparence abstraites : textures 3d, écrans bleus correspondant à des espaces faussement neutres d'apparition de corps virtuels, etc.

*It's in the game* présente ainsi des images filmées par Sondra Perry, accompagnée d'un ami basketteur professionnel, au Metropolitan Museum of Art. La visite du musée se focalise autour d'œuvres liées à un héritage colonial : masques amérindiens, antiquités ramenées d'Égypte, etc. Des modélisations en 3d de ces œuvres, réalisées par l'artiste, sont intégrées au montage. Des formes esthétiques ayant été transférées de force d'un espace dans un autre, dans le contexte d'une domination économique et politique, sont à donc nouveau transférées par l'artiste dans un autre espace, virtuel et faussement « libre ». Le MET, depuis quelques années, numérise en effet massivement ses collections sur un espace en ligne dédié et gratuit. Une mission culturelle prétendument désintéressé et philanthrope, qui masque en réalité les enjeux politiques propres à l'histoire même de l'invention du musée comme espace d'exhibition de trophées coloniaux, et aujourd'hui, dans un contexte postcolonial et globalisé, comme rouage essentiel des politiques de *soft power*.

La visite au MET est ensuite mise en parallèle, dans cette même vidéo, avec un scandale lié à la modélisation des joueurs de la ligue NBA dans la série de jeux de basket *NBA 2k* d'EA Sport (le titre de la vidéo, *It's in the game*, reprend d'ailleurs le slogan de cet éditeur). L'ami basketteur qui accompagne

Sondra Perry n'était en effet pas présent par hasard. Dans une autre séquence, face à un écran du jeu *NBA 2k* qui montre la composition de son ancienne équipe, les Georgia Southern Eagles, il décrit chacun de anciens coéquipiers — qui sont tous noirs — tels qu'il les a connus dans la réalité : performances sportives, souvenirs personnels, etc. Pour lui, ils sont parfaitement reconnaissables à l'écran, alors même leurs véritables noms ont été effacés à cause d'un conflit autour du droit à l'image et des licences sportives. Comme le musée, le jeu vidéo a donc transféré les corps et l'apparence de basketteurs noirs, sans leur réel consentement, dans un espace virtuel. L'opération revient à leur conférer une valeur symbolique et économique, dont pour la majorité d'entre eux, ils ne profiteront pas.

*It's in the game* est un bon exemple de comment l'art engagé de Sondra Perry, de façon particulièrement frappante, déplace l'expérience sociale dans des univers formalistes. La réflexion — attendue mais malheureusement incontournable — sur la possibilité même d'une contestation dans le cadre institutionnel idéologiquement ambigu de la galerie, est donc ici amenée avec particulièrement d'habileté. Sondra Perry travaille sur des espaces dont l'apparente vacuité, loin d'être synonyme de liberté et de possibles, est au contraire vecteur d'exclusion. C'est la preuve que l'art abstrait est loin d'avoir dit son dernier mot, et que si l'avènement de nouvelles technologies est aujourd'hui avant tout synonyme de nouvelles techniques de pouvoir, il est aussi à l'origine de mutations esthétiques.

**Angelo Careri**

Dean Daderko, "Conversations: III Suns: Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry", *Mousse Magazine*, No. 57, February/ March 2017.

# MOUSSE

CONVERSATIONS Mousse 57

## III Suns: Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry

by Dean Daderko



Sondra Perry, *Young Women Sitting and Standing and Talking and Stuff (No, No, No)*, 2015, performed by Joiiri Minaya, Victoria Udondian, and Ilana Harris-Babou at The Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, New York, 2015. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: the artist

Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry recently mounted astounding and important solo exhibitions in New York. Jafa's searing and prescient short video *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, presented at Gavin Brown's enterprise's new space in Harlem, and Sondra Perry's intense and perversely humorous *Resident Evil* at The Kitchen were both deeply affecting for me on the strength of their shared interests in Blackness and the illuminating ways in which they smartly address the conditions in which Black folks find themselves socially, politically, and physically today. Given the precarious and dangerous situation of people of color—in the United States and further abroad—voices like Jafa's and Perry's shed an urgent and necessary light on what are feeling like increasingly dark times.

ARTHUR Jafa: One of the things that I found really interesting about your show, Sondra, is how you combine formal and political elements. And there's another sense too—the visceral. You introduce a lot of gratifications of the flesh. Yeah, there's techno savvy, and technology and media, but my impression was, "Wow, this is very Vodun, digging peoples' bodies up and reanimating them."

SONDRA PERRY: It's really complex. I've been thinking through how to represent different, simultaneous points of view in my work. In my recent video *Resident Evil* (2016), I included Fox News footage where you see lots of people shooting footage on their phones of Gerardo Rivera's live broadcast from Baltimore during the recent uprisings there. And there's a citizen journalist who also uses this footage. Then there's the Fox broadcast itself. I'm sticking these things together to establish a ground where I can think through Black being and also come to terms with just what being is.

AJ: Do you see your work as a body? It's a funny term. Is it a body? Or, what's not a body? What's an un-body of work? Your show is literally a re-assemblage. You're putting together something new, like a Frankenstein monster, which introduces a sense of dismemberment.

SP: That's it! I made nonfunctional exercise machines, and animated pictures I took of my skin in a video I projected over an entire wall. I think that the idea of humanness is fundamentally an illusion, and in order to avoid White normativity, I prefer to disassemble my own body. To take my skin, reanimate it into fluid waves, and make exercise machines that have their own artificial intelligence. The machines let you know that if you think you're going to get a workout on them, it's probably not going to happen.

AJ: I met someone in my show at Gavin's who saw my video *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, and talked to me about mobilizing people. He was super charismatic, saying how we've got to take our society back. Even though I'm obsessed with politics, I'm not an activist. There's nothing wrong with it, of

course. And maybe it's even the primary mechanism by which things change in society. But it seems to me that artists operate in a different space—one that's unconscious on a certain level, and symbolic. Black Lives Matter didn't exist as a hashtag prior to Obama becoming president. Black people want a Black president, and we get a Black president, so we assume that this person, because he's statistically Black—whatever that means—is going to look out for the interests of Black people. But Black people are still being shot like dogs during the tenure of a Black president. What does that mean? How do you proceed?

DD: Can you talk about appropriation?

AJ: I feel two ways about it. I've got a lot of video footage in there, a lot of other peoples' stuff, pulled from the Internet. I talked with attorneys who said it was fair use because I was using small clips. It made me think that "fair use" is not the same as "fair." I see a very problematic relationship with criminality comprising ownership in slavery, right? I've got a problematic relationship between law and property. Yeah, I don't want nobody stealing my shit. At the same time, if ain't nobody stealing your shit, your shit probably don't got no value. I'm like, "Well, it's a good sign," a sign that the thing being pirated has some currency. The more your shit has value, the more it's going to be pirated. We're living in a different time and space where technology and the way people use it has completely outrun any kind of Cartesian model that'd keep things orderly. This is a really anarchic moment. They're trying to figure out, even now, how to clamp down on the Internet. It just refuses to be controlled. My friend John Akomfrah said something in an interview that hit me like a ton of bricks because it was such a crystalline articulation of my fundamental methodology. He talked about putting things in an "affective proximity" to one another. That's about as clear as I've heard it. People say, "Oh you cut your video to Kanye's music," but it was like eighty-five percent cut before I even heard his song. I saw him performing "Ultralight Beam" on Saturday Night Live and thought it was amazing, so I downloaded it. I download everything. Anything I like, I download it. I don't even think about it anymore. I also cut out pictures from magazines. It's like, I see something, and want to have it because I may never see it again. It's impulsive. Some people say it's neurotic. Well, my thing is, is it productive?

SP: Right!

AJ: It's kind of like, how are you trying to effect change? I see myself as an undertaker. I'm trying to grab people and say, look, this is what's going on under the surface of things. Don't look away. It's a natural human response to recoil from something you're disturbed by. It's what people do—they pull back. If it's something really hard to see, they'll run away, or turn the page. I've trained myself to do almost the opposite: if something really disturbs me, I absolutely am going to download it. In hip-hop, it's the same thing: you take a thing and do something with it. You don't make a thing. Yeah, these folks are making things, but not usually from the raw material of notes and tones. Hip-hop takes all these given things, these preset blocks, and treats them in a way they weren't necessarily produced or intended to be treated.

SP: That way of inventing a story is part of the reason I started working with my family. I realized that they were really good storytellers. I just think back to being young and listening to the same stories at family events. I'd recognize how those stories would change over the course of ten years or so. It relates to how we move through the world. In one video I recently made with my family I asked them to talk about family histories, but to flip them a little bit, to introduce a tiny bit of fiction. That's what they did the entire weekend we shot. To make a long story short, their contributions changed the entire work. My grandmother told me a story about burying an American flag in her backyard. She said when my aunt went into the military, she started hanging flags in front of her house. She said she'd been taking them down and burying them in the backyard for twenty years. I thought this was so amazing. A few years ago, my grandmother covered most of her backyard with cement, which would have made the flags inaccessible, though there were still some, she said, in the collard green beds.

DD: You included this footage in *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One* (2015), right?

SP: Yes, but that footage was staged. I staged an un-burial because she had the most recent flag under her bed, where she keeps everything: birth certificates, the election of Barack Obama newspaper, all that stuff. My family told me that since it was winter, she was waiting for the ground to get soft to bury it. So we staged an un-burial. When the video was shown, my mom and all of her sisters came to see it. When the un-burial part came up, I said to her, "This is nuts, I can't believe y'all do this." My mom looked at me and said, "We don't." The piece was already done and I'm thinking, "You did what I asked you to do, but without letting me know!" I thought about it for a second, and then asked myself, "Why are you surprised?" It's a survival instinct to elaborate stories this way, and it's so indicative of how we live. It's what Black people do.

AJ: I feel the same way. A Black family is almost like a living readymade. They are readymade. A lot of times people don't quite realize what a resource this can be. Anything you throw at your family, they'll definitely throw it back, and it'll be more complicated when they throw it back at you. It won't be what it's supposed to be. It may not even be true. It may be corrupted. But in terms of how it's corrupted, it can seem even truer.

SP: Definitely! I'm working on a new piece right now about how my mother's company changed all of their employees' desks to a thing called the Uprise system. It's a mechanized standing-desk system. The company's logo says "Join the Uprising!" These clinical office wellness things use wild trademarks and logos. They seem to say, "You're doing better for yourself, you're a revolutionary, you're standing while you work." She said, "But what you don't realize is that standing while you work makes you really tired." And I said, "That's it exactly!" So we're working on a piece that addresses the politics of uplift in relation to the Uprise system. As my family and I are working on these things together, I have to keep reminding folks that this is not just a theoretical understanding of how Black people interact—it's always been this way. I think I got a clearer, more historical understanding of this from reading Simone Brown's book *Dark Matters* (2015). She's talking about surveillance generally, and more specifically about seeing or visualizing Black

folks through certain types of technologies. Lantern laws were one of the first surveillance technologies in the Western world. In her book Brown opens up a space for thinking more fully about being seen, or not being seen, and how this visibility or lack of it is utilized.

AJ: Earlier, I thought you were starting to say something about Black people and technology, and how your work addresses it.

SP: That's exactly what I was getting at.

AJ: It's as if those two things—Black people and technology—are diametrically opposed. It's so clear that this isn't the case, because why wouldn't Black people not just be interested in technology, but also very close or versed in its various uses? In a certain respect, at some point we were the technology. It seems like people always react when they see a Black person with a computer in their hands, like there's something misbegotten about it. Look at Scott Joplin and the player piano, or Jimi Hendrix's guitar: there's never been a moment where we weren't totally preoccupied with technology. And these technologies are the precursors of robotics. It goes back to your idea of things that get used by other people for their own purposes.

SP: There's a moment happening. I think what I'm trying to do with my work is really try to sandwich these ideas into a clear understanding of how technologies have always existed within our community. There are a lot of entanglements that are hard to parse. In my work, this becomes apparent in my interest in representing my flesh through digital manipulations. I animate it with a 3-D rendering program called Blender that's open source. You don't have to install it on your computer in order for it to work, which is important to me because I'm such a transient being. I put the program on a zip drive that I can pick up and take somewhere else. It's important to me to have this kind of mobility, conceptually and actually. I'm interested in taking what I have, no matter how traumatic or joyful, and seeing where it goes. This conception is really at the base of the things that I'm making.

AJ: On some level, it's kind of like, you can't have a position about a thing if you are a thing. The last twenty years, thirty years of hip-hop has been Black people with samplers, with computer systems. So why does this stuff even linger? Why is it that we're not understood as a technologically engaged class of people? Clearly we're not scared. We'll get in there and say, "Yo, you may have designed this thing to do X, Y and Z, but what it's better at is this."

SP: Right!

AJ: One of the things I've been continually obsessed with is the movie *Alien* (1979). To me it's no accident that when the alien first pops out of the guy's chest, all the White folks pull back. But Yaphet Kotto grabs a fork, and he's gonna go in on the alien! He's the only one who's pushing forward, right? He's the one saying, "I recognize, I know what the fuck this is. Let's kill it and let's kill it now!" He recognizes the danger immediately.

In a sense, he's seeing himself. He knows what the danger is. Everybody else is like, "gasp," but he wants to take this thing out. And the alien even has

fronts2, you know? It's like some total hip-hop shit. And I am obsessed that they got this seven-foot-two Sudanese brother, Bolaji Badejo, to play the alien. Black people can't even get work in movies when they want to. So they go to London and find a seven-foot-two Sudanese guy? This is not an accident. You can't tell me it's arbitrary. Somebody, unconsciously or otherwise, searched him out because on some fundamental psychoanalytic level, they knew the alien was a nigga, excuse my language. For real, they straight-up knew this on some profound level.

DD: Yes, and come to find out that the guy who saves the alien is actually a human-looking robot who works for the corporation!

AJ: Exactly! Because the robot is how the corporation implements its power. Every time something comes up, Yaphet Kotto has the most radically pragmatic solution. He's like, "Fuck all this shit, let's nuke the planet from outer space, get the fuck out of here, and deal with the legal ramifications later!"

SP: Later!

AJ: Everybody else is getting into discussions about science and exploration, he's like, "No!" It's him and the working-class [White] dude, Harry Dean Stanton, who voice their opposition.

SP: Yup!

AP: It really ends up affirming how—I always like to say, we're ill suns, it's a term I have now. I say, "Ill suns, we're ill suns," meaning we're suns that shine, but we shine in this way that's off. We are also the illegitimate sons and daughters of the West, meaning we're in it, we're absolutely products of it, but because of the way W. E. B. DuBois's dual consciousness thing works out, we look at this stuff from both inside and out. Like, you go to see a cowboy Western, and you're in this weird complicated between-space: you're either fine with the cowboys or with the Indians. It's constantly fluctuating back and forth. I think there's something about this fluctuation is so emblematic of what Blackness is.

[1] Eighteenth-century laws in New York that required black, mixed-race, and indigenous enslaved people to carry lit candle lanterns with them if they were walking in the city after sunset, unaccompanied by a White person; lantern laws are seen as the precursors to today's stop-and-frisk policing policies.

[2] Decorative tooth covers made of gold, silver, or other precious metals.

Arthur Jafa is an artist born in Tupelo, Mississippi (1960). His latest screenings have been held at ICP, New York; International Center of Photography School, Barnard College, New York, Museum of Contemporary African Diaspora Art, New York. Selected exhibitions include Serpentine Gallery, London (2017); Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York (2016).

Sondra Perry (1986, New Jersey) is an interdisciplinary artist whose works in video, computer-based media, and performance explore what Perry calls the "slippages of identity" that define subjective experience in the digital world. Her latest solo show has been held at The Kitchen, New York.

Dean Daderko is curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

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Jennifer Krasinski, "Sondra Perry Explores the Intersection of Technology and Black History in America" *The Village Voice*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/11/30/sondra-perry-explores-the-intersection-of-technology-and-black-history-in-america/>.



# Sondra Perry Explores the Intersection of Technology and Black History in America

by JENNIFER KRASINSKI

November 30, 2016



Who or what defines evil? In America, certainly after 9-11, it's a word that's been used to describe any act of insurgence against a vision this country has of itself as essentially good. It's a polarizing concept, refusing self-reflection in favor of a willful blindness — and, in its refusal, conflating power with virtue, might with right. In her ferociously witty and searingly intelligent “Resident Evil” exhibition, multimedia artist Sondra Perry dissects how this notion of evil infects black identity, how it colors blackness in America.

Just thirty years old and less than two years removed from Columbia's MFA program, Perry is already making a name for herself as a thinker and maker, creating videos and installations at the intersection of black history (both the personal and the collective), technology, and identity. As she told New Museum curator Lauren Cornell last year in an interview for *Mousse* magazine: "I'm interested in how blackness is a technology, changing and adapting, through the constant surveillance and oppression of black folks across the diaspora since the 1600s. Unmediated seeing isn't a thing."

What *is* a thing for Perry is the question of who is mediating — and how. Throughout the exhibition, she makes her own presence known as the designer of the stories she flashes before her audience. Sometimes she appears as an avatar, modeled in her own likeness. Her hand, though invisible, is felt when we see a cursor dance across a screen. She's the one we assume is behind the camera that paces her hometown of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and enters her family home at night. It's a sequence that puns darkly on the "first-person shooter" p.o.v. of video games, as well as that of footage taken from body cameras worn by law enforcement. Artist or gamer or stalker? Creator or hunter or hunted?

Perry takes the exhibition's title from the sci-fi/horror video game/movie franchise, which pits humans against zombies and other mutant forms. She painted the walls of the Kitchen's exhibition space chroma key blue (a/k/a blue-screen blue), an eye-punishing color used in the production of special effects, which allows designers to composite actors with backgrounds — to weave real bodies seamlessly into imagined worlds. If, on the one hand, this blue tips its hat to possibility — to the transcendence of reality — for the artist, it also speaks to disembodiment, to a kind of cold storage for slaughtered bodies.

[illegible]

Perry's avatar appears again in *Graft and Ash* for a *Three Monitor Workstation*, an installation for which a triptych of monitors has been fastened to the front of an exercise bike—cum-workstation. The artist's likeness, moving and blinking like an alien reptile, tells us of a scientific study that proves that black people who believe this world is just — who believe on some level that “they get what they deserve” — are more prone to suffering from chronic illnesses.

How to exorcise such evil from the mind and body within a context that writes fatal errors into the most easily corruptible of all operations, our stories? In the exhibition's titular installation, Perry addresses the racist narrative structures that shape ideas of blackness in the media. In one sequence, we watch footage from the 2015 protests in Baltimore that took place after the death of Freddie Gray; a protester yells at Geraldo Rivera for covering "the black

riots,” rather than Gray’s story, for white news media. Later in the video, when Perry’s camera enters her family home, it finds Eartha Kitt singing “I Want to Be Evil” on the television. Perhaps, just perhaps, the artist finds something to embrace in this desire.

One of the many consequences of the recent election is the widespread calling-out of “fake news.” Facebook, Twitter, and other outlets have been charged with disseminating untruths that led to the election of Donald Trump. Even the savviest and smartest members of the media have been disoriented by the ways in which the incoming administration and its followers bend stories to their will and wish. Editor of the New Yorker David Remnick recently said of the normalizing of Trump: “I think I’m hallucinating.”

In “An Open Letter to White Liberal Feminists,” posted on the website of the African American Intellectual History Society, LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, associate professor of Africana studies at Williams College, wrote of her white colleagues’ distress at the turn America has taken:

*I am delighted that you have received the potential awakening of a lifetime, and that now you might actually get what so many of us have been describing all along. Welcome to that deep perpetual angst.*

Our country was a terrifying place for many of its citizens long before November 8; it’s just that some of them — some of *us* — only recently learned exactly how and why ours is a nation to be feared. What we are seeing now is what America is and has been for some time. Perry’s exhibition puts us in a mind to remember that all we had to do to know this was to watch closely, and pay attention.

Sondra Perry: ‘Resident Evil’

The Kitchen

512 West 19th Street 212-255-5793, [thekitchen.org](http://thekitchen.org)

Through December 10

Margaret Kross, “Critics’ Pick: Sondra Perry”, *Artforum*, March 2016, <https://www.artforum.com/picks/id=64976>.

# ARTFORUM

## New York

### SONDRA PERRY

#### THE KITCHEN

512 West 19th Street

November 2, 2016 - December 10, 2016

Sondra Perry’s crucial exhibition “Resident Evil” registers systemic, racialized violence and viscous identities under surveillance. Against the chroma-key blue walls of postproduction and computer operating system screens of death, a majestic animation, which shares its title with the show, smears the artist’s skin cells like molten lava, giving shape to our structural meltdown. Perry seamlessly choreographs an unnerving network—Fox News Baltimore coverage, a YouTube relaxation trance, a televised exorcism—that offers possibilities for rewiring power relations. Deconstructing righteousness as whiteness and badness as blackness, Perry doesn’t advocate bodily transcendence; she wants Eartha Kitt singing, “I want to be bad.”



View of “Sondra Perry: Resident Evil,” 2016

Kitt appears as “Bad Eartha” on a TV broadcast in *Resident Evil* (all works cited, 2016), pressing her hands against the camera glass with come-hither seduction, calling to herself as a representation. The diegetic sound contributes to a shift in subjectivity, and Perry’s subtext proposes to subvert social binaries by occupying them. Captured by *Blair Witch*–style shaky camera pans and overlaid with accounts of police brutality, the dimly lit domestic scene becomes ominous.

Surrogates for depleted bodies repeat throughout: a rowing workstation mired by globs of hair gel (*Wet and Wavy Looks—Typhon Coming on for a Three-Monitor Workstation*) and a malfunctioning cyborg that twitches and fades, seemingly with emotion (*Graft and Ash for a Three-Monitor Workstation*). The automaton, Perry’s avatar, is exhausted by the risks of being itself and by running hardware beyond its specifications. It’s a potent metaphor for projections that white norms graft onto black culture, corrupting the flesh of physiological health with symptoms in perception and behavior. As public truth devolves and consciousness morphs with fraudulent news and faulty algorithms, the latent virus erupts on every surface—and Perry exposes its entrenched complexity.

— Margaret Kross

Jessica Lynne, "First Look: Sondra Perry", *Art in America*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/first-look-sondra-perry/>.

# Art in America

MAGAZINE FEB. 01, 2016

## FIRST LOOK: SONDRA PERRY

by Jessica Lynne



Sondra Perry's *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One* (2015) is a hypnotizing video that explores the relationship between identity and ritual. Perry, who graduated from Columbia's MFA program last year, uses her personal history as a point of departure. On view in MoMA PS1's fourth edition of "Greater New York," the 26-minute, two-channel video features members of Perry's extended family reenacting traditions, singing and sharing oral histories.

The two channels show grabs from a pair of computer screens, with footage appearing in windows. The video begins with a short clip of Perry's family preparing for a group portrait in her hometown of Perth Amboy, N.J. Their faces are partially covered with neon green ski masks, the same color as the desktop wallpaper surrounding much of the footage. In the next episode, they restage the burial of an American flag in the backyard, while in another window Perry's grandmother describes this as a family tradition; her mother had told her old flags couldn't be thrown in the garbage. In the final vignette, the family gathers in the living room and sings the popular gospel song "Somebody Prayed for Me" as the camera pans slowly. The singing continues on one screen, while a clip of the family peeling sweet potatoes together around the kitchen table appears on the other.

Sondra Perry: *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One*, 2015, two-channel video, 26 minutes.  
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

Investigations of black American history and ceremony are crucial for Perry, who is currently an artist in residence at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. “Red Summer” (2010) is a photo series that evokes the tension surrounding U.S. race riots during the summer of 1919. She set off smoke bombs in her grandparents’ backyard and photographed the two of them obscured by the gray cloud, suggesting the physical destruction that occurred in cities such as Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Perry often complicates these inquiries into identity by addressing the ways in which technology shapes personhood, for example, when she alludes to the green screen in *Lineage*. Green screen compositing is used to superimpose subjects onto virtual backgrounds—a technique Perry reminds us of with the color of the two desktops in her “multiple-monitor workstation.” Perry’s family members are dressed in identical green balaclavas and black clothing, as if they were background material to be chroma-keyed out. But their bodies remain solid, grounded in the environs of the Perth Amboy house as the situations and ceremonies change. It is as if Perry wants to suggest that identity is the result of the constant editing of memories and narratives. As the film’s title proposes, history is the amalgamation of these acts over time, acute projections of our many personal renderings.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW Sondra Perry’s video in “Greater New York,” at MoMA PS1, New York, through Mar. 7, 2016.

Jessica Lynne is a founding editor of the online journal *ARTS.BLACK*.