No Safe Mode

Sondra Perry’s Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation

by Nora N. Khan

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.

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.
SONDRA PERRY

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 coquant – 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 désinvolte, il lui explique que dans le scénario, il a été réani 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 exercices 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, bouvet, « flottant » sur des fonds bleus qui évoquent non seulement les procédés de l’incrustation vidéo, mais aussi le « blue screen of death » caractéristique de l’OS Windows et de ses erreurs fatales. Dans une série de vidéos intitulées *Netherr* (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’omertà en cas de comportement inapproprié de la part d’un collègue en service, comme c’est le cas lors de beuves. 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 militaire noir prenant à partie 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 vus à la première personne par l’artiste elle-même. Elle y sillonne un quartier résidentiel du New Jersey dont elle est originale, 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 type d’images qui circulent désormais de plus en plus à chaque nouvelle bagarre 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 surhumaine 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 bleus d’oubli — les erreurs fatales de la police ne sont jamais reconnues et ne font qu’encrasser des réclamations du système —, mais aussi parce que l’image fantasmée et projetée sur les corps noirs fonctionne comme une incrustation vidéo.
can you do it one more time?
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 apparente abstraites : textures 3D, écrans bleus correspondant à des espaces faussés, 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’Egypte, 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 nouveau transférées par l’artiste dans un autre espace virtuel et faussément « libre ». Le MET, depuis quelques années, numérise en effet massivement ses collections sur un espace en ligne dédié et gratuit. Une mission culturelle prétendument désintéressée et philanthrope, qui masque en réalité les enjeux politiques propres à l’histoire même de l’invention du musée comme espace d’exposition de trôphées coloniaux, et aujourd’hui, dans un contexte postcolonial et globalisé, comme rouage essentiel des politiques de soft power.

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 ses coéquipiers — qui sont tous noirs — tels qu’ils 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’habilité. Sondra Perry travaille sur des espaces dont l’apparence 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
CONVERSATIONS Mousse 57

Ill Suns: Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry

by Dean Daderko

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
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: Laters!

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.

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.

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

by JENNIFER KRASINSKI

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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.

The video netherrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr 1.0.3 moves from a tutorial on the “blue screen of death,” the message a Windows user receives when the operating system experiences a fatal error, to the “blue wall of silence,” law enforcement’s unspoken omertà. Between images of Bill Gates dancing, police raids, and Perry’s chattering avatar, the artist comps in photos of black women who died in police custody. Perry doesn’t tell us much about the dead — no stories, no histories. She only retains their file names: Diamond.jpg; Aiyana_Jones.jpg. Floating here in the blue, they’re simply flat files.

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

Through December 10

**The New York Times**

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By ROBERTA SMITH, MARTHA SCHWENDENER and WILL HEINRICH    NOV. 14, 2017

Sondra Perry

‘Resident Evil’

An installation view of Sondra Perry’s “Resident Evil.” She uses video games in her work, which illuminates the black experience. Credit Sondra Perry and Jason Mandella/The Kitchen
“Resident Evil,” the New Jersey-born artist Sondra Perry’s first institutional solo show, should be required viewing. With four formally accomplished, brutally forthright video installations, Ms. Perry uses the implacable inhumanity of computer and video-game software as a searing window into the contemporary black experience.

One video makes the connection between police brutality and operating system failures explicitly, combining discussions of the so-called “blue screen of death,” a type of Windows error message, and the “blue code of silence,” the corrupt police officer’s version of omertà, with photographs of black women and girls who have died in police custody. In another, Ms. Perry’s own face, jarringly grafted onto a ready-made avatar though it doesn’t quite fit, impersonates the kind of deeply shocked false consciousness that life inside such systems can foster.

But the crowning heartbreaker is the title piece, named after Capcom’s first-person shooter video game from 1996. Footage of the artist’s living room, of her mother reading on the couch and of Eartha Kitt singing “I Want to Be Evil” on their television skips jaggedly into footage of a protest in Baltimore after the 2015 death, in police custody, of Freddie Gray. We see both Fox News and citizen-smartphone versions of an encounter between Geraldo Rivera and the young activist Kwame Rose. While Mr. Rose makes an impassioned case for his own and his neighbors’ humanity, Mr. Rivera rolls on like an automaton, unable to deviate from his preprogrammed, sensationalist goal.

**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.”

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
Sondra Perry’s *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Work-station: 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.
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.


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