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The Body After Representation: Figuring Posthumanist Corporealities in Contemporary Art

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THE BODY AFTER REPRESENTATION:
FIGURING POSTHUMANIST CORPOREALITIES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

BY
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communities due to barriers resulting from settler colonialism. I invite everyone who may read this thesis to join me in reflecting upon our relationships to the lands on which we reside, as well as our responsibilities within decolonization efforts.

Prologue

In the wake of the rise of posthumanist thought in the United States and Europe over the past few decades, there is currently much interest in the proposition of overcoming the position of 'the human,' facilitated by a reordering of Man's relationships to machines and non-human animals. Through such a move, it is suggested that humans may unilaterally shed their corporeal forms in favor of something greater; as Australian artist Stelarc famously once said, "the body is obsolete."[1] A favorite artist of many posthumanists, Stelarc exemplifies an enthusiasm for art's potential to visualize this transcendence of the human body by way of new technologies. Yet, an understanding of 'the human' as a colonial project reveals that the body is in fact far from obsolete, illuminating instead how racial difference is produced through the body, with racialized subjects being prescribed as the non-human. As a result, the liberatory promises of posthumanism are so often void for those whose position has always laid outside the realm of Man.

A lack of attention within art history to the emergence of racialized bodies out of colonial regimes has thus far limited discussions of the body as artistic media, with existing frameworks proving inadequate for grasping work which takes up the body from the position of the non-human. While much of such scholarship has previously centered upon performance art, an appraisal of the processes by which the raced body is made to materialize illuminates a wider range of embodied practices, accounting for the diverse approaches artists of color have taken with the body outside of the material, spatial, and temporal limitations of the genre of performance art. As such, a reinvigoration of scholarship on performance art is necessary to more fully contend with the forms of racial embodiment put forth by artists of the present. Rather

[1] Stelarc, "Prosthetics, Robotics and Remote Existence: Postevolutionary Strategies," *Leonardo* 24, no. 5 (1991): 591.

than moving towards a disappearance of the body as posthumanist scholars so often suggest, a lens critical of 'the human' instead allows us to engage with how bodies may emerge in manifold ways, often unexpectedly so. I refer to bodies here not "to deny ontological validity" to dehumanized subjects, but to draw attention to the ways in which racializing processes target the corporeal as a means of making subjects intelligible under hegemonic representational regimes.[2] In my analysis, I understand race as not merely being inscribed onto the body, but race itself giving the body shape, necessitating a reading of the scales of humanity that precede the body and dictate how the body materializes. This approach illuminates an emerging tendency within contemporary art in the United States, in which artists are exploring alternative modes of embodiment through the manipulation of bodily matter. In the aftermath of identity politics, these artists respond to heightened suspicions regarding the promises of representation (many of which remain unfulfilled), subverting normative conditions of visibility. Reckoning with the processes by which the body is made material, these artists reconfigure the materiality of the raced body in order to move against dominant racializing processes and arrive at new forms of racial embodiment. As such, the works created through these moves constitute a productive intervention into the larger posthumanist conversations in which art remains a participant. Looking beyond Stelarc and his peers, these artists do not urge for a dissolution of the human, instead taking up the non-human as a constructive mode through which to speculate alternative futurities.

The emergence of 'the human'

The construction of the visibly non-human Other offers a highly relevant framework for reckoning with the shortcomings of existing scholarship on performance art—after all,

[2] Simone Browne, "Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity and Biometrics," *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2010): 136.

performance artist Coco Fusco argues that "the construction of ethnic Otherness [is] essentially performative and located in the body."[3] Numerous scholars have posited that the construction of the Other is wedded to the contemporary Western construction of 'the human,' with racializing processes being founded upon the colonial project of making colonized and enslaved subjects 'non-human.' In her watershed essay "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," philosopher Sylvia Wynter argues that construction of the human as an ontological category is fundamentally premised upon the marking of racialized subjects as non-human.[4] Wynter traces the origins of what she refers to as the "ethnoclass" of Man—and what others term the 'liberal humanist subject'—as an approach to personhood which emerged during the Enlightenment period of 18th century Europe yet continues to operate as the normative Western definition of 'the human.'[5] Replacing theological approaches endorsed by the Church, which had previously oriented human beings as subjects within a divine order, the liberal humanist subject positions the human as a secular, individuated, and rational subject, who is "the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of history."[6] The liberal humanist subject's basic structure hinges on freedom, yet its freedom is buoyed on the existence of its opposite, its concept having been developed alongside the rise of European settler colonialism and racial capitalism. Centuries of genocide, slavery, and exploitation were rationalized through the deeming of colonized and enslaved persons as unfree, non-human Others. Visual culture has

[3] Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *The Drama Review* 38, no. 1 (1994): 149.
[4] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.
[5] Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 260.
I choose to use the term "liberal humanist subject" throughout this essay for the sake of clarity.
[6] Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 8.

always played a role in the production of the liberal humanist subject—from the dawn of European colonization, museums and their ideological predecessors operated as a major cultural apparatus for mediating the colonizer's encounter with the Other. The Age of Enlightenment saw a great number of public museums open in Europe during the 18th century; the same values which engendered the production of the liberal humanist subject were foundational to the rise of these new institutions, which took the form of the 'encyclopedic museum,' a form which the West remains enthralled by today. The encyclopedic museum inducted the idea that all objects could be ordered and classified, to be conserved and displayed at a site where humans could examine and produce knowledge about them. Objects stolen during colonial conquest were inserted within these epistemological grids, with meaning being projected upon them through colonial perspectives.[7] Into the 19th and 20th centuries, the practice of making exhibits out of African, Asian, and Native American individuals fueled popular public attractions. These "ethnographic spectacles circulated and reinforced stereotypes, stressing that 'difference' was apparent in the bodies on display. They thus naturalized fetishized representations of Otherness, mitigating anxieties generated by the encounter with difference."[8] While human zoos have for the most part disappeared, these desires to produce visibly Othered bodies remain within contemporary racial formations, being dually embedded in the bastions of culture which make up contemporary art world ecosystems.[9]

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[7] Ciara Ennis, "Curatorial Practice: Week 1," MS40: Curatorial Practice (class lecture at Pitzer College, Claremont, CA, September 3, 2019).
Later divisions of objects into natural history museums and art museums reinforced the intellectual superiority of Europeans, with objects created by Europeans deemed worthy of serious aesthetic consideration and those from Africa, Asia, and the Americas framed as useful only for anthropological study.

[8] Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *The Drama Review* 38, no. 1 (1994): 152.

[9] In her essay "The Global White Cube," curator Elena Filipovic traces the history of biennials, making clear how the large-scale, international exhibitions of the present are an outgrowth of past world's fairs, world's fairs being those same events at which human beings were put on display. See Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and*

The relics of performance

> *"I wanted my actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material—a further dimension of the construction."*[10]
>
> —Carolee Schneemann

In the Western canon of art, the development and rise of performance art in the United States and Europe—timestamped around the 1960s—operates as a critical landmark in the reckoning of bodies as artistic media. While we might find attention to traces of the body—more specifically, the gesture—given to Impressionism's visible brushstrokes and Abstract Expressionism's action painting, performance art introduced the possibility of a full bodily presence being an integral element to the realization of an artwork. The medium thus required a new set of terms to be written for the ideological space of art, enacting a challenge of many of the Enlightenment ideals inherited by Modernism. The emergence of performance art was crucial in its revealing of the bodies hidden by Modernism; as art historian Amelia Jones writes, performance art holds "the potential to challenge the assumption of normativity built into modernist models of artistic evaluation, which rely on the body of the artist (embodied as male) yet veil this body to ensure the claim that the artist/genius 'transcends' his body through creative production."[11] The presentation of the artist's body (or that of surrogate performers) in the gallery space challenged the relations between the viewer and the art 'object,' insofar that the place of the art object was assumed by a human being who could not be regarded by the same terms as an image or otherwise static matter. Performance has indeed provided a productive venue for artists of color to engage in institutional critique; for Luiseño artist James Luna's 1986

Biennials in Post-Wall Europe, ed. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 63-84.

[10] Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 1979/1997), 52.

[11] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing The Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14.

Artifact Piece, the artist laid in an exhibition case at the Museum of Man in San Diego, placing himself beside didactics of his own construction. Luna put forth fictional ethnographies as a means of interrogating the role of systems of display in the materialization of his own body; as art historian Jane Blocker articulates, "the Indian is, in his own body, a museum. He is on perpetual display for a culture that views him as a walking artifact."[12] Interrupting the anthropological narratives which sanitize histories of settler colonial violence and invisibilize the museum's culpability within the ongoing settler colonial project, Luna engaged in "an embodied archival form in which the past (not only Luna's past or that of his ancestors but the past of the museum itself) remains, is remembered, is repeated, and is passed through the flesh of the living body."[13] Indeed, performance art was and continues to demarcate a productive arena within which artists may put forth "subaltern epistemologies."[14] Without discounting the significance of such works, it is however apparent that the framing of performance art within the art historical canon has largely focused on white artists; thus, existing scholarship proves insufficient for accounting for the dynamic approaches artists of color have taken in working with the body as an artistic medium.[15] For these artists, the terms by which the body emerges are fundamentally different—ideologically speaking, not all of us have been granted a human body to begin with. Particularly with respect to more recent works, theories of performance art cannot fully capture the vast number of forms through which the raced body may materialize—working from the

[12] Jane Blocker, "Ambivalent Entertainments: James Luna, Performance, and the Archive," *Grey Room* 37 (2009): 57.
[13] Ibid., 56.
[14] Ibid., 55.
[15] Though much attention has been given to (still mostly white) women performance artists, much of this scholarship focuses on gender without accounting for the role of race within such a matrix. A significant amount of discourse surrounding feminist art of the 70s and 80s were also highly bioessentialist, being "based on the belief in a female essence residing somewhere in the body of women." See Judith Barry, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making," in *Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, and Joanna Frueh (New York: Routledge, 1988), 37. See also, Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," *Art in America* 64, no. 3 (1976): 75.

position of the non-human, artists of color's engagements with the body have not and will not always be within the scope of the body as traditionally seen.[16] Art historian Kristine Stiles writes that performance art was radical in that it "presents two human beings who negotiate meaning with one another, however complicated that mode of communication might be."[17] However, what are the stakes of this project for those who are themselves not seen as producers of meaning?

An emerging tendency in contemporary art

> *Race, either conceived as biology or as culture, organizes social relationships and turns the body into a signifier.*[18]
>
> —Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

Building on existing performance art scholarship, an approach which attends to the construction of 'the human' unveils new dimensions of raced subjects in works past and present, registering new understandings of the body and thereby forging new connections between performance art and that considered outside the realm of performance. More recently, artists are increasingly moving past an interest in pictorial subjects as a means of rendering the margins, looking beyond the body as a continued, individualized whole. This increasing refusal to vie for the position of the liberal humanist subject perhaps grows out of what Jasbir Puar describes as "a poststructuralist fatigue with the now-predictable yet still necessary demands for subject

[16] While scholars such as art historian Amelia Jones have used the term 'body art' to reflect certain focuses within performance art as well as reframe discourse on the genre, with Jones defining body art as works "that take place through an enactment of the artist's body … that is then documented such that it can take place through photography, film, video, and/or text," the boundaries of body art still show an inability to register how artists of color transcend spatial, temporal, and material limits with their work. See Jones, *Body Art*, 13.

[17] Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, ed. Russell Ferguson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 228.

[18] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race," *Camera Obscura* 24, no.1 (2009): 14.

recognition."[19] Much of the performance art scholarship cited here was penned during a critical point at which identity came to be used in order to understand how power operates, then acting as a vehicle for coalition-building across race, gender, sexuality, and other vectors of difference.[20] However, many have now ventured to claim the present untenability of identity politics, which, from its emergence in the '80s and '90s, has since transformed into "a politics of representation that's not actually affecting the material conditions of the people who are supposedly represented."[21] Yet, an effective charge is presented by the work of many contemporary artists; in the words of art historian Huey Copeland,

> We're seeing artists continuing to develop a diversity of means that speak to the ways in which subjects are produced—but without necessarily giving us bodies in representation, without capitulating to the demand to figure identity in a way that assumes difference is visible only through rendering a particular kind of body, a certain kind of subject.[22]

It is within these currents that the following artworks can then be introduced. Curiously, while Postmodernism levied a harsh rejection of many Enlightenment ideals—such as the existence of singular, essentialized meanings—critiques of the liberal humanist subject have largely been

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[19] Jasbir K. Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics," *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 49-50.

[20] Within the art world, identity was taken up with varying levels of success and failure; the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which featured a historically diverse roster of artists, attempted to challenge the means by which institutions could address identity. Troublingly, however, by organizing the exhibition by sociocultural categories applied to the artists, the curators reinforced notions of the burden of representation, severely limiting interpretations of the works on display. While many critics deemed the show overly didactic and lacking in aesthetic quality, it more significantly reinscribed binary distinctions of racial difference and foreclosed meaningful discussions of race and other aspects of personhood. It could perhaps be argued that these shortcomings hint at what scholars note to be identity politics' inadequacy in the present.

[21] Kara Keeling, in conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Joselit, Kobena Mercer, Michelle Kuo, Emily Roysdon, and Huey Copeland. "Collective Consciousness: A Roundtable?" *Artforum*, Summer 2016.
https://www.artforum.com/print/201606/dipesh-chakrabarty-david-joselit-kar-keeling-kobena-mercer-michelle-kuo-and-emily-roysdon-moderated-by-huey-copeland-60095.
The co-option of identity by corporations and other forces have distilled once powerful identifiers into individualistic, marketable tokens, removed from their commentary on lived experiences and the motility of power and difference. The charged conversations surrounding identity politics are now often flattened into a sort of "neoliberal multiculturalism," according to Kara Keeling (ibid.).

[22] Huey Copeland, in conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Joselit, Kara Keeling, Kobena Mercer, Michelle Kuo, and Emily Roysdon. "Collective Consciousness."

siloed into critical ethnic studies, only recently gaining more widespread attention across disciplines.[23] However, I argue that an interrogation of the liberal humanist subject engenders a dipping into a register beneath identity, suggesting that race operates not as a metaphorical standing-in for the subject, but rather marks certain subjects as synonymous with recipients of violence. As curator and media scholar Legacy Russell writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a body."[24] The central question then becomes not merely 'How do bodies acquire meaning?' but more so 'How do bodies become material, and how are they assigned value?' Disassembling the self both materially and ideologically then offers an active mode of intervening in racializing processes. Rather than attempting the impossible project of recuperating the liberal humanist subject, might the space of the non-human be occupied for subversive ends?

The practices of artists such as Korean American artist Anicka Yi and Black American artist Sondra Perry pose as a productive sampling of this emerging attitude, demonstrating key moments in what comprises a larger tendency within contemporary art. Using experimental media to play with the materiality of the raced body, Yi and Perry occupy the liminal space between the human and non-human, complicating the desire to be seen as human by suggesting alternative forms of racial embodiment. Turning away from a politics of representation, the practices of Yi and Perry are valuable not for how their work stands for their race, or how it is magically imbued with some spectacular racial sensibility, but for the radical strategies these individuals cast upon the visual field in order to compose textured and embodied, racialized

[23] Though theories such as Foucault's conception of biopolitics and Agamben's writing on bare life are presently much discussed, these frameworks are consistently shown to lack engagement with race. See Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 1.
[24] Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (New York: Verso Books, 2020), 29.

subjects. As Samira Kawash writes, "The body is the sign of a difference that exceeds the body. The modern concept of race is therefore predicated on an epistemology of visibility, but the visible becomes an insufficient guarantee of knowledge. As a result, the possibility of a gap opens up between what the body says and what the body means."[25] The colonial reliance on the optical yields a racializing process that is inherently fractured, leaving room for slippages, misreadings, and reinterpretations. Numerous works created during the late 20th century by performance artists of color precipitate later engagements with the raced body; in works such as Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* series, created between 1973 and 1980, the weight of the body is often felt through its absence or through its traces.[26] However, in many of these newer works, the body is neither absent nor present, but rendered through a fragmentation of bodily matter which scatters the body across time and space.

Expanding upon the projects of performance art of decades past, these works are enabled by the new terms of relationality they create, reordering how bodies relate to one another within the gallery space. These works produce embodied, raced subjectivities, yet the subject in question is not necessarily formulated *then* presented to the viewer (who gazes upon it, removed from the work), but the subject might equally be considered as the audience as rendered by the work (the audience who is implicated in the work and can themselves become its subject). In discussing 'the viewer' of these artworks, I refer to the liberal humanist subject, who by design populates the white cube; however, there are always Others who arrive in the space as well. While I risk reinforcing the centralization of the white viewer in the exhibition space, it is necessary to draw attention to the relationship between the artwork and the liberal humanist

[25] Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 130.
[26] "Ana Mendieta: *Silueta* Series Photographs," Galerie LeLong & Co., accessed April 29, 2021. https://www.galerielelong.com/viewing-room/ana-mendieta/selected-works?view=slider.

subject in order to address the transformations that occur. To speak of the emergent Asian/American subjectivities central to Yi's work, as an Asian viewer I already approach the work with the knowledge that I do not belong within the institution in which it is shown. Yet I view works such as these with the feeling that these works are winking at me, as both the works and I infiltrate the space and assume subversive positions. In her seminal text *Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race*, Wendy Chun encourages an approach which takes up race's function as a tool, or technological apparatus, rather than a biological determinant; by reading how race is wielded as a means to an end, "understanding race and/as technology enables us to frame the discussion around ethics rather than around ontology, on modes of recognition and relation, rather than on being."[27] By making those patterns of "visualization and revelation" legible, comprehension of how race moves and operates yields new possibilities for subversion, or what Chun describes as "[making] race do different things."[28] Such is precisely what artists like Yi and Perry do: accessing new modes of visuality and racial embodiment through a wielding of race in unexpected ways.

Materializing the subject: making legible the Asian/American subject

Consisting of several insecticide containers set before a steel gate, Anicka Yi's *Immigrant Caucus* doesn't look much like a human body (fig. 1). Yet, these canisters are breathing, emitting a fragrance derived from the sweat of Asian-American women and the emissions of carpenter ants—or so the wall text reads.[29] The museological convention of the wall text, as a didactic element, supposedly provides clarity and illumination to the viewer, who is

[27] Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology," 9.
[28] Ibid., 28.
[29] Katherine Brinson and Susan Thompson, Exhibition Description for *Life Is Cheap* (New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2017).
While this text was not written by the artist herself, it can be assumed that it was based upon descriptions she provided during the exhibition's production.

able to further probe the essence of the work through knowledge of its material elements. However, the ambiguity of Yi's informational offering leaves much of the viewer's confusion unresolved—How has this sweat been processed? What kind of emissions were collected from these ants? How does one imagine the scent of Asian-American women?[30] Yi inhibits the reification of race by prompting the viewer to scrutinize the assumed meanings of "Asian-American women." [31]As the viewer considers the fact of these ingredients, they are thrown into an interrogation of those racializing processes which make the Asian-American, female subject appear. It is through an iterative practice that the subject is made legible and able to be accounted for—the act of naming Asian American women as such, coupled with the circulation of racial and gendered characteristics imposed upon Asian American women, continually reinforces the definition of Asian American womanhood in the public imagination. Lacking a clear referent, this process is here exposed and laid bare—the gas is invisible to the naked eye, and the scent itself is difficult to determine.[32] In producing a sort of call-and-response with the viewer, Yi's work builds on the legacy of performance art's "intersubjectivity," being constructed through relations with the viewer.[33] Stiles writes, "[Performance art] has made more concrete the metonymic relationship of exchange that exists between the viewer and the work of art."[34] The viewer struggles to reconcile their sensorial experience—or lack thereof—with that which the

[30] Since the original mounting of the work at the Guggenheim, Yi has revealed some details about the production of *Immigrant Caucus*, though its origins remain necessarily perplexing. Yi writes, "I brought the idea to several collaborators, including the perfumer Barnabé Fillion, who helped create a base for the Asian-American part of the fragrance (vegetal and floral, with notes of cedar, hay, cumin, and cellophane), and for the ant (citrusy and meaty). The forensic scientist Kenneth Furton identified the compounds found in human sweat and ant tissue, which the artist Sean Raspet translated into a second set of scents." See Anicka Yi, "How I Solved It: Transforming Ideas Into Smells," *New Yorker*, May 9, 2017. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/how-i-solved-it-transforming-ideas-into-smells.
[31] Brinson and Thompson, Exhibition Description for *Life Is Cheap*.
[32] The artist herself reports that the scent is "sweaty and herbaceous until the garlicky note of the ant kicks in" (ibid.).
[33] Amelia Jones, *Body Art*, 14.
[34] Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy," 228.

wall text dictates; while the viewer may anticipate a scent that is delicate, or seductive, or otherwise, there is little to confirm or refute those expectations. Critics' reviews include observations such as "The musty, hard-to-put-your-finger-on odor—or air—that permeates your head remains vague, and this state of not knowing is unnerving," and "I visited the exhibition twice and smelled nearly nothing both times, aside from a few faint whiffs of what recalled a wet cave or a wooden table wiped with some cleaning product."[35] The work refuses to contend with its anticipated associations, and the viewer is instead left to unravel their own thought process. Without an object to land on, the racializing practice is thrown off course, left disordered and unfulfilled. Viewers must instead contend with the fragrance's containers, stainless steel vessels with brass accents that shine in the light. These stark, industrial forms give shape to the racializing, gendering process, evoking the cycles of labor and capital which ultimately produce the Asian American subject.

Drawing upon the aesthetics of mass production, the form of the work is thus implicitly responsive to the racializing mechanics that characterize Asians as machines, which may be traced back to early characterizations of Asians as raced Others. As literary scholar Michelle Huang writes,

> The 19th-century Chinese coolie who labored on the Transcontinental Railroad was figured as both subhuman and superhuman—animalistic, yet able to endure harsh conditions that white laborers could not. The robotic worker thus serves as a hinge point between historical forms of Orientalism (railroad worker) and more futuristic itera-tions (cyborg).[36]

[35] Saul Anton, "Anicka Yi," *4Columns*, June 23, 2017. https://www.4columns.org/anton-saul/anicka-yi; Claire Voon, "A Display of Sweat, Ants, and Bacteria at the Guggenheim," *Hyperallergic*, June 27, 2017. https://hyperallergic.com/384804/a-display-of-sweat-ants-and-bacteria-at-the-guggenheim/.
[36] Michelle N. Huang, "The Posthuman Subject in/of Asian American Litera-ture," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (February 2019): 4.

Other scholars have suggested strong linkages between contemporary Asian racialization and new media; as elaborated in a collection of texts edited by Asian Americanists David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu, techno-orientalism describes the imagination of Asia and Asian people in simultaneously hyper- and hypo-technological terms, as being both technologically primitive and technologically advanced. Within contemporary conditions, Asian Americanist Margaret Rhee has argued that Asian Americans are racialized as robots, or "cyborgs," the latter taking off of posthumanist models, to be elaborated on later.[37] Techno-orientalism formulates an Asian relationality to technology that always necessitates white Western intervention and domination; within this imaginary landscape, it is clear that the Asian subject-as-automaton is rehearsed in many contexts.[38] Drawn through this legacy, the Asian American subject remains unthinking, unfeeling, cold, and interchangeable. As discussed later, this characterization also forges a connection with the carpenter ants who too contributed to this work, with both Asian Americans and carpenter ants imagined as unthinking hordes, useful for production and little else.

As American corporations increasingly move production offshore, exploiting workers in the Global South for lower production costs, Asia has come to be viewed as merely a factory for the West; the phrase "made in China" drums up fantasies of assembly lines populated by faceless workers. By intentionally associating the Asian American subject with industrial containers, however, Yi leverages these racializing processes for different aims; the juxtaposition of the somatic experience of the expelled scent with the automation of the mechanical sprayers suggests an embrace of the Asian American self-as-technology. While the mechanized apparatus

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[37] Margaret Rhee, "In Search of My Robot: Race, Technology, and the Asian American Body," *The Scholar & Feminist Online* 13, no. 3 (2016). http://sfonline.barnard.edu/traversing-technologies/margaret-rhee-in-search-of-my-robot-race-technology-and-the-asian-american-body/.
[38] David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 5.

becomes seemingly part of the self, however, these instruments do not operate in a production line to serve a manager or corporation. Rather, in dispersing a confounding scent, they work to deconstruct the Asian American subject under the white gaze (or white nose). The transient nature of *Immigrant Caucus*' olfactory elements echoes Peggy Phelan's writing of how the ephemerality of performance-based works rejects the commodification of art 'objects': "To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. … Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital."[39] Though not an explicitly live event, *Immigrant Caucus*' gaseous state and confounding premise make the work difficult to quantify, and thus it is not easily assigned value; in producing such conditions, Yi defies the yoking of Asian racialization to economic forces, which renders Asians as "the personification of capital."[40] Thus, in crafting an embodied Asian American subject, *Immigrant Caucus* expansively dislodges the Asian cyborg from a position of entrapment and brings forward new possibilities for interspecies kinship and racial ecologies. Furthermore, the Asian cyborg—who is already entangled with technology—is resultingly primed to take up media scholar Wendy Chun's presentation of race as technology, employing it in order to generate subversive materialities and unexpected movements.

Subversive materialities: the olfactory

Yi's *Immigrant Caucus* bridges the material and the imagined, expressive of how Huang describes race: "Race as fabricative technology does not mean that race is intangible or imaginary, but syncretic in its materiality."[41] In taking up the olfactory, Yi constructs a theater of

[39] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146-148.
[40] Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 6.
[41] Huang, "The Posthuman Subject in/of Asian American Litera-ture," 13.

relationality which betrays the logic of the white cube. Older exhibition practices have made way for the emergence of the white cube—originally named by Brian O'Doherty—which exists as a now-standardized feature of exhibition design, acting as the dominant interface between works of art and their audiences. In his oft-cited text *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, O'Doherty describes the white cube as manifesting as the pristine, white-walled gallery space, emerged as an institutional site for the exhibition of art as a result of the European modernist project, symbolic of a decontextualized arena for works of art to be encountered. While its naturalized presence as a design feature regularly goes unquestioned by museum- and gallery-goers, its illusion of neutrality operates to mask the ideologies flowing through it. As "man, the centre and hero of liberal humanism, was produced in contradistinction to the objects of his knowledge," the liberal humanist subject is the assumed audience within the white cube, wherein objects are displayed for the viewer's inspection, yet remain physically and ideologically separate from the viewer's person.[42] Within the white cube, artworks on display are meant to reveal a true and singular essence, engendering the continuation of the Enlightenment emphasis on sight. While not all prominent artworks of the 20th century were sited within the white cube—indeed, the second half of the 20th century saw significant moves by artists to show work outside the traditional museum or gallery space—it remains a normative exhibition strategy, dominating institutional presentations of art. Its near ubiquity continues to render art spaces as zones in which the liberal humanist subject is welcomed and affirmed, casting out all others. While the white cube conscribes the viewer to be "well behaved, solemn, disembodied, and able to focus on the singularity of the work of art with an uninterrupted gaze," Yi's work

[42] Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, 9.

denaturalizes these terms and constitutes an intervention.[43] Swirling through the air, Yi's fragrance penetrates visitors' bodies, barring the possibility of the audience standing apart from that which it spectates. With its trans-corporeal qualities, Yi's work intervenes in the audience's body chemistry, becoming part of the viewer's systems just as much as the viewer becomes part of it. Yi forces a move from a disembodied visual experience to an embodied one; the viewer is recruited into the project of the work, compelled to do business with the phantom Asian American female subject haunting the white cube.

In her intervention into paradigms of display, Yi furthermore plays on colonial anxieties about the Other breaching the bounded self, as her scent trespasses borders meant to separate the spectator from the spectated. Such a metaphor is particularly apt given the nature of historical and contemporary Yellow Peril rhetoric, which suggests that "Asiatics can look just like friends, and enemy aliens have already taken up residence within."[44] By the time the viewer has registered the fact of this mystery substance, they have already inhaled it, taking it into their own body. Its ingestion is ideologically intoxicating; on the occasion of Yi's exhibition following her winning the 2016 Hugo Boss Prize, the Guggenheim described *Immigrant Caucus*: "Yi posits the scent as a drug that manipulates perception, offering humans the potential to experience the installation with a new, hybridized perspective."[45] The mobility of the odor too imbues the imagined Asian American female subject with agility and freedom, making it a moving target. Despite being grounded in its physical form by way of the insecticide canisters, the work is largely immaterial; as a result, the subject takes a motile form, that of an uncontainable gas, one

[43] Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 64.
[44] Colleen Lye, *America's Asia*, 161-162.
[45] "The Hugo Boss Prize 2016: Anicka Yi, Life Is Cheap," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, accessed April 24, 2021. https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/the-hugo-boss-prize-2016.

that is difficult to discern and thus impossible to intellectually pin down. The work contends with the material relations of the socially constructed racialized body, recognizing that while racializing practices call the Asian American female subject into being under the purview of white supremacy, this subject position can always be invested with new, liberatory meanings, whether by the self or in community with others.

Drawn into longer timescales, the museological processes that belie the sanitized gallery space give way to the practices of art conservation, which desire a static, fixed object to be ordered and preserved. Olfactory works, in their elusive, gaseous forms, materialize in a manner which voids the possibility for stabilization—unlike many paintings and sculptures, they are not so easily tucked away in a temperature-controlled warehouse. While the white cube prepares the viewer—the liberal humanist subject—to encounter an isolated art object, set apart from the viewer and mounted for the viewer's inspection, art conservation practices prepare the art object for insertion into a larger collection, allowing privileged individuals to study it for generations to come. Art objects are thus fixed as emblems of knowledge for the liberal humanist subject, who is defined as knowledge's producer. In their overlapping histories, literary scholar Hsuan Hsu argues that the impulses of art conservation and ecological conservation are fundamentally linked, with olfactory art meeting these practices at their intersection: "As an inherently trans-corporeal medium, olfactory art defies the spectatorial logic that organizes both art galleries and commonsense perceptions of nature as a space that is distinct from the human."[46] Thus, we return to the positionality of the human as a divisional device, with the distinction between human and non-human paralleling that of man versus nature. As scholars have demonstrated, the colonial drive to catalog and order the flora and fauna of the New World evolved into

[46] Hsuan L. Hsu "Olfactory Art, Transcorporeality, and the Museum Environment," *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2016): 2.

taxonomies of race and related 19th-century scientific thought (such as human physiognomy).[47] In bringing together the insect and the human, *Immigrant Caucus* rearranges these hierarchies, favoring a mess of assemblages over linear arrangements.

Interspecies kinships: Asian/American carpenter ants

In allegedly synthesizing olfactory material derived from Asian American women and carpenter ants, Yi produces a juxtaposition that returns to histories of Asian Americans as a force of expendable, easily replaceable workers—as is similar to human characterizations of ants—to recall the coolie's characterization as "animalistic, yet able to endure harsh conditions that white laborers could not."[48] Framed by the presence of insecticide canisters, the Asian American subject might further be read as an invasive species, spoiling the delicate stasis of an environment in which it doesn't belong. Indeed, anti-Asian narratives continually frame Asians as an encroaching danger, posing an existential threat to white America.[49] Yet, *Immigrant Caucus* illuminates not only how the position of the oppressed can be occupied in both human and non-human realms, but also the potent potentiality of kinships born out of shared subjection. Perhaps non-human beings may offer alternate models of sociality and relationality for humans to draw from; after all, Yi's interest in the ants springs from "their intricate division of labor and matriarchal social structure, as well as the sophisticated olfactory system that guides their behavior."[50] In its very title, *Immigrant Caucus* refers to a communal, politicized assembly, acknowledging frameworks generated by the state while enacting a refusal. Yi's use of language relating to the nation gestures to the casting of Asians as perpetually foreign in the construction

[47] Grace Kyungwon Hong, "'A Shared Queerness'": Colonialism, Transnationalism, and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 7, no. 1 (2006): 74.
[48] Huang, "The Posthuman Subject in/of Asian American Litera-ture," 4.
[49] Colleen Lye, *America's Asia*, 160.
[50] Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "The Hugo Boss Prize 2016: Anicka Yi, Life Is Cheap."

of the white American citizen: as scholar Lisa Lowe writes, "In the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally."[51] If the Asian is marked as non-human in the process of demarcating the boundaries of the liberal humanist subject, thereby giving the liberal humanist subject its form, Lowe argues that, through a similarly dialectical relationship, Asians are marked as non-citizens as a means of structuring the American citizen. In subverting bureaucratic perspectives, *Immigrant Caucus* lacks certain expected forms of recognition—those Asian American women who contributed their sweat, for example, aren't credited by name in accompanying texts—yet these omissions do not indicate ignorance or existential erasure. Simply, Yi refuses to align with those forms of recognition conscribed by the state, forms which contribute to her own subjugation. *Immigrant Caucus* neither suggests shielding oneself from the visual nor reflecting racializing schemas back upon themselves; rather, Yi draws upon a quieter, gestating power, one not necessarily about circumventing the visual but instead working in a different mode. The work gestures toward an accumulation of collective power, manifesting as a swarm of Asian American subjects moving en masse, untraceable and unconstrained. While Yi may be seen to paradoxically affirm identity politics' reduction of subjects to their mapped placements, her refusal to depict these Asian American women by image or in name calls upon Chun's proposition of race operating for divergent ends. While the diametric opposite of identity politics might be to void race and gender altogether, Yi both recognizes the shortcomings of such categorical markers and orients them such that they move differently.

In works more widely encompassed by a framework inclusive of alternative approaches to the body, artists are increasingly less reliant on the body acting as evidence for itself. In her

[51] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 4.

foundational text *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language*, Italian art historian Lea Vergine writes that the performance artist generally is "obsessed by the obligation to exhibit himself in order to be able to be."[52] While many at the end of the 20th century operated within a politics of representation, others have increasingly challenged the uncritical embrace of visibility, asking how certain subjects (and bodies) become visible in the first place, being now suspicious of the racializing processes at work in the optical domain. Furthermore, while Jones argues that the particularity of the body is emphasized in performance art as a means of stressing the body's "nonuniversality," artists such as Yi are less so focused on accentuating their status as an individual and more so interested in foregrounding possibilities for new kinships and uncovering new modes of being with one another.[53] While Yi subsumes the visual, as we will see, Perry plays in it, proposing an alternate strategy of approach. It is during the process by which subjects are made visible that they are simultaneously made Other, rendered non-human as they are brought forward into racial schemas. While Yi reanimates the Asian body as cyborg, hacking the racializing process in order to make it do her bidding, Perry takes up Blackness as its own technology, routing her work through the flesh to reach alternative modes of recognition.

Materializing the subject: that which comes before the body

Perry's *Flesh Wall* takes the form of a 3D animation, its projection filling the entirety of a gallery wall (fig. 2). With its ridges and crevasses of varying shades and tones, what initially appears as a sculptural form in relief is in fact a photographic image of Perry's skin, captured on a macro level and subsequently processed through software. *Flesh Wall* envelops visitors within it, assuming the role previously taken by the white cube. On view is purely the surface of the skin, without the contours of the bodily form. Rather than showing the contours of the body, we

[52] Lea Vergine, *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language* (Milan: Skira, 2000), 8.
[53] Jones, *Body Art*, 9.

confront the epidermis as the site of sociality. This magnification denies the desire to view a human form in its totality, much like how Yi avoids naming her participants or showing their faces; instead, *Flesh Wall* turns the gaze towards its viewers.

Coating the pristine interior of the white cube, *Flesh Wall* posits a challenge of the liberal humanist subject through an embracing of the flesh as a mode of escape, inventing a new process of coming into materiality. As with Yi's wielding of the gaseous state of *Immigrant Caucus*, the fluid nature of *Flesh Wall* loosens the webs of meaning tightly wound around the flesh, driving the flesh instead towards existence as a container for alternative forms of being. In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Spillers writes, "I would make a distinction … between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. … before the 'body" there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography."[54] As Chun discusses the means through which the body is made to stand in as an essentialized marker of race, Spillers frames that which comes before the rendering of the body—the flesh, which exists as the indeterminate zone of embodiment. The kidnapping and enslavement of Africans in the process of chattel slavery in the New World entailed "theft of the body," "a willful and violent severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire."[55] The flesh is the body made bare, exposed, disaggregated, immobile. Enfleshment produces the Black body as a scene of perpetual violence, with Blackness manifesting not only as a constellation of social meanings but as a bringing forward of the sedimented histories of torture, mutilation, and murder at the hands of European settlers and slave owners. If the liberal humanist body is a site of personhood,

[54] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.
[55] Ibid.

autonomy and possession, the flesh is deprived of those qualities, being instead a body that offers no political efficacy, rendering Black people as subjects whose kidnapping, imprisonment, and brutalization are legitimized and deemed acceptable under white supremacy. While Asians-as-robots evoke man-made, industrial aesthetics, such as the gleaming metallic surfaces of Yi's insecticide canisters, Spillers' terming of the flesh conversely suggests something deeply organic, as one might refer to the flesh of a fruit or of an animal. Yet just as Yi's use of gaseous matter contradicts the supposed automation of the Asian-as-robot, Perry employs digital technologies to animate the flesh.

Subversive materialities: the flesh as media

Flesh Wall suggests taking up the flesh as media itself; Perry says, "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."[56] Black studies scholar Alexander Weheliye argues that an embracing of the flesh dislocates the liberal humanist subject and is itself a position that can be harnessed for liberation; in this same current, the markings of violence act as a vehicle for exiting these systems. Of the potentialities held within the flesh, Weheliye writes, "In other words, the flesh is not an abject zone of exclusion that culminates in death but an alternate instantiation of humanity that does not rest on the mirage of western Man as the mirror image of human life as such."[57] In *Flesh Wall*, the flesh becomes its own source of production, creating its own stage upon which new materialities may be produced.

Rather than simply being raw documentation of the skin's surface, *Flesh Wall* modulates it such that it becomes nearly unrecognizable. Refusing to defer to established systems of

[56] Dean Daderko, "Ill Suns: Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry," *Mousse* 57, February–March 2017, http://moussemagazine.it/arthur-jafa-sondra-perry-dean-daderko-2017/.
[57] Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 43.

racialization, the flesh authors itself, through its materiality subverting the terms of capture and control embedded within it. Moving across different states of matter, the flesh becomes fluid, a mass gently undulating; the flesh itself is the architecture of the space, rather than being the object enclosed within it. Within the white cube, art is encased within European epistemologies, every visual cue juxtaposed against a standard of whiteness. However, through the projection of *Flesh Wall*, Perry replaces the white cube with a setting of her own creation, allowing her to set the terms by which viewers relate to the art and to each other. The intervention of *Flesh Wall* constitutes a perspectival shift—rather than independent, disembodied subjects moving through the space, those within the gallery's walls find themselves highly aware of other bodies within the space, not least the artist's own. Perry recasts the space, "giving shape to our structural meltdown."[58]

Thus, the wall creates a new theater of relationality, as opposed to the mythic neutrality of the white cube. Here, the flesh is not an "object of inspection" but an arbiter of its own, ever-expanding process of creation.[59] "The kinds of colonial procedures to which Spillers refers, in other words, are imaginatively reconstituted in Perry's dissolution of her body, as her molten skin becomes not so much object arrested for inspection as vital, fugitive substance."[60] Perry translates the markings of violence embedded in the flesh, collecting its histories and reconfiguring them, taking the flesh—that which is the negation of the body—as an origin for liberatory practices. The open-source software Perry uses, Blender, does not require users to download it, creating terms for production which act as an apt metaphor for Perry's refiguration

[58] Margaret Kross, "Sondra Perry, The Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, November 2–December 10, 2016," *Artforum International*. https://www.artforum.com/picks/sondra-perry-64976.
[59] Arabella Stanger, "Bodily Wreckage, Economic Salvage and the Middle Passage: In Sondra Perry's Typhoon coming on," *Performance Research* 24, no. 5 (2019): 17.
[60] Ibid.

of modalities of racial access; rather than conceiving of race as a tool of domination, Perry posits a mobilization of Blackness in which Black subjects are able to participate in their own self-determination.[61] To return to Chun, to "make race do different things," the subaltern must be able to locate venues through which to realize this project.[62] In Perry's work, the body-as-flesh becomes the point of entry; Perry says of her practice, "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."[63] In moving through the flesh, Perry does not merely attempt to recuperate the Black subject, affirming the Black body over flesh, but rather "the flesh provides the ground for a political ontology of the image where other humanities can be claimed and materialized as open source and fluid waves."[64]

Materializing the subject: probing the limits of the digital avatar as a surface for racialization

Perry's 2016 *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* invites audience members to seat themselves on an exercise machine, above which a tri-fold screen is mounted (fig. 3). Upon the screen, a digital avatar appears, a single humanoid form shown from the shoulders up. Speaking to the viewer, they begin the video with a monologue about the conditions of their production. Naming the location and date of their creation, as well as the software used to bring them to life, they explain that they are based on the artist's physical appearance. However, they say, "We were rendered to Sondra's fullest ability, but she could not replicate her fatness in the software that was used to make us. Sondra's body type was not an accessible pre-existing

[61] "Flesh Wall," Times Square Arts, accessed April 27, 2021. http://arts.timessquarenyc.org/times-square-arts/projects/midnight-moment/flesh-wall/index.aspx.
[62] Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology," 9.
[63] Lauren Cornell, "Chroma Keys: Sondra Perry," *Mousse* 53, April–May 2016.
[64] Daniela Agostinho, "Chroma key dreams: algorithmic visibility, fleshy images and scenes of recognition," *Philosophy of Photography* 9, no. 2 (2018): 151.

template." Numerous media scholars have articulated how the process of designing avatars—meant as representations of a user within digital landscapes—often reproduce normative ideas of the body, invisibilizing those whose attributes fail to align with a given system's categorical limitations.[65] As such, Perry's avatar identifies the indexical systems that spawn the subject while concurrently registering such systems' impossibility. If avatars exist as a means of transmuting users' bodies into pixelated worlds, the dissonance alluded to by the avatar emphasizes that its referent is spatially and temporally elsewhere, the clip having been recorded prior to the exhibition. While *Graft and Ash* points to the limitations of systems of representation in apprehending the fullness of certain subjects, it also suggests that the difference between one's portrayal and one's embodied self may provide room for shielding oneself from surveillance by the state and other institutions. As the avatar says, "They adjust the software to fit the body, but we construct elaborate performances that obscure our competence." Perry embraces what Legacy Russell terms 'the glitch': "Illegible to the mainstream, the encrypted glitch seizes upon the creation of a self that, depending on the audience, can at once be hypervisible and simultaneously unreadable, undetectable."[66] Furthermore, Perry's avatar is self-aware and conscious of the conditions of its own production, making the avatar difficult to pin down as a discrete, legible subject. Digitally rendered, it cannot be fully human, yet its liveliness approximates that of a conscious being. In the space between subject and object, Perry employs the malleability of the flesh to produce her avatar. If our present regimes of recognition contribute to processes of enfleshment, thereby producing narrow definitions of Blackness, then this work sets out to invent new frameworks for making the Black subject visible. In the new

[65] Luke Stark, "Facial recognition, emotion and race in animated social media," *First Monday* 23, no. 9 (2018). https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/9406/7572.
[66] Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 123.

relationships constructed by the presence of the artist's body before the audience, Perry extends performance art's reveal of how bodies can never fully be known, being perpetually unstable sources of knowledge production. As Jones writes, "Body art, through its very performativity and its unveiling of the body of the artist, surfaces the insufficiency and incoherence of the body/self (or the body-as-subject) and its inability to deliver oneself fully (whether to the subject-in-performance herself or himself or to the one who engages with this body)."[67]

The figure on screen uses pronouns such as "we" and "ourselves," but it remains unclear for the duration of the film who exactly "we" is meant to refer to—perhaps it is the union of Perry and her avatar, here questioning the very values of singularity and individualism which originate within Western epistemologies. Returning to Kawash, here Perry points to the inherent slipperiness between the avatar and the original referential subject, gesturing to the fissures within representation which make space for subversion. The film later pans to a flesh-colored sphere hovering above a planar grid, these two shapes otherwise floating in empty space. A computerized voice states, "I am nobody"; later, when the screen has returned to the avatar, the avatar says, "We are a DIY, not all that representative thing, which makes being a being impossible or whatever." Occasional glitches in the avatar's movements and speech—skipped frames, repeated audio—furthermore exposes the terms of their production, vacillating between the artificial and the organic. Despite being a digital production, the avatar continually returns to

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[67] Jones, *Body Art*, 34.
This approach to the body as an insufficient means to self-knowledge to the "subject-in-performance herself" is furthermore relevant to Fanon's phenomenology of race; in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes, "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. … Below the corporeal schema I had sketched out a historic-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by 'residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinaesthetic, and visual character,' but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details." See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1952/1986), 83.

embodied experiences to ground the viewer within this very tension. The avatar speaks to the somatic effects of racial domination, citing a scientific study on the correlation between anti-Black discrimination and health outcomes. In this dialogue, the avatar says "we," identifying themselves as Black, centering themselves as an embodied, Black, subject, having unseated those representational terms that intend to tether them to the dehumanized space. Throughout the video, *Flesh Wall* occasionally wallpapers the avatar's background, situating them within an autonomous arena of their own authorship. To the extent that Perry's avatars become embodied subjects in and of themselves, however, they are also always haunted by the presence of the artist's body elsewhere.

Subversive materialities: materializing the audience's body

In Perry's investigation of alternative racial embodiments, the museum- or gallery-going audience too is made to engage with their own bodies as they interact with the work. Rather than allowing them to be passive spectators, the work acknowledges the viewer's presence and implicates the viewer within systems of legibility and recognition. Staring at the viewer, the avatar asks, "What time is it? Sondra only asks because you're in a gallery and it's the middle of the day. She don't wanna presume she knows what you're doing here or that either of you are complicit in the imperialist thievery inherent in the West's cultural colonialism." Voiding the authority typically afforded to the viewer, Perry's avatar makes the viewer the subject of their inquisition. Much like Yi's interruption of the viewer's racializing practice, Perry's work actively unseats the viewer from their distanced, unaffected position, the avatar registering the viewer just as much as the viewer registers them. In both Yi and Perry's works, the viewer is brought forward as an embodied subject. Approaching *Graft and Ash*, the viewer seats themselves in the chair, feeling their body distribute their weight upon its armature. If they so

choose, they may use the pedals of the bike, making the process of engaging with the work a literally active one. They may feel their muscles moving, working up a sweat, feeling their heart rate increase. In the process of physically situating themselves *within* the work, rather than merely before it, they are given a heightened awareness of their own corporality. The bike is assembled such that it cannot be used as it is expected to be, however; *Graft and Ash* is one of several works by Perry featuring exercise machines in which the artist has obstructed the gears with hair gel, intervening in these machines' intended use. In a discussion of this work with fellow artist Arthur Jafa, Perry said, "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."[68] This anthropomorphization of the machine harkens back to the dreams common to posthumanist thought, in which the body and the machine bleed into one another, producing a new, composite subjectivity. However, rather than enhancing the liberal humanist subject's prior capabilities, Perry's machines—which she states "have their own artificial intelligence"—resist the liberal humanist subject's intentions.[69] This melding of the body with the machine does not serve to enable further exploitation of the laboring subject, but rather provides new opportunities to thwart the racializing process. Through Wendy Chun's theory of race as technology, the embodiment of the machine makes possible new techniques for deception and redemption. The bike is seemingly part of the self conceived by the avatar, who inquires, "How many jobs do you have? Do you work here? How is your body? How does your body feel inside of us?" Gesturing towards the shaping of racializing processes by capitalist production, Perry sets up her avatar-as-cyborg to then act against these attitudes towards labor and consumption.

[68] Dean Daderko, "Ill Suns: Arthur Jafa and Sondra Perry."
[69] Ibid.

If Spillers speaks to "the embodiment of those banished to the zone of indistinction," it is from this position that Perry's avatar speaks; formerly silent, the flesh is now speaking, and it is impossible to turn away.[70] It is thus through slipping into the role of the subaltern that the Other is able to subvert the very frameworks which create such a position: "We are not as helpful or Caucasian as we sound." Through such a disguise, acts of rebellion are made possible, "like assembling the pedals backwards and hiding the hexel wrenches." Troubling the forms of knowledge production assumed of the gallery space, Perry harnesses the terrifying power of the unseen, turning Blackness into a formidable, ghastly force. As Nora Kahn writes of *Graft and Ash*, "Ambient, in the background, is the unseen body, both Perry's and the black body, generally."[71] If, as Homi Bhabha suggests in "The Other Question," racial stereotypes are produced as a means of "[masking] the colonizer's fear of the inability to always already know the Other," Perry continually emphasizes this feared unknown.[72] Interspersed with audio and video clips taken from videos of exorcisms posted on YouTube, *Graft and Ash* further brushes against terms of belonging. Addressing a ritual practice of ridding evil from a space, Perry's work might resonate with Sara Ahmed's phenomenology of whiteness, in which Ahmed describes how spaces are shaped to accommodate white subjects: "Public spaces take shape through the habitual actions of bodies, such that the contours of space could be described as habitual. I turn to the concept of habits to theorize not so much how bodies acquire their shape, but how spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them."[73] Rather than allowing her work to be melded to the tastes and comfortability of the liberal humanist subject, by blanketing

[70] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 38.
[71] Nora N. Khan, "No Safe Mode," *Flash Art*, September 18, 2017, https://flash---art.com/article/sondra-perry/#.
[72] Bhabha's concepts summarized in Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," 153.
[73] Sara Ahmed, "A phenomenology of whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 156.

the white cube with her own flesh, Perry herself sets the terms for her work's reception. Traversing the ever-shifting boundary between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, Perry's subjects roam across a terrain of their own design—and only they know where they are headed.

While neoliberal, late stage capitalist forces have spurred a flattening of identity, turning it into an individualized possession rather than a grounds for naming shared subjection, artists such as Yi and Perry approach Asianness and Blackness as technologies in and of themselves, necessarily carriers of a charged politics. It is thus evident that an analytic which centers the origins of 'the human' within colonial regimes might effectively supplant the role of identity politics, with identity politics having since been drawn away from its radical origins. Similar suggestions have indeed already been made by posthumanist scholars such as Donna Haraway, whose *A Cyborg Manifesto* remains a fundamental text of posthumanism. However, insofar as Haraway presents her cyborg as an intervention into feminist identity politics, her formulation remains left without an accounting for the imbrication of 'the human' with racializing processes. Thus, while an embrace of the posthuman in the wake of identity politics has become increasingly popular, a centering of racialized subjects creates friction within these very same posthumanist discourses.

Race and the posthumanist subject

"Epistemological correctives cannot apprehend ontological becomings."[74]
—Jasbir Puar

Citing the differential definition of the human—produced through binary oppositions such as man versus machine and man versus nature—celebrated posthumanists such as Donna Haraway suppose that this ordering, which is structured such that the human is always oriented

[74] Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,'" 50.

to dominate that which the human is not (machine, animal, et cetera), might be dismantled and that an embracing of those previously negated characteristics—such as those associated with machines or with animals—might make way for new constellations of identity. Haraway calls for the dissolution of the human, yet her definition of the human—the arbiter of knowledge who presides over animals and machines—equates to that of the liberal humanist subject, a position not all human beings occupy. Thus, to erase the liberal humanist subject is to risk eliminating the subjects whose very existence emerged to act as its foil.[75] For Haraway to suggest a reconsideration of those previously abject traits and an embracing of them within ourselves, she fails to acknowledge that some of us have always been assigned to those categories outside of the human, never having had the ability to choose otherwise. In a sense, it seems that Haraway senses the forces of techno-orientalism which engineer relationships between Asians and technology; she writes, "Ironically, it might be the unnatural cyborg women making chips in Asia and spiral dancing in Santa Rita jail whose constructed unities will guide effective oppositional strategies."[76] Dealing in a currency of race, Haraway recruits the Asian subject as a means of pushing forward her thesis yet refuses to contend with the material consequences of being a racialized subject, that beyond the discursive space. Those Asian women manufacturing computer chips do not merely elect to enmesh their bodies with technological processes; rather, this occurs within the global circulation of capital, in which these women's positionalities are dictated by a variety of forces beyond their individual will.

As discussed earlier, those seeking to locate the posthuman within art history typically foreground the use of new technologies in artistic practice, using technological innovation as a

[75] Warren Liu, "Posthuman Difference: Traveling to Utopia with Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012): 9.
[76] Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 14.

measure for development. However, such analyses, which embrace artists such as Stelarc, situate many of these artworks as modelling how technological apparatuses may enhance the autonomy of the liberal humanist subject, propelling the human into a higher realm of thought and being. Stelarc's works, which often involve the integration of technology into the artist's body, are propelled by his oft-quoted claim that "the [human] body is obsolete," spoken from a position of whiteness.[77] Such sweeping statements evidence that the artist has done little to trouble the naturalized definition of 'the human', from which his work emerges from. For those excluded from the position of the liberal humanist subject, the body is anything but obsolete—rather, it is integral to the very ways in which they are brought into being. As with much posthumanist thought, then, the inclusion of racialized subjects is foreclosed by the limited definitions of 'the human' inherent in the project's premise.

However, if Haraway urges for the addition of the machine, the animal, and the human as a means of constructing a new composite position, Yi and Perry complicate the cyborg in their dance between a multiplicity of positionalities.[78] In these affinities, we find that perhaps a new mode is possible—Rhee's use of the word "cyborg" for the contemporary Asian subject suggests that posthumanist projects might be recuperated through disloyalty to their racializing premise. As scholars have argued, Haraway's cyborg depends on the prior existence of the discrete categories of the human, the machine, and the animal, which are then enmeshed to create the cyborg, reifying those categories in the process.[79] Beyond Haraway's chimeric subject, Yi and

[77] Stelarc, "Prosthetics, Robotics and Remote Existence," 591.
[78] "Haraway's 'disassembled and reassembled' recipe for cyborg graftings is utterly dependent upon the calculus of one plus one, the logic wherein pre-existent identities are then conjoined and melded. … Put simply, for Haraway, there once was not a cyborg." See Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 147.
[79] Dianne Currier, "Feminist techological futures: Deleuze and body/technology assemblages," *Feminist Theory* 4, no. 3 (2003): 323.

Perry suggest that we may occupy multiple places simultaneously—Yi and Perry are at once machine, animal, and human being. Rather than focusing on Haraway's cyborg, perhaps a better framework for this approach is found in Puar's favoring of assemblage theory, in which bodies may be defined in relation to one another, rather than through assignment to predetermined identity categories.[80] Such a reading complicates the individualism of the (liberal) posthuman(ist) subject, suggesting the power of collective movement outside of the visual. Rather than complete disavowal of posthumanist projects, inhabitation of the positions of the non-human Other complicates proposals for the direct disposal of 'the human' as a subject position. Instead, a critical lens towards 'the human' may generate a productive space, one in which 'the human' may be made to function differently rather than wholly disappear. These artworks move in response to the marking of non-white, colonized bodies as non-human, using a shared strategy of embracing one's non-human status and turning it into a tool for self-authorship. Through Perry's use of avatars and Yi's composition of scents, the process of racialization is hijacked—the system malfunctions, illuminating the system's flaws. The racialized subjects of these works thus claim power by turning the racializing process against itself.

Epilogue

Outside of art history, Karen Shimakawa's articulation of the powerful function of Butler's "critical mimesis" within Asian American performance resonates with all of these works, even those beyond the Asian American: "they self-consciously engage the effects of that discourse on the Asian American body and recirculate and redirect the force of abjection through and on that body."[81] Despite not working solely within the realm of performance, these works

[80] Naturally, this work takes off from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of the assemblage. Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,'" 61.
[81] Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 21.

still work through the legacy of the medium, highlighting the rich potential that continues to lie in taking up the body as artistic media. These artists' imaginative uses of the body allow them to participate in a "practice of material speculation," echoing art historian Caroline Jones' coining of the term "biofiction" to describe Yi's works, in which "fiction [is] released even from text and allowed to play in haptic and olfactory domains."[82] While the ideas conveyed by Yi's work remain largely figurative—we cannot truly become a hive mind, or take the form of hybridized human-ant beings—these metaphorical frameworks open up a commentary about the material experiences of exploited yellow bodies. Oriented within a genealogy of Asian American speculative fiction, Yi's artistic practice easily demonstrates affinities with literary works such as Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, in which odor too acts a subversive force.[83] While they arrive in dimensional space rather than existing as pure text, it is apparent that works by Yi, Perry, and other artists make use of strategies approximating science fiction, magical realism, and the like in order to imagine alternative modes of knowledge formation and kinship. As Weheliye writes, "Where dominant discourse seeks to develop upgrades of the current notions of humanity as Man, improvements are not the aim or product of the imaginaries borne of racializing assemblages and political violence; instead they summon forms of human emancipation that can be imagined but not (yet) described."[84]

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler describes 'critical mimesis' as such: "This is citation, not as enslavement or simple reiteration of the original, but as an insubordination that appears to take place within the very terms of the original, and which calls into question the power of origination that Plato appears to claim for himself." See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 45.

[82] Hsuan L. Hsu, *The Smell of Risk* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 145; Caroline A. Jones, "Biofiction and the Umwelt: Anicka Yi," in *The Hugo Boss Prize: 20 Years*, ed. Kate Norment (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2016), 93.

[83] Larissa Lai, "Future Asians: Migrant Speculations, Repressed History & Cyborg Hope." *West Coast Line* 38, no. 2 (2004): 168-194.

[84] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 126-127.

It has been 36 years since *A Cyborg Manifesto* was first published, and eventful ones at that. The field of posthumanism remains vast, encompassing a multitude of—often contradictory—trajectories. Though so often forgotten within cyborgian fantasies, these artists demonstrate how raced subjects can take up posthumanist projects for themselves, utilizing the posthuman to forge critical links across time, space, shape, and form. The expansiveness of this topic necessitates a number of connections beyond the scope of my thesis; these include its relevance to affect theory, developed by Deleuze and Guatarri and subsequently taken up by many others; the range of aesthetics and philosophies which fall under the banner of Afrofuturism(s); analysis of interspecies relations, especially as they pertain to posthuman ecologies, as written about by scholars such as Anna Tsing; and a great many other directions. While my discussion focused on American artists and scholars, I believe there to be transnational implications to this work as well. Particularly necessitating acknowledgement is the potential for queer theory to enrich this discussion, perhaps through the work of José Esteban Muñoz, whose imagination of queerness mirrors these artists' visions for alternative forms of racial embodiment: "We are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality."[85] Also gravely lacking from this analysis is the invaluable contributions of disability studies scholars, who have long been developing theoretical approaches to the body in relation to hegemonic conscriptions of capacity and debility. Taking up these various fields in an analysis of such emergent subjectivities ultimately may fulfill the promise of seeing and being with one another not along transactive pathways, but in dynamics of mutuality leading to liberation.

[85] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

Figures

Figure 1. Anicka Yi, *Immigrant Caucus*, 2017. Powder coated steel and powder coated aluminum expanded mesh, stainless steel insecticide sprayer with brass fittings, ultrasonic diffuser, fragrance. Dimensions variable. San Francisco, 500 Capp Street.

Figure 2. Sondra Perry, *Flesh Wall*, 2016-2020. 3D animation. Dimensions variable. Zurich, The Luma Foundation.

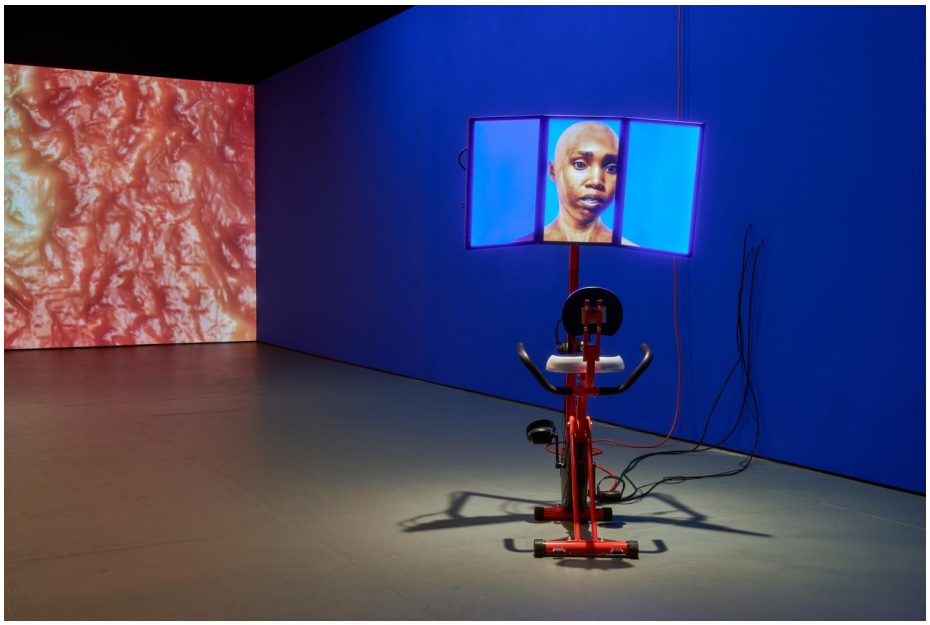

Figure 3. Sondra Perry, *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*, 2016. Video, bicycle workstation. Dimensions variable. 9:05 min. New York, The Kitchen.

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