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# ARTISTIC GESTURES: CHOREOGRAPHY IN THE ARTIST'S PORTRAIT FILM

by

KRISTIN D. JUAREZ

Under the Direction of Jennifer M. Barker, PhD

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the artistic gestures in the artists' portrait films made by women of color, including: Howardena Pindell, Blondell Cummings, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Mickalene Thomas, and Jumana Manna. As an interdisciplinary genre, artists' portrait films rethink the moving image's relationship to cinematic vocabularies of narrative and develop innovative choreographies, or aesthetic arrangements, of the moving body and the moving image. This dissertation adopts the term artistic gesture to engage the ways artists use aesthetic experimentation from other mediums to create intimate portraits that call our social contracts into question. Through an engagement with choreography, this dissertation examines the central role of gesture in artists' portrait films as a mode of making that is responsive to the subjects in the artists' works. By engaging gesture at the intersection of the social and the aesthetic, this

dissertation engages gestures as physical, theoretical, and interdisciplinary exchanges. Each chapter focuses on the work of an individual artist through dance practices such as contact improvisation, social dance, polyrhythms, and intertextuality. By engaging the moving image choreographically, I examine the ways destabilizing gestures create porous archives that reposition the intimate lives of women of color within the histories of the avant-garde.

INDEX WORDS: Portrait films, Video art, Video installation, Choreography, Experimental cinema, Experimental dance, Contemporary art, Race theory, Black women artists

ARTISTIC GESTURES: CHOREOGRAPHY IN THE ARTIST'S PORTRAIT FILM

by

KRISTIN D. JUAREZ

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy of Moving Image Studies

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

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2019

ARTISTIC GESTURES: CHOREOGRAPHY IN THE ARTIST'S PORTRAIT FILM

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**DEDICATION**

In dedication to Rafa and Rafy. They continue to encourage and inspire me.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the 2015 exhibition *Howardena Pindell (1974–1986)*, the video *Free, White and 21* (1980) stands out. There is a moment in the video in which she begins to gesture. Pindell is recalling being tied to the bed by a teacher and left for a couple of hours. As she speaks, she begins to bandage her head. Facing the camera, she unrolls the bandage from the back of her head, tucking it under chin and back around to cover her forehead and then her eyes, her nose, and mouth. She covers her hair and circles her neck with the bandage.

The camera, which has been static until this point, begins to zoom in tightly. As she speculates on whether the child who defended her knew she was Black, the camera focuses on the movement of her hand as it bandages her Afro. The camera zooms out and drifts to the right as she finishes bandaging. With a cut, we are brought back to a tight shot of the bandages completely covering her head and face, leaving only a small opening below her lower lip. Zooming out again, Pindell remains still, posing with the bandages held taut at her neck before she lowers her arm and loosens its tension. The camera tends to this process as it focuses in on the details of Pindell's body. Moving for the first time since the video's start, the zoom-in creates tension between accumulating gestures and the completed action. The camera's zoom out draws attention to the pose she holds.

It is possible to find many meanings in the gesture. It is autobiographical, recalling the major car accident she was in the preceding year that resulted in memory loss. It is metaphorical, enacting a kind of violent silencing she has experienced in the art world—what she goes on to characterize in her writing as “censorship by omission.”<sup>1</sup> Its coverage of her nose and mouth threaten her life, reflecting the impossibility of living in a shroud. As the gesture overlaps with

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<sup>1</sup> Howardena Pindell, “*On Planning an Exhibition—Autobiography: In Her Own Image*,” in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997), 72.

her speaking about her childhood, she folds together moments in time, finding a similarity in the process of these actions in their gestures—the wrapping of her arms as they are tied with sheets and the wrapping of her head.

Rooted in the familiar gesture of bandaging, she performs it past its logical stopping point, changing how we understand it. Her pose emphasizes the transition from an everyday gesture to an aesthetic one. During the brief stillness of a portrait, she depicts the (im)possibilities of the pose as it reaches the limits of representation. Through the performance of the pose, she recognizes the viewer's desire to circumscribe the meaning of her work and her body as well as the impossibility of it being able to capture feelings, memories, and touches that cannot be expressed through words. As the gestures reach stillness, the pose is both incomplete and too full of meaning.

When she unwraps the bandages at the end of video, we recognize the performance as a durational and physically precarious act. It takes place between two unsettling gestures. She peels off a skin-like film from her face and reviews its distorted trace. A shaky camera quickly shows her in profile covered in bandages before she unwraps the bandage around her head. Meticulously rolling up it up as she loosens it, she circles her neck, uncovers her hair, mouth, nose, and eyes, which stare directly at the camera. The bandage is rolled up so tight it can be reused, leaving no trace of its action. The video ends with Pindell dressed as a cartoonish version of a skeptical white colleague. Pulling a panty-hose mask over her head, she dismisses all of Pindell's accounts.

The structure of the work plays out through a shot-reverse-shot, a formalization of the exchange that stages a conversation between Pindell as herself and the “hybrid blond wig

person” she also performs.<sup>2</sup> The work is dominated by the exchange between her spoken recollections and their dismissals, doubt, and rebuttals. After each edit, there is a pause before Pindell speaks. The hesitation leaves room in the exchange for viewers to listen, make sense of what they are hearing, and form a response.

The coupled physical and camera movements bring a startling awareness of the viewer’s physical relationship to Pindell and the gestures she performs. As viewers, we are asked to confront how we relate to the image. This relation creates a tension between the desire to live vicariously through the movement we see on screen and the culpability we might inherit if we do so. As Pindell’s physical gestures of wrapping and unwrapping are at once reparative and silencing, the gestures maintain a shifting relationship between the viewer and the body on screen. The camera records a performance and her testimony but also creates the form of the performance. As a “video performance,” Pindell engages in an exchange with the camera as it moves, creating what I go on to define as formal gestures. The cinematic structure of the shot-reverse-shot gives the performance its shape as a call and response between Pindell and the character she plays, between Pindell and the camera, and between Pindell’s image and the audience.

I began to understand how the performed and formal gestures created an encounter with the viewers, changing the direction of the call usually aimed at women of color, requiring viewers to respond. The responsive position is vulnerable and uncomfortable and resulted in a wide range of responses over the course of the video’s history of exhibition, from outrage to empathy, that does not align neatly along race. Pindell’s gestures produce intimate and unpredictable exchanges between the moving body and the moving image, as well as the filmed

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<sup>2</sup> Kellie Jones, “Interview with Howardena Pindell” in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2011), 226.

body and the viewing body. This uncertainty initiated a shift in my thinking about her work, about performed gestures and their arrangement of form and viewer relations. It made think about other video work by women of color and the demands their gestures make on the viewer.

Situated within her practice, *Free, White and 21* marks the beginning of her *Autobiography* painting series and a return to figuration. It marks a transition in her career, leaving the Museum of Modern Art to be a professor at SUNY Stonybrook, and the beginning of her studies on the demographics of the art world that would later be published.<sup>3</sup> Its moving testimony details the artist's upbringing and the racist encounters she has experienced throughout her life. Her memories recall institutional racism of being removed, looked over, and excluded from school programs, college committees, and professional opportunities. She describes intimate acts of racism through gestures of unwanted advances, violent wringing, and withheld handshakes.

*Free, White and 21* has become a watershed work of its time. Still, the formal characteristics have gone under-considered in their contribution to how the work makes meaning. Through attention to the relationship between the moving image and the moving body, the continuity of her artistic gestures come into view. Although the video may seem radically different from her paintings, we begin recognize her practice of sewing, hole punching, and numbering as her commitment to taking mundane gestures to their limits, serving as formal experiments that layer movement and time onto, between, and beneath the painting's surface.

The exhibition *Howardena Pindell (1974–1986)* was curated by Andrea Barnwell Brownlee at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, where I worked as a graduate assistant. Barnwell Brownlee's emphasis on the artist's experimentation has influenced my methodological

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<sup>3</sup> This includes "Statistics, Testimony, and Supporting Documentation" and "Artists' Periodicals as Alternative Spaces."

approach in this dissertation. The show made available a collection of work that had gone largely unseen. By presenting a bridge in her work, the show sought to engage a moment that is often considered as an abrupt change from her abstract atmospheric white grid paintings to her return to figuration. The exhibition repositioned Pindell's formal investigations as they developed from her formal art training, her travels, her interest in African adornment, and meditation. For Barnwell Brownlee, it was important to demonstrate how Pindell developed her formal vocabulary by exhibiting her delicate and intricate works on paper, her "video-drawings," her video *Free, White and 21* (1980), and her large-scale *Autobiography* series.

Through this commitment to the artist's process, the exhibition revealed Pindell's engagement with various mediums to be gestural experiments that reposition everyday gestures as aesthetic inquiry. She continues to use forms such as the grid, numeration, the hole-punched circle, the hand-drawn vector, and the hand-sewn stitch in this transitional period in her work. The hole-punched circles and hand-sewn stitch are gestures of women's domestic and secretarial work. Her use of circles also speaks to a childhood memory of seeing red circles on the bottom of drinking glasses that were meant to signal their use for black customers in a restaurant. As a mathematician's daughter, vectors, numeration, and graphs were part of Pindell's daily visual vocabulary. In her essay "Numbering: Counting on My Fingers and Toes," she recalls watching her father as he meticulously recorded the numbers on the family car's odometer in a book of graph paper.<sup>4</sup> The grid is also a feature of modern painterly inquiry. In her work, vectors are used direct the eye towards the endless possibilities of movement, time, and the space of a work's surface. Due to the exhibition of video drawings, I began to consider how moving images might serve her gestural experimentation. As the exhibition made a moment in time of Pindell's

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<sup>4</sup> Howardena Pindell, "Numbering: Counting on My Fingers and Toes" <https://pindell.meachicago.org/the-howardena-pindell-papers/numbering-counting-on-my-fingers-and-toes/>



practice available, her artistic gestures were more clearly visible. As a result, the show complicated the relationship between aesthetics and politics that was beginning to cement around her work.<sup>5</sup>

In the 2017–2018 Whitney exhibition *An Incomplete History of Protest: Collections from the Whitney Museum 1940–2017*, Howardena Pindell’s *Free, White, and 21* (1980) was included in a part of the exhibition titled “No Idle Gesture.” This was a section that focused on feminist performances and the aesthetics and politics of women’s work and emotional labor; the exhibited works included Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ handshakes with maintenance workers in *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976) and Mary Kelly’s *Primapara* (1975), in which she photographed close-ups of her children’s nails being cut. The 2017 Brooklyn Museum exhibition *We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85* also included Pindell’s video. Here, her work was shown alongside the performance recording of Blondell Cumming’s *Chicken Soup* (1978). Situated within exhibitions that have different trajectories, Pindell’s work formed a pivotal convergence, creating intertextual historiographies of aesthetics and politics that tremble, moving between different trajectories as part of the museum collection and the vulnerable personal records of Black women artists that have not yet been archived.

### ***1.1 Defining Gesture between the Social and the Aesthetic***

I began to think of artistic gestures as productive term that engages the complexity of gestures as aesthetic and quotidian expressions of the social contract, one that can respond to the unstable movements of aesthetics, race, and politics. In this dissertation, I engage gesture as physical, theoretical, and interdisciplinary exchanges characterized by the transition from the legible to illegible. In this transition, gestures may simultaneously produce productive aesthetic

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<sup>5</sup> In an exhibition review of her early abstract paintings, one reviewer identified Pindell’s formal meditative investigations as rage.

non-closures, and put the individual at risk of losing contact with society. I further posit that the gesture's transitional quality becomes a significant method by which women of color have developed a genre that I go on to define as the artist's portrait film. Defined by uncertainty, artist's portrait films rely on "choreography" as arrangements of physical and formal gestures to create unstable portraits that question the social contract of-and-as aesthetics.

In this section, I outline the transitional qualities of the physical gesture, followed by the ways the promise and threat of the gesture's illegibility have shaped theories on avant-garde practices in experimental cinema, video installation, and dance film. I will look to how choreography turns our attention to arrangements of the physical gestures of the moving body and the formal gestures of the moving image. Finally, I elaborate on the politics of the choreographic, as an intertextual arrangement of the physical gesture, creates a porous archive. As aesthetics of a medium and archives are bound by the epistemological impulse toward an ordering of the visual, when one is destabilized in the artist's portrait film, the other is thrown off balance.

Physical gestures respond to the rhythms of everyday life and as such reflect the habits we form and the improvisations we are forced to make. As Andrew Hewitt explains in his genealogy of gesture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when gesture falls out of legibility, the subject risks losing his or her connection to society.<sup>6</sup> For Carrie Noland, gestural between-ness is filled with cultural potential. As a medium of the body, gesture arranges the body as it comes into form, open to variation. In *Agency and Embodiment*, she explains that through gesture, the body is able to resist the social pressures that condition it and move in ways that make new cultural forms.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Duke University Press Books, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

In his critical text on gesture, Giorgio Agamben examines the role of gesture in the social contract. Gesture, he writes, is a “means without ends.” He explains, “What characterizes the gesture is that in it nothing is produced or acted, but rather something is being endured or supported.... *The gesture is the exhibition of mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such*” [original emphasis].<sup>8</sup> As such, it is always in transition, always between the completion of an action and before the formation of meaning. As a process, the social contract is always open to the promise variation and the threat of disorientation. On Agamben’s interest in the sociality of gesture Lauren Berlant explains that gesture is a formal sign of being in the world, in the middle of the world.<sup>9</sup> The idea of being the middle, in the midst, and at the threshold, is an important feature of the artists’ portrait films in this dissertation as both formal and social expression.

For Agamben, art, cinema, and dance become a way to support and endure gesture’s provocation of the social contract. In its attempt to recuperate a gesture’s movement from unintelligibility, the medium becomes an archive and a site for experimentation. Eadweard Muybridge’s motion studies became a proto-cinematic form. Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* became an archive or atlas of the history of human gestures across histories of art. Agamben writes, “*In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss*”<sup>10</sup> [original emphasis].<sup>11</sup> As images attempt to index the gesture’s movement, aesthetic invention also makes room for its non-closure. This becomes a central feature of Chapter 1, where I mobilize the pointing finger as a way to think about shifting as a

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<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, First edition edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2000), 56-57.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 198.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55.

critical intervention of the fixity of the indexical trace in Blondell Cummings' artist's portrait films.

Gestures provoke an aesthetic rearrangement of movement, space, and time. In her book *The Minor Gesture*, Erin Manning explores "minor gestures" as demanding artful orientation toward what we might overlook. Manning continues, "The minor often looks inconsistent, unrigorous, flimsy and as such is often overlooked... It is out of time, untimely, rhythmically inventing its own pulse."<sup>12</sup> She continues, "The minor gesture creates sites of dissonance, staging disturbances that open experience to new modes of expression."<sup>13</sup> To attend to art practices that take their shape from minor gestures means looking at the alternative temporalities and spaces marginalized subjects inhabit. LaToya Ruby Frazier documents her family in a decaying factory town that is "out of time." Mickalene Thomas's video installation *Do I Look Like a Lady?* archives the late-night spaces of the comedy club and television slots. Jumana Manna's *Blessed Oblivion* makes a portrait of underground activities.

Gestures exist at the intersection of the social contract and the aesthetic, allowing us to attend to the transitions between social order and dissonance and the arrangement of sensation in ways that resist the rationalization of the trace and support movement's unpredictability. It is important to note that for each of the writers mentioned above, dance becomes a critical practice that helps them explore the potential for the gesture when it is not bound by the limitations of social legibility. We begin to see how choreography of gestures can make new demands on the moving image.

In this dissertation, I turn my attention to the gesture's directive call and, perhaps more significantly, its responsive movements as a means of making work that does not separate avant-garde aesthetic experiments and identity work. By experimenting with the formal relationship

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<sup>12</sup> Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 2.

between the moving body and the moving image, these practices require a more expansive way of understanding how the moving image takes its shape from the intimate lives of the artist and subjects. This negotiation is particularly resonant for women of color, whose bodies and environments may be vulnerable, uncertain, and unsteady; whose images in visual culture are often deemed either excessively vulgar or insignificant; and whose art is often considered at the margins of avant-garde histories.

As gestures provoke new aesthetic invention, they also provoke a methodology grounded by exchange rather than ordering. Erin Manning finds gesture to be a productive way of working against the hierarchies inherent to scholarly methodologies and toward the new forms of knowledge that art as “research-creation” engages.<sup>14</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard furthers the notion of gesture’s motility in his elaboration on the fluid possibilities of “gestural exchange” between performers, between performers and spectators, between films, and between disciplinary boundaries.<sup>15</sup>

### *1.2 Gestures between Video, Video Installation, and Dance*

As my objects of study move between video, video installation, and dance, I also move between disciplinary fields that have sought to examine the formal demands that gestures can produce. I draw on analyses that have to examine gesture’s role in aesthetic experimentation. Akira Lippit develops the idea of “digesture” as shifting engagement between the profilmic body and the body of the apparatus. Looking at experimental media and video works that utilize digital techniques such as the glitch and erasure, he examines “digesture” as something that strips away the narrative context of gestures, exposes the frame, and makes visible the forces acting upon the

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<sup>14</sup> Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Gesture and Commentarty,” *Iyyun, The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, 42, 1 (1993): 37-48.

body.<sup>16</sup> Erasing cohesive narratives and diegesis, digesture engages the relationship between the moving body and moving image as shifting one that “opens a space before and beyond...a space beside and outside, but always from within a minor space opened on the other side of cinema.”<sup>17</sup> Like Francis Bacon’s painted bodies, digesture shifts between figure and field, abstraction and representation, materiality and dissipation, and body and energy.<sup>18</sup> Digesture becomes an exchange between the moving body and the moving image. In my chapter on Mickalene Thomas, I engage digesture as a way to approach the manner in which multiple performances and various editing techniques become a type of polyrhythmic archive.

Formal disruptions can change whom and how we remember. In *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film*, Domietta Torlasco asserts that the digital transforms video installation and new media work, shifting from the unidirectionality of projection into a coiling of the fold.<sup>19</sup> She examines how Agnes Varda’s video *The Gleaners* doubles the gleaning gesture of its subjects through form, constantly shifting between painting, printmaking, photography, and film and historical figures. From life to form and back to life, gleaning becomes a method of disorderly recollection by which Varda recalls her own life.<sup>20</sup> Out of this physical gesture, cinematic forms such as montage take on new textural potential without clear-cut boundaries.<sup>21</sup> She asks, “Can we look at digital gleaning as a practice and a theory of the margins—a mode of cultural preservation at odds with the archive as an ‘archic, in truth, patriarchic’ order of time and space? To promise a different genealogy, indeed, of a nonlinear, disorderly lineage?”<sup>22</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2013) xiv.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

my chapter on Jumana Manna's film *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*, I examine the fold of digital montage used to archive lives who exist on the edges of geopolitical visibility and social acceptability. Taking Palestinian "thugs" as her subjects, she turns documentary footage into an intertextual archive that recalls Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, creating a speculative historiography of underground films and underground cultures.

Throughout this dissertation, I also explore Torlasco's question of what a theory and practice of the margins looks like. I engage works that document marginalized subjects through experimental practices that cannot disentangle the bodily movements, strategies of the everyday, and art histories. To do so, I draw on scholars and poets who have worked to reposition the margins. The poet Audre Lorde explores the rhythms of those living in the threshold; performance scholar Peggy Phelan writes on the way art histories create margins as a practice of delineating the center; and dance scholar Brenda Dixon-Gottschild explores the poly-centered movements that simultaneously engage rather than marginalize different parts of the body.

My methodological application of choreography, as a responsive arrangement of moving bodies and moving images, is directly related to the formal experimentation dance films have generated. In her writings on dance films, Erin Brannigan suggests that dance has made new demands on the moving image. She examines how different films applied filmic techniques, primarily slow motion, superimposition, and repetition to capture the dance *Watermotor* by Trisha Brown, whose choreography maintains same transitional properties of Brownian motion. Brownian motion is the physical phenomenon in which a particle is likely to move in any given direction. It is both completely unrelated to the past, and never stops. Brannigan writes, "Here is movement that exists entirely in the inbetween state, never formulating into a moment that is

privileged, a moment of registration.”<sup>23</sup> For Brannigan, the filmic techniques in the *Watermotor* films allowed movement to challenge filmic registration to maintain the choreography of transition. I engage different choreographies of transition, including the dance films of Blondell Cummings, contact improvisation in LaToya Ruby Frazier’s performances with her mother, polyrhythms in Mickalene Thomas’ works, and “dancing the ground” in Jumana Manna’s work.

Across film, new media, and dance, gesture provokes aesthetic innovation that expands the way cinematic techniques relate to the moving body. Their key concepts—digesture, folding montage, transitional movement that resists registration—come to bear in my analysis of the artists’ work in this dissertation and take on political stakes for women of color. By identifying these destabilizing practices within artists’ portrait films, I engage the work as both formal and archival experiments, changing who and how we remember.

### 1.3 *Choreography as Method*

Throughout this dissertation, I focus on the way gestures challenge the archival impulse of the portrait, which favors the material trace, unilateral temporality, and order. Not only does dance serve a critical aesthetic form that imagines the possibilities of gesture it also engages the gesture as a vulnerable and porous archive through its intertextuality. For dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, intertextuality is a way of locating the Africanist presence in obvious and not so obvious movements, from basketball to European ballet and everything in between.<sup>24</sup> Although intertextuality speaks broadly to the way cultures influences on one another, Dixon Gottschild zeroes in on the gesture at this convergence, in which the flexed foot and the occasional off-center tilt present in the choreographies of both George Balanchine and Alonzo

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<sup>23</sup> Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 133.

<sup>24</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “The Diaspora Dance Boom (Dance in the World and the World in Dance)”, [https://brendadixongottschild.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/diasporadanceboom9\\_04.pdf](https://brendadixongottschild.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/diasporadanceboom9_04.pdf), pp 2.



King refer to cultural notions of Black “cool.”<sup>25</sup> For Dixon Gottschild, movement becomes a way to simultaneously question aesthetics and the social contracts of blackness. Drawing from the literary term, she writes, “Forces, trends, phrases, traits, movement modes—texts, or tropes, in other words—of the various cultures in the air around us form the threads with which we weave our ‘new’ patterns.”<sup>26</sup> Physical gestures, as they move between everyday strategies to dance aesthetics, cannot disentangle their historicity from their future, creating new aesthetic and archival arrangements that do not rely on fixity but the constant shifts of cultural production.

Through Black traditions of movement and Blackness as movement, I locate the gestures generated by the intimate lives of women of color in the documents of performance archival records of video and video installations. In chapter one I examine *A Visual Dairy* (1980), a collaborative video made by dancer Blondell Cummings and experimental filmmaker Shirley Clarke. In this work, Clarke’s attention to Cumming’s choreography acts as an intervention into the canons of experimental cinema and experimental dance. In this dissertation I contend that attention to choreography within the moving image not only creates opportunities to redefine art histories, choreography’s formal arrangement of movement, time, and space invents responsive modes of intelligibility of the moving image.

My attention to choreography emerged at I worked on the 2018 exhibition *Dancing Platforms Praying Ground: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance* at Danspace Project in New York. Curated by Reggie Wilson and Judy Hussie-Taylor, the Platform explored wildly different choreographic approaches to Wilson’s own interest in the dance history and history of slavery that converge at St. Mark’s church, the oldest site of continuous religious practice in Manhattan and the home of Danspace Project. Wilson’s own approach is a rigorous investigation

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 2—3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 3.

of gestures and dances of seemingly unrelated traditions. In doing so, he uses the Diasporic gestural archive as an expansive site for experimentation. In the dance commissioned for the Platform...*they stood shaking while others began to shout*, Wilson folded together the formation of The Shakers, the African Diasporic practices of the Ring Shout, and a playful game characteristic of postmodern dance—making a dance phrase out of his student’s everyday gestures. Through an entanglement of gestural phrases, he constructed a historiography of gesture that remains both site-specific and transcendent of the rules binding history. In a presentation he gave before the performance, it was Wilson who succinctly described choreography as the tale of three sisters: movement, time, and space. It became a way to think about the complex arrangements of movement present in his work that does not relate to meaning but to maintaining multiple investments simultaneously.

Wilson’s work is premised on the notion of the body as a valid form of knowing, and gesture is a central part of his practice. He uses choreography to explore the complexity of a gesture’s movement and its histories. Similar gestures might have radically different origins, aims, and relational significance depending on the context, for example. The exhibition’s publication is filled with collages that interpret Wilson’s approach to choreography and the questions that arise out of his disorienting arrangements. One particularly striking spread juxtaposes a photograph of the modern dance icon Ruth St. Denis with an etching of a Black church worship from 1872. In it, a woman stands above the rest performing the same gesture. As the images shift from between choreography and praying, they make room for a speculative historiography. Placed side by side, their similarities de- and re-contextualize the gesture and its recording, weaving together an intertextual history of the gesture that connects modern dance, religion, and the American history of race. Although these images are destabilized through their

formal arrangement, their origins are not erased. Their archival locations were cited in the catalogue's image index. It was important for Wilson that these images and their sources were documented in the catalogue, allowing the gestures to remain grounded while creating opportunities to speculate new relations between them.

Out of gesture's ability to move in life and dance, I develop my use of "choreography." This allows me to pay attention to profilmic gestures, by engaging the specific way performances extend everyday gestures to their aesthetic limits. As a formal arrangement of movement, space, and time, choreography also applies to the relationship between the moving body and the moving image. Choreography asks us to rethink the moving image's relationship to cinematic vocabulary. I use the idea of the "choreographic" to relate the artist's portrait film to the way dance thinks about gesture as a porous archive. The choreographic serves as a political mode of movement through which I understand how gesture destabilizes the archive.

Because the moving image has become a critical aspect of artists' practices, it is necessary to engage their artistic gestures, or the specific formal gestures that shape how they record their subjects. This choreography of the moving image is a mode of being responsive and responsible to the subjects in the portrait. These vulnerable portraits of intimate gestures develop trembling archives, responsive to the transitions and shifts of everyday life and the aesthetic innovations these gestures demand.

#### *1.4 Chapter Overview*

As a result of experience with exhibitions of Pindell's works and Wilson's choreography and more broadly my experience of exhibition development at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art and Danspace Project, I began to see the exhibition as a critical opportunity to reorient viewers towards an artist's gestures. In turn, I have structured this dissertation around close

analysis of specific artists and their portrait films because the conceptual work cannot be separated from the complex ways that gestures manifest within these works. Through their gestures, thoughts become available.

In my chapter on the pointing finger, I look at productive tension between the shifting nature of the deictic index and the fixity of the indexical trace. By focusing on its destabilizing presence as a physical and formal gesture in the dance films of Blondell Cummings, I demonstrate gesture's motility to explore identity politics in experimental practices. For LaToya Ruby Frazier, portraiture became an experimental mode of recording a community on the verge of disappearance. Shifting between stillness and movement, the choreographic relationship between her and mother archives the vulnerability of the unrelenting forces of de-industrialization. Mickalene Thomas attends to personal archives and the acts of care by those preserving the increasingly obscure performances of Black women performers. *Do I Look Like a Lady?* is a vulnerable archive of ephemera that seems unruly, following a choreographic logic of Black social dance. In Jumana Manna's *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*, she makes use of the folding edit as a way to undo temporal conditions of the archive. By creating heterogeneous continuity between the past and future, she imagines intertextual histories that may have never existed.

By focusing on the works of specific contemporary artists, I have begun to sketch out the genre of the artist's portrait film as it emerges out of interdisciplinary practices. Throughout this dissertation, I look to specific dance and performance practices that utilize gestures of and as transitions. Not bound by a rigid set of formal characteristics, artists' portrait films come into form through multidirectional, polyrhythmic, and intertextual gestures that engage the choreographic potential of gestures that resist the registration of the trace. The genre creates trembling archives that attend to vulnerability of lives that risk falling out of contact with society.

In the artist's portrait film, artists develop choreographies of the moving image, using aesthetic experimentation to document the intimacy of personal lives and to call our social contracts into question.

## **2 POINTING THE FINGER: THE SHIFTING GESTURE IN BLONDELL CUMMINGS' CHOREOGRAPHY**

In 2017, The Brooklyn Museum exhibition *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85* featured a performance recording of Blondell Cumming's *Chicken Soup* (1978). The dance, which was inspired by memories of her grandmother and chores in the kitchen, examines aesthetic gestures that form out of quotidian acts such as cooking and scrubbing. Recalling the dance in her essay on the emergence of experimental Black dancers in New York City, Joan Acocella writes:

In 1981 Blondell Cummings made a dance, ‘Chicken Soup, in which, while scrubbing a floor on her hands and knees—an act of exemplary realism—she would repeatedly break off, rear up, and shake, in jagged, convulsive movements, as if she were in a strobe light. Then, with no acknowledgement of this interruption, she would go back, serenely, to scrubbing the floor. This strange back and forth made the piece very interesting psychologically: the floor-scrubbing so homey and soapy and nice (Cummings wore a white dress), the convulsions so violent and weird. Was this woman happy doing this domestic task, or did she hate it so much that she was going crazy?’<sup>27</sup>

As her gestures move from everyday recognizable actions into aesthetic illegibility, Acocella is left wondering if she is crazy. Blondell’s convulsions or spasms put her at risk of falling out of contact with society. Blondell Cummings is a critical figure in American dance; in 2006, *Chicken Soup* was designated an American masterpiece by the National Endowment for the Arts. As a Black choreographer, her work drew from the intimacy of domestic spaces and her training as a photographer. Dance phrases examine aesthetic gestures that form out of quotidian acts such as cooking and scrubbing. In her solo work, her movement is often stuttered as if captured by a camera and replayed in stop motion. Focusing on the intimate moments in women’s lives, her choreography became a practice to think about the aesthetic potential of everyday life and the everyday potential of aesthetics. In his biography entry on the artist, Thomas F. DeFrantz chronicles, “In 1978 Cummings formed the Cycle Arts Foundation, a discussion/performance workshop focused on familial issues including menopause, the bonding and sharing rituals of lifestyle, and art-making.”<sup>28</sup> Cumming’s aesthetic makes the intimate exchanges between women a site for experimentation.

In this chapter, I create an intertextual archive of the deictic gesture as it appears between chorography in dance films and the choreographic relation to the archive in poetry and

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<sup>27</sup> Joan Acocella, “A History Lesson” *The New Yorker* Feb. 21, 2012 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/a-history-lesson>

<sup>28</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz, “Blondell Cummings,” biography entry in *Great Performances: Free to Dance*, <https://www.thirteen.org/freetodance/biographies/cummings.html>

photography. I focus on two artist's portrait films by Cummings: *Commitment: Two Portraits* (1988), a television performance inspired by *Chicken Soup*; and *A Visual Diary* (1980), an experimental video made with Shirley Clarke. Through *Commitments*, I examine the way choreography of everyday gestures gives way to the aesthetic experimentation. In *A Visual Diary*, I examine the formal deictic gesture as it creates a shifting choreography of the moving image. By grounding these works in deictic gesture, I attend to its presence at the limits of representation.

From the physical to the formal gesture, I look at how shifting destabilizes the certainty of the artist's portrait film, creating a genre that challenges the fixity of the image and the archival impulse of the portrait. Instead, the deictic gesture in artist's portrait films can provide an alternative definition of presence for marginalized subjects that reorients the archival impulse of the moving image and portraiture toward movement. Experiments in deixis reimagine the portrait as an unstable document that resists the fixity of the trace, favoring the present over historicity, anachronism over progression, and disorientation over order. By doing so, they generate what I define as "trembling archives." A trembling archive is a deictic document that is continuously shifting, attending to the unsteady position of vulnerability.

### ***2.1 The Shifter as a Physical Gesture***

*Two Portraits* is a video comprising two works by Blondell Cummings made for the television program *Alive from Off Center*. As a video made for television, the dance airs and effectively takes place in the home. Creating an intimate scale for dance, *Portrait* takes place in on the set of a kitchen and comprises three activities: sitting at the kitchen table, scrubbing the floor, cooking on a cast-iron skillet. Although *Chicken Soup* was performed on a bare stage save for the objects between which the artist moves—a chair, a brush, a long green cloth, and a

skillet—the set in *Portrait* is fully realized for television. As in *Chicken Soup*, Blondell’s voiceover recites poetry by Grace Paley and Pat Stein, who recount memories of women as they sat around the kitchen table endlessly talking about childhood friends, operations and abortions, death and money. Her gestures converge and diverge around these voiced memories, shifting between mimetic, minimalist, and expressive everyday gestures. However, they do not always coincide. As the poem speaks of abortions, she cradles her arms and rocks them back and forth. The video begins with her seated at the kitchen table. Her head bobbles, her lips contort into an exaggerated mouthing. She then starts to rock, with her arms raising up creating a sharp angle at her elbow. Her arm moves in parts. First it swivels at the wrist and then rotates from the shoulder. Her body moves polycentrically; her arms, head, torso, and feet move together but at different paces, each in constant transition.

In this first *Portrait*, the pointing finger appears throughout the work, emerging between recognizable gestures and aesthetic movement. Even as the gesture aligns with the voiceover, it creates a tenuous narrative reenactment. She pulses the finger downwards and runs it across the top of the kitchen table after she speaks about cockroaches. The pulsing movement breaks up the downward thrust into many micro-movements, creating what Brenda Dixon Gottschild refers to as freeze frames of stopwatch gestures.<sup>29</sup> She wags it as she puckers her mouth; it runs in circles at the edge of the table as she speaks of operations. It sweeps up as she teeters backwards in her chair as she speaks about death. It turns downwards with talk of money; as she taps her other hand, she moves her fingers together in circles in front of her. Holding a cast iron skillet in one hand, Cummings waves it furiously as she retreats during an unspoken argument. As a deictic gesture, it shifts our attention from her body to the people, things, and words around her. She

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<sup>29</sup> Brenda Dixon-Stowell, “Blondell Cummings: ‘The Ladies and Me,’” *The Drama Review: TDR* 24, no. 4 (1980): 40.



points to “this table,” “this hand,” “that up above.” She emphasizes her point when the gesture appears as the “you look here now” of an argument. It has no single meaning, taking on different moods. Even as it repeats, the pointing finger maintains constant variation as it expresses different life events and social contracts. The gesture slips out of meaning when it cannot be easily recognized in relation to the voiceover or her other movements.

Cummings uses domestic tasks as an origin for experimental dance, investigating gestures that are located within them. Domestic routines become formal repetition and something more profoundly ritual. Improvisational movement disrupts memories of her mother and grandmother as she moves towards illegibility. Cummings creates a portrait that does not seek to fix the voiceover to her movements, but examines dance as a movement between the poetry’s and her personal memories. No longer bound to the kitchen, choreography of gestures bridges familial genealogy and experimental dance and experimental dance and Black lives. In her essay for the 2010 exhibition *Move. Choreographing You: Art and Dance since the 1960s*, Peggy Phelan writes:

The unexamined shadows of women and people of non-white cultures are abundant ghosts in the history of Western art: rather than list and measure all these missing bodies (of work and lack of work) here we may simply note that one of the center’s most consistent habits is making margins. Bodies of work that take movement as their subject and form are perhaps especially neglected since they can tell us so much about centering, and the function of centers, as ethical practice.<sup>30</sup>

We can find the pointing finger in the canonical history of the avant-garde. In points at the center of Duchamp’s last painting *Tu’m* (1918) and at the center of the television screen in Vito Acconci’s *Centers* (1971). In both, the gesture becomes a disruptive gesture meant to direct viewer’s to look at the medium’s surface, destabilizing the illusion of representation. For women

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<sup>30</sup> Stephanie Rosenthal, ed., *Move. Choreographing You: Art and Dance Since the 1960s* (London: The MIT Press, 2011).

of color at the margins of the avant-garde canon, the deictic gesture furthers the disorder it directs at the limits of representation. For bodies that have been historically deemed “too much,” the limits of representation are both a formal and social interrogation. They do so by engaging the gesture’s relational or provisional order, creating a choreography of gestures that shift in and out of reason. As Erin Manning writes in *Relationescapes*, the dancing body creates opportunities to unthink the dichotomies populating the world. She explains, “It’s that movement allows us to approach them from another perspective: a shifting one. When we are no longer still, the world lives differently.”<sup>31</sup> The result of the experimental deixis moves away from the dualism of the margins and the center and toward an intertextual archive that is poly-centered and multidirectional.

In *Portrait*, the pointing finger becomes part of a repertoire of overlooked gestures of the kitchen that both call and respond to the poem and the camera. Made for television, the video takes its form between dance documentation and fictional television program, anticipating her next movement, moving between low and high ground as she scrubs. The camera’s sweeping movement, cuts on actions, and close-ups of gestures create a familiar repertoire of filmic techniques that reorients gestures toward the center of the screen. The interplay between the camera’s grand gestures and the dance’s minor ones reflect a strategy Nicole Fleetwood defines as non-iconic, an archival practice of capturing a myriad of small, unexceptional, unhurried acts that resist singularity and narrative completeness.<sup>32</sup>

Chorographers have taken up this idea of shifting through the body in transition. Characterized by unpredictable movement, Brownian motion has been defined in dance as an

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<sup>31</sup> Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012), 14—15.

<sup>32</sup> Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011) 64.

insistence on an in-between state that offers no fixed forms or privileged moments.<sup>33</sup> As Erin Brannigan explains, the choreography of Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown express Brownian motion as it unfolds unpredictably and multidirectionally. It is ungraspable, always in transition, thwarting expectations of dramatic structure.<sup>34</sup> Cummings' actions move between small and sweeping ones; they align and disrupt the poem's narrative; in concert with the filmic gestures, they turn daily tasks into the drama of a soap opera.

In dance, Brownian motion challenges any predetermined notions of movement, space, and time. Comprising entirely shifting small movements, choreography's constant motion resists representation. As Cummings gestures through the pointing finger into dance, she questions the social contracts embedded in the domestic sphere. This is not a necessarily a moralistic critique of gender roles, nor does it engage it with complete reverence. Rather, through aesthetic experimentation, the choreography between the moving image and moving body reorients the domestic scale of movement, time, and space that remains open to aesthetic variation. This variation creates room for a genealogy that finds Black movement in experimental cinema.

We see this variation in Maya Deren's film *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), in which Talley Beaty, a Black choreographer, moves between nature, domestic space, and a museum space. A single leap endures, extending past the limits of what is humanly possible. Through a montage, the leap is portrayed from multiple perspectives and environments. As a result, the dancer's relationship to the ground is constantly shifting, destabilizing the dancer's body, and disrupting the spatial and temporal linear thrust of the action.<sup>35</sup> Brannigan writes, "Performance in such films serves the vertical film form by releasing figures from the demands

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<sup>33</sup> Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 133.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 108.

of storytelling, allowing them to become part of the transference of movement across bodies and to resonate in moments that are freed in space and time.”<sup>36</sup> Here, the moving image and the moving body act in an exchange, enabling the body and the film to move radically.<sup>37</sup> Although Brannigan explores this as a strictly formal disruption, we cannot ignore that political transgression of the film, as it supports a Black dancer as he disregards the spatial boundaries of segregation that were in place in the 1940s. By relating deictic experiments in choreography to the moving image, Deren developed a mode of filmmaking that supports formal and social disruptions.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.2 *From the Deictic Gesture to the Deictic Index*

Deictic gestures resonate deeply with the relationship between blackness and the image. In Claudia Rankine’s book of poetry *Citizen: An American Lyric*, she engages in a poetic call and response with artworks by John Lucas. The poems do not end but transition into one another. She draws a through-line connecting the murder of Trayvon Martin to the American history of lynchings, creating an incomplete archive of Black death. As the poem continues, readers are confronted with Lucas’ manipulated archival photograph of a lynching in 1930. A man in a crowd points up toward the black night where a hanging body has since been erased. The absence refuses to repeat the violent spectacle against Black people. As the pointing finger becomes a formal gesture that expresses the violent social contract of anti-Blackness, the absence of the hanging body attempts to evacuate the social ordering.

Rankine’s words appear before the image on the page. She writes, “He’s there, he’s there but he’s hung up though he is there. Good-bye, I say. I break the good-bye. I say good-bye

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 132.

before anyone can hang up.”<sup>39</sup> This disorientation becomes a condition of possibility for Blackness. By refusing the fixity of the photograph and blurring temporal distinctions of here/there/now, the body is not subject to violence in perpetuity. Together, Rankine and Lucas allow for the minor gestures to challenge the tyranny of the visible and to imagine a place and time for intimate exchanges to undo the anti-Black structural regimes. Their experiments in deixis create a space for grief and vulnerability to yield an aesthetic strategy of shifting that once again becomes a strategy for living.

As Rankine’s words shift, the image of the body hanging up is reimagined as an everyday gesture of hanging up the telephone, creating an intimate exchange where she is allowed to say goodbye. Movement between the image and poetry shifts back and forth, blurring where the responsive gesture is located. In the shifting relationship between photograph and poetic imagery, the artists change the deictic gesture of the angry mob into a gesture that supports a body that resists registration of the trace and reorients the social contract in the photographic image as supportive.

As Alessandra Raengo explores, the deictic index allows race theory to break from the hold of photography’s logic. As Raengo outlines in *On the Sleeve of the Visual*, visual technologies of the photochemical image and their logic of indexical trace have sutured notions of race to the Black bodies.<sup>40</sup> She furthers disruptive possibility in Mary Anne Doane’s elaboration of the deictic index. Looking at a photograph from an anti-lynching campaign, she finds that the shadow of a lynched body superimposed over a crowd acts as both a trace and as a pointing finger gesturing outside of the image toward both the body politic and the out-of-view lynched body. For Raengo, the confluence of the shadow as trace and deixis enables a shift

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<sup>39</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 1 edition (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 27.

towards support of the lynched body and anti-racist campaigns, countering the violent spectacle and reaching toward social justice.

The deictic nature of Blackness is put into contrast with Franz Fanon's feeling of being fixed like a dye by the pointing finger's assertion "Look a negro."<sup>41</sup> Through Fanon's use of cinema, photography, and the archive, he examines the way Blackness is both fixed and relational, ordering and disorienting. Looking at these moments, Darby English writes, "These passages are exemplary of the way Fanon crafts his reconstruction through a series of *creative gestures* that renders consciousness of the Black body insistently in relation to its structuring antagonisms and continual reconstruction in and through representations" [emphasis mine].<sup>42</sup> Fanon uses the deictic gesture to engage the antagonisms of the social contract. Although this threatens Fanon, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney find political potential in Blackness' refusal to be called to order. Introducing their project, Jack Halberstam explains that, "When we refuse, Moten and Harney suggest, we create dissonance and more importantly, we allow dissonance to continue."<sup>43</sup> The social potential of experimental deixis comes then out of a refusal to be fixed in place, and might always be disorienting, creating encounters that are both "world-making and world-shattering."<sup>44</sup> The deictic gesture's order and responsive disorientation yields a politics of disorder. For women of color creating artists' portrait films, artistic gestures are not only aesthetic experiments, but also radical gestures that might migrate back into life and reshape our relationship with one another.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>42</sup> Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 38.

<sup>43</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Autonomedia, 2013), 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

### 2.3 *Deictic Experiments*

For *A Visual Diary* (1980), Blondell Cummings collaborated with experimental filmmaker Shirley Clarke. Clarke was trained as a dancer and made many dance films that explored the choreography of the moving image and the moving body. Very little is written on how this collaboration came to be. Writings on Clarke's dance films and her transition to video have largely ignored this work, and this absence signals what attention to artists' portrait films can bring forward. In his essay "After a New American Cinema: Shirley Clarke's Video Works as Performance and Document," Thomas F. Cohen examines a shift in Clarke's videos from the 1970s to the 1980s. This shift marked a change in Clarke's practice of using video as an ephemeral part of a performance with her "Tee Pee Video Space Troupe" to more conventional documents of performances that maintain "a set temporal limit" in works such as *Savage/Love* (1981) and *Tongues* (1982).<sup>45</sup> *A Visual Diary* exists as documentation of the dance performance, a temporal experiment of limits in dance, and the archival record of their collaboration. As a result, the work signals a gap in the canons of both experimental cinema and experimental dance that might only be filled through investigation of the personal archives of Clarke or Cummings.

*A Visual Diary* reimagines a dance from *The Ladies and Me* (1979). The video begins as a portrait film situated between performance documentation and experimental cinema, weaving together a stage performance and still images of a domestic space. As Cummings' performance begins and ends with a lonely drink at the kitchen table, laughing turns to despair quickly and without reason. She moves between everyday gestures and abstract ones unpredictably. Taking a drink leads to crying, which sends her to floor. As she moves from the table to the ground, her body shifts between small movements and grand sweeping ones. In her essay "Blondell

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas F. Cohen, "After the New American Cinema: Shirley Clarke's Video Work as Performance and Document," *Journal of Film & Video* 64, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer, 2012): 58.

Cummings: The Ladies and Me” Dixon Gottschild describes the dance as shifts between loss and control, shaking sobs and controlled movements.<sup>46</sup>

Dixon Gottschild describes the moment when she picks herself up from the ground. She writes, “She returns to standing—as though the intensity of the loss of control finally shook out of her the mood unleashed by the demon in the bottle and her own despair.”<sup>47</sup> It is at this moment of choreography that something happens in the video, changing the relationship between Cummings and the recording. As she sweeps her arms side to side, a surprising formal disruption occurs. The video no longer progresses forward and instead becomes a montage that splits up her movement into a sequence of still poses that have been stitched back together. Documenting multiple performances, or the same performance from radically different angles, the single movement now entangles multiple temporalities and spaces. Between these poses, still shots of domestic space are inserted—clothes hanging from a line, windowsills, and bathrooms. As an experiment in deixis, the montage destabilizes a cohesive relationship between movement, space, and time. The video creates a diegesis that allows her to move in multiple directions and inhabit multiples spaces at once. Through montage, the video is not bound by dualism of inside and out, creating a heterogeneous continuity that weaves together interior space and physical exteriority, then-ness and movement, interiority and now-ness.

The video’s experimental structure is informed by a choreographic transformation of an otherwise unremarkable private moment. A lonely drink becomes a point departure for her choreography as she expresses the dizzying forces of domesticity. The video takes on a unique form that follows its own rules and logics, supporting her body as it transitions between legible and illegible gestures. As Cummings comes back to stillness at the kitchen table, a full body

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<sup>46</sup> Dixon Gottschild, “Blondell Cummings: The Ladies and Me,” 41.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.



laugh seems to take over her body. Instead of leaning forward and back in one fell swoop, each part of the movement is stilted once again like the freeze frames of stopwatch gestures. These then become a series of transitions, and Cummings appears to tremble.

Trembling exists in the face of unmanageable vulnerability; it reorganizes how the body experiences movement, time, and space in ways that may seem incompatible—incidental and overwhelming. As an embodied response to the pointing finger that runs through race and art theory, trembling has been persistent yet overshadowed by the deictic gesture's insistence. Trembling is a responsive gesture that moves in multiple directions, disrupting the linear thrust of the present.

Trembling becomes a way to sense a crisis as movement without resolution. Brian Massumi explains that without termination, "...movement enters a state of perpetual turnover onto its own rebeginning. Gesture barely just made folds over into gesture already in the making, in continuous variation."<sup>48</sup> As an intertextual archive of trembling forms as a response to the deictic gesture, it becomes a theory of the margins, and a trembling archive takes shape.

As with the physical movement, the trembling archive is acutely responsive. In contrast to the fixity of the trace, a trembling archive is a deictic document that is continuously shifting, attending to the unsteady position of vulnerability. It does not resemble the desire of visual traditions to rationalize, measure, or fix interiority to exteriority. The trembling archive maintains uncertainty between the aesthetic and social contract of the gesture as it risks falling out of legibility.

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<sup>48</sup> Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, 140.

#### 2.4 *Toward the Choreographic: Choreographies of Trembling*

By supporting a trembling archive, artists' portrait films by women of color experiment with the way images remember. They produce gestures that suggest ambivalence to the record by risking illegibility. They engage in a radical relationality that continually finds new potential in the way subjects relate to one another, to the moving image, and to an audience. In the introduction to her book *The Choreographic*, Jenn Joy explains, "To engage choreographically is to position oneself in relation to another, to participate in a scene of address that anticipates and requires a particular mode of address, even at times against our will." She continues, "I imagine the work of the choreographic as one possibility of sensual address—a dialogic opening in which art not only is looked at but looks back, igniting a tremulous hesitation in the ways we experience and respond."<sup>49</sup> For Joy, choreography is an attention to the spasms, trembling, stutters, and steps. As movements marked by uncertainty, choreography demands new ways of making and writing about art that moves against the closure of the visible.<sup>50</sup>

Choreography attends to the encounter as a mode of address that has shifting demands on the viewer that might be vulnerable. In the documentary following Okwui Okpokwasili's performance *Bronx Gothic* (2014), the film examines the demands she makes on the audience. When the work begins, she is already present when the audience enters the performance space. For 20 minutes, she stays with her back to the audience, trembling toward exhaustion. Her movement erases any marked beginning and the work begins in transition. Her body is also in transition, neither here nor there permanently. Turning to face the audience, her trembling transforms the secure distance between herself and the audience into vulnerable intimacy. As the sweat seeps from her skin to her clothes, the sound of her feet and voice settles over the hum of

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<sup>49</sup> Jenn Joy, *The Choreographic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 2—3.

the audience as they enter. Trembling, as a sustained spasm, puts Okpowasili at risk for losing contact with society, calling her social contract with the audience into question. In a talk back, audience members shared their experience of this disorienting beginning. There was a different moment for everyone when they began to adjust to the artist's destabilizing movement. They realized they were no longer witnesses but supporters, enduring together.

Trembling rearranges the relationship that she and the audience maintain to time and space. Trembling changes the direction of look assigned to theater spaces, so that Okpokwasili can look back, creating a space for shared vulnerability. Trembling becomes a way of entering into Okpokwasili's personal archive through mutual prehension as she reads fictionalized childhood letters exchanged between herself and another girl and puts her body, a living archive of her experiences, on the line. As a performance that begins in both response and exhaustion, trembling disrupts the dramatic structure. For 20 minutes, linearity is disrupted in favor of an enduring sense of being in the midst, creating a way forward that is multidirectional.

As they destabilize distinctions between you/me and here/there/now, experiments in deixis can attend to who remains at the formal and social margins of the image, allowing responsive gestures to precede the grand gesture. By attending to the various ways that identity conditions how we respond to the world, artistic gestures enable women of color to place their experiences in exchange with formal experimentation and the genealogies of avant-garde practices. For women of color creating artists' portrait films, artistic gestures are not only aesthetic experiments. They are also intertextual gestures that might find their ways back into our lives and reshape our past and future relations with one another.

### **3 MOMME PORTRAIT SERIES: AN ARCHIVE AT THE THRESHOLDS OF MOVEMENT AND STILLNESS IN LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER'S PORTRAITS**

LaToya Ruby Frazier captures the intimate relationships of those grappling with the fallout post-industrialization, including: the closing of the Ford car factory in Lordstown, Pennsylvania, in *The Last Cruze* (2019); the water scandal in Flint, Michigan, in *Flint is Family* (2016); the closing of both the mill and the hospital in her own hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, in *The Notion of Family* (2001–2014) and *Campaign For Braddock Hospital (Save Our Community Hospital)* (2011), respectively. Her practice documents the wake of global capital, paying attention to lateral movements on the fringes of progress. Within each series, Frazier often shifts the scale of her lens, from aerial views to intimate embraces between family, friends, and colleagues, to demonstrate systematic impacts on individuals and their relationships. Shooting in domestic spaces, workspaces, hospital rooms, and the urban environment, Frazier threads together the intimate rhythms of lives facing crisis. In this chapter I focus on a series of

the artist's portrait films and photographs she made with her mother called *Momme Portrait Series*. In the series, Frazier and her mother portray their relationship through exchanges of furtive glances, comforting embraces, and aggressive holds. Taken together, the series is more like a series of studies or sketches, process-oriented investigations that are open to surprises that are both formal and interpersonal.<sup>51</sup> In these intimate scale of the domestic sphere, they examine the responsive relationships between laboring bodies and industrial forces.

*Momme Portrait Series (Wrestle)* is a silent video, less than a minute long. It begins with her mother, centered in close up, dimly lit, in front of a pastel floral comforter. With her hair casually pulled back and dressed in "house clothes," she looks down, averting the camera's eye. As she moves her head, the lighting changes. The video progress in stop-motion, breaking up the thrust of her actions into quick halting micromovements. We are reminded of the halting style of Blondell Cumming's choreography, what Brenda Dixon Gottschild describes as "the freeze frames of stopwatch gestures."<sup>52</sup> As the camera pulls back and the video pulses forward, Frazier and her mother appear in an embrace that quickly transitions to hair pulling and wrestling. Locked in a hold, one gains and the other loses; they move together towards the sides of the screen before descending out of view at the bottom of the frame.

Through the use of stop motion, stilted images of Frazier and her mother quickly succeed each other, creating a disorienting relationship between stillness and movement. It is impossible to tell if editing is mobilizing stilled images or if stillness is halting the camera's movement. As a result, the images maintain both photographic and filmic vocabularies. Even their composition blurs the formal distinction between the photographic portrait and the filmic close-up, they both

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<sup>51</sup> Marsha Meskimmon and Phil Sawdon, *Drawing Difference: Connections Between Gender and Drawing*, Sew edition (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> Brenda Dixon-Stowell, "Blondell Cummings: 'The Ladies and Me,'" *The Drama Review: TDR* 24, no. 4 (1980): 40.

engage the same goal of bringing interiority to the surface. In the succession of close-ups, Frazier and her mother are placed in shot-reverse-shot composition. However, as the two avert their gazes, and the lighting flutters with each edit, editing does not create a unified diegetic space to sustain a conversation. Instead the an intimate exchange reveals the complicated emotional toll of things that have gone unsaid between mother and daughter. It is a quick exchange filled with isolation, play, missed connection, resentment, comfort, and memories that are unavailable to the viewer.

After the next hard edit, they appear side by side. Frazier's mom leans on Frazier with her whole body. She rests her head on her daughter as they each look off into different horizons. Their bodies shift through a choreography of small gestures as they continue to wrestle. They bump heads and exchange a quick smile, a nuzzle, and a frown. The gestures are quick and hard to isolate. Her mother brings her hand to her face, another hand is placed on the other's belly, they embrace, they fight. As they pull apart, they grasp for each other before they move off screen toward opposite sides of the frame.

After another edit, they appear once again, this time as one amorphous form emerging from the bottom of the frame, hidden under the same patterned sheet used as the backdrop. The sheet forms around their bodies, forming recognizable outlines of their wrestling, but forcing viewers to imagine the physical contact they are making. Frazier's arm then shoots out from under the sheet, followed by her mother's arm. Improbably, a leg shoots out, followed by more legs and arms in a jumble of limbs. They are no longer standing. They have fallen but continue to wrestle. In the video, wrestling serves as a task out of which improvisational gestures emerge. Frazier's artistic gesture begins to take shape as investigation between stillness and movement at different registers within the image, including: physical gestures in contact improvisation, formal

gestures in the videos' micromovements, and immobility as a condition of possibility. Frazier also examines stillness and movement between the moving image and the photographic image as way to examine each medium's enabling constraint.

Frazier's videos are often exhibited alongside her photographs on small picture-sized screens. In *Momme Portrait Series (Floral Comforter)* the two appear in a photographic extension of (*Wrestle*). Frazier and her mother stand side by side with their arms grazing each other. They both look directly at the camera with no discernable expression. Their pose both anticipates and concludes the action in (*Wrestle*). As Frazier develops photographs and videos out of the same scene in *Momme Portrait Series*, the works engage in a call and response, creating an ambiguous order that cannot be thought of as linear or progressive. Together the photographs and videos relate to one another as part of an ongoing process.

In this chapter I examine the choreographies of contact between Frazier and her mother in the *Momme Portrait Series*, as they perform a tangle of gestures that stem from their vulnerable familial relationships and their vulnerable relationships to their environment. As the camera echoes the demanding reciprocity of the Frazier women's actions, their movement generates aesthetic experiments out of the social contract between a mother and daughter. Echoing Agamben, she posits gesture rather than visibility at the center of the image. By engaging portraits through movement, she documents the intimate thresholds of Black families while challenging the way photography's fixity was used to evidence Blackness. As she develops choreographies of contact, the images in the *Momme Portrait* series investigate stillness in the midst of falls and micromovements in the midst of stillness. As Frazier engages choreographic shifts between stillness and movement in her portraits, I conclude with the political potential of the trembling archive.

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### 3.1 *Contact Improvisation: Choreography at the Threshold of Stillness and Immobility*

In (*Wrestle*) Frazier and her mother engage one another responsively in the artist's portrait film. The physicality of their relationship unfolds as a series of adjustments and shifting positions, resembling contact improvisation. Instead of uplifting each other, Frazier and her mother explore their lateral movements, the ways they support each other, and endure each other's weight as they fall. In her book *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, Goldman finds contact improvisation to be an embodied practice of self-readiness. She writes, "Unlike their modernist forebears, contact improvisers investigated stillness and sought ways to improvise *in the midst* of unfamiliar falls"<sup>53</sup> [emphasis mine]. As contact improvisation, their wrestling does not aim to declare a winner, but becomes an experimental task that mobilizes the process of an intimate relationship, as well as trains them to be responsive to an unpredictable and unrelenting future. For Goldman, improvisational dance serves as a practice of freedom that involves "giving shape to one's self" by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape.<sup>54</sup> As Frazier and her mother perform a series of configurations that ends in an amorphous shape, they create physical strategies to explore the complicated affects of dependency.

Contact improvisation also make social claims on the history Black movement between stillness and social immobility. Looking to Fred Moten's analysis of Harriett Anne Jacobs' autobiography *Incident in the Life of Slave Girl*, Goldman finds that a space that is simultaneously cramped and capacious that can be yield "an amazing medley of shifts, a

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<sup>53</sup> Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



choreography of confinement.”<sup>55</sup> Through this view, she aligns the practice of contact improvisation with the stillness that characterizes the embodied non-violent protests that took place during the Civil Rights Movement. For Frazier and her mother, stillness serves a generative position that moves between the fall and recuperation, stillness and political resistance.

Jason King further explores the relationship between black movement and the choreography of falling in his essay, “Which way is down? Improvisation on Black mobility.” For King, stumbling and falling reflects Black movement recuperates vulnerability. It becomes both a precondition and a counterpoint to counterpoint to social uplift and the American dream.<sup>56</sup> He writes, “Dance tells us everything about the political complexity of Black folk, who improvisationally transform the fall, the slip, the dip, into intended movement.”<sup>57</sup> As choreography, Goldman and King define the political potential of black movement, which provides a productive tension with the epistemological insistence of Black visibility.

In (*Wrestle*) the pushes and falls give way to a choreography of everyday gestures, or habits, of engaging with each other. For Erin Manning using habits as choreographic tools activates their conditions of possibility.<sup>58</sup> Habit directs our movements, organizes our time, makes experience predictable.<sup>59</sup> As they explore their interdependency, Frazier and her mother explore the unsteadiness of habit and its ability to source interpersonal and aesthetic experimentation. Frazier and her mother are in varying states of dress and undress, often in house clothes. They use bedsheets and curtains as backdrops, the lights and cameras are often on view, emphasizing the process of their collaboration and the construction of the image.

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<sup>55</sup> Goldman, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Jason King, “Which way is down? Improvisations on Black Mobility,” 39.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>58</sup> Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 88.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

For Frazier, attention to the physical relationship with her mother becomes a way to examine the toll of their history, as well as the toll of environmental and economic toll of post-industrialization on the body. Together, Frazier and her mother explore what Manning defines as the “minor gestures” or the precarious experiences that reshape the nuances of everyday life. Manning continues, “The minor often looks inconsistent, unrigorous, flimsy and as such is often overlooked...It is out of time, untimely, rhythmically inventing its own pulse.”<sup>60</sup> Frazier and her mother create art in the disorienting time of the threshold. In the artist’s portrait film (*Wrestle*) the lights flicker as the video stutters, creating a sense of suspended time, not progression.

For Frazier and her mother, transitional gestures create a rhythm of living in the threshold. *Momme Series (Heads)* begins with a single frame filled by Frazier and her mother, both dressed in house clothes and wearing wig caps. With Frazier in back and her mother in front, they stand so closely that they could be touching, resting their heads on one another. They engage in a choreography of head turns, shifting positions, trading off who is leading and who is following. They pause, alternating breaths before they move again. As Frazier looks down, her mother briefly looks at the camera before she turns her eyes away. Their faces are blank, but their skirting eyes convey an emotional distance at odds with their physical proximity. With their heads turned and looking off screen, the frame’s limitations become pronounced; the world beyond the image has caught their attention, and they are less concerned with the camera in front of them.

The image doubles, creating two screens side by side, appearing as a double-channeled or stereoscopic installation, in which Frazier and her mother each inhabit their own frames. Situated on opposite ends of each image, they are as far apart as possible, separated by the frame’s edges. Shadows of the same man move across each screen, appearing to hover by each of the women.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

As Frazier looks away, her mother quickly acknowledges the camera. When Frazier looks across screen in her mother's direction, her mother appears to avoid her glance.

As they shift, they appear to each other in passing, existing in the image at the threshold of each frame. These are strategies at the formal margin and of the social margins. In *Litany of Survival*, Audre Lorde describes the shifting nature of precarity, writing the following:

For those of us who live at the shoreline/standing upon the constant edges of decision/ crucial and alone/for those of us who cannot indulge/the passing dreams of choice/who love in doorways coming and going/in the hours between dawns/looking inward and outward/at once before and after/seeking a now that can breed/futures/ like bread in our children's mouths/so their dreams will not reflect/ the death of **ours...**<sup>61</sup> [original emphasis].

For Lorde, precarious lives constantly negotiate the position of the margin's edge. As a practice, at the margins, thresholds become a site of physical, temporal, and spatial transitions. Living in a state of constant shifting demands new modes of perception, intimacy, and political engagement with the intimate fleeting moments of contact that occur in transitional spaces and times.

Frazier's multidirectional movements disrupt the progression of the moving image, creating a choreography of thresholds.

The two images share an edit, simultaneously changing where they are located in their frames. While Frazier is more tightly framed, they both sit on the right side of the frame, facing the same direction. The shadowy figure remains. While Frazier winces, her mother rests her hands in her head. Frazier shakes her head and looks at the camera. The frame disappears, leaving the recording of her mother as she fidgets and adjusts, unable to sit still. As the video unfolds, the screens expand and contract like their breaths, activating physical and affective micromovements into formal improvisations.

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<sup>61</sup> Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival" *Poetry Foundation* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147275/a-litany-for-survival>

In *(Heads)* they pause and breath as they turn their heads, they sit at the edges of the frame. The frames expand and contract in space, doubling and disappearing in syncopation. Manning continues, an enabling constraint is the opening of a relational process.<sup>62</sup> As a result, this interpersonal investigation is also an aesthetic experiment, disrupting expectations of how the moving image progresses narratively.

### 3.2 *The Enabling Constraints of Video and Photography*

In Frazier's portrait films formal experimentation cannot be excised from the strategies of living as Black women. In *(Wrestle)* they lean on each other in between wrestling, and drop out from the bottom of the frame. The frame acts as both a record and a boxing ring, delineating the boundaries of their action. In *(Heads)* images expand and contract. Their performance is a practice of contact improvisation within the image and with the image, visualizing what Erin Manning and Brian Massumi refer to as an enabling constraint. For Manning and Massumi, "An enabling constraint is constraining to the extent that its focus is to structure the field of improvisation and enabling in the sense that the constraint is potentializing."<sup>63</sup> For Manning and Massumi, an enabling constraint is relationship between structure and improvisation of movement. Not bound by the forward thrust of linear narratives, all of the edges of the frame become available. For Frazier, the enabling constraints in movement interrupt narrative's forward thrust of the moving image.

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<sup>62</sup> Erin Manning, "Creative Propositions for Thought in Motion" INFLeXions No. 1- How is Research-Creation? (May 2008) <https://www.inflexions.org/issues.html#i1>

<sup>63</sup> Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, "Toward a Process Seed Bank: What Research-Creation Can Do," in *Media - N*. <http://median.newmediacaucus.org/research-creation-explorations/toward-a-process-seed-bank-what-research-creation-can-do/>

The concept of medium is tied to the logic of the enabling constraints. Mary Anne Doane refers to the enabling impediments of medium. She writes the following:

The potential of a medium would thus lie in the notion of material resistances or even of matter/materiality itself as, somewhat paradoxically, an *enabling impediment*. The juxtaposition of negativity and productivity is crucial here. A medium is a medium by virtue of both its positive qualities (the visibility, color, texture of paint, for instance) and its limitations, gaps, incompletions (the flatness of the canvas, the finite enclosure insured by the frame).<sup>64</sup>

Just movement disrupts linearity of the moving image, Frazier uses multidirectionality in the photographic portrait to disrupt its conflation between stillness, interiority, and the fixity of the indexical trace. The photograph *Momme Portrait Series (Shadow)* corresponds with the video (*Heads*). In (*Shadow*) Frazier stands behind her mother, turned to the side so that only the profile of her face and top of her shoulder are visible. Her eyes are cast down and out beyond the edges of the frame. Frazier's mother stands straight, facing the camera head on. Behind Frazier, a life-size shadow of her mother is cast on the crosshatched backdrop. Their proximity is both threatening and protecting. Her mother is both before and after, here and there. Their looks and bodies engage in multidirectional orientations shifting our attention toward their inner thoughts and their changing relationship. Their deictic pose creates a productive tension with the indexical trace of the shadow, exploring the photograph's enabling constraints.

For Frazier, the medium's limitations and its positive qualities cannot be disentangled. By using silver gelatin prints, Frazier faces the material resistance of the traditional process as well as weaving in its historical material and theoretical resonance. Using a process that dates back to the turn of the century, she engages a technological and formal lineage that returns to Braddock's industrial heyday to document its decline. The prints are made through process where dye is

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<sup>64</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity" in *d i f f e r e n c e s : A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* Volume 18, Number 1, 2007: 130.

fixed to paper, evoking a Fanonian metaphor of his Blackness. This photochemical fixity of the indexical trace came reinforce the notion of race as Coco Fusco and Jennifer Gonzalez outline in their writings for *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*.<sup>65</sup> She uses the tradition to ground herself and her subjects within an aesthetic tradition and historical reality that has, as she explains, excluded, erased, and omitted the lives of Black people in the American fabric of industry.

According to Doane, a medium's immutable qualities become the conditions of possibility. In photography, among its enabling constraints are stillness of the subject and fixity of the trace. In Roland Barthes's treatise at on photography, he identifies the medium's enabling qualities through an image of his mother, and exposes its limitations in the image of a Black man. Barthes describes the potential of the photographic portrait through the gesture. The "perfect gesture," he writes, relies on the affective shock, in which the photographer carefully senses, culls, and summons the invisible from his/her subject. As a result, Barthes makes the case that the aesthetic potential is driven by contingency, and that "shock" makes palpable sensations that cannot be constrained to representation or contained by rationalization. Out of this exchange, surprises multiply within and around the image, capturing what occurs outside of the grasp of vision. One of these surprises, which he calls performances, emerges from the tradition or portrait painting, in which a gesture is "apprehended at the point in its course where the normal eye cannot arrest it..."<sup>66</sup> The subject's gesture becomes a significant source of potential, of affective charge, and force that moves beyond the portrait's figure. It is movement caught between meaning, in enduring duration.

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<sup>65</sup> Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds., *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010) 32—33.

Frazier echoes this power of the gesture in photography. In Frazier's photographs, she and her mother pose together in a series of different poses that reflect their sameness and their differences. She and her mother use the camera to develop a formal investigation of the fleeting gestures they exchange. In their portraits, they carefully stage their appearance in the image. Through their placements of different of mirrors and cameras they create deictic experiments, confusing distinctions between here-and-there.

Barthes generates theory out of a photograph's positive qualities of his mother's gesture. As he finds an image of his mother as a young girl, the contingent gesture blossoms into the sting of the punctum. Resisting the impulse to have the gesture represent his mother, he takes pains to describe how "the awkward gesture" and "the naïve attitude of her hands" makes the essence of his mother's being sensible. In his description, the undeveloped gesture and her accidental pose give way to the affects surrounding the image, mainly his grief. He finds this image, unlike the others, does not just express her identity but her essence.

Frazier and her mother are ambivalent toward the photograph as an authoritative record and the portrait's ability to draw out the essence of its subjects. Their attention to gesture allows interiority to slip out of grasp, withheld from each other and from the viewer. As they engage the consequences of disappearing and the lasting consequences of photography's enforcement of race, they introduce experimental deixis as an intervention of the indexical trace.

Barthes uses the photograph of a Black man to demonstrate the medium's ability to express "very raw material of ethnological knowledge."<sup>67</sup> Avedon's portrait of William Casby works the same way as his mother's picture but yields different effects. In contrast to surprises the image of his mother held, Casby's image determines what is knowable about race. In the image of Casby, which is captioned "A Black man born a slave," Barthes does not see a face but

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<sup>67</sup> Barthes, 28.

a mask. Stripping him from individual presence, Barthes finds the “essence of slavery” instead. As Shawn Michelle Smith critically notes in *At the Edge of Sight*, the legibility of race narrows the possibilities of what Barthes can find.<sup>68</sup> When addressing the direct gaze in William Casby’s portrait, Barthes’ does not find the subject’s performance and cannot find the gestural exchange, its agency to call or even respond. Race, as Alessandra Raengo writes, is founded on the assumption that Blackness is a corporeal fact and knowable narrative.<sup>69</sup>

In contrast, Frazier and her mother often appear together in different configurations — pressed against each other, almost out of view, in front of and behind the camera. Acting as both artists and subjects, they accomplish what I have described as experimental deixis through a multidirectional process. In front of and behind the camera, they take turns looking through the camera and looking back at it, constantly shifting between authority and vulnerability of mother and daughter, artist and sitter, ethnographer and subject. In an artist statement from 2008, Frazier writes the following:

Mom is co-author, artist and subject. Our relationship only exists through a process of making images together. I see beauty in all her imperfections and abuse. Her drug addiction is secondary to our psychological connection. When we are capturing one another we meditate on our difference and sameness.<sup>70</sup>

As a result, they engage in experimental documentation that maintains the affective and physical shifts taking place between them as time acts as a reparative force on their relationship and unrelenting force on their bodies.

According to Cynthia Freeland, portraits are defined by three traits: a recognizable body, along with inner life (character or psychological state), and the ability to pose or present oneself

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<sup>68</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 46.

<sup>70</sup> LaToya Ruby Frazier, Artist Statement for *The Notion of Family*, Center for Photography at Woodstock, <https://www.cpw.org/artist/latoya-ruby-frazier/>.



to be depicted in a representation.<sup>71</sup> For Barthes, Casby cannot be free to pose himself. For Frazier posing becomes a way to create photographs that move beyond the the portrait's enabling constraints. She explains, "My position and role as daughter, photographer, and filmmaker transcends the objective practice in classic documentary, which has continuously undermined the Black family experience by avoiding our emotional and psychological realm."<sup>72</sup> Frazier and her mother use their multirectionality to complicate the history of the photographic portrait, and the way formal enabling constraints fixed blackness to the surface and refused its depth. As the photographic act simultaneously illustrates the artists' abilities to formally look inward and outward, before and after, Frazier and her mother mobilize stillness.

Although the photographs of Frazier and her family do not direct a call to action, the agency of movement has important political implications. As King and Goldman engage in the transformation of the incidental and improvisational movements of Black people into the choreographic of Blackness, they both develop a view of freedom as ongoing adjustments to enabling constraints, rather than a desired endpoint devoid of constraint. Frazier's performances with her mother explore movement at the aesthetic threshold of blackness between hypervisibility and invisibility. Like Fanon, who related his Blackness to photography and to cinema, Frazier uses photography and cinema to explore how Blackness feels. Like Fanon, who also describes being seen as a stumbling and crawling, Frazier explores how falls might be recuperated. In Frazier's portrait films, blackness takes an amorphous shape as an ongoing relational engagement with the overarching antagonizing structures of deindustrialization.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and Persons* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 74.

<sup>72</sup> Artist Statement for *Momme Portrait Series*, Center for Photography at Woodstock, <https://www.cpw.org/artist/latoya-ruby-frazier/>.

<sup>73</sup> Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 38.

### 3.3 *Micromovements and the Mobility of Stillness*

By mobilizing stillness, Frazier explores the responsive potential of immobility. *Self Portrait (Steel Mill)* is a two-channel video without cuts. In one frame, Frazier stands nude from the waist up in medium close up. In the other, the smoke from a steel mill billows out from behind a series of homes. The stillness of the camera and its durationality give way to the Frazier's physical micro-movements. Frazier's deep breaths, her wavering body, and her direct stare come into relief, creating a call and response with the factory smoke, seeping out of chimneys, that is populating the image. She stands in front of a gold floral sheet, the light shining behind it visible through it. The rise and fall of her labored, breath is doubled by the barely perceptible rise and fall of the camera as it records the factory.

The juxtaposition of her breathing body with the factory's rise and fall is more than a cause and effect between the moving body and the moving image, between the body and its environment. Rather the juxtaposition reveals a responsive negotiation. By pairing these images, she explores immobility that Goldman investigates as "tight places," writing, "[Houston] Baker's term offers a useful starting place from which to analyze the ways in which one's shifting social and historical positions in the world affects one's mobility."<sup>74</sup> As Frazier performs at the limits of movement, the subtlety of her movement reorients the experience of time and space.

In standing still, she engages the exhausting responsivity of immobility. Erin Manning writes, "Standing still is a metastable activity: the stillness demands precise adaptation to the micro-movements of a shifting equilibrium. To stand still you have to move."<sup>75</sup> Linking this to posture, she continues, "Posture is less a stopping of movement than a passing-through. If standing still is a shifting between thousands of micro-movements in the making, posture is how

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<sup>74</sup> Goldman, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012), 43.

its incipient actions is felt.”<sup>76</sup> As the dual frames create a tension, Frazier’s labored breathing binds them together. As stillness gives way to micromovement, the camera both supports Frazier’s bodily rhythm. Frazier endures the camera’s look and a lifetime of the factory’s waste.

As stillness becomes reoriented as micro-movements, Frazier engages the disorienting relationship between immobility and stillness. In “In which way is down?” King writes, “Blackness has always been more of (a) movement, both literal and abstract, than a racial category. Blackness performs the direction of indirection, the mobility that is immobility, the reorientation that is disorientation.”<sup>77</sup> For King, Blackness cannot be fixed, even in its immobility; it persists as a destabilizing movement.<sup>78</sup> By orienting Blackness as movement and not visibility, King shows the disorienting potential of shifting between stillness and movement. Frazier’s stillness engages the indirection of immobility as incipience. For Frazier incipience is not aimed towards progress. The micromovements of her stillness tremble in excess of fixity and exhausting movement.

Once again, the video does not mimic the horizontal thrust of narrative form, but takes its shape from her body in constant adjustment. These adjustments exist in contrast to the productive gestures of industrialization. In her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Doane explains, “In Taylorism, each of the laborer’s movements must be meaningful; ideally there is no loss or excess in the system. The body’s movements are efficient and purposeful, and time becomes the measure of that efficiency.”<sup>79</sup> In contrast, Frazier’s immobility exposes the legacy of industrialization, the movements of labor

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>78</sup> Jason King, “Which Way Is down? Improvisations on Black Mobility,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 14, no. 27 (n.d.), 29.

<sup>79</sup> Doane, Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 10.

have been replaced by labored breathing, disorienting distinctions between lost and excessive movement.

As micro-movement, Frazier might not appear to gesture in any direction. Instead, she engages the interruptions made on the cyclical rhythms of her body. As a result, her breathing—the rise and fall of her chest, the movement of her breath, its pervasive sound—holds open space and time. Lauren Berlant explains that an aesthetic arrangement of bodies allows them to perform an interruption amid transition. She writes:

It involves encountering what it feels like to be in the middle of a shift and to use reconfigurations of manner amid the persistence of the body in the world to embody not the continuities of institutionalized history but something incoherent or uncongealed in the ongoing activity of the social.<sup>80</sup>

For Frazier, micromovements of her breath perform an intervention into the histories of American industrial progress and it asks the moving image to sense and respond rather than simply record her body. Berlant elaborates, “The gesture does not mark time, if time is a movement forward, but makes time, holding the present open to attention and unpredicted exchange...A situation can grow around it or not, because it makes the smallest opening, a movement-created space.”<sup>81</sup> Even in the non-response, Frazier’s breath negotiates a physical, temporal, and spatial orientation of between-ness. The impact of micromovements is further developed through dance’s keen attention to the bodily shifts. As Manning discusses, dancers have the ability to “breathe space, folding the space into the duration of a textured tactility that moves the air, creating a sense of clearing.”<sup>82</sup> As a minor gesture, her breath attends to nuanced rhythms that might otherwise be overlooked. Standing still becomes a way to create a responsive viewer.

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<sup>80</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 198.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 198—199.

<sup>82</sup> Manning, *Relationescapes*, 71.

As Frazier's images wrestle with the historicity of the medium and its potential as breathing document, the knowledge of the record and aesthetic ambiguity, Frazier's artistic gestures make room in the archives for lives not deemed productive.

### 3.4 *A Trembling Archive*

As a trembling archive, Frazier's series *Momme Portrait Series* engages personal and social vulnerability from behind and in front of the image. Manning writes, "The minor gesture is the force that makes the lines tremble that compose the everyday, the lines, both structural and fragmentary, that articulate how else experience can come into expression."<sup>83</sup> For Frazier the negotiation between still and moving images, stillness and movement, fixity and deixis are all ways to create a trembling structure. Trembling between stillness and movement acts as a responsive formal gesture that constantly negotiates the past and future. The *Momme* series is part of her nearly fifteen year long photography and video series *Notion of Family* (2001–2014) series. As a portrait series that has unfolded over time, portraits reflect the tension between the uncertainty toward the future and the optimism it once held. Photographs document the mantles, refrigerators, and nightstands as archives teeming with baby pictures, class photos, and mall portraits, when the future was brighter. With renewed attention to documentation in *Notion of Family*, the Frazier women turn to self-portraiture to capture lives exhausted by the everyday negotiations of living in the rust belt.

Creating formal composition of intimate exchanges they develop a porous archive of Black portraiture and blackness in the archive. Referencing the social documentary of Walker Evans and Gordon Parks, Carl Van Vecthen's portraits of key figures from the Harlem Renaissance, Frazier engages different modes of capturing Black life. As she works new media,

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<sup>83</sup> Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 7.

Frazier creates videos at threshold of vision and movement. As a result she creates portrait films that perform archivization. For Domietta Torlasco describes new media art creates archives that “speaks of lost life as much of life that demands to be lived, subverting the order that holds sway over the relation between intelligibility and existence.”<sup>84</sup> Echoing what Torlasco defines as the “heretical archive,” Frazier’s work “displays and affirms against the violence of definition and the inevitability of forgetting.”<sup>85</sup> Through movement, Frazier engages a choreographic potential of the portrait. Profilmic gestures allow images expand and contract, double and blur, and give out from the bottom, challenging the horizontal thrust of the moving image and its temporal progression. Frazier and her mother create a responsive aesthetic that is unconstrained by photographic fixity.

Although Frazier and her mother engage new media forms that are not bound by linearity, she does not insist on videon installation as a movement towards freedom. Rather, the video installations archive an ambivalence of living in the midst of social and physical declines.

Jason King concludes:

Terminal ambivalence is the performance of disorientation. And performing ambivalence around terminality is another way to consider how people survive in the midst of suffering, negative circumstance and death. No dead-end is really an end, no fall is really a fall, just an opportunity to (re-)move. In the midst of constant worries about the political (in)direction of Black people, we might pay more attention to the way Blackness already remobilizes the concept of directionality.<sup>86</sup>

While making the series, her grandfather dies, her grandmother dies. Her mother gets sick. She gets sick. Although the photographs of Frazier and her family do not direct a call to action, the agency of artistic expression has important political implications.

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<sup>84</sup> Torlasco, xv.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> King, “Which way is down?,” 43.

In *The Momme Portrait Series*, Frazier's artistic gesture engages immobility and movement, and movement as stillness, creating multidirectional movement. Together, Frazier and her mother engage the enabling constraints of medium, Blackness, and (im)mobility to reorient the terms of value in their lives and make room for their lives in the histories of art.

As an archive of shifts between movement and stillness, Thomas develops a trembling archive. Frazier choreographs the relationship between herself, her mother, and the camera using multidirectional orientations in the pose, contact improvisation in performances, and the micromovements of stillness. Through these images with her mother, Frazier creates formal experiments that interrogate the camera's role in shaping American notions of race in both portraiture and social documentary. Together, these portraits create an expansive record that is not fixed but multidirectional.

#### 4 POLYRHYTHMIC ARCHIVES IN MICKALENE THOMAS' PORTRAIT FILMS

In the spring of 2017, the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art presented an exhibition of Mickalene Thomas' new experimental moving image work titled *Mickalene Thomas: Muses, Mentors, & Celebrities*. Housed within a historically black women's college, the Museum was significant site for the exhibition, which was first developed and shown following the artist's residency at the Aspen Art Museum in 2016. Together, the works weave a history of avant-garde practices in visual art and contemporary visual culture. The works reference the formal properties of foundational experimental film and video makers, including Nam June Paik's video sculptures and Andy Warhol's screen tests, to performances of Black icons such as Eartha Kitt, Nina Simone, and Josephine Baker. As Thomas explained in her artist's talk at Spelman College, her approach to each medium requires a different "gesture," or a different formal means of working through a particular idea.<sup>87</sup>

In this chapter, I focus on work from two exhibitions *Mentors, Muses, & Celebrities* and the 2017 exhibition *Mickalene Thomas: Waiting on a Prime Time Star* at Tulane University's Newcomb Museum. At the Newcomb Museum, the exhibition featured large-scaled paintings and photography, along with a living room tableau in which her film *Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman* was on view. In discussing the works from these exhibitions, I attend to the artist's portrait films along with their relationship to painting. In doing so I attend her development of polyrhythmic choreography of the moving image. Here, polyrhythm speaks to the way her formal interest in collage simultaneously attends to the artist's painterly gestures, the moving image, and multiple subjects' movements.

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<sup>87</sup> Mickalene Thomas in conversation with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Art Papers Live at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, February 9, 2017.



Expanding on my analysis of LaToya Ruby Frazier's multi-directionality, I examine how Thomas enables Black, queer, and female subjects to appear on screen in unpredictable aesthetic and social arrangements that might feel intimate, insecure, and without contour. In doing so, we begin to see how polyrhythms of the moving image and the profilmic gesture create archives of Black women performers who create intertextual gestures as a means of political multiplicity—what Malik Gaines defines as “multiple positionality.”<sup>88</sup> Using a complex arrangement of movement, Thomas attends to the ways in which her subjects transition from positions of exclusion. In doing so, she creates dissonant archives of intertextual gestures that are unmoored from the fixity of order.

Thomas is known for her elaborate painted and photographic portraits of Black women—including models, her partner, and her mother; these portraits are playful and subversive, intimate and monumental, and feminine and feminist. Like LaToya Ruby Frazier, Thomas used the act of portraiture to develop her relationship with her mother through an ongoing exploration of her mother as a subject, up to and following her death. In these painted portraits, Thomas often combines classical poses such as the odalisque with Blacksploitation tropes, creating portraits of women that combine visual strategies that simultaneously reference the canon of European art, Black visual culture and her own memories.

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#### 4.1 *Polyrhythmic Gestures of Video Installation*

In *Do I Look Like a Lady?*, Thomas creates an archive of Black women who have used performance as a site of multiple positionality that entangles the politics of their bodies with social justice and pleasure. *Do I Look like a Lady?* takes its name from the opening line of a

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<sup>88</sup> Malik Gaines, “The Quadruple-Consciousness of Nina Simone,” in *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 23, No. 2, (2013): 248.

comedy set by Adele Givens. Stepping on stage, she asks the crowd, “Do I look like a fucking lady or what?” punctuating the discordance between look and sound of respectability and establishing an intertextual performance. The title becomes a kind of refrain, echoing the name of Thomas’ video-painting diptych series *Ain’t I A Woman?* Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech, and bell hooks’ 1981 book of the same title.

In *Do I Look Like a Lady?* Thomas creates a mosaic of moving portraits of controversial black female singers and comedians who have been both revered and reviled in popular culture for their sexuality. Ripping material from YouTube videos of film and television performances, Thomas creates a discontinuous and fragmented archive of black female entertainers, including Josephine Baker, Pam Grier, Moms Mabley, Whoopi Goldberg, Nina Simone, and Eartha Kitt. She also includes comedians who are less well known in mainstream culture, such as Adele Givens and Phyllis Yvonne Stickney, who were popular in the 90s with Black audiences on late-night TV and in comedy clubs. The shifting formats reflect the vulnerability and the persistence of these records. As the work exists between the television screen and the digital projection, and the theater stage and the computer, they have so far managed to “migrate” into new formats.<sup>89</sup> Their persistence relies on a community of lay archivists.

At Spelman College Museum of Fine Art the work was projected directly onto a wall using two high-powered digital projectors, creating side-by-side projections. Formally, the double projection echoes the dual nature of vision and stereoscopic technology. Here, however, the arrangement of images never becomes cohesive. As these individual moving portraits proliferate next to each other, they cannot be considered discretely but rather always in physical and temporal relation. As the bodies in the work move, they are not limited by the dualism of the screen but instead follow the multiplicity of polyrhythmic and polycentric movement. Thomas’

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<sup>89</sup> Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness, *Migrations of Gesture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

performers are not bound by the diegetic space and time of their original recordings; rather, they exist in polyrhythmic relation to each other.

Extreme close-ups, slow motion, intermittent static, and a sliding structural grid all serve to remove the context of the performances in favor of an emphasis on the gestural, ranging from the comedian's emotive facial expressions to the singers' gesticulations. The sliding grid that frames Thomas' subjects delineates the space of performance and punctuates the act of recording. For Akira Lippit, the interconnected registers of movement of profilmic gestures and the body of the cinematic apparatus form what he calls "digesture." "Digesture" strips away the narrative context of gestures, exposes the frame, and makes visible the forces acting upon the body.<sup>90</sup> As the moving grid is applied to choreographed performances, they are transformed into incomplete and unpredictable acts. Gestures become responses to the aesthetic delimitations of formal movement.

Through this collection of performances, Thomas creates an unpredictable archive of gestures that range from the incidental to the histrionic. The measured pacing and cadence of the comedians are contrasted with the frenetic dancing of Josephine Baker and the gratuitous physicality of Pam Grier mud wrestling with another woman. Wanda Sykes and Mo'Nique time their gestures to coincide their words, oscillating between sexual pantomiming and conversational gesticulation. According to dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, polyrhythmic movement is an Africanist approach to dance that creates "an aesthetic that privileges complex, contrapuntal rhythms."<sup>91</sup> Polyrhythmic dancing allows all parts of the body to move and carry

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<sup>90</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>91</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, "The Diaspora Dance Boom (Dance in the World and the World in Dance)," [https://brendadixongottschild.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/diasporadanceboom9\\_04.pdf](https://brendadixongottschild.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/diasporadanceboom9_04.pdf), pp 4.

different rhythms.<sup>92</sup> While polyrhythmic dancing often refers to a single body, here Thomas engages in the polyrhythms of a community of gestures.

Thomas also engages polyrhythm as a way of exhibiting multiple moments in time. Both Baker and Kitt reappear repeatedly at different points in their careers, during which they went in and out of favor in popular culture. As these images come in and out of view, their movement directs the camera to follow, creating a rhythm of pans and close-ups. Thomas created the moving grid as a formal gesture that moves across both screens, at times delineating the performances, and at other times destabilizing them. While Black women's bodies have been used to define the norms of white femininity through excess, in this work, they act in relation to each other. Excess becomes the condition from which to resist what Gaines describes as permanent positions of exclusion and alienation.<sup>93</sup>

A recording of Eartha Kitt's performing "Let's Do It," is mirrored across both screens. In the original recording Kitt performs directly to the camera. In the video installation Kitt's body is framed by the moving grid. Bars of static threaten the security of the image. The grid's movement directs your eye to her performance, such as the flick of her hand and the way her head drops as she looks into the camera. The video is slowed down, so that her iconic purr and wink can be studied before the clip deteriorates into static. She emerges again in the next edit across both screens as an older woman. The recording begins midway through a sentence. She laughs and quickly changes course as says, "and suddenly through the window came a bomb, and suddenly we were caught off from the world..." She continues to speak about her daughter in a singsong voice as she transitions into a rendition of "All by Myself." One screen "gives out" becoming static before a grid of comedians comes into view. As more performers come in to

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Gaines, "Quadruple Consciousness."

view across the screens, they flicker and fade behind static. Kitt's voice begins reverberate and loop, becoming both the call and response. The testimony of Kitt's experiences of shame and love form a sound bridge connecting these affects disparate gestures that emerge from dancing and joking.

By breaking down performances into a series of unpredictable moments, Thomas creates studies of her subjects wherein small bodily movements take the place of narratives. Due to the formal movement featured in the work, performers featured in the video installation are constantly engaged in transition—between the set-up and the punch line and crescendo and applause, productively thwarting narrative expectations of performances. Drawing from Jose Esteban Munoz's *Cruising Utopia*, Juana Maria Rodriguez suggests that quotidian gestures are laden with political potentiality: “As a mode of critique, gesture emphasizes how a cascade of everyday actions is capable of altering political life. As a way of articulating political action gesture highlights intentions, process, and practice over objectives and certainty.”<sup>94</sup> Gestures have the potential to activate the body as a corporeal archive of marginalized communities and undocumented moments. As an ongoing accumulating process, gestures have the potential to perform unexpected political improvisations.

As the performances advance and recede on screen, they move like solos in a social dance. Black social dancing, as choreographer Camille A. Brown states, is not choreographed by any one person, nor can it be traced to any one moment. As a historic form of Black movement, social dancing has served as a means of fugitive expression in which improvisation resists binding social constraints, allowing communities to form and un-form through movement and over time. Black social dancing expands the polyrhythm of a single dancer into a social

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<sup>94</sup> Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 2.

configuration. As Thomas' subjects "dance," she imagines a community of black women that forms through contrapuntal polyrhythm rather than symmetry.

In his essay "Bone-Breaking, Black Social Dance, and Queer Corporeal Orature," Thomas F. DeFrantz explains the political potential of movements within black social dances, as they move from between queer and heteronormative homosocial spaces. For DeFrantz, Black social dances continue to provide opportunities for "flashes" of non-normative gender expression, contributing to unexpected renderings of social identity.<sup>95</sup> He writes, "Black social dance grows in volume and effect through these engagements with queer embodiment. Queer gender articulations, including those performed by non-queer dancers, drive Black social dance practices forward."<sup>96</sup> As Thomas formal grid collects and displays these performances, certain performances advance, allowing for these flashes, forming as innuendos that dissolve when pinned down, that gestures towards queer lives. While the performers featured in the work do not express explicitly queer sexuality, their non-normative gender expressions make room for queer renderings of the social contract.

During its exhibition at Spelman, *Do I Look Like a Lady?* was shown within a living room/study/studio interior space. Books by Black feminist authors were stacked for viewers to read while watching. Together viewers were prompted to create communities of Black female entertainers, Black feminist scholars, novelists, and themselves, wherein the personal lives of Black women and avant-garde experimentation cannot be isolated from one another. Shown at Spelman, the work resonated within the cultural and historical context of a historically Black women's college. Reverberating against the long-standing campus discourses on respectability, Black feminism, and the increasing presence of queer politics.

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Bone-Breaking, Black Social Dance, and Queer Corporeal Orature" *The Black Scholar* Vol. 46, No. 1, 2016, 69.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

*Do I Look Like a Lady?* is not only intersectional but creates intertextual gaps of intelligibility, as it enables the raunchy to change the course of the institutionalization of Black feminist politics. As viewers read and watch and clap and laugh, they gesture towards these women, supporting their subversion as it takes shape around gestures and what goes unsaid. In her book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, Juana Maria Rodriguez argues that gestures extend the reach of the self, bringing “we” into a possibility that is continuously coming together and coming undone.<sup>97</sup> Through choreographic thinking, Thomas examines the ways in which Black women have used comedy and music to transform vulnerable experiences of shame and pleasure into emergent collectivity. As these performances move from the comedy club, to the TV slot, to YouTube, to the exhibition, the dissonant “we” that the work archives also expands.

Thomas’ uses polyrhythms as a way of creating formal connections between portrait of Black women and avant-garde histories. Her films *Screen Tests* were exhibited as part of *Muses, Mentors, & Celebrities*. Shot in Super8, the works incorporate Warhol’s films of the same name, the experimental traditions of hand-painted films, and the medium of the home movie. In the videos, in which Thomas, her partner, and models serve as subjects, the camera zooms in on the subjects’ faces and captures their shifts between poses as they adjust their facial expressions and comportment under the camera’s scrutiny. The top and bottom of the preceding and proceeding film frames were intentionally left visible when the film was processed. Thomas’ painterly hand becomes visible through the multi-colored lines of paint that occasionally streak the image before circling the eye of one subject and the lips of another. As an alternative to visual traditions, Jennifer M. Barker suggests that the haptic generates “a caressing touch rather than a

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<sup>97</sup> Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 2.

penetrating gaze.”<sup>98</sup> Looking to the painterly effects of Carolee Schneeman’s film *Fuses* (1967), Barker explores how the haptic engages the tactile qualities of painting and potentially provides a feminist alternative to film’s scopic vision.<sup>99</sup> By creating a dynamic relationship between the moving image, the moving body, and the artist’s painterly gesture, Thomas engages the rhythms of filmic movement, where one source of movement is not privileged but can play off another in polyrhythm. In Her *Screen Tests* formal gestures create intermedia strategies of touch that engage painting and/as the moving image.

#### 4.2 *Intertextual Disruptions*

Thomas couples this haptic approach to building up of the canvas with collage techniques that render bodies from multiple sources. In *Shinique Now I Know* (2015), the reclining nude recalls Ingres’ *La Grande Odalisque* (1814). In Thomas’ painting, the construction of the image is laid bare; the decorative floral motif of the interior space transitions into a flat treatment of the surface at the painting’s top edge. The photograph fragment that is used as her subject’s eye is in a different color and scale from the rest of her face. The photograph used to depict her subject’s legs is in contrast to the painted nude torso, joining two different kinds of records, histories, and theories. By incorporating photography, glitter, and acrylic to complete her subject’s body, Thomas develops a portrait that formally combines the different processes, enabling constraints, and rhythms of the different mediums used in creating the work.

In her paintings, she creates highly tactile surfaces by using patterned fabrics, glitter, and beadwork to render the contours of her subjects’ bodies and build up the surface of each canvas. These sumptuous tactile surfaces generate an intimacy with their viewers that favors touch over the look, creating exchanges of mutual prehension. Thomas’s formal interventions call into

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<sup>98</sup> Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, CA: California Press, 2009) 24.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*



question the social contract that visual culture has maintained with black women's bodies. As Nicole Fleetwood discusses in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*, visual culture has historically rendered Black women's bodies both visibly excessive and subjectively muted through what she defines as hypervisibility.<sup>100</sup> By creating a sense of painterly touch in her painted portraits, Thomas develops an aesthetic of care that intervenes in a visual culture that has deemed Black women's bodies simultaneously superfluous and indispensable to establishing normative codes concerning the white female body and femininity.<sup>101</sup>

Thomas deliberately engages feminine and/as feminist aesthetic strategies as she utilizes materials and spaces of women's work. In her large-scale paintings, her painterly gestures can be characterized more as adornment than brushstroke. Rhinestones decorate painted toenails; sequins are used as the material of clothing. She builds living room tableaus for her exhibition and her studio, provoking viewers to consider the domestic sphere as a site for aesthetic experimentation. In creating multimedia collage, Thomas both intervenes in the tradition of art history and engages the artist-subject relationship from multiple perspectives. This multiplicity creates a contrapuntal diegesis of her painting, enabling the rendered body to maintain different spaces and times simultaneously, and allowing her subject to shape shift before the viewer's eyes. As collage techniques enable her subject's body to maintain multiplicity, the paintings' haptic surface generates intimacy between the viewer and the painting's subject.

As Thomas creates prehensive encounters between the painting and viewers, viewers are prompted to share in the experience of desires that might be familial and familiar, feminine and feminist, however disorienting this engagement may be. Through her use of multiple perspectives and mediums, Thomas enables the Black female body to hold multiple positions,

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<sup>100</sup> Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), 111.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

transforming the stasis of her subject's pose into what Erin Manning describes as the passing through, or incipience, of posture.<sup>102</sup> She writes that "Posture is less of a stance than tendency of momentariness."<sup>103</sup> Posture is a tendency towards transition. The subjects in her portraits are not fixed in time by the pose, but maintain an agency of incipience within the image, creating a sense of movement that exceeds the limits of the image. As Thomas creates paintings and photographs of the same subjects, she explores her subjects in transition between mediums, and between one instance of the pose and another.

As Thomas queers the subject-artist relationship, she presents another way to portray women, making portraiture a way of establishing contact through mutual prehension. In his essay "Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness," Derek Conrad Murray contextualizes Thomas' practice as queer. He finds that Thomas's engagement with aberrance serves as a productive disorientation that views identity as an enabling constraint—a set of strictures that provide room for improvisatory ways of being.<sup>104</sup> For Jason King, disorientation becomes a condition of possibility for Blackness.<sup>105</sup> Queer, in this case, speaks to the ways in which sexual desire and non-normative gender expressions can be socially disorienting, disrupting the social contract that maintains we look at portrait. Discussing the social orientation of queer phenomenology, Sara Ahmed writes, "If the sexual involves the contingency of bodies coming into contact with other bodies, then sexual disorientation slides quickly into social disorientation, as a disorientation in how things are arranged."<sup>106</sup> Through her haptic paintings of

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<sup>102</sup> Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012), 44.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>104</sup> Derek Conrad Murray, "Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness," *American Art* 28, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 10.

<sup>105</sup> Jason King, "Which way is down? Improvisations on Black Mobility," in *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 27 14:1: 25–45.

<sup>106</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 566.

women, Thomas' paintings require viewers come into contact with black women who both display their bodies and look back. By creating haptic portraits, Thomas turns sexualized poses into intimate exchanges. An intimate relationship runs counter to the spectacle or invisibility of black women's bodies that we have learned to expect in visual culture.

In introducing *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Jack Halberstam writes that disorientation in the undercommons is not just unfortunate, but necessary. The undercommons is a way of being within exclusion, and an expression black radical traditions that refuses to be called to order. Halberstam writes:

...you will no longer be in one location moving forward to another, instead you will already be part of 'the movement of things' and on the way to this 'outlawed social life of nothing.' The movement of things can be felt and touched and exists in language and in fantasy, it is flight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself.<sup>107</sup>

Because disorientation becomes a way of being within exclusion, it speaks to the incongruous simultaneities that the undercommons purposes through a radical community of heterogeneity. As a social practice of nothing, Harney and Moten develop fugitivity develop communities around movement and touch that risk unintelligibility. As Thomas's images support her subjects' provocation of social disorientation by developing an aesthetic gesture that emerges from collage and engages in "multiple positionality." Malik Gaines writes that "multiple positionality is a source of provisional power, and a way to act in excess of the permanent exclusion experienced in any one location."<sup>108</sup> Considering the "quadruple consciousness" of Nina Simone, Gaines investigates how she performed outside of the dualism of a whole or divided Black subject. For Gaines, Simone performed the multiplicity of Blackness, weaving together performance traditions including blues, poetry, folk, theater, and pop—and transforming "the locations of

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<sup>107</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Autonomedia, 2013) 11.

<sup>108</sup> Malik Gaines, "Quadruple Consciousness," 248.

marginality and exclusion into improvised positions from which to speak.”<sup>109</sup> Her performances are also characterized by interruptions, trailing off, and abrupt changes of course.

In *Shinique Now I Know* is made up of interruptions, such as the multiple sources for her body, a Black woman’s use of a classical pose, a title that sounds more like a hip-hop song than a painting you would find in art history. Together, the painting uses intertextuality of the pose to disrupt the viewer’s expectations of the image. For Dixon Gottschild, intertextuality is a way of recognizing how specific movements, or gestures, are used and repeated across various seemingly distinct genres of dance and in everyday movement. Drawing from the literary term, she writes, “Forces, trends, phrases, traits, movement modes—texts, or tropes, in other words—of the various cultures in the air around us form the threads with which we weave our ‘new’ patterns.”<sup>110</sup> Intertextual movements yield unpredictable archives, filled with interruptions promising to appear in unexpected contexts.

For Thomas, disorientation characterizes both the performative strategies of her subjects, as well her own aesthetic strategy. By shifting between mediums within a single work, Thomas has developed a polyrhythmic gesture that prompts viewers to encounter images that are full of interruptions. These intertextual images have been decontextualized, what Jose Munoz might describe as images that have lost their epistemological ground. As Gaines engages multiplicity as a transitional, open-ended aesthetic strategy that is informed by a social position of the margins, I further investigate its potential as an archival strategy in Thomas’ work.

### 4.3 *Intermedia and the Study of Transitions*

*Ain’t I A Woman?* (2009) is a series of three painting-video diptychs. In each, Thomas uses video footage as a study, or preparatory drawing, for her painting and exhibits them both

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 3.

alongside each other. In the three works, her subjects are her mother Sandra and two trans women, Fran and Keri. The title is both a playful and political statement reflecting queer identity politics and Sojourner Truth's speech asserting Black womanhood. Hung side by side, the video and painting explore how their subject can dictate the formal process. The series was initially exhibited without reference to the subjects being transgender, enabling Thomas' subjects to not have to qualify their gender status. Accompanying each video, songs by Eartha Kitt relay various musings on what it means to be a woman, with her inimitable vibrato channeling a trembling vulnerability into a blend of charm, sex appeal, and subversion. In choreography transitional gestures generate new aesthetic forms. In his essay "Embracing Transition, Dancing in the Folds of Time," Carter suggests that:

Taking transition literally as a matter of gesture can facilitate thinking about its impact on relationality in ways that attend to the physicality of embodiment without bracketing the body's social, psychic, and affective dimensions.<sup>111</sup>

For Carter, dance becomes an appropriate framework for trans work due to the keen attention that dance places on transitions, enabling shifts from one kind of movement to another and from one temporality to another in ways that are not linear or progressive. He writes that transitions allow a forward-moving body to side step, a slowly moving body to accelerate, and energetic exchanges between bodies to take place.<sup>112</sup>

In the series, video serves as a form of sketching, creating a moving image version of preparatory drawing. Like preparatory drawings, the videos capture Thomas' subjects from a variety of positions and perspectives. Made prior to the paintings and exhibited after their completion, the videos act as both the call and the response to the portraits. Just as drawing

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<sup>111</sup> Julian Carter, "Embracing Transition, Dancing in the Folds of Time" *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, (2013): 4.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

maintains the artist's presence through his/her gestures, Thomas also moves in and out of the frame, occasionally taking photos. Examining the medium of video through the perspective of drawing, we can learn from the formal and social expectations of the practice. Nancy establishes the connection between the artist's formal gesture and the subject's movement, establishing a bridge between Nancy's definition of this term and my elaboration of the artistic gesture.

In his text for his exhibition titled *The Pleasure in Drawing*, Jean Luc Nancy writes the following:

Drawing is the opening of form. This can be through in two ways: opening in the sense of a beginning, departure, origin, dispatch, impetus, or sketching out, and opening in the sense of an availability or inherent capacity. According to the first sense, drawing evokes more the gesture of drawing than the traced figured. According to the second, it indicates the figure's essential incompleteness, a non-closure or non-totalizing of form.<sup>113</sup>

For Nancy, figuration in the sketch addresses the body's formal potential and its corporeal capacity rather than formal resolution. The preparatory drawing is then an open-ended exchange between an artist's gestures and a subject. Thomas' diptychs do not seek representational closure and instead remain open-ended in formal and potentially political ways. As the videos become a point of origin for the painting process, they document how the subject passes through a series of poses or postures, and the exchanges between artist and subject.

As documents, the videos capture her subjects' ability to shift, adjust, and reorient their postures. Keri poses boldly, seductively leaning over with her legs spread, before bending backwards in a way that seems to defy the limits of the body. Echoing Keri's backbreaking bend, the camera tilts 180 degrees, throwing the viewer off balance. Fran sits on a couch, coquettishly shaking her hair loose as she tilts her head and smiles broadly at Thomas off camera. Thomas'

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<sup>113</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 1–3.

mother, Sandra, goes from sitting formally with her hands on her knees to a confident and easy stance with her hands on her hips.

While these may seem insignificant physical gestures, they reflect their subjects' comportment, what Henri Lefebvre refers to as “dressage.” At the beginning of his chapter on the ways in which iterative gestures become habitual, Lefebvre writes: “Each segment of the body has its rhythm. These rhythms are in accord and discord with one another. What does one mean when one says of a boy or a girl that he or she is fully *natural*?” [original emphasis].<sup>114</sup> Here, Lefebvre links two ideas that are central to Thomas' rendering of her subjects: an aesthetic strategy that is polyrhythmic and a strategy for living that interrogates the expression of gender through gesture and exploring the potential for new rhythms and norms. Dressage has particular resonance for Black trans women, for whom movement acts a form of gender expression—a way of supporting their identities while protecting their bodies from the threat of violence. For Berlant, “dressage” cannot distinguish a movement's origins as forced adaptation, its potential to yield pleasurable variation, and its threatening dissolution of life-confirming norms.<sup>115</sup> In *Ain't I a Woman?* the video is a formal study of how her subjects move. With Eartha Kitt's bouncy musings on womanhood, their movements maintain multiplicity of the pleasures, pressures, and threats of gender expression.

In his essay exploring the keyword “transition” for the inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Julian Carter writes the following:

Transition is thousands of little gestures of protest and presence, adding up and getting some momentum behind them so that you finally achieve escape velocity from the category you were stuck in all those years ago. But how do you know when you have arrived? “Transition” is not like “the operation” in this sense, though “the operation” often serves as an imagined conclusion. At some point, for

<sup>114</sup> Henri Lefebvre, “Dressage,” in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Gerald Moore and Stuart Elden, (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 38.

<sup>115</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 8–9.

many people, changes become less pronounced, less socially and affectively intense. We may stop celebrating every sign of our revised movement in the world. We are on the other side.<sup>116</sup>

As Carter explains, small or minor gestures indicate the constant revisions that accumulate and indiscernibly transition from laborious to habitual. The transitional gestures are postures that make ungraspable and incipient movement felt.<sup>117</sup> Quotidian transitional gestures are incomplete insofar as they are without closure. Performing gender is not delineated by a before and after. Rather transitioning gestures become habit through a process that simultaneously remembers and invents new techniques of the social contract, which Manning defines as “emergent collectivity.”<sup>118</sup> This attention to political potential to the formations of habits is what Manning refers to as “choreographic thinking” of the interval.<sup>119</sup> As a choreographic thought, Keri’s disorienting backbend allows us to turn with her, engaging posture’s transitional movements as a social practice of relation.

Erin Brannigan identifies transitional movement in dance as form of Brownian motion that challenges any predetermined notions of movement, space, and time. As they are comprised entirely of shifting, unprivileged movements, transitions resist registration of the trace and the past.<sup>120</sup> Instead, they are entirely relational and open-ended. As Thomas’s subjects move between poses, they perform habits of passing that remember movement and resist the past. These gestures create new techniques of sociality and demand new aesthetic gestures.

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<sup>116</sup> Julian Carter, “Transition,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (May 1, 2014): 235–37, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2400145>.

<sup>117</sup> Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 43.

<sup>118</sup> Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 127.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 133.



As the diptychs engage transitions between stillness and movement, one is not privileged over the other. In fact, Thomas made other portraits based on these videos. In the paintings' decorative buildup, the canvases show Thomas' touch. In the series, the painting and video do not just point at each other but instead reach towards each other in mutual prehension as they engage in ongoing exchange that favors touch over the look. As the diptychs respond to their subjects' movements, Thomas creates a polyrhythmic arrangement of painting and video, Eartha Kitt's charm and Sojourner Truth's declaration, moving image and moving body. In doing so she creates disruptive forms out of discordant aesthetic traditions and identity politics. Like Nina Simone's performance of "Mississippi Goddam" in which her political outrage was delivered as a bouncy show tune, the diptychs create what Gaines describes as intertextual gaps of intelligibility.<sup>121</sup> In these intervals, Thomas' subjects perform multiple positions of Blackness and womanhood.

Recalling the video stacks of Nam June Paik, *Me as Muse* (2016) uses stacked video monitors to combine digital and analog technologies, to remember and transform video's formal abilities. Using the polyrhythmic artistic gesture, Thomas reimagines her paintings, such as *Shinique Now I Know*, through the moving image. She considers collage not only as a sequential montage but also through a spatialization of the cut. Displayed through monitors stacked into a sculptural grid, the work plays out through a variety of syncopated edits and pans, switching between animated snakeskin textiles, benday dots, and her nude body. As her image syncs across the grid of monitors, the camera zooms in on and lingers over her body, resting on her breasts, her tilting head, and her hand, which is resting on her thigh. Using digital processing, her image is disrupted by a montage of reclining nudes across art history and visual culture. As a polyrhythmic portrait she imagines the pose as poly-centered movement between bodies. As

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<sup>121</sup> Gaines, "Quadruple Consciousness," 253.

polyrhythmic movement, the composite portrait bodies form, dissipate, disperse, and split the screens, moving with a digital fluidity that would be impossible to achieve using analog processing of swipes, vertical rolls, and static's visual snow. As they appear and disappear, polyrhythmic movement is like the collage remembers different temporalities.

As an intertextual portrait of the reclining nude, the work coils together Thomas posing as *La Grande Odalisque*, the testimony of Eartha Kitt, Gustave Courbet's *Origine du monde* (1866), Grace Jones, Sarah Baartman (known as the "Venus Hottentot"), and others using the sculptural techniques of Nam June Paik's video sculptures. Thomas uses an interview with Eartha Kitt as voiceover. In it, Kitt speaks about the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that she experienced growing up. By imagining many Black women's bodies as one portrait, Thomas echoes Lefebvre when he writes that "The crowd is a body, the body is a crowd..."<sup>122</sup>

The formal arrangements of video installation support the resulting intertextual gaps of intelligibility. For Adrian Martin, video installations favor nominal or minor scenes; they enable layered structures and suggest other ways of knowing.<sup>123</sup> Considering the video installations of Chantal Akerman, Martin explores how minimal gestures that are caught in between can become indicative of entire potential narratives of love, loss, identity, conflict, co-habitation, and solitude.<sup>124</sup> Rather than creating a coherent mise-en-scene, video installations can arrange elements of movement and gesture, time and space, and image and sound in more expansive ways that may yield fractured and conflicting layers.<sup>125</sup> Jenny Chamarette explains that video installation is particularly suited to attending to gesture as form is also characterized by between-

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<sup>122</sup> Lefebvre, "Dressage," in *Rhythmanalysis*, 42.

<sup>123</sup> Adrian Martin, *Mise En Scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art*, Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014., 2014), 197

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

ness.<sup>126</sup> In a video installation, the archival impulse resists the structural ordering of the archive in favor of a shifting document that responds to affective, ephemeral, and palpable gestures.

By using an intermedia approach to intertextuality, Thomas utilizes the pose as a reparative archive of trauma. In their introduction to their issue “Public Sentiments” for *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, Ann Cvetkovich and Ann Pellegrini define the archiving of trauma as an act of relation that finds affective points of contact between public and private feelings.<sup>127</sup>

By engaging with the way in which private lives are made public, Kitt’s testimony reverberates among the muted subjectivities of the women portrayed. By exhibiting the performance of her subjects’ nudity, Thomas transforms the act of looking into act of beholding a performance, which, as Cvetkovich and Pellegrini suggest, is a more empathic form of identification.<sup>128</sup>

Thomas develops an artistic gesture that forms around multiple positionalities of her subjects and the hyper visible archive of Black women in visual culture. By engaging in polyrhythmic strategies that converge around touch, vision, and movement, Thomas develops archives grounded by the vulnerability of intimacy.

#### 4.4 *The Dissonant Archive*

In *Do I Look Like a Lady?* Thomas manipulates found footage into an incomplete archive whose order is difficult to anticipate and remember. Thomas posits an archive that does not seek order but consists of interruptions, changing courses, and improvisations. Like Jose Esteban Munoz, who examines the potential of queer archives to transform ephemera into evidence, Thomas creates a record of fleeting movements that may seem insignificant, ungrounded, and random. For Munoz, queer possibility emerges from an archival image that is not

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<sup>126</sup> Jenny Chamarette, “Between Women: Gesture, Intermediality, and Intersubjectivity in the Installations of Agnes Varda and Chantal Akerman,” *Studies in European Cinema* 10, no. 1 (2013): 45–57.

<sup>127</sup> Ann Cvetkovich and Ann Pellegrini, “Introduction to Public Sentiments,” *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 2, no. 11 (Summer 2003): 2.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

epistemologically framed and remains ungrounded because it is performatively polyvalent and ephemeral.<sup>129</sup> In this homosocial, social dance on screen, the women frankly discuss sexual desire and control, race, and identity—making available flashes of queer potential through instances of fleeting relationality.

Through a composite portrait of “nasty women” in *Do I Look Like a Lady?* Thomas generates a polyrhythmic archive in which the excessive nature of dirty jokes and the ephemeral nature of late-night performances can be situated as aesthetically and politically rigorous. Their physical gestures of non-closure resist becoming evidence and instead suggest how performers transform memories into corporeal practices and generate feelings that linger after the performance. These gestures relate to ephemera or what Munoz describes as “the traces of lived experiences and performances of lived experience maintaining the politics and urgencies long after these structures of feelings have been lived.”<sup>130</sup> Simultaneously, they re-present some of the images coming through Thomas’ own childhood living room, as part of the polyrhythmic composition of acts that have represent the ephemeral residue that has impacted her life. For Munoz, the residues of different live performances in the public sphere have powerful world-making capabilities.<sup>131</sup>

The work asks us to reconsider the avant-garde potential of both the temporalities of the Black public sphere—the nightclub and comedy club—as well as the intimacy of the Black private sphere, wherein HBO specials, *Late Night at the Apollo*, and VHS tapes were aired, recorded, rewound, and watched again. As these women carved out space in the afterhours, Thomas archives the ways in which they have transformed marginalized positions into spaces of

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<sup>129</sup> Jose Esteban Munoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 6.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

improvisation. This improvisation is both full of potential and threatening. In her essay, “Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future,” Kara Keeling explores how temporalities and the scopic regime are indelibly tied to the threat of violence against Black queer bodies.<sup>132</sup> For Keeling, moving images might support their subjects’ queer temporalities as a means of archiving against the grain. Images that go ungrounded reflect not only support of the productive polyvalence of art but also provide security to their subjects. Keeling suggests that we not ground precarious lives but instead allow them to exist unbounded by time so that they might reappear in a time when their visibility allows us to look after and care for them.<sup>133</sup> By creating a disordering archive, Thomas’s video installation posits viewing as a collective act of care, around which “we” begin to form.

For Rodriguez, the potential of gestures lies not only in their futurity but also in the way they coil together the past and present, which reveals, “how memory and feeling are enacted and transformed through bodily practices.”<sup>134</sup> The multiplicity of gestures serves as polyrhythmic records of bodily practices that exist at the limits of social legibility. They are also records of what cannot be traced such as the memories and feelings that went unsaid. In the video installation these gestures are not isolated acts but a collective repertoire of movements and memories formed out of alienation and exclusion.

Archivization may also be considered a choreographic relationship between form and its subjects. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida writes, “The archivization produces as much as it records the event.”<sup>135</sup> Due to this responsive relationship, formal disruptions

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<sup>132</sup> Keeling, Kara. “Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, no. 4 (2009): 565.

<sup>133</sup> Keeling, “Looking for M—,” 582.

<sup>134</sup> Rodriguez, 5.

<sup>135</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1997), 27.

transform how we remember. Domietta Torlasco suggests that “As perception undergoes new technological mutations, a certain practice of digital media enables us to see *otherwise*—to envision a past that has never been present and together with it, a future that cannot be exhausted by willful anticipation.”<sup>136</sup> As images in Thomas’ video installation disappear into static, we are reminded of the effort that countless users have taken to locate, digitize, and upload to YouTube and ultimately saving these performances from obscurity. The static suggests the moment of anticipation of recording from the TV, the love expressed by watching a video until the tape wears down, and the dependence on a precarious medium that was never meant to be archival.

Through the artist’s portrait films, Thomas archives intertextual gestures in polyrhythmic arrangements that are unmoored from fixity. This multiplicity generates radically dissonant performances that cannot separate the future from the past—recalling what Torlasco defines as the future anterior, or the “what will have been.” These uncertainties are reflected as formal gestures that appear across genres and mediums, and in everyday gestures of resistance and performances that practice freedom. Through choreography of these ephemeral transitions, Thomas creates a more expansive means of remembering how the intimate lives of Black women continue to shape the history and the future of the avant-garde. In doing so she develops a choreographic thinking of the gestures in the archive that questions the social contract of shared experiences and allows emergent collectivity to form around memories that “will have been.”

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<sup>136</sup> Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2013), 99.

## 5 DANCING THE UNDERGROUND: CHOREOGRAPHIES OF THE UNSTEADY LANDSCAPE IN JUMANA MANNA'S *BLESSED BLESSED OBLIVION*

In Jumana Manna's 20-minute-long video *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* (2010), the artist creates a "portrait of male thug culture in East Jerusalem, manifested in barbershops, autoshops and body building." Taking its style from Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, the video transforms documentary footage into a rhythmic entanglement of images whose visibility obfuscates meaning even as the footage sheds light on its subjects and their environment.<sup>137</sup> Taking as her subject *ars*, or "thugs," and their spaces, Manna focuses on an underground culture that is unfamiliar to both Palestinian cinema and globalized mass media alike. Her subjects are brazen, vain, shifty, trendy, vulgar, enterprising, and criminal. Filmed in tight close-ups, indoor spaces, and darkness, there are few instances where the outside world, as a geopolitical reality, is made visible within the frame.

As a video made in Palestine, it is tempting to search for allegorical meanings within this text. However, the video resists this kind of reading through its destabilizing treatment of its subject, style, and exhibition. Instead, it creates a portrait characterized by social choreography, which Andrew Hewitt defines as the way in which we rehearse and resist social order in both dance and everyday gestures. Because the subjects of *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* deliberately exist "underground," viewing becomes an act of accounting for what Kara Keeling describes as perceivable but not necessarily recognizable.<sup>138</sup>

While I have previously focused largely on practices that have emerged within the Black experience, I turn here to the Palestinian diaspora. Just as Black activism and Palestinian

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<sup>137</sup> Torlasco identifies this contradictory strategy of light and obfuscation as a key concept of the fold in her book *Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film*.

<sup>138</sup> Kara Keeling, "Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, no. 4 (2009): 567.

liberation have historically been linked, the use of the term “thug” also suggests a relationship between Black men and Manna’s subjects. Palestinian images like Blackness in the image have been a source for scholars to examine the relationship between politics and aesthetics. In this shift from Blackness in the moving image to Palestinian moving images, I suggest that artists’ portrait films reconsider the politics of aesthetics through a destabilizing choreography of gestures.

Set to Arab club music, the montage does not separate labor and leisure, creating everyday actions like weightlifting, tinkering with cars, and getting a shave into a rhythmic dance. This chapter focuses on the way in which the choreography of subjects’ gestures and those of the video both “dance the ground.” For Erin Manning “dancing the ground” connects a choreographer’s consideration of the ground as a participating element in dance to the adjustments we make in response to our daily stumbles.<sup>139</sup> Here, the ground refers to how Manna’s subjects manage their geopolitical landscape, as well as how the video manages the political expectations often attributed to Palestinian aesthetics. In his book *Social Choreography*, Andrew Hewitt asks “How can we be satisfied with establishing a relation of metaphoric causality between aesthetics and politics—linking one term to another—when one of the terms moves and shifts; when it dances?”<sup>140</sup> By examining the choreographic potential of the moving image, I look at how Manna’s images unground the causality of Palestinian aesthetics from the politics of the landscape. As the artist’s portrait film points outside of the frame to both a geopolitical reality and to different aesthetic traditions, it cannot be sited within a single genealogy but insists on the porous archive created by intertextual gestures.

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<sup>139</sup> Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012), 71.

<sup>140</sup> Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Duke University Press Books, 2005).



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### 5.1 *A Portrait of Shifty Subjects*

*Blessed Blessed Oblivion* begins with a black screen; “Hamsawi” Ahmad Bashir, the video’s lead, is in the middle of telling a dirty joke. He is speaking Arabic in a distorted high-pitched voice. He is speaking as a woman asking her son to get Viagra for his father, painting a vivid picture of a vagina that is so hungry that it has grown teeth and eaten a cucumber. Following stifled laughter from Manna, the video opens on a close-up of Bashir smoking a cigarette. In an extreme close-up, the camera focuses in on the way he brings his fingers to his mouth as he transitions into reciting the 1936 poem “The Martyr” by Abd Al-Rahim Muhmoud. She obscures his face, favoring quick, unfocused glimpses of his lips as he licks them and his shoulder-length gelled curly hair as he tucks it behind his ear. Here, the zoom’s scrutiny does not enact surveillance; rather, it keeps her subject hidden. As viewers we have already been thrown off balance as we try to make sense about who this man might be. The joke and poetry are discordant; the black screen and the zoom both effectively hide the video’s subject.

Following the opening poem, the words “Blessed Blessed” pulsate across the screen. The pace of the pulsating text is matched by the centrifugal force of a car doing donuts at night, where the whirling taillights emphasize a frenetic movement. In the next shot, the camera is pulled back to show Bashir and two other men seated under the harsh light of a street lamp and one man crouched by the hood of a car. At first glance, they seem to be loitering, turning their heads in different directions. Under the scrutiny of the camera and the pulsing beat of the music, their subtle gestures become a choreography of shifting positions so as not to draw attention to themselves. The scene becomes not one of inaction but waiting, changing the temporality from wasting time to the calculated time of the lookout. The word “Oblivion” appears again on the

screen, completes the video's name. The subsequent sequence progresses with both new and recycled shots—the images spin out into a sequence of images capturing these men's gestures as they dance at a bonfire, smoke brand name cigarettes, tinker with cars, and whisper in each other's ears. Often, the shots are so tightly framed that small pauses emphasize the transitional gestures made by the men on screen. During the lookout, one man clasps his hands. A man in an underground cellar shifts his hips, revealing heaps of car parts in front of him. As a man whispers into another man's ear, he drapes his arms across the other's shoulders.

Manna's montage de-privileges movements as they slip between habitual “thoughtless” gestures and meaningful action. For Henri Bergson, a gesture is an expression of an “inner itch.” He writes, “Gesture, thus defined, is profoundly different from action. Action is intentional, or any rate, conscious; gesture slips out unawares, it is automatic.” The video does not differentiate acts of labor and pleasure. Automatic gestures become small interruptions that allow desire and anxiety, tenderness and violence, and vulnerability and recklessness to blur together into a disorienting frenzy that cannot be attributed with certainty to any one gesture.

While the men are busy stealing, hawking, and repurposing goods, Manna repurposes images by repeating them in the montage; she steals images by filming surreptitiously and generates meaning by provoking her subjects into performing acts of masculine bravado, which is not without its stumbles. There is a moment when the montage pauses and gives way to her subject's voice. We do not see him as he speaks; instead, we see a grainy dark shot of a windshield as he and Manna drive around at night. They are off to “get some money.” It is unclear what exactly he means. He brags about all of the things he has accomplished despite his political immobility—“clubbing, tripping, and mafias.” He has reached borders. He is interrupted by a phone call that he attempts to avoid answering. Manna asks him what the caller wants: “Shit

I don't know." The subtitles translate his pauses as stilted sentences. "He wants 15,000 shekels. No big deal." She asks again, "For what?" Bashir replies with "Nothing." He pauses again. "I took some stuff from him once. Some clothes and trousers. And spend their value." As he revises his statements, his confidence slips, revealing a sliver of doubt and even fear before he becomes defiant again. "He wasn't straight with me once, so I got him back." She pushes him to answer. He stalls again before saying "Shit. I don't scared." Each revision reveals the way in which Bashir makes adjustments as Manna attempts to destabilize his composure, or the way he negotiates an unsteady social contract. He stumbles and recovers his masculinity, even at his own expense.

## 5.2 *Stumbling: A Gesture Between Dancing the Ground and Social Choreography*

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined formal disorientation as process of corporeal negotiation with the ground. In my chapter on Mickalene Thomas, I suggest that images retain a queer potential when they remain epistemologically ungrounded. In my chapter on LaToya Ruby Frazier, I examined her performances with her mother as contact improvisation, a practice of stillness in the midst of falling down. Here, I investigate stumbling at the intersection of dance and race theory to focus on the way in which the body orients itself on an unsteady ground. Because Palestinian geopolitics is oriented towards the land, it is tempting to assign the political liberation to Manna's subjects as they "dance the ground." The video's formal dancing questions this impulse.

As the video continues, the artist creates an extended scene of the men dancing in different environments and different proximities. At a house party, one man directly beckons to her and the camera. The camera films at a distance as they burn something that resembles a flag. The camera seems to be filming from a hidden location as men form a ring around a single

dancer in a social dance. Folded into this dance scene are images of looting that focus on the broken glass on the floor, underground cellars filled with car parts, and pyrotechnics that appear to rain down. In *Relationescapes*, Erin Manning examines how the ground plays into movement. She writes, “Actively prehended, the ground moves (with) the dance.”<sup>141</sup> For choreographers, she writes, “The ground contributes to the dance as a form-finding element in the dancer’s shape-shifting process, operating not as a stable entity but as an active determinant in the process.”<sup>142</sup> For Manning, walking to the bus stop is not different from dancing, positioning daily and aesthetic movements as responsive shifting grounds.

Manning continues, “How movement moves is relational. When we move the relation, we never begin with gesture. We move into gesture. What a body can do is characterized by its capacity to make sense beyond a vocabulary of the already-there.”<sup>143</sup> For Manning, improvisational movement may at first be unrecognizable and unintelligible, which suggests that the redistribution of the sensible can be framed choreographically. As Manna films her subjects, the camera’s view is often obscured, creating a new challenge for viewers in terms of understanding the subjects of the portrait. As the video documents gestures that slip out spontaneously, the work features pauses, interruption, and abrupt changes in course. Through Manna’s dance-like approach to gesture, we are asked to pay attention to the ways in which these men relate to each other as the choreography of gestures that do not seek closure or resolution—what Jen Joy describes as stutters, steps, trembles, and spasms.<sup>144</sup> Manna’s subjects maintain a deictic relationship with the ground, as they constantly reorient their position to it. If as Manning

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<sup>141</sup> Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012) 71.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>143</sup> Manning, *Relationescapes*, 76.

<sup>144</sup> Jenn Joy, *The Choreographic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014).

suggests we consider the ground as an active participant in how we move, we must also consider the shifting terrain.

Like Manning, Andrei Lepecki considers stumbling to be a productive slip between walking and dancing and a means to make sense of the disorienting social position of Blackness. In his book *Exhausting Dance: Performance*, he examines Frantz Fanon's stumble after a boy gestures towards him, calling "Look a negro!" He writes the following:

Words pushing a Black man to the ground, breaking up his body. After the stumble and falling apart, Fanon describes the choreographic realignment required by his new mode of being, this new mode of presence forced by the ballistics of the racial epithet and by the shifting ground under his feet....For this realignment not only implies a paradoxical dancing, it reveals the impossibility of dance to remain unquestioned.<sup>145</sup>

Lepecki identifies Fanon's stumbling as choreographic engagement with ground—connecting dance, as a field of knowledge, to a foundational moment in race theory. As stumbling gives way to crawling, movement requires a reorientation that reveals the kinesthetic demands of a racist terrain.<sup>146</sup> Here paradoxical dancing refers to the way Bashir speaks about the freedom he has attained despite his immobility, as well as the way the everyday actions of these *ars* or thugs takes them underground, and the way politics enters into scenes of her subjects dancing.

Hewitt considers stumbling from a different position than that of Lepecki, as he shifts from the provocation of a gesture to its recovery. He writes that "Stumbling needs to be thought of not as a loss of footing but rather as a finding one's feet: it is the act in which the body rights itself by a retraction [recovery] and the mind becomes aware of the operation of measure and balance—'a secret force'—operating in and through the body." Stumbling becomes a way to understand everyday movement as a recovering from social disorientation. In "Which way is down? Improvisations on Black Mobility," Jason King recognizes how Black men have stylized

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<sup>145</sup> Andre Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2006), 96.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

stumbling in their walking as a perpetual loss and recuperation of balance. *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* is filled with these falls and recuperations. Joyrides, stealing, and dancing are all ways for Manna's subjects teeter on the edge and maintain a tenuous control over their bodies in an unsteady political landscape. Manna, however, is not convinced this freedom is liberating:

Unlike the revolutionary, who also seeks to subvert established mores, these young men seem to have lost their compass, and are unsure how to attain the freedom they so passionately long for. They engage in escapist acts that deflect but do not defeat bourgeois culture. They are the expression of an uncertain sense of political identity among segments of Palestinian youth, and their behavior poses only a superficial threat to the established structures of power.<sup>147</sup>

As Manna explains, these escapist acts are a kind of a rehearsal of resistance to the social order that is ultimately recovered by geopolitical power structures. As a portrait, Manna's video remembers its subjects through their escapist tendencies and the gestures that are lost or overlooked in a causal relationship between politics and aesthetics. Through her formal gestures, Manna calls into question where the political or choreographic gesture is located in Palestinian aesthetics.

### 5.3 *The Folding Montage as an Intertextual Gesture*

Manna applies pressure on her subjects both from within and outside of the frame. Through her editing, she creates a formal rhythm based on profilmic gestures. As a dance, it becomes unclear which movement is directing the other. This recalls Akira Lippit's definition of the "digesture" as the potential for editing to both drain gestures of their meaning and to release them into new dramas. For Lippit, the external force of di-gesture becomes a way to interrogate cinema from the outside. For Manna, the folding montage becomes an intertextual gesture that "dances the ground," thus destabilizing the landscape of experimental cinema and Palestinian cinema.

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<sup>147</sup> Jumana Manna, "What about Power?" *Inquiries into Contemporary Sculpture*, New York: Sculpture Center and Black Dog Publishing, 2015.

In *Heretical Archives: Digital Memory at the End of Film*, Domietta Torlasco develops a new theory of montage. She writes that “In film and installation art, the edit or fold operates as the hinge, the turning point, the open and potentially disarticulating pivot around which the reversibility of the visible and invisible occurs.”<sup>148</sup> Considering Timothy Murray’s elaboration on the fold, she characterizes cinema’s relationship to new media as a mode that configures “the deep memory of the archive.”<sup>149</sup> As an intertextual gesture, montage itself becomes a folding archive. The formal gesture remembers the form Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* and its close treatment of his subjects, allowing the montage to fold together a history of underground cultures through a history of underground cinema. Experiments with montage stand in contrast to the tendency towards narration that characterizes Arab traditions of storytelling and experimental cinema. Still, the folding edit operates beyond the dualism of continuity and discontinuity, thus offering the promise of a heterogeneous continuity—an attribute that echoes Ranciere’s distribution of the sensible.<sup>150</sup> The fold allows “...a memory of cinema that is multiple, incomplete, ever shifting, in which the digital does not realize the dream of an absolute, immaterial, totalizing recall but, on the contrary, allows for the proliferation and mobilization of singular viewpoints.”<sup>151</sup> Manna’s intertextual gesture of montage folds together the traditions of Palestinian cinema, the aesthetics of experimental cinema, and the mobility of digital video. This heterogeneous continuity of the folding edit creates what Munoz refers to as an epistemologically ungrounded image. In *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*, reversibility is registered in different ways. Torlasco explains the fold as a “turning inside out rather than an excision of the

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<sup>148</sup> Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (Minneapolis ; London: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2013) 64.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

visible, a reversal rather than an annihilation of perception.”<sup>152</sup>As an artist’s portrait film, Manna transforms documentary footage into an experiment in form that is unbounded by genre, throwing allegorical signification into a tailspin. A dirty joke becomes a poem; a poem becomes a dirty joke.

Reversibility creates an important friction between Manna’s work and the broader genre of Palestinian cinema, which can be characterized by the relationship between the inside and the outside of the frame, as well as within and outside of borders. In *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture*, Patricia Pisters develops a method of reading the “mist of [the] virtual images” that surround and entangle Palestinian films but are not visible within the frame.<sup>153</sup>

Discussing the films of Elia Suleiman, Pisters writes of scenes in which intertextual gestures create disruptions and misrecognitions. She considers a scene depicting Palestinian men kicking something unseen on the ground and explores how it brings to mind memories of media images depicting violence that has been enacted against Palestinians. Viewers are prompted to misread a close-up of clenched hands as a violent encounter. A zoom-out reveals it be an intimate act of care between father and son/filmmaker. For Pisters, the relationship between the political and aesthetic emerges from this code mixing. She explains that

‘Nomadic Thought’ suggests that such valuable production on the new can be achieved by ‘mixing up all the codes,’ an activity that is especially noticeable in the artistic style at work (a style of writing, a style of filming). This mixing up of codes into something new that is not coded is, according to Deleuze, ‘what style as politics means’ and what he calls ‘the beginning of a nomadic adventure.’<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 53–54.

<sup>153</sup> Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 252.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 257.



Code mixing becomes a way of reversing the perceptible, a formal kind of stumbling, or dancing the ground that relies on the instability of intertextuality. In Manna's video code mixing underground culture and underground films create a porous archive of gestures and filmic action. What exists outside of and surrounds the image is speculative, allowing the Nazi flag in *Scorpio Rising* to burn in *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*. In East Jerusalem, it might be an Israeli flag, perhaps an American flag, or perhaps not even a flag at all. As we watch the car do doughnuts in *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*, we wait for the fatal crash and the police from *Scorpio Rising* to arrive. In contrast to the history of Palestinian cinema, the allegory of liberation cannot be found.

#### 5.4 *Borders, Checkpoints, and Road Blocks: Palestinian Cinema's Gestures towards the Ground*

Palestinian cinema has been largely characterized as a cinema of exile—a deictic cinema that points towards the shifting delineations of the ground as it features borders, walls, and checkpoints. Stories that take place in the car represent movement, obstruction, and displacement, as well as the allegorical drive towards liberation. In *Seeing Through Race*, WJT Mitchell describes the film *Journey 110* (2009) by Khaled Jarrar:

...*Journey 110* subjects the viewer to the ordeal that it represents as it turns the darkened space into an analogue of the underpass. Its confinement to this space enacts the sense that Palestinians live in a “no exit” situation, with no outsides to their underground existence. Movement and obstruction, migration and internment have become a way of life rather than a temporary passage. In this regard, the film reminds us of the structuralist films of Michael Snow in the 1960s with their obsessive exploration of single, confined spaces (especially corridors). But now the perceptual exploration has been given a specific human and political context.<sup>155</sup>

For Mitchell, Palestinian art has the ability to function outside of representation to develop an aesthetic strategy that is both experimental and responsive to its subjects'

<sup>155</sup> W. J. T Mitchell, *Seeing through Race* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 145.

movements. Mitchell forges an intertextual lineage of Palestinian cinema, connecting it both to the form of structuralist film as well expanded cinema's interest in transforming the passivity of theater space and the act of viewing. For Mitchell, the political condition of invisibility creates new stakes for formal experimentation.

Palestinian contemporary art also has been the focus on the political potential of aesthetics. Echoing theories on Blackness and the image, some theorists have likewise become invested in the Palestinian condition as a means to interrogate the relationship between the scopic regime of visibility and the aesthetic potential for transgression—what Ranciere defines as the “redistribution of the sensible.” In *The Emancipated Spectator*, he analyzes a photograph in a series by Sophie Ristelhueber of Israeli roadblocks on a Palestinian road. At first glance, the areal shot appears to depict an uninterrupted idyllic landscape. For him, the series does not offer an anticipated meaning and instead creates a curiosity for the viewer that upends the “dispositions” of the body and mind. The landscape is an image of uncertainty “...where the eye does not know in advance what it sees and thought does not know what it should make of it. Their tension points towards a different politics of the sensible—a politics based on distance, the resistance of the visible and the uncertainty of effects.”<sup>156</sup> For Ranciere, aesthetics engages the political as it disrupts how we understand the ordering of formal arrangements. He goes on to write that “They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought, and consequently, a new landscape of the possible.”<sup>157</sup> While using a physical landscape to describe a landscape of imagination, Ranciere here stops short of claiming that an image might change the politics concerning Palestinian land.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Reprint edition (London: Verso, 2011), 105.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>158</sup> Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 62.

Palestinian images have been used to theorize land at the intersection of social and aesthetic strategies. Ranciere argues for the distance of the bird's-eye view that draws one in, whereas Mitchell makes the case that being within allows a viewer to experience a political condition without exit. The relationship between inside and outside becomes an important characteristic of the aesthetic and its political promise.

In contrast to this dualism between the inside and outside, Manna creates a heterogeneous continuity. In *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*, we are not brought in but instead are constantly kept at the surface. The camera illogically focuses on the pink soap on a car, the suds of shampoo in a man's hair, and the strained faces of those lifting weights, among other subjects. A carwash acts as a front for underground activity. We go deeper underground into a cellar containing stolen car parts. Manna calls into question the social contract of Palestinian art as she creates an unstable archive in her video. Agamben writes that "*In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss*"<sup>159</sup> [original emphasis]. Through Manna's formal gestures of non-closure, she creates an unstable archive of gestures belonging to Palestinian underground cultures that have also been lost.

### 5.5 *To Archive Otherwise*

The video begins and ends with mirroring sequences. While it began with Bashir's transition from a dirty joke to a poem, the video ends with a transition from a poem to a dirty joke. Bashir prefaces the final reading of the poem by defiantly stating that, "When the Martyr Abd Al Rahim Mahmoud wrote this poem, he wrote for people to believe in it. Not for being put in a film, which isn't convinced by its words." By concluding the film with his skepticism, both

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<sup>159</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2000).

Manna and the Bashir acknowledge the difference between the act of recording and its place in the archival record.

For Domietta Torlasco, digital montage presents an opportunity to create a heretical archive. She writes, “‘To archive *otherwise*’ is to archive according to a logic that defies conscious thinking, to enact a mode of remembrance that, insofar as it realizes itself through covert associations, will always require attentive and imaginative interpretation.”<sup>160</sup> She imagines the folding edit as a bearer of a memory that comes from the future, thus “allowing the emergence of images (specters) that speak of lost life as much as of life that demands to be lived.”<sup>161</sup> By using the folding edit to capture the lives of the *ars* or thugs in her video, Manna creates a porous archive that also imagines a lost history of experimental Palestinian film and Jerusalem’s lost bohemian and hedonist cultures. The video records instances of dancing the ground that might be simultaneously subversive, escapist, and self-destructive. The formal gesture of the folding montage remembers Palestinian lives that left no traces. Instead, she fabricates records out of heaps of car parts and fictitious artifacts that have long since been removed.

In 2014, *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* accompanied a sculpture series at the Sculpture Center in New York. Both the video and the sculptures are assemblages of appearances, the authenticity of which is fundamentally impossible to ground. Through Manna’s sculpture, the folding montage takes shape in physical form. The sculptures exist as deictic experiments challenging how the present, past, and future relate to one another.

The sculptures’ resemblance to specific textures and wall materials found in East Jerusalem is undermined by their hollowness or structural instability. Because they are

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<sup>160</sup> Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 51.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

constructed of egg cartons, they cannot be accepted as archaeological artifacts. Walls with metal shards poking out, tiled stairs, and cinderblocks are clustered together and appear to have been excised from a site. The idiosyncratic placement of these objects emphasizes them as both uncovered artifacts and sculptural replicas. As replications made out of cheap materials, their staged placement upends expectations of authenticity, value, and seriousness. They are shown together with sculptures made of Plexiglas containers that are filled with seatbelts and crumpled sheets of car metal that resemble a John Chamberlain sculpture. Manna displaces filmic fragments from their original medium, allowing them to re-emerge as sculptural material in increasingly abstract forms. Her reference to her contemporary subjects and the history of their terrain forges disparate historical moments together to create a porous historiography out of fractured temporalities and archival fragments.

By depicting the heterogeneous continuity of an archaeological site, she reorients the political nature of landscape as a matter of surface. The sculptures look like they were culled and spat out by a Google search. Her sculptures test the viewer's insistence on authenticating the Palestinian image. Instead, all that one can be certain are qualities of texture, echoes of form, and allusions to or memories of an original site that is nowhere to be found.

When exhibited within the sculptural site, *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* is another layer within the exhibition. Like the sculptures, the video undermines the viewer's ability to geographically authenticate, locate, or grasp the images. Together, the video and the sculpture remain incoherent, surface, and unspecific. Rather than transforming the sculptures into an immersive installation environment, the video coincides with it. In the exhibition, the video was shown on a television mounted on the wall. A cinderblock step was placed before it. Viewers, it seems, were required to pay attention to the ground and be prepared to stumble.

For the 2015 exhibition *Aftercinema* held at the Beirut Art Center, Manna uses the folding montage to further abstract the subjects in her moving image. Seatbelts were woven together and hung like banners. A large anthropomorphic sculpture sat like a disembodied digit on top of a cart. For Manna, the exhibition materialized the power structures that she examined in *Menace of Origins* and *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*. The sculpture in her *Water Arm* series (2019) reference both drainage systems and limbs, depicting “bodies as infrastructure in an unstable or perhaps incomplete system.”<sup>162</sup> Manna paid attention to sites where the underground become visible. Mounted on walls, wedged in corners, and placed on the floor, they disappear and reappear in what she describes as an “ever-extending and or receding network.”<sup>163</sup> As intertextual formal gestures, the sculptures are continually misplaced and displaced, reappearing in new contexts and folded into new bodies of work.

In her latest film, *Wild Relatives* (2018) and corresponding sculpture series shown in *A Small Big Thing* (2018-2019), she documents attempts to maintain Syrian seed banks, an effort to preserve the Syrian landscape through its agriculture. Her sculptures take their shape after the traditional vessels Syrian farmers used to preserve seeds, which she describes as a type of underground archive. Manna, who moves between cinema and sculpture, investigates the archaeological relationship between the soil and time. This allows us to imagine what occurs around, behind, and beyond the screen.<sup>164</sup>

Archives of the underground may not ever exist, and, as such, they are speculative in nature. In her book *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*, Laura U. Marks writes, “The archive is a rabbit hole...Excavating in it can end in disappointment, disorientation, or

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<sup>162</sup> Jumana Manna, Artist statement for *Water Arm Series*, jumanamanna.com

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> This is a methodological approach that allows Jennifer Wild to account for the cinematic strategies in avant-garde art in *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema*.

madness.”<sup>165</sup> For Manna, material investigations into excavation and the archive yield continuous heterogeneity. Marks goes on to state that “Each archival fragment drags all this material, cultural, and political baggage after it, as a lady’s long train sweep up and carries along debris as she passes.”<sup>166</sup> For Marks, the archival fragment becomes a source of possibility as it moves along the ground, dragging debris into a porous archive that grounds Palestinian memories within a world memory bank.<sup>167</sup>

### 5.6 *Politics of Palestinian Portraiture*

Portraiture is culturally significant social contract between the photographer and subject and between the photographer and images. Marks writes about the documentary *To My Father* (2008), which details the history of a photography studio in Gaza. In the 1950s and 60s, people sat for portraits so that they could send them to loved ones in Egypt and Jordan. From 1967 onwards, portraits were taken by police as a way to identify people, “employing indexicality in the most violent way.”<sup>168</sup> In contrast, *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* documents its subjects while avoiding surveillance ensuring that movements cannot be traced or fixed.

In her art book *The Keeper*, Shuruq Harb creates an archive of portraits sold by street vendors in Ramallah. For Harb, the images are amusing due to their heterogeneity; the book includes images of movie and soap opera stars, political and religious figures, and motorcycles.<sup>169</sup> Recognizable images include those of Jean Claude Van Dam, Enrique Iglesias, Saddam Hussein, and Osama Bin Laden. Investigating further, Harb discovered that one of the picture vendors, who became the subject of her work, obtains his images from the Internet.

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<sup>165</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Hanan Al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 213.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 283–24.

<sup>169</sup> Shuruq Harb, Lecture performance at ArteEast, New York, Posested March 10, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/41099442>, accessed 12/10/2014.

Through interviewing this street vendor, she learns that, contrary to her own expectations, less than 10% of the videos he sells are political. The pictures, she concludes, are like newspapers reflecting back the things that were happening. The vendor's entrepreneurial activity did not escape police surveillance, and he was subject to interrogation. The art book acts an archive of portraiture active life in Rumallah and the very real threat the portraits posed to the governing officials. Harb's work is not a call to action but rather demonstrates the way in which the circulation of portraits becomes a political threat, despite the fact the images did not depict political figures. As a result, their circulation assumes choreographic potential, as the creation of new portraits responds to the shifting cultural landscape.

Shot digitally and disseminated on the Internet, *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* also defies the exilic structure that often characterizes Palestinian cinema. The video's wide dissemination sidesteps the limited theater screenings and the satellite television programming that have hindered the distribution of Palestinian films in the past. The widespread adoption of digital media has led to a new relationship between how images move and how they move us. As Manna's videos are played on loop in a gallery or replayed endlessly on the artist's website, viewers are able to return to the beginning of the text, draw different conclusions, notice different formal and structural features, and form different attachments to the men whom Manna follows. The video's online presences means that it can be accessed anywhere and at any time, which allows its subjects to exist in the enduring present of the digital sphere.

The images depicted in *Blessed Blessed Oblivion* create an intertextual portrait of the unfolding present, the history of experimental cinema, and the new media object. As such, Manna redefines what is traditionally identified as the role of the political in the narrative of Palestinian cinema. Manna's artistic gesture might best be described as stumbling in that she



engages the process in which the body, an artistic medium, geopolitical grounds, and historical records are destabilized and fall out of legibility. As these physical and formal gestures teeter on the edge of legibility, stumbling becomes a way of thinking form and everyday that is not just representational or allegorical but a tenuous relationship between an individual and the social order.<sup>170</sup>

By attending to how the artist's portrait film creates a choreography of gestures that shifts between portrait, experimental cinema, and post-cinematic object, Manna's artistic gesture makes room for intertextuality, thus enabling the work's political gesture to evade having a singular meaning imposed on it as it links and unlinks actions of daily life with multiple aesthetics of the moving image.

### **CONCLUSION: ON REPOSITIONING ARTISTIC GESTURES IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS AND ARCHIVES**

In this dissertation, I have outlined the ways in which the artistic gesture serves as a productive term that engages the innovative choreographies shaping the relationship between the moving body and the moving image, as well as the choreographic potential of intertextual gestures to create porous archives. As gestures lose legibility in artists' portrait films, they destabilize the enabling constraints defining moving image mediums. This relationship between intermediality and intertextuality is indicative of the way in which Black artists have redefined the stakes of formal experimentation. In artists' portrait films formal experimentation is grounded by the political disorientation of the responsive nature of Black movement. While I have focused on artists' portrait films, interdisciplinary collaborations further this aesthetic-as-social experimentation. Here, I am thinking of collaborative practices involving Black women

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<sup>170</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (1900) as quoted in Jenn Joy, *The Choreographic*, 81–82.

working across the visual arts, dance, and film, such as Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengundi's investigation of dancing sculptures; Katherine Dunham's dance influence on Maya Deren's films; Blondell Cummings and Shirley Clark investigations of filming dance, and Julie Mehretu and Jason Moran's improvisatory performance of paintings. This list of collaborations goes on multidirectionally towards the past and the future and merits further investigation.

Through the use of intertextual gestures, artists' portrait films generate trembling historiographies as they move in multiple directions, disrupting the linear thrust of the present. The exhibition history of artists' portrait films also gives insight into how these radical collaborations were supported, and prompt further research into the exhibition practices of museums and alternative spaces, screenings and performances. In turn, we can look for ways these exchanges inform, critique, and expand on each other. As artistic gestures yield expansive aesthetic investigations of the social contract, they present opportunities to examine the social contexts of the avant-garde. Throughout this dissertation, I attempted to demonstrate that each of the artist discussed developed artistic gestures of the moving image in relation to their larger art practices—Frazier's photography, Thomas' painting, and Manna's sculpture. In doing so, I have aimed demonstrate the importance of curatorial practices as central to orienting the artist's portrait films as both social and intermedia experiments within an artist's larger practice.

Museum archives have also become productive places for artistic gestures to persist in relation to each other. A museum archive is filled with studies, incomplete thoughts, and unstable materials. While the museum collection is generally reserved for canonical works, its archive makes room for the minor gestures, the experiments that might not be visible in a single work. Out of these minor gestures, we can find identify new ways in which artists' portrait films create new choreographies of the moving image. Curatorial practices that attend to the

experiments usually left in the archive can reorient canonical practices as polycentric rather than marginalizing.

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