

***Rashaad
Newsome***

The interview below is compiled and edited from two conversations with Rashaad Newsome in 2020, one on March 6, in person, and another on May 19, over Zoom.

Curators Two weeks after our studio visit in March the COVID-19 pandemic hit New York and events previously scheduled to take place moved to virtual platforms. Within virtual space, what has been exciting to you and what models or platforms do you think people could be utilizing?

Rashaad Newsome I've been thinking a lot about the idea of livestream. I'm finding myself in many conversations about livestream. People are trying to reproduce reality-based experiences. Why?! What is "live" in this time? Reality isn't offering much in the way of hope, at the moment, so I want to explore the imaginative possibilities of augmented reality. It is the world of the imagination and I'm trying to go as far down that rabbit hole as possible.

This project [at the Shed] is an exercise in playing with that.¹ My friend [April] DJ-ed live on Instagram Live and filmed it. One of my dancers, Legendary Monster Mon_Teese, used the PHANTASM lens that I created in Snapchat last year to film himself dancing, the vocalist Precious went on Facebook Live to do their vocals and filmed it. All of these livestreams were then given to me and I collaged them into one video. They were all done live, separately and at different times, and then the amalgamated video will be screened live on the Shed's Instagram. That live video seamlessly flows right into a live DJ-set by April. Was it live when we each did our thing? Is it live in the moment the video is being premiered? It's really playing with this idea of what

¹ *Go Off! Joy in Defiance*. Creative direction by April Hunt (DJ) and Rashaad Newsome (artist), with Legendary Monster Mon_Teese (performer) and Precious (commentator). The Shed, New York, NY, June 14, 2020. <https://theshed.org/program/157-april-hunt-and-rashaad-newsome-with-legendary-monster-mon-teese-and-precious>.

is live in this time of livestream. The experimentation with these various platforms results in a transmedia experience.

But then, there's also the whole idea of avatars—after coming off of creating *Being* and starting that project with this idea of making this physical robot and then thinking, why does it need to be physical?² There's that maker-side where you want to make something physical, but if you're not bound by physicality, isn't that more interesting? You can be anything at any time. For instance, on your phone, you can be a unicorn or a chicken (*laughs*). It's really as far as your mind can go. I'm thinking a lot about that and what is truly possible in that space.

C So many people are just trying to recreate reality right now, and recreate what existed prior to this moment.

RN This moment is about reimagining everything that wasn't working before, and I think there's something to the gatekeepers no longer having the power they used to have. People are finally looking at the stain of white supremacy on the world and having conversations in a way that I have never experienced before, this is really exciting. What does the contemporary art landscape look like when everyone is being held accountable for their bad behavior?

C It becomes a question for us around how online-space is its own space and has its own kind of reality—and different functions that also require their own kind of treatment. There's no easy translation.

RN I've been having conversations with friends who are talking about how they want to go out and have a good time. I'm

² *Being* is a cloud-based artificial intelligence humanoid created by Newsome and programmed with the works of theorists such as bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Michel Foucault.

thinking about how to make the virtual premiere of *Shade Compositions* (Pittsburgh) a kind of outing.

Premiering the project this way seemed to me like a cool way to reimagine the viewer's live-art experience. When talking to potential partners we discussed that maybe we could have a virtual cocktail reception in advance of the screening where people could get dressed up, and have a drink together from the comfort of their own home. There could even be a red-carpet type situation where people can share what they're wearing. Rather than even thinking about a reality-based version of that, what if you just use avatars and you can come to an event literally dressed as an avatar of your own design, whatever you want. It was an imaginative way of having an evening out that could never be matched by reality.

C That's also a nice departure from capitalism and thinking about brands, only to still be able to get dressed up, have a night out, and not think about it in terms of what brand you're wearing but rather the other possibilities of what you could be, or other beings you could be.

RN Right now I'm working on this year's King of Arms Art Ball, which is going to be virtual, taking place July 10. When I was doing this event before, a big part of it was trying to use the architecture of ballroom to get people to think critically about the world they live in and lean into their imagination—rather than acquisition as a way to comment on [the world]. I'm excited about this one because in some ways shelter-in-place forces people to be creative in ways they may not have known they could be. They will also have access to resources via their phone like face apps, augmented reality lenses, and such. It's going to be more about who can be the most inventive, not who can acquire something.

C In our last visit, we talked about the changes you've witnessed in the global vogue community, which prompted you

to begin work on your forthcoming documentary. When did you start to observe these changes, and what has that evolution looked like?

RN I started to see it in 2014. I lived in Paris for a year in 2005, off and on, and when I was there, there was no ballroom scene. Then when I went back in 2014, which is when I started to make this film, there was this huge scene and it was like it had always been there. It was just as big as New York. I went to, like, three different balls when I was there and there were tons of people, I was so amazed at how fast that happened. Ballroom [in New York] is a Black and Latinx queer experience—but there, it was all different types of folks and it wasn't just queer, it was all types of sexual identities. There were also many Paris chapters of US houses. The first new house that I met was the House of Ladurée, which you see in the sample clip when they asked me to be the godfather.

From a performance standpoint, I see them as being a little more creative because the culture is so new that people are really excited and they just want to do it. A lot of that, too, has to do with a socialist system where the government takes care of everyone in that country to a certain extent, in a way that in America that's not the case. So the realities of day-to-day lives expenses are a little bit heavier on people here, so people do really need to get something out of what they're doing which I think can often affect one's creativity.

One thing we're exploring in [the documentary] is also the rise of cisgender women in the scene. There is a huge group of cisgender women, particularly white women, who have entered the scene, and I'm very interested in how these folks are thinking about what they do. There are some women who are amazing. They come in and people don't think that they're going to be able to do it. It's such a weird thing to see—the fact that they're there and voguing becomes a spectacle—and people go crazy for it. You'll see a [white

cisgender] woman battling, let's say, a Black trans woman who is equally as amazing, if not way more amazing, but somehow it will be eclipsed by the spectacle of a white woman voguing in that space. I'm wondering in what ways that is reinforcing certain racial stereotypes, and in what ways the Black community has internalized white supremacy and is enacting that on themselves, or how queer community has internalized homophobia and is enacting that on themselves. That's something I really want to explore in the film.

When I started making the film, I wanted to show a global picture, but because the culture is growing so fast we're rethinking the decision to stick to certain countries and territories. Now, we're also thinking about hitting other places because there are interesting stories. For example, in Russia there's a whole scene. It's a challenging film to make because it's about my work, so it's a process film, but my medium is people. These people have experiences and stories. Then there's this culture that the people are participating in, so there's multiple stories being told. We're trying to figure out how to tell all those stories in a feature-length format.

Another reason why I feel a certain sense of urgency around making [the documentary] is because of the legacy of Black cultural production being co-opted and then sold back to Black people. We saw that with rock 'n' roll, with jazz, with hip-hop—and vogue culture at this very moment is on that precipice because it's being taken on by so many different people globally. At a certain point, the people who created it will be erased from it. There's already so much language out there. When the work has been cited, there's some reason that people need to cite Madonna or *Paris is Burning*... like it needs to center that white interpretation of this culture to access it. Vogue is at the precipice of that moment where it's going to be co-opted and those people are going to be erased. This film has to be made to rebut that and get [the history] from the mouths of the practitioners.

I don't think that culture has fixed boundaries. Culture is supposed to grow and expand, and that's what is so fantastic.

People can interact with it and do different things, but it's problematic when it's being done in an inequitable society.

C Your role in this film reminds us of *Shade Compositions*, where you've spoken about your role as that of a conductor of an ensemble.

RN When I think critically about the orchestra and connections to a Eurocentric practice, I also see [the ensemble] as a choir, which is a lot more diasporic, for example, when you think about the Black church. I see myself as a conductor of a gospel choir, and I play with that, too, in terms of my wardrobe.

[The documentary] made me realize how the role that I play in all of my work mirrors the work of a director. As a director, you're working with large groups of people and you have to know how to balance being in control so that something can actually be produced, but also leave room for people to have a voice and to enhance what is trying to be produced while also pushing people beyond their limits so that when it's done, they can actually be proud of it.

C Do you think there's a difference in how the mechanisms at work in *Shade Compositions* play out in live performance as opposed to watching a video of it?

RN Absolutely. Because you're in a gallery or your own home, you're safe. It's a safe way to consume without being challenged at all. In the live performance, the audience must deal with the gaze of the performers as they attempt to consume them. I think my physical resistance to being consumed in live performance has a different effect as well. It came from thinking about [whether it's possible to] create counter-hegemonic work in historically hegemonic spaces. One could argue that's impossible. Having my back to the audience makes it harder for me to be consumed. I'm focused on the performers and they are focused on me, to some extent. The looking relationships are always in opposition

to the audience as a way to complicate the consumption of our Black bodies.

C What is your thinking around the usage of repetition, which is a central device in *Shade Compositions*?

RN That's my way to get to abstraction. When you see that front row [in *Shade Compositions*], for instance, making a gesture (*does smack gesture*), you're like, "I know that," but after a while, you lose sight that they're smacking and it becomes rhythmic. It becomes hypnotizing, you lose sight of the act of what they're doing, and you get lost in the sonic experience. That's where the repetition comes in.

They are also improvising, which is deeply connected to the Black American experience. It's what we have done and continue to do in the face of our complicated history. It's how we make something out of nothing. In this case, nothing is a gesture that produces a sound. They create an array of narratives that bring forth that gesture. Those gestures then become music and that music then becomes both the method for our survival and an object of study for us as we try to understand our survival. I believe what's happening in the streets across the country is a form of improvisation. People are fed up with the corrupt, unfair, untrustworthy, and violent government systems in America. They don't know what to do at this point, so they are improvising.

One thing that I always noticed that happens for the group is that there's this moment when they get to this place where they transcend entirely, after making this gesture for a very long time, and at a certain point they start to move like a machine. Like someone will be like (*smacking gesture*), and then the person in the middle will be like (*smacking gesture*), and then someone else will be like (*smacking gesture x 3*), and their bodies are moving in the way that the rhythm is going and you see this kind of movement going through the sections. That's the moment when I'm like, okay, they're in it, and the improvisation becomes de-

liberate, and that's when I start to go off with the effects because now I know they have completely let go and can handle anything I throw at them. It's the most exciting part. I'm close, so I see it in detail, but I've also seen how the audience sees it. This moment is also something that I think translates into the video version as well.

C We wanted to ask you about the relationship between the archive and abstraction, specifically in the context of vogue. Are you thinking about your work as an archive that you're trying to build? What is the level of abstraction that you bring into it?

RN It's already in the realm of abstraction. What I've been thinking critically about lately is erasure. I'm thinking a lot, lately, about erasure regarding abstraction. *Being* looks the way they look not because they are Black, or because I'm trying to make a Black robot, but because when I was thinking about *Being*, I was thinking that they are beyond a body, beyond a physicality, they don't need to look like anything, and that's what's incredible. So, I'm like, well, how do you engender an image that is entirely non-binary?

Where does the aesthetics of abstraction come from as we know it in the West? African art, Cubism, Surrealism. When you start to think about abstraction, it is a diasporic practice. I'm thinking about abstraction as something that is not only in art practice but also a way of life. The existence of the African-American is rooted in abstraction, too. The African-American experience is a collage.

All of the work I'm doing could be considered an archive of the dance form [vogue], but I'm coming back now to this idea of the archive through *Being*. During my residency at the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence we are thinking about what the archive looks like in the diaspora, a griot. I see *Being 2.0* as a digital griot. This fall, I am creating a small motion capture studio to capture the movements of vogue practitioners proficient in styles

ranging from Old Way-vogue Femme and all their subsets. We will apply this data to the *Being* avatar rig and animate it. Also, I am writing a script for *Being* to perform a lecture/dance workshop to function as a reimagining of a Black queer archive. I hope to make the archive publicly accessible to bring forth new possibilities for research and an enhanced academic experience.

C It feels like *Icon*, which was in your Studio Museum show, serves as a transition point between the videos you were making documenting performances, and your videos working with technology.³ How were you thinking about computer technology, video programming, or animation in *Icon*?

RN I wanted to move away from analog collage. I had a lot of training in post-production, so I wanted to do collage but in a video space—thinking again about that idea of abstraction, and how, in early 20th century, abstract artists flattened the surface to depict different sides and angles that suggested three-dimensionality. Within the digital space, I wanted to bring back the depth and this idea of the work being a window onto a scene. I was coming off of all that work that was using heraldry as a way to talk about the culture of domination. I was thinking of the beginnings of heraldry, which is part of ornament, which is a part of the Baroque. When considering the beginnings of the Baroque, I came to the Basilica. Ornament and heraldry are often used as a framing device on this type of architecture. I was also considering architecture's place within the culture of domination, and how it's often used between cities and nations as a source of power. Architecture became the starting point for the work. I inserted the Black body because there's this connection between the body and baroque architecture, the Vitruvian

³ *Rashaad Newsome: THIS IS WHAT I WANT TO SEE*, organized by Amanda Hunt (Assistant Curator), The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY, March 24–June 26, 2016. <https://studiomuseum.org/exhibition/rashaad-newsome-what-i-want-see>.

principles, the ribbed vaults, etc. Black bodies were erased from this era of art.

Recently I did a talk at the Getty, in conversation with the show they did about Balthazar who was one of the original kings that were present for the Christ child's birth. He was Black, but historically, in painting, he's been painted white. They had gathered all of the paintings of him as he really was. Again, you think about how the Black body is erased from history or put on the margins, so I was thinking, let me pull that body in and make it present. It's a reclaiming of that body.

[In *Icon*], you see the body in that architecture engages in a dance of freedom. As the environment tries to impose limitations on the body, it continually expands the space. You're sort of going into these new worlds that resemble video game aesthetics. That choice came from thinking about the whole idea of levels—(laughs) There's levels to this shit—and how you're continually trying to decolonize and how that's a never-ending task. You're always just going to another level, but you never really win the game. It's about just staying in the game.

Rashaad Newsome's biography can be found in the first booklet of this catalog.