Rhyme and Dissonance: Shared Strategies in Works by Lorna Simpson, Wangechi Mutu and Leslie Hewitt

by

Sonia Louise Davis
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .............................. page 3
Illustrations .................................. 5
Introduction .................................. 6
  1. The Early 90s Moment and the 1993 Whitney Biennial .............. 12
  2. Lorna Simpson Across Mediums ........................................ 21
  3. Disem-bodies: Wangechi Mutu’s Collaged Constructions .......... 44
  4. (Re)framing Revision: Physicality and the Past in Recent Work by
     Leslie Hewitt ................................................. 63
Concluding Thoughts ............................ 84
Bibliography .................................... 87
Appendix: Creative Component – Honors Thesis Installation: the
rememories series and other works .......... 90
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Illustrations

Introduction

In this written portion of my Honors Thesis in African American Studies, I explore the work of three contemporary black women artists: Lorna Simpson, Wangeci Mutu, and Leslie Hewitt. I chart an aesthetic lineage through an examination of key works by each artist, contextualizing my analysis within the broader social-historical “moments” of the art’s production. My interest lies in *intertextuality* between creative practices and by putting these specific artists’ bodies of work in dialogue and in context I will examine common threads, references, and modes of critical art-making. I use *intertextuality* to refer to the meaning-shaping that occurs outside an artwork, when references exterior to the work itself play a part in interpreting and producing new meanings, which is a feature I find especially compelling in Simpson’s, Mutu’s and Hewitt’s practices.

I ground my visual analysis in the artwork itself—my reasons for selecting artists whose work differs so greatly from one another is to highlight the common tactical approaches each uses to interpret her world. *Critical ambivalence* is a shared strategy I locate in all three artists’ work that seeks to acknowledge, appropriate, disrupt, and de-familiarize without impressing upon viewers a straightforward stance on the issues addressed. The incorporation of contradictory visual elements or the juxtaposition of disparate references leaves much of the meaning-making up to viewers, and in so doing provokes productive inquiry and resists easy explanations. Fed by the surge in discourses of multiculturalism and identity politics, artists responded with critical work that encouraged active viewership. The art of this
moment is reflective of a shift in the relationship between art-making and the larger social field.

Beginning with Lorna Simpson, whose work is emblematic of this shift, my analysis moves on to Mutu and finally Hewitt; both have been active in the wake of the early 90s moment. I consider the conditions surrounding their work’s production, and outline the ways in which each artist incorporates intertextual and critically ambivalent strategies into her work. By virtue of a distinctly black studies/cultural studies critical approach, I hope to open the work up to nuanced, object-based, contextual analysis. I focus on the formal, aesthetic, and conceptual tools employed by each of these three artists, situating their practices in context. What distinguishes the early 90s moment is a combination of circumstances that make for a particularly fertile, charged environment. By this I mean that the 90s presented an opportunity for self-conscious reflection on American society within the context of contemporary American art.

Compared to the climate of the 60s and 70s, an earlier art-historical moment in which much of art’s focus was created in direct response to recent social movements, the period of the 80s and 90s saw a shift in the kinds of creative approaches taken to racial politics and body politics, which were increasingly crucial sites of artistic expression and exploration. This is not to say that the art of the 80s and 90s did not engage these issues as they still pertained to the experiences of all Americans living with the legacies of recent civil rights movements, but rather that the needs and terms of the debate had changed. Just as it would be unwise to view literature or visual art in a vacuum outside the context of its production, it would be
foolish to ascribe too much weight to historical events, portraying artists’ output as wholly responsive. Especially when considering complex pieces, it is helpful to see the work as a product of its time not just in reaction to context but producing a new one.

Simpson and many of her peers, including Glenn Ligon, Fred Wilson and Carrie Mae Weems, challenged expectations and considered new categories and definitions with a critical kind of work that engaged questions of positionality and subjectivity, institutional critique, and complex non-essential identity construction, through painting, photography, and site-specific installation. These artists addressed the particular circumstances of the 1990s cultural environment as it posed new sets of problems for marginalized artists who managed to achieve a certain amount of success. Amid insistence on proving their worth and the burden of feeling responsible (or being made) to represent their communities to mainstream audiences, artists like Ligon, Weems and Wilson asked difficult questions without providing answers. They strayed from easy interpretations and preachy didacticism, while remaining somewhat elusive in their “message.”

Simpson’s site-specific full room installation, Hypothetical? (1992), included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, is a work that both critically captured the moment and one that was often glossed over or simply ignored by critics looking to seemingly “more controversial” work. One of the elements the piece incorporated was a clipping from a Los Angeles newspaper following the acquittal of Rodney King’s attackers. I argue that by strategically using intertextuality and critical ambivalence, Simpson and, subsequently Mutu and Hewitt, engage in distinctly productive practices of art
making, both responding to and weighing in on important issues, while developing nuanced understanding that can extend outside of art into the wider society.

This study will focus on time periods ranging from the early 1990s to 2008, which I divide into the early 90s moment, the late 90s into the early 2000s, and the post-9/11 to immediate pre-Obama segment of the first decade of the new millennium. It is helpful to consider the assorted circumstances that contribute to art production in these periods, especially since there is not a great deal of historical distance between the present time of writing and the moments discussed. I want to be clear about my divisions. I have limited the reach of my study to explore the change in recent visual art among practitioners loosely belonging to the same “group,” to elaborate and hopefully to articulate myriad approaches to a kind of critical work and the efficacy of ambivalence in this work’s production and understanding.

What I trace through Simpson, Mutu and Hewitt’s work, is the varied and strategic uses of critical ambivalence that confronts a viewer’s gaze with an uncertain posture, and the way in which the work engages significant issues through intertextuality, referencing worlds both outside and within the work. In deployment of distinctly productive practices, I argue that in fact, this work anticipated critical language in discourse that could adequately understand it.

Art historian Darby English writes eloquently of the need to open up the scope of “black art” beyond limited readings of race, to “displace race from its central location” in interpretations of artists’ work that precisely push against strict categorization and restrictive assessments. I find his call especially persuasive when considering Simpson, Mutu and Hewitt. To address work that is complex and critical
and that uses the tactics of strategic ambivalence almost as a new version of Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism,” a study of these artists’ work begs criticality and context. Spivak’s term acknowledges that essential or stereotypical tropes of identity are sometimes used self-consciously in contexts that necessitate compromise. In relation to the history of artistic representation, artists of color are often seen as working with and against notions of essentialism. I argue that Simpson, Mutu and Hewitt consciously and critically work with and against ambivalence in varied ways throughout their practices. To adequately explore their work, I take up English’s charge to “expand our view of the many contested fields of possibility out of which ‘black art’ is seen to come, so that we might accommodate in our interpretations all that the work itself engaged in order to be possible.”¹ I will remain attentive to these questions throughout this study.

My first chapter provides backdrop for the early 90s moment through an analysis of a particularly crucial and controversial event. The Whitney Museum of American Art’s 1993 Biennial Exhibition laid significant groundwork for dialogue on issues of institutional accountability and critique, and stimulated a redefinition of the contemporary American art landscape. While the show was unsuccessful in a number of ways, it remains critical to my project because of its relevance to Lorna Simpson’s evolving practice. In the following chapter, I examine Simpson’s work through touchstone shifts in medium that serve to rearticulate her artistic concerns in innovative and strategic ways. Hypothetical? ’s inclusion in the Biennial marks a turning point in Simpson’s practice; I contextualize this shift to establish the creative

tactics on which the next two artists build. The third chapter explores Wangechi Mutu’s collaged disruptions that employ similar strategies of critical ambivalence and intertextuality to interrogate the site of the female body, and the fourth chapter is a reading of Leslie Hewitt’s formalist vernacular constructions, which completes the lineage I have drawn. Finally, I conclude by considering what has changed in art consciousness and production from the early 90s moment to the post-9/11 and pre-Obama context, namely the interventions and ongoing legacies of Simpson, Mutu and Hewitt’s work.
1. The Early 90s Moment and the 1993 Whitney Biennial

I will now provide a brief historiography of the early-1990s moment, taking into consideration both art and culture. An analysis of the discourse and debates surrounding a significant event serves as the backdrop for this study of artists’ work in context: the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Biennial exhibition of 1993. The Biennial seeks to bring together the best art produced in the previous two years and in 1993 the exhibition attempted, itself, to be constitutive of the contemporary “moment” in American art. The curators chose to address “the construction of identity,” and admitted that their approach might be unexpected or seen as out of place as a framework for a bi-annual survey of American art, anticipating a backlash against art perceived as “solely political.”2 The real questions the 1993 Biennial posed for the conception of American art, importantly the institution’s historical (and continued) exclusion of people of color and women artists, and systematic mapping of “inappropriate”3 to works created by said non-normative American artists, were avoided or largely ignored by the organizers of the show. My interest lies in the way reactions to and debates about the show and the productive work of the art itself served to change the scope and landscape of contemporary American art. Essays included in the catalog as well as reviews of the show are indicative of this moment, and a thorough contextual analysis frames my thinking about the relationship of artists’ productive practices. In this landmark exhibition, which contained its fair

2 Why art by “these kinds of artists” is necessarily political in the context of the Whitney is, unfortunately, not fully conceptualized, as I will demonstrate later. David A. Ross, “Preface: Know Thy Self (Know Your Place),” 1993 Biennial Exhibition (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 9.
3 Ibid., 9.
share of successes and failures, the questions posed by the artwork itself can often get lost in the shuffle. In the pages that follow, I explore why this was the case. I also use the Biennal and its immediate surrounding context as a jumping-off point for the rest of my study, considering the model framework within the post-9/11 and pre-Obama context, from 2001 to 2008.

Out of the “culture wars,” and in the aftermath of a conservative presidential administration under Ronald Reagan, the 1993 Biennal exhibition stands as a kind of watershed moment for critical contemporary art, and serves as the temporal marker for a new phase in both multiculturalism and the post-modern trajectory. Debates surrounding this particular installment of the “alternate-year megashow”\(^4\) were incredibly hostile, polarizing critics and artists to opposite ends of the political spectrum. The Biennal’s group of curators sought to change the focus of the show to reflect the urgency of the time by reacting to the contemporary climate of identity politics: “There is no single set of questions with more relevance at this moment, no set of shared concerns with more resonance of this moment than those raised by artists concerned with identity and community.”\(^5\) Arguably these conceptions of identity and community as outlined in the show’s selection and organization needed to be further justified as belonging so centrally in an exhibition of American art. Issues of tokenizing came into play in the Biennal, especially in cases that called upon artists to speak from and for their communities. Paul Gilroy stresses the very real dangers involved:


\(^5\) (emphasis original) Ross, 9.
In the ironic milieu of racial politics, where the most brutally dispossessed people have often also proved to be the most intensely creative, the idea that artists are representative public figures has become an extra burden for them to carry. Its weight can be felt in the tension between the two quite different senses of a word which refers not just to depiction but to the idea of delegation or substitution.\(^6\)

The idea of “artists as spokespersons” does a certain damage to readings of their work and presents an ulterior motive on the part of the institution in terms of selection criteria for the show. The Biennial catalog’s preface anticipates a reaction against a thematic organization around this type of work, but does not fully interrogate the institution’s place in historically refusing to consider this work Biennial-worthy before. That is, for all the justification as to why the institution was widening its typically narrow scope of inclusion for this year’s show, there was little acknowledgement of the structures in place which have historically excluded those same artists the Whitney was suddenly proud to claim as its own.

In her essay “Passionate Irreverence: The Cultural Politics of Identity,” from the 1993 Biennial catalog, Coco Fusco notes with impressive foresight the significance of “our historical moment,” located amidst the throes of an “ideological battle over symbolic representation.”\(^7\) The contemporary climate was wedged between the settling dust of tumultuous domestic and international circumstances, including the Reagan 80s and the shifting geopolitical situation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the LA riots and the Tiananmen Square massacre, and facing the impending millennium. Fusco’s astuteness about the particulars of the moment are


clearly presented in her analysis of contemporary responses, pointing to the conflicting nature of sudden success stories of “different” artists, “While some might look upon the current wave of multiculturalism as inherently empowering and/or new, others look upon the present in relation to a long tradition of ‘celebrating’ (or rather, objectifying) difference as light but exotic entertainment for the dominant culture.”8 The question of whether the inclusion of difference serves the dominant culture or those doing the “representing,” is fraught in the framework of the Biennial. The representation of singular identities denies individual subjection and restricts difference within falsely homogenized “other” groups. Increased visibility for previously underrepresented artists, including women, gay and lesbian artists, artists of color, Third World and indigenous artists, grew rapidly alongside market demand for the newest art “trend.” The double-edged sword of success meant that artists were expected to speak for their respective communities, as representatives to the mainstream art world while making work to represent these communities, according to Gilroy’s reading of the dual meaning of the word. In this way, a simple celebration of difference can reinforce essentialized notions of identity if artists are seen as authentically representing their culture only when they confirm expectations or stereotypes.

By couching the show in terms of “relevance,” the curators of the 1993 Biennial implicitly denied asserting that the quality of the art granted its inclusion. This avoidance leaves room for the kinds of attacks that were leveled at the show from many angles, mainly that the work and these artists were not up to usual

standard and that this show was an exception to the rule. This distinction is crucial because it places a problematic burden on the artists included in the show to project the curatorial mission or at least guide viewers’ readings of works along a certain agenda. The catalog’s preface seems to speak specifically to those who would argue that “this kind of work” simply had no place at the Whitney: “Oddly, consideration of the construction of identity, central to an understanding of contemporary society, may seem inappropriate as the framing reference to introduce an exhibition surveying the past two years of American art. Inappropriate because the issues of self and community seem to these critics solely political; fully outside the realm of art. Not merely outside art’s territory, but beyond art’s reach.”

Some critics did not mince words when getting at the real issues at stake, namely the identity of American art. Richard Ryan’s editorial takes aim at almost all parties involved in any discussion of the Biennial—the artists, the curators, critics and collectors—and condemns the exhibition as well as everyone who seems not to share his vehemently negative perspective on it: “To say the Biennial was ideological is not to say that it echoed the Old Left politics of class and power struggle; it was steeped, rather, in the new cultural politics of race and gender. This is a body of art which trafficks in no explicit theories, projects no intellectual content beyond a pervasive sense of victimhood, espouses nothing more than a confrontational attitude that rotates through the stations of self-pity, self-absorption, and malice.”

It appears the curators anticipated this anti-intellectual designation and goes some way towards explaining their inclusion of essays by prominent theorists including Homi Bhabha, Fusco, B Ruby Rich and

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9 Ross, 9.
10 Ryan, 51.
Avital Ronell. The show featured a reading room where visitors could engage some of the relevant discourse, and while even this effort was critiqued by some to be “too academic,” it does represent a conscious move by the institution to attempt to deal with the problematics of the day. But if self-absorbed victimhood is all that can be read into the art from the perspective of critics like Ryan, then there are still serious gaps in the Biennial’s project.

For many the curatorial perspective rightfully chose to embrace the diversity of a changing American landscape. In the minds of others, the show was fraught with failure from the very beginning for its uncritical inclusionary aims and, some would say, almost tokenized use of some of the artists in the show. It was not necessarily that these new artists’ voices were only now, suddenly, beginning to appear, but perhaps that they had reached a loud enough decibel-level not to be ignored any longer. We must remember the Guerrilla Girls who had been making critical activist work for years, and who engaged the Biennial specifically in their 1987 exhibition, “Guerrilla Girls Review the Whitney.” Among other works, their show included “The Color Blind Test,” a chart tallying the total number of non-white artists included in the Biennial since 1973 (non-white men: 3 Asians, 17 Blacks, 8 Hispanics, 0 Native Americans; non-white women: 2 Asians, 0 Blacks, 0 Hispanics, 0 Native Americans). The 1993 Biennial is an important step towards inclusion, but because it relies on uncritical acceptance of selected artists, it fails to address the museum’s long history of exclusion. In fact, as the Guerilla Girls make clear, it may be worse to finally include artists from minority communities if the institution is unwilling to

engage its own relationship to the processes of exclusion and discrimination, deceitfully insisting that this work is now good enough to display without providing real reasons why. The “absence of any thorough-going historical reflection”\textsuperscript{12} is one of the dangers of “liberalist ambitions of inclusion as necessary criterion.”\textsuperscript{13} According to Charles Wright Jr., the Whitney’s survey proved to be a “magnanimous, but unrigorous multiculturalist web of institutional double-speak in which the museum is haplessly entangled.”\textsuperscript{14} The problems with the inclusion of previously marginalized artists lay in the fact the curators did nothing to acknowledge the institution’s role in that process, as if to say that 1993 just so happened to be a year when a lot of artists of color and women artists were finally making Biennial-worthy work, that their difference was suddenly important.

What the Biennial exhibition stands for in the context of this project is manifold. As a controversial show at a major museum it reflects the charged politics of the time; angry voices from both sides of the debate fueled critical reception of the show in the years following and spurred many other attempts at new shows for a new day. Fusco’s invocation of “symbolic representation,” as “a key site of political struggle,” is exceedingly important with regard to the latter 1990s, as artists found themselves in situations where their work could not simply speak for itself. To use Homi Bhabha’s term for intersubjective experiences in the interstices, from his essay in the Biennial catalog, conscious of the weight thrust on the few to represent the many, the range of creative responses engaged in a variety of “negotiations.” Curator

\textsuperscript{12} Wright Jr., 188.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 191.
Thelma Golden opens her essay “What’s White...?” from the exhibition catalog, with a quote from Cornel West’s “new cultural politics of difference,” which states that his goals are to “historicize, contextualize and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing.” Wright’s reading of Golden’s argument centers on what he finds to be an overly simplistic definition of difference, constructing singular identity positions in opposition to whiteness. A major problem in the project of the exhibition exists because, “a recognition of the necessary inter-dependence of all positions and agents within the context of difference is not fully acknowledged or theorized by the curators of the exhibition, who insistently present difference as produced in opposition to, rather than as negotiated among subjects.” The denial of complex subject positions by the Biennial’s curators and concept points to a troubled contemporary understanding of difference in dominant visual discourse.

As a simultaneous achievement and failure, the Biennial became a catalyst for discussions of art’s place in politics, minority artists’ responsibility to their communities and the need for higher visibility, as well as countless other debates that began in this period and would continue, in various shapes, into the present day. Tricia Rose’s groundbreaking study, Black Noise, insightfully notes the shifting landscape of American culture in the early 1990s as it relates to rap music, a form she asserts, “brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society.” Rose reads between critics’ polarized receptions to connect this cultural production to a larger context, stating that

16 Wright, 197.
rap’s “contradictory articulations are not signs of absent intellectual clarity; they are a common feature of community and popular cultural dialogues that always offer more than one cultural, social, or political viewpoint.”\textsuperscript{17} Parallels made to the visual art of the period are less frequent, and the Whitney’s reluctance to project potentially contradictory notions of difference is indicative of the problematic identity art framework of the show. \textit{Hypothetical?}, along with \textit{Notes on the Margin of the Black Book}, can be seen as touchstones for an expanding critical creative practice, dually responsive to and constructive of the contemporary context. In the following chapter I will show how Simpson engaged the tropes of intertextuality and critical ambivalence within the context of the 1990s moment, through an informed, prolific, and continuously evolving career.

\textsuperscript{17} Tricia Rose, \textit{Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America} (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 2.
2. Lorna Simpson Across Mediums

Lorna Simpson’s artistic practice has taken many shapes over the course of a career now entering its third decade. As an art school student in the late 1970s she became disenchanted with what she found to be limiting in the realm of documentary photography, beginning an explorative foray into new methods and materials that would characterize her creative practice within her first years as a professional artist. Simpson continued to work through the photographic medium, repositioning her camera as a tool to disrupt the traditional tropes of “objectivity” she found unsettling. Shooting models in a studio setting gave the artist complete control over the image-making process and the addition of text matted alongside finished photographs resulted in contemplative, multi-layered products. Through these early phototext works, produced throughout the 1980s, Simpson was able to voice not only her discomfort with the practice her work inevitably critiqued but also the “established” relationships between photographer, camera, and subject, between image and text, and between the viewer and the artwork. The phototexts questioned the role of the photograph itself, how it is read and the process of seeing a viewer undergoes when encountering the work. The shift her work took in the mid-1990s, abandoning the phototext format and the physical figure entirely, is indicative of a fluency in multiple media and genres, as well as a further engagement of themes developed in the earlier work. Significantly, Simpson continued to ask crucial questions as her work took the form of large felt serigraphs, which exemplify her critically ambivalent practice and opened doors for new kinds of interaction with viewers. The analysis of Simpson’s
work that follows will be situated within the historical context out of which she was working and with which her practice created critical dialogue.

The specific post-1968 historic-political context, which is often characterized by the shift from more direct engagement with the civil rights movements to a critical if distanced look at the recent past, is crucial to any discussion of cultural production made during those years. What is significant about the 1980s is a relationship to a past many were not involved (or alive) in, or that many felt was no longer urgently relevant to their lives. A generation of art-school-educated artists equipped with tools and the opportunity to say something “new,” sought to press forward with innovative technology, media, and goals in mind. In the age of “multiculturalism” and post-modernism, the possibilities for young artists of color were enormous compared to past generations. What they were working towards varied, but consciousness of the historical tradition of artists of color in mainstream spaces provided a backdrop for many. According to bell hooks, the promise of a critical postmodern practice is immense and long-awaited: “We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static overdetermined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency.”18 In many ways Simpson and many of her contemporaries including Carrie Mae Weems, Kara Walker, and Glenn Ligon, as well as older established artists David Hammons and Adrian Piper, can be contextualized and grouped together in a responsive,

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deconstructive mode that addresses the concerns of postmodernism as they affect black people and the black art tradition. However, the move to critical and often ambivalent practice provoked a conscious distancing from much of the didactic, “essentializing” work that had been strategically important as a source of cultural pride through social movements of previous decades. In the 1980s context of multiculturalism, artists were seeking attention to their work that would not tokenize their practice under the fixed label of identity art. Simpson and others pushed against strict categories by making challenging critical work.

Outlining Simpson’s humble beginnings, Okwui Enwezor examines the shift from an early documentary practice to mature phototext work in “Repetition and Differentiation—Lorna Simpson’s Iconography of the Racial Sublime.” Enwezor charts Simpson’s early photographs from trips abroad as laying the groundwork for the basis of a “photographic argument about the nature of photographic subjectivity and the artist’s control over the process of image making.” As the budding artist became increasingly aware of the powerful potential her images could possess, Simpson began to use her camera as a tool of investigation rather than documentation. The influence of experimental artists and teachers on the West Coast impacted Simpson’s developing subjective use of the medium, as she veered away from the weighted moment of documentary photography to the staged construction of studio portraiture. Photography’s potential to function as “a wholly philosophical product’

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19 This is not to make a strict value judgment, but more to distinguish the work of younger artists from earlier work by artists who were not willing or perhaps could not afford to take on ambivalence, whose considerable achievements in terms of initial visibility paved the way for future generations of artists of color. I am thinking mostly of generational differences between artists of the Black Arts Movement and those active in the 1980s and later.
in the deconstructive mode” held her focus as she worked through what that could mean for her creative practice.21 In this way, Simpson critically engaged the deconstruction of documentation.

Central to Simpson’s deconstructive conceptual practice, the photograph itself remained a primary concern as she continually interrogated its uses and functions. Removing the basic tenet of documentarians to adhere to the “authenticity” of an image, Simpson constructed the world in front of her lens, making the artist’s touch visible while avoiding any trace of her “hand” in the final product. She combined the “portraits” she took in her studio with text she crafted and mounted together alongside the images as a complete whole. Often elliptical groupings of words, combined with serial polaroids of black models in white shifts with their backs to the camera or cropped at the neck, disrupted traditional readings of both photograph and text. As Coco Fusco notes, Simpson worked to shatter photography’s accepted stability of “referent = image = text/caption,” interrogating not only the way her work would be read, but how viewers have ingrained a certain way of reading. Commenting on her mode of “antiportraiture,” Simpson noted her intention behind deliberately denying her models faces: “The viewer wants so much to see a face to read ‘the look in the eyes’ or the expression on the mouth. I want viewers to realize that that is one of the mechanisms which they use to read a photograph. If they think, ‘How am I supposed to read this, if I don’t see the face?’ they may realize that they are making a cultural reading that has been learned over the years, and then perhaps

21 Ibid., 109.
see that it is not a given.”22 Dismissing the medium’s “givens,” Simpson used photography through the phototext pieces to interact with viewers critically, refusing to propose new truths in place of those she refuted.

The phototexts are essentially “absent portraits,” pictures of figures whose heads are cropped or whose backs are turned, hiding their faces from the camera. Enwezor finds Simpson’s denial of access functions to “rework the ethical paradigm of the documentary, critically questioning the maudlin sentimentality introduced in early photography of the face as a window into the soul of a subject.”23 The artist’s presence takes the lead role, in a sense, and the viewer is shut out of an expected relationship with the photographer’s subject, unable to approach it in the same way. Thus Simpson calls attention to the processes of reading and seeing. Enwezor terms the “fundamental dialectic” of Simpson’s phototext pieces the “relationship between plentitude and negation.” He goes on to establish what this relationship means for each part of her practice, “The privileging of the black female subject in her photographic projects addresses the question of plentitude, while the insistent refusal of the face of the woman alludes to her negation by the culture at large.”24 Instead of responding to this negation with didactic positive imagery, which at times can be said to be a practical and necessary tactic, Simpson complicates the issue with a frustrating negation of the key element in portraiture meant to be the most visible indicator of

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23 Enwezor, 117.
24 Ibid., 116-117.
subjectivity. Simpson’s camera becomes subjective in the process.²⁵

²⁵ Much of the scholarship on the history of photography, and the history of black subjects in particular, can be useful in analyzing Simpson’s phototexts. The artist is very aware of the power of her chosen medium, as well as its tenuous past in this country. Lisa Gail Collins writes of the “visual process of exhibition, dissection, and display,” which constructed black bodies for a white public most dangerously in the infamous and oft-cited case of Saartjie Baartman, the South African woman who was captured and exhibited across Europe in 1810-1815. The “visualizing myth,” concerned with providing evidentiary justification for widely held beliefs of racial inferiority, has direct relevance in the history of photography: “eleven years after the discovery of the first practical photographic process—the daguerreotype—in France, photography was being used in efforts to document the essential difference of people of African descent.” in Collins, 24.
1. *Guarded Condition*, 1989, 18 color Polaroids, plastic letters, 21 engraved plastic plaques, 231 x 333 cm
(courtesy of Salon 94)
Kellie Jones’ extensive survey of Simpson’s work, “(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” discusses the contradictions the phototexts engage, both formally and conceptually. As work with a black female subject they deal with the dual realities of blackness and womanhood, commenting on both the general and the particular. However, as Jones is quick to enunciate, “embedded in the very structure of the work itself, in this case in the confrontation between the specificity of individual vision and the need of social forces to control what is recorded, is the action of the artist prying into the history of photographic practice, questioning what we see and how we see it.” (my emphasis) What Simpson does is to displace a “true” reading of the figure in her work by deliberately effacing any recognizable personal identity, literally withholding her models’ faces in “antiportraits.” The history of photographic practice is “burdened by legacy of visual violence,” inflicted on those bodies which are made most visible as well as those historically invisibilized through a lack of (self) representation.

Simpson’s phototext constructions point directly to the process of seeing, confronting viewers with the uncomfortable acknowledgement of their own looking. The art-historical trope of the gaze, taken up significantly by feminist scholars to address the dominance of an assumed white male viewer, is complicated by the restrictive access Simpson allows to the female subjects in her works. The “privileging of the black female subject” resists the normative gaze through its controlled negation: a non-erotic, fragmented, defiant stance, cloaked in the

27 Collins, 24.
ubiquitous white shift that recurs in anonymous repetition. Simpson’s staged phototexts are more of an echo or a whisper, fragments situated inside “alternative space.” The combination of text on plastic plaques references pseudoscientific labeling and the explanatory captioning found commonly in museums. Given the history of unlimited access to bodies of color, seen in the forced nudity of early daguerreotypes that sharply contradicted all conventions of modesty of the day, Simpson’s simple white shifts offer her subjects a degree of protection against a harmful historical gaze.\(^{28}\) Their refusal to acknowledge the camera and, thus, the photographer does not return the act of looking as in traditional portraiture. Viewers’ awareness of their own gaze is heightened by Simpson’s “misuse” of the medium, a defiant lack of access to bodies that have historically been denied such privilege to privacy.

Initial critical response was certainly divided and many found Simpson’s practice subversive for its engagement with larger themes than so-called “personal politics,” while others could not extend readings beyond race. The black female figure in front of Simpson’s camera was sometimes seen as a stand-in for the artist behind it. In fact, one critic even went so far as to label Simpson’s practice “narcissistic.” Jones points to \textit{Artforum} critic Joshua Decter’s 1994 article lamenting a “willful disregard of the camera’s lens,”\(^{29}\) which may in fact be the artist’s intention, or rather a full acknowledgement of photography’s artifice. What the artist wrestles with in her phototexts are issues of universality as it relates to the black

\(^{28}\) Collins writes extensively of the earliest uses of photography by Swiss zoologist Louis Agassiz who photographed American slaves for documentation of those anatomical differences “unique to ‘the African race’” that justified their believed inferiority to whites, connoting the power of the visual to aid in the construction of “truth” and implicating photography’s role in that process. Collins, 19.

\(^{29}\) Jones, 77.
female subject in art. Western art history has assumed universal viewership of the white male gaze, relegating the female subject to the object of that gaze, and the white female figure as the ideal form of objective “beauty.” Simpson inserts an atypical, back-towards-the-camera figure to force viewers to read differently, directing the question back at them. She uses a recognizably black figure but removes traces of individual distinction to draw out larger issues and reject typical historical assumptions about black female subjects. Simpson “not so much countered as blocked traditional readings by presenting the renunciatory back, the non-erotic fragment, as a form for contemplation”\(^{30}\) and in so doing, makes the work question itself as its viewers do the same. The formal congruence of the phototexts in recognizable repetition and differentiation was seen as Simpson’s signature mode, and as Huey Copeland argues, as time went on seemed to trap the artist as critics regularly conflated “one work with another, and all of them with their maker.”\(^{31}\) Decter’s assertion that the figures in the work were nothing more than representations of the artist herself refusing “to complete the gesture of (self)portraiture,”\(^{32}\) brings to light many of the difficulties in marginalized artistic practice, seen as only able to speak to and for “the community,” limited by Gilroy’s burden of representation.

The problems of (white) universalism are critically addressed in much of the significant African American visual lexicon that precedes Simpson’s work. There is a strong history of DuBoisian “uplift” art, in which the power of the visual is harnessed as propaganda to uplift the race, and taken up in the Black Arts Movement, through

\(^{30}\) Jones, 31.


\(^{32}\) Jones, 77.
positive imagery, drawing often on a unique and exceptional black aesthetic or authentic essence, that sought to combat negative stereotypes and oppression. Most notable, is the famous assertion “Black is Beautiful,” which rejected negative stereotypes of black as bad and ugly through a reversal of the discriminatory into self-empowerment and pride.

Strategies employed over the course of history have unquestionably varied with time and place, as have debates among practitioners and theorists about the best way to address perennial issues of the denial of black subjecthood in artistic and literary canons. I invoke uplift art and thought of the Black Arts Movement to bring Spivak’s strategic essentialism back into the discussion. Self-conscious artistic production can utilize essentialist notions of cultural essences to counter and subvert hegemony at specific historical junctures for specific goals, and ambivalence can be used in much the same way. Without unanimously rejecting the work of the past, Simpson questions a singularly didactic approach to visual expression with ambivalence, deflecting the criticism to the modes of seeing and understanding rather than strategies of earlier eras. This approach is perhaps what simultaneously enchanted and enraged critics who encountered her work. According to Jones, Simpson’s practice is committed to the creation of “new paradigms for looking at the human form,” not content with simply critiquing contemporary disjunctures in those modes, maintaining both responsive and productive potential, and arguing against the damage done by the established conditions of Western art.

33 Jones, 32.
In the mid 1990s Simpson made a departure away from the use of the figure, or rather the physical body, in her work. This shift was met with much dismay as some critics hastened to claim she had lost her political edge. Perhaps partially owing to critics’ insistence and conflation of the phototext works into a singular (exhausted) model, and due to a desire to try something new, the figure in Simpson’s work vanished. She had undertaken installation work and incorporated traces of the body, such as shoes and diaries, and she began working with felt. The shift to felt, which can be characterized by a more direct engagement with the politics of the contemporary “moment,” was preceded by site-specific installation, the most significant of which being Hypothetical? (1992), included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial as mentioned earlier. According to some views, this piece anticipated the complete removal of figures; however, I believe it signaled a movement in Simpson’s practice to engage similar issues differently, maintaining and heightening an active relationship with viewers by implicating them in the physical space of the work.

One wall of the room featured a grid of instrument mouthpieces inserted into the gallery wall across from a small black and white image of lips on the opposite side. A small newspaper clipping under glass with the word, “hypothetical?” etched across it, stood alone on the third wall, and featured part of an interview with Mayor Tom Bradley of Los Angeles, California. Contextualized in the immediate aftermath of the LA riots, the quote reads, “Asked whether he would now be afraid to be a black man in Los Angeles if he were not the Mayor, Mr. Bradley paused, then said: ‘No. I would not be scared. I would be angry.’” Essentially, the question asks a black man how he would feel if he were a black man, in the guise of asking the mayor how he
would feel were he not the mayor. “In the pause between the journalist’s question and
Bradley’s answer the remnants of masculinity are revealed.”34 Centered on the
journalist’s poorly worded leading question that presumes black men and mayors to
be mutually exclusive groups, Simpson’s piece considers positionality and
subjectivity, which are far more fluid terms than “identity” in the debates and
discourse of the time. The quotation cuts to the core of the Biennial’s construction,
specifically the problem of encouraging members of “other” communities to express
themselves, but only permitting them to do so on the terms of an institution endorsing
a limited conception of “identity” that allows for one label alone. Hypothetical?’s
critical reception is interesting for the readings that find the work locked in a rather
basic argument against stereotyping. Rosalind Krauss’ reading of the work dismisses
the Mayor Bradley newspaper clipping as “irrelevant to the piece and not particularly
interesting,” and instead reads the work as dealing with black rage and the artist’s
process.35 Hypothetical?’s complexity stood out in the Biennial, and this ironically
made it easier for critics to pass over it, because of its refusal to fight on the political
and essentialist terms framed by the curatorial position.

In the years following the Biennial, Simpson began working with photographs
in new ways. The move to felt registers a significant departure from the mounted
phototexts, and expands interestingly on relationships to viewers and space explored
in installation. As the artist explained in a short documentary about in-process work
for Annenberg/CPB, felt differs from photo paper in that it absorbs light rather than
reflecting it. The surface itself has a supple materiality and images can be rendered in

34 Jones, 62.
detail through the process of serigraphy, a type of screenprinting. Jones insightfully comments on the entrance of the new material and what it means for Simpson’s practice: “Simpson’s turn to felt was a brilliant one, for it spoke to issues of sensuality on a number of levels. As a fabric it was incredibly tactile, calling out for our touch. Even the process of its creation recalled sexual performance: felt is made by adding moisture to hair and compressing it. Finally, the word itself conjured bodily contact.”36 Felt changed the surface of the work but also the viewer’s experience of it. Such a lush material invited the viewer to encounter the work more closely, which abstracted the image printed on it beyond the point of recognition. The felt serigraph pieces are composed of large grids of felt rectangles that form enormous composite images of black and white landscape and interior photographs, often seven or eight feet across. There are no visible figures but each image implies a missing human presence and is as elegant as it is melancholy. Text panels accompany the works and provide slight context, usually coming in the form of snippets of dialogue or brief portions of narrative, spoken by or about specific people. Viewers scan the landscapes for signs of life, searching for the bodies that belong to voices that explicitly reference sexual acts.

36 Jones, 68.
2. The Park, 1995, Serigraph on 6 felt panels with 2 text panels 67 x 67 1/2 inches overall, (courtesy of Salon 94)

LEFT TEXT PANEL:
Just unpacked a new shiny silver telescope, And we are up high enough for a really good view of all the buildings and the park. The living room window seems to be the best spot for it. On the sidewalk below a man watches figures from across the path.

RIGHT TEXT PANEL:
It is early evening, the lone sociologist walks through the park, to observe private acts in the men's public bathrooms. These facilities are men's and women's rooms back to back. He focuses on the layout of the men's bathroom-- right to left: basin, urinal, urinal, urinal, stall, stall. He decides to adopt the role of voyeur and look out in order to go unnoticed and noticed at the same time. His research takes several years. He names his subjects A, B, C, X, Y, and O, records their activities for now, and their license plates when applicable for later.
Simpson’s series of felt serigraphs titled, the Public Sex series (1995-1998), confronts viewers differently than her phototexts. The series draws on the physical implication of viewers in space first charted in installations like Hypothetical?, through their massive size as well as the dislocation in clarity versus abstraction depending on physical closeness to the work. The text/image relationship is still disrupted through the use of snippets of conversation, rather than singular, elliptical words, making the viewer look again at the images, searching for bodies they still don’t see. The felt pieces allude to figures and their actions that are not viewed in the images themselves, which charges viewers’ with voyeurism much more explicitly. Interviewed in the exhibition catalogue for a Centro de Arte Salamanca solo show in 2002, Simpson notes the distinction between her previous formal mode and the image/text relationship in the serigraphs,

Although voyeurism is referred to in the text, there is no ‘view’ or portrayal of any sort of intimacy other than the conversations that refer to stairways, observation, a scene from Female Trouble (a film by John Waters), a sociologist at work, office suites under construction etcetera. I wanted to create images that reflect a tradition of landscape and architectural photography as the pictorial description of these places.37

The felt pieces that comprise the Public Sex series depict empty locations, landscapes and exteriors, devoid of any figural markers, while the text panels document unseen intimate encounters that lie outside the physical boundaries of the printed images. Simpson mentions briefly in an interview with Thelma Golden some of the personal context for the work that can help shed light on their shifts in tone. Created in the

aftermath of the most devastating period of the AIDS crisis, the sense of loss evoked in the series may parallel what the artist describes as an “overwhelming feeling of absence.”38 The context of this “moment” is significant within Simpson’s career and external to it, for its resonance with much of the arts community specifically and American society in general. The Public Sex series begs the question of viewers’ own expectations, and highlights a voyeuristic impulse as well as the trepidation with the issue of sexuality during this period. Simpson’s ambivalence plays out in the lack of an easily accessible reference point and in her ability to imply figures and bodies while implicating viewers in voyeuristic acts of looking.

Huey Copeland’s “‘Bye, Bye Black Girl’: Lorna Simpson’s Figurative Retreat,” seeks to understand what happens when the “signature” figure leaves the work and the artist shifts into uncharted territory of an abstracted representation of the body. In response to some of the critics who denounced this formal shift as reflective of the artist’s loss of interest in the political and social concerns of black subjects, Copeland comments on the “sharp bifurcation of Simpson’s critical project,” noting that critics “either lauded her ‘new-found’ interest in the universal or judged the work deficient without the discursive meat of identity politics.” However, as he suggests, the “discursive meat” is still present—critics had a harder time reading the body into depictions of its absence. Certainly invoking a subtler approach but with the potential to engage “the universal,” Simpson’s felt works opened up the process of “reading” again. Viewers were confused as to whether the artist could continue speaking about black (female) bodies without directly portraying them. In a conversation with Thelma Golden discussing the formal choices and the physical size of the felt works, Simpson talks about how viewers encounter the work, and specifically the disjuncture between clarity of image and text in how close one gets to the pieces. In Still (1997) text is printed directly onto the felt as opposed to the separate felt text panels displayed alongside some of the other felt works. Simpson notes,

> From a distance you can’t quite see the text that’s embedded into the image, while the image has great clarity. As you come closer to it, the image becomes less distinct while the text becomes more succinct. You engage with the piece in this very subtle way. With a lot of those

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39 Copeland, 74.
works that claim a large space...I always seem to insert some kind of disruption.  

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4. *Still*, 1997, Serigraph on 36 felt panels with 1 text panel 120 x 216 inches overall, (courtesy of Salon 94)
The removal of the physical figure and the addition of felt signaled a profound change in the way the artist was engaging familiar questions and posing new ones. The traces of the body that haunted the felt serigraphs became a subtle gesture towards the artist’s previous work as well as a way of engaging a larger scope of themes deemed by some to be unsuccessful in the previous model. As is not uncommon when an artist’s work changes direction or seemingly abandons identifiable “signature” characteristics, Simpson’s new body of work was met with a range of responses. Some worried she had given up issues of race and politics altogether because black women’s bodies were visually absent from the work. Perhaps even more so than in the phototexts, viewers are left to make sense of what they are presented with: as Jones notes, “gathering together meaning becomes our process, and one that we must own.”41 By virtue of their enormous size, the felt pieces have a grander, almost cinematic presence. They invite the viewer into the scene, but the closer one gets, the less clear the image becomes and the more one is confronted with a blur of texture and grays. The effect on the viewer is dislocating, as Simpson brings “looking” and “seeing” into literal confusion.

The felt pieces anticipated Simpson’s move to film and video, which builds off themes she had been exploring in still media. Her 2003 film, Corridor, a double projection video installation centered on the daily life of a black woman in 1865 and 1965, stars Wangechi Mutu in both roles side by side. Mutu’s own work is also located primarily in the site of the female body, and though she uses drastically

41 Jones, 74.
different tools and materials, her practice embodies critical ambivalence in striking ways.
3. Disem-bodies: Wangechi Mutu’s Collaged Constructions

Wangechi Mutu is a Kenyan-born New York-based mixed-media visual artist whose work engages broad themes of selfhood, embodiment, and beauty centered on the site of the female body. Throughout her work in collage with watercolor and on Mylar, as well as in her sculptures, installations and performance, this body takes a variety of forms. It is constructed through a mixture of “found” fragments and painterly drippings, or in layers of multiple bodies clipped from magazines, or it can be the gallery space itself; the body effectively becomes something of a new creature altogether. These new bodies are comprised of, and significantly highlight, contradictory elements of their own construction as sexualized wounded figures, in glamorous diseased skin, exhibiting vulnerable, aggressive and modest brown flesh. The work these collages do is to externalize possible contradictions in a black female identity position onto the physical body itself, while charging the viewer with an assessment of their aesthetic value. Can something grotesque also be beautiful? Mutu’s work complicates binary formulations of the otherness of black female flesh by creating visually seductive images that speak to the violence representation has done to these bodies in the real world, as well as the real and symbolic violence of war, colonialism, and globalization. Her bodies are the literal sites of critical ambivalence and function as an embodiment of contradictions—grotesque beauty, virile sickness, chimera/cyborg modes of being—that trouble normative structures, readings and representations of (female) bodies, and confront viewers with their own complicity in those same organizing processes.
The medium of collage suits the kind of (de/re)constructive work Mutu takes on, especially given her subjects and the frankensteinian process of dismembering “healthy” images, using the parts to create a new, “sickly” whole. Her choice to work with collage is conscious acknowledgement of past artists whose work was instrumental in shaping the medium’s technical and formal concerns, aesthetic possibilities, methods and failures. Hannah Höch and Romare Bearden come immediately to mind, not only for the similarities in source material but also for some of the strategic work disparate media references can do in a “high art” framework, working out of the specific contexts of German Dada and the Harlem Renaissance respectively. Höch’s photomontages address beauty and contemporary notions of womanhood through the use of popular imagery constructed so as to allude to a perhaps “universal” femininity, in works like Beautiful Girl (1920), or the extremes to which the technique could push (metaphoric) representation in later works like Grotesque (1963). For their use of distortion and fragmentation both Grotesque and The Bride (1933?) work in conversation with much of Mutu’s work in the medium and can be seen as informing the kind of deliberately haphazard (re)construction of appropriated images that seem somewhat of a conscious affirmation of the artist’s hand in the process. Bearden’s work similarly nods to its own artifice in the creation not only of nuanced figures, but of assembled settings, providing a narrative structure to many of his compositions. Summertime (1967) is as much about the space of the neighborhood stoop as it is about the figures’ place in the world at large and their own world, and in works like The Calabash (1970), which takes the typical art-historical subject matter of a bathing nude constructed from assembled magazine elements that
fragment her body while coalescing the natural environment around her. Certainly with these artists and countless others in mind, Mutu’s work takes an innovative approach to collage as a strategic tactic in her creative practice.

Mutu’s watercolor and collage *Pin-Up* series from 2001 is composed of several “portraits” of partially nude female figures whose gestures reference both glamorous fashion pin-up posters and images from pornography and the sex industry. Their flesh is painted in a varied brown-hued watercolor, toned and modeled to suggest real bodies in conceivable studio-lit settings; however, their faces are made up of magazine cut-out features and their hair looks like images straight out of a shampoo advertisement. Beyond these aspects, something else seems “off” about these bodies. Although it may not be the first characteristic the viewer discerns, ultimately what is most striking is that each figure is an amputee. Some are missing hands, legs or feet, and a few have crutches or peg legs. These bodies share a condition of damage yet all seem to wear their scars proudly. Many look directly out at the viewer, at once prompting a gaze while aggressively seeking to disturb it. There is agency in female sexuality and these images complicate issues of self-presentation, explicit and directed voyeurism, and the role and presence of women of color in both the sex and fashion industries. In some cases these figures look out of mismatched magazine eyes seeming to provoke a sexualized gaze, a kind of “come-hither” visual confrontation that works to seduce and repel the viewer.

Kellie Jones writes of the contradictory notions of self-perception and presentation of black women in Mutu’s compositions. As she states:

> The individualism and self-determination of (black) women is often read as aggression, and is something that the world has trouble finding
a place for. It is a characteristic, perceived of course as masculine, that
many times has to be combined with the sensual or erotic (designated
as feminine) in order to be understood. The impetus to unite these
parts of the whole finds strange parallels in places where the
erogenous abuts the violent.\footnote{42}

The violent and erogenous find a home together in the bodies of the women in Mutu’s
\textit{Pin-Ups}, who want to be seen as beautiful and sexy, begging the reconsideration of
conditioned readings of black womanhood and notions of beauty across (national)
contexts.

\footnote{42} Jones, quoted in Wangechi Mutu, \textit{A Shady Promise} (Bologna, Italy: Damiani, 2008), 81.
(courtesy of Gladstone Gallery)
The bodies Mutu crafts are racially coded as black but they raise the question as to whether or not they can be read as decidedly African. The mass media references in the forms of facial features, hair and accessories pose an interesting dichotomy between the assumptions and expectations of “otherness” and the critical work done to address these assumptions but remain ambivalent in confirming or denying their validity. Does Mutu reject a feminist discourse by acknowledging and not necessarily subverting the patriarchal white male gaze? Are our worst fears confirmed about the diseased and victimized “women over there?” Is she really speaking to a larger condition of women’s oppression without doing the legwork to resist a singular reading of victim-hood at the hands of Western culture? There is a tension between beautiful sexualized imagery of women of color and the gaze that poses a potential threat to straightforward readings for or against feminism. Female sexual empowerment is not undone in the presence of an established gaze, nor is the gaze necessarily subverted through the presence of dark bodies. In relation to Simpson’s denial of voyeuristic access to the body in the phototexts, Mutu’s presentation of the body as a performative sexual subject troubles notions of victimization and feminist empowerment.

As Mutu shows in these and in some of her more recent work, this kind of ambivalence may in fact be an effective method for wider readings and a broader scope on the work from critical and experiential perspectives. Collage is perfectly suited to pack in disparate elements. Mutu seems to reference tactics similar to Simpson’s characteristic wordplay, a nod to the question of how we look, see and read images; however, she does so through a different method, medium, aesthetic and
process. Mutu’s move to synthetic Mylar marks a shift in her image-making process as well as in the nature of her results. In busier, meticulously-worked pieces she addresses more directly some of the thematic discrepancies of cultural bodies while maintaining, and at times magnifying, the work’s ambivalent tone.

*I Have Peg Leg Nightmares* (2003) is a large watercolor and collage on Mylar that signals a new direction in Mutu’s work, as it harks back to the figures in the *Pin-Ups* while presenting a new kind of form altogether. The surface of the work has been dramatically altered to make the paint pool and splatter in drips all over the body and give the figure plastic-looking skin. Perhaps this aspect is what gives the work such a visceral feel. This female form appears diseased—white blotchy clusters of dots cover the skin—and her amputated leg explodes blood where the peg is attached. A face of borrowed eyes and lips turns to face the viewer in an over-the-shoulder glance as the figure’s back is towards us. She wears a jeweled flower in her frozen windswept hair and large clasped hands reveal bracelets, giving the impression that perhaps the white dots on the body are not directly on the skin, but are some type of irregularly patterned beige-and-green-tinted fabric, worn tight. This speckled and scarred figure, with her back facing the viewer and a somewhat blank expression on her face, is vulnerable, seemingly protecting herself from a potentially dangerous outside gaze. Much of Mutu’s two-dimensional figurative work from 2003, 2004 and 2005 features similarly crafted bodies comprised of layered watercolor, magazine clippings and shreds, with some kind of painterly gesture on the top-most layer. In some of these works she incorporates non-human elements onto the figures, rendering them not fully human as they are fragmentarily whole. These works can be seen as following
either a naturalist vein, through the use of botanic and animate cut-outs sutured onto posed figures, as talons in place of stilettoed feet; or, a futuristic vein, which synthesizes human and machine in the form of motorcycle and other mechanical additions, often replacing hands and arms, filling the previous void in place of amputation. *Double Fuse* (2003) shows two twin figures with claw-like motorcycle appendages in place of one arm. These figures are covered in white dots like the figure in *I Have Peg Leg Nightmares*, but they are also decorated in glimmering glitter-lesions that cover their skulls and arms. Their poses are confident and almost regal, tufts of hair that falls off shoulders appear militaristic, so perhaps these are the bodies of female warriors, their bodies endowed with powerful attachments, toeing the masculine/feminine line in aggression and self-determination.
6. *I Have Peg Leg Nightmares*, 2003, collage and watercolor on Mylar, 43 ½” x 30”
(courtesy of Gladstone Gallery)
7. *Double Fuse*, 2003, Ink and collage on Mylar, 45” x 72”
(courtesy of Gladstone Gallery)
These hybrid figures pose questions as to the essential “purity” or “wholeness” of a given identity and suggest that bodies can be comprised of myriad different elements, conceptually or art-historically. The significance of Mutu’s use of collaged “found” objects is crucial to another level of understanding of hybridity, in that her figures resist an ethno-cultural diagnosis as a collection of scraps from a variety of sources. Mutu’s choice of fashion and motorcycle magazines, as well as pornographic and ethnographic documentary images, reflects a cross-section of representative media. In an essay titled “Tactical Collage” by Malik Gaines and Alexandro Segade that appears in Mutu’s *A Shady Promise*, the authors highlight the important work Mutu’s deliberate use of source material and mastery of the medium does for conceptions of female embodiment: “Mass culture makes the female body into a banality, a threatening negation for the people who live in such bodies. In Mutu’s body of work, this condition reveals itself not as a coherent system of oppression, but as a disjointed mode of being.”43 This disjuncture is embodied in the female form throughout Mutu’s work, and her process of cutting and (re)assembling mirrors the violence caused by external state or international forces on specifically raced and gendered bodies, and mirrors the language of self-hate and fragmentation of body image in the violence women do to themselves and to each other. The interplay between ideals and the oftentimes harsh realities that underpin them is present in the literal form of the figure. Hybridity is “a tactic for defying the tyrannical, taxonomical order of seeing, that most violent imposition onto the bodies

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of those made into specimen.”44 Mutu reclaims the fragmented, contradictory body to make sense out of the world that constructs it.

_The Ark Collection_ (2006), a series of postcard-size collages of layered photographs from pornography magazines and books about African women, deals with bodies in relation to each other. All the images are “found,” and there are no clearly identifiable marks from the hand of the artist. Working more as an editor/draftswoman, Mutu uses her meticulous skill to direct the eye through these layered images, highlighting poignant juxtapositions between images as the series engages the relationship between these two seemingly distinct photographic representations of black women’s bodies. Without the drawn or painted figure from her previous work, the artist frames the body as the literal frame of the postcard, the space embodying contradictions between bodies and fragments rather than using a single body to house them, as before. The formal connections amongst images are readily apparent, but closer viewing of individual postcards yields varied results, at times apparently tongue-in-cheek and slightly gruesome.

One particular card lines up a full-frontal reclining body with a portrait of the face and bust of a woman wearing a colorful beaded necklace. The two images are layered on top of each other such that the face of the African woman obscures the face of the black American woman, while the first woman’s face is also obscured by the large breasts of the second. The women are woven so that breasts can double as eyes and the necklace marks the place where we expect genitals to be, effectively cut up into a shared anonymous identity, each face fragmented beyond possible

44 Ibid., 146.
recognition. In another image from the collection, an enormously large arm and thighs wrap around a rural scene of a small, lone seated woman in such a way as to make the hand grasp the figure and transform lace pantyhose which is cut in the shape of a veil to line up perfectly with the seated figure’s head. These images are certainly Mutu’s most playful, but also explicitly engage the politics of representation in Western-driven media, symbolic violence against, and exploitation and othering of women of color within a Western context as well as those outside, “over there.”
8. *The Ark Collection*, 2006, collage, 6 ½” x 9 ½”
(courtesy of Gladstone Gallery)
The question of victimization arises powerfully in the context of the *Ark Collection*, as well as with regards to Mutu’s own statements about her personal identity as an African woman living and working in the U.S. The globalized world has the same, if not greater, potential to perpetuate violence against minority groups. With freer trade for some has come wider wealth disparities for many, and with the dissolution of the “stable” nation-state model, fluidity and transit in conjunction with stricter borders has become a norm. Mutu describes her enchantment with her source material as coming out of her own experiences and exposure to the kinds of images she collects for her work. Her interest lies in the symbolic meaning of media representations, and she acknowledges that her creative practice essentially plays with fire:

You can tell what American mainstream culture is thinking by looking at a newsstand. For the most part, there’s a lot of misogynistic material, and a few things that have to do with sports and cars. If you want to know what an animate system is about, you look at its shit, like elephant dung. If you want to know where the animal has been and whether it’s healthy, you sift through its stool. That’s a little bit what it’s like when I look at media; it’s quickly processed, it’s not the most high-end knowledge but it definitely gives you a cross-section of what is going on.45

The erotic linkage between images of women of color who work in the sex industry in the United States and “documentary” images of African women from travel books, is made clear through the visceral juxtaposition of fragmented bodies. Curator Lauri Firstenberg comments on the damage done by Western imagery, noting what she finds to be an interesting critical position in Mutu’s *Ark Collection*: “These images do

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not defeat the erotic, however; they perform within the language of hegemony, borrowing canonical visual tropes to co-opt, alter, amputate and confound." While I would agree that the postcards perform within oppressive language, I would add that the movement *between* images provides a distance that posits neither explicit rejection of this kind of visual language nor whole-hearted support.

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(courtesy of Gladstone Gallery)
An interesting parallel presents itself in Christian Marclay’s *Imaginary Records* collection (1991-92), a series of constructed images made from sewn-together album covers that assembles incomplete pictures of body parts or sections of an object, most notably the neck of a guitar, from several different albums to make a new whole. In this kind of photomontage, the original image that seeks to become whole dictates the organization of the assemblage, and in most cases the square albums jut out at odd angles so that the images continue fluidly. In Mutu’s *Ark Collection*, on the other hand, the rectangle of the postcard does not change while the interior images are cropped, shaped into relief, and thrown into a jarring juxtaposition that often works against the “wholeness” of particular figures, instead registering a completeness in the finished product.

Mutu seems more invested in a complex and deliberately ambivalent position of subjectivity. We recognize the kinds of bodies she shows us snippets of, but struggle to reconstitute a resolved “whole” figure from disparate parts, unlike in her *Pin-Ups*. Mutu’s work complicates the structures of visual representation of black women’s bodies through her strategic use of collage and photomontage. Her figures and figure-based collage works embody the contradictions inherent in the realities of disjointed modes of being. Her beautiful aesthetic language addresses art-historical traditions of representation and contemporary popular imagery. Using the “shit of culture” in combination with anthropological photography, her collages perform disruptive appropriation through female embodiment.

This criticality is especially significant in the context of the post-9/11 “moment,” because of the enlargement of gaps between America and large portions
of the international community, but also in the slippages of essentialized notions of representations on a new and larger scale. The influence of images and the media in constructing narratives is anything but new; however, the proliferation of the internet in the period of late globalization has continued to impact notions of “us” and “them,” “here” and “there.” Especially considering the United States’ conflicting role as simultaneous international peacekeeper and terrorist fighter, the idea of war has changed drastically. The dislocation in Mutu’s bodies may be indicative of the distinctly post-9/11 raced and gendered body, a hot topic in contemporary cultural debates. Through intertextually ambivalent strategies Mutu interrogates notions of beauty and the grotesque, of healthy parts and sickly wholes, and the contested site of the female body in art history and contemporary international politics. The information age of late-capitalist globalization might prompt ponderings of chimera hybrid constructions, and Mutu’s Afro-Futurist disem-bodies thoughtfully meditate on the potential of the ever-fleeting present moment. Nonetheless, the present moment can hark infinitely back to pasts, and sometimes history’s significance can seem even greater. Leslie Hewitt is an artist who engages the past through objects and ephemera, signifiers of a lost time and lost narratives, who draws on the vernacular to consider historical memory and the lapses in the dominant narrative’s inclusion of particular stories.
4. (Re)framing Revision: Physicality and the Past in Recent Work by Leslie Hewitt

Leslie Hewitt works primarily in photography, sculpture and site-specific installation, although maintaining strict boundaries among mediums is disadvantageous to define her particular practice. Interested simultaneously in the “illusionary potential of photography and the physical weight of sculpture,” her works often blur lines between the two, featuring, most prominently, photographic documentations of sculptural arrangements of groups of objects in the artist’s studio including re-photographs of collected snapshots. Hewitt engages themes of history and memory through the use of a personal archival impulse that remains situated within the broader historical narrative of African American consciousness, employing a vernacular aesthetic with heavy formalist, and at times Minimalist, concerns. The artist’s distinct visual language complements her conceptual practice, highlighting viewership and interiority while consistently referring outside the frame of visual depiction. Serial images are common in much of her work, as are large prints housed in custom frames that rest on the floor of exhibition spaces rather than hanging on gallery walls, addressing notions of time and of physicality. I am interested in Hewitt’s play of subjectivity through the found objects and re-photographs that dominate her photographs and those objects that she creates or situates. Her conceptual strategies open up the possibility for multiple readings and an insertion of effaced or erased narratives into the totalizing narrative of historical memory.

47 from brief statement on artist’s website, Leslie Hewitt, www.lesliehewitt.info
Critical, with an air of ambivalence, Hewitt’s work is as much a product of its time as it is a conscious reflection on the histories that have come before. Engaging the explorative potential of photography, sculpture and installation, Hewitt works to construct a distinctly personal subjectivity and active viewership through the everyday reminders and resonances of collective historical memory.

Examining Hewitt’s ongoing *riffs on real time* (2002-2009), which feature large photographed documentations of temporary constructions of re-photographs and selected assortments of ephemera on varying “grounds,” will provide analytical grounding for much of her practice, in addition to an introduction to the kinds of formal and conceptual tools she uses. Most significantly, “riffs” addresses intimate personal recollection amidst the absence of figures, critically inserting the viewer into a relationship with memories that are not theirs, but seemingly probing their ability to identify or relate to them. Hewitt’s much larger custom-framed print series, including *Make it Plain* (2006) and the *Midday* series (2009), play specifically with notions of physical and sculptural weight, in both content and situation of display, depicting still-life constructions of objects arranged against a wall of the artist’s studio, and highlighting the floor both in the image and outside in the space of the framed piece. Seriality and interchangeability resonate within these temporary and temporal arrangements and the objects that comprise the still-life sculptures themselves, are evocative of experiences and references outside the work, including literature, commerce, and history. Prompting an actively constructive viewership, these works read like stills in a film, relating to other media and significant moments in historical consciousness, while addressing the mundane particularities of absent radical
participants. Hewitt’s use of recontextualization in “riffs,” physicality in Make it Plain and the sculptures Untitled (Capsule) (2005-2006) and Untitled (Resist, Resist, Resist) (2009), and the use of temporal “no-time” in the Midday series, all point to a process-based conceptual practice that foregrounds vernacular aesthetics and cultural specificity to consider nuance and erasure—“each developed project is a call to an audience on [an] intimate, but imperative level.”

(courtesy of D’Amelio Terras)
Hewitt’s several 10-print photographic series *riffs on real time* are formalist excursions into the depths of personal and collective memory, through the exclusive portrayal of collaged elements on the studio floor. The resulting documented montages present a series of visual haikus, which incorporate archival, aesthetic and formalist impulses. Addressing the conceptual process, Hewitt states, “I focus the camera lens acutely within the vernacular of the everyday; revealing several perspectives at once.” Each carefully composed image in the series is comprised of three distinct layers, like three phrases of a haiku, consistent in their rhyme, repetition and variation. Individual images are self-reflexive and contained as groupings of similar but divergent versions of the three parts are present in unique arrangements across the series. The top layer of each one of the “riffs” is a snapshot, speaking to the casual nature of family record-keeping and the importance of the mundane for those who are personally connected. These often decaying pictures are placed in the center of the new re-photograph’s frame, and are actively (re)framed by the next two layers on top of which the snapshot gently rests. Middle layers are closed books or pages ripped from magazines, an element of ephemera with loose direct connection, at least verbally, to the scene depicted in the top photographs. Handwritten scribbles and frayed corners hint at previous owners, while the bird’s-eye view perspective echoes evidence documentation (as in a crime scene), perhaps pressing a viewer to consider those persons deliberately absent from view. The outer edge of each temporary assemblage is quite literally the ground, evenly framing the first two elements in wood floor or shag carpet. What Hewitt’s “riffs” engage in most productively is

49 from artist statement at, www.lesliehewitt.info
recontextualization; of time and space, and in the relationship of elements in the
collage to each other and all parts of the whole to the viewer.
11. *Riffs on Real Time* (10 of 10), 2008, C-print, 40” x 30”
(courtesy of D’Amelio Terras)
Concerned with the distinction photography makes with sculpture, Hewitt treads the line of the strictly defined art object, meditating on an ever-shifting “photograph as object.” Her “riffs” take as their subject physical photographs, portrayed in all their idiosyncrasies with bent corners and fading color, curling up from the surface on which they are placed, and shown in warm and evenly controlled interior lighting. The resulting image, though, is a flat documentation of the real space of the “collage,” at once playing along with photography’s ability to depict three-dimensional space, while simultaneously exposing and reinforcing that illusion. In addition to space, time is also destabilized in the act of re-photography, which Hewitt, herself, points out,\(^5\) noting the presence of two “photographic moments”: in the original snapshot and the artist’s present-day studio documentation. The setting within each “riffs” series work in tandem with the top layers to comprise ten complete conceptual wholes; the “riffs” series from 2008 is set entirely on wood floors and some of the earlier series includes a variety of interior floorings and carpets. The wood floors bring out similarities in both the snapshot layer and the middle paper or magazine layer, highlighting variations in different floors, as some appear older and well-worn while others are brighter and newer-feeling. Each floor is carefully paired with top materials that draw connections between folded or ripped paper and paint and tool markings on the wood of the floor. Lighting reinforces the “photograph as object” condition, casting slight and consistent shadows on each “beneath” layer and the ground.

\(^5\) noted in Leslie Hewitt, “Riffs on Real Time” (lecture given as part of Fellows’ Presentation Series, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Cambridge, January 27, 2010). (unpublished)
The congruencies between elements in the collage can be attributed to Hewitt’s keen attention to aesthetic and compositional devices. Her distinct visual language in “riffs” is made through a process of “visual syncopation,” in which parts of the whole image rhyme and relate, making a series out of a very cohesive set of images. Hewitt describes the effect on the viewer, “slowing down the process of looking,” as the tension in each image works to suspend time, activating viewers by pulling them into the frame, but keeping them caught in the in-between space of photographic moments in shallow perspective. The viewer’s encounter with the images on the gallery wall works alongside the flattening of space inside the images to provide an indecisive moment in the movement from the floor in the image to the wall outside the frame. The trompe-l’oeil effect of the ground in each image that works to literally “frame” the top two layers of collage is magnified by their placement on the wall, as well as their enlargement to 40”x30”, which makes the viewer suspend belief, if only momentarily, in the image in front of their eyes. The implied presence of the viewer is, in this case, necessary for the completed gesture to take effect, and it may be in this directed relationship that an active and identifying viewer is created.

A certain psycho-social empathy is accessed in the snapshots, books, and notebook pages placed so casually yet deliberately on the floor. The document of their presence is somehow almost a guarantee of their ephemerality, and Hewitt’s process engages and questions the camera as image-maker, proposing and recording the “photograph as object.” As Thomas J. Lax astutely states, “Hewitt’s ‘Riffs’ are as

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51 Ibid.
much lyrical reflections on reality as they are meditations on reel time and photography’s role in the production of reality.”52 The viewer is made to consider, “what reality is this?” or rather, “whose reality?” which is all the more powerful. The question of “what” undermines the notion of universal viewership when we consider the families and stories that appear so central and so flat in her “riifs.” Hewitt’s aesthetic Minimalist impulse embodies a certain kind of ambivalence, in that rich color images contradict Minimalism’s clean white and grey tones. The formalist use of the vernacular vocabulary, however, works to insert these forgotten narratives into the greater (art)-historical canon. The snapshots themselves may, in fact, be contemporaries of Minimalism, and the influence of Sol LeWitt can be seen in Hewitt’s attention to form and repetitious syntax. While LeWitt’s grid sculptures seem to pare down concept and system to almost remove the artist’s process from the work, Hewitt instead inflects form with vivid vernacular language that draws attention to the artist’s process and to hidden narratives, weaving varied and apparent contradictory influences into resolved poetic works.

(courtesy of D’Amelio Terras)
In *Make it Plain* Hewitt engages the physicality of the photograph as a distinct object, considering the possibility of literal as well as conceptual and metaphoric “weight,” implicating the space around the work in installation as well as engaging viewers who confront it. The series includes a set of five large (60”x84”) photographs set in custom wood frames and, as per the artist’s website, “a copy of Eastman Kodak’s Twenty-Fourth Edition book titled ‘How to Make Good Pictures’ affixed to the floor.”

There is a relationship developed between the framed prints, which rest on the floor and lean against the gallery walls, and the “real,” physical book that remains stuck on the floor in front and between them, creating a kind of constellation of specifically situated art objects. In addition to their large scale, the frames are not set with glass. This has a direct effect on viewership, allowing viewers a metaphoric entry into the work. The ground in front of the framed photographs becomes activated space, both through the use of the Kodak book and the positioning of the frames, which the artist notes, “calls into question the walls, the floor and the viewers.” Connecting the “horizon-line,” created where the floor meets the wall in the photographs, to the exterior “horizon-line” of the floor and wall on either side of the frame, “the space of the installation as a whole becomes a site of implication for the construction of historic memory.”

This kind of constructivist viewing process is mirrored in Hewitt’s creative practice, significantly through the use of books and snapshots.

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53 as noted at www.lesliehewitt.info
55 Ibid., 87.
Books appear inside the framed photographs, and function as dual conceptual and architectural support within Hewitt’s assembled photo-sculptures. Paperback copies of Joanne Grant’s anthology, *Black Protest: History, Documents, and Analyses, 1619 to the Present*, and Otto Kerner’s *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, both published in 1968, serve as the functional base of the arrangement. Huey Copeland notes the conceptual significance of Hewitt’s use of two volumes that differ so greatly in their perspective on violence, but adds that they “share an understanding of the inversely proportional relationship between exertions of white power and imaginings of black freedom.”56 These two texts push against the dominant narrative of American history in the collection and analysis of bottom-up resistance efforts that were so often rejected by both official legislature and violent backlash. The Kerner commission’s report provided an analysis of the ills affecting African Americans and pointed to white racism as the underlying cause of violence across the country. The recommendations to President Lyndon B. Johnson advising massive governmental aid to northern cities stricken by poverty and unrest went unheeded as none of the proposals from the commission’s extensive list of was enacted; *Black Protest* fills in the gaps that history has erased in the largely untold stories of agency and resistance of African Americans. Hewitt’s piece takes its title from a quote by Malcolm X, perhaps referencing a kind of intertextual synthesis of the perspectives offered in these texts.

13. *Make it Plain (5 of 5)*, 2006, digital chromogenic print, 60” x 84”
(courtesy of D’Amelio Terras)
In one image the books stand upright as they would on a shelf, as if Hewitt had isolated these two in place of the full bookshelf of American history as signifiers of the struggle for civil rights on local and national levels. A blank, square wooden panel balances on top of the books, centered in the frame and leaning against the wall in the photograph to match the lean of the frames in the gallery. Perhaps it is another frame or a deconstructed part of furniture. This square confronts the viewer frontally, taking up a majority of the visual frame, but with a deliberate lack of content, which provides a literal screen in the composition as well as marked contrast to the books as vessels of information. Along with the conceptual weight of historical narratives, the literal weight of the images in frames that rest on the floor gives the photographs a sculptural insertion into the viewer’s space. Hewitt takes this idea of weight in and through books to another end in her sculptural constructions that contain books as physical objects. Untitled (Capsule) is seventy-six first and second edition copies of Alex Haley’s Roots, boxed in a grid, spines up. Signaling both the production of historical narratives as well as the historical moment of the book’s production, in 1976, Untitled (Capsule) speaks to the physicality of books as objects in space and in cultural memory and consciousness. “The open walls of the container seem to denote that the wisdom contained in these volumes is now freely available, while the use of the word Capsule in the title suggests its portability.”57 In this way, Hewitt considers the legacies of older generations, and the practicality or relevance of their experiences to our own in this “moment.”

Another work that draws loosely on the language of print and publication is *Untitled (Resist, Resist, Resist...)*, a stack of “books” that upon closer inspection are revealed to be concrete slabs bound in faux hard covers. In some ways the piece is “riffs on real time, in space,” as the 3-dimensional construction draws heavily on Minimalist tradition, formally and aesthetically, in shades of white and grey outer material. The play of light and shadow activates a viewer’s attention and compels the discovery of falseness (prompting the well-known adage, “you can’t tell a book by its cover”), but the formal concerns of the sculpture also root it to the ground, transforming the literal weight of the books in *Make it Plain* into physical weight in space with this concrete trompe-l’oeil. The immobility of concrete might refer to the literal construction of history, and “resist” might speak against the falsehoods of a history based on the omission of particular narratives.
14. *Untitled (Resist, Resist, Resist)*, 2009, concrete, board, polyester paper, rubber band, 10” x 12” x 7”
(courtesy of D’Amelio Terras)
Hewitt’s visual inclusion of *Black Protest* and the Kerner Report as compositional elements in her still-life constructions, as well as markers of a critical historic moment, signals a certain ambivalence about the production of historical narratives and the congruent function of conflicting texts through formal composition. The stability and repetition of “the ground” in the images, and the Kodak book’s literal attachment to the floor of the gallery space, reinforce historic memory as accessed through the objects within the frames. These elements resemble the artist’s (re)constructive process, as moments and events add together, comprising elements of a narrative that, unlike history, does not necessarily have a single linear trajectory. The accessibility of historical moments, as well as the practical use of knowledge, is suggested in the two sculptural works, *Untitled (Capsule)* and *Untitled (Resist, Resist, Resist...)*, in that these books no longer serve their functional purpose but signify cultural historicism and memory, while also making reference to the art-historical canon. Hewitt seems to suggest that these two tropes are not mutually exclusive. Along with *Make it Plain*, these works serve as a reminder of the importance of the past in moments and of moments in the past by activating the physicality of history and memory.
15. *Untitled (Connecting)*, 2009
digital c-print in custom maple wood frame 50” x 60” x 1/8”
(courtesy of D’Amelio Terras)

16. *Untitled (Seems To Be Necessary)*, 2009
digital c-print in custom maple wood frame 50” x 60” x 1/8”
(courtesy of D’Amelio Terras)
The *Midday* series are documents of temporary constructions that elaborate upon Hewitt’s visual language to create artfully composed filmic stills that make a conscious departure from the haikus of “riffs.” Seriality and interchangeability inform still-life aesthetics as the group of objects is repeatedly reconstructed and recorded. There is a feeling of “no-time” in the images, and even though the series reinforces the filmic quality of each image, they feel very much like stills of moving images. In this way *Midday* acts like a record of the artist’s process in real/reel time. The literary reference and base of several of the photographs is Claude Brown’s autobiographical novel, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), which confronts the historical environment affecting African Americans coming of age in the 1940s and 50s in an account of everyday life in Harlem. Esperanza Rosales finds the series “fixated on representing impermanence and passage of time,”58 and I would add that the artist documents this impermanence in her photo-sculptures but points outside the frame to historical moments and alternative narratives which are made visible by the slippages. Rosales goes on,

In attempting to build and re-build relationships through objects, Hewitt pictures a quiet history of sorts by referring to breaks in a timeline. The process of recombining objects is an attempt to articulate beyond what is presently possible, and is perhaps motivated by a desire to formulate a language adequate enough to describe newly emerging, present-day contexts in relation to history by utilizing elements of the past.59

As a physical and visual revisionist history project, Hewitt’s work highlights the gaps in stories we think we know. Tattered books and fading snapshots are elements that

58 Esperanza Rosales, “‘A Historical Pause’: an essay exploring notions of rest and the representation of time in Leslie Hewitt’s recent work,” (commissioned by the artist and D’Amelio Terras gallery, New York for Art Basel | Art Statements in 2009)

59 Ibid., np.
constitute the past, and situating them as Hewitt does so centrally in the visual field of reference in her work calls on the imperative to reveal those histories erased by traditional historical narratives.
Concluding Thoughts

In the exhibition catalog for a show of work by emerging black artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001, Thelma Golden reflected on the art of previous decades and its relation to the current cultural landscape. She mused about a term she and Glenn Ligon began using at the end of the 90s—a “serious and silly” attempt to define an evolving, as yet unnamed notion in visual art,

“Post-black” was shorthand for post-black art, which was shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes. For me, to approach a conversation about “black art,” ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the same time...it was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as “black” artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness. In the beginning, there were only a few marked instances of such an outlook, but at the end of the 1990s, it seemed that post-black had fully entered into the art world’s consciousness. Post-black was the new black.60

Golden’s half-ironic invocation of “post-black” is crucial to a conception of present day creative production. While “post-modernism” speaks to the explicit rejection of those categories, frameworks and ideals so bound to Modernist thought and practice, “post-blackness,” as employed by Golden and Ligon, does not denounce the notion of blackness. Instead, their designation refers to the increasingly precarious ground on which strict definitions of distinctly “black art” now rest. The simultaneous acknowledgement and dismissal of “black art” as an ostensible category points to the critical self-reflexive work art-makers have engaged in.

60 Thelma Golden “Introduction” in Freestyle (Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.
I make the comparison between “post-blackness” and multiculturalism, as contested territories in respective contexts. Post-black can be an interesting lens through which to view our contemporary moment for the implication that artists’ goals and production has shifted in such a way that old categories and definitions of their practices are no longer viable. I bring this term into my discussion to consider its relationship to the three artists in this study, and especially the legacies of early critical practices in the 90s moment. Whether Simpson, Mutu or Hewitt label themselves post-black is not at issue—ongoing redefinitions of blackness and its relationship to contemporary American art in their specific practices has a wider scope.

Throughout this study I have demonstrated the critical creative strategies of three artists our contemporary moment would be hard-pressed to ignore, artists whose creative practices engage contemporary climates and historical narratives, and whose works embody intertextuality and ambivalence in insightful, productive ways. Lorna Simpson’s shifting practice has engaged black female subjectivity through a deconstructive photographic mode that began with her absent portrait phototexts and continues through her move to felt serigraphy in the Public Sex series. Her felt works, installations, and her recent video works implicate viewers through a self-conscious critical use of the mediums and constant oscillation inside and outside her works. Prompting a more nuanced understanding of the way in which viewers see, as well as art’s function within the larger socio-cultural context, Simpson’s work has remained

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61 I locate significant problems in the way “post-black” has crept into contemporary understandings of race in American society. It has been uncritically taken up by people representing a variety of perspectives, from those who argue that the election of a black president “corrects” American racism, to those who announce their own “color-blindness” in surface-level acceptance of different faces into the American milieu.
resolutely “of” the moment, as it ushered in new modes and new considerations for art and discourse in the latter 1990s.

Wangechi Mutu’s assembled constructions work through contradictory notions of beauty, disease, hybridity and wholeness via the site of female embodiment, interrogating unilateral readings of victimhood and empowerment. Her fragmented disem-bodies make strategic use of appropriated imagery in reconstructed figural forms and in layered juxtapositions in the space of postcards. Lastly, Leslie Hewitt’s photographic, sculptural and photo-sculptural works insert vernacular aesthetics and erased narratives into collective historical memory, implicating physicality in formal choices through poetic visual language. Internal dissonance and serial reel time point to the artist’s process.
Bibliography


**Web Resources**

*A World of Art: Work in Progress Series:* Lorna Simpson
http://www.learner.org/resources/series64.html?pop=yes&pid=129

http://www.lesliehewitt.info

http://www.lsimsonstudio.com

Rema Hort Mann Foundation Website,
Appendix: Creative Component – Installation: the *rememories* series and other works

Artist Statement

For my Honors Thesis in African American Studies I have combined written scholarship with creative practice, designing a project that fulfills my desire to engage art and artists of the contemporary African Diaspora while simultaneously working to produce my own succinct body of visual artwork. The project includes two distinct but interrelated parts: an analytic study of three black women contemporary artists in context, and a visual art component culminating in an exhibition. My starting point was considering which artists I admire and am inspired by and challenging myself to analyze the tools and strategies in their work I found most compelling. I am drawn to Lorna Simpson’s multilayered aesthetic conceptualism that shifts seamlessly between mediums and materials, and I am struck by Wangechi Mutu’s brilliant play in collaged musings on contemporary subjectivity. Leslie Hewitt’s work informs many of the questions I consider in my own fledgling practice, especially in her use of vernacular and ephemera, but also for her keen eye and elegant visual style. The research has always been of dual importance, both as the foundation for a study of contemporary artists and their practices but also as practical and applicable knowledge to motivate working through some of the questions I was thinking about articulating visually. I remain interested in keeping my feet in both worlds, in art-making and art-writing, so this project has been an invaluable opportunity to produce
the kind of works I intended on, with each side informing the other and providing tools to better understand and produce work.

The final visual component is an installation arranged in a single viewing space, installed for the duration of 9 days, March 26 to April 4, 2010. The visual artwork included in my thesis is an exploration into the depths of memory and rememory, concerned with how we make use of the past in the present—considering autobiography and archives, belongings and objects, forgetting and the process of remembering. Rememory is a term I borrow from Toni Morrison that suggests an active kind of remembering, centered on the idea of remembering a memory through a subjective (re)constructive process. I’m interested in how to “make” history so in some ways the work has attempted a visual memoir.

The installation is an exploration into the uses and re-uses of the personal past, an assemblage of remembrances that incorporates found and created odes to forgotten things. The nine print series of photographs that appears in the installation, rememories, combines familiar places with staged constructions of sentimental objects, recording the process of remembering a memory in rich color prints. The video component, playback, considers re-authorship as a process through footage I shot fifteen years ago as a young girl on my parents VHS camcorder. Essentially three different scenes edited together back to back to back, playback is set entirely in the living room of the apartment I grew up in, and prominently features the red rug and the television set we inherited from my grandmother. These two motifs are picked up in the untitled frame pieces that hang on the back wall of the exhibition space. A set of two handmade custom frames present two color photographs taken in
my grandparents’ house in Iowa City in 1972. The images, which look to be Kodak instamatic prints, are paired with black and white digital backdrops of patterned fabric that I took. One of the color photographs has a similar television to the one on-screen in playback, and is a similar vintage to the television in the installation on which playback is shown. The second vintage snapshot of clear period dining room features the same red rug present in the early 90s living room footage in playback. Through each different medium in these three pieces, I’m interested in framing the archival impulse, figuratively, conceptually and literally, and I am heavily involved in the fiction of re-writing my own history.

I like the idea of old photos being windows into another time and place, and I feel like most of my attraction to the physical records and devices of the past has to do with their “obsolescence” in the current day. Pictures, music and movies are all widely accessible as groupings of zeros and ones, as coded information that gets transmitted and translated digitally. They have advanced past the point of taking up “real” space in the physical world, and while this change has at times seemed gradual, it can all be registered within the span of my 22-year lifetime. I can chart my elementary and high school years through technological innovation, counting the lifespan of devices in consistent use and disuse over time. I remember my pink and green walkman from car trips and stories of playing Sesame Street cassettes through the car stereo when my batteries died. Then there was the red CD-player, useful in brooding adolescence for personalized “mixes,” and I was in the beginning of seventh grade when the coveted iPod first came out. Time, innovation and “progress” have rendered most of these items, including VHS tapes and VCRs, and a good portion of
film, “useless” for efficient and practical purposes, which is not to say that these things are extinct but that there are now methods and machines that can replace and outperform them. In some ways, the markers of childhood are always replaced and part of getting older is adapting to new tasks and environments with new tools for living and understanding. I can say that collecting and using “lost” materials appeals to me as a way of knowing myself in the world today and I find it especially useful as a method for connecting to past stories of previous eras, through the stuff we have only a record of. The jumpy transferred VHS footage and faded color of photographs over 35 years old are important qualities of my selected materials that are as much surface-level as they are crucial to the nature of the objects and their (re)use.
17. Installation view: the *rememories* series and other works, 2010
(copyright Sonia Louise Davis, 2010)