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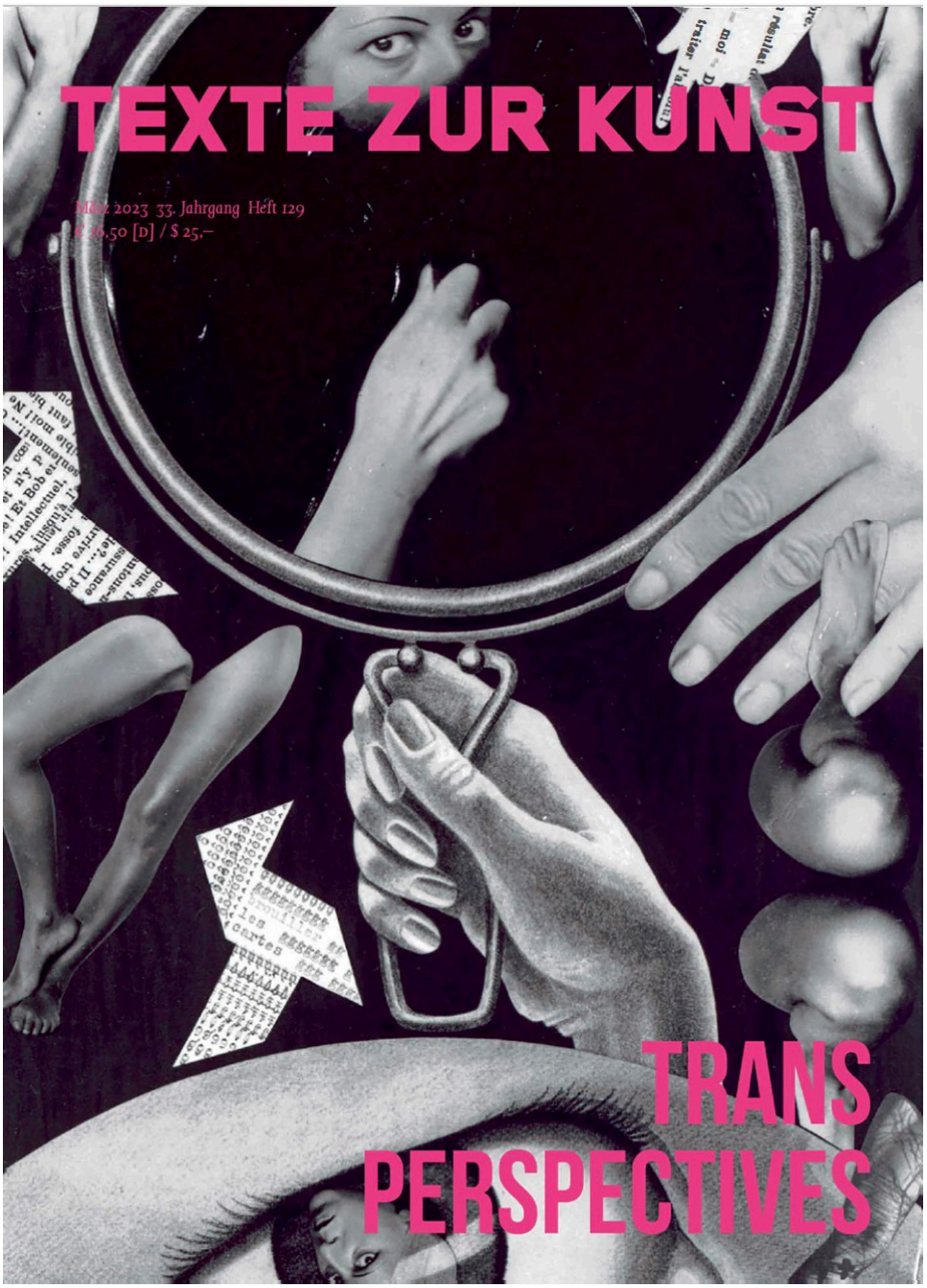
# TEXTE ZUR KUNST

"The Moon Is Trans: On Cultivating an Aesthetics of Reaching/Jeanne Vaccaro in conversation with P. Staff and Kiyan Williams," *Texte Zur Kunst*, March 2023



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# PREFACE

At some point during the past decade, trans stopped being fringe. In 2022 alone, we have seen Vladimir Putin summon the specter of "sex change operations" in his justification of the invasion of Ukraine. We have seen the United Kingdom on the verge of a constitutional crisis over progressive trans legislation in Scotland. In the United States, hundreds of laws have been suggested to legislate trans people out of existence. And in Germany, Justice Minister Marco Buschmann recently justified delays in passing a long overdue *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* (self-identification law) by barely hiding his transmisogyny behind safety concerns for visitors of women's saunas. Yet these are in no way new developments. For many years, so-called anti-gender movements have functioned as the connective tissue of the global Right – with trans people as one of the most visible and most contentious subjects of debate.

Simultaneously, the last decade has seen a proliferation of self-authored representations of trans and nonbinary individuals. In 2014, for instance, Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time*, with the magazine proclaiming a "transgender tipping point." *Pose*, coproduced by Janet Mock and starring the largest cast of Black and Latinx trans actresses in TV history, was met with critical acclaim. And this year, Kim Petras won a Grammy for her duo with the nonbinary singer Sam Smith. Yet just as the visibility has increased, so has the violence. Homicides, especially of Black trans women, are continuously on the rise.

How do these larger social and political developments relate to the art world? Many major galleries and museums now present some non-cis artists, and the list of participants invited to the 2022 Venice Biennale to imagine a "magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned" and "where everyone can change, be transformed, become something or someone else" included many trans and nonbinary creators. The age of the trans freak show, apparently, is over. But what's next? Was this just a means to pinkwash major art-world institutions as they fail to change structural discrimination and create spaces hospitable to trans people? Does the framing of trans artists' alleged transgressiveness reduce the complexities of their lived experience to romanticize them as brave epitomes of Queer Theory? Transness itself quickly becomes a reference to describe countless other things: lives give way to metaphors in the wake of an easily interchangeable affix; trans is curtailed to a state of superfluidity in which questions of structural inequality, unequal access to health care, and so on are too easily ignored.

Shifting the perspective, *Texte zur Kunst* deliberately foregrounds trans artists and writers, who reflect on, among other things, the prevalence of transmisogyny; the intersections of racism, anti-Semitism, and transphobia; the necessities and joys of (digital) spaces for trans people from all backgrounds; and a productive new language for trans aesthetics. Methodologically speaking, many texts envision a peculiar trans materialism: linking lived experience with, for instance, a critical engagement with the politics of visibility or institutional critique, the contributors explore how trans materializes on the art market, in museums, and beyond. This means expanding the canon, since access to the pantheon of alleged high art is often limited to the few who can satisfyingly handle the master's tools. This is a claim that Farah Thompson exemplifies in her reading of Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's game designs. Because of her experience as a Black bisexual trans

woman, Thompson reads these games as meditations on the peculiarity of Black trans aesthetics. Questions about unequal access and the necessity to create exclusive spaces also drives the conversation between artists Vidisha-Fadescha, Chris E. Vargas, Kübra Uzun and philosopher Luce deLire: What does it mean to access institutions where the prerequisites for participation are based on cis white standards? And what role can hospitality and kink play in creating post-authoritarian alternatives?

In a separate contribution, deLire offers a critique of what she characterizes as *representational justice* and its theoretical foundations in Judith Butler's politics of subversion. The politics of visibility, she argues, often thwart to sustainably alter violent, and especially transmisogynist, environments – with significant consequences for the artistic sector. Thinking about how to weather hostile environments, Hil Malatino describes a concept of endurance, with which trans artists and writers imagine what it means to subsist. Based on the work of Young Joon Kwak and Kiyan Williams, Lex Morgan Lancaster discusses the effects of histories and processes on the material behaviors and morphologies of trans and racialized bodies while expanding the idea of what has been termed *queer abstraction*. In a similar vein, in their interview, Williams, P. Staff, and Jeanne Vaccaro reject the current discourse of representation versus abstraction in writings about work by trans artists.

As many of the texts in our features section articulate the need to challenge the paradigm within hegemonic institutions, this issue of *Texte zur Kunst* continues its editorial theme to other sections of the magazine as well. The reviews, for instance, discuss the works of artists ranging from Toni Ebel to Greer Lankton to Kim Petras to Wu Tsang. The image spread presents artworks commissioned from not just one but multiple artists: Andrea Illés, Ebun Sodipo, El Palomar, Katayoun Jalilipour, Pippa Garner, Raju Rage and Nad MA. In addition, this issue includes literary forms of artistic research by artists and writers Aristilde Kirby, Maxi Wallenhorst, and Ginevra Shay.

*Texte zur Kunst*'s cis team is extremely grateful for the trust and work our contributors invested in this issue – especially to Luce deLire, who put in much more additional labor than she initially signed up for. As the following pages underscore, trans artists have repeatedly been disregarded by art history, the art market, and the media (and *Texte zur Kunst* has been no exception). Yet narratives and institutions won't be transformed by merely changing one's perspective. Institutional transformation is about engaging with the lived and material realities of transness, about making spaces more hospitable for trans people, and about (re)distributing resources equitably. We hope that this issue not only conveys the necessity for such a change but also contributes to the possibility of deep structural transformations in the future.

**LUCE DELIRE, ANTONIA KÖLBL, CHRISTIAN LICLAIR, AND ANNA SINOFZIK**

An extended and annotated version of this preface, alongside a comprehensive bibliography, can be accessed on TZK's website.

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# THE MOON IS TRANS: ON CULTIVATING AN AESTHETICS OF REACHING

Jeanne Vaccaro in conversation with P. Staff and Kiyan Williams

P. Staff, „À Travers Le Mal", 2022

**The art world, like any other marketplace for forms of capital, relies on give and take. Access to it comes only through admission. For artists from marginalized communities, this often means declaring your identity at the door: you may enter as a "woman artist," a "Black artist," or, increasingly, a "trans artist." While many art institutions symbolically invest in diverse representation, they do next to nothing to address the material realities of those they ask to show up. It is thus with suspicion and ambivalence that curator Jeanne Vaccaro and artists P. Staff and Kiyan Williams share their conversation. Rejecting the current discourse of representation versus abstraction and (dis)embodiment in art writing about work by trans artists, they seek new language through reflections on their own practices.**

JEANNE VACCARO: I am preoccupied with efforts at naming and with the institutional obsession with naming an aesthetic movement *trans*. I want to ask, What is lost when the social and political organization of ideas, bodies, and histories is conscripted to be called something? I see these impulses (in museums and scholarship) as a continuation of previous efforts at naming and, in that way, as conferring solidity on a disciplinary chain. What gets stuck by a supposedly shared description of an aesthetic movement – whose name announces itself as in flow? With description comes a reference world, a set of things determined to be inside or outside its scope. How then, do you as artists, and I as a critic, endeavor

to recalibrate the norms of art history and its canonizing efforts?

The terminology of abstraction is in vogue and, with it, an ongoing question about representation and identity. I get wary whenever a concept is positioned as an ideal, and it always feels like an empty gesture to engage with art historical formulations that try to read identity into art or try *not* to read identity into art. Both seem to upload the binaries we are attempting to dispel.

Both of your practices dispense with the proper object of the art historical by wrestling the body not entirely out of the frame but positioning it as one in a constellation of meaning-making objects. The body is an anchor – a loose one. I wonder if we can talk about the promiscuity of method not as a confrontation with form but as a defiance of genre.

**P. STAFF:** I don't know if you experience this, Kiyan, but I find it so hard to put down my suspicion and to relinquish resistance when being asked to talk about trans aesthetics, to define it in the contemporary moment, to situate it in art history, or to even trust its framing here now via *Texte zur Kunst*. It's hard to be generous. It feels like a trap. Do you know what I mean? My instinctive response is to be cautious and defensive, but there are probably reasons for this defensiveness that are worth interrogating. And reasons that are very trans! I do want to start by saying that if we turned off the recording, if we pushed *Texte zur Kunst* out of the picture, it would be a completely different conversation – and that feels like an important place to start.

**KIYAN WILLIAMS:** I'm glad you named that. Today I feel elusive and ambivalent. That's my entry point to how I want to publicly talk and think about trans aesthetics, cultural production, and contemporary art. I am not feeling declarative or a need to define anything. Rather, my skepticism will orient my approach to our conversation.

**PS:** If we weren't recording, I would trust that between the three of us there would be some commonality around how we define what is trans, and we would be able to speak comfortably to its plasticity. We might not agree completely, but there is a kinship, which is vital. When I am asked the same question in a forum like this, by *Texte zur Kunst*, my immediate question is, Well, what do *you* mean by trans? You define your terms first. What baggage are you bringing to it? And implicitly there, What shit are you trying to pin on me? I trust the dialogue that is *ours*. I don't trust the institution, art history, or *Texte zur Kunst* to be able to engage with transness, trans aesthetics, trans lives without these implicit layers of eugenicist, ableist, white supremacist, medicalized formulation. When we're asked to define something trans, to discuss some aspect of it, it always feels like there's this liberal paradox undergirding it: a platform, a route, a forum is being offered where we are meant to give account for why we should be granted a livable life. And the conditions are always such that we also have to capitulate to the forces that deny that very possibility. It's a rhetorical sleight of hand.

**JV:** I love the way you are bringing in suspicion, but I am feeling a more active sense of rage about the way disciplines – and by extension, the capillary institutions, the publications, conference papers, art fairs – embrace the knowable. Even as the critique of the trap of visibility (see

*Trap Door*) has been absorbed into discourse, the material conditions have not caught up. We are left with a door half ajar and the impending fear of it closing (or, the desire for it be slammed shut, depending on whom you ask). The politics of scarcity are real. There is also a violence of eavesdropping on transness as it is made available to a public, and I'd like to call out institutions that grant an audience permission to listen in while opting out of the collective work that liberation demands.

**KW:** In part, my ambivalence arises because disciplinarity or the canonization of art doesn't always emerge organically out of artists creating with each other, around each other, and in conversation with each other in a lateral way. Instead, it is often imposed. Artists might not even agree with or necessarily want to participate in the ways in which our practices are being canonized or framed within certain discourses. Articulating one's own positionality, to find one's own language and – if not define – position our own selves within what we're doing can be an act of agency when so much of creative cultural and knowledge production is usurped or misinterpreted or used for reasons that aren't self-driven. On the other hand, having to contextualize one's practice can be a burden particularly felt by Black trans artists.

**PS:** I do think it's interesting to contend with what a trans aesthetics would be if it arises, like you say, Kiyan, from the inside of a community. It would seem to suggest an aesthetic that is highly localized, highly contextualized, minor, vernacular, kind of intimate. Which doesn't necessarily mean twee – doesn't preclude bombasity at all. But like you say, there's an unbalanced distribution of labor there too.

I am reminded of a question that I think Terre Thaemlitz once asked: How do you talk about a community that is primarily operating in secret or remains hidden in some way? Could we argue that, statistically, the majority of trans people are not in fact out or able to be out? Are closeted in some way? The closet being potentially many different spaces. I'm a little wary because it feels like summoning this idea that comes with an implicit accusation of a failure to self-actualize – I am against that. I hate the juvenile determinism of "egg" discourse.[1] I am thinking more of something that connects to an idea of an undercommons rather than an in or out binary. If we want to talk about transness, about trans aesthetics, is it misleading to point immediately toward what is *most* visible? It sounds like a facetious or dead-end question, but I want to push back against the idea that it's all there and up for grabs.

**KW:** I want to push against the binary discourse of representation versus abstraction as framing tools to attempt to locate and pin down the work. It feels reductive. That binary feels like it is the only available discourse as an entry point into the work.

**JV:** Yes, it is about identifying the available containers that disciplines cycle through. I mentioned the sequencing of identity movements earlier (from "feminist" to "queer" to "trans" art) because it seems like every identity movement and, in turn, every aesthetic movement must go through the same set of questions. When I curated the exhibition "Bring Your Own Body: transgender between archives and aesthetics" at

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Kiyan Williams, „Between Starshine and Clay“, 2022

the Cooper Union in 2014, a common criticism was how shiny and formal the exhibition felt in the pristine white walls of the gallery. Of course, the history of the politics of exclusion means most trans art has been made and displayed in less formal spaces – living rooms, community centers. Even as I am pushing back hard against the cultural elitism and hierarchy of the institution, what is left out of the record is a function of politics of prestige and means we lack a formal exhibition history of trans art. We need a method to contend with the violence of erasure, and I don't think the answer is additive.

Returning us to the question of abstraction and representation, I wonder about trends that seek to get rid of the body. It feels to me that there is a culture of devaluing the body as an aesthetic ideal.

**PS:** The way that I approach it – body versus no body, abstraction versus figuration – is to lean into known and felt strategies from experimental film and choreography, as well as transed and cripped assemblages. I use strategies in my work that co-opt and misuse the visual technologies of the clinic (MRIs, ultrasounds, X-rays), perverted architecture, hyper-sensual medias, volatile materials. I do subscribe to a particular trans mode that exists in the tension between dissociation and hypervigilance. Obviously, these states aren't exclusive to trans people, but I do see it as a distinctive and unique tendency. Likewise, there is this intense connection between the citational, theoretical, and discursive and an affective, poetic, corporeal way of navigating the world. I see myself as moving back and forth between these surface and subterranean worlds.

**JV:** When I experience both of your works in person, I feel how they ping at the sensorial. Both of your practices are research-driven in ways that are not immediately available to a view, which is all part of the unfolding of the work, a tension and release around holding back and making known. You are digesting and revising histories and then placing them at points of access that are not easily predictable or taken from.

**KW:** I think a lot about the dilemma you named earlier: the weight of representing a body versus getting rid of the body as an aesthetic goal and the implications of that specifically for Black/trans/queer/femme artists. For me, the other side of the dilemma is that Black/trans/queer/femme people, our bodies, and our likenesses in visual art are always under intense scrutiny and investigation, and are routinely and systemically evaluated, dissected, and consumed by a hegemonic, dominant gaze. I'm cautious about and am often attempting to refuse making my body available to those dynamics. I sometimes have the desire to make a realistic figure, to represent a/my body – and then I actively resist and refuse that impulse by breaking the form up. For example, in *Between Starshine and Clay* (2022), I cast my full body in earth. I then broke up the entire sculpture and reassembled the fragments into a suspended constellation, with my head and hands as the only figurative elements. Building, unbuilding, and rebuilding – that's my making process. I'm working through questions of representing or articulating my sense of embodiment in real time, through the materials I'm working with, through the forms that I'm making. It is a building up of a form, but then also a breaking down of a form, and then I arrive at something that doesn't

necessarily feel resolved but that feels like I've worked through those anxieties.

**PS:** Do you feel you have a comfortable relationship with your materials? Is it intuitive? Is it a happy relationship?

**KW:** I have been consistently working with dirt and earth (I use them interchangeably). That's the material I feel most comfortable with because I have such a deep tactile relationship to it. Working with earth came out of my early performances before I went to art school. It's the one material that engages all aspects of my sentience. It engages me physically since it's heavy and arduous to engage with. It engages me intellectually in thinking about earth as a metaphor for ideas of belonging, history, in geological time, diaspora, transformation, decay, human subjectivity, and the larger ecosystem I am a part of. It engages me spiritually by compelling me to think about myself as connecting to something larger. It's a highly experimental material to work with. I'm always trying to get it to do things that it doesn't do innately. It hits all the things that make me excited about being an artist: a sense of vitality and curiosity and experimentation. I'm curious about your answer to that question.

**PS:** The way you are talking about your engagement with material sounds like such a beautiful mirroring. Both in the way that it can meet you, physically and in the way that you can sculpt yourself into it and out of it. I'm fascinated to ask because I'm not a hands-on material person at all.

I don't think I'm necessarily thought of as a really *digital* artist. But at the same time, almost every part of my work is digitally mediated in some way, and there's a pretty heavy degree of mechanical reproduction. But it's also often haptic, or accidental, or kind of tumbling. It can have this tumbling, accumulative sensation that I think is disarmingly organic. Not organic in the parlance of *wellness*, but entropic. That is a material space I find comfort in.

In my video *Weed Killer* from 2017, the act of self-narrating one's sickness, which becomes uncomfortably merged with one's transness, becomes further transmuted through infrared image close-ups of flesh and body and hair, chains and machinery, and flashes of postindustrial landscapes that are somewhat suggestive of climate catastrophe. There's an attempt in it to render bodies in their fundamental qualities – heat, liquid, skin, air. The faces of the performers are at once surveilled and irradiated, and through this thick layer of abstraction, they seem to bleed out into the gallery itself. The screen that the film is projected onto glows hotly, it is reflected in the flooring and walls, so surface and image collide, each abstracted and epidermal at the same time. I like to use deep sub-bass sounds that will literally shake in the chest cavities of the audience members. There's so much potential for bleeding into each other.

**KW:** We need new language to describe these aesthetic gestures. I love the image of your face bleeding into thermal color. Abstraction can be read many different ways, and in what you are describing, it sounds like a sense of porosity and fluidity, which is language that doesn't equate abstraction with erasure or a violent disembodiment. In my own practice I use a lot of cosmic and geological metaphors to consider my sense of self as a part of a larger constellation.

I love that image of a face that bleeds into something larger as an aesthetic gesture toward capaciousness and not being limited by the boundaries of one's own flesh. That's where I feel language and ideas around trans embodiment are really potent and rich. It gets at so many ideas that I'm interested in both personally and creatively: transcending the tyranny of the individual, inhabiting a subjectivity and way of being in the world that is dynamic, fluid, and ever changing, thinking about how I'm not just a discrete subject but that my sense of self is in relation to an ecosystem bigger than or beyond me.

**PS:** I totally follow. In my work and thinking, I am often trying to account for what it is to not live but not be fully dead either, to be un-living yet un-killable. There's a state of un-being that is unable to flourish into or actualize *the good life*. But there is a potency to drilling down into that state, a capaciousness. Without wanting to project onto your practice, I see that in your relationship to earth and dirt, to soil, land, and landscape. I think we are both wrestling with a similar question: what it means to confront subjecthood amongst structural abandonment, history, border, landscape. The way that transness can be understood not only as taxonomic, and not only as descriptive, but also as a way of describing the process through which thingness and beingness come into the world, no matter how strained.

**JV:** Although you have very different practices (one more mediated and digital, the other sculptural and earthy), you both engage in simultaneous excavation and building, gesturing to a cosmological interplay of earth and space, across our present moment and embattled histories and imagined futures. It brings to mind a quotation from the diary of trans activist and archivist Lou Sullivan from 1969 – the year of the moon landing – in which he wrote, "Don't let it be on the moon as it is on earth."[2] I see you both as having a desiring disposition, an active engagement that is building, assembling, and bridging, what I would think of as a method of retention and composition.

**PS:** What I return to a lot in my work is a sense of a displaced violence, a shadow of violence, or – picking up on the Lou Sullivan quote – a moon of violence that has to orbit, that has to be a confluent presence, a constant gravitational relation to the present. This is metaphorical, but I try in the work to establish a literal weight to it. I am trying to make available a sensitivity to the violence that constitutes the making of a person, or to conditions of "safety," or the conditions of being that we're all moving through together. I think a lot about the way Jasbir Puar articulates being "available to injury." In a way, this is a desire to *feel* some otherwise serpentine concepts, of bio- and necropolitics, liberal and fascist regimes, debilitation. But I do believe that we all feel it, on some level. The Sullivan quote made me think about a show I had called "On Venus." In that work, I'm continually describing an *elsewhere*, as a strategy to more accurately speak to the here and now. Venus is this *other* planet where the pressure is too great, and the winds blow too hard, and our bodies are pulled apart and reformulated, and there's this churning violence. But it's never as simple as an elsewhere; it is here with us all the time.

Kiyan, I feel your work does something similar, but with the violence of the American context.

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Kiyan Williams, „Ruins of Empire“, 2022

**KW:** I'm currently interested in how precarity and violence are quietly embedded in American iconography, nationalists' symbols, and neoclassical architecture. *Ruins of Empire*, my public sculpture that was in Brooklyn Bridge Park, reimagines the Statue of Freedom, a historical bronze monument that sits on top of and quietly looms over the US Capitol Building. Also known as Armed Freedom, the monument is a neoclassical female figure wearing a war helmet and holding a sword and shield. Fabricated using extracted labor of enslaved people at the height of the Civil War, the monument is the embodiment of the dissonance of the American project. I rendered the historic bronze as a deteriorating statue being swallowed by the earth, using the visual language of ruination and unbuilding as a strategy to tell a story about a symbol that glorifies the state, to unbuild a monument of a nation founded on subjugation, regulation, and policing.

**PS:** It goes without saying that trans rights, and trans lives, are being used as a focal point for a whole set of contemporary right-wing, protofascist, TERF, and white-supremacist arguments right now. In October 2018, the *New York Times* leaked a United States Department of Health and Human Services memo that sought to redefine "sex" as "a biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth."[3] The UK is tearing itself apart right now over something as simple as the right to self-ID, a set of legislation that is already in use without any real complication in a number of other European countries.[4] It seems to be that what this points to is a crisis of capitalism, which is a crisis of social reproduction, which is a crisis of sex and gender, and primarily race. I wonder if perhaps, to continue your line of thought, Kiyan, what is remarkable about trans aesthetics now is its relationship to, and an inhabiting of, this flashpoint of crisis. The veil of the real, the privatized bourgeois family, the nation-state, tearing itself apart. The best art is, in my opinion, ruinous, whether emotionally or politically. Maybe what makes trans aesthetics pertinent now is an unrepentant capacity to make and invert the world as we know it, theoretically, politically, corporeally.

**JV:** I often think about the interface with the institution and how important it is to name the quieter violences, pointing to the eruptive capacities, and making little holes so things can seep out. Trans embodiment is a problem for art institutions, and we need to ask why.

Notes

1 *Egg* or *egg mode* is internet slang to describe trans people who do not yet realize that they are trans or are in denial about being trans.

2 Lou Sullivan, "June 1969–August 1970," in *Youngman: Selected Diaries of Lou Sullivan*, ed. Ellis Martin and Zach Osma (New York: Random House, 2021).

3 Erica L. Green, Katie Benner, and Robert Pear, "'Transgender' Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration," *New York Times*, October 21, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/21/us/politics/transgender-trump-administration-sex-definition.html.

4 Pippa Crerar and Libby Brooks, "Rishi Sunak Blocks Scotland's Gender Recognition Legislation," *Guardian*, January 16, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/16/rishi-sunak-blocks-scotlands-gender-recognition-legislation.

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**KOMMENDE AUSGABE / UPCOMING ISSUE:**
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TEXTE ZUR KUNST

Lancaster, Lex Morgan, "Trans Abstractions, Decomposing Figurations: Young Joon Kwak and Kiyan Williams," *Texte Zur Kunst*, March 2023

## PREFACE

At some point during the past decade, trans stopped being fringe. In 2022 alone, we have seen Vladimir Putin summon the specter of "sex change operations" in his justification of the invasion of Ukraine. We have seen the United Kingdom on the verge of a constitutional crisis over progressive trans legislation in Scotland. In the United States, hundreds of laws have been suggested to legislate trans people out of existence. And in Germany, Justice Minister Marco Buschmann recently justified delays in passing a long overdue *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* (self-identification law) by barely hiding his transmisogyny behind safety concerns for visitors of women's saunas. Yet these are in no way new developments. For many years, so-called anti-gender movements have functioned as the connective tissue of the global Right – with trans people as one of the most visible and most contentious subjects of debate.

Simultaneously, the last decade has seen a proliferation of self-authored representations of trans and nonbinary individuals. In 2014, for instance, Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time*, with the magazine proclaiming a "transgender tipping point." *Pose*, coproduced by Janet Mock and starring the largest cast of Black and Latinx trans actresses in TV history, was met with critical acclaim. And this year, Kim Petras won a Grammy for her duo with the nonbinary singer Sam Smith. Yet just as the visibility has increased, so has the violence. Homicides, especially of Black trans women, are continuously on the rise.

How do these larger social and political developments relate to the art world? Many major galleries and museums now present some noncis artists, and the list of participants invited to the 2022 Venice Biennale to imagine a "magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned" and "where everyone can change, be transformed, become something or someone else" included many trans and nonbinary creators. The age of the trans freak show, apparently, is over. But what's next? Was this just a means to pinkwash major art-world institutions as they fail to change structural discrimination and create spaces hospitable to trans people? Does the framing of trans artists' alleged transgressiveness reduce the complexities of their lived experience to romanticize them as brave epitomes of Queer Theory? Transness itself quickly becomes a reference to describe countless other things: lives give way to metaphors in the wake of an easily interchangeable affix; trans is curtailed to a state of superfluidity in which questions of structural inequality, unequal access to health care, and so on are too easily ignored.

Shifting the perspective, *Texte zur Kunst* deliberately foregrounds trans artists and writers, who reflect on, among other things, the prevalence of transmisogyny; the intersections of racism, anti-Semitism, and transphobia; the necessities and joys of (digital) spaces for trans people from all backgrounds; and a productive new language for trans aesthetics. Methodologically speaking, many texts envision a peculiar trans materialism: linking lived experience with, for instance, a critical engagement with the politics of visibility or institutional critique, the contributors explore how trans materializes on the art market, in museums, and beyond. This means expanding the canon, since access to the pantheon of alleged high art is often limited to the few who can satisfyingly handle the master's tools. This is a claim that Farah Thompson exemplifies in her reading of Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's game designs. Because of her experience as a Black bisexual trans

woman, Thompson reads these games as meditations on the peculiarity of Black trans aesthetics. Questions about unequal access and the necessity to create exclusive spaces also drives the conversation between artists Vidisha-Fadescha, Chris E. Vargas, Kübra Uzun and philosopher Luce deLire: What does it mean to access institutions where the prerequisites for participation are based on cis white standards? And what role can hospitality and kink play in creating post-authoritarian alternatives?

In a separate contribution, deLire offers a critique of what she characterizes as *representational justice* and its theoretical foundations in Judith Butler's politics of subversion. The politics of visibility, she argues, often thwart to sustainably alter violent, and especially transmisogynist, environments – with significant consequences for the artistic sector. Thinking about how to weather hostile environments, Hil Malatino describes a concept of endurance, with which trans artists and writers imagine what it means to subsist. Based on the work of Young Joon Kwak and Kiyan Williams, Lex Morgan Lancaster discusses the effects of histories and processes on the material behaviors and morphologies of trans and racialized bodies while expanding the idea of what has been termed *queer abstraction*. In a similar vein, in their interview, Williams, P. Staff, and Jeanne Vaccaro reject the current discourse of representation versus abstraction in writings about work by trans artists.

As many of the texts in our features section articulate the need to challenge the paradigm within hegemonic institutions, this issue of *Texte zur Kunst* continues its editorial theme to other sections of the magazine as well. The reviews, for instance, discuss the works of artists ranging from Toni Ebel to Greer Lankton to Kim Petras to Wu Tsang. The image spread presents artworks commissioned from not just one but multiple artists: Andrea Illés, Ebun Sodipo, El Palomar, Katayoun Jalilipour, Pippa Garner, Raju Rage and Nad MA. In addition, this issue includes literary forms of artistic research by artists and writers Aristilde Kirby, Maxi Wallenhorst, and Ginevra Shay.

*Texte zur Kunst*'s cis team is extremely grateful for the trust and work our contributors invested in this issue – especially to Luce deLire, who put in much more additional labor than she initially signed up for. As the following pages underscore, trans artists have repeatedly been disregarded by art history, the art market, and the media (and *Texte zur Kunst* has been no exception). Yet narratives and institutions won't be transformed by merely changing one's perspective. Institutional transformation is about engaging with the lived and material realities of transness, about making spaces more hospitable for trans people, and about (re)distributing resources equitably. We hope that this issue not only conveys the necessity for such a change but also contributes to the possibility of deep structural transformations in the future.

**LUCE DELIRE, ANTONIA KÖLBL, CHRISTIAN LICLAIR, AND ANNA SINOFZIK**

An extended and annotated version of this preface, alongside a comprehensive bibliography, can be accessed on TZK's website.

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LEX MORGAN LANCASTER

# TRANS ABSTRACTIONS, DECOMPOSING FIGURATIONS: YOUNG JOON KWAK AND KIYAN WILLIAMS

Kiyan Williams, „Between Starshine and Clay", 2022

**In the works of Young Joon Kwak and Kiyan Williams, bodies are present only in parts. But rather than pinning down the relation of figuration to abstraction in their art, Lex Morgan Lancaster digs into the materiality of it. In applying trans and crip as processes of experience, the scholar and curator moves beyond appearance and instead brings to the fore the often-violent material histories and forces that shape bodies. At the same time, Kwak's and Williams's engagements with their respective materials underscores the fugitive capacities of these materials, which circumvent control and subvert stable notions of what is natural or artificial.**

A long, rectangular sheet of brittle amber-colored fiberglass cloth arches up in a tall fold, both ends resting on the gallery floor, creating a narrow space for us to see in between the two ends. Two cast resin hands emerge at the corners on one end, crawling with fingers grasping the floor. A third disembodied hand – more naturalistically cast and painted with modulated skin tone and gold fingernails – is placed on the floor at the other end, delicately lifting up the edge of the sheet. This is *Hermaphroditus's Reveal I* (2017) by Young Joon Kwak. This sculpture might recall the abstract fiberglass and resin sculptures of Eva Hesse, which emphasize the uncontrolled behavior of raw, base materials. Kwak's hands drag this material down to the floor, accentuating its fold and flow to create a negative space where there is nothing to be revealed, defying our expectations.

Playing between presence and absence, Kwak grounds their work in ontological processes without succumbing to either a coherent bodily composition or an immaterial abstraction.

Kiyan Williams similarly sculpts forms that are excessively material and create open spaces for what is de-formed or yet to be figured. *Terrestrial Form, Pour #2 after Benglis and Serra* (2021) is a tall black mound of earth, black truffle fungi, and Vaseline. There is a fluorescent lime-green extension cord draped around it – living matter wrapped in a potentially live wire – and a digital connector plug embedded in the surface, as though the form could communicate data or project image and sound. A long, synthetic, fluorescent-green braid hangs down from the top of the sculpture, and two black feet appear on the floor, slightly separated from the mass. This work directly references the abstract postminimal sculptures of Lynda Benglis and Richard Serra, deploying the dirt and ooze of impure abstraction along with everyday objects and bodily extremities to insist on the body's vital impurity as well.

Producing decomposing or disintegrating figurations that exceed the boundaries and capacities of a normative anatomy, Kwak and Williams convey trans senses of embodiment that are irreducible to taxonomies of gender. Their sculptures perform what I have called the "drag away" from categorical perception that abstraction offers while maintaining clear ties to expansive embodiments that are so crucial to trans inquiry and engagement with the world. In the process, they undermine binary conceptions of abstraction versus representation.[1] While my previous work on queer abstraction argues for the activation of desire and the subversion of gendered and racial taxonomies in works where bodies are emphatically absent, my analysis of trans abstraction here deals with the irreconcilable tension between materiality, figuration, and the body that works by Kwak and Williams make palpable, and with which trans artists and theorists continue to wrestle.[2] Most notably, David Getsy has argued that abstraction offers methods for pursuing trans politics of the body without directly representing them and that abstract sculptures specifically can activate "transgender capacities" that help us to engage with gender as mutable and multiple.[3] Pursuing abstraction as an active force that undermines the presumed correspondences between form and body, this essay mobilizes understandings of trans or transgender that do not cohere around binaries and instead are about fugitive movements, contentious multiplicities, unmanageable matter, and wild materializations.[4] I similarly deploy affective and relational concepts of "crip" in the sense of destabilizing material experiences and refusing corporeal compliance that we see in the objects themselves (rather than a straightforward representation of a disabled person).[5]

The objects and spaces I discuss here contribute to these understandings of trans and crip as processes, actions, and modes of engagement with the world rather than just appearances. Trans and crip are distinct as well as overlapping categories of experience, and I am pursuing trans theory as it is shaped by critical race and crip perspectives. This short essay emphasizes a trans approach that also centralizes these intersections, particularly concerning issues of materiality, with the understanding that transness is shaped by race and crip experiences that also cannot be conflated. While there is a tendency to view even the most nonrepresentational sculptural forms

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Kiyan Williams, „Terrestrial Form (Pour #2 after Benglis and Serra)", 2021

in anthropomorphic terms of bodily metaphor, especially from trans and crip perspectives that centralize the body, my approach to abstraction focuses on the material processes that interrupt perceptions of a form-as-body. Even when the work is partly figural, I am less concerned with bodily resemblance and more with the active materiality that shapes and misshapes ontological processes and perceptions.

Kwak and Williams drag abstraction down to the ground, rejecting the presumed transcendence of an incorporeal abstraction while also dragging away from corporeal legibility and coherence, insisting instead on material impurity and instability.[6] In these trans abstractions, the artists explore a vexed tension between absence and presence to suggest a potentiality, opening space for the otherwise of trans embodiment that is constituted by sensual experience, not compulsory figuration or operation. Rather than the cohesive wholeness of a body contained, they produce fragmentation, deformation, elasticity, and multiplicity, returning to the body's base impurity and mutability or to the seemingly corrupted matter of the body, which also makes us aware of its instability. Kwak and Williams deploy this fugitive potential of excessive materiality otherwise marked as monstrous – using media such as dirt and plastic in their unruly capacities and everyday objects against their normal function – in order

to refigure our conceptions of embodiment: not just what it might look like but what it might do in relation to matter in the world.[7] This worldly matter is not external or separate from the material behaviors and morphologies of our bodies; rather, it actively shapes them.

Kwak's and Williams's approaches to materiality insist on abstraction that is not *extraction* – as in a withdrawal from the senses or the material, or violent settler-colonial processes of removal, or essentialist logics – but that gets down and dirty with the disintegrating processes that might undo and that we may yet do something with. Central to my thinking here is Jill Casid's proposition for "doing things with being undone," or an aesthetic praxis that works with the deformation, decomposition, and decay of our states of disposability in what Casid considers the "crisis ordinary of the Necrocene," in living death.[8] Casid prompts me to ask how Kwak and Williams contribute "deformative" aesthetic tactics to a politics of abstraction that would not lift off in a transcendent path of transformation but that would instead pursue the minoritarian agencies of matter that decays and matter that lives while accounting for loss and for life in the wake of being discarded.[9] Further, Kwak and Williams mobilize the potentials of this fugitive materiality to produce figurations that prompt new ways of thinking abstraction as trans and crip tactics for the unresolved, unrevealed, and decomposing of matter that refuses to cohere or compose into representative bodies (bodies that must either maintain normative composition or be subject to ongoing surveillance and violence).

Kwak's sculptural works often manipulate objects in ways that shore up bodily objectification while undermining categorical ontological perceptions. Also a performance artist, Kwak is the founder of Mutant Salon, an ongoing collaborative project with other queer, trans, femme, and BIPOC artists and performers. Williams's sculptures and installations often use dirt and clay to create abstracted figures, exploring historical ties between Black bodies and the land in the United States, as well as the imbricated ecological and political forces that continue to shape both. These artists engage with legacies of sculpture in relation to ontological forces, and they both deploy base, unstable matter to render alien forms. Although the artists' identities are not the subject of my analysis (I focus on their artworks rather than their biographies), I do take seriously that their practices are shaped by their subject positions while also exploring more expansive implications that may exceed their intentionality. My approach is object-oriented and engages in subjectless critique while maintaining its grounding in the everyday material forces that shape individual and collective bodies, taking my cue from these works that respond to gendering, racism, ableism, and histories of forced enslavement that persist in the heteropatriarchal racial capitalism of our present.

Considered together, these artists' abstractions reckon with the unmanageability of trans, crip, and racialized existence by figuring bodies that are at once excessively material and torn apart, dis-figured, and beyond the human. This work speaks to the experiences of those who are excluded from human subjectivity and yet nevertheless live in the face of violent regulatory regimes that insist they shouldn't. I would not say that trans, crip, and racialized experiences are *only* material, but this work prompts me to look critically at how materiality constitutes their

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Kiyan Williams, „Between Starshine and Clay“, 2022

trajectories and provides possibilities for working with certain unmanageable material states.

Williams uses dirt as a charged, historically loaded, and unruly sculptural medium. Their installation *Between Starshine and Clay* (2022) transports us to a dirt-covered landscape or planet bathed in a warm orange glow. First, we encounter *Sentient Ruin 3*, a tall cylinder of cracked earth with a head held by a long thin neck, its calm face turned slightly upward with eyes closed. Reminiscent of ancient ruins, the head is cracked open to reveal the metal rod that supports it. Behind this being, an explosion of earth and sandstone is suspended in midair: rocks with imprints of the artist's touch and fragmented impressions of their face and hands float above a reflection pool. The placement of the face at the top center and hands on either side, gesturing up and out, suggest a shattered and uncontained body. Williams figures these decomposing beings from the living matter of earth that bears a heavy historical weight, plunging us into a queer trans Afrofuturist time-space that is not here or not yet here, and yet shows us how bodies are formed and deformed by everyday matter.

These fragments of suspended earth contain soil excavated from sites where ships carrying enslaved Africans first landed in the United States, and the sandstone is from the facade of the US Capitol, which was built by their labor.[10] Williams has explained that soil contains historical memories of violence and trauma, traces of lives stolen in processes of settler colonialism, but that it is also the basis for new life: "The soil embodied the abjection of being Black and queer and poor, the structural violence and conditions that shaped my life. But it too represented the possibility for transformation."[11] Williams's abstracted figures bear witness to the afterlives of settler colonialism and chattel slavery, and the Black queer and trans capacities for growth and transformation in the wake of this history. Destruction and creation, past and future, pessimism and utopia all share the same space – a space of multiplicity that would be totally unmanageable if not for Black queer trans capacities for working with such deeply ambivalent matter. The material instability of Williams's chosen medium aligns with Jessica Cooley's theory of crip materiality, specifically the "inherent vice" of artworks that deteriorate over time, undermining institutional demands for physical integrity and conservation. An insurance term used during the transatlantic slave trade, "inherent vice" once applied to enslaved humans deemed property, to absolve enslavers of liability for their deaths at sea.[12] Cooley understands Williams's materials as crip specifically because they hold volatile material histories of lives deemed disposable and carry them into the present.[13] The Black, trans, crip materiality of this work mobilizes noncompliant matter that undoes itself from within to undermine the persistent white supremacist, patriarchal, imperial capitalist logics that mark some lives and bodies for death. At the same time, this decomposing matter is used to figure beings that refuse to be contained.

When we enter the installation, we hear a recording of Lucille Clifton and Williams's collaborator, Kumi James (BAE BAE), reading Clifton's poem "won't you celebrate with me":

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman

Young Joon Kwak, „Sleeping Muse", 2020

> what did i see to be except myself?
> i made it up
> here on this bridge between
> starshine and clay,
> my one hand holding tight
> my other hand; come celebrate
> with me that everyday
> something has tried to kill me
> and has failed.

Considered through the lens of Clifton's poetics, Williams's work manifests from forces of self-determination in the wake of ongoing anti-Black patriarchal violence. The gritty materiality of their work, producing life-forms that persist and emerge from the vital matter of shattered ruins, forge alternative ways of sensing and being from within, even as one is othered and objectified from without. Black trans studies scholars C. Riley Snorton and Marquis Bey, following and extending the work of Hortense Spillers, have posited Black and trans as fugitive processes of unfixing gender by mobilizing the fungibility of flesh. This fungibility (commodification of the human as object) is a violent component of slavery that persists today and yet becomes a form of possibility in Black trans analysis and cultural production, a fugitive undermining of gender binaries along with ableist understandings of the fixed or captive body.[14] Williams's installation materializes this sense of a body that cannot be held captive, but it visually captivates us with a refusal of corporeal or symbolic integrity. It suggests the Black, queer, trans, crip subject position that is both made monstrous in its rejection from the symbolic and material order of things and mobilizes that excess to claim a power of refusal – to mobilize the violence of an abstraction of the body from the outside for a capacity to explode limiting signification according to racialized, gendered, and ableist material codes. The violence is still there, and still felt, but within that process

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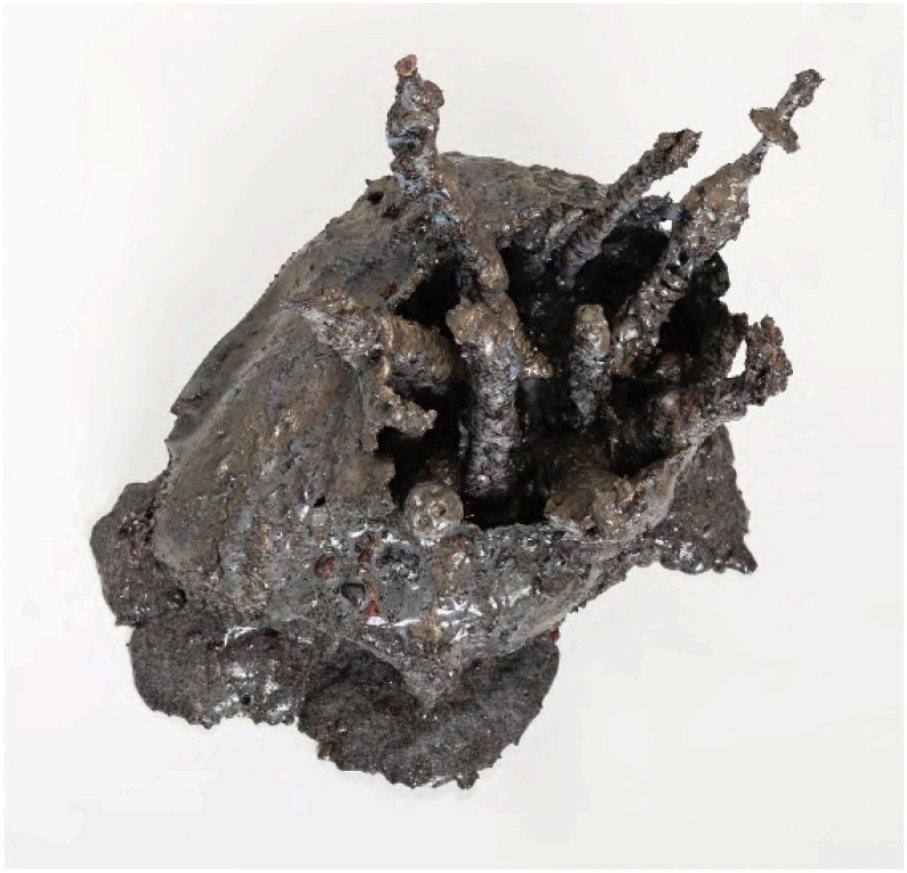

Young Joon Kwak, „Sleeping Muse", 2020

there is the possibility for re-creation in new material terms.

Kwak similarly deploys the grit and slime of impure matter to sculpt abstracted, decomposing figures. In Kwak's exhibition "Dilectio" (Cerritos College Art Gallery, 2020), the artist used plastic matter to engage with the plasticity of sex and gender. They created objects from the interiors of vagina "replicas," sex toys made to be penetrated but that become abstract geometric forms and multiplying protrusions. *Sleeping Muse* (2020) – a re-creation of Constantin Brâncusi's *Sleeping Muse* (1910) – is an abstracted head with a mask-like face lying on its side, covered and soaking in a pool of shiny, gritty brown goo (a compound of aluminum and nickel silver powder, dirt, rocks, and resin). The top of the head bursts apart, and cast resin interiors of vagina replica sex toys protrude out, their sharp edges caked in dirty residue. This reference to a modernist sculpture suggests that the tradition of abstracting the body, in order to create a "universal" human body, violently obscures difference; Kwak recasts this figure using base, impure matter to reclaim it for difference, for a vibrant monstrosity.

In Kwak's work, bodies are not merely plasticized; bodies and gender are shown to be already plastic. The prosthetic is transformed from a to-be-fucked object into something that penetrates, its interior made exterior, absence made

presence. I am reminded of Paul Preciado's claim that "gender is first and foremost prosthetic" and that sex is not a natural but rather a technological phenomenon.[15] Prosthetics are generally thought to support a disabled body but are not considered a "real" part of that body; indeed, Preciado notes, the dildo marks lesbian and trans bodies disabled.[16] Kwak's work similarly reminds us of the constructedness of gender and sex and notions of ability, using fragmented, plastic part-bodies to undermine the very borders of signification (the divide between signifier and signified – the seeming truth of the body itself and the representation of the body). Kwak's use of both plastic and organic matter to render these abstracted figures suggests a fluid border between what we assume to be a body's natural state and the biotechnological and prosthetic devices that both support heteropatriarchal ableist constructs *and* enable us to shatter them. Brâncusi's passive muse is exploded here, uncontained, leaking primordial ooze, transed, and cripped.

I wonder what this work can contribute to new materialist understandings of vital matter – not a universalist notion of matter unmarked by difference but how living matter and the afterlives of material processes can be mobilized for queer, trans, crip, anti-racist lifeworlds, where the stakes of ontology are always high. For now, I suggest that Kwak and Williams produce trans abstractions that show us how bodies are dis-figured by harmful material histories and processes – the kind of harm that seeps into the skin and the bones and the earth – and yet also contain the capacities for material fugitivity in their decomposition and deformation, taking shape and making space in the world in and through the unmanageability of our matter.

Thanks to Jill Casid and Cyle Metzger for their feedback and suggestions on this essay.

Notes

1 Lex Morgan Lancaster, *Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022). In my chapter on "Transforming Everyday Matter" (110–32), I insist that queer abstraction is a *process* rather than a look, and I also pursue "deforming" aesthetic processes as queer, crip strategies. I build on those arguments here.

2 Abstraction is now considered a major force within trans art practices. Current conversations about the viability of abstraction in trans visual studies and art history are fueled by the shared understanding that visibility and representation are not inherently liberatory for transgender subjects; see Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). David Getsy and Jack Halberstam have argued that transgender approaches to abstraction can destabilize harmful visual taxonomies and binary perceptions of bodies; see David J. Getsy, "Seeing Commitments: Jonah Groeneboer's Ethics of Discernment," *Temporary Art Review*, March 8, 2016, https://temporaryartreview.com/seeing-commitments-jonah-groeneboers-ethics-of-discernment/; and Jack Halberstam, "Trans Representation after the Figure," *Frieze*, no. 227 (May 2022).

3 David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 34. Importantly, Getsy argues that tracking these trans capacities is "a hermeneutic rather than an iconographic task" (36).

4 Definitions of "trans" have expanded to describe aesthetic and material concerns beyond a singular identity; see Cyle Metzger and Kirstin Ringelberg, "Prismatic Views: A Look at the Growing Field of Transgender Art and Visual Culture Studies," *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 2 (August 2020): 159–70; see also Aren Z. Aizura, Marquis Bey, Toby Beauchamp, Treva Ellison, Jules Gill-Peterson, and Eliza Steinbock, "Thinking with Trans Now," in "Left of Queer," ed. David Eng and Jasbir Puar, themed issue, *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 125–45.

5 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

6 Nicolas Cuello writes about "impure abstraction" in the

zine catalogue for "Mis-Shapes," a group exhibition curated by Catalina Schliebener Muñoz for Tiger Strikes Asteroid New York (2022), to describe problematized uses of the abstract where languages of geometry and taxonomy clash to suggest queer, trans, nonbinary, racialized, crip possibilities of embodiment. See also the classic text from Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997) for an approach to base materialism in modernist art practice that celebrates the debased and uncategorizable.

7 On monstrosity in relation to trans embodiment, see Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 244–56. Stryker crucially understands materiality as central to the trans violation of the symbolic order and also that trans subjects are considered monstrous precisely because they expose the constructed and unnatural foundations for all gendered embodiments.

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15 Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 27.

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Antonucci, Maricia, "Kiyan Williams, Unsettling the Histories of Public Sculpture," *Monument Lab*, September 26, 2022

STORY

# KIYAN WILLIAMS, UNSETTLING THE HISTORIES OF PUBLIC SCULPTURE

September 26th, 2022 Marica Antonucci

Installed in a grassy enclave near Pier 3 of the Brooklyn Bridge Waterfront Park (New York), *Ruins of Empire* by Kiyan Williams presents viewers with an oversized female figure constructed out of bits of hardened earth. The sculpture was created for *Black Atlantic*, an exhibition organized by the Public Art Fund (open May 17- November 27, 2022). With its title the show looks to the work of Paul Gilroy, who developed the transnational notion of the Black Atlantic in 1993 in order to theorize cultural identities whose history has been profoundly marked by the transatlantic slave trade.[1] While the exhibition as a whole comprises various site-responsive works that address aspects of Black experience in the United States, Williams' piece offers a complex meditation on the history of monuments and public sculpture from a Black diasporic perspective.

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Kiyan Williams, *Ruins of Empire*, 2022, Courtesy of the artist. Image provided by the author. Photo: Nicholas Knight. Kiyan Williams, *Ruins of Empire* was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented as a part of *Black Atlantic* at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17 - November 27, 2022.

Williams' figure, who seems to have grown out of the park's own soil, nonetheless has a historic lineage. Her appearance is drawn from that of the so-called *Statue of Freedom*, the 19th century neoclassical bronze statue created by Thomas Crawford that sits atop the dome of the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. Though the statue's high placement prevents a detailed viewing, it is equipped with several patriotic additions like a laurel victory wreath, a shield featuring 13 stripes, and an inscribed pedestal that reads *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one"). In *Ruins of Empire* the figure is displaced from her aloof architectural perch and is brought quite literally down to earth to reckon with the nation's complex historical record.

Both the U.S. Capitol and its crowning statue, two symbols of American democracy, were built with enslaved labor. Furthermore, Crawford's original design, created in the 1850s, featured the female figure wearing a liberty cap. This head covering, given to formerly enslaved persons in ancient Rome, became a symbol of liberty during the American and French Revolutions and remained popular throughout the nineteenth century. Yet this symbolic language was rejected by the project's supervisor, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis who would soon go on to become the president of the Confederacy. Declining the liberty cap, Davis proposed a helmet, which Crawford integrated into his final design.[2] In so doing, the monument's allusions to slavery—a divisive issue that would soon plunge the nation into a bitter war—were muted in favor of less overtly inflammatory symbols. However, the foundational contradiction at the root of American democracy, namely the gap between the nation's professed ideals of equality and liberty and the reality of an enslaved population that sustained its rapid economic growth and imperial expansion, remained. The statue's construction itself further enacted this contradictory entanglement, as the bronze casting made after Crawford's original plaster was executed in part by Philip Reid, an enslaved laborer at the foundry tasked with producing the statue.[3]

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Thomas Crawford, *Statue of Freedom*, 1863, bronze, 19 ft. 6 in. tall, U.S. Capitol Dome, Washington D.C. Image courtesy Architect of the Capitol. Image provided by the author.

It is this fundamental paradox of American history that Williams' processes bring to the fore in *Ruins of Empire*. Reimagined and repositioned on ground level, the work courts viewer engagement and dialogues with its own local context in contrast to conventional monuments that maintain a distance from audiences. Beyond the shores of the Brooklyn Bridge Park, one sees the Statue of Liberty, another monument dedicated to democratic ideals. By creating visual conversations through sightlines, Williams' work encourages viewers to reassess the claims made by this famous statue. At the same time, the work sparks reflection on the park itself, once a busy commercial port active until the 1970s. During the nineteenth century, the

area was an important site of exchange and storage of sugar, tobacco, and coffee—goods whose own connections to enslaved labor and other exploitative practices are known. Beholding *Ruins of Empire* reactivates this salient yet overlooked historical legacy.

Williams' choice of material furthers and nuances this historical reflection. In the shift from bronze to hardened earth, the statue's appeal to freedom is reconfigured with respect to its nineteenth-century source. Cast bronze, a solid and enduring material, has been used for monumental sculpture since antiquity. Across various epochs, bronze has served to commemorate and sustain power, naturalize violent conquests, and promote particular ideological frameworks. As an intrinsically durable material, it functions as an efficient vehicle not only to convey political and historical narratives, but also to sediment them into a collective unconscious over time. By means of its own material manipulation by sculptors, bronze molds the minds of its public audience through particular visual configurations. Soil, on the other hand, is much less stable. Though it can be fixed into certain arrangements, it remains highly susceptible to external forces that can erode it. One sees this in *Ruins of Empire*, which manifests traces of material degradation. Cracks appear on its surface while detached fragments rest on its surrounding grass. Over time, Williams' figure of freedom breaks down unlike her Capitol predecessor who remains largely impervious to the elements and other destabilizing forces. In so doing, the materiality of the work mirrors the unstable and fraught histories underpinning notions of American freedom itself that surface when the historical record is interrogated. In other words, the work materially enacts the consequences of a rigorous critique of some of America's most naturalized ideals. Freedom is recast as tenuous and subject to external threats and decay —a timely insight for today's politically turbulent times.

Kiyan Williams, *Ruins of Empire*, 2022, Courtesy of the artist. Image provided by the author. Photo: Nicholas Knight. Kiyan Williams, *Ruins of Empire* was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented as a part of *Black Atlantic* at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17 - November 27, 2022.

The conventional forms and materials of monumentality are fundamentally questioned in *Ruins of Empire*. Traditional appeals to solidity and longevity are denied in favor of an unstable and temporary configuration that subverts standard understandings of freedom. With *Ruins of Empire*, Williams turns a historic monument against itself to expose the erasures, fictions, and volatilities underpinning its ideological claims. As a result, rather than proclaim an empire's glories as monuments so often do, Williams highlights the fragility and inconsistency of one of its core principles. More broadly, the artist sheds light on the ways in which public art might signify differently in order to more accurately reflect society and the experiences of its historically marginalized populations. Viewing the work, one is reminded of an observation made by Walter Benjamin in 1940, when the German thinker asserted that history is written by its victors and famously added that "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[4] *Ruins of Empire* manifests the uncomfortable duality Benjamin observes, but it also reveals that history need not always been written by its victors. Indeed, when it is not, it speaks even more forcefully.

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**1** Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and its Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

**2** "Statue of Freedom," accessed July 12, 2022, https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/statue-freedom

**3** "Philip Reid and the Statue of Freedom," accessed July 12, 2022, https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/statue-freedom/philip-reid.

**4** Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 4*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W.  ennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2003), 392.

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ARTFORUM

Vogel, Wendy, "Kiyan Williams," *Artform*, September 2022.

**Kiyan Williams, *How Do You Properly Fry an American Flag*, 2022,** nylon flag, flour, paprika, acrylic fixative, 4 × 6".

## Kiyan Williams

LYLES & KING

Smoke literally and metaphorically suffused Kiyan Williams's solo exhibition "Un/earthing" at Lyles & King. Also lingering in the air were the smell of soil, vegetable oil, and flour, along with assorted seasonings used for summer cookout dishes. Channeling rage and a desire for representation at this turbulent moment in history, the show opened only weeks before the commencement of the January 6 select committee hearings into the Trump-instigated insurrection. Just inside the gallery's entrance, Williams had installed a dozen four-by-six-inch nylon souvenir American flags that had previously flown over the Capitol and which they had purchased via various Congressional representatives' websites. They, however, had been battered and deep-fried.

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All of the banners were titled *How Do You Properly Fry an American Flag?*, 2022, and are a continuation of Williams's 2020 performance of the same name. The works recall Dread Scott's controversial installation *What Is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?*, 1988; Scott critiqued the national symbol by placing it on the ground, inviting viewers to step on it as they wrote responses to the titular question. Produced at the height of the US culture wars of the late 1980s and early '90s, Scott's work caused a national uproar that dovetailed with a 1989 Supreme Court decision that upheld "flag desecration" as an act of free speech. Williams's Old Glory cookout also suggests a link to the whitewashed history of barbecue, which has long been rooted in the customs of African American cuisine.

Williams's flags were mounted to the wall in sundry positions: right side up, upside down, or backward. Crunchy layers of thick, pale batter almost totally obscured the stars and stripes on some of them, while others bore tawny burn marks or zesty spatters of paprika across their centers. Near the works, Williams showed a pair of untitled drawings from 2020 that were created from the aftermath of a fry. The lovely, earthy abstractions get their color from oils and spices—such as turmeric, paprika, and the Puerto Rican seasoning blend sazón—used in the cooking process. As performances, Williams's flag fries exist somewhere between joyful celebrations that reclaim BIPOC culinary traditions, and burn-it-all-down expressions of rage. During the course of the show, the artist held one such event, inviting participants to bring condiments of their choice to "flavor" three large flags that were likewise once flown over the Capitol.

The exhibition also included sculptures from the artist's series "Sentient Ruins," 2021–, composed of mud, moss, binders, and other elements, and are built around steel armatures. Williams transported some of the earth from Virginia's Lake Drummond—part of the remote Great Dismal Swamp, where Indigenous and formerly enslaved people created independent communities. The works variously evoke people, architectural remnants, and tree stumps. Though cracked and seemingly delicate, the sculptures are precisely constructed, as evidenced by the detailed facial features on *Sentient Ruin 1* and the Donatella Versace–esque blond wigs in *Sentient Ruin 7* and *8*. Williams has written that their practice is influenced by Land artists such as Beverly Buchanan and Ana Mendieta. Like theirs, Williams's work monumentalizes the presence of race, queerness, and femininity in the landscape—aspects that run counter to white and masculinist ideations of "the wilderness." Placed atop metallic sheets, Williams's sculptures simultaneously evoke the reflective surface of a body of water or the understated silver Mylar glamour of Warhol's 1960s Factory.

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As an artist two generations younger than the pioneers of Land and Conceptual art, Williams freshens the logics of transposition and opposition inherent to those movements. Our fraught national symbol becomes a crispy savory snack, its textured surface reminiscent of both scorched flesh and desiccated ruins. The swampland is relocated to the gallery—but reimagined via the invocation of Indigenous nations or diaspora whose members might have inhabited it. Invested as they are in questions of monumentality, Williams accepts neither nature nor culture as a blank slate that can be reinvented by artists. Rather, their work engages in the complicated reparative labor of un/earthing historical truths in places where such records no longer exist.

— *Wendy Vogel*

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artnet news

Dafoe, Taylor, "Why This Artist Is Deep-Frying American Flags – and Inviting Guests to Bring Their Favorite Seasonings for the Batter," *Artnet News*, June 3, 2022

**On View**

# Why This Artist Is Deep-Frying American Flags—and Inviting Guests to Bring Their Favorite Seasonings for the Batter

Kiyan Williams will be dipping nylon American flags that once flew over the nation's capitol into spattering pans of oil.

**Taylor Dafoe**, June 3, 2022

Kiyan Williams, *How Do You Properly Fry An American Flag* (2022). Courtesy of Lyles & King.

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While many Americans were enjoying Memorial Day barbecues this past weekend, artist Kiyan Williams was concocting a cookout of a different sort: This Sunday at Lyles and King gallery in New York the artist will be frying up some American flags.

At the event, the artist will be dipping nylon flags that once flew over the U.S. capitol building into spattering pans of oil. Visitors are invited to bring their own regionally-favored seasonings for the batter.

A dozen previously cooked flags are already installed in the gallery as part of the New York-based artist's solo show, "Un/earthing." Crispy as corn dogs, the objects look both delicious and disgusting; more like something you'd find at a state fair than an art exhibition.

Installation view of Kiyan Williams's exhibition "Un/earthing," 2022. Courtesy of Lyles and King.

Both the sculptures and the performance belong to a body of work titled "How Do You Properly Fry An American Flag?," which the artist began in 2020, during the pandemic, when Williams took part in the Recess residency program.

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“A source of vitality for me during the pandemic,” the artist said, “was cooking on the phone with my friends and sharing recipes... It became this way of being with people and engage in a kind of ritual of community without being able to physically be with people.”

By that point, Williams had already been collecting capitol-flown flags, which, apparently, are available for purchase. Cooking provided a fitting transformation agent.

“I started to realize that cooking was this kind of non-traditional way to manipulate materials, kind of a sculptural process,” Williams recalled.

To do anything with a flag is a political gesture, and, sure enough, baked—fried?—into Williams’s project is a send-up of Americana and the passive nationalism it implies, not to mention the country’s love of fatty foods.

But there’s another side, too. As the project extends beyond the sculptures to include a participatory event—a “social practice piece,” the artist said—so, too, do its intentions broaden beyond pharisaical critique. Inviting participants to introduce their own spices and culinary traditions to the recipe, Williams is also asking them to reflect on our own relationship to the flag, the country, and our national pastimes.

“I think it’s about making a mess of all these contentious ideas” of what America means, the artist explained, noting that they’re also documenting the project with video. “It’s really the transformation of this bubbling, charred crust that comes out of frying that I find to be particularly compelling.”

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Installation view of Kiyan Williams's exhibition "Un/earthing," 2022. Courtesy of Lyles & King.

Also on view at Lyles and King are six human-sized figures from the artist's "Sentient Ruins" series, each built from steel and soil. The latter material is particularly important for Williams, who often sources samples from historical sites of racial subjugation and environmental violence, then combines them into totemic, earthly creatures. Much of the soil used for the "Un/earthing" sculptures, for instance, came from the Great Dismal Swamp in North Carolina and Virginia, where escaped slaves established maroon communities the 18th and 19th centuries.

By combining dirt from different parts of America, the sculptures, Williams said, "are engaging with a collective experience or history that speaks to all of the land across the United States and how the country was built."

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In addition to “Un/earthing,” Williams just opened a solo show at the Hammer Museum in L.A. and is included in Public Art Fund’s current outdoor exhibition, “Blank Atlantic.”

*“Kiyan Williams: Un/earthing” is on view now through June 25, 2022, at Lyles & King in New York.*

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THE ART NEWSPAPER

Angeleti, Gabriella, et al. "Six must-see shows during Frieze New York," *The Art Newspaper*, May 16, 2022

# Six must-see shows during Frieze New York

From Genesis P-Orridge at Pioneer Works to Louise Bourgeois at the Met, our pick of the best exhibitions in the city this week

Kiyan Williams is one of five artists who have created new site-responsive works at the Brooklyn Bridge Park that investigate identities created by transatlantic networks
Photo: William Jess Laird

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*Black Atlantic*, **Brooklyn Bridge Park, Brooklyn, until 27 November**

Sited along the waterfront in Brooklyn, this Public Art Fund show, co-curated by the artist Hugh Hayden, takes as its starting point the 1995 book of the same name that emphasised the hybrid identities and cultural practices created by transatlantic networks. Hayden, and Leilah Babirye, Dozie Kanu, Tau Lewis and Kiyan Williams, have created works responding to those diasporic experiences and to the site, within a harbour that was a hub for the transatlantic trade in sugar, cotton and slaves. Williams references this history directly in *Ruins of Empire*, an earthen statue designed to transform over the course of the show. Its form is based on a statue in Washington, DC that depicts the allegorical figure of freedom—though it was created in part through the labour of enslaved people. Williams's re-imagined take on the figure underlines the many shortcomings of that symbolism.

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CULTURED

Tawe, Elisha, "Kiyan Williams Puts the American Flag in a Frying Pan," *Cultured Magazine*, December 2, 2022

YOUNG ARTISTS 2023 ART

# Kiyan Williams Puts the American Flag in a Frying Pan

Pulling materials from the Earth, the artist creates work that speaks to our relationship with the natural world.

WORDS
**Elisha Tawe**

PHOTOGRAPHY
**Tomás Stockton**

December 2, 2022

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Kiyan Williams's work manifests across several mediums, from sculpture and performance to video and installation, but earth remains a constant. "I think of earth as a collaborator when I'm working with it by hand," the artist, 31, says. "It's like this dance, this exchange, where I'm giving it form and we're working together in this slow, rhythmic, meditative way. If you use too much pressure it collapses, but you have to use a certain amount of pressure to create forms. It's changed my relationship to time and touch."

The New York–based, Stanford University and Columbia University alum pulls from a range of Black and queer influences to form their own way of seeing, critiquing, and conjuring. One of their first exhibited pieces to emerge from this process was *Meditation on the Making of America*. Collecting dirt from different sites imbued with fugitive, obscured histories connected to the Black American diaspora, Williams performed a series of gestures involving their entire body, which resulted in a rough outline of the Continental U.S. To Williams, this was a way to speak to the foundational histories of colonial extraction that built the Euro-Western world.

"Museums often consider the materials I work with as fugitive and messy, so inherently there's this sort of institutional critique imbued in the work," they tell me. "I'm interested in both materials and processes that we might name as quotidian. Earth is imbued with history and memory, and in working with it I get to engage with all that." This fascination with the quotidian is clearest in Williams's ongoing works around the American flag. When I ask how they arrived at frying the flag, they laugh before sharing, "I love to cook and one day I was cooking and I was amazed at how the fish I was frying immediately transformed when it was in a pan. I thought it was a beautiful sculptural process. The bubbles, the charring. So I proceeded to create different iterations of that, but with a flag." Their flag-fryings muddy the relationship between artist and spectator. The interventions invite the public to bring ingredients pertinent to their communities which are integrated into the public frying, imbuing the flag with elements of marginalized groups whose contributions to the development of the U.S. are often ignored.

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Williams plans to continue exploring through this iterative process. They are engaging with and enthralled by the works of the members of the contextures movement of the 1970s, and are situating their works within Black conceptual practices that gesture beyond figurative and abstract discourses. Currently, they are creating a series of follow-ups to the New York installation of their hardened earth sculpture: A reimagination of the Statue of Freedom, which sits atop the U.S. Capitol Building, entitled *Variations of Freedom.*

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BOMB

"Forms That Don't Yet Exist: Kiyan Williams Interviewed by Louis Bury," *BOMB Magazine*, November 18, 2021.

# Forms That Don't Yet Exist: Kiyan Williams Interviewed by Louis Bury

*Sculpture and performance that work with soil.*

Kiyan Williams, *Sentient Ruins*, 2021, earth, steel base, and armature, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Visual Arts Centre.

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Kiyan Williams is not afraid to get dirty in quite literal ways. From a performance in which they emerged from a trash bag beside a New York City dumpster (*Trash and Treasure* [2014]) to a sculpture of uplifted, zombie-esque arms made from soil and installed without permission on the riverbank of a colonial-era slave dock site (*Reaching Towards Warmer Suns* [2020]), their art places them in intimate relation with the abject and the taboo so as to meditate on the human body's capacities as well as its fraught, complex gender and racial histories.

In particular, Williams has developed a homespun repertoire of gestures—throwing, rubbing, patting, licking, whipping—to manipulate the material of soil. Sometimes these gestures comprise the content of a public performance; other times, they take place behind the scenes and are evident only as sculptural traces and impressions of the artist's body. In all cases, they enact a smart, suggestive transvaluation of dirt as both a material and a concept. The mid-century anthropologist Mary Douglas notoriously defined dirt as "matter out of place," the kind of perceived pollutant that well-ordered galleries and institutions assiduously scrub out of sight. Williams's work instead moves toward the mess—toward the displaced, discarded, or conveniently forgotten—taking up the burden, as well as the opportunity, of reparative care.

—Louis Bury

**Louis Bury**
Can you talk about your background in performance?

**Kiyan Williams**
When I was an undergraduate at Stanford, my performance studies classes introduced me to artists such as Pope.L and Ana Mendieta who used their body to investigate the conditions that shaped their sense of

the world. That resonated with me in terms of remaking norms around gender identity. My earliest performances were interventions in public spaces. Those performances gave me a language to describe experiences in my personal life.

**LB**
A language in the sense of a performance-studies vocabulary or a language in the sense of choreographic movements?

**KW**
Both. Performance studies gave me a vocabulary to understand how power, history, and social norms are encoded in bodies, and the performances themselves were a mode of analysis to think about the conditions in which my body exists. My performance *Unearthing* (2016) in which I buried myself in a mound of dirt, glitter, and effluvia illustrates this point. As I rubbed soil into my skin, I improvised words exploring my identity's rejection of normativity. This process helped me understand dirt as a metaphor for my shifting sense of self, particularly through natural processes of growth, transformation, and decay.

**LB**
It's fascinating how you play with dirt's positive and negative meanings.

**KW**
I move between the terms "dirt," "soil," and "earth" because they each have different connotations. The range of meanings is what draws me to the material. In works that critique hegemonic institutions, I often say "dirt," drawing on Mary Douglas's ideas about how dirt transgresses established borders. In works that engage with the legacy of American Land art, I'll often say "earth" or "soil."

Kiyan Williams, *Meditation on the Making of America*, 2019, performance, earth, canvas, wood panels. Photo by Lily Wan. Courtesy of the artist.

**LB**

How do these considerations manifest in the physical experience of working with soil?

**KW**

It always feels like a collaboration. I might have an idea for what form I want a piece to take, but there are certain shapes that the material, because of its viscosity, won't allow. I make a mixture out of mud, and depending on how well I mix it there will be different levels of clay and air content, which allows me to manipulate its qualities to fit the effect I'm looking for. But the most important thing is being careful and working slowly—repeating the same gestures over and over. As the sculpture dries, it cracks and appears to be fragile when in fact it's actually quite rigid and structurally sound. To me, that tension—that precarity—metaphorically embodies what it means to be human.

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**LB**
Can you talk about the artworks in which traces of your body are evident but your body itself isn't directly represented? I think it was Gilles Deleuze who said something to the effect of, "It's not a question of what a body is, but what it can do."

**KW**
It all depends on what I want to convey in a particular piece. In *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*, for example, I wanted to suggest collective, as opposed to individual, experience, so I incorporated multiple arms into the sculpture. In *Meditations on the Making of America* (2019), a performance that resulted in a wall work, I made a rough outline of the continental US using mud. The completed map contains numerous imprints of my hands, evidence of the process of creation and transformation. These material traces are related to questions of Diasporic embodiment. I think of them as an alternative archive, as evidence of lived experience for people whose lives elude traditional documentation.

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**LB**

You've told me that sometimes you give yourself rules or guidelines in the creative process.

**KW**

I have rules to help me develop forms and shapes that don't reproduce a colonial visual grammar. One of my rules is to avoid making a square or rectilinear shape. I think squares, boxes, and cages are oppressive. They're meant to contain and capture and create boundaries. When working with soil, my goal is to create a form that doesn't yet exist or one that evokes biomorphic shapes. I don't want to package it into something neat and safe for easy consumption.

**LB**

Whoa! Where does your rule against squares come from?

**KW**

When I was in grad school, the critic Claire Bishop delivered a talk in which she argued that research-driven contemporary art adopts the visual vocabulary of science, which results in work placed in vitrines or squares. That resonated with me and helped me realize that I don't want to reproduce the visual language of science and containment in my own work. This well-known critic made this observation, and, without disagreeing with it, I felt clear that it wasn't the thing I was going to do.

Installation view of Kiyan Williams, *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*, Anderson Collection at Stanford University, July 29–December 5, 2021. Photo by Andrew Brodhead. Courtesy of Stanford University.

**LB**

How do you understand your way of working in relation to predecessors?

**KW**

The additive way that I layer soil on top of itself feels related to historical processes, to the way soil can conceal history but can also reveal it when things are unearthed. In terms of art history, some of my works are inspired by Lynda Benglis's early pours as well as Richard Serra's early work with lead. Serra has this piece that's basically just a document listing all the ways he was manipulating lead. I wanted to take a similar approach to manipulating soil, whether by pouring it, scraping it, shaping it, or even allowing it to collapse into itself. Ana Mendieta and Beverly Buchanan are also touchstones for me because they're Earth artists who worked with their hands rather than large machines. Buchanan worked in the American South and was concerned with how the land holds history and memory.

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**LB**

How would you characterize your own work's relationship to place and site?

**KW**

I'm interested in understanding my relationship to the US through the African Diaspora as a way to acknowledge the erased or ignored histories embedded in the land because of settler colonialism. Several years ago, I attempted to retrace some of my ancestors' early 1800s journeys to the Americas, using census and ship records to identify locations where they once lived or traveled and then visiting those locations in New York, Virginia, and the US Virgin Islands. However, today many of those sites contain no physical evidence of my ancestors' lives. I collected soil from the sites and used it in sculptures and performances, as the soil seemed to contain the only material traces of their lives.

Kiyan Williams on site at the Anderson Collection at Stanford University installing *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*, July 29–December 5, 2021. Photo by Andrew Brodhead. Courtesy of Stanford University.

**LB**

What are you working on going forward?

**KW**

I was recently at a BOFFO residency on Fire Island where I did a series of performances and sculptures on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, thinking about it as a portal of Diasporic identity and the shore as a site of trans*formation. I'm also at work on a book project in which I outline a divergent genealogy of American Land art. Like my work to date, these new projects consider the systems of extraction and dispossession that are at the root of global climate catastrophe and that disproportionately impact Black and Indigenous peoples. However, I'm also expanding my range of materials by incorporating mycelium and other organic materials into the work. Fungi have been particularly exciting materials to work with because of their reparative capacity; for example, some fungi can be used to clean soil contaminated by oil. It's a way to think about remediating lands and bodies haunted by colonial violence.

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Kiyan Williams: Reaching Towards Warming Climes *is on view at the Anderson Collection at Stanford University until December 5; Williams's work can also be seen in the group exhibition* How to Cook a Wolf *at the Center for Books Arts in New York City until December 11 and in the exhibition* Bodies in Conflict *at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington in Bowmanville, Canada, until December 15.*

*Louis Bury is the author of* Exercises in Criticism *(Dalkey Archive Press, 2015) and is Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY. He contributes regularly to* Hyperallergic*, and has published art writing in the* Brooklyn Rail *and* Art in America*, as well as creative writing in* Boston Review *and* The Believer.

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The Stanford Daily

Figueroa, Kyla, "Artist Kiyan Williams '13 on social justice, performance and…dirt?" *The Stanford Daily*, November 18, 2021.

Arts & Life • Culture

# Artist Kiyan Williams '13 on social justice, performance and … dirt?

*Artist Kiyan Williams '13 presented at an event co-sponsored by the Anderson Collection, CCSRE and IDA. (Photo: KYLA FIGUEROA/The Stanford Daily)*

By Kyla Figueroa
Nov. 18, 2021, 11:06 p.m.

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Artist Kiyan Williams ’13 visited Stanford this Tuesday at the Anderson Collection’s first indoor event since the start of the pandemic. The event, co-sponsored by the museum, the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE) and The Institute for Diversity in the Arts (IDA), was a conversation moderated by IDA Director A-lan Holt ’11. Williams quickly delved into their art practice, sculpture and performance and how it has developed thematically since their time at Stanford.

Williams described their path as shifting from performance to more material-based work. At Stanford, they studied CSRE and Theater and Performance Studies (TAPS), during which they were introduced to performance artists that “used their bodies to confront conditions that limited their lives.” After learning about public protest art, Williams began to see performance art as a tool for intervention, activism and community organization.

We can see this in one of Williams’ early works, titled “Where Will the Poor Go?” This performance art piece took place in New York City in 2014 after Williams graduated. They traveled by train from Brooklyn to Harlem, ending their trip at the local Whole Foods. They chose to stop at the supermarket because of the community tensions around gentrification at the time; Whole Foods’ move into Harlem emphasized the shifting demographics in the neighborhood as African-Americans were pushed out of their homes. The performance itself, which consisted of Williams and others dressed in trash bags and holding protest signs, allowed the audience to observe the effects of gentrification.

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*Williams' "Where Will the Poor Go?" took place in New York City in 2014. (Photo: KYLA FIGUEROA/The Stanford Daily)*

"This early performance was me using my own body as a way to call attention to and contend with the larger questions me and my community encountered," Williams said.

The next piece they discussed is called "Unearthing," which Williams described as their first fully realized work. This artwork was first staged in 2014 at Dixon Place and produced during Williams' art residency EmergeNYC at The Hemispheric Institute at New York University. Williams was trying to build a life as an artist. This compelled them to ask "big questions:" "Who are you? Where are you from? Who are your people, community? How did you get here?"

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In light of these reflections, they were drawn to work with dirt to center themes of home, belonging, dispossession and displacement. "Unearthing" catalyzed the beginning of the ongoing relationship Williams has with "soil, earth and organic materials," marking what they call the "genesis of their artistic process." Buried waist-high in dirt, Williams adorned their body in paint and glitter, transforming into an "otherworldly being" to reflect their fluid definitions of gender, body and home. They described the process of "unearthing" themselves as a way to arrive at meditations. "Unearthing" was also performed at Meyer Green in 2018 — A-lan Holt remembered the large amounts of dirt brought to campus and how genderqueer students and Oakland residents participated in the show.

"It was a ritual of some sort and, in a way, reclaiming space," Williams said about the project. "Wherever I choose to root myself, as seen by the performance, is home, is where I belong.  It was a type of grounding that was individual and also collective."

Their relationship with dirt continues to evolve. In graduate school, Williams explored dirt with its multiple meanings. "An Intimate Encounter with Dirt" was inspired by a quote from Mary Douglas: "Dirt is matter out of place. Dirty things are those that disrupt dominant belief systems and norms."

In the piece, Williams takes a closer look at this theme of departure by using dirt as an extension of their flesh and an articulation of their own subjectivity. They thought about how Black, queer and working class people are considered abject within white heterosexual hegemonic culture.

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"I was reclaiming that idea of being matter out of place, with my art serving as a confrontation and act of resistance to normative culture," Williams said. "The goal was to reclaim dirt as abjection but also vitality."

"An Intimate Encounter with Dirt" was performed in 2018 at Columbia University's Wallah Art Gallery, which had just opened to the public. The gallery's building was part of the University's redevelopment plan to expand north into Harlem by using eminent domain to displace neighborhood residents. Here, the immaculacy of the museum was interrupted by Williams performance, and, thus, the harm the institution had caused was brought into the limelight. "Quite literally I was taking my 'dirt' and bringing it into this museum," Williams recalled.

Earth and its multitude of meanings are also the focus of their newest piece "Reaching Towards Warmer Sun," which has been on display at the Anderson since July 2021. Sculpted during a fellowship at Virginia Commonwealth University, the public art installation is set among the grove trees outside of the Anderson and consists of several hands reaching upward from the ground. Williams sculpted these hands using soil collected near the piece's original location along the banks of the Powhatan (James) River in Richmond, Va.

Williams, whose creative process often includes walking around specific locations and "opening their full range of sentience" to observe and learn the social and historical context of a space, explained the location's significance — it's where some of the first enslaved Black people landed in the "New World." "Reaching Towards Warmer Sun" ultimately serves as a public intervention against a "willful amnesia" of harm the country has caused toward communities of color.

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"I am interested in how history is remembered and omitted in public spaces and objects," Williams said. "For instance, the monuments [such as] those on Monument Avenue that celebrate Civil War criminals are still on display." As Williams was creating "Reaching Towards Warmer Sun," protests broke out across the country, and many privileged U.S. citizens confronted the violence of American history for the first time.

Williams had some difficulty installing "Reaching Towards Warmer Sun," in part because their work — which supposedly did not have the proper installation permits — was removed by the city. It was an extensive process to retrieve their materials.

"This really shows the policing of public spaces, of art and of lives." A-lan Holt added.

To conclude, Williams discussed their complicated, context-dependent relationship with art and social justice. Their definition of social justice is a project rooted in addressing and repairing structural and systemic harm, and this approach to art practice and pedagogy is productive as one learns to engage with the past, humanity and how to exist outside of art itself. This opposes traditional pedagogy, which attempts to adopt a watered-down version of protest that isolates one from the world, teaching art as a form of capital. The latter approach harmfully tokenizes people of color and turns social justice into a buzzword. Remembering is just a first step to repair; liberation is the goal. As Williams explains, "It's not about color; it's about commitment [to repairing harm]."

Williams will continue to focus on earth as a catalyst for life, growth, transformation and decay — a cycle they are heavily invested in. As for the future, they see a world of self-determination for those who are currently being harmed:

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"I imagine liberation as not only surviving and receiving basic needs but living on one's own terms and grounding our lives as certainty, a sustaining life."

*This article has been edited to reflect that "Unearthing" was first staged in 2014, before Williams had their MFA from Columbia. The article has also been edited to explain that Williams had difficulty installing "Reaching Towards Warmer Sun" because the sculpture itself was not permitted, not because their car was incorrectly permitted. The Daily regrets this error.*

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The Stanford Daily

Martinez, Nascha, "'Reaching Towards Warmer Suns': A Q&A with artist Kiyan Williams '13," *The Stanford Daily*, August 17, 2021.

Arts & Life

# 'Reaching Towards Warmer Suns': A Q&A with artist Kiyan Williams '13

*Williams' "Reaching Towards Warmer Suns," located at Stanford's Anderson Collection (Photo: TOM QUACH/ The Stanford Daily)*

**By Nascha Martinez**
**Aug. 17, 2021, 8:29 p.m.**

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*The Stanford Daily sat down with artist and writer Kiyan Williams '13. One of their exhibits, "Reaching Towards Warmer Suns," is currently being featured at the Anderson Collection at Stanford University from Jul. 29 to Dec. 5. Williams has also created numerous other works of art, such as "Pig Roast," inspired by police violence toward Black people. They previously worked at Virginia Commonwealth University and served as a fellow with New York University. Their art will be exhibited in New York City this coming fall.*

**The Stanford Daily [TSD]:** What inspired your current exhibit, "Reaching Towards Warmer Suns" with the Anderson Collection at Stanford?

**Kiyan Williams [KW]:** As an artist, I like to find connections between the environment we inhabit and the experiences and histories of Black and queer people in America through the lens of migration diaspora. When I was originally making "Reaching Towards Warmer Suns," I was living in Richmond, Virginia, and teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University. I would go on walks by the river while I was exploring the city, and I learned that the trail that I would walk along was a former dock with the transatlantic slave trade. It was kind of under-acknowledged and in such proximity to where I lived. I was inspired to create public artwork to acknowledge the obscured, erased, unacknowledged history. At the same time, public conversations were taking place about the role of — or critiquing — statues of Confederate criminals throughout the United States, and so there was a public conversation happening about, "what is the role of public art," "what is the role of monuments to white male war criminals." Given all of that, I was inspired to create a public artwork, a monument rooted in a different aesthetic and conceptual framework.

**TSD:** Could you go more into depth about why you choose to use soil in so much of your artwork, and especially in conveying your different messages both historically and politically?

**KW:** When I was an undergrad, I took a class with Cherríe Moraga, who was a Chicana, lesbian, feminist playwright and poet. She introduced me to the work of Ana Mendieta, an artist who often worked with Earth, and would insert herself into different environments as a way to think about her experiences with displacement and connection. I was really inspired by the possibility of connecting with Earth as a way to think about our relationships to the land.

**TSD:** You use hands and different shapes in your artwork, and especially in "Reaching Towards Warmer Suns," the arms are quite curving and long. Was there any importance or message you wanted to convey through the shape and curvature of the arms?

**KW:** I find lots of inspiration through observing — thinking about the world as not just human-centric. The world is expansive and includes plant life, flora, other forms of life. And so I often find inspiration from just acknowledging and thinking about the world as an ecosystem of interdependent relationships between humans and non-human life. In thinking about the sort of larger ecosystem we live in, I look toward relationships between people, and bees, and plants — for that particular piece I just found lots of inspiration from the trees that were growing along the riverbank that I would take walks on. So the length of the curves kind of mirrors those trees, and then when I installed the work, I always installed them in relation to and in response to the trees around them. In the grove at Anderson, they're installed within a grove with the circle of trees around them, and they kind of mirror the shape of those trees.

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**TSD:** What impact do you hope your "Reaching Towards Warmer Suns" piece will leave on viewers?

**KW:** One of the great things about being an artist and creating art for the public and for a wide range of people is that I love how different people interpret the work. For example, one of my favorite things is watching kids play with the work and high-five the hands. When I presented the work at Socrates [Sculpture Park], I had a conversation with a Pakistani woman and her two children who were at the park when I was installing it, and her son was so excited about the work. She interpreted the work with her kids without me saying anything about it, and she was able to interpret it through a lens of thinking about people who were displaced and dispossessed, but who ultimately were fighting for freedom; she was able to look at the work and interpret it for her kids in that way. But then her son said to me, "Oh, it looks like Jack and the Beanstalk, like someone put a bean and then it's growing up to the sky." And so, I love seeing the range of ways that people interpret art — both thinking about the history and my own sort of messages that I want to convey, and also creating new meaning and really interacting with the work. By interact, I mean touch it or really engage with it, walk through, sort of come up with their own experiences. But it's also going to be a reminder of the kind of history that haunts the land, including California.

*This interview has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.*

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TOPICAL CREAM

Beverly, Kiarrah L., "Kiyan Williams on forging your own path, community, and notes on digging," *Topical Cream*, May 4, 2021.

# Kiyan Williams on forging your own path, community, and "Notes on Digging"

Published May 4th, 2021
By Kiarrah L. Beverly

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Brooklyn-based writer and entrepreneur Kiarrah L. Beverly speaks with artist Kiyan Williams about forging your own path, community, and *Notes on Digging*.

**Kiarrah L. Beverly: It was such a pleasure working with you at Recess in Brooklyn; I wanted to bring it back home and kick this off with a shout-out to Stephanye, Camilo, and Allison for connecting us. First and foremost: What are your pronouns?**

**Kiyan Williams:** My gender pronouns are they, them, theirs, and she, her, hers. I am a multidisciplinary artist from Newark, New Jersey who works fluidly across sculpture, performance, video, and wall works.

**How has the experience of growing up in Newark, New Jersey, and coming out as a non-binary artist helped you shape your creative process and relationship to the art world?**

Growing up in Newark, I had instilled in me a certain sense of courage and fearlessness, and that's also related to being non-binary. But I grew up in a community where it wasn't always the safest for me to be publicly queer and where there were no pre-existing models of who I could be in the world. I had to figure all of that out on my own. Part of that meant that I had to embrace the unknown and to not fear being a trailblazer. That also helped me forge a path as an artist because it gave me the courage to try new things, to experiment, to embrace ideas that were unfamiliar. All of that is still a part of my creative practice.

## "My work is a reflection of my world. It's a reflection of my experiences, my challenges, my struggles."

**You went to Stanford University in California, then came back to the east coast to complete your MFA at Columbia University in New York. How did those experiences differ for you?**

Let's see. Well, I was very different. When I was an undergrad at Stanford, I was like a sponge. I was eighteen. I moved three-thousand miles across the country to a place that was completely new to me. And I would just learn so much about my life, about the world. I took classes in history. I took art classes. I took classes in race and gender studies. I wasn't an art major. But all of my experiences in undergrad—both in terms of my academic learning and the opportunities I had to intern with and be mentored by other artists—ultimately helped me realize that working in performance and visual art could be a real profession. And after I finished undergrad, I decided to move back to the east coast, specifically to New York, in order to cultivate my creative practice as an artist. I wanted to cultivate my artistic practice around other Black, queer, and trans people, and for me, that community was in New York City.

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**You've stated in the past that you consider your ability to be yourself at all times to be one of your greatest accomplishments; as a Black non-binary artist, why is that important to the work that you do?**

My work is a reflection of my world. It's a reflection of my experiences, my challenges, my struggles. For me, practicing, self-determination, being able to exist in the world on my own terms, allows me to bring a certain type of authenticity to my work. It allows me to present my voice and my vision with clarity and with concision such that my point of view is my point of view and it's unique, but it's also unwavering. I'm not going to shift that because of external forces.

**Your video *Notes on Digging*, which premiered at The Shed last year, has been described as "transforming your need to dig in and make art out of the earth into a ritual of care." Can you talk a little about that piece?**

I created *Notes on Digging* when I was living in Richmond, Virginia. I had been doing a lot of research on the history of the slave trade in Richmond specifically. I was making *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns* (2020), a public art work to memorialize and commemorate the lives of enslaved Black people who were kidnapped and brought to Richmond, Virginia. During the process of making that public sculpture, the pandemic started. For most of that time, much of the world was in quarantine. I made that sculpture during quarantine and what it revealed to me was that being in nature and working with the earth was a way to work through the feelings of isolation that we were all experiencing. Also, working with earth, being in nature, going on hikes, and going on walks was a way for me to process both the recent trauma brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the historical and ongoing trauma that Black people in America experience.

**Working with you at Recess on the project *something else (Variations on Americana)* (2020) was an amazing experience. Helping you fry the American flag for the piece "Flag Fry" was something I will never forget. You've shown me we can fry more than a pork chop. In a sense, I can say—I got down and dirty for my country. What was the concept behind frying the American flag and what was the message you wanted to convey?**

Exactly. No, totally. I got the idea of the flag fry during the summer of 2020, when there were uprisings across the country and across the globe against anti-Black violence. I wanted to extend the tradition of Black American artists who have appropriated and manipulated the American flag in order to reveal or critique structural and systemic inequality. I was also thinking about cooking as a way to transform materials through a kind of chemical process in which you take something and you manipulate it by seasoning it, frying it, baking it, et cetera, in order to transform it into something different or edible.

“I was also thinking about cooking as a way to transform materials through a kind of chemical process in which you take something and you manipulate it by seasoning it, frying it, baking it, et cetera, in order to transform it into something different or edible.”

But I was specifically interested in the method of frying, because when you fry something, you change the texture, the skin, the coating of it. I started to fry flags and I was really attracted visually to these bubbles that would form on top and the way the flags would char in different places. That kind of became a metaphor for the distress that was happening in America. America was like this boiling, kind of festering, charred thing. I wanted to stage an intervention into the sort of romanticized, idealized notion of America as the land of the free and the home of the brave, which we all know is more myth than it is fact or more ideal than it is reality. And so frying the flag, distorting it, manipulating it, was a way for me to communicate that.

**How did you find out about Recess?**

I found out about Recess through previous artists who did sessions there, who were friends and mentors of mine. I went to a session by the artist Jacolby Satterwhite back when Recess was still in Soho. Then I remember being really engaged in sessions by Black Art Incubator and Sable Elyse Smith. What I appreciated about all of those Recess sessions was how they catalyzed and brought in community around an idea. I really appreciated that element of social practice—that ability to be with people as a kind of collaborative, a collective art-making experience.

Like a lot of events in the world, my session at Recess was impacted by the pandemic. I'm so grateful to have worked with the team at Recess in order to reimagine what my session could be, not only to fit my individual needs during that time, but also to imagine ways to contribute to the collective well-being of my community of artists in New York. I used the studio as a rudimentary space where I could just work through ideas, and I ended up changing the name of my session because I wanted to respond to the necessary changes that were happening in the art world. Following critiques about the art world's elitism, its anti-Black racism, and transphobia, I wanted to make a space that was more accessible, more equitable, and safer for non-white, non-cishet people. I had to do something else because the world was something else and needed to be something else.

"Following critiques about the art world's elitism, its anti-Black racism, and transphobia, I wanted to make a space that was more accessible, more equitable, and safer for non-white, non-cishet people."

**What is one piece of advice you would give to other LGBTQIA+ millennials?**

This is a question that I think about often. I would say my advice would be to listen to your intuition and your internal voice. And by that, I mean that if you know your life, and you know your experiences, then you know what you need in order to thrive, in order to be whole, feel loved, and feel supported. Don't be afraid to listen to that voice because the world will try to diminish and silence that voice. Don't be afraid to ask for help, even though that can often be really challenging because of shame and fear. Though there are people who may not want to help you, there will be at least one person who wants to help and support you.

**What is one piece of advice you would give your younger self?**

You know what? When I was young, I was already self-determined, I was already a self-advocate. So instead of advice, I would want to give appreciation to my younger self because I had to figure out lots of things as a kid. I had to navigate a lot of unsafe situations alone. I had to be fiercely independent and had to do a lot of stuff on my own that typically people would do with the help of parents or a community. So instead of giving myself a piece of advice, I'm going to give my younger self a shout-out and say, "Mama, you did that." You did your thing. You did what you needed to do for yourself. Don't be ashamed of any of the decisions you made that you did out of survival, because you did it out of self-love. Period.

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*Kiarrah L. Beverly is a twenty-seven-year-old mother, writer, and business owner born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. This feature was published in collaboration with Assembly at Recess.*

*All photographs by Lyndsy Welgos.*

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HYPERALLERGIC

Bury, Louis, "Kiyan Williams Digs Into the Meaning of Soil," *Hyperallergic*, November 7, 2020

Film Reviews Weekend

# Kiyan Williams Digs Into the Meaning of Soil

In their film on view at the Shed, the artist explores dirt's unsettling aesthetic effects, as well as its conceptual resonances.

by Louis Bury
November 7, 2020

Notes on Digging by Kiyan Williams (2020), video still of work in progress (all images courtesy the artist and the Shed)

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"I had to dig it out," Kiyan Williams explains in the breathy opening moments of their short film "Notes on Digging" (2020), part of the Shed's series of online commissions, *Up Close*. "I had to find a way to get it out of and off of my body." Little is visible of Williams's body yet, just a close up of their sneaker-clad feet working a shovel in a small grass field. The field is part of Virginia's Richmond Slave Trail, a recreation spot along the James River that, during the colonial era, was a dock site "where some of the first enslaved Black people touch[ed] land" on the continent. The "it" that Williams digs out refers to past and present trauma: the violence inflicted upon African slaves centuries ago and the violence inflicted upon "Black trans people" today in the US, with the implication that the latter should be understood as part of the former's "unwanted inheritance."

The nine-minute-long film documents the making of Williams's uncanny public sculpture, "Reaching Towards Warmer Suns" (2020), a cluster of exaggeratedly long dirt stalks, each culminating in an outstretched dirt hand, that rise like zombie arms from the earth. The ingenious sculpture is powerful even when mediated by a camera; New Yorkers will have the chance to see it in person this fall as part of Socrates Sculpture Park's *MONUMENTS NOW* exhibition. In the meantime, *Notes on Digging* exists not simply as a prelude but as a compelling artwork in its own right, an ecological Black trans* ars poetica that contemplates how to "memorialize the ongoing struggle of self-determination for Black people."

The film addresses this question through its interplay of spirituality and embodiment, language and visuals. Williams describes the process of making the sculpture as a reparative ritual, an effort "to see what traces of stolen life were left in the soil." "The first time I touched the dirt I knew it was medicine," they recount, as they crouch down and rub the soil in their hands, "It held me together, grounded me, kept me rooted." In another sequence, Williams vogues in a reedy field, wearing an unbuttoned button-down with a t-shirt underneath, as the voiceover describes how dirt is "a metaphor for all the things that once made me ashamed of inhabiting this body." The camera then cuts to a shot of the artist reclined on a dock, wearing a long black dress; Williams adds that dirt "also represent[s] the possibility for transformation, regeneration, to become something otherwise."


*Notes on Digging* by Kiyan Williams (2020), video still of work in progress

Williams has used dirt as an artistic medium across a number of early career projects, from a response to geophagic practices among enslaved Africans in the Americas ("Dirt Eater," 2019), to smears of earth and paint on canvas (*Earth Works* series, 2018) that evoke Richard Serra's black paintstick drawings and Clifford Owens's performative drawings with coffee grounds. This is a smart, inspired material choice on Williams's part. Dirt has gritty, slightly unsettling aesthetic effects, as well as suggestive conceptual resonances, that accord with the works's overarching themes and underlying ideas. Part of what makes *Notes on Digging* so effective is the way Williams articulates those ideas with conviction and ease, distilling complex insights from contemporary Black theorists such as Christina Sharpe and historians such as Isabel Wilkerson into an accessible, casually poetic, explanatory narrative.

Throughout, Williams connects questions of Blackness and transformation to ecological concerns. The voiceovers include paeans to nature's soothing capacities but the film's larger, more disquieting message is that the roots of today's climate crisis extend back to the extractive practices of settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Geographer Kathryn Yusoff calls these exploitative, often buried eco-histories "Black Anthropocenes," arguing that they are "predicated on the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth." In *Notes on Digging*, Williams uses artistic process to work toward sloughing off the legacies of those burdens at both an individual and collective level. The endeavor recalls the chthonic artistic rituals of pathbreaking 1960s and '70s ecofeminists such as Agnes Denes, Aviva

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Rahmani, and Ana Mendieta, yet another way that Williams draws on the past to make a present uniquely their own.

*Kiyan Williams's "Notes on Digging" is currently on view online in the Shed's* Up Close *series.*

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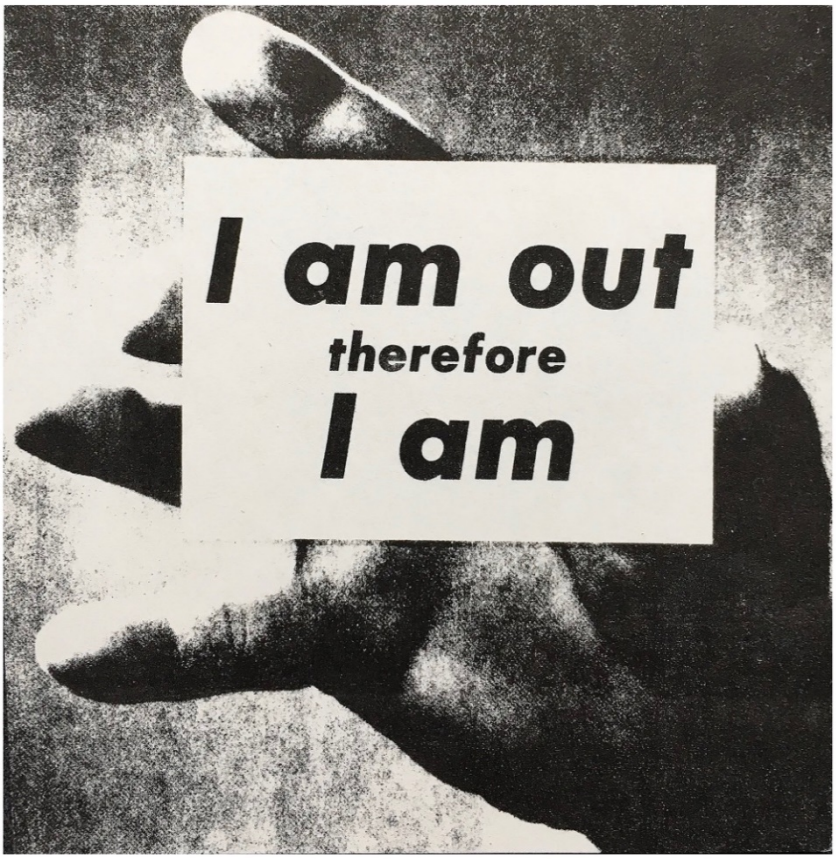
THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Lescaze, Zoë, "13 Artists Reflect on the Stonewall Riots," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, June 27, 2019

# 13 Artists Reflect on the Stonewall Riots

50 years ago, the Stonewall Inn became the center of the gay rights movement after a series of riots broke out. Its influence on these artists still reverberates.

Give this article




Adam Rolston's "I Am Out Therefore I Am" (1989), from the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art exhibition "Art After Stonewall: 1969-1898," on view through July 21, 2019. © Adam Rolston, courtesy of the artist

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**By Zoë Lescaze**
**June 27, 2019**

The Stonewall Inn, a mob-owned gay bar in New York's West Village, was an easy target for surprise raids in the late 1960s. Busts were common, riots were not, so when the police began making arrests in the early hours of June 28, 1969, no one expected resistance. But that night, the crowd erupted. People hurled insults, then coins, beer cans and bricks. Reinforcements rushed to the scene as Stonewall supporters poured out of neighboring dives to join the melee. Half destroyed, Stonewall reopened the following night. The rioters returned, singing protest songs, and so did the police, armed with tear gas. The clashes, which continued on Christopher Street for days, were barely covered in the news, but they altered the course of history.

The Stonewall riots electrified the nascent gay-liberation movement with urgent, ferocious energy during a time when homosexuality was illegal in 49 states and widely considered to be a mental disorder. Suddenly, what had been a nonviolent push for civil liberties became an uncompromising crusade. The protests catalyzed the formation of radical civil rights groups, in New York and across the United States. A year later, the first pride march set out from Stonewall, growing from several hundred people to several thousand as it moved up Sixth Avenue. This year, more than four million people are expected to attend the city's annual celebration.

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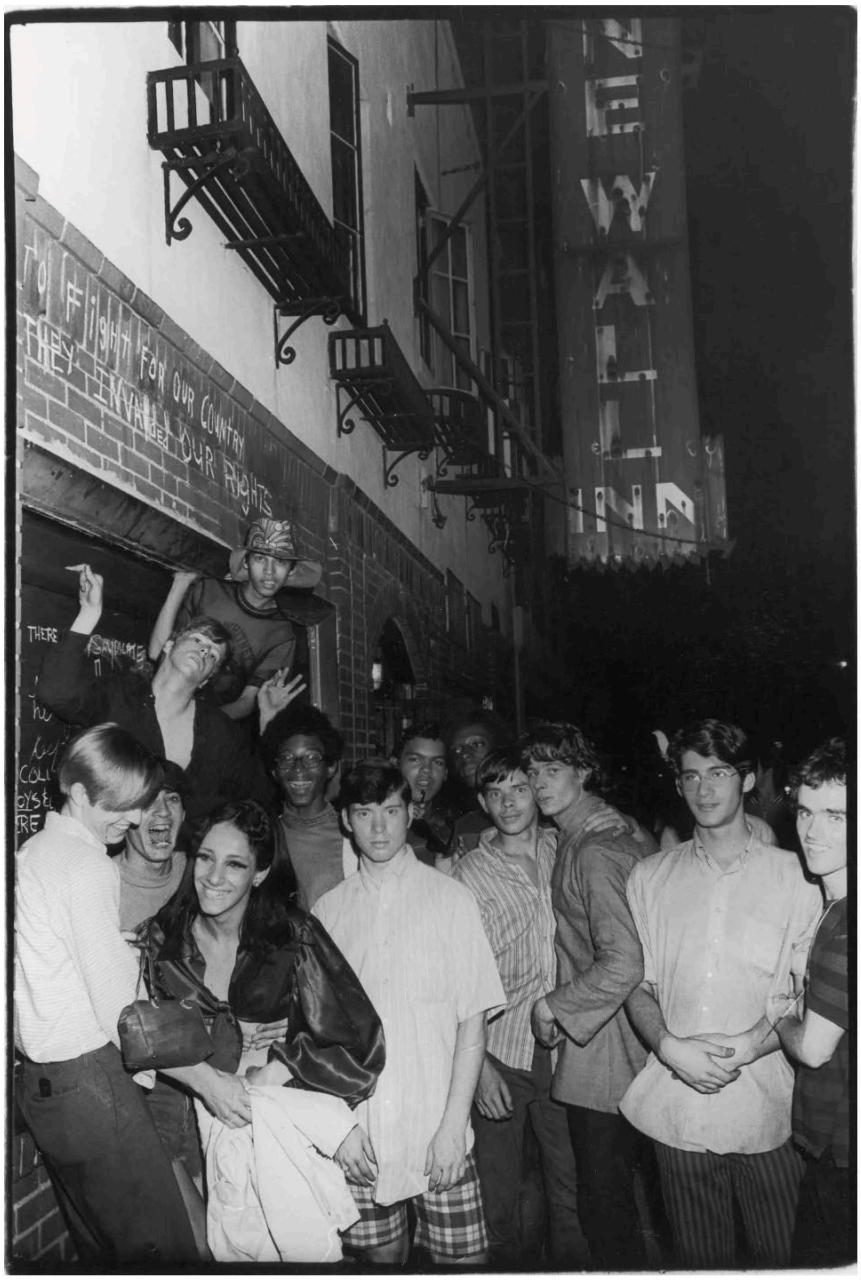


Fred McDarrah's "Celebration After Riots Outside Stonewall Inn, Nelly (Betsy Mae Koolo), Chris (Drag Queen Chris), Roger Davis, Michelle and Tommy Lanigan-Schmidt, June 1969" (1969). Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images, courtesy of Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York

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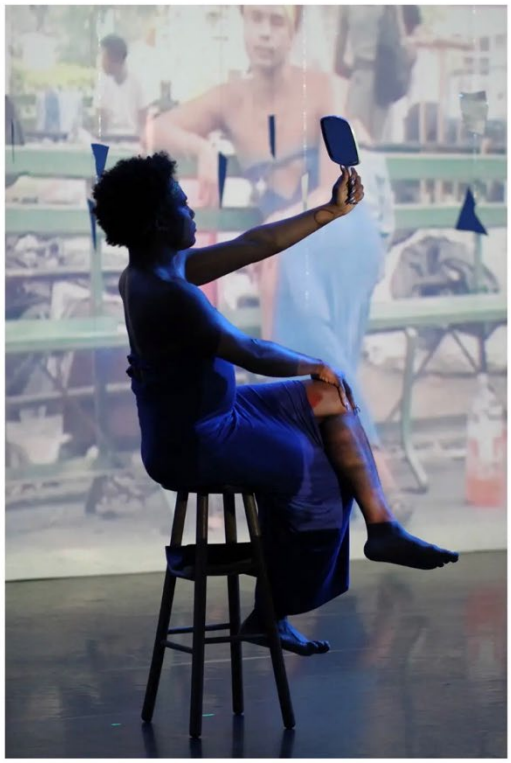
To mark the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, T Magazine invited a multigenerational group of artists to reflect on the demonstrations and their legacy. "Today, there's a lot of infighting about who threw the first brick," observes Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, an artist who was at the bar that summer night, in his response below. (Lanigan-Schmidt's work is currently on view in "Art After Stonewall, 1969–1989," a joint exhibition at New York University's Grey Art Gallery and the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art — one of several shows throughout the country devoted to the protests and their aftermath. Others can be found at the Brooklyn Museum and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.) But the riots, he reminds us, were only possible because of the solidarity of the many different groups who joined forces 50 years ago. "Stonewall was very diverse, and it was unified in its diversity."



Kiyan Williams's "Reflections" (2017). Portrait by Elijah Ndoumbé. Artwork © Kiyan Williams, courtesy of the artist

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**Kiyan Williams, b. 1991**

As a black nonbinary transfemme teenager growing up in Newark, N.J., I didn't know of any other people like me, in real life or history. During my freshman year at Stanford, I took a queer studies course, where I first learned about the Stonewall riots. I was empowered through learning about people like Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera and other black and Puerto Rican activists and artists who transgressed normative gender and resisted the forms of oppression that confined their lives. I was especially empowered by learning about their struggles against the carceral system, the police state, economic injustice and trans misogyny. The Stonewall riots and the gay liberation movement were catalyzed by poor black and Puerto Rican folks, people who were referred to as street queens, people who went to bars to get drunk and dance, to find community and joy. These were racial, sexual and gender deviants who were politically and economically disenfranchised, who created networks of care for each other and who took to the street to resist various forms of state violence. Contemporary L.G.B.T. politics often forgets and neglects queer, trans and gender nonconforming folks from the hood, the banji girls, those of us who come from under-resourced communities, who are denied access to health care and affordable housing, and who lack viable means of making income. I am inspired by the vision of those street queens from Stonewall and the gay liberation front who envisioned a world for those of us who are trans/gressive in myriad ways to live multifaceted lives of deep satisfaction, interdependence, self-actualization and profound joy.

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HYPERALLERGIC

Small, Zachary, "Queer Artists in Their Own Words: Kiyan Williams Uses Dirt to Unearth the Exploitation of Black People in America," *Hyperallergic*, June 19, 2019

Art

# Queer Artists in Their Own Words: Kiyan Williams Uses Dirt to Unearth the Exploitation of Black People in America

LGBTQ Pride Month is now. Every day in June, we are celebrating the community by featuring one queer artist and letting them speak for themselves.

by Zachary Small
June 19, 2019

*The month of June is a time to celebrate the LGBTQ community and reflect on the advances of queer people to strengthen civil liberties around the world, even in a moment of great political uncertainty. It's also a good opportunity to spotlight the richness and diversity of culture we have within the community. Hyperallergic is commemorating Pride Month by featuring one contemporary queer artist per day on the website and letting them speak for themselves. Click here to participate.*

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Kiyan Williams in their studio (photo by William Jess Laird, courtesy the artist)

# Kiyan Williams

**Age:** 28

**Location:** New York City

**Artistic Medium:** Sculpture, Performance, Video

**Who are you and what do you do?**

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I'm a Pisces and artist born in Newark, New Jersey. My work thinks through the relationship between Blackness, trans/gressive subjectivities, and ecology. In my recent work, I excavate residue from sites of loss within the African Diaspora: slave castles and sugar plantations in the Caribbean and American South; the archives of Black gay artists who died of HIV/AIDS; and a low-income residential building in West Harlem demolished by commercial developers. To borrow the words of Saidiya Hartman, "I am intent on tracing an itinerary of destruction." Working primarily in sculpture, video, and performance, I am attracted to materials that are silent witnesses to the historical and ongoing dispossession of Black people in America.

**What are the top three greatest influences on your work?**

Black feminist and queer texts (Thomas Glave's *Among the Bloodpeople: Politics and Flesh*), rhythm and blues from the 1990s, and mycelium.

**Describe your coffee order.**

Two creams and two sugars.

**What is your greatest accomplishment?**

Giving myself permission to exist on my terms. Period.

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**What constitutes a perfect day?**

Arriving from my dreams into a still and quiet morning; laying silently in bed for an hour after; having coffee plus an aimless walk down 125th Street and saying good morning to the people I pass; a few uninterrupted hours in the studio; a few hours in the library; a vogueing session with some friends; dinner and drinks with a good sis; and ending the night shaking my kitty kat to some Jersey club music. All done without answering a single email and little interaction with a phone or computer!

**What was your favorite exhibition from last year?**

*God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* curated by Hilton Als at David Zwirner.

**What would your superpower be if you had one?**

Being able to articulate and express my feelings to others without speaking them.

**What is one question you wish somebody would ask about your work?**

The real story about why I use dirt and soil as my primary materials.

**What is the greatest threat to humanity?**

The systems of extraction and exploitation that undergird violences enacted on people and the land.

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**What did you make when you first started making art?**

T-shirt and bandanas for friends who passed away.

**What is your all-time favorite work of art?**

*Sula* by Toni Morrison

**What are your plans for pride month?**

Avoiding and evading corporate-cis-gay pride.

**What is the future of queerness?**

Reparations for all Black people.

**Greatest queer icon of the internet: Babadook, Momo, or a pervading sense of existential angst?**

A pervading sense of existential angst.

**Is there enough support for queer artists where you live?**

No.

**How do you stay cool during the summer?**

Rosé and a cute rooftop situation.

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**What is your favorite type of milk?**

Yikes! We don't do milk.

*"Queer Artists in Their Own Words" is an ongoing feature happening every day in the month of June. For prior posts in the series, please click here.*