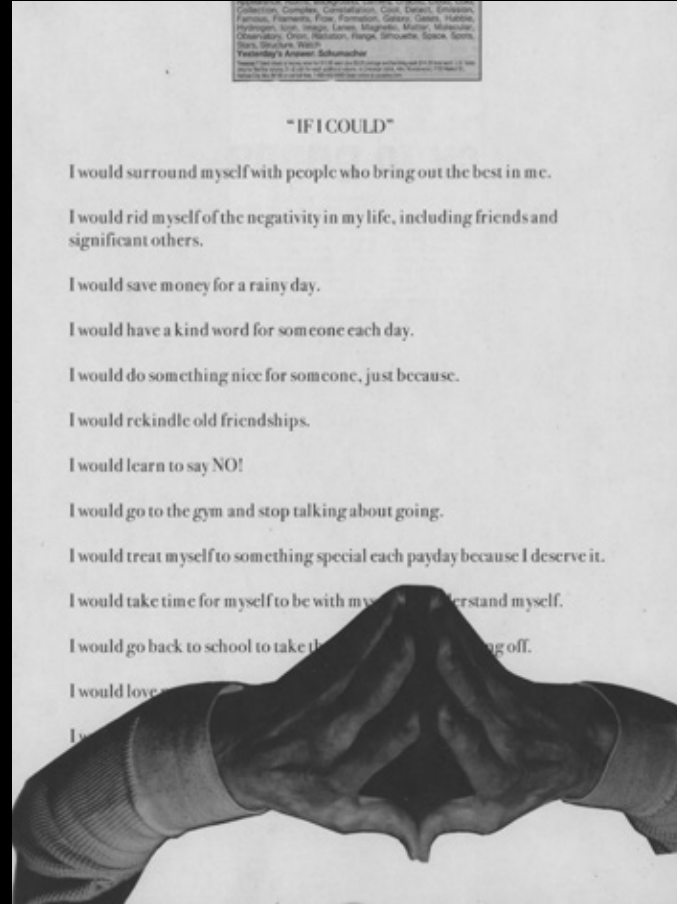
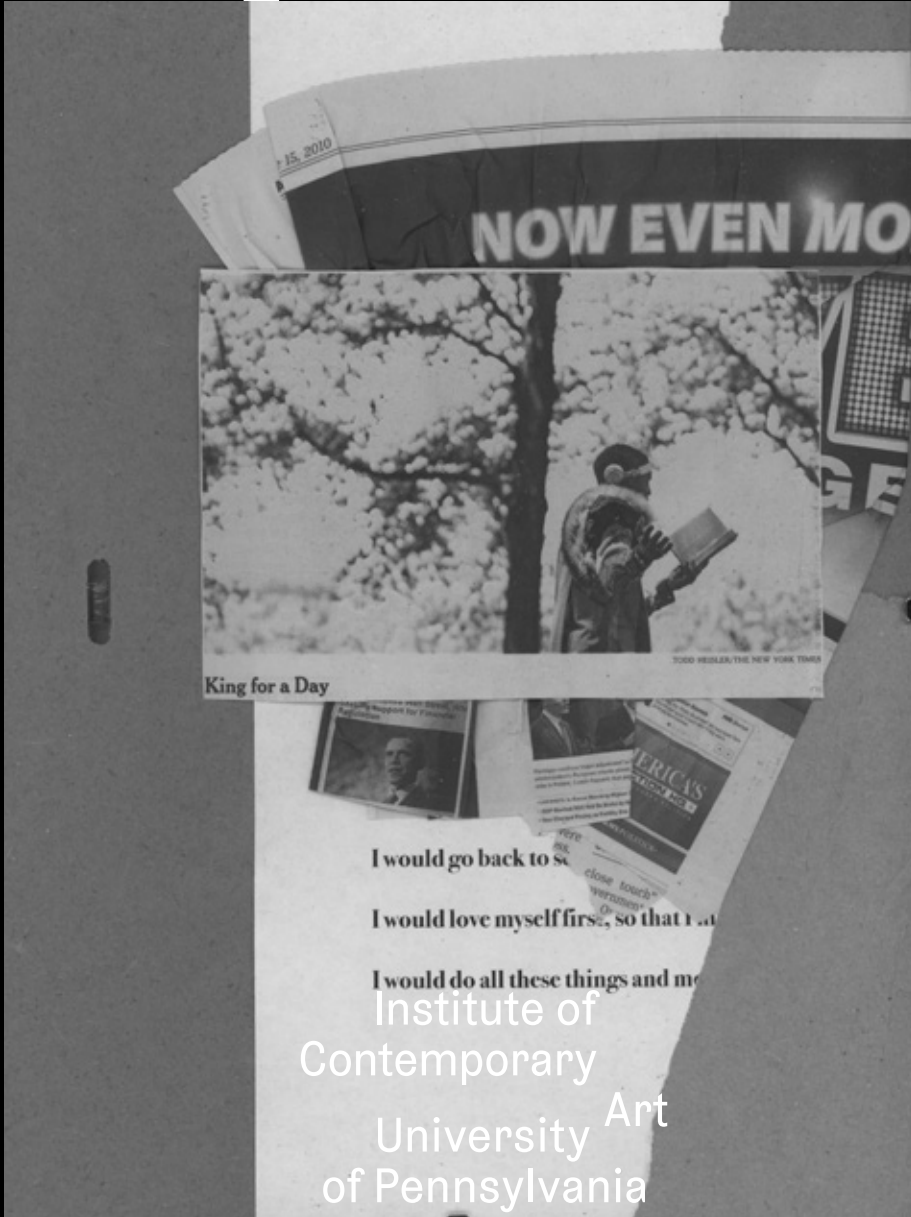


#SPEECHACTS

SPEECH/ACTS
September 13–December 23, 2017

Speech/



Act

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THE EDNA S. TUTTLEMAN GALLERY

ARTISTS

Jibade-Khalil Huffman
Steffani Jemison
Tony Lewis
Tiona Nekkia McClodden
Kameelah Janan Rasheed
Martine Syms

With poetry and prose by
Morgan Parker and Simone White.

What are the limits
of expression? Where
does
language go limp,
break apart, or fall
into pieces, stammers,
glimpses,
or just merely the
black marks that make up
letters?

—Dawn Lundy Martin,
'A Bleeding: An
Autobiographical
Tale' (2007)

I use the term “wake” not to designate a period that directly followed the Black Arts Movement, but instead as a nod to the scholar Christina Sharpe’s idea of “the wake” or “wake work.” “Wake work” is formulated “as sites of artistic production, resistance, consciousness, and possibility for living in diaspora.” In addition, the term “wake” connects contemporary black oppression throughout history, rooting its origin within the wake of the first slave ships bound for America.

Scholar Kevin Quashie notes in his book *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* that the politics of representation is “where black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaning/fulness rather than as a marker of the human individuality of the person who is black.”

Speech/Acts assembles a generation of artists who have been influenced by black experimental poetry. In linguistics, a speech act is an utterance that philosopher J. L. Austin defined as “not only describing a given reality, but also changing the social reality they are describing.” Blackness is constituted through language, as language is a primary method of expressing and maintaining power. The artists in this exhibition use poetics as a tool to manipulate the conceptual and structural elements of language and the social contexts in which language is employed, appropriated, and abstracted. These complexities and contradictions are explored in a range of mediums: collage, drawing, text-based installation, and video. In *Speech/Acts*, the artists utilize aspects of experimental poetry in their work as a means to interrogate such forms of power, rendering the experience of blackness more exact.

The exhibition’s title draws inspiration from Richard Iton’s *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. In the book, Iton examines the work of the late poet Amiri Baraka, who is widely credited for founding the Black Arts Movement—a movement that connected the radical politics of the Black Power Movement with all forms of creative production. The artists in this exhibition represent a generation working within the wake of the Black Arts Movement, making art that engages the political from a place of personal immediacy.¹

Not all utterances need be loud. Many of the works in *Speech/Acts* are remarkably quiet. This quietness speaks to the capacious interior lives of black subjects—a quality that is often reduced to a narrative solely defined by its performance of resistance.² *Speech/Acts* attempts to interpret the artists’ adoptions of black experimental poetry as an investment in mining what poet Dawn Lundy Martin has called “unrecognizable speech”—one that resists “the tyranny of the prosaic, the beautiful, the poetic utopia” and instead, exposes the inadequacies of language, insisting on abstraction as accuracy.

Jibade-Khalil Huffman
(born 1981, Detroit; lives Brooklyn)

Poetry allows me to be the person being attacked, the eighteenyearold in the hoodie and the person standing outside of that. Writing provides me with the ability to slip in and out of different registers and that is ultimately why I'm working the way I do.³

— Jibade-Khalil Huffman

Jibade-Khalil Huffman began his career as a poet but started working with visual art as a way to create beyond the limitations of the written word. His works often utilize photography, video, collage, and text, resulting in a blurring between the textual and visual. The three-channel video, *Untitled (Citizen)*, 2015, was created in collaboration with the poet Claudia Rankine. The video uses the final ten pages of Rankine's landmark book *Citizen: An American Lyric* as a script and was created shortly after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Rankine's book spotlights banal forms of racism as experienced by black Americans every day. Through the lens of Huffman, Rankine's explorations of micro-aggressions are translated through three concurrent projections that include mundane shots of a city and a central video of a staged performance by actors. The result speaks to both Huffman and Rankine's interest in poetry's ability for the narrative voice to embody the position of "I," "we," and "they" simultaneously.

Steffani Jemison
(born 1981, Berkeley; lives Brooklyn)

On September 24, 2009, Derrion Albert, a Chicago-born high school student, was beaten to death on the city's South Side. Albert's murder, one of 453 homicides that year in the city, drew national attention because of his status as an honor roll student. Artist Steffani Jemison, who was studying in Chicago at the time, became interested in the poem "Affirmations for Living," a prologue to a popular street fiction novel, that reportedly hung near Albert's desk as motivation. In *Untitled (Affirmations for Living)*, 2011–ongoing, Jemison uses the poem to create a series of collages that is both a formal experimentation with material as well as with text. With the poem beginning with "If I could," Jemison's collages are haunting meditations on the common occurrence of black death in America.

Tony Lewis
(born 1986, Los Angeles; lives Chicago)

Working primarily with graphite and paper, Tony Lewis utilizes fragmentation in his large-scale drawings as a primary means to interrogate language and its mobilization in constructing race. Lewis begins these works with an unidentified template sentence—sometimes culled from found text or generated through his writings—that he then disassembles across sheets of paper. The final drawings result in nonsensical letter arrangements that bob and weave throughout the graphite-stained pages. Like the writings of poet Douglas Kearney, Lewis uses strategies such as exploding syntax or what Kearney has called “performative typography” to interrogate the rigidity of how words are written and read. In a recent body of work, Lewis has turned to Bill Watterson’s iconic comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* to create poetry from the comic’s text bubbles. With pencil and correction fluid, Lewis obliterates aspects of each comic cell, leaving remnants of Watterson’s creation visible and newly constructed from a black subject position.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden
(born 1981, Blytheville, Arkansas; lives Philadelphia)

The artist and filmmaker Tiona Nekkia McClodden is attracted to troubled and fractured archives. Her installation within *Speech/Acts* consists of two films that explore the relationship between the poets Brad Johnson (d.2011) and Essex Hemphill (d.1995), both of whom died because of the AIDS epidemic. In her series *Brad Johnson Tapes, X-On Subjugation*, 2017, McClodden recites Johnson’s “rage poem,” “On Subjugation” (1988), the finale in a series of ten videos documenting McClodden reading Johnson’s texts while performing acts of BDSM on herself in her studio.

Brad Johnson Tapes, X-On Subjugation, is placed in conversation with Essex Hemphill by way of *Essex + Audre*, 2015, part of the multimedia project *Affixing Ceremony: Four Movements for Essex*, which first appeared on the ICA’s website in 2015 for A Day With(out) Art. *Essex + Audre* uses a scene from Marlon Riggs’ seminal essay film *Tongues Untied* 1989, in which Hemphill sits gazing away from the camera while withstanding homophobic slurs and phrases until looking at the viewer, almost haunting the screen, and defiantly looking at the viewer to recite an excerpt from Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). Like Johnson’s *On Subjugation*, Lorde’s words, as recited by Hemphill, seethe with rage and desire: “I know the anger lies inside of me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning. Easier to crucify myself in you than to take on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting that we are worth wanting each other.”

Kameelah Janan Rasheed
(born 1985, East Palo Alto; lives Brooklyn)

In the closing line of poet Harryette Mullen's 'S*PeRM**K*T' she writes, 'speed / readers skim the white space of this galaxy', which I have always interpreted as an observation of the manner in which the reading and viewing of certain 'texts' — visual texts included — has become a hasty affair; one in which the audience quickly refers to formulas and expectations, rather than approach works newly and patiently to extract the nuances. This is the danger of selfreplicating tropes and performances of identity on one plane: there is a predictability which gives others a license to skimread your existence.⁴

—Kameelah Janan Rasheed

Kameelah Janan Rasheed's research-based practice explores the complications and slippages of language as it relates to blackness and often begins with the artist's own writing. She is an adept writer and many of the texts that appear in Rasheed's installations have quickly permeated popular culture, often being adopted as hashtags or catch phrases like, "Flexin' My Complexion." In her installation, *A Supple Perimeter (the second activation)*, 2017, Rasheed draws inspiration from literary theory and the tradition of black experimental writing to explore the expansiveness of blackness which exists in public, private, and within one's interior. Creating scores to manipulate text on the beds of copy machines, Rasheed utilizes

the tools typically used for the self-publication and distribution of radical writings to manipulate text, bending and stretching words to their limits of legibility. Throughout the run of the exhibition, Rasheed will make adjustments to the installation—a gesture meant to signify the instability of black subjectivity itself.

Campion, Darren and Kameelah Janan Rasheed. "Other Histories: An Interview with Kameelah Janan Rasheed." *Paper Journal*, 20 June 2013. paper-journal.com/kameelah-janan-rasheed/.

Martine Syms
(born 1988, Los Angeles; lives Los Angeles)

I always thought poetry was kind
of corny.⁵

—Martine Syms

Martine Syms' *Lessons I-LXXXVI*, 2014–17 is a series of 30-second commercials for the Black Radical Tradition. Structured as a canto—a subdivision of an epic or narrative poem—the first lessons in the series were inspired by poet Kevin Young's book, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. *The Grey Album* is comprised of literary and cultural criticism and lyrical choruses that center black culture as American culture. Just as Young's book moves throughout art, music, and popular culture, Syms' *Lessons* consists of a plethora of found and original footage, including homemade movies, clips from 1990s talk shows, and YouTube videos. Accompanying this installation of *Lessons* is a wall painting that reads, "Lightly, Slightly, Politely." The phrase is a reference from the author Zora Neale Hurston's slang glossary, which means "something done perfectly." However, Syms' use of the idiom is twofold: one which points to black literary traditions and the other that acknowledges the societal pressures impressed on black people, particularly women, in America.

Benor, Dalva. "Martine Syms on L.A., Coming Offline and the Language of Pop." *Dazed*, 20 Apr. 2016. www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/30820/1/martine-syms-on-la-coming-offline-and-the-language-of-pop.

THE RACIAL IMAGINARY INSTITUTE

Within *Speech/Acts* is a satellite outpost for The Racial Imaginary Institute (TRII), founded by poet Claudia Rankine. Because no sphere of life is untouched by race, the Institute convenes a cultural laboratory in which the racial imaginaries of our time and place are engaged, contextualized and demystified. Visitors are encouraged to use TRII's space within the exhibition as a site to read, write, and reflect on the ways that race is constructed through language and how white supremacy distorts such constructions. This outpost is positioned within *Speech/Acts* as a way to engage with critical readings around poetry, language and race and will function as the site for a reading group organized by Julia Bloch, Amber Rose Johnson, Davy Knittle, Brooke O'Harra, Meg Onli and Olivia Porte. The *Speech/Acts* reading group will meet and discuss the following texts:

- Sat, Sep 23
1PM
Citizen: An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine
- Sat, Oct 7
1PM
Franklinstein by Susan Landers and *Janey's Arcadia* by Rachel Zolf
- Sat, Oct 21
1PM
Introduction to *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* by Anthony Reed and Introduction to *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* by Dorothy Wang
- Sat, Nov 4
1PM
Of Being Dispersed by Simone White
- Sat, Nov 18
1PM
The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be by Harryette Mullen
- Sat, Dec 2
1PM
Zong! by M. NourbeSe Philip

Noncirculating copies of these texts and other supplemental readings are available to read at the Kelly Writers House and within The Racial Imaginary Institute's outpost within *Speech/Acts*.

RELATED PROGRAMS

Wed, Sep 13
5PM
6:30–9PM

Member's Preview
Opening Celebration

Tue, Oct 10
6PM

Race and Form: A Dialogue
A Conversation with Dorothy Wang, John Keene, Meg Onli, and Julia Bloch, hosted by the Penn Creative Writing Program

Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104

Wed, Oct 18
6:30PM

Performance: Jibade-Khalil Huffman

Wed, Nov 8
6:30PM

Lecture: Claudia Rankine

Lightbox Film Center, 3701 Chestnut St, Philadelphia, PA 19104

Sun, Dec 3
1PM

Conversation and workshop with
Kameelah Janan Rasheed
Co-presented with the Leeway Foundation at ICA

Wed, Dec 13
6:30PM

Speech/Acts Catalog Launch with readings and conversations with Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Morgan Parker, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, and Simone White

Fri, Dec 15
7PM

Speech/Acts Catalog Launch with readings and conversations with Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Morgan Parker, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, and Simone White

Verse Books, 20 Jay St, Brooklyn, NY 11201

Speech/Acts is organized by Meg Onli, Assistant Curator. A fully illustrated catalogue co-published with Futurepoem will accompany the exhibition, featuring reprints of seminal texts from Fred Moten and Harryette Mullen; newly commissioned poetry and prose by Morgan Parker and Simone White; an essay from the curator. Support for *Speech/Acts* has been provided by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Edna W. Andrade Fund of The Philadelphia Foundation, Nancy & Leonard Amoroso, Toby Devan Lewis, and Carolyn Oakley Lowe & Winston I. Lowe.