

Black Labor: Notes on Work in the Black Avant-Garde

/MICHAEL STONE-RICHARDS

*Work is a foretaste - a preliminary
experience - of death.*

William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*

Thou hast hit it; for there's no better sign of a brave mind than a hard hand.

King Henry VI, Part 2, IV.ii.19-20¹



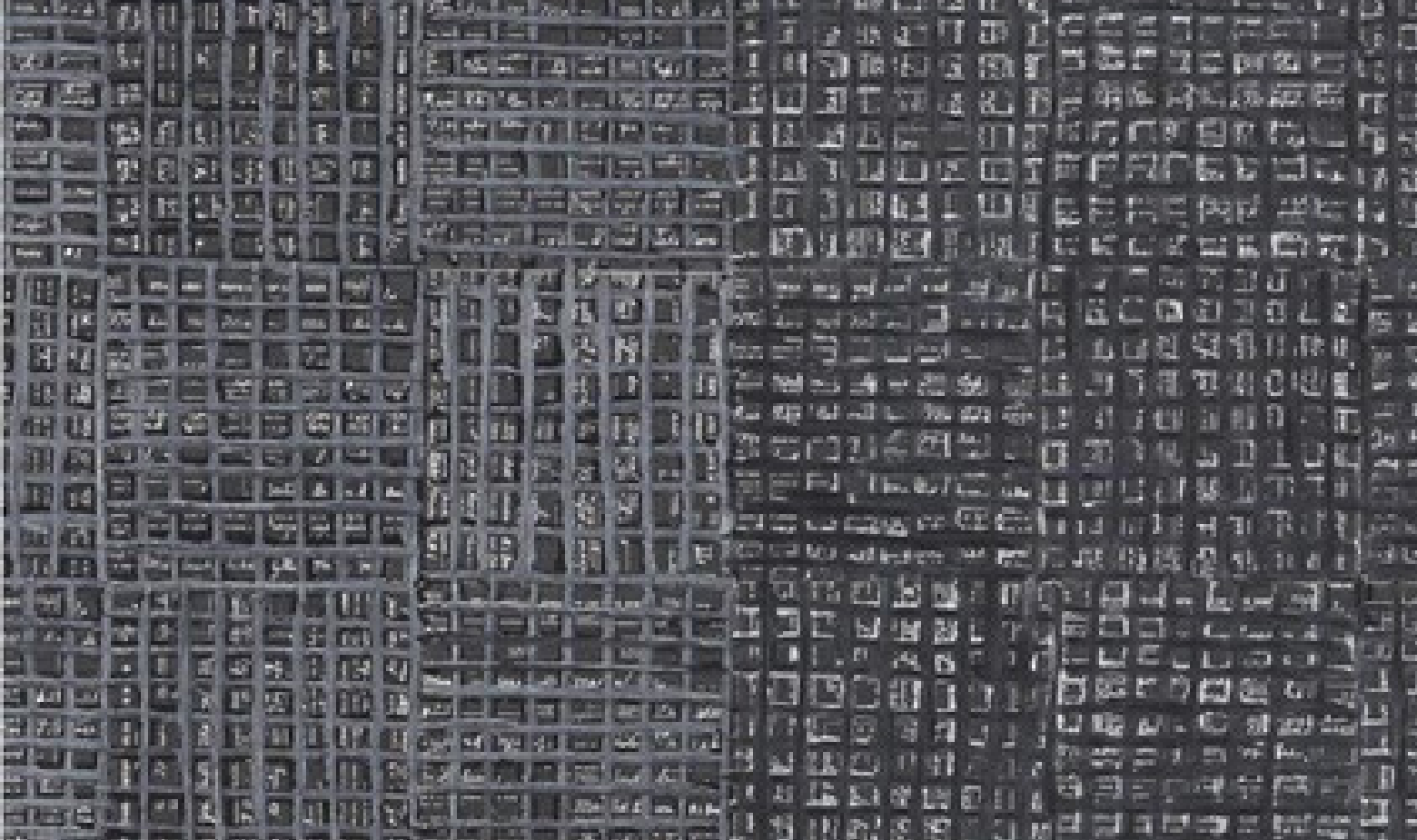
Above: McArthur Binion, *Route One: Box Two: IV*, 2017

Right: Detail

Oil paint stick and paper on board

84 x 84 inches (213.4 x 213.4 cm)

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.



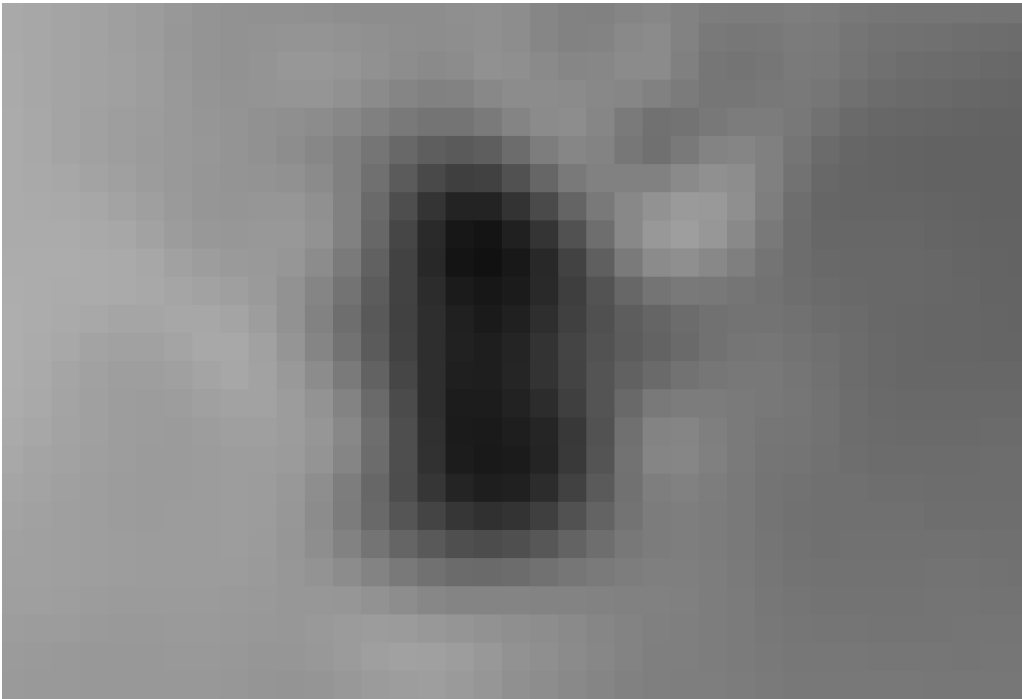
1 *The Hand in the painting of McArthur Binion.* First, the seductive surface. On approaching the painting of McArthur Binion – whether for the first or the umpteenth time – it is the surface that attracts, that seduces: the textures are soft and rich, delicate in the way that surfaces laid down by slowly made crayon or ink can be, the patient gridded lines clearly hand drawn, the face of the artist bent over closely to the plane, almost breathing on the soft crumbly surface of crayon and ink, the pressure of the hand, the fingers intent/tion – first intention, as it were – not only making but being captured simultaneously, not only depicting but being in the latency of the frame. There are moments, as in the *DNA* series exhibited in Chicago in 2014, when the surfaces of Binion paintings are like jewels of glistening light and as a viewer one simply wants to hold back a little and not hasten the reveal, not allow any perceptual moment to become too quickly resolved into an image – any image – but simply to allow the play of surface textures made by the varied force and lightness of this touch, this hand, of this artist. Rarely is it such a pleasure not to know, and simply to allow oneself, one's looking, one's seeing to be trained by the surface, led by the hand, through the touch of the work. At a certain distance, however, a sense of relief – physical relief – begins to allow itself to be glimpsed, and with it another kind of work, a kind of sculptural work of relief as forms – vaguely – allow hints of their underlying presence through the texture. At first, what seem to be other marks and markings, under-markings, are slowly revealed as letters, in rhythms of letterings, glimpses of words and

wordings in groups revealing names / dates / locations sometimes in whole, often in parts. The medium reveals more than one support. Paper, maybe. Names. Numbers. Addresses. Yes. Dates. Or a map. Of Mississippi. Or photographs, fragments of photographs. Portraits / unknown? Anonymous? Self-portraits. Lynching. And all at once the perceptual plane dissolves, re-adjusts itself between the seductive and the repulsive, as if one part of the painting recoils from another in the same temporality as one part of the mind of the viewer also recoils in shock from its own recognition. At first, you, as viewer, think there is something buried – stories, histories – but the painting is a seduction in which the *handling* of memory is a *masking of the blow* without which masking there would be no distance to allow the viewer the time of recognition, of acknowledgment. The acknowledgment of work. The memories that are handled as phylogenetic memories, memories, that is, that an individual carries for a group, a species, a people: the child in a large family – in Mississippi – of cotton-pickers. The life of labor for an entire family and people. The geographic displacement of the family along with thousands, eventually millions of others from Mississippi and The South northward in search of work and a different state of mind – 12 Million Voices, says Richard Wright, seeking work and “to escape these marked-off areas of life.” Art is, though, a marked-off area of life for the young Binion, a zone of engagement that allows for needed autonomy from the family, as well as offering a means to reflect upon the labor

of the family and the nature of labor to which the family – the species – is condemned, or, too, labor as means of escape, liberation. Suddenly the many beautiful, troubling textures of Binion’s *oeuvre* seem to assume a figuration – the hand – and a subject: what the hand, *the instrument of instruments*, as Aristotle put it, does, namely, *work in the construction of a world*. I think of the recent works – for example, the paintings in dialogue with Saarinen in the recent *Binion / Saarinen: A McArthur Binion Project* at the Cranbrook Art Museum – of which *Route One: Box Two*, 2017 [oil paint stick and paper on board] has become something of a talisman for me for the way in which the minimalist grey surface of grids yields to grids nested within smaller grids – from the frame to the clear sense of the division of the picture in two halves, then into larger boxes, each diminishing into a smaller scaled version of itself nested within to reveal *the movement of language as a form of light* within the smallest hand-drawn and so not quite rigid grid, almost as though the grids, that is, the unit of measurement, are made up of bodies (metonymically: the middle passage?) not abstract (modernist) forms, bodies delivered by hands... *The Standard Certificate of Live Birth* [in Mississippi] can be read in several of these works including Lehmann Maupin’s *Route One: Box Two*. The *standard* is the abstract norm, but the part refers to what has been delivered by hand, namely, the result of labor, the living body of the child. The hand, in Binion’s work, is a stand-in, a metonym, for labor, fragility, death.



Thornton Dial (b. 1928), *Hard Labor*, 1998, initialed TD upper right carpet, rope, metal, fabric, industrial modeling compound and paint on plywood, 48" h x 48" w x 3" d



2 And suddenly the intuition derived from looking at these recent grey-ground works at Lehmann Maupin yielded passage to something else, namely, the extent to which Afro-American avant-garde practice takes as its subject the nature of Black labor, and it's been there all along from the most figurative – or should I say literalist? – to the most nonchalantly post-modernist. At its most literalist it is there in the work of Thornton Dial's *Hard Labor*, 1998 (48 in. high, 48 in. wide, 3 in. deep) whose media consist of carpet, rope, metal, fabric (i.e. denim), industrial modeling compound and paint on plywood.

3 *For Jane Schulak + Culture Lab Detroit*
It is present with equal insistence and knowing literalism in Theaster Gates' *Tar Painting* series, 2012, inspired, he says, by the *labor* of his father as a roofer; and think, too, of Gates's 2012 White Cube exhibition *My Labor is my Protest* where, in conversation with Tim Marlowe,² Gates speaks of exploring through his practice "a conversation about labor [and] the role of performance and the possibility of beauty"; where, in the same interview, he also says that "my dad was a roofer for much of my life, and I think that I've come to my *creative hands* as a result of learning to build buildings and roof with him."³ Finally, Gates explicitly situates his father's labor as a form of sacrifice which frees him, Theaster Gates, from the need

to be angry: “and part of the reason that I have the luxury of not being angry is because my dad labored so hard - so there is a consciousness of the history of struggle.” (Theaster Gates in conversation with Tim Marlowe, White Cube website, 2012). Most telling in the White Cube conversation, however, is Gates’ (acknowledgment of) mourning the death of his mother in 2010 of whom he says that she helped make his work possible even as she did not understand it but, even more pointedly, that he did not seek to bring her into his work, which is also to say, his world, and he did not wish to repeat this omission with his father. In another context I shall delve further into the

language of mourning - the public act - shared by Gates in this conversation. Here, I simply wish to foreground the connection Gates establishes amongst labor (both his father as a roofer working with tar and his mother in some sense subsidizing the beginning of his art), mourning (his mother, but also proleptically his father of whom Gates says that he did not, after the death of his mother, want to repeat the same mistake with his father), and Art (here represented by “Jasper Johns,” in a tellingly odd passage the sense of which requires that it be treated as a parenthesis and the sentence incomplete). I quote in extenso as it is in many ways a remarkable passage:

My mom died in 2010, and I think that I really hated myself for not having her understand better what I was up to on the day-to-day; and especially because she financed so many of my crazy ideas ... I just never gave her the nod, the respect, to trust that she would understand this crazy world that we occupy, and I just didn't want that to happen with my dad. (In a way, we could say that the *Tar* works are a kind of response to ... um ... Jasper Johns ... that there's a ... that from reading about Johns, there was a kind of insistence upon only considering the *work* at even, you know, as people move on, they say, “No, Johns, that was about your dad, man! It's about, you gay, dude! You gotta deal with that! You gotta deal with that!” “I'm not gay! This is not about my father!”) And, so, I think that in a way, my dad's 78, my dad's gonna pass [...] my dad is aging, and it just seemed, it was only this moment that I realize that my first Gift was roofing, and that my dad was actually the beginning of my artistic practice, because I had to *labor* with him, and I had to help him take care of his buildings as a very young person - and I never thought about that as fodder,⁴ potential fodder, until I was in the middle of my show here, and I realized that in these moments, when my dad is aging and things are decaying - spring is turning into winter in his life⁵ - that I didn't want to miss the opportunities [...] from having direct engagement with the people I love ... and I felt that my dad had loaded content that was *super* good and he was a *helluva* of a fabricator who could roll with me through a successful body of *work*!



Alison Janae Hamilton, *Pitch*, detail, 2019 MASS MoCA



Alison Janae Hamilton, *Pitch*, detail, 2019 MASS MoCA

Quick - as there will be other occasions to unpack in detail this remarkable passage: In this passage Gates discusses the following implicit relations:

“Art” is Jasper Johns - Labor is the Father - Mourning is the Mother.

Consistently *labor* is the physicality of what is undertaken by the working-class father (tar, roofing), whilst Johns produces *work*, and Gates says that his father can roll with him, Gates, “through a successful body of *work*.” Again, moving quickly, Gates wants to say that Johns represents a conception of Art that insists on the work itself, by which one presumes he means a certain kind of autonomy of the work of art and the mental processes that it entails or entrains; Gates, on the other hand, at least in this moment of acknowledgment in “direct engagement with the people I love,” wants labor, contra Johns, to represent - or better, even, *indicate*, point to - a beyond of Art, an outside of Art, beyond the white cube (“there are things that are more important to me than White Cube gallery,” he will say): labor is one such, but so, too, is mourning. This *outside* of Art can lead to a revalorization of Blackness *in* Art as well as Blackness *and* Abstraction. The association of Blackness with labor marginalizes it in terms of modern art (and such is also the case for working class art *per se* in the economy of modern art⁶), but the implicit relation with mourning, Black mourning, might change the way of thinking about the materiality and language of abstraction - not Malevich, not Mondrian - to allow a conception of abstraction based upon neither a semiotic of disembodiment (say, primitively: Aurier; say, in its most powerful technology: Mallarmé,

but in all cases post-symboliste) nor the historicity of art language (say, Binion and Whitten speaking always about not being of art history),⁷ but rather a conception of abstraction as veiling (of grief) or masking (of power) anchored in different material practices, whence labor.⁸ The *Tar* paintings declare in all their surface viscosity the class-based labor of the father: there is nothing to see *beyond it* (there is no transcendence à la Mondrian, à la Malevich, or Kandinsky): this black substance is the substance of labor itself. It is pure function. It fits where it must. The *Tar* works also and simultaneously block vision - there is nothing to see *into* - and so they veil, protect the grief of loss (the personal), thereby making for (public) mourning.

More than ever I regret that I was not able to be present at this exhibition at the White Cube gallery in London! It is only after listening to this remarkable passage *and* requesting permission to reproduce an image of Gates producing *Tar* work with his father - an image which I first encountered online - and was politely informed that “This is not a work that we allow to be reproduced” that I began to think more clearly as to why it might be that the photography of Gates and his father with *Tar* work production as reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, *My labor is my protest*, are all reproduced in varying degrees of low-res quality.⁹ (A new

kind of low-res, different to what appeared in the 1980s in mail art, is now current in advanced practice: in Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide* (2007), in Arthur Jafa's *akingdoncomethas* (2018), and in each case there is a distinct significance of mourning. - And may be this practice of the low-res as marker of mourning and *limited* un-masking might be seen, too, at work in Okwui Enwezor's *Catalogue for Documenta 11, Platform 5: Exhibition* the first 30 (unpaginated) pages of which, compiled by Nadja Rottner, consist of montages of (relatively) low-res documentary photographs of various catastrophes of our modernity - AIDS, (civil) war, state terrorism, guerrilla terrorism, forced migration, genocide,

scenes of sweat labor in the manufacture of consumer commodities - as if the lowered quality of resolution (but which of the available senses of *resolution*?) suggests a diminution, a lessening in some way (the mystery or the alchemy of the commodity?) the result of circulation within the neo-liberal economy of commodification.¹⁰ - The refusal of high definition (and the attendant refusal of circulation) might well be grasped as an attempt to guard, to secure, to retain something from dissipation and even prurience. It would be to keep from full view, and here in Gates, to convey the sense of the image as somehow incomplete and so not fully commodified.

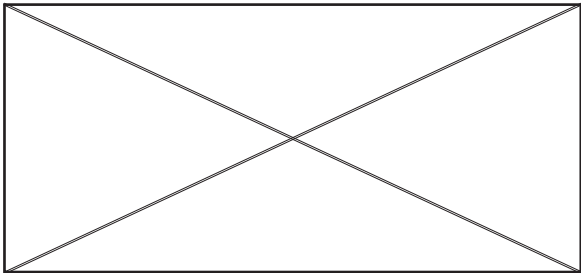
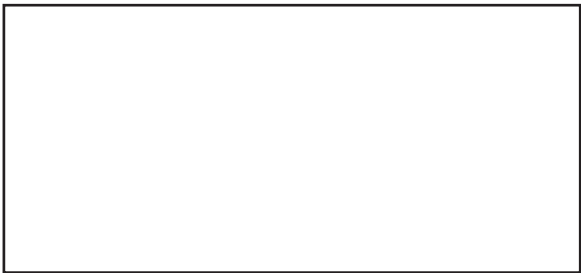
4 I meet Larry Ossei-Mensah, then the new Susanne Feld Hilberry Senior Curator at Large for MOCAD. We share ideas about what we are working on. I speak of this set of reflections on the hand in Binion's art, and the developing concern with Black labor in the Black avant-garde. Without missing a beat, he tells me of an exhibition called *Pitch* by the artist Alison Janae Hamilton that he co-curated with Susan Cross at MASS MoCA earlier in 2018. Alison Janae Hamilton is a photographer and installation artist born in Kentucky whose work is a reflection on the Southern condition - especially Black Labor. I can but quote from the accompanying text written by Cross and Ossei-Mensah on *Pitch*:

The title of both exhibition and a new installation, *Pitch* draws on a number of meanings and associations. It suggests the inky black or rural nights and thick forest, as well as the sounds and music that animate the landscape. *It also refers to the resin of the conifers tapped in the turpentine camps of northern Florida - an industry that bolstered the southern economy from the Jim Crow era to the 1950s and relied on the grueling labor of African-Americans.* Evoking the towering pines characteristic of the area, the artist has installed a grove of trees [Fig. 5 and Fig. 6] in the gallery. Ghostlike, they conjure the real and metaphorical scars that the turpentine industry left on the environment.

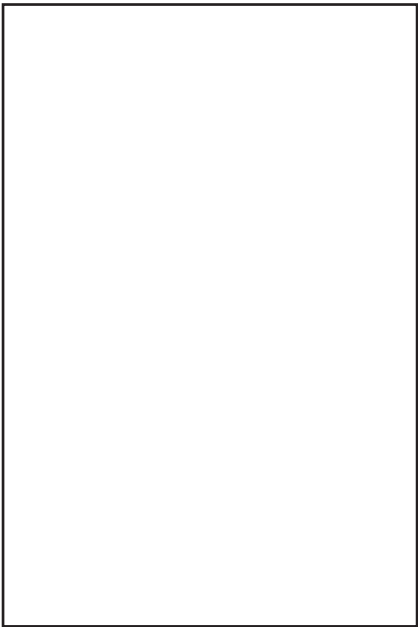
(Susan Cross and Larry Ossei-Mensah, *Pitch*, MASS MoCA, 2018. Text available online at MASS MoCA website.)

There is of course more, much more, that can be said about this important work of an emerging artist, not least on the role of the “MOTHE/R [...] HER” and related questions of natality... We could return to Gates’ *Tar* works and see in them, too, a deep concern with natality and the way in which natality foregrounds the need to change stories or narrative commencements. Suffice to say that a new visual language is being configured out of and around questions of world, world-making, subjection, and physical labor precisely when the digitization of representation (and lived experience?) has become irreversible - and maybe it is surprising just how varied is this visual language as it articulates a new *subject* in art.

5 It is present, too, this question of Black labor, with in-your-face materiality, in Kevin Beasley’s Whitney exhibition *A View of a Landscape*, 2018-2019, the centerpiece of which is a cotton gin motor from Maplesville, Alabama which Beasley had hermetically sealed in transparent perspex with customized microphones creating a new acoustic environment, which is then used as the medium for a sound performance as the sound of the cotton gin is channeled into another separated room. The effect is to re-configure the associations or metonymies of labor and social violence inherent to the representation of the cotton gin to become or provide, within the frame-work of the gallery, new media of subjective appropriation. It is and it is no longer the instrument of murder for Emmett Till, just as it is and is no longer the instrument of labor that facilitated the expansion of enslavement. It is silenced in its hermetic tenderness, which allows long fascination - were it not so silenced the viewer could not long stand there, stand with it, but the *enforced* silence, a form of *interval*, permits multiple sensorial engagements. When I experienced this work at The Whitney, looking at this silent but moving object, I could not decide, at points, whether I was looking at something like Yorick’s Skull or the Skull of which Rilke spoke for which one day there would be a device capable of playing back every thought (or hurt?) which passed through the mind of which this Skull had been an infrastructural part. To look at this engine was to feel so many deaths, so many murders, so many who died from exhaustion. All silenced to allow the mind sufficient distance to engage the *view*. To which end, one thought also of and to the white cube, the frame of art that now contained this instrument of labor which perfectly encapsulated the violent insertion of the subject into industrial time. Contained affect piped to the ear in another room where one could sit still but never have image and sound coincident in one *space*, but there is a place... (The late Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, the philosopher of his generation most sensitive to the philosophical dimension of music as a medium of subjective appropriation, quotes Nietzsche on the ear as *the organ of fear*. Beasley’s music is not street music, to allude to Kodwo Eshun on the studio origins of techno *musics* and Afro-Futurism, but a pharmakon and meta-music of trans-figuration. Being present at two performances of this work - at The Whitney and The Kitchen - convinced me that what I was witnessing was nothing less than a *danse de réjouissance* made possible by the containment and separation of the historical affect associated with the cotton gin, its varied and powerful social ontology.) Without denying the violent, rusted materiality and historicity of the cotton gin motor, Beasley’s gesture enables the instrument of labor to acquire a new impressiveness as the physical thing of work and social violence becomes in performance entered into a liminal (temporary) dematerialization as two economies of images become phenomenologically jarring as visual and acoustic cultures enter into mediation a new kind of experience of subjective appropriation.



Ghostlier de-marcations and the labor of leisure. There is a visual argument to be explored in juxtaposing Philip Johnson's *Glass House* and Beasley's *A View of a Landscape* which initially I undertook at Cranbrook - an argument that would explore leisure and labor in an architectural iconography that goes from the Barcelona Pavilion, Farnsworth House, to Rachel Whiteread's *House*, with Breton's Glass House in *Nadja* as intertext.



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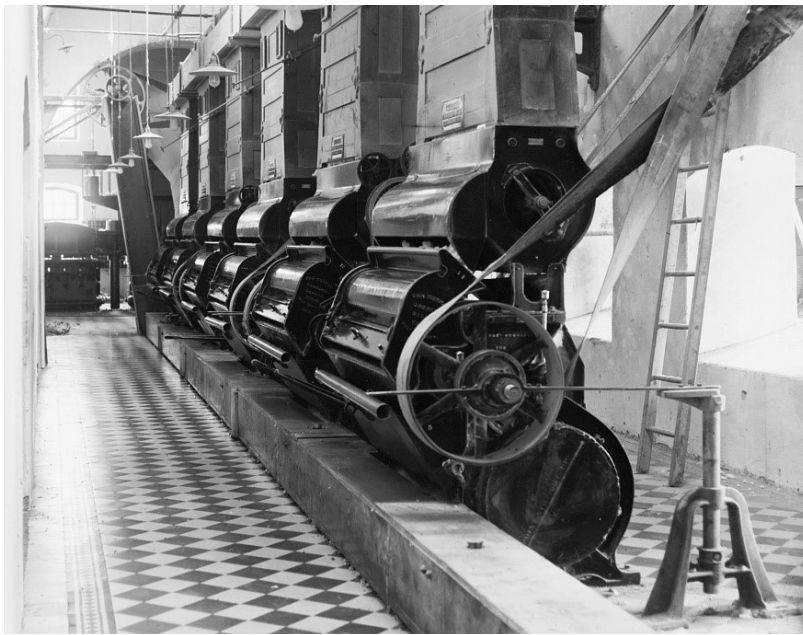
And snow, scarce as any Northern cotton, or, David Hammons doesn't work hard like James Brown

For Max Dax - Berlin / Detroit

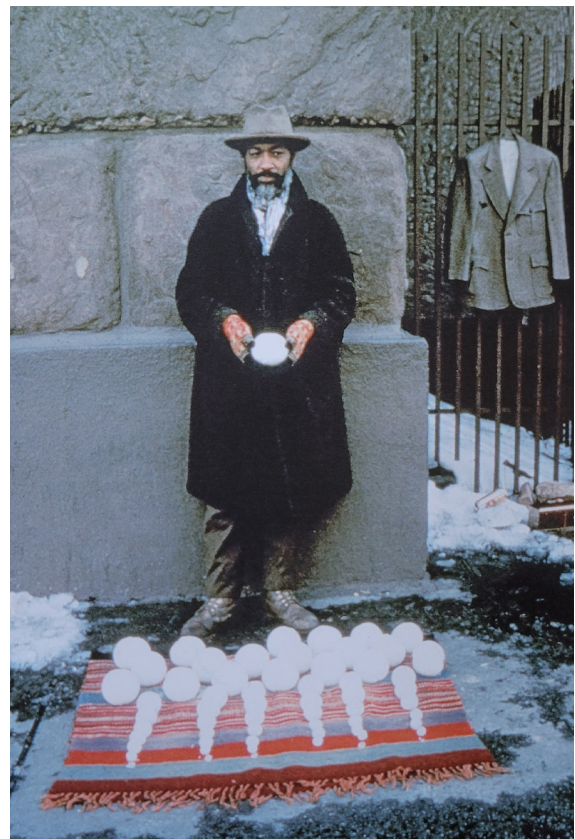
[Cotton] meant a new world.

W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Black Worker," *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 - 1880*

Finally, but by no means exclusively, this insistence on Black labor is present, too, in David Hammons' *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983, Cooper Square, New York, near the Cooper Union Art School, where David Hammons laid out rows of snowballs for sale in New York City, for what is *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* if not the negative of Negro Work? Here is Hammons as recorded in an oral history: "I'm not working that hard. When you find a found object, the work is halfway complete." (David Hammons quoted in Elena Filipovic, "The Color of Money," *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (London: Afterall Books, 2017), 79.) And: "I'm not going to put that much energy into an art object to prove to these folks that I'm legitimate. [...] But now that I'm not going to spend like, uh, the rest of my life overworking, like James Brown, the hardest working man, he up sweatin' and screamin' and crawlin' on the floor to prove to these folks that you're a good singer. I'm not gonna do this shit." (David Hammons, *ibid*, 79-80.) The art historian Elena Filipovic comments, "After all, what could be more simple and *less work[-like]* than making snowballs in winter?" (Elena Filipovic, *ibid*, 80.) This witty nonchalance is the *reductio ad absurdum* that makes the point of *the labor of the black avant-garde*, for as Hammons knowingly comments, "Ain't no black person gonna pay you for a snowball. [laughs] That's *not* gonna happen." (Hammons, *ibid*, 89.) And Hammons has in mind not only "no black person gonna pay for a snowball," he has in mind, or rather, the work brings into its orbit - its metonymic web - Black artists who are focused on the kind of work that would find - or is it, fit? - its market conditions, surrounded as Hammons was - especially in New York - by a commercial culture of painting where "Other Black artists [in New York] couldn't understand why you would do it [produce something] if you couldn't sell it."¹¹ When Hammons, here in his interview with Kellie Jones, speaks of *other Black artists*, he has in mind other Black artists *unlike* Senga Nengudi who, in Los Angeles, was conceptual when he, Hammons, "was [still] working in frames," but who, through sharing a studio with him, helped him become more conceptual just as she in response to his presence became more figurative, "That's when she started doing the pantyhose [i.e., not your communal garden figuration, MSR]; those pieces were all anatomy," and this following on from "when she used to put colored water in plastic bags and sit them on pedestals." No one would speak to her and "She couldn't relate." Nengudi made the move to New York "and still no one would deal with her because she wasn't doing 'Black Art.' She was living in Harlem. So she had to leave here and go back to L.A. and regroup."¹² There is more than a little anger (mixed with astonishment? at the blindness? at the self-defeating lack of self-awareness?) in Hammons' tone as, crucially, he points to a different economy: "Then I came in after her; I said: 'I'll try it, I'll try it with my shit,'"¹³ which is not only the language of refusal (James Brown has *his* shit, afterall) but a marking



Cotton gin motor



David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983,
Performance documentation.
Courtesy: Tilton Gallery, New York.

of transition to the magical substance of *shit* that Hammons can deploy as he channels, *plays with the bad areas*. Here is Hammons again: “There were no bad guys here [in New York], so I said ‘Let me be a bad guy,’ or attempt to be a bad guy, or *play with the bad areas* and see what happens.”¹⁴ Nengudi and (her refusal of) the submission of “Black Art” to the market were material and psychic conditions for the emergence of Hammons’ limning of a possible economy of anti-commodification where he played with bad areas where “nothing in it was for sale,” coming up “with an abstract art that wasn’t salable”:

These things were brown paper bags with hair, barbeque bones, and grease thrown on them. *But nothing was for sale*. [My emphasis] Other Black artists here couldn’t understand why you would do it if you couldn’t sell it.

And:

I came here with my art in a tube. I had a whole exhibition in two tubes. I laid that on the people here and they couldn’t handle it, nothing in it was for sale.¹⁵

Hammons speaks of the *contact* with Nengudi (“So *by us* sharing a studio”) as precipitating a new mode of practice which in being outside commodification resulted in forms or, better, following the late Pierre Fédida, *informal substances* from playing with bad areas, psychic bad areas and bad cultural areas: brown paper bags (bad enough) but with hair (Jews *and* Blacks have a thing or two about hair), and barbeque bones, and grease.¹⁶ At their moment of origination these informal substances are outside the art frame and this feature or aspect alone allows one to grasp them as part of a collapse of the work (*oeuvre*) in a movement toward the event (*événement*), and indeed, in both Nengudi and Hammons performance - with a pronounced cultural-therapeutic dimension which draws upon identifications in series and which also falls outside the art critical model of discrete form - will assume increasing importance. (Here, it becomes unavoidable, for me at any rate, not to see that Hammons’ description of Nengudi’s practice evokes the parallel practice of Lygia Clark and Clark’s movement from discrete abstract objects to performative object-situations with therapeutic goals.¹⁷)

In light of the *contact* - and there can be no contact that does not leave a trace - and the encounter with Nengudi and the resultant playing with bad areas that makes available or possible the range of informal substances not for sale as outlined above, it remains that not only selves but objects, too, need testing, and the test (*épreuve*) here will be an object for sale that will survive the fact of exchange. *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*. A molded form prepared from (New York) snow, and so not an informal substance *per se* but one which nevertheless participates in the economy of anti-commodification essayed and prepared by the informal substances which emerged from play with bad areas.

Bliz-aard Ball Sale permits another angle on work / labor production and, through a series of metonymic associations, the cotton gin, for we need to be reminded that the cotton gin, as conceived for the Americas by Eli Whitney, was meant to *lessen the burden of labor*, but instead vastly increased and expanded the burden of labor on enslaved Americans and in such a way that it became *efficient* to employ - which is also to say, to enslave - vastly more Black Americans. The cotton gin had exactly the opposite effect from what its creator intended and thereby increased suffering in the world. Allow me to put this another way, Eli Whitney's cotton gin is one of the most stunning illustrations *avant la lettre* of the Jevons Paradox, that paradox first formulated by the nineteenth-century British engineer and mathematician William Jevons that for any technology made more efficient the end result will be an increase in overall consumption of whatever material it is that one first sought to conserve. Increased efficiency necessarily leads to increased consumption. Hammons' refusal of the idolatry of labor - of demonstrable and demonstrative expenditure of energy as figured through "James Brown" - might thus be construed as a refusal that recognizes that labor is the violent insertion of the subject into industrial time. (It is, after all, John Dewey, not Heidegger or Ernst Jünger, who speaks of that condition in which work *becomes* labor.) *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, on this construal, is not, however, merely a token of non-work but rather a presentation through metonymy of an economy of work-anti-work-non-work in a landscape - of which the rug is a synecdoche¹⁸ - for the production or work-like construction of something *like* cotton - the metonym par excellence of violent labor which, pace Du Bois on "The Black Worker," could *build a new world* - namely, snow balls. Here is Jean Toomer's sonnet, "November Cotton Flower," from *Cane*, with the onset of winter,

And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing.

With the onset of winter, cotton vanishes from the South, and its attendant or associative violence hibernates, as it were. What if cotton - and its attendant violences - could reappear in the North as snow - a violent rainstorm (*blizz*, dialectal), or a violent blow (*blizzard*) - something in its way as equally light as (Northern) cotton? Here they are, lined up on a rug / landscape arranged like cotton balls rhyming with snowballs. A miracle? That such a transposition might occur? Or that anyone - but not a Black person - could pay for snowballs in winter in New York (or anywhere else for that matter where snow customarily falls)? Cotton does not grow in winter, and Toomer's sonnet, "November Cotton Flower," imagines the immaculate appearance of such a November Cotton Flower as correlative of a possible time in which something new comes into the world, something that not even Superstition had seen before:

Brown eyes that loved *without a trace of fear*,¹⁹
Beauty so sudden for that time of year.

If cotton meant *a new world*, why might snow not also intimate (the equally spectral outlines of) a new world? A world not based upon labor, nor money and so where "all the realm shall be in common,"²⁰ a world, it might be said, where the common is based upon talking, the encounter through speech? Hammons:

When you have an object between you and them, people will talk to you. They'll say, 'What is that? Is it for sale?' But if you're just standing on a street corner, everyone's an enemy of each other. But one object... it becomes a conduit for conversation with with someone you've never met before.²¹

Du Bois on the coming of freedom to the enslaved at the end of the Civil War:

For the first time in their life, they could travel; they could see; they could change the dead level of their labor; they could talk to friends and sit at sundown and in moonlight, listening and imparting wonder-tales.²²

- “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” *King Henry VI*, part 2, IV. ii. 73. One day whilst listening to the radio I decided that I had heard this line followed by knowing giggles once too often and that it was time that I knew what it meant in Shakespeare. I pulled down my copy and started to read and was absolutely stunned to realize that the sentence is embedded in a workers’ discourse on justice, labor, and social rank, a not unimportant part of which was the desire on the part of those who labored to eliminate money - “there shall be no money,” and “All the realm shall be in common,” an expression of the realm being held in common would be conveyed through garment: “I will apparel them all in one livery,” as sumptuary laws would be abolished. To this end, “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers,” presumably as lawyers are part of the machinery of policing social order. The argument does not end here and there is more than a whiff of Pol Potism involved - Shakespeare will, after all, compose *Coriolanus* - but the issues bearing upon the relations between labor, rank, and justice are all present where “Virtue is not regarded in handicraftsmen,” even though “there’s no better sign of a brave mind than a hard hand.” Whence the injunction, “Labor in thy vocation.” (*King Henry VI*, Part 2, IV. ii. 15.)
- Power and labor. Long before Marx, or Capitalists, for that matter, one of our oldest creation narratives, the *Enuma Elish*, and related Mesopotamian stories, made clear the cosmological significance of labor in the organization of societies. From tablet 1 of the *Story of the Flood* the problem is posed as follows:

When gods were man,
They did forced labor, they bore drudgery.
Great indeed was the drudgery of the gods,
The forced labor was heavy, the misery too much,²³

and don't you know, the gods complained. Throughout these narratives there are variations on a theme for how the (lesser) gods escaped the drudgery of labor, but perhaps the most powerful version is to be found in tablet 6 of the *Enuma Elish* where, after an intergenerational battle between the first and younger gods, Marduk, leader of the victorious younger gods, takes a defeated god, Quingu, on whom symbolic punishment will be inflicted:

They bound and held him before Ea,
 They imposed the punishment on him and shed his blood.
 From his blood he made mankind,
 He imposed the burden of the gods and exempted the gods.
 After Ea the wise had made mankind,
 They imposed the burden of the gods on them!
 That deed is beyond comprehension,
 By the artifices of Marduk did Nudimmud create!²⁴

That deed is beyond comprehension - no matter the translation, the effort is to convey what a miraculous thing it is to be able to create a being, a creation requiring powers great and exemplary even for a god, a being to bear drudgery and labor and, miracle of miracles, for that being, created by a god, to accept its condition. Here is Marduk's speech, Marduk's promise to his fellow gods - the 1% of their day -

"I shall create humankind,
 They shall bear the gods' burden that those may rest."²⁵

In other translations it is made clearer: So that the gods may be *at leisure*. The politics of labor is here the foundation of the politics of *jouissance* after which the architecture of society and sociality is wholly organized.

7 There are many examples of the attempt at an aesthetic presentation / comprehension of labor as a form of life worthy and in need of reconception - and here one is reminded of the stunning observation by Simone Weil, in the context of the crushing experiences in the car factories of Renault that led to her writing *La Condition ouvrière*, that the only thing of value in the modern world that had genuinely never occurred to the Greeks was the idea of the spirituality of labor - a need felt right across the political and social spectrum by aristocrats, boy scouts, Nazis, Stalinists, and workers, but also artists: some examples could include Courbet's *Stonebreakers*, 1849 (destroyed during World War II by Allied Forces in the bombing of Dresden), the image of the peasant or the rural poor in nineteenth-century French art,²⁶ Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism, Russian Proletkult and Russian Constructivism, all the way to Walker Evans²⁷ and beyond into the 1960s - here see the historiography presented in Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era* (2011). Even the pose and social iconography of Abstract Expressionism: jeans, white t shirts, the flaunting of the dirtiness / physicality of the *labor* involved in making *works* of art as an attempt to elevate artistic labor as a means to make of art a social substance worthy of dignity - in this respect reversing that elevation of the social status of the artist from artisan and guild member to gentleman friend of the Court that took place in the Early Modern period within the framework of Humanist / Renaissance values. (This iconography of AbEx labor garments - hear, again, the laborers of Shakespeare's *King Henry VI*, part 2: "I will apparel them all in one livery" - may have been intended as a rejection of aestheticism, but it is worth being reminded that young disciples of Ruskin, for example, Oscar Wilde, volunteered their physical labor to aid the working poor.) Labor is transformational, that is, societies are made through labor, and it is not an exaggeration to say that in the modern period one does not have to be a Marxist to affirm or believe in the centrality of labor to social life - such a belief is integral to Capitalism and all forms of authoritarianism, as well as many artistic traditions seeking a means through which to anchor their practice beyond Art itself, the outside of Art, if you will. It remains, however, that this strain of labor thought, in its own way "modernist," does not become canonical, and definitively loses out, cannot, that is, mount an aesthetic accounting of why labor does not diminish the aesthetic (as this has come down broadly from the eighteenth-century emphasis on play, fancy, and imagination), cannot, indeed, account for why labor is the principal form of social domination from the age of the *Enuma Elish* to the age of totalitarianism and beyond into the culture of consumerism, above all as the social domination of labor works through a near total control of time under Capital. This incapacity means that it is all but impossible to mount an effective account of liberation based upon labor - the Kibbutz movement must surely be the last time that such an argument concerning the social egalitarian possibilities of labor could have been taken seriously at the societal rather than communitarian level. One need only think to the violent and sacrificial role of labor in the rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union and Mao's China, the attempt of all post-colonial African countries to industrialize rapidly as a precondition for a differed liberty for the pattern to be clear that no liberation can be realized without overcoming the centrality of labor to social life. The Black Worker as historicized by Du Bois may, indeed, be seen as the prefiguration of the Worker as theorized by Jünger as the figure of labor typical of global modernity.

8 Consider the following *image*. Bowdoin College, a distinguished liberal arts college, presents an exhibition, *The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting* in 1964, for its time a culturally important exhibition, and Bowdoin is fortunate to have Martin Luther King visit the exhibition in response to an invitation from the Bowdoin Political Forum, a student organization. Amongst the main photographs publicizing the event, one of Martin Luther King with the Curator of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Marvin Sadik, in front of Thomas Hart Benton's painting, *Plantation Road*, 1944, oil on canvas (Pittsburgh: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute), depicting two mules and two Black laborers sorting cotton.²⁸

9 To the extent that Black art in the Western diaspora was anchored in, or sought, even at certain key moments, to valorize labor (let's call this the Booker T. Washington world-view, which would become the Black capitalist / Nationalist world-view), then the very mode of representation expressive of such sociality and labor will indicate such effort as marginal to what was in the process of becoming the dominant ethico-aesthetic thinking of modernism - see Breton in *Nadja* as he walks against the (depressing) crowd headed home at rush-hour and thinks: *Allons, ce n'étaient pas encore ceux-là qu'on trouverait prêts à faire la Révolution* (Let's keep going, it was not yet these people whom one would find ready to make the Revolution), which is not so far from General Baker of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers saying to Jerry Herron that "it takes quite a lot to get working men to riot. It ain't easy!" A similar sentiment is also to be found in Eliot, Valéry, and Debord. This modernist refusal and rejection of labor - that, in any case, has long had a fully articulated social and political philosophy - is not because the conception of modernism at work here is concerned with aesthetic purity so-called, but rather, such labor and its attendant values is precisely what is to be overcome, is precisely what endangers the future models of sociality nascent in modernism the most compelling of which models bear on the refusal of money and commodification.²⁹ (An Ezra Pound refuses money, whilst a Georg Lukacs refuses commodification, and both Eliot and Breton seek new conceptions of order, the one religious - Anglo-Catholic social teaching - the other mythic - drawing upon Anarchist social thought. Peter Viereck always insisted that Anarchism was the only logical alternative to Conservatism!) We see this in Marx on time; Dewey on when *work becomes labor*; Debord on the ethics of time, and most recently in the powerful articulation of the conception of value in Marx's critical theory by Moishe Postone:

We have seen, says Postone, that Marx's presentation indicates that general historical emancipation is grounded not in the possible full realization of the already extant form of production but, rather, in the possibility of its overcoming. This critique is rooted not in what is but in what has become possible - but cannot become realized within the existing structure of social life.³⁰

The standpoint of a historically informed critique, argues Postone, would be temporal rather than spatial and would involve not the "open realization of labor's centrality to social life," but recognizing instead that "labor's constitutive cen-

trality to social life characterizes capitalism and forms the ultimate ground of its abstract mode of domination. This approach interprets Marx's notion of capitalism's basic contradiction in terms of a growing tension between a form of social life mediated essentially by labor and the historically emergent possibility of a form of life in which labor does not play a socially mediating role."³¹ (Let me add, here, that the spatial turn in critical theory of art practice, in what it presented as a rejection of the Romantic fetishisation of time, could never account for the way in which, through the commodity-form, time became medium and form of social domination under capital.)

10 People of African descent are often spoken of as *a people of the Middle Passage*, which means, minimally, people, creatures of labor. (Of course, "we" are all, in the modern world, people of the Middle Passage.) In the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to the Natal Land), a key moment in the articulation of Black avant-garde sensibility and poetics, Aimé Césaire expressed this idea of a people of the Middle Passage, and its related conception, that modernity is built on Black labor, as follows (and I quote in the translation of the late John Berger and Anna Bostock, the same translation used by a young John Akomfrah who would also in film meditate on the intersection of Black labor and modernity):

My name is Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool and New York and San Francisco
not a corner of this world but carries my thumb-print
and my heel-mark on the backs of skyscrapers and my dirt
in the glitter of jewels!
Who can boast of more than I?
Virginia. Tennessee. Georgia. Alabama.

Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*, 1939 / 1956, translation 1968.

Black labor is the name of the port cities of France, England, and the United States of America. An important aspect of the contemporary Black avant-garde has found here a new and surprising *subject* of art.

11 The movement between Hammons - anti-work, non-work - and Gates' *Tar* paintings in *My labor is my protest*, permits a new practice of seeing and acknowledgment, a lifting of the disavowal inherent to aspect-blindness, as labor is thought in relation to refusal (anti-work and non-work) and mourning (the veiled grief of the *Tar* paintings) in the realm of symbolisation where alone the conditions of possibility of representation can be grasped, made figurable. The non-seeing *made visible* in the *Tar* works, the labor of sorrow - the overcoming of aspect-blindness on the part of the viewer, of which the maker is the but the first instance - becomes a figure of the kind of determinate negation required to make movement into the future a historical possibility. Here is the foundation of a new accounting of abstraction as the mourning - and the logic of separation - which makes possible abstraction (in painting, but also in representation *per se*) becomes linked to labor *in the process of being superseded*. Now, pace Alison Janae Hamilton and Theaster Gates, we can begin - but only begin? - to re-pose the question, *What's the matter, mother?*

ENDNOTES

1. William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI*, Part 2, ed. Andrew S. Cairncross (London: Methuen, 1957, 1969).
2. See the website for *My labor is my protest* at White Cube, including the conversation between Theaster Gates and Tim Marlowe from which all my quotations from Gates are taken: https://whitecube.com/exhibitions/exhibition/theaster_gates_bermondsey_2012. Accessed 04-18-22
3. On the cultural and class significance of the work of the hands, cf. Janet Zandy, *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004).
4. Difficult not to hear *father*, also content, the father as content.
5. Listening to Theaster speak, the poetic register is not merely in the (surprising?) diction - "when my dad is aging and things are decaying - spring is turning into the winter of his life" - but the very tender tone of voice.
6. And this is so even in spite of the deeply felt valorization of folk art and song, of which the Negro Spirituals are very important examples along with the Blues, within the culture of Modernism.
7. Jack Whitten: "LEARN TO HATE THE HISTORY OF ART AND ABOVE ALL DON'T TRUST IT." Whitten, "Studio Log, 8 October '98," *Notes from the Woodshed* (New York: Hauser and Wirth, 2018), 257.
8. I have outlined a conception of abstraction in terms of veiling and masking in Michael Stone-Richards, "Underneathness - Surface - Work in McArthur Binion," in *McArthur Binion: DNA*, ed. Diana Nawi (New York: DelMonico Books, 2021), 13-21, and in lectures during my time as Visiting Fellow in Critical Studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art, 2019-2020.
9. See the low-res photographs of *Tar* works and the instruments of tar work (brush, truck, etc.) concluding with a portrait photograph of The Artist and his Father in *My labor is my protest* (London: White Cube, 2012), 25-35.
10. See the *Catalogue for Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2002).
11. David Hammons, in Kelly Jones, "Interview with David Hammons," *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 249.
12. Hammons, "Interview," 249-250.
13. Hammons, "Interview," 249.
14. Hammons, "Interview," 249. My emphases.
15. Hammons, "Interview," 249.
16. See Tom Finkelpearl's conceptualization of this same material in terms of dirty materials, "On the Ideology of Dirt," in *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble* (Boston: ICA, New York: P.S. 1 Museum, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 61-89.
17. On Lygia Clark, see Pierre Fédida, "Substance informe," *Par où commence le corps humaine: Retour sur la régression* (Paris: PUF, 2000), 105-119, and Fédida, "Ne pas être en repos avec les mots: Entretien avec Pierre Fédida," in *Lygia Clark: De l'oeuvre à l'événement. Nous sommes tous le moule. A vous de donner le souffle*, ed. Suely Rolnik and Corinne Diserens (Nantes: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 2005), 69-70.
18. Robert Farris Thompson identifies the rug as a Moroccan rug and also observes, quite rightly, that the rug *changed the situation*. Cf. Robert Farris Thompson, "David Hammons: 'Knowing their Past,'" *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (Pittsburgh and New York: Periscope Publishing, 2011), 100.
19. My emphasis in order to mark what is *immaculate* in the sudden appearance of beauty.
20. *King Henry VI*, part 2, IV. ii. 65.
21. David Hammons, quoted in Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 73.
22. W.E.B Du Bois, "The Coming of the Lord," *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 122.
23. *Story of the Flood*, 1700 B.C.E., trans. Benjamin R. Foster, in *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 1995), 52.
24. *Enuma Elish*, 1900 - 1600 B.C.E., trans. Benjamin R. Foster, in *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 1995), 39.
25. *Enuma Elish*, 38.
26. Cf. Robert L. Herbert, "City vs. Country: The Rural Image in French Painting from Millet to Gauguin," *From Millet to Léger: Essays in Social Art History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 23-48. In one way or another Herbert's book of essays is concerned with labor and the technology of labor.
27. Cf. Thomas Zander, *Walker Evans: Labor Anonymous* (D.A.P. / Koenig, 2016).
28. I first chanced upon this photograph of Martin Luther King at Bowdoin in the exhibition catalogue, *Le Modèle noir: De Géricault à Matisse* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay / Flammarion, 2019), 21. In the context of Bowdoin's 1964 exhibition, the image may be found online with further rich documentation at https://www.google.com/search?q=martin+luther+king+bowdoin&client=fir&efox-b-1-d&sxsrf=ALiCzsabmdW7UGy1_0zYcQURLgOYO0QqBJw:1661527092450&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwimYlTh5uT5AhU-IWoFHUsBAACQ_AUoAXoECAEQAw&biw=1152&bih=534&dpr=1.67#imgsrc=JBIQMYUGEeLhzM.
29. In another context, I shall touch on the *life and work* of Tillie Olsen as a way of exploring the way in which even, or may be especially, writers insistent on the social and political engagement of their practice still come up against aporias which lead them to recover the insights of the modernist fiction that sees the aesthetic as a refusal of labor and its political ordering - its ontology of commodification. See Michael Stone-Richards, "Aporias of Attention," *Care of the City* (forthcoming, Sternberg Press).
30. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2003), 360-361.
31. Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 361.