

Art

MONTHLY

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Oscar Murillo

Interviewed by Cherry Smyth

Activism as Art

Tom Snow

Virtual and Other Bodies

Mark Wilsher

Larry Achiampong

Profile by Tom Emery

archives, some four million photographs, of Johnson Publishing Company. In the 1940s and 1950s, this organisation masterminded two magazines, *Jet* and *Ebony*, that were hugely significant in shaping 'the aesthetic and cultural languages of African-American identity'. Gates's self-abnegating show, touring from Milan's Fondazione Prada, is anchored by large, gorgeous photographs – deeply stylish images of beautiful black women – by two key editorial photographers working for Johnson, Moneta Sleet Jr and Isaac Sutton. But it also tests out different ways of engaging with the company's image trove in granular detail: handle-with-white-gloves spreads of fashion-shoot contact sheets, freestanding mini-archives where one can take out individual framed photos and prop them for contemplation, videos, vinyl wall-hangings, vitrined stacks of vintage magazines. Aesthetic history here seems awake and processual, vivified in the present through viewer engagement; Gates, whose own career shows he is nothing if not a super-savvy pragmatist, has formatted the show like an iceberg, and makes you want to participate, to unearth more images equal to the handful of swaggering ones on the walls.

Maybe it's generational, but gratifyingly hands-on exhibitions stand out for this viewer because I don't, as a rule, want to participate. It takes inventiveness or, as in **Clegg & Guttman's** intermingled presentation with **Franz Erhard Walther** at KOW, it takes a drum kit. *Cognitive Exercise No. B2: Syncopating with the machine beat*, 2006, invites visitors to pick up the sticks and bash along to a metronome, set at your chosen speed (ignore that in favour of a freeform workout, as I did, and you're not doing the piece right). Rules align the pairing of artists here, which foregrounds the necessity and problematics of agreed codes of being. Rules need not mean restriction, however. Walther's *First Work Set*, 1963-69, features folded canvas objects laid out on a larger piece of canvas; there are half a dozen, at one end, and it seems like the work's generous thrown gauntlet – that you borrow parts of it and use them elsewhere, presumably freely – has been taken on by prior attendees. So, apparently, has Clegg & Guttman's double-edged *Humiliation II*, 2019, a kind of tapering barrel of a type that obstreperous women were imprisoned within, in pairs, during the Middle Ages, until they learned to coexist with others.

Unlike so much relational art of the 1990s in particular, such proposals seem rooted in what a human subject might actually want to try, rather than what the artist wants them to experience. It makes all the difference. Where both Clegg & Guttman and Walther retreat, at different points in the show, into bodies of work that are rule-driven but whose interactions have occurred before we got there, we might well miss partaking – as in the former's set of official photographic portraits of statesmen and other figures, including Walther, which are commissioned but can be refused if the sitter doesn't like their image. And maybe the notion of interfering with a structure becomes particularly appealing if the larger infrastructure it is presented within – Gallery Weekend and its attendant biases – feels like something in pressing need of revision from within. ■

Martin Herbert is a writer based in Berlin.

New York Round-up

Queer Thoughts • Bodega • Ludlow 38

The flyer for **Diamond Stingily's** 'Death' at Queer Thoughts is an image of the artist lying on what seems to be a surgical bed, eyes closed, with an exposed chunk of flesh below the brow and over



the bridge of the nose. The show's centrepiece, *Cephalophore*, is a bronze cast of Stingily's face mounted at head-height on one wall. Her face peers through lengths of braids hung on each wall of the room. The braids trail down, held by hooks on industrial metal conduits mounted high on the wall, about ten per rail, spaced around half a foot apart. They graduate down with different thicknesses, bulging and tapering organically and pool on the floor in front of the walls. The sculpture, *Kass (Punishment)* ('Kass' named after Kaa the snake in *The Jungle Book*) made out of Kanekolan hair (a synthetic fibre used for adding braids to hair) has had different iterations in Stingily's works through a number of years. The closed eyes of the cast in *Cephalophore* make it read as a death-mask that she has left to be gazed upon – an image of the artist that doesn't look back at you. The idea of being on view also comes up in the press release; in a one-scene play script describing seven girls singing, one girl points at the audience and demands: 'Well, what the fuck are y'all looking at?' It's also about the general game of image and representation. A cephalophore is a saint who is represented as carrying their head in their own hands, signifying their martyrdom by beheading. Here we're greeted by it at head height and it's the gallery that holds the head. The gallery becomes a body, adorned with hair extensions. The small space is a perfect fit for the exhibition, forcing a pared-down and concentrated focus. In the press release, one girl seems to die – 'she's only hurt or I don't know maybe she did die but either way something will come back' – then immediately springs back to life. Maybe the show stages the death of her image, but her art is still around.

'Against Attachment' at Ludlow 38 is an arrangement of sculptures by **Ser Serpas**. The front space is vacant apart from an

Diamond Stingily
Kass (Punishment)
2019 installation
detail

Lydia Ourahmane
'low relief' 2019
installation view

old wood and metal freestanding shelf resting on its side holding on one end a torn and ripped fragment of pink glass wool insulation that appears almost painterly, draped over a bar. The gallery lights have been taken out and the space is only lit by daylight and the faint glow of a laptop screen in the back space. An old mattress drifts out the corner of the ceiling, hanging precariously overhead. On the laptop we witness a screen-capture recording of Serpas navigating windows and browser tabs of YouTube and Soundcloud, mixing live a soundtrack made up of the open sites. It feels intrusive, voyeuristic and compelling to watch this process. Behind that, a suspended doorless fridge with text scrawled over it leans above a grubby electric oil-filled radiator that is angled perpendicular to meet it. The composition, palette and placement of the objects in the show appear laboured and careful. The component items have all been imported from the street and Serpas describes the gallery as a commons and platform for these objects to disclose themselves. The work complicates ideas around value and the systems that establish it. Serpas catches objects in circulation, after use and ownership. They are picked up in a shifting economy stream where ownership is blurred – transferred from the public street to the gallery and back again.

In the press release Serpas acknowledges how producing work in a windowless apartment, lit mostly by her laptop, affects the production of her work. One that is reflective of her living situation growing up where the cost of living limited her access to objects. The show brings different elements into play: contingency and value, as well as the artist herself within that system.

In Lydia Ourahmane's exhibition at Bodega, there is a single braid of hair that carries a different, more loaded weight – *1 decade of hair*, apparently cut from the artist in the gallery a few days before the show opened, rests neatly bound on the floor. The floor has been mopped with betadine, an iodine-based solution used to prepare the surface of the skin before surgery and it preps the gallery space for the artist's own cuts and insertions. It is a hardened stain that licks up and colours the bottom of the walls yellow. Also on the floor are four repeated cross-sections of Ourahmane's abdomen, from hip to bust, cast in bronze and covered in sealed lead, blending into the dark gloss coating of the antiseptic solution. Abstracted, the forms appear alien (think of the featureless black entity in the 2013 film *Under The Skin*) but also relatable and intimate. Each one has its specific weight noted in the material list, imparting each segment with a sense of its own individual existence.

The title piece *low relief* looks like a negative cast of a mottled piece of flesh, encased by coagulated blood-like wax and backed by brass. It stands upright on the gallery's front window, viewable from all angles with a nearby thermometer marking the temperature of the room to note its 90°-fahrenheit melting point, signalling its status as always on the verge of becoming something else.

Ourahmane attaches a glossary to the show as a press release, pointing to the exhibition as a kind of text to be interpreted. Apart from physical materials and attributes, it defines verbs: binding, hovering, translating, replacing, cutting. 'Hovering' is one entry that could describe Ourahmane's presence. Her practice is often research-driven, but this show scans as personal, more like a 'low relief' self-portrait. The move inward feels confident – if it's a text, it's a poetic one. ■

Tim Steer is a curator and writer based in London.

San Francisco Round-up

Altman Siegel • Oakland Museum of California • SFMOMA and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

This spring the San Francisco Bay Area hosted a number of exhibitions that emphasised the social and socio-political. This confluence of shows – Suzanne Lacy's career survey at SFMOMA and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 'Queer California: Untold Stories' at the Oakland Museum of California, and Matt Keegan's language-riffing solo show at Altman Siegel – are rooted in conceptualism and varied forms of political activism, some more explicit than others, and a keen awareness of diverse populations.

Matt Keegan is a New Yorker, but there is an aspect of his work that feels well suited to West Coast diversity and California conceptualism – artists such as Ed Ruscha and Allan Ruppersberg (whose survey exhibition was concurrently on view at the Hammer Museum in LA). Keegan's exhibition was titled 'Use Your Words', a call to find a voice, but also perhaps to use it in more literal ways. For nearly a decade, Keegan has been inspired by a deck of image-based flash cards that his mother made with magazine pages and used to teach English as a second language students. Are images more malleable than words, he seems to ask as he translates words into images, video and abstract sculpture.

The works exude childlike simplicity. There are multiple iterations of an oversize recreation of a six-piece puzzle, one that forms a puppy illustration. There is wallpaper that appropriates commercial flashcard photos of expressions on the faces of people of various ages and races, each wearing a primary-coloured T-shirt that gives the impression of a kid's birthday party. The figures are child friendly, but doesn't this infantilise adults who are learning the language?

Use of abstraction seems to speak directly to grown-ups. Throughout are powder-coated, laser-cut steel wall sculptures that resemble construction-paper cut-outs of Rorschach tests. The three *Puppy Puzzle* works, 2019, each have pieces missing, creating an abstract in the negative space, a deep red that evokes Ellsworth Kelly. Puzzles, flash cards and tests are all educational tools that Keegan deconstructs, paring them down to forms with meanings that are playfully abstract and malleable. His work speaks a language that attempts to go beyond the rational into a kind of universal dialogue.

There is a shift in the meaning of identity in the sprawling **Queer California**. The show's sub-heading is 'untold stories' which, in an introductory wall text, is noted as 'two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, and other queer people in California' – all of which is to signal that the included art and artefacts are a complicated mix. Curator Christina Linden has a tall order in striking a balance. She does so best when presenting the original Pride flag, designed by Gilbert Baker (Editorial *AM406*) in 1978, and text that explains its colour-coded history. The original version contained two colours, pink and turquoise, that were dropped for mass production, losing not only colour but also the associated meanings – sex, magic/art. Facing the original is Amanda Curreri's *Misfits 1979 (Sex and Art)*, 2013, a textile work that honours those missing shades.