

Rizvana Bradley and Denise  
Ferreira da Silva  
**Four Theses on  
Aesthetics**

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Why rethink aesthetics now, when catastrophe has become the watchword of the day, and when all but the most restrictive pragmatism could easily be construed as little more than bourgeois frivolity? Is this not, after all, the age of Antonio Gramsci's "morbid symptoms," in which the many heads of fascism are rearing across the globe? Yet the fascism which liberal modernity and civil society have always required has never abided by this order's mendacious separation of the political from the aesthetic. Genocide, now as before, is an aesthetic project. The question, then, should not be why rethink aesthetics now, but rather how do we survive the aesthetic regime that carves and encloses the very shape of our question? "The quest(ion) of blackness," to draw my accomplice Denise Ferreira da Silva's words from my own mouth, can only be enunciated through losing one's voice, or rather through yielding to the polyvocality that is always already the condition of possibility of speech. Thus, in writing together, Da Silva and I have not so much pursued a theoretical synthesis as a reticulation, a raveling of the threads of our thoughts, which already twisted and frayed in one another's text(ili)c(s). Four theses, another declension from the Hegelian triad. Our open proposition.

– Rizvana Bradley

A conversation can and usually is taken as an encounter, a convergence, but one that might just be – and the best conversations (which are also another name for collaborations) are – nothing more than that which takes place there, in that moment, under those circumstances, towards those particular ends. This conversation, our convergence, is not so much an offering as it is an invitation to the reader to join in and further it.

– Denise Ferreira da Silva

### **Infinity**

The *world*, as the totalizing onto-epistemology that is modernity's genesis, limit, and horizon, is a thoroughly aesthetic conceit. To toil within or rail against the field of representation is already to be enmeshed in the aesthetic, for it is by way of the aesthetic that the ontological ground on which we are said to stand becomes experience. In this register, Man – the *transparent I*, the universal subject who would make the world, if

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Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Blacklight, 4Waters-Deep Implicancy*, 2018 (left). The Otolith Group, *Zone II*, 2020 (right).

not just as he pleases – appears, apropos Sylvia Wynter, as none other than *homo aestheticus*.

This is the ontological figure consolidated in post-Enlightenment European thought, whose presupposed capacity for self-determination and self-development is both indistinguishable from the expropriative displacement of ecological entanglement that animates (bio)history, and, further, tantamount to the capacity for aesthetic experience and judgement.

The Subject's *sensus communis*, of course, only emerges through the constitutive excommunication of the Savage (THE CONQUERED), the Negro (THE COMMODITY), the Primitive (THE OTHER), and the Traditional (THE underdeveloped) – figures who nevertheless come to haunt Man as the bearers of an ontological dissonance, an immanent declension, we might call blackness.

What else can be said about the conquered, the commodity, the other, and the underdeveloped, besides the fact that they apply to all who do not fall within the spatiotemporal borders of the post-Enlightenment figure of Man, that is, the transparent I? Not much, would be the appropriate answer, if all that is taken into account is what is offered by way of the constraints of dichotomist thinking. That is, if the question were not raised about the conditions under which the universal protective force held by *the ethical* would be extended to some humans (whether that force is bequeathed by the divine ruler or author, in their mastery of the transcendental form that is reason). If the question were not raised, that is, about why blackness is so “naturally” visited by total and symbolic violence.

When the categorial force of blackness is confronted with the total violence that its historical trajectory cannot but recall, it cannot but refract and fracture the *transparent shoal* (the threshold of transparency) that protects the Subject's onto-epistemology across his scientific and aesthetic moments. The total exposure of blackness both enables and extinguishes the force of the modern ethical program, insofar as the disruptive capacity of blackness is a quest(ion) toward the end of the world. Blackness is a threat to sense, a radical questioning of what comes to be brought under the (terms of the) “common.” If the ordered world secures meaning because it is supposed to be knowable, and only by Man, if that world is all the common can comprehend, then blackness (re)turns existence to the expanse: in the wreckage of spacetime, *corpus infinitum*.

## Re/De/composition

Thinking the artwork as poethical, as “a composition which is always already a recomposition and a decomposition of prior and posterior compositions,” requires being poised for the advent of becoming *as* matter, and its immanent interrogation of the temporality of forms.<sup>1</sup> In contradistinction to understandings of the artwork as an autonomous totality, or those that would consign the artwork to some iteration of Kant's *forma finalis* – that is, the reductive ascription of a formal purposiveness to the object – a poethical reading stresses the provisional ground where questions of form, formlessness, and abstraction collide. The artwork, a singular composite, need not simply anticipate or reiterate questions which presume the formal principles of external causation (*causa efficialis*), interior determination (*causa finalis*), or abstract perception (*causa formalis*). For these senses, calcified as the only tools for comprehending nature (the realm of objectivity) and world (the kingdom of subjectivity), have sustained the tautology of modern thinking precisely through being rendered axiomatic. Once released from the anticipation of order and the presumption of meaning, the artwork becomes liberated from its representational obligations to nature and world. As a poethical piece, the artwork extends the question(ing)s of *causa materialis*, the undeterminable of contemplation. (Re)turning in and as form(s), a poethical descriptor for existence presumes neither linearity nor its predicates, separability and determinacy. The reorientation poethical art invites expresses the infinite re/de/compositions that normative spacetime would foreclose.

The axial intensities of verticality and horizontality, the strict linearity, the primary coloring, that signal abstraction's formal legacy, do not so much indicate a restrictive geometry or truncated chromaticity as an open set, where, for instance, even the fidelity of a line or the vertices of a square may be exacted with improvisatory emphasis. The poethical work deforms the teleological imperative of purposiveness, and the racial demarcation of the (in)capacity for aesthetic judgement this imperative necessarily (re)inscribes. The poethical work tends toward the revelation that such an effort to reduce, discipline, and contain the unwieldy materiality of the world is always already an exercise in futility. We might think both of seriality and deformation not as formal deviations from the major paradigms of modernist art, but as aesthetic practices which enact the decomposition of the art historical canon, and of canonicity as such. Such decomposition is

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achieved not by a method of subversion, but by the accumulation of surreptitious (re)turns, which gather ruinously beneath the sign of the authoritative artwork. The serial proliferation of returns exposes the autonomous artwork as itself nothing more than a re/de/composition, a contaminated assemblage of citations and de/formations.

### Seriality

The perennial failure of *homo aestheticus* requires the perpetual renewal of the aesthetic, an operation which, irrespective of its beauties or horrors, cannot help but be the renewal of catastrophe. But this history of aesthetic revitalization is preceded and exceeded by another kind of innovation, which we may call aesthetic, even as the aesthetic can never account for it. What, then, might open and be opened by an inquiry into black practices of seriality? What takes form, or is deformed, in “the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property,” as Saidiya Hartman proffers?<sup>22</sup> How to come to terms with such serial self-fashioning without recourse to an idea of the open in which boundlessness becomes only another name for frontier, which is to say an enclosure, an expropriation, a clearing?<sup>23</sup> For the interminable historicity and impossible history of blackness has always come before the horizontality of Man’s freedom, as its effaced footing and ineluctable limit. How do we regard the insistent and ongoing re/de/composition of the (black) figure, in the midst of contemporary art’s simultaneous exaltation and reduction or relegation of the figural to the scene of racial representation? How do we comprehend such figurations as part of a suite of interventions – an epigraphic seriality, as Fred Moten might put it – which denotes not the refusal of serially imposed violence as political end, but rather the reanimate means through which any aesthetic inquiry into the social life of form must pass?<sup>24</sup> We insist that, even as such means bear the terrible burden of diffusive terror and the terror of diffusion, black seriality cannot be thought of as reducible to separability, sequentiality, or the determinacy of individuated forms and objects. In other words, our aesthetic thinking refuses to presume black seriality as wholly coterminous and coextensive with the serial imposition of antiblack violence that constitutes the modern field of representation and the history of form, as if the violent enumeration of black bodies were truly a ledger of or accounting for injury.

Here, black art finds an anticipatory rapport with avant-garde art movements and their respective performances of refusal – the

rejection of modernism’s gridded dispossession, for instance, which is also a cartography of disposability, disregard, abusive violation, cultural erasure, and social death. However, the very fact that these performances are both denied to and refused by blackness throws into sharp relief the radical disjuncture between these respective modalities and traditions of artistic labor. Black artistic labor, which takes the fabric and substance of social existence as an alternative means of production, refracts the conceptual legacies of the autonomous totality of the artwork, and wonders about the image left on the retina. Rather than thinking blackness as difference notwithstanding worldly violence, we regard the serial recomposition and decomposition of blackness as incitation to an utterly divergent gestic imagination. Our critical attentiveness to these incitements remains attuned to a gestural difference that is irreducible, both to the serial violence of the racial regime of representation and to the so-called “politics” that clamors for recognition within it.<sup>5</sup>

### Generativity

If the poethical artwork is no longer preoccupied with the perils of departing from the onto-epistemology of modernity, and its rendering of existence through the certainties of being, then how might aesthetic considerations start from and stay with the “object” – which is at the same time “thing” as well as “commodity” and “other” – without returning to Man or the Subject, the Human or Humanity, the Ego or Subjectivity. If our aesthetic thought begins with the “other” as commodity, as Hortense Spillers recalls, does it unavoidably (re)confront the violence that is modernity’s condition of possibility, devastating any solace that might be found through the figurations of the colonial, racial, and cis-heteropatriarchal matrix?<sup>26</sup> Does such a thought inevitably reinscribe subjugation as origin and horizon? Or does the aesthetic, as thematized in and as black existence, as a radically disruptive ethical orientation, stage a devastating confrontation with modern philosophy that ultimately targets its aesthetic, theoretical, and ethical ground? What happens when blackness guides considerations of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the theoretical? Here are two propositions: (a) Black Study recalls the sonic and mobilizes it against the discursive closure of blackness in pathology, and (b) in doing so, disarranges the post-Enlightenment onto-epistemological field. Blackness (as object) unsettles the (aesthetic) ground upon which the transparent I emerges. For this reason, the analysis and poesis of Black Existence challenges the tenets of Social Theory and

Aesthetic Theory alike precisely because, as a referent to total violence, it breaks through the enclosure that is discourse and exposes the limitations of both post-Enlightenment versions of modern ontology, the philosophical and the sociological.

Black Study reorients the conversation in the contemporary international art scene, as it introduces to the critical tools of contemporary philosophy a set of concepts, formulations, and questions that bypass, without ignoring, what would have otherwise remained the latter's undisturbed Eurocentric core. Black Aesthetics – that is, that which fosters, facilitates, and modulates “black enunciation” – signals an other site for the analysis of artistic creation, collective existence, and political practice. As such, it provides the basis for a project that militates against and serially undermines the modern liberal political architecture, in its violent post-Enlightenment configuration and operations, as well as the fascistic doubles that liberalism at once requires, solicits, and half-heartedly decries. Black Aesthetics is an utterance that, in its immanent derangement of modernity's grammar, marks and is marked by the art of passage without coordinates or arrival, the art of life in departure.

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**Rizvana Bradley** is Assistant Professor of Film and Media at UC Berkeley. Her scholarship and writing on contemporary art, film, and media has been published in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, *Film Quarterly*, *TDR: The Drama Review*, and is forthcoming in *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*. Her writing has also appeared in *The Yale Review*, *Art in America*, *e-flux journal*, and *Parkett*. Bradley's first book manuscript is a recipient of a Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, and offers a critical examination of the black body across a range of experimental artistic practices that integrate film and other media.

**Denise Ferreira da Silva** is a Professor and Director of The Social Justice Institute-GRSJ at the University of British Columbia. Her academic writings include the books *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minnesota, 2007), *Race, Empire, and Crisis of the Subprime* (Johns Hopkins, 2013, with Paula Chakravartty), and *Unpayable Debt* (MIT and Sternberg 2021). Her collaborative art practice includes *Poetical Readings* and *The Sensing Salon*, with Valentina Desideri; the play *Return of the Vanishing Peasant*, with Ros Martin; the films *Serpent Rain* (2016), *4 Waters-Deep Implicancy* (2018), and *Soot Breath/Corpus Infinitum* (2021), with Arjuna Neuman; and the musical *Opera Infinita* (2021), with Jota Mombaça and Anti Ribeiro. She is a member of the collective EhChO.org.

1  
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2  
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3  
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4  
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5  
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