

Arthur Jafa's seven-minute short film Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death cuts together footage of Charles Ramsey; Swag Surf, a black variation on the wave at sports games; Fred Hampton's widow the day after his assassination; Bayard Rustin, organizer of the 1963 March on Washington; Storyboard P, dance legend; the 2015 murder of Walter Scott in South Carolina; kids dancing in a club; Hortense Spillers; Birth of a Nation ; former president Obama singing "Amazing Grace"; Earl Sweatshirt; Ferguson, Missouri; Michael Jackson; Floyd Mayweather; the Civil Rights Movement; Beyoncé; Martine Syms; Odell Beckham Jr; Alien ; Rob Peters; Bradford Young; Marshawn Lynch; Larry Davis; Thelonious Monk's hands; Chris Brown; Martin Luther King Jr.; IceJJFish, atonal R&B singer; astronomical images; Drake; Mahalia Jackson; and many others, in order to explore the distance and proximity between motion and movement. The film's title refers to the Nebula Award-winning 1973 short story by James Tiptree Jr., née Alice Sheldon, Love is the Plan the Plan is Death, about spider-like creatures who devour their mates in the course of their lifecycle.

The following excerpts a conversation between the filmmaker and Tina Campt, Professor of Africana and Women's Studies and Director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women, at a listening party for Love Is the Message, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem on December 10, 2016.

Arthur Jafa and Tina M. Campt

Love is the Message, The Plan is Death

Tina Campt: We were talking earlier today about the difference between movement and motion. We think of these two things as synonyms but they're not. Movement means changing the position of an object related to a fixed point in space; the focus is on that space. Motion, on the other hand, is a change in the location or position of an object with respect to time.

One of the things that your montage and sequencing technique does is provoke our relationship to images by exposing us to them at a certain velocity over time. The impact of a work like *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* keys off of how short the span of time is in which we actually have contact with a single one of these images—each of which is incredibly arresting—before it transitions to the next. This is why I talk about listening to images and why we've called this event a listening session. Listening to images is about allowing yourself to be accessible to the affects produced in all these different encounters. Which are the historical black-and-white images? Where are the bodies moving? How do you see the choreography of bodies and violence and music in relationship to each other?

Prior to this evening, I would watch *Love is the Message*



over and over again on my computer and I would find myself positioning myself backwards and forwards, closer or farther away to the screen. I noticed that I was not trying to see the photos or the images more carefully or more closely. I was trying to tweak or to amplify the relationship to get the impact of the images. I needed to get that impact physically by way of the sound. I actually needed to feel the contact between the soundtrack and the way in which it actually makes bodies move.

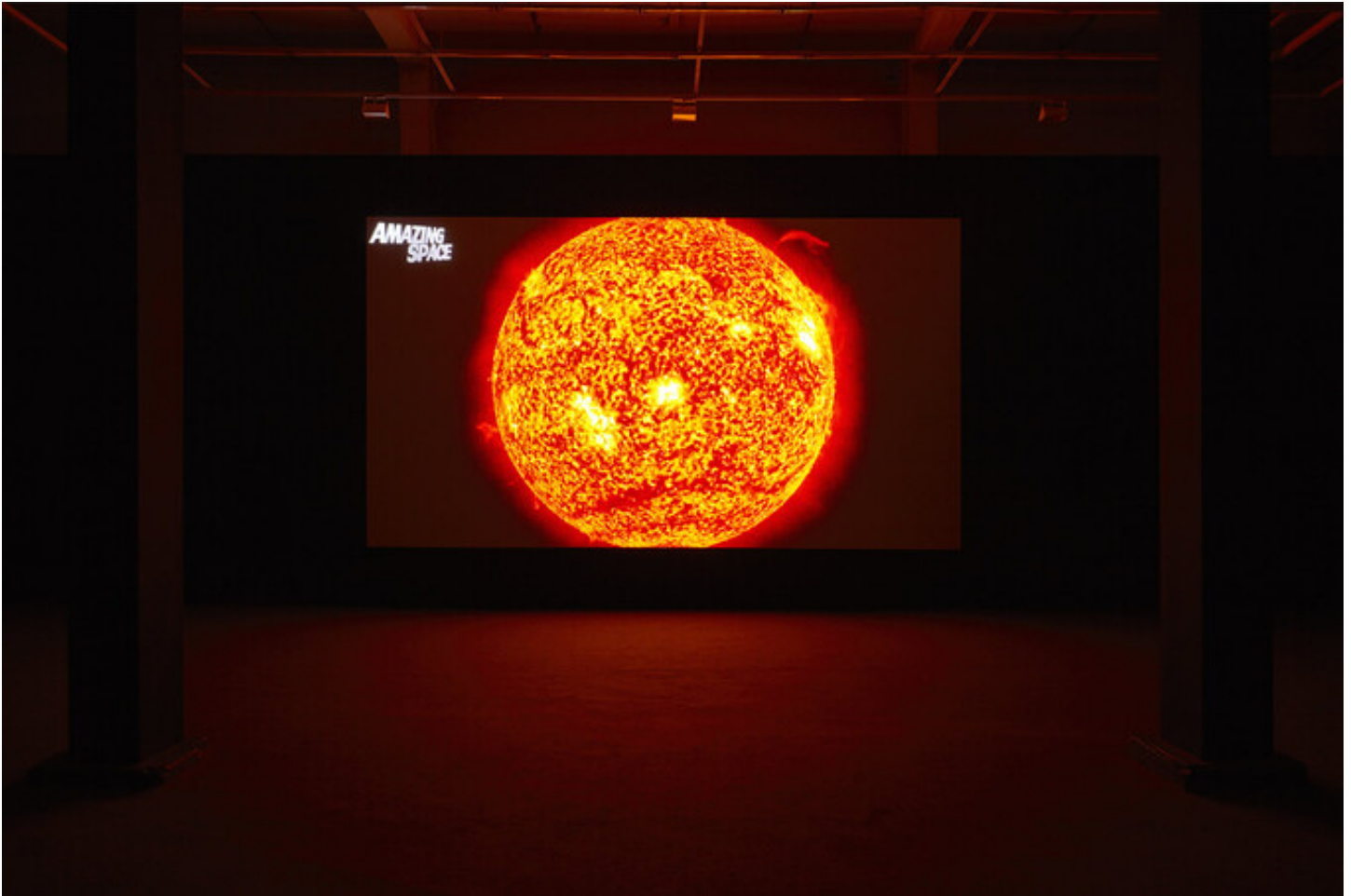
To open yourself up to a different sensory experience of film or to a different sensory experience of images often means actually adjusting your physical proximity to them. One way that physical proximity is calibrated is through sonic penetration; the way in which music and sound connect us. At its most basic, most fundamental level, sound is the movement of particles through air. It's a vibration that is calibrated in waves. The extent to which we can hear it depends on their frequency. There are all sorts of different sounds that we as humans cannot hear. They're not audible to us because we physically can't pick them up. Except by touching them or as a vibration. Like sounds, images have a frequency, which we can adjust. We calibrate our sensibility to images in the way we let them impact and contact us.

Arthur Jafa: This goes back to something I've said repeatedly, a mantra really, which is that my overriding ambition is to make a black cinema with "the power, beauty and alienation of black music."

TC: Tell us what you mean by that?

AJ: Well, to go back a little bit: I'm from Mississippi and went to Howard University to study architecture. I'd always wanted to study architecture; it's my first love to this day.

And in a sense, my preoccupations then were the same as now. Even though then I would have said something like, "I want to make a house that's like *Kind of Blue*. Or a house that's like *Electric Lady* or *Songs in the Key of Life*." But by my third year at Howard I couldn't really see a path to accomplishing the things I was interested in. I'd realized pretty early on that there was a class dimension to who got to practice and do the kinds of things I was interested in doing. I became disenchanted with the possibilities of architecture for me. I didn't know many black people that owned their own homes. I didn't know any black people who were going to be able to commission me to make the



essentially experimental architecture I was interested in. I remember telling my father at some point, “Dad, I think I’d rather be a failed filmmaker than a failed architect.”

So I wandered down to the film department at Howard and the first person I met was Haile Gerima. And that was very fortuitous. Haile had graduated three years prior from UCLA (and had been at the epicenter of the “LA Rebellion”), where, for the first time, black filmmakers were consciously and collectively engaged with thinking through what it might mean to make black cinema. One of the first things Haile said to me was: “We have to make black cinema.” And in a way this dovetailed perfectly with my ongoing ambition, which had been to make a house (and now a film) that was like black music.

It became clear, however, that our idea of black cinema was being narrowly constrained by the binary opposition to Hollywood we’d adopted. They’d say, “What’s black film? Black film is not Hollywood. It’s against Hollywood.” And that’s a fairly radical idea when you’re first confronted with it but very quickly my classmates and I were like, “OK, so if that’s the case, and if Hollywood has narratives, does that mean black film is necessarily nonnarrative? If Hollywood films are in color does that mean black films have to be in black and white?”

So we started to think through what black cinema could be if it wasn’t so narrowly defined as being against Hollywood, but was defined in its own terms. For me it came down to being about the music: How and why is the music so powerful? So, I’ve spent a large part of the last thirty years thinking about what makes black music so powerful, and how to transpose this power into this other medium, cinema.

I realized that the black voice was at the core (technically, formally, and spiritually) of why black music was powerful. People typically talked about cinema in terms of stories, narratives, thematics—but it quickly became clear that we needed (additionally) different concepts. So, for example, the idea of black visual intonation was conceived as the cinematic equivalent of the black voice. You’d never confuse Billie Holiday with Fela or Fela with Bob Marley or Marley with Charlie Parker or Miles Davis, right? Each has a certain signature relationship to the black voice (as transgenerational continuity) and with black vocal intonation specifically, whether in the voice of the performer or played out instrumentally, as a primary mode of expressive articulation. I was interested in coming to understand this vocal intonation, and how these traditions or continuities of manipulating tonalities are bound up with what it means to be black.



What is the relationship between black music and Western music? African-American music is Western music—a lot of people don't seem to realize this. I like to say like we are illegitimate progeny of the West (ill suns), in the sense that a lot of ideas were imposed on us (nonconsensually, so to speak), ideas which we internalized and made something new of, something unique and distinctively American, all without us ever being seen or accepted as the legitimate heirs of these ideas. Black people came to the Americas with the very deepest reservoir of cultural traditions, modes of expressivity. There's a great quote by Nam June Paik: "The culture that's going to survive in the future is the culture that you carry around in your head."

The Middle Passage is a great example of that. Despite the fact that we came with a full spectrum of incredibly rich traditions of expressivity (both material and immaterial), black people came to be most strong in those spaces where our cultural traditions could be carried in our nervous systems. Architecture, painting, sculpture, those kinds of things, they tended to erode (relatively speaking), in contrast to things like dance, oratory, and music (which could be constantly renewed in the new context in which we found ourselves).

TC: Speaking of dance, it seems like in your work the

motion of bodies is really crucial and it has to do with what we were talking about earlier, the relationship of black people to spatial navigation. There's bodies and movement in violence and bodies in motion through dance—which is not always choreography—it's a relationship to rhythm or music and then bodies in motion through athleticism, right?

So you've got Mohammed Ali, you've got the basketball—you've actually got the fans around the basketball court [doing the Swag Surf] who are synchronizing with the people on the floor, and this connects with what you were telling me about how you understand black people's capacity to navigate space.

AJ: One of the reasons I spend so much time thinking about music is because music is a great place to actually think through ideas that you can also share with people. Particularly black folks: we know all the music. We know everything that we've ever made.

We can sing all the songs—even when we don't know the words, we know a song's precise structure, its trajectories and inflections. Increasingly though, I've become interested in dance, African-American social dance. And I've been thinking through what's happening when people

actually dance. The first interview I ever read with Cornel West, in the early '80s, he was talking about black culture in that expansive, encyclopedic way he's known for, and somebody asked about black visual culture. His response was: "As far as I can tell it's not very apparent." It set off a bit of a shitstorm. Folks like Howardena Pindell were like, "Cornel's speaking from a place of ignorance. He doesn't know what black visual artists have done. He's giving ammunition to those racist forces who want to keep black people out of this particular arena, the visual arts." But I remember Cornel went on and said something like, "I think the reason why it's underdeveloped is because it never found support in the only institution that black people had, which was the church."

Fundamentally, it's a brilliant insight. Most black (American) churches (Baptist and Methodist) are Protestant, they're not Catholic. And we know one of the primary differences between protestant Christianity and Catholicism has to do with their respective relationships to the visual.¹ So song and dance and these kind of things found support in the black church while the impulse to visualization didn't.

Even if you go to somebody like Basquiat—one of his parents is Haitian and one is Puerto Rican. This is not a small fact because if you go to Haiti, Puerto Rico, or Brazil, places where Catholicism is the dominant religious form that black people practice, you find more openness towards visual expression, particularly as it coalesced around describing saints and things like this. In the Protestant church, this wasn't the case.

One of the things I've found most fascinating about black American social dance is how it has functioned without any sort of external authority (what's good or isn't good)—meaning that there's been little or no commodification of black social dance, with the kind of externalized system of reviews (and sales figures) that goes along with commodification. Not that there's anything wrong with the amazing modernist (or "professional") dance that black folks have done as well, but when you go to a dance, a social dance, and folks are dancing (in the round, so to speak), the dopest dance is the dopest dance. Meaning, the person who is dancing and has the most charisma, who's displaying the most expressivity, doing the most amazing things, is operating on the cutting edge of both the self-authorizing and the collectively resonant, right?

Cornel was onto something. But he mischaracterized or misnamed it. It's not that there was black *visual* underdevelopment—but there certainly was what I call black *pictorial* underdevelopment.

We need to make the distinction between the visual and the pictorial. Because, for example, we apprehend dance (and style, postural semantics, etc.) visually. So I'm really trying to think through what's going on when black people

dance. On a phenomenological level, what's going on? There are at least two things that black Americans are acutely sensitive to. One is rhythm. Everybody's familiar with the idea that black people have an acute sensitivity to rhythms. But there's another thing that people have a much harder time grasping, or getting a handle on, which is that black folks have an acute sensitivity to what I term *vectors*, or spatial arrays.

One place you see this is in basketball. A player (both moving and in motion) from almost anywhere on the floor can launch the ball into a trajectory where it'll arc, descend, and go through the hoop. You see the same thing in soccer—like with Pelé. And with the *ginga* (capoeira). There are things bound up in very complex ways with our experiences (the Middle Passage, slavery, Jim Crow) that have impacted how we operate in space, how we understand and how we interact with space. So there's this acute sensitivity to space.

I started saying, "Oh, black people can predict the future"—and that sounds really crazy, but what I mean is that there's an acute sensitivity to vectors and trajectories. If a person throws a ball, they have to calculate on the fly the speed and trajectory at which that object has to be launched so that it's going to land in a predesignated point. And most of the time you're not talking about a fixed target (this is not golf). You're talking about a person, in motion, calculating what a ball is going to do while another person (or persons) is trying to stop them.

I think when black people dance, a lot of what's happening is the playing with, the setting up of, series of vectors and then breaking them. Like a pun. The obvious example is Michael Jackson and the moonwalk. He looks like he's going in one direction but he's actually going in another direction. Something similar happens when you throw the ball at a target as your moving. If you can't anticipate where it's supposed to land, you can't fully appreciate when it does something different from what's expected (one could say, "when it behaves in a fugitive fashion"). You have to perceive these two different things (what it's supposed to be doing and what it's in fact doing) simultaneously. It's really about flow—flow through figures. I have been preoccupied these last three years with this whole question of flow through figures. And this dovetails with your distinction between motion and movement.

TC: Going back to Cornell—and forgetting whatever his judgment or assessment of black visual culture is, or its underdevelopment—and talking instead about it being the site of authorization: dance is visible in the church, as you say. Consider the importance the Pentecostal movement places on the visible black body possessed by Christ. The church actually becomes a site of navigating those vectors, visually enacting a specific trajectory of bodily motion.



AJ: You know we're here in Harlem at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Gavin has said to me a couple times, "There's so much energy here. How do we tap that energy?" And I said to Gavin, "Oh that's an ongoing project because even for the Studio Museum (which has been here for thirty years) there's the ongoing challenge of how to tap this energy. How do we get people in here?" So we got into this whole thing. We created these posters. And the posters we chose have these lynching images. And there was a lot of back and forth about the appropriateness of putting these things in the street. Well my thing was like, first of all, there's something to be said for just making explicit what is oftentimes implicit—which is black people being killed as if we're not human beings. How do we introduce something in the space that can cut through the noise? There's a real problematic around the appropriateness of having an image of a man getting murdered. But this footage is all over the place. It's everywhere. It's not like we're talking about digging stuff out of some archive that's never been seen before.

It's literally everywhere so the question becomes: How do you situate it so that people actually see it, this phenomena, as opposed to just having it pass in front of them? How do you have people actually see it? And simultaneously, how do you induce people to apprehend

both the beauty and the horror these circumstances? There's something profound (and magical) to be said about the ability, the capacity to see beauty anywhere and everywhere. I think it's a capacity black people have developed because not only are we not authorized, we're demonized—we are radically not affirmed, so we've actually learned not just how to imbue moments with joy but to see beauty in places where beauty, in any normative sense, doesn't necessarily exist.

In the previous film I made, *Dreams are Colder Than Death*, there is a moment when Hortense Spillers makes this startling formulation about the difference between the body and flesh. She says, "The flesh gives empathy." That's what I feel like I'm trying to manipulate and at the same time get at—a sort of rendering of how black people feel now. The work feels very constructed to me; I'm struggling with it. Does the constructedness of it in any way undermine the real emotions that are elicited?

TC: But that's the thing about the mechanics of empathy. Are you trying to get us to think about the constructedness of empathy? At this point in time, do we have any choice? Do we have any choice in terms of what



empathy is?

AJ: Well, I think empathy is maybe the single most important thing that's at issue now in society. We know that the process of oppressing people requires the one who is oppressing another to first dehumanize them. I mean, this is the oldest strategy. We've seen it time and time again. We see it in Nazi Germany. They put people in situations where their humanity is thrown into questions because it's like ... Somebody said to me recently if you throw a bunch of crabs in a barrel (as if the barrel was the national habitat of the crabs—you know?), it's gonna produce and elicit certain kinds of behavior which, considered ahistorically, will appear to be innate, rather than an adaptation to malevolent circumstances. Same thing if you throw people into a barrel.

The people who are dehumanizing others are trying to maintain or hold onto the sense of their own humanity. If I step on a bug, I know maybe the American Society for the Protection of Animals might get mad, but I'm really not stressing it too deeply when I step on a roach. I'm just not. I don't think about whether the roach has a family and children or anything like that. I just step on it. But you can't do that with human beings unless in some way you convince yourself that they're bugs. So ultimately it comes

down to the relative presence or absence of empathy. You cannot oppress people without expending a certain type of psychic energy, unless the whole mechanism, the whole superstructure is supporting that understanding of the other as being less human, less feeling than you are. I think you learn empathy. I think it has to be taught.

I was cinematographer on the film *Daughters of the Dust* years ago, thirty years ago. *Daughters*, for those who don't know, is about a black family at the turn of the century in South Carolina—they're trying to decide whether they should stay off-land, you know off the mainland, on the island. Or should they go to the mainland and become a part of society at large? It's very much a film about Africans, African-Americans, becoming black.

I remember a talk I gave about the film at the New School. We showed the film and then afterwards we were talking, and I'll never forget this older white woman, she stood up and said, "This is an amazing film. When I see this film I don't see color. I see my grandmother. I see my grandmother. I don't see color when I see this film." And she was a very nice lady (speaking from what I took to be a progressive place) but I remember asking her, "Why can't you see color and see your grandmother?" Like why is that a split, you know? Why do you have to erase her blackness

in order to see your grandmother in this woman? I think that's what's at stake. It comes to empathy.

So I'm very much preoccupied with how the work that I do tries to expand narrow notions of who we are. Who is we? You know, who identifies with what, this whole idea of



The classic way in which cinema works is that you identify with the people on the screen. You go to see a movie and you identify with a person. Generally, you identify with a "good guy." And there's a whole battery of things—lighting, costumes, and everything else—that the filmmaker manipulates to make it clear (implicitly and explicitly) who's going to be the good guy and who we're supposed to identify with. One of the things that was radical about *Daughters*, if something was radical about it, was when you went to see that film the only subject positions you could occupy were those of black women. There were no other subject positions available. You can't even find white guys as bad guys. It's just black women, right? *Daughters* does what it does but I don't think it's going to change people's attitudes. What it does do is make it harder to pretend as if black women are less human. Because for its two hours you're forced (or allowed, I would hope) to exist in someone else's skin. It erodes one of the psychic mechanisms in place that lets you pretend that that person (a black woman) has less feelings, less humanity, less whatever than you do, right?

empathy being learned? We know that women have better empathy muscles than men. Because they get to go to films where they don't see themselves and they project themselves anyway. They get to exercise that muscle.

Audiences of color exhibit better empathy in cinema because they go to cinema all the time where they don't see figures that look anything like them and they've accordingly developed the capacity to project themselves into that space and empathetically have that experience. We need more cinema that constructs more spaces for more types of people to be able to exercise their empathy muscles.

So it's one of the reasons I'm not generally interested in making films about white folks. I'm really interested in making work that is always foregrounding black people's humanity, bad guys or good guys. I like the alien. I'm a big fan of the alien. I'm a big fan of Hannibal Lecter, who I think is black and passing. Fundamentally, I just want to see black people who are complex. And competent at

what they do, even if they're mad geniuses or whatever.

TC: I think that we should try and wrap up.

AJ: Well hold up, I have to show something else. When I do these talks and show these things everybody's like, "Oh, it's just so heavy." It's so this, it's so that, but you know I like love, too. So I wanted to end with something that's sweet, that's got a high love quotient. A more overt high love quotient. I hate people going away thinking, "Golly, man, it must be hard being AJ."

Last thing.

[*music*]

AJ: Can you get the light?

X

Installation views of *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016) are courtesy of Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York / Rome.

Arthur Jafa is a visual artist, filmmaker, cinematographer, and TNEG (motion picture studio) cofounder born in Tupelo, Mississippi and currently residing in Los Angeles. Renowned for his cinematography on Julie Dash's pioneering film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Jafa, also the film's coproducer, put into practice techniques he had long been theorizing. 'Black Visual Intonation' is but one of his radical notions about re-conceptualizing film. He is the director of *Slowly This* (1995), *Tree* (1999), and *Deshotten*

1.0 (2009). Jafa was the director of photography on Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1994), Isaac Julien's *Darker Shade of Black* (1994), *A Litany for Survival* (1995), Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson's biographical film on the late Audre Lorde, John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), Manthia Diawara's *Rouch in Reverse* (2000), Nefertite Nguvu's *In the Morning* (2014) and shot second unit on Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014). *Dreams are Colder Than Death*, a documentary directed and shot by Jafa to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech, garnered acclaim at the LA Film Festival, NY Film Festival and Black Star Film Festival where it won Best Documentary. His writing on black cultural politics has appeared in various publications such as *Black Popular Culture* and *Everything But the Burden*, among others.

Jafa's notable solo, group, gallery and museum exhibitions include Artists Space, New York, NY (1999); Okwui Enwezor's traveling exhibition *Mirror's Edge*

BildMuseet—University of Umea in Sweden / Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada / Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy / Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland (1999); 2000 Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Black Box, CCAC Institute, Oakland, CA (2000); Media City Seoul, Korea (2000); *Bitstreams*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2001); Social Formal, Westaelischer Kunstvein, Münster, Germany (2002); *My Black Death*, ARTPACE, San Antonio, (2002); The Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA (2016); The Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA (2016); Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, NY (2016). Jafa will hold forthcoming solo exhibitions of his work at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, MI; and The Serpentine Gallery, London, UK later in 2017; his work is on view at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

Tina Campt is Claire Tow and Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Africana and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, Director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women, and Chair of the Africana Studies Department at Barnard College. Campt joined the Barnard faculty in 2010, prior to which she held faculty positions at Duke University, the University of California at Santa Cruz and the Technical University of Berlin. Professor Campt's published work explores gender, racial, and diasporic formation in black communities in Germany, and Europe more broadly. She is the author of two books: *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (2004), an oral history that explores the experiences of Black Germans during the Third Reich, and *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (2012), which theorizes the affects of family photography of in early twentieth century Black German and Black British communities. Campt has edited special issues of *Feminist Review*, *Callaloo*, and *small axe*, and together with Paul Gilroy, co-edited *Der Black Atlantik* (2004), the first German language collection of key texts on the Black Atlantic. Her third book, *Listening to Images* (forthcoming in 2017 from Duke University Press) theorizes the everyday practices of refusal and fugitivity enacted in a frequently overlooked genre of black vernacular photographs she calls "quiet photography." Professor Campt is the recipient of research grants and fellowships from the Leverhulme Trust, the American Association of University Women, The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Social Science Research Council, and the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities.

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Early radical Protestants smashed stained glass windows, preached outdoors in local languages, and in general opposed the immediate and the vernacular to the figurative and the representational. —*Eds.*