

# ARTFORUM

Best of 2020

Thomas J. Lax

Thomas J. Lax, December 2020

## 1. RALPH LEMON, *RANT #3* (THE KITCHEN, NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 29)

From the end of February through this past autumn, the art I have seen—mostly from my New York City apartment—has reflected our containment, while also offering an opportunity for assembling at a distance. Artists have retooled platforms designed to surveil and turn us into involuntary producers, creating new forms of intimate, anonymous address. Trauma has been described in its unruliness, and we have imagined another world. This list is an itinerary of the recent past, a chronological account of some of the love and abolition that have offered us ways in and through the ongoing war on Black life. It seems fitting to begin with the last live performance I saw before New York’s lockdown, Ralph Lemon’s *Rant #3*. Organized as part of Okwui Okpokwasili’s and Judy Hussie-Taylor’s Danspace Project Platform “Utterances from the Chorus,” this free event was set to Kevin Beasley’s penetrating house music. It included a cast of Black and brown chorines—Okpokwasili, Samita Sinha, Paul Hamilton, Stanley Gambucci, Mariama Noguera-Devers, Dwayne Brown, and Darrell Jones—who touched down in a line of syncopated movement as if beckoning us to their spaceship. Lemon danced in the corner, with the words A FREE SHOW painted across his bare chest.

## 2. JONATHAN BERGER (PARTICIPANT INC, NEW YORK)

For Berger’s installation *An Introduction to Nameless Love*, the gallery floors were covered with half a million charcoal cubes on which stood text-based sculptures composed of countless one-inch hand-soldered tin letters spelling out stories of unspoken affection: between a conservationist and a diamondback terrapin, an autistic philosopher and a communication supporter, a Shaker and furniture. These tales of nonromantic attachment proposed queer alternatives to hetero- and homonormative longing, matter-of-factly narrating the connections formed among people, animals, and



Ralph Lemon, *Rant #3*, 2020. Performance view, the Kitchen, New York, February 29, 2020. Mariama Noguera-Devers and Dwayne Brown. Photo:



Jonathan Berger, *Untitled (Tina Beebe, Barbara Fahs Charles, Robert Staples, and Michael Wiener, with Matthew Brannon)/Untitled (My Name Is Ray, by Michael Stipe)*, 2019, tin, nickel. Installation view, Participant Inc, New York. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.

inanimate objects. All of the accounts end in a generous act of letting go.

### 3. MORGAN BASSICHIS, *QUARANTUNES*

Bassichis's musical videos, the first released soon after lockdown began, broke through a soundscape otherwise filled with sirens and silence. Each of Bassichis's new looks and electronic-piano refrains offered a spell, lullaby, or protest song—a soundtrack against isolation and state terror we could sing, cry, or scream along to.

### 4. MALIK GAINES'S CONCERTS

For ten Sundays this spring, writer, performer, and collectivist Malik Gaines performed concerts in the bright light of the sun setting over his Manhattan apartment. The five-song sets of covers were thematized according to the moment's emotional landscape: "Songs of Longing and Despair" when lockdown began, "Sexy Jesus" for Easter Sunday. Devoted listeners could find one another to get right (and wrong) for the week ahead.

### 5. ORIAN BARKI AND MERIEM BENNANI, *2 LIZARDS*

Signs warning us to keep six feet away; eccentric musicians coming out of the woodwork to play for essential workers; the wearing of monochrome masks: *2 Lizards* registered the changes wrought by the novel coronavirus. This series of 3D cartoons on Instagram about a cast of animal characters was one of the few public forums capturing the pandemic mood and documenting our uncanny new norms.

### 6. LAUNCH EVENT FOR NICOLE R. FLEETWOOD'S *MARKING TIME: ART IN THE AGE OF INCARCERATION*

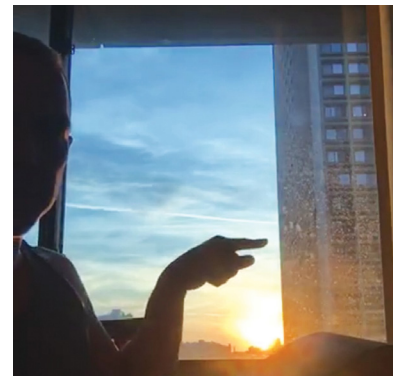
Fleetwood's monograph about artists working within and against US prisons was released by Harvard University Press in the spring (an accompanying exhibition opened in September at MoMA PS1, New York). During a Zoom Q&A organized to celebrate the book's launch, Kenny Reams, one of the artists included in the project, called in from Arkansas. Reams's 1993 conviction was recently overturned, but he remains in solitary confinement. Reflecting on his situation, he said, "The wheels of justice turn slow, period."

### 7. *TIME* (GARRETT BRADLEY)

Bradley sent me a link to her feature-length documentary during the third week of the uprising. *Time* follows Sibil Fox Richardson, a charismatic abolitionist, entrepreneur, and mother of six fighting for the release of her high school sweetheart, Robert. Edited by Gabriel Rhodes, the black-and-white verité film moves back and forth between Bradley's



Morgan Bassichis performing *Quarantunes* on Instagram, March 20, 2020.



Malik Gaines performing his concert "Songs About Feelings About Law," New York, July 5, 2020.



Orian Barki and Meriem Bennani, *2 Lizards*: Episode 4, 2020, HD video, color, sound, 2 minutes 50 seconds.



Book launch for Nicole R. Fleetwood's *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* on Zoom, April 28, 2020. Top row, second from right: Nicole R. Fleetwood.



camera and the home movies Fox made as a means of sustaining her family during the bureaucratic horror of their separation and in anticipation of the moment they would again be together.

## 8. AUTUMN KNIGHT (THE KITCHEN, NEW YORK, JULY 24–AUGUST 10)

Equal parts radio show, ASMR object theater, critical race theory lecture, and animation, the hilarious performance videos Knight created for her stint at the Kitchen featured her reveling in the sensory pleasures of making photocopies, power-drilling, and wire-spooling as she explored the venue's offices. Streaming just as most cultural institutions were issuing action plans to address their histories of systemic racism and endemic toxicity, these send-ups of the nonsense of woke office culture called out the palliative function that Black art has been called on to offer up.

## 9. THE FINALE OF MICHAELA COEL'S *I MAY DESTROY YOU* (HBO)

Describing her autofictional TV show, about a young writer who is roofied and sexually assaulted, Coel named the various ways in which rape culture structures our lives as the “theft of consent.” “Ego Death,” the show's finale (spoiler alert), spools out into three alternate endings for redressing the protagonist's violation: a revenge narrative that includes the pleasure of seeing and destroying her rapist's white cock; an allegory of restorative justice in which we find out that her attacker was himself a child victim as the two attempt to evade state capture; and a resplendent surrealist sequence in which our protagonist generously tops him before making him vanish. Ultimately, she chooses none of these fantasies and instead spends the evening with friends in her garden.

## 10. MATI DIOP, *IN MY ROOM*

In Diop's film, made during quarantine in Paris, we see the director dancing in four-inch red velvet Miu Miu pumps, strutting in an open leopard-print trench coat, watching her neighbors, and listening to interviews she recorded with her recently deceased grandmother. The observational still life shuttles between banal voyeurism and the current realities of immanent death and ecstatic self-pleasure. It reminds us that in the middle of a plague, the latest intensification of this epoch of endless wars, *we're here and we're living*.

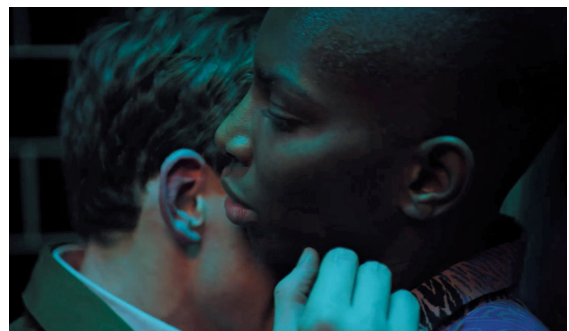
Thomas J. Lax is curator of Media and Performance at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. They are currently working on the exhibition “Just Above Midtown: 1974 to the Present” with Linda Goode Bryant.



Two stills from Garrett Bradley's *Time*, 2020, HD video, black-and-white, sound, 81 minutes. Fox Rich.



Autumn Knight performing during her residency at the Kitchen, New York, August 7, 2020. Photo: Paula Court.



*I May Destroy You*, 2020–, still from a TV show on HBO. Season 1, episode 12. David (Lewis Reeves) and Arabella (Michaela Coel).



Mati Diop, *In My Room*, 2020, 4K video, color, sound, 19 minutes 59 seconds. Mati Diop.