

The Machine Is Us

Exhibition Essay by Jaymie Johnson

Even this far into the 21st century, the recent social media furore surrounding US congresswoman and free-style dancer Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez illustrated that the spectacle of someone dancing without compunction can still ruffle the right (and alt-right) feathers.¹

If I Can't Dance To It, It's Not My Revolution — a phrase derived in part from similar words by writer and feminist anarchist Emma Goldman (1869-1940) — speaks to the necessity of embodiment for the success of revolution. Embodiment is understood as a complexity, as a theory, and as “the tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, feeling.”²

It is my fifth time entering the virtual exhibition *If I Can't Dance To It, It's Not My Revolution*. I take a new route and follow the vibrant yellow arrow pointing straight down, leading me to a pastel hued split-fountain rainbow page with 8 linked icons. Each option is marked with the name of an artist or writer featured in the juried youth exhibition. I choose one and enter a page containing the artwork of Josh Franklin, which features two images, “48 hour (Walk-in Structure) Right Panel” and “48 Hour (Walk-in Structure) Front Panel” where dripping abstract marks of latex on voile sit atop the same pastel rainbow backdrop as the first page.

This backdrop is a visual element that runs through the entire virtual exhibition along with saturated yellow text, a hand cursor, and highlight function. I scroll to the bottom of the page to be met with three more options. I click on “virtual walk-through tour” and am transported this

1 DOOMSQUAD, *Let Yourself Be Seen*, last modified May 10, 2019, accessed July 30, 2020, <https://doomsquad.bandcamp.com/album/let-yourself-be-seen-3>.

2 “*Dictionary.com*,” accessed July 30, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/embodiment?s=t>.

time into a three-dimensional room where I can move my cursor to virtually walk around and through Franklin's latex painted cube structure.

The virtual juried youth exhibition website, designed by Christian Hernandez of Vancouver's alternative publishing collective DDOGG, is a creative work in itself, a choose-your-own-adventure style maze of varied ways to land at a handful of pastel rainbow pages. The pages display the visual work of selected artists Meadow Kroeger, Spencer Legebokoff, Josh Franklin, Katherine Victoria MacKay, and Bethany Pardoe, and the new commissioned literary works of Nelson Aiken, Suki Simington, Spencer Legebokoff, and Hailey Viers. In addition to the visual and literary art works, the website features artist talks and interviews, bios and statements, and a 'Reading List and Resources' page filled with BIPOC centered anti-racist resources and action lists.

By the time I've landed on an excerpt from Hailey Viers's poem, 'When the Apocalypse Comes':

*Why are youth these days so depressed,
when we watch tragedy happen
in real time now.
A moment of silence for it all
and I would never speak.
I refuse to carry the weight
of everyone's mistakes
on bones designed to hold
one person.*

I have 49 new browser tabs open, including a YouTube video playing LCD Soundsystem; a Spotify *80s Italian Disco* playlist; a few books listed on goodreads.com; some Instagram pages; numerous Wikipedia pages; a podcast episode interview with artist Dread Scott; and two Google Drive folders containing dozens of PDFs on critical race theory, including a PDF version of Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990).

With the seemingly disparate blend of aesthetics that compose the exhibition, from the varied visual works to the ever-present pastel

rainbow background, it is impossible to ignore how this virtual space is in stark contrast with the ‘blank’ white walls of a typical gallery space. The exhibition’s virtual architecture is arguably far more fitting for a youth show dealing with themes of feminism, anarchy, and revolution, even while it juxtaposes the exhibition title, which speaks to the necessity of embodiment. This juxtaposition occurs despite, and perhaps also in opposition to, the common understanding of the internet as a disembodied space. The ‘Feminist Principles of the Internet,’ a series of statements that “offer a gender and sexual rights lens on critical internet-related rights,” state that six of their seventeen principles fall under the ‘Embodiment’ category.³ This categorization of *embodiment* “looks at our diverse experiences and relationships as human beings embodying multiple identities and realities in ‘disembodied’ online spaces”⁴. From this perspective, digital space hold possibilities for embodied experience in what is further echoed by posthuman feminist scholar Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985):

“The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.”⁵

If I Can’t Dance To It, It’s Not My Revolution offers us an opportunity to witness the process by which theory is embodied and realized by these emerging artists. This is in large part thanks to the wealth of information, interviews, and links that accompany the visual and literary works, coupled with the unforeseen timeline of global events that took place leading up to and during the exhibition. With an open call that ended the day before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a Global Pandemic, the juried youth exhibition, which was originally intended to be held at Oxygen’s physical gallery space, was moved online with a delayed opening that occurred two months into the global anti-racist protests spurred by the police killing of George Floyd,

3 “Feminist Principles of the Internet” is created by a multi-national group of activists and advocates organized by the Association for Progressive Communications; Web site Accessed July 30, 2020, <https://feministinternet.org/en/embodiment>

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5 Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 180, http://www.usask.ca/english/architectures/pages2/contents/electronic-page_note10.html

an unarmed Black man in Minneapolis, USA, and four centuries into the colonial project on Turtle Island.

The interview and artist talk portion of the site reveals how these artists are understanding a multiplicity of crises, as well as what and how they're viewing, finding, and digesting information and creative work. In response to the interview question 'What do you think are necessary agents for change in society? In your community?' Bethany Pardoe and Meadow Kroeger respond respectively, in part, "If society ever intends to change in order to fix problems such as climate change or poverty it is important that all be united in performing their part..." and "without everyone's willingness to make or accept adjustment to their lives nothing will be changed." Both artists speak to the immediate collective action needed to 'flatten the curve' of the pandemic and the importance of applying this effort to other issues.

Adding to this call for collective, collaborative action, is the acknowledgement of privilege and responsibility. To the question 'Do you include social justice and/or activism in your work? If so, how does it manifest?' Josh Franklin begins, "I attempt to break down and understand my own familial contribution to the racist creation of manifest destiny while relearning and situating myself in the place I call home." Speaking, partly, to the responsibility we each have in understanding our positionality.

In contrast to a gallery exhibition, this virtual juried youth exhibition offers a more holistic and embodied look into the minds, hearts, and processes of local young artists during this time of intersecting and ongoing climate, disease, racial justice, and human rights crises. As viewers, we are given the opportunity to more actively engage with the ideas and interests of the artists. We are even offered the ability to bop along to each artist's would-be first song on their kitchen dance party playlist.