

Press Release

RETROaction (part two)

Charles Gaines, Gary Simmons and Lorna Simpson
with Edgar Arceneaux, Kevin Beasley, Mark Bradford, Torkwase Dyson, Lauren Halsey, Leslie Hewitt,
Rashid Johnson, Caroline Kent, Tony Lewis and Rodney McMillian

Curated by Homi K. Bhabha, Kate Fowle, Charles Gaines and Ellen Tani

27 February – 5 May 2024
Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles
North B Gallery

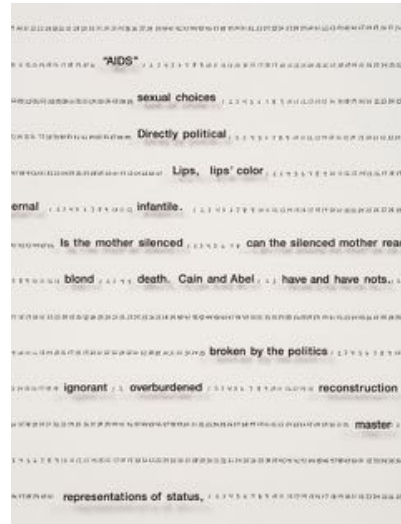


Los Angeles...In the early 1990s a generation of artists in the United States were using exhibitions to draw attention to real-world crises: by the time Bill Clinton was inaugurated in January 1993, AIDS was officially the #1 cause of death for men aged 25 – 44 in the country; the Los Angeles uprising had been declared the most destructive period of local unrest in US history; and the Culture Wars were in full force, after the Robert Mapplethorpe ‘obscenity’ hearing marked the nation’s first criminal trial over content in an exhibition. Terms such as multiculturalism, identity politics and marginalization signified spaces of contestation, while in art, the market had collapsed following a global recession, causing an unprecedented number of galleries to shutter.

It was in this context that artist Charles Gaines developed the exhibition ‘The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism’ for the University Art Gallery at the University of California, Irvine, in close collaboration with the gallery’s director, Catherine Lord. Presenting works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Renée Green, David Hammons, Ben Patterson, Adrian Piper, Sandra Rowe, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Pat Ward Williams and Fred Wilson—all little known artists at that time—‘The Theater of Refusal’ intended to ‘reveal the strategies of marginalization and to propose an alternative,’ as Gaines described his approach then. Integral to the show was a reading room, for which Gaines accumulated articles and reviews about the participating artists that he highlighted to reveal limitations in the discourse of marginality and its instrumentalization by mainstream criticism.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of ‘The Theater of Refusal’—in a social and political context that bears many similarities—this exhibition in downtown LA looks back at that seminal project and continues the theoretical investigation to understand its resonances today. Co-curator Homi K. Bhabha has called this process ‘retroaction.’

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He suggests, 'A conventional retrospective looks back from the summit of the present to synthesize the past by giving it a culminating shape. In contrast, 'RETROaction' brings forth the legacies of 'The Theater of Refusal' in the early 1990s to interact with the lessons and lesions of art today. It takes a view of the present in all its decolonizing tumult—racial violence, pandemics, climate catastrophe, migration and displacement—pinpointing a critical moment of transition in the '90s from which to move forward.'

'RETROaction' presents works from the early 1990s by Charles Gaines, Lorna Simpson and Gary Simmons, who all participated in the original 'The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,' as well as a new iteration of the exhibition, this time subtitled 'Black Art and Reconstitution,' presenting the work of ten artists who all embrace abstraction and materiality in their practice, selected by art historian, Ellen Tani, together with Gaines.

'We speak less now of marginalization and refusal than of the world systems—historic and ongoing—that undergird those processes: capitalism, colonialism, racism. We consider Bhabha's description of the way we can think of past work and its relation to the present moment through an investigation of strategies of marginalization from the '90s and how it has transitioned into a critical space—30 years later—now dominated by the issues of decoloniality, which in turn gives representation to those suppressed ideas of the '90s,' says Gaines. 'We chose to undertake an investigation of abstract art produced by Black artists to show that the controversies around representation—a significant context for the marginalization of their practices—continues today. Like the original project, 'Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Reconstitution' rethinks structures of artistic knowledge and the critical discourse that surrounds it.'

About RETROaction and the New York presentation:

RETROaction is a project initiated at Hauser & Wirth with the prominent Harvard academic, Homi K. Bhabha, to explore the 'nowness' of art and critical concepts from the recent past in dialogue with artists who work with the gallery: it posits that our current time is one for retroaction more than retrospection. The first iteration of the project created a smaller presentation of the 'The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Reconstitution' and also explored the Whitney Biennial in 1993—a show that has subsequently been recognized as establishing many terms that underpin our current cultural debates. Artists included: Ida Applebroog, Charles Gaines, Mike Kelley, Zoe Leonard, Glenn Ligon, Cindy Sherman, Gary Simmons and Lorna Simpson with Kevin Beasley, Torkwase Dyson, Leslie Hewitt and Rashid Johnson.

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About the curators

Homi K. Bhabha is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities in the English Department and Comparative Literature Department at Harvard University. He is the author of numerous works exploring postcolonial theory, cultural change and power, contemporary art and cosmopolitanism. His works include 'The Location of Culture,' which was reprinted as a Routledge Classic, and the edited volume 'Nation and Narration.' Bhabha has also written articles on contemporary art for Artforum and essays on the work of William Kentridge, Anish Kapoor, Taryn Simon and Matthew Barney, amongst others. With the support of the Volkswagen and Mellon Foundations, Bhabha has led a research project on the Global Humanities. He is a Corresponding Fellow at The British Academy, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Critic-in-Residence at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He holds honorary degrees from Université Paris 8, University College London, Freie Universität Berlin and Stellenbosch University.

Charles Gaines is a pivotal figure in the field of conceptual art. His body of work engages formulas and systems that interrogate relationships between the objective and the subjective realms. The concept of identity politics has played a central role within Gaines' oeuvre, and the radical approach he employs addresses issues of race in ways that transcend the limits of representation. Using a generative approach to create series of works in a variety of mediums, he has built a bridge between the early conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s and subsequent generations of artists pushing the limits of conceptualism today. Gaines is also exhibiting as an artist in 'RETROaction.'

Ellen Tani is an art historian and curator based in Rochester NY, where she is Assistant Professor of Art History at Rochester Institute of Technology. She has held postdoctoral fellowships at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, and her museum career includes curatorial roles at the ICA Boston, Whitney Museum and Bowdoin College Museum of Art. As a specialist in contemporary art's intersection with critical race studies, with a particular focus on conceptual- and performance-oriented practices, Dr. Tani uses methods from the arts and humanities to explore questions of power, gender, race and ethnicity from the 20th Century to the global present. Her writing has been published in Art Journal, Panorama, American Quarterly, Art in America and other outlets.

Kate Fowle is curatorial senior director at Hauser & Wirth. Prior to joining the gallery in 2023, she was director of MoMA PS1; chief curator at Garage Museum in Moscow; and executive director of Independent Curators International (ICI) in New York. She was also the first international curator of UCCA in Beijing and co-founder

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of the first Masters Program in Curatorial Practice on the West Coast. Fowle started her museum career in the UK, where she initially trained as an artist. She has curated more than 50 exhibitions internationally and initiated numerous institutional programs to support artistic research and collective practices.

Publication

In summer 2024, a new edition of the 1993 publication 'The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism' will be released by Dancing Foxes Press with Künstlerhaus Stuttgart and LAXART, marking the 30th anniversary of Charles Gaines' and Catherine Lord's exhibition and publication 'The Theater of Refusal.' Coedited by Rhea Anastas, Charles Gaines, Jamillah James and Eric Golo Stone, this publication reprints in facsimile the eponymous 1993 publication that documented the show, which contained essays by Maurice Berger, Gaines and Lord, as well as the transcript of a roundtable that included a range of artists and writers. Reproducing images of the exhibition for the first time in color, the new edition augments the original publication with an essay by poet and scholar Fred Moten; recent conversations between Lord and Gaines and between Moten and Gaines; a roundtable discussion that echoes the first, moderated and edited by Thomas (T.) Jean Lax and Jamillah James; and an afterword by Rhea Anastas. Supporters include Hauser & Wirth, Galerie Max Hetzler, the Rennie Collection and a Teiger Foundation Director's Award.

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Caption and courtesy information:

Installation view of 'The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism,' organized by Charles Gaines, University Art Gallery (UAG), University of California, Irvine, 1993. From left: David Hammons, 'African American Flag,' 1990; Renée Green, 'Blue Skies,' 1990; Gary Simmons, 'Us & Them,' 1990; Pat Ward Williams, '32 Hours in a Box . . . and Still Counting,' 1988.
Photo: Catherine Opie

Rodney McMillian
Untitled (Red Sunset)
2023
Latex, acrylic on blanket
134.62 x 149.86 cm / 53 x 59 in
© Rodney McMillian
Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles
Photo: Brica Wilcox

Charles Gaines
Submerged Text: Signifiers of Race #6 (detail)
1991
Ink on paper, silkscreen on acrylic, 2 parts
Each: 94.6 x 79.4 x 3.8 cm / 37 1/4 x 31 1/4 x 1 1/2 in
© Charles Gaines
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth
Photo: Keith Lubow

Lorna Simpson
Twenty Five Candles
1993
25 color Polaroid prints
Unique
Each: 60.7 x 60.7 cm / 23 7/8 x 23 7/8 in
Each framed: 63.2 x 51.8 x 3.8 cm / 24 7/8 x 20 3/8 x 1 1/2 in
© Lorna Simpson
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth
Photo: Timothy Doyon

Kevin Beasley
Patch
2022
Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton, altered house-dresses, altered t-shirts, shoelaces
213.4 x 236.2 x 5.1 cm / 84 x 93 x 2 in
© Kevin Beasley
Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles
Photo: Evan Bedford