

I LOVE MYSELF I WANT YOU TO LOVE ME

BY KATHY NOBLE

The “formation of the self” was the subject of the highly debated 2017 Whitney Biennial. It is a popular topic: numerous articles—covering everything from selfies to identity politics—are published each week on what selfhood might mean today. As of 2017, many of these articles refer to narcissism, the go-to term to convey myriad issues of the “self,” from simple self-involvement to psychopathic abuse. Narcissism is used with the same ease to refer to the poses of teenage girls on Instagram and the delusions of Donald Trump. This essay focuses on manifestations of narcissism in recent art that considers the construction and performance of identity in American culture.

Jordan Wolfson, *Riverboat song* installation view at Sadie Coles HQ, London, 2017. © Jordan Wolfson. Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Robert Glowacki



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Narcissism is the most demonized personality disorder, and it is also now the most overused amateur diagnosis. In *The Selfishness of Others: An Essay on the Fear of Narcissism* (2016), Kristin Dombek writes brilliantly on the recent proliferation of websites and chat rooms that form the digital world she names the “narcosphere,” offering self-help and quasi therapy to self-identified victims of narcissism. But if narcissism is now an insult, some of the traits associated with narcissism are also socially sanctioned traits of entrepreneurial citizens who want to get ahead: self-entitlement; control, via manipulation and exploitation; lying when necessary; a highly performing public self; and the projection of their own shame, anger, and lack onto others, as a form of psychological splitting—so that they stay “good” and the other becomes “bad.”

Jordan Wolfson’s recent work considers figures victimized by narcissistic abuse and violence, offering an aestheticization of the two forms to create a “euphoric” spectacle for the viewer. His video *Riverboat song* (2017) begins with an animated character—a young boy, described as Huckleberry Finn in the press release, with messy tufts of orange-red hair—dancing in high heels to Iggy Azalea’s song “Work.” The boy’s gestures mimic the movements of a stripper; as Azalea raps her tale of formation, Huck grows oversized breasts and a large rear, which fall off as he shimmy and shakes. Wolfson’s deadpan voice tells a story of a romantic relationship with a narcissist. The tale follows the kind of vampiric, abusive trajectory that is often told in the chat rooms of the narcosphere: “When I leave you, you’ll forgive me and blame yourself... You’ll find my lack of empathy disturbing...” As the video ends, Huck looks at his reflection and touches a mirror as Bob Dylan sings, “Nobody feels any pain.”

Just before the end, a YouTube clip of a white man beating a black man briefly appears. This moment inspired Wolfson to create the controversial virtual reality work *Real violence* (2017), in which Wolfson batters a white man (actually a lifelike animatronic doll) to death. As the doll’s head cracks open and bleeds, Wolfson stamps on it repeatedly. The moment reminds me of my own experience of violence: When I was twenty-two, I was brutally attacked by a teenage girl. The vision of the girl jumping to propel her head toward my face is burnt into my brain. She looked just like me—small, thin, with a blond ponytail—but her face was contorted with rage. The bodily force smashed my nose to pieces and left me lying unconscious, bleeding on the pavement. In response to a question from Beatrix Ruf, Wolfson claimed that “real violence... has the potential to have a euphoric effect on the viewer.” But when you have experienced *real* violence, in *real* life, the idea that watching it can induce “euphoria” is disturbing, and worthy of deeper reflection than Wolfson’s work gives it. Wolfson’s *Real violence* is performed provocation, the contemporary version of Chris Burden’s *Shoot* (1971) or Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* (1974), but without the risks that these artists experienced.

Wolfson’s comments celebrating “real violence” were made in relation to *Colored sculpture* (2016). This work portrays the Huck Finn character in the form of an animatronic puppet that hangs from chains hooked into motorized winches, in a quadrant of steel truss. The puppet performs a macabre dance, its limbs moving elegantly around, before it is jerked, flung, smashed, or dragged along the floor. It speaks, listing actions (“Four to bleed you; five to touch you; six to move you...”), and, at another point, Percy Sledge’s “When a Man Loves a Woman” blasts to accompany its pathetic choreography. Ajay Kurian wrote of *Colored sculpture*: “Let us imagine for a moment that *Colored sculpture* was precisely that, a sculpture of a person of color. Let us imagine that, rather than seeing a red-haired white child, we saw a black boy hanging from the rafters. What then? My guess is that the reaction would have been different. Instead of feeling an empathic queasiness, a kind of universal wretchedness, I would wager that many would say that the piece is too “obvious,” too simple, too direct, too political, too “real.”¹ Kurian’s statement suggests that looking into a mirror that directly reflects the image of America’s racial division would, perhaps, be too shameful, and thus destroy art’s narcissistic façade.

As if responding to Kurian’s critique, Wolfson created *Black sculpture* (2017). The same Huck Finn doll is “reincarnated” (as described in the press release) and cast in black rubber. He sits against the gallery wall, his body pulled upright by a chain that attaches his head to the ceiling. The press release does



Jordan Wolfson, *Riverboat song* (stills), 2017. © Jordan Wolfson. Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London



Jordan Wolfson, *Black sculpture*, 2017. © Jordan Wolfson.
Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Robert Glowacki

not address what seems an undeniable reference: the history of American black slaves' bodies. That's all the more surprising given that slavery is central to the book Wolfson references—Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck escapes with Jim, a runaway slave. Wolfson's Huck Finn, in his black incarnation, literally inhabits the role of a shackled slave; but unlike *Colored sculpture*, *Black sculpture* is lifeless. The press release states: "Its eyes are hollow, awaiting animation and character. Its diabolical grin and awkward anatomy nod to the genre of evil dolls and toys, while its disconnected limbs—threaded by metal chains—carry a deeper subtext of latent violence." It goes on to state: "Throughout his latest work, he exploits the distortions of cartoon to render the reality of human acts and behaviours without moralizing or polemic."

So here we are, in 2017, looking at a lifeless black figure hung from a chain without moralizing or polemic. The white cube might be positioned as a space of neutrality, but the image Wolfson has invoked is the image of the history of a violently racist America. To take another's reality and transform it into one's own, without any consideration for that other's history or the feelings that this might invoke, is a narcissistic act.

Yet Wolfson is surely aware of this, regardless of his assertions of neutrality, given his use of Iggy Azalea's song in *Riverboat song*. Azalea (a white Australian) had a public Twitter fight with musician Azealia Banks (an African American) that began when Banks pointed out that Azalea referred to herself as "a runaway slave master" in the lyrics to her song "D.R.U.G.S." Azalea later apologized: "Sometimes we get so caught up in our art and creating or trying to push boundaries, we don't stop to think how others may be hurt by it."² Azalea has also been widely

critiqued for her mimicry of African American dialect in her music, which musician Jean Grae described as "verbal blackface." Perhaps, like Azalea, Wolfson is a little caught up in trying to push boundaries—nevertheless, his work is laced with symbolic references. Wolfson's zombie-like black figure³ speaks to a form of black abjection that has occurred frequently in American popular culture from the last century. Artist Hannah Black writes lucidly about black abjection in an essay for *frieze d/e*. After dissecting Hal Foster's famous essay⁴ and its positioning of the interest of artists (Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, et al.) in abjection as a valorization of misery, Black writes that Foster argues: "If there is a subject of history for the culture of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, the Person of Color, but the Corpse." In her counterargument, Black states: "American prisons are overwhelmingly black, American poverty is overwhelmingly black, American 'abjection' is overwhelmingly black. But contemporary art is overwhelmingly white, seeming to only register blackness as either an aesthetic modulation or a species of 'identity politics.'" Black goes on to cite theorist Rey Chow: "I want to argue that it is actually the colonizer who feels looked at by the native's gaze. This gaze, which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer 'conscious' of himself, leading

to his need to turn this gaze around and look at himself, henceforth 'reflected' in the native-object." This "self" becoming conscious of its "self," and thus rejecting those unlike this "self," can be interpreted as a form of narcissistic "splitting." The "other" is too other, so much so that it cannot possibly be part of their reality as constructed in their own image, so it must be rejected as another world entirely.

In an interview in this magazine, artist, director, and cinematographer Arthur Jafa reflected on race, selfhood, monstrosity, and othering: "I've been continually obsessed with the movie *Alien* (1979). To me it's no accident that when the alien first pops out of the guy's chest, all the White folks pull back. But Yaphet Kotto grabs a fork, and he's gonna go in on the alien!... He's the one saying, 'I recognize, I know what the fuck this is. Let's kill it and let's kill it now!' He recognizes the danger immediately. In a sense, he's seeing himself."

For Jafa, in his own art, the Internet is not a narcissistic pool but a way of making and sharing a multiplicity of histories and identities. Jafa's seven-minute video *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016) tells a story of African American identity via found footage; Jafa interweaves iconic figures, such as Barack Obama and Martin Luther King Jr., with crowds, athletes, musicians, dancers, protestors, victims of police violence, moments of burning sun and some movie aliens—taken from YouTube, Getty Images and various other sources—set to the soundtrack of Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" (2016). Jafa is a masterful editor: as his choreography of bodies moves from one to the next, joy transforms into pain and back again, over and over, creating fierce intensity through gasps of tension and release. It is at once a work of sublime beauty and an affirmation of horror existing in plain sight, presenting a polarized duality: the black culture that we consume (which dominates American music and



Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (stills), 2016.
Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome



Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* installation views at Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome

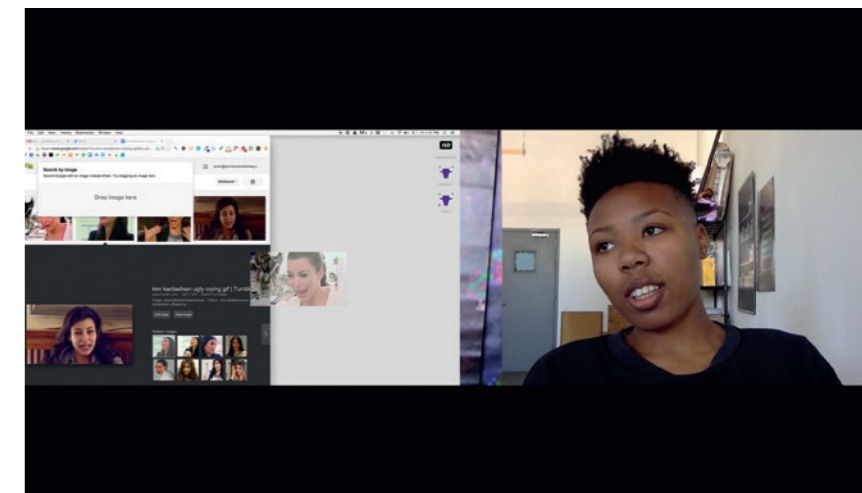


sports) and the black bodies that we abuse or murder (if you are a black American, you are twelve times more likely to be murdered than a white American⁵). It deliberately produces a concentrated form of cognitive dissonance. Such dissonance occurs when a person holds two opposing beliefs simultaneously; it is often a form of narcissistic projection, when unconscious beliefs leak out via actions, contradicting the individual's stated beliefs. The collective narcissism of daily life and the cognitive dissonance it entails are themes of Cécile B. Evans's new fictional television series *Amos' World*. Evans asks a series of questions about contemporary life: How does the "self" in the digital age reconcile the gap between the perceived freedom and the control of the network? Is the "architect" who built the system the cause, or are those who use the structures also responsible for the world they inhabit? And when, if ever, do we become aware of our narcissistic subjectivity and realize that there was another viewpoint all along? *Amos' World* is set in a socially progressive housing estate inspired by famous Brutalist housing complexes such as the Cité d'Habitation and Habitat

67. The aim was to encourage perfect individual-communal living communes for the capitalist age—yet they nearly always failed, as people did not conform to the behaviors envisioned by the architects. The first episode of *Amos' World* introduces the titular character Amos, who represents the stereotype of the frustrated, angry white man, who exudes an arrogance that belies his true, slightly pathetic nature; he almost enjoys wallowing in the grotesqueness of his own actions. He resembles a cross between Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's fallen-to-earth Little Prince and architect Peter Smithson, who co-designed the famous London social housing estate Robin Hood Gardens, only to later describe the tenants as despicable and ungrateful.

Amos is played by a three-dimensional puppet with a digitally rendered face, and the other characters—inhabitants of the estate and the Weather, a kind of benevolent foil to Amos—are real and animated performers. As in all good television, the titular subject, Amos, is never the actual subject. As dramas unfold, what began as a utopian living situation becomes increasingly psychologically challenging—the characters' emotional and physical needs are revealed to be in conflict with what those who constructed this society believe to be "good." Long before the Internet, television was the site of broadcasts in which a mirroring, or projection, of Western societies' various selves occurred. Martine Syms's *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* (2015) uses the format of a television sitcom to create a pitch for a fictional show entitled *She Mad*. The work is an essay on the portrayal of the black American self via a history of the sitcom, which combines Syms's own experiences with details of popular culture. Syms uses this hall of mirrors—from real life, to fiction, to real life that imitates fiction, to a proposal of a fiction that tells the history of this fiction interwoven with real life—in order to imagine a new narrative of selfhood (an excerpt of Syms stating "We're not aliens" from *The Mudane Afrofuturist Manifesto* (2013) also appears in Jafa's work). Stefano Harney and Fred Moten speak of the theorization of black performance in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, (2013); in the chapter "Blackness and Governance" they write: "What is the essence of (your) (black) performance? An imperative is implied here: to pay attention to (black) performances since it is left to those who pay such attention to retheorize essence, representation, abstraction, performance, being." Syms has stated that sometimes she feels that "we're still talking about an essentialist idea of what is or is not black art... I get really bored with the idea that there is some specific way that black art looks. I am, however, very intrigued by the idea of making an image in a black way... I think less about myself as a black artist than I do about making work for a black viewer." Syms is paying attention: to the complexity of the selves that exist within her potential audience.

Syms's emphasis on the audience reflects a paradigm shift that television has undergone in the last decade to place emphasis on producing a vast range of shows that reflects viewers' myriad desires, interests, and realities. The Internet might be labeled narcissistic because of the selfie, but it has decentralized knowledge production, and in the process it has destabilized the dominance of the institutional voice—which in turn has fueled the production of diverse televisual broadcasts by writers and directors such as Aziz Ansari, Issa Rae, Justin Simien, and Jill Soloway. It has also reinvigorated the music video as an art form. Kanye West's infamous video for the song "Famous" (2016) comments ambiguously on the intersections of racial politics, gender politics and narcissism. It shows twelve silicone sculptures—of Chris Brown, George W. Bush, Bill Cosby, Ray J, Caitlyn Jenner, Kim Kardashian, Amber Rose, Rihanna, Taylor Swift, Donald Trump, Anna Wintour, and himself—lying naked in bed, asleep in a row, forming a quasi-religious tableau.



Martine Syms, *A Pilot For A Show About Nowhere* (stills), 2015.
© Martine Syms. Courtesy: the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York



Top - Cécile B. Evans, *Amos' World: Episode One* (production still), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna / Rome
Bottom - Cécile B. Evans, *Amos' World: Episode One* (lead image), 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna / Rome

The sculptures mechanically “breathe” to appear lifelike, vulnerable in their sleeping state. They were exhibited at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles for one day. “Famous” offers an extreme exercise in the cognitive dissonance of selfhood, as does West’s entire project as an artist: his music comprises myriad layers of compositional, improvisational, sampling, and performance traditions. “Famous” includes samples from Nina Simone’s “Do What You Gotta Do” (1968) and trailblazing Jamaican reggae artist Sister Nancy’s “Bam Bam” (1982) and features guest vocals by Rihanna. West juxtaposes the lyrics “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / Why? I made that bitch famous” with material by highly influential black women, while rapping “For all the girls that got dick from Kanye West.”

However, West and his work are hard to read, since he exhibits such volatile personal extremes—for example, offering Cosby and Trump public support, which he later recanted. Some critics argue that his misogynistic lyrics are a performance of a stereotype of the identity of a black male hip-hop artist (and so could be read as “overidentification”—a term that Slavoj Žižek coined with Slovenian band Laibach when they controversially performed as Nazis on national television in 1982—whereby you inhabit the role you seek to critique, which could equally apply to Wolfson). Others argue that West’s misogyny is plainly inexcusable, no matter what the intentions. His approach could be described as the kind of cultural anthropophagism Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade described in his *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928): he encouraged Brazilian artists to take a cannibalistic attitude to both their own and Western culture, in the wake of postcolonial Brazilian politics and culture—rather than assimilating, the artist-as-cannibal eat their enemies and digest them to create a new product. But sometimes West eats the wrong thing and spits it out again quickly.

The formation of the self can be a violent act. It is also an act that cannot occur alone: it is influenced, sometimes controlled, by the institutions around us. How we interact, perceive, frame, depict, and discuss the events of our lives affects the future of our lives. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) sociologist Erving Goffman treated these interactions as a form of performance, espousing the belief that human behaviour is shaped by the struggle to “perform” the self you wish to be—and in turn, you can control the viewer’s reaction. However, fundamental to this study was Goffman’s belief that humans are taught to consistently modify their behaviour to fit in institutionally and socially. At an event organized by the artist Cally Spooner (*A Social Body Event* with Serpentine Galleries) addressing ideas of community, the clinical psychologist Dr. Victoria Lidchi stated that “The social is psychological and the psychological is social, and so our inner world is manifested in our outer actions and our outer world is created by these actions.”

Racism and sexism are endemic under the structural conditions of a capitalist patriarchy. They are also conditions of living in themselves, not random occurrences. The institutions we live within are not set up for everyone to thrive; in fact, they are barely set up for most people to survive, as the economics of class also play out. Most Western institutions mirror an old world. Although many have recalibrated their surface image, their false self, they have barely evolved the scaffold, the subconscious, of their internal systems, their true self.⁶ This is not conjecture, it is a fact that numerous statistics evidence: the precise forms of discrimination may vary, but they exist, both overtly and invisibly, everywhere. Denying this is akin to Donald Trump denying climate change. The question of basic civil and human rights, let alone equality, are subject to our collective ability to move past this form of institutional narcissism. As Audre Lorde argued so eloquently, you can’t dismantle something using the tools of your master, you need to find your own tools, your own structures, possibly even your own institution. Or, as Netflix’s *Dear White People* advises, “don’t fuck your oppressor”—especially when your oppressor is attempting to seduce you with their near perfect mimicry of authentic empathy. In an interview on Ray Filar’s Killjoy FM (Resonance), the academic Sara Ahmed stated: “So much violence is hidden by being usual, or ordinary, or everyday. You don’t notice the violence that occurs to a homeless person, as we have been taught to screen out things that threaten our own occupation of a space.” What, in your need to feel special, to retain occupation of your space, are you screening out?

1. Ajay Kurian, “The Ballet of White Victimhood: On Jordan Wolfson, Petroushka, and Donald Trump,” *Artspace* (November 15, 2016), <http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/jottings/ajay-kurian-on-jordan-wolfson-colored-sculpture-54364>.
2. Steven Horowitz, “Iggy Azalea Apologizes for Controversial ‘Runaway Slave Master’ Line,” *HipHopDX* (March 12, 2012), <http://hiphopdx.com/news/id.18983/title.iggy-azalea-apologizes-for-controversial-runaway-slave-master-line>.
3. The zombie concept in American cinema originally arose from Haitian slaves. “Suicide was the slave’s only way to take control over his or her own body. And yet, the fear of becoming a zombie might stop them from doing so. The zombie is a dead person who cannot get across to lan guinée [Africa]...To become a zombie was the slave’s worst nightmare,” writes Amy Wilentz in “A Zombie Is a Slave Forever,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/31/opinion/a-zombie-is-a-slave-forever.html>.
4. Hal Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” *October* (1996).
5. Caroline Mortimer, “Black Americans are being killed at 12 times the rate of white people in the developed world,” *Independent*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/black-americans-12-times-more-likely-murdered-developed-country-dallas-shooting-statistics-a7127596.html>.
6. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott explains narcissism as an extreme form of “false self” (the self we all construct to some extent to present to the world), which hides an underdeveloped, or nonexistent, “true self” (the authentic inner self that feels and knows its reality). Winnicott’s thesis describes a duality that plays out in contemporary art and culture: on the one hand is the narcissistic protagonist, who performs successfully, albeit superficially, at first glance; and the other is the authentic protagonist, who can initially appear self-involved in their own identity politics, but in doing so actually look outside themselves to engage with others.