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Andrea K. Scott "Arthur Jafa's Crucial Ode to Black America," *The New Yorker*, January 23, 2017

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ARTHUR JAJA'S CRUCIAL ODE TO BLACK AMERICA

The filmmaker's momentous video installation "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, is required viewing.



A still from Arthur Jafa's lyric and searing installation at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, in Harlem. Courtesy Arthur Jafa / Gavin Brown's Enterprise

Our forty-fourth president, dignity incarnate, leaves office this week to make way for a reality-TV star. Whether you're looking for art to reflect a sense of outrage and despair or to deliver flashes of joy, Arthur Jafa's momentous video installation "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, is required viewing. (It closes Jan. 28.)

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Jafa's subject is bigger than politics—it's the matter of black life in the United States. A century of police brutality and political gains, of triumph, tragedy, and resilience has been distilled into seven lyric and searing minutes of rapid-fire clips culled from a passel of sources. A partial list: silent movies, documentary footage of marches and concerts, sports coverage, music videos, news stories, Hollywood blockbusters, police-dash-cam downloads, citizen journalism, the artist's home movies, and, of course, YouTube. (To viewers familiar with media art, the results may suggest a woke update of Bruce Conner's pioneering 1958 film collage, "A Movie.")

The piece opens with the hero-next-door Charles Ramsey, who rescued the Ohio kidnapping victim Amanda Berry, in 2013, telling reporters, "I knew something was wrong when a little pretty white girl ran into a black man's arms. Dead giveaway." It ends with the singer James Brown collapsed on the stage, an image that becomes almost martyrlike in the wake of scene after scene of bodies violently felled.

Jafa has spoken of his desire to create a cinema that "replicates the power, beauty, and alienation of black music," and the length of his supercut was determined by Kanye West's song "Ultralight Beam," which plays behind the audiovisual patchwork like the beautiful backing of an intricate quilt.

At the age of fifty-six, Jafa is making his *début* at the gallery, but he has a distinguished career as a filmmaker, with credits ranging from a cinematographer for Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut" to the director of photography on Solange Knowles's video "Don't Touch My Hair." He may be best known as the cinematographer of "Daughters of the Dust," directed by Julie Dash. Like that movie (and like the paintings of Kerry James Marshall, now exultant at the Met Breuer), Jafa's "Love" disrupts the whitewashing of American culture with a black-centric view, one that is traumatic, ecstatic, and long overdue. ♦