

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Tobi Haslett, "Object Lessons," *Artforum*, December 09, 2016

## ARTFORUM

### Object Lessons

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Arthur Jafa, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, 2016, video, color and black-and-white, sound, 7 minutes 30 seconds. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**"MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN"** is the rhetorical equivalent of teargas—a bit of blinding toxin to spray at the livid crowd. But behind the flash and menace of Trump himself, his advisors have begun to undertake other, subtler operations on our shared language, delivering, in their interviews and slogans, more insidious tweaks to speech. Steve Bannon, chief strategist and a cofounder of alt-right Breitbart News, has proclaimed that he's no racist, but an "economic nationalist" whose princely sympathies reach beyond the white working class to the minority poor. So his rapacious political project has in fact been a holy mission—a chance to lift up the savages. "I was the one who said we are going to Flint, Michigan, we are going to black churches in Cleveland," he told the *Wall Street Journal*, "because the thrust of this movement is that we are going to bring capitalism to the inner cities." Yes of course, because Black poverty lies at some pitiful *remove* from the capitalist system—not at its clogged, spastic heart.

*Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, a giant single-channel video installation by Arthur Jafa, supplies Bannon's idiocy with a smart counter. (No matter that it was made before the elections of November 8th.) A collage film, it relishes the textures and patterns of Black music, and it exposes—with cleverness, poignancy, and slicing, vicious puncta—the brutal bond of Blackness to the commodity form. That bond dooms and

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arouses. Everyone but Bannon knows that Black people in America were captured, whipped, murdered, raped—and had their families fractured, psyches throttled, and culture blasted and suppressed—all for the noble purpose of making someone rich. [Fred Moten](#)'s name for Black radical aesthetics is “the resistance of the object”—so freedom might mean *marching through*, not flinching from, precisely the process of commodification that formed and punished a people, the swelling dreams and curling deceits of exploitation and profit, “progress” and surplus, value and lack.

But “freedom” is taking it a bit far—let's say “agency.” Jafa's video flirts with a sleek form, the music video, which he cuts and distorts. [Kanye West](#)'s rap-gospel “Ultralight Beam” is the basis, and the song's fusion of two distinct musical styles tempts us to name what might be common to all forms of Black expression—how they swing through suffering, drawing from every political insult a melancholy principle in trial and refusal. Like [Chris Marker](#) and [Harun Farocki](#) before him, Jafa is a master of the repeated gesture. (Jafa is also cinematographer for [Solange Knowles](#)'s two most recent videos, and, famously, [Julie Dash](#)'s 1991 *Daughters of the Dust*, currently playing at New York's [Film Forum](#).) But his archive is different: viral videos of crowds swaying in basketball stadiums; triumphant footage of Bayard Rustin, MLK, and Malcolm X; and low-res clips of police abuse and the protests they prompt. What emerges is not some stonily virtuous monument to Black history, but a staccato commentary on the power of capital to link the pleasures of the spectacle to the terror of race.

There's a small difference, though, between what we're watching and what we see. Jafa's images are of varying “quality.” Cop car dash-cam footage is diced into bleary pixels, only to be followed by [Bobby Seale](#)'s still, solemn face, speckled by film grain. A handful of clips are stamped with the gettyimages® watermark, which floats with glassy indifference over Dr. King, or fire-hosed demonstrators, or a shot of a burning house. Source matters here—origins, less so. The degradation of the image is an index for its circulation, its exchange, and ultimately its part in constructing—nay, “performing”—a collective identity whose historical struggle is bound, in some part, to the function of the eye. [Hito Steyerl](#), lover of glitches and .MOV files, has [written a whole manifesto](#) in defense of the “poor image.” Here, that poverty is Black.

But I've made the video sound too bustling, too teasing, too pleased with itself for the wittiness of its effects. It is also a forceful work. “This is a God dream, this is a God dream,” West sings over the shifting collage, shoving redemption into the sad parts. Jafa's juxtapositions rise above cleverness but shrink from sentimentalism, constructing a picture of Blackness that manages to fold a whole emotional galaxy—glory, disappointment, buffoonery, lust, poise—into seven minutes of mass-market pop. Music orders the piece; but that music is itself disordered, tripping gracefully through its own syncopations and eccentricities, all the while doing its pretty embroidery on the beat. *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* seems to conjure Langston Hughes's gruesome joke: that Bop music got its name from the sound of a cop bashing his billy club into a Negro's skull. What is the relation, really, between history and aesthetics, trauma and form? Thirty seconds into Jafa's piece, West's voice dips over footage of a fleeing Walter Scott as he takes a police bullet in the back. This week, we learned that the officer in question will walk free—to the surprise of nobody I know. By now it's a tradition, an inevitability, a promise, a pattern, a curse—which is to say, a rhythm.

*Arthur Jafa's Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death plays through January 28, 2017 at [Gavin Brown's Enterprise](#), 429 West 127th Street, New York.*