

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Orit Gat, "Arthur Jafa," *Frieze*, January 22, 2017

## Frieze



### Arthur Jafa

#### Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, USA

Even if you don't recognize all of the images in *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016), they are somehow familiar. Many of the scenes in the seven-minute, found-footage video are iconic – Martin Luther King waving from the back seat of a car; Jimi Hendrix onstage – while others have been circulated widely, like the viral videos of crowds dancing during suburban basketball games or President Obama singing 'Amazing Grace' at the funeral of Clementa Pinckney, the South Carolina State Senator who was murdered, along with six other black parishioners, by Dylann Roof in a Charleston church in 2015. A repository of representations of black lives in the US, the film utilizes images that have been culled from sources as varied as television news and YouTube videos, archival films and C-SPAN, the public-access channel televising US government proceedings.



Arthur Jafa, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, 2016, installation view, Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 2016-17. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

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The sequence is fast, the pace incessant: Notorious B.I.G., aged 17, performing on a Brooklyn street; a young boy crying in front of the camera; basketball player LeBron James slam-dunking; a white police officer violently arresting a young black woman in a yellow bikini on the front lawn of a suburban house. Part of what makes this video so powerful is the duality it presents: the duality that epitomizes race relations in the US. On the one hand, most American music is actually African-American music, American sports are dominated by black athletes, and fashion, language and a multitude of further American societal signifiers are often appropriated from black culture. On the other hand, the African-American community has suffered a history of racist segregation, as well as economic and social marginalization, since the era of slavery, which continues to inflict multiple forms of violence on black lives today.

Set to 'Ultralight Beam' (2016), a track from Kanye West's last album, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* brings up the idea of the music video as a space of visual experimentation and political potential. (Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, 2016, has been widely discussed in these terms; it was heavily inspired by Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, for which Jafa was the cinematographer.) But *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* is not a music video: it's an extension of Jafa's 2016 project for the Hammer Museum's Made in LA biennial exhibition, in which he displayed a large-scale installation of vitrines full of notebooks he's been working on since the 1990s. The notebooks are collections of black American visual culture: collaged newspaper clippings, art reproductions, architectural photographs and small objects that refuse to restrict or marginalize a supposed 'black aesthetic' to stereotypical images of music or violence, sports or poverty.



Hortense Spillers in Arthur Jafa's *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

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With *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, Jafa – who has thus far worked primarily in film, as both director and cinematographer – combines a deep understanding of the political potential of the moving image with a consideration of the movement of images; that is, how their process of circulation is, in itself, a meaningful narrative of exposure. The cultural zeitgeist today is largely constructed on social media and video-sharing platforms. That's why Beyoncé could 'drop' *Lemonade* and see it explode – explored in long-form essays, shared across social media, listened to in bars and clubs, discussed everywhere – within hours. In its video-clip format and mixing aesthetic, and the choice to use Kanye's song as a soundtrack, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* explores these forms of contemporary expression to their full political potential and effect.