

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Seph Rodney, "Confronting the Limits of Catharsis in a Video About Black American Life,"  
*HYPERALLERGIC*, January 24, 2017

## HYPERALLERGIC

### **Confronting the Limits of Catharsis in a Video About Black American Life**

Arthur Jafa's "Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death" communicates a truth about black life in the US: Many of our public encounters erupt in violence or are premised upon violence.



Arthur Jafa, "Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death" (2016) (still), video (color, sound), 7 minutes 25 seconds (all images courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome)

It's rare that an artwork gives you permission to cry. Watching "Love Is The Message; The Message Is Death" (2016), the seven-minute video by the cinematographer and filmmaker Arthur Jafa, I feel I have that. This has something to do with the setup at Gavin Brown's Harlem gallery. Opening its front door, I slip through the heavy black curtain to the left to enter a dark and cavernous garage space without seeing anyone, not even a gallery attendant, making me anonymous. I face the engulfing screen with only a few pillars for company. The video montage leaves me as wrung out as an old

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

dish rag; lynchings; Biggie Smalls spitting his flow on a neighborhood sidewalk; a young Angela Davis smiling; breathtakingly vicious police assaults on black men, women, and children; Miles Davis veiled behind dark glasses; Drake performing on a stage; dancers from the Harlem ballroom scene mercilessly death-dropping; Odell Beckham Jr. displaying his outsized athleticism; a black woman sweating and hollering in her church; heterosexual couples grinding on a dance floor; the farcical eyewitness accounts that have become internet memes; more police savagery; an alien monster ravaging a city as armed forces throw all their military ordinance at it; a solar flare erupting from the sun's surface.



Still from Arthur Jafa, "Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death" (2016)

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jafa has said he wants to make black cinema that has “the power and beauty and alienation of black music.” He’s made a work that does this by using pieces of found footage in what he terms “affective proximities.” This means that Jafa has had to astutely calibrate how one image sequence resonates with the next to create a dynamic lyricism that eddies at moments and then swells to become a wave mesmerizing in its contained ferocity. This particular undercurrent of “Love Is the Message” is true of black life in the US: Many of our public encounters and meetings erupt in violence or are premised upon violence. There are images of Muhammad Ali dancing away from the blows of his opponent, civilians trying to dodge the blows of police batons, cowboys attempting to control the power of the wild animals they ride. I come to see how church is a sanctuary given that it is one of the few spaces in which the threat of violence seems significantly checked



Installation image of Arthur Jafa, “Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death” (2016)

The video is undergirded by the brilliant gospel-R & B fusion “Ultralight Beam” by Kanye West. Because the song gives the video its pacing and heightens its drama, I want to map its lyrics onto my reading of the whole work. It goes, “this is god dream; this is everything.” And crying only offers a brief respite from the agonies and ecstasies I’m taken to.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY



Despite this, I remind myself of Bertolt Brecht's warning against an easy acceptance of the cathartic moment in lieu of a deeper and more elusive possibility in the theatrical experience. "Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death" is not a political program or a set of real-world strategies by which to move through and past this history of endemic violence. The dream of a paternal god that, as Kanye's song insists, will deliver us peace, serenity, and loving, and "make everything alright," isn't enough to transform our social relations. This dream is *not* everything. It never has been. In the dark chamber by myself, I take time to mourn the legacy I've been given, but emerge knowing that there is work to be done.

*Arthur Jafa's Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death continues at Gavin Brown's Enterprise (429 West 127 Street, Harlem, Manhattan) through January 28.*