

# When the Land Meets the Body

Dear La Vaughn,

Allow us to address this text for your solo exhibition *When the Land Meets the Body* at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art in the form of a letter to you. We want to express how inspired we are by your impressive body of work and how grateful we are to have you as a friend, colleague and mentor. Our conversations on art, coloniality, archives and love for the past seven years have guided and enriched our practices as artists, scholars, curators, educators and women. It is our hope that this modest letter can help unfold the generosity that surrounds your artistic practice, and the rich and manifold layers that your work embodies.

We take up the epistolary form to emphasize the collaborative, dialogical intimacy of our friendship,<sup>1</sup> but also and foremost because the epistolary form is reflected in your art works. To take up the epistolary form is to evoke the oral tradition that your lyrical video essays deploy, often addressed to subjects that you conjure from archival arrest. In your site-specific video *In the Place of Shadows* (2021), you create an intimate video letter of care addressed across time and space to the two children Alberta Viola Roberts and Victor Cornelius, who were taken from their families in the Danish West Indies to Copenhagen, Denmark, where they were put on display in the 1905 Colonial Exhibition at the Tivoli gardens and never returned to their parents. In the video essay *Por El Viento Y La Corriente/ Becoming Wind and Current* (2023) you address an unnamed ancestor, who escaped the plantation extermination camps, by listening to the “frequencies of the water and the wind,” to quote visual culture scholar Tina Campt.<sup>2</sup> In writing this letter to you, we also want to acknowledge the special place that the epistolary form holds in your practice more broadly. I remember you once wrote about your father, who was a priest and a gifted storyteller, and how he was part of your artist bio:

“I share this as a reminder that we all are a living accumulation of ghosts.  
I am honored that I can continue the oratorical traditions of my family....”<sup>3</sup>

The oratorical tradition that runs through your family also runs through your work, and it is those voices present in your practice that we want to honor in this letter.

After an initial research visit to Charleston, SC in preparation for this exhibition you wrote the following on Facebook:

In 2017 I made a couple of works based on the hands of the enslaved in the architectural legacy of St. Croix. I made a sculpture using the coral stones they cut out of the ocean which was used in the foundations of most colonial era buildings and can also be seen in some walls. I also made a series of wall rubbings as a way to record their work. It’s pretty impactful to see in some of the buildings in Charleston, SC the literal fingerprints of enslaved children

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Maya Acharya and Gabriella Muasya who in their essay “Sensible Ruptures: Co-creating an Audio-visual Archive for Transformation and Embodied Knowledge” (2023) eloquently make use of the epistolary form and shows its queer, transformative potential within academia.

<sup>2</sup> See Tina Campt, “The Art of refusal”, part of the programme “Fleshing Out the Image,” December 5, 2020: <https://fleshingouttheimage.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> La Vaughn Belle Studio, Newsletter 26 October 2022.

as it was their job to form and turn the bricks. The picture is taken at the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture. They graciously gave me a tour of their archives earlier this week. It's the most impactful thing I've seen in a long time.<sup>4</sup>

These thoughts speak to your longstanding commitment to “making visible the unremembered,”<sup>5</sup> by which you invoke, probe and recombine colonial archives, bodies, spirits, land and the built environment. In pulling from these various materials, you create new forms to register presences that have been obliterated by the most violent histories.

Literary scholar Saidiya Hartman noted how archives and historical records are marred with countless gaps and omissions, especially as it relates to the lives of enslaved people. She coined the writing method of *critical fabulation* to redress archival omissions, weaving imagination and storytelling with archival records to imagine what was and “what could have been,” drawing out care for the lives unaccounted for in the archives.<sup>6</sup> Tina Campt extends Hartman's method beyond narration through “the Black body itself” and its capacity to manifest what she calls “Black (counter)gravity,”<sup>7</sup> a term she uses to counter the weight of anti-Blackness with the Black body's capacity to evoke and register obliterated experiences, create different traces, and hold a deeper reservoir of memories. As we follow your work, we notice that your artistic practice extends these methods into what we might term a *material* critical fabulation, through a bodily sensing of the material evidence in the landscape or the built environment that registers the afterlives of slavery and the presence of Black lives across space and time. From the miniature fragment—a fingerprint of an enslaved child-laborer, whose name we do not know, but whose fingerprint is forever engraved in the hand-molded bricks; to the coral stones dug out of the water in St. Croix by the enslaved laborers and used as the foundations in colonial buildings; to the *Chaney*, scattered porcelain shards that emerge after a heavy rain—you surface the discarded and unnoticed, rearrange the elements, and unfold a different relationship of care for the past, present and future by cutting, burning, ripping and reconnecting the parts into new conceptions of space, time, the body and the human.

In anticipation of the new video (*Effluvia*, 2023) you created in South Carolina, you asked “What if my body was more like a tongue and it could feel the old of water and the sweet of dirt, what if it could taste like a whisper? What if it could do things we don't have verbs for yet?”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the exhibition, the land meets the body meets the archive to both test and expand the boundaries of each, rearticulating Spinoza's question of what does a body do? What do the land, the sea, the shoreline and the horizon remember? What kind of contacts do they register? What forms do they give rise to when they meet? What other histories does an image contain?

Your own body becomes the primary medium to explore these questions, as you plunge into the dirt of the rice fields, or gently caress a dogfennel. In doing so, you draw a “ciné-geography”<sup>9</sup> that

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<sup>4</sup> La Vagn Belle, Facebook post, 26 January 2023.

<sup>5</sup> La Vaughn Belle, artist statement.

<sup>6</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, no. 26 (2008): 11.

<sup>7</sup> Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2021), 47.

<sup>8</sup> Instagram post, artist's profile, July 20 2023.

<sup>9</sup> We draw on Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray's notion of ciné-geography, which describes “situated cinicultural practices in an expanded sense, and the connections—individual, institutional, aesthetic and political—that link them transnationally to other situations of urgent struggle.” Kodwo Eshun & Ros Gray, “The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography,” *Third Text*, 25:1 (2011): 1-12.

counters the maps drawn by Empires that have fractured lands and bodies. Through your bodily remapping, you open to a possibility of drawing relations to other sites impacted by colonization, based on the particularity and ecology of the sites you engage.

This bodily cartographic practice is extended through different media in your large-scale collage series *Storm (How to Imagine the Tropicalia as Monumental)* (2021-2023) where you collapse space and time, layering land, sea and storm to “transgress temporal limitations, cross infinite distances, and invent multiple horizons”<sup>10</sup>. In your watercolor series, where the land meets the sky and the sea, the horizon “refuses to bend in sorrow”<sup>11</sup>, exploring the question of what do islands do? Both your collage series and your watercolor series are different bodily and material registrations of what poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant in his poem names a “tortured geography”<sup>12</sup>:

*To every tortured geography*

*Not work, taut, deaf, monotonous as a sea, endlessly sculpted—but  
eruptions yielding to earth’s effervescence—that expose the heart, beyond  
worry and anguishes, to a stridency of beaches—always dislocated, always  
recovered, and beyond completion—not works but matter itself through  
which the world navigates—attached to and quickly discarded by some  
plan—first cries, innocent rumors, tired forms—untimely witnesses to this  
endeavor—perfectly fusing as their imperfections meet—persuading one to  
stop at the uncertain—that which trembles, wavers, and ceaselessly  
becomes—like a devastated land—scattered.*<sup>13</sup>

In the *Swarm* series, by cutting and burning your way through archival images, you listen to the “lower frequencies”<sup>14</sup> of the archival images and transport yourself to the past of the photograph to create supernatural interventions into the archives, while creating an other-archive, where overlooked histories can be registered. In the digital collage *For Those of Us Who Live on the Shoreline*, the “sea purslane, sea grape, manchineel and mangroves are the keepers of boundary, constructing a kind of living archive as the roots systems hold in the erosion of memory and time.”

I remember that after a master class that I invited you to hold, the students were astonished by your work. In the Q&A that followed, one of the students asked if you consider yourself more of a scholar or an artist.<sup>15</sup> You refrained from giving a direct answer and instead handed it over to me. I don’t remember what I answered back then, but today my answer would be this: What constitutes your *material critical fabulation* is that you sculpt with concepts and percepts, you make videos with fabula and frequencies, you rip, cut and burn with affect and shadows, and you paint with time and space. You treat your subject matter with the mind of an artist-scholar, while treating the materials with the haptic knowledge of an artist. In doing so your artistic practice gives rise to new concepts,

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<sup>10</sup> In the words of La Vaughn Belle.

<sup>11</sup> This is a quote from Belle’s video *In the Place of Shadows* (2021).

<sup>12</sup> This visual mirror between the collage and the poem was created by La Vaughn Belle on Facebook, 23 September 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Édouard Glissant, “Riveted Blood,” *Black Salt: Poems by Édouard Glissant*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Alex Colon and the students of the course “Reparative Practices in the Cultural Archive of Colonialism” at Bard College/Open Society University Network, Summer 2022, for their engagement with your work.

through which we can make sense of the world around us. Your practice ushers in a cosmology, or what we might situate with Glissant as a poetics. Here we have attempted to flesh out a few of those concepts, but many more are still lying in wait in the sea purslane, sea grape, manchineel and mangroves—just waiting to surface.

Without further ado, we will leave it to the visitors to make their own impressions of your work, in their own time.

With love,

Daniela and Katrine,

Lisbon/Provence/Copenhagen/Nuuk/Beirut

Summer 2023

**Daniela Agostinho**, PhD, is a visual culture scholar, curator, and Assistant Professor at the School of Communication and Culture, University of Aarhus in Denmark. She works in the fields of visual culture and artistic and curatorial research with a particular focus on colonial archives and the care and display of contested histories. She is co-editor of the books *(W)archives: Archival Imaginaries, War and Contemporary Art* (Sternberg Press/MIT Press, 2020) and *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data* (MIT Press, 2021).

**Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld**, PhD, is a visual artist, independent researcher, and educator. Her artistic research explores how to develop “reparative critical practices” through assembling fragments of cultural memory, colonial histories, and migration embedded in the built environment, in public spaces and in archives. Recent works include *Voices in the Shadows of Monuments* (2022); *Archives that Matter* (2018-2019), *Entangled Archives* (2020-22), *Rematerialisations* (2022), and *Reroutings* (2022).

Together they co-direct the network “Reparative Encounters: a transcontinental network for artistic research and reparative practices” with La Vaughn Belle and colleagues from the US Virgin Islands, Ghana, and Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland).