



## ON THE BLUE STAGE

A Conversation between  
Rashid Johnson and Hendrik Folkerts

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Hendrik Folkerts: Since *Seven Rooms and a Garden: Rashid Johnson and Moderna Museet's Collection* opened in September 2023, I have been spending a lot of time in the exhibition—giving tours or just walking around. I feel very inside of it. That said, I know that you've been away from it, so you might have developed different thoughts and relationships to the exhibition. How does it feel to return to the project at this point, kind of midway?

HF And that's really what I want to do: discuss the throughlines. Being in this reflective mode, it brought me back to October 2022, when you were in Stockholm for your first site visit. As we were walking through the eight galleries that would become the seven rooms and a garden, we said, "We need a stage!" We needed a mechanism that would enact this hybrid exhibition—a survey of key moments and methodologies in your practice *and* a presentation of Moderna Museet's collection. Indeed, the dialogue in space between those two distinct elements required a support structure.

And so the "blue stage" was born: blue, as a reference to a color that has played such a significant part in your work, and a stage, as a display apparatus that manifests differently in each of the galleries of *Seven Rooms and a Garden*. Sometimes the blue stage is an actual stage, only five centimeters high, that visitors can step onto, and other times it is a blue wall, a blue ceiling, or even blue furniture. As a rule, Moderna Museet's collection is always displayed on the blue stage, and your work is "offstage." Whatever the form of the stage is, it

Rashid Johnson: I feel almost blind to it, you know? I haven't had the opportunity to be so present with it, so it's great for me to be able to look back and think about what we accomplished with this exhibition.

functions as a relational device that—quite literally in this case—stages things in dialogue with each other, making your work a context for Moderna Museet’s collection and vice versa. I want to understand your relationship to the stage, but also the act of staging, a bit more, as you have worked with performance yourself in the past.

HF Such an invitation comes with a responsibility for hospitality. You set the stage so beautifully here, to speak

RJ I really like this prompt because it makes me think about intention and intentionality, how I can imagine my relationship to my own project as well as to the projects of others—and the opportunity to think about one’s practice in that continuum. Using what we’ve called a stage, I think a lot about how I’ve become invested in the idea of an invitation, and how my relationship to performance has rarely included me performing. I do perform, at times, in my films, but often performance involves me inviting others to activate spaces either alongside me or spaces that I provided for them to inhabit. This allows my work or the aspect of my project that is more singular and autonomous—namely the painting and sculpture practice, which is, of course, in conversation with a lot of things in art history as well as self-referential moments—to enjoy that autonomy, while also providing a space for discourse.

The stage has consistently come into my work as a space for discourse, a space for me to be a witness to other artists’ production, other artists’ concerns. I want to employ some of the opportunity that my work has given me to have a broad opportunity for amplification, to provide space for other artists, both historical and contemporary artists. I think our exhibition has effectively extended invitations to living artists, to contribute, to be in dialogue with both my project and the museum.

about how your practice, how your frameworks and the work itself have been host to other artists, whether living or more historical. What have been successful strategies of hosting and hospitality for you?

HF Cally Spooner, an artist and writer I have worked with frequently, said it so succinctly recently: “How things travel when they are left alone.” What that inevitably leads to, if you provide that kind of freedom to people as they’re hosted in a certain situation, is agency. I think agency, if sincere and held well within in a space without overly fixed conditions and expectations, can lead to extraordinary things.

RJ It’s a much lighter touch than you might imagine. This holds true as a host in other aspects of my life too. For instance, when people come into my home, I give over the space: Go to the fridge and get whatever you like. I’m less of a present host and more of a host whose ambition it is to make you feel like the space is as much yours as it is mine. This translates to how I extend the invitations to and host artists in these installations, or any kind of institutional context, namely to say, Here’s the space, and this is an invitation to amplify your voice inside that space, to contribute to a dialogue and a discourse inside that space alongside me and the other guests. I love that it’s so undictated and it comes without expectation. As an artist, the thing I am least excited about is an invitation that comes with an expectation. That’s true in my relationship to residencies, or invitations for exhibitions and speaking engagements. I want freedom. The reason I signed up for this job, for this task, for this responsibility of being an artist and a practitioner and a person who amplifies their voice and speaks truth to circumstances, is freedom—when I am brought into a space, to say what it is that I want to do there.

HF In the exhibition *Seven Rooms and a Garden*, your practice becomes the host for a lot of different things, for the work of other artists but also for Moderna Museet, its collections, and institutional histories. But it's also the other way around, which makes this exhibition the perfect hybrid, as the museum becomes a host for your work, and for artists coming into the space of the exhibition and creating things. Only recently Dana Michel staged her durational performance *MIKE* [2023] in the show, but we have also rotated the film program in the third room, the so-called bedroom of the show [see pp. 36–37], which, so far, has featured six-week-long chapters with video works by Bouchra Khalili; Michelangelo Miccolis and nick von kleist; Charles Atlas and Robert Breer; a mini-survey of Tony Cokes's videos; and the first chapter with Esra Ersen, Every Ocean Hughes, Klara Lidén, and Santiago Mostyn, with works from our collection. So perhaps I should turn it around and ask, If the stage is an instrument of relationality, staging hospitality and agency as reciprocal phenomena, what did the experience of working like this in a museum do for you and mean to you?

RJ A hundred percent! I think *agency* is really the perfect word, as it reflects a couple of different ways of considering your relationship to that space of hospitality. It comes with a sense of responsibility. This may be a projection of my own, but when you have a certain agency, the autonomy and opportunity it comes with fosters or even necessitates a sense of responsibility as well as a sense of needing to be clear. It is important to be held accountable for what you do in the space that provided you all this autonomy and opportunity.

RJ Museums, as institutions, are always evolving and growing. I think there's not one way to imagine what an institution is and what an institution is attempting to be.

I continue to cherish the opportunity to participate in institutions that have public-facing roles and responsibilities, mostly because that's where I fell in love with art. I actually fell in love with art in an institution that you formerly worked in, the Art Institute of Chicago. I was brought there with a school group. It wasn't a decision my parents made, even though my parents were very invested and interested in culture, but for them, that culture didn't necessarily extend to certain kinds of cultural institutions like the Art Institute of Chicago. It just wasn't a place that they thought to bring me as a youth. But the school did, and in the invitation that was made to the school to bring students to the museum, I found my first love. I continue to recognize the value of these places and cherish the opportunity that these institutions provide, acknowledging that they are places where some young person—or any person for that matter—may fall in love, and how valuable that can be in someone's life experience.

When I'm invited to be present in and engage with such an institution, I'm thinking not only about how my practice fits into the collecting histories of that museum, how and in which ways the dialogue that I'm having with my curatorial host, the engagement I'm having with folks in education, my physical presence—whether that's over the course of the opening or through the conversations that often take place around the exhibition—but I'm also thinking about the detritus that I leave after I'm no longer present. I realize it's odd to refer to the impact of art as detritus, but I feel it's an interesting and more complex way to talk about it. Because when you are participating in an exhibition, there are so many moving parts, there are so many moments to which you are often physically engaged and present. The dialogues and the

HF Let's explore that in more detail. In a way, the blue stage does something else as well. It highlights. It elevates the art, of course, but also the people who visit the exhibition, as they step onto the stages. One conversation we've had over the course of this project is that we encourage people to be witnesses. That word, *witness*, has held a prominent place in your work. How is the audience invited into the space as a witness?

conversations and all of what goes into it, which sometimes is public-facing and sometimes takes place in the holes of the institution, behind the screens of the exhibition, but the detritus is what's left, the impact that the project is going to have on the audience. I'm not an artist who is beyond considering the audience. However, I don't pluralize the audience, I don't have expectations for them, nor do I identify them. I don't want to frame who they should be in order to be in this conversation alongside me.

RJ The idea of being witness is central to how an engagement with art takes place. Some people may consider this semantics, but I don't. *Viewing* something is an irresponsible action. You are only responsible to yourself to some degree, and even in that way, it's quite loose, no strings attached. Now, witnesses we have expectations for. We expect them to have a recall. What did you see? What is your recollection? Can you tell me what you felt? Can you tell me what it looked like there? There's a great quote by Maya Angelou that I use often, just because it's so prescient in almost every conversation I have: "At the end of the day people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel." In how I imagine that role, being witness, I'm asking from an audience that they'll remember how they were made to feel.



In *Seven Rooms and a Garden*, we created these spaces and stages that ask for a certain kind of engagement from the audience. When they commit to walking onto the blue stage of the first room, or when they commit to walking onto the blue-lit lawn in the titular garden, when they commit to lying on the blue bed that we created in the “bedroom” with the film program, when they commit to sitting on the blue chairs we make available in the last gallery that function as a space of rest and respite while you watch my film *Black and Blue* [2021], when you commit to those points of engagement with the tactile opportunities that we provide for rest or participation, I think we make a softer landing and create more of an opportunity for witnessing.

HF I want to make my way to another throughline in the exhibition, which is abstraction—not merely as an art-historical motif, but integral to your work in all its variations, regardless of the medium. The first room in *Seven Rooms and a Garden*, titled “The Salon,” is dedicated to abstraction [see pp. 26–27]. Here we show, on a large steel armature placed on the blue stage, numerous art histories of abstraction in Moderna Museet’s collection, from Asger Jorn to Etel Adnan, from Cy Twombly to Rubem Valentim, from Barnett Newman to Stanley Whitney, from Lee Lozano to Lee Bontecou. The display is centered on the work of South African artist Ernest Mancoba [1904–2002; see p. 28]. Offstage, so to speak, your work *God Painting “Closed Eyes”* [2023; see p. 29] is presented alongside a live recording from 1956 of Louis Armstrong playing the song “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue.” The song evokes histories of music vis-à-vis visual art history as well as the more political question of whose shoulders bear or should bear the responsibility to speak out against violence and

injustice—Armstrong was criticized for not using his platform enough to point to the racial violence in the United States. Abstraction returns in some of the other rooms as well: one gallery centers on notions of improvisation through Henri Matisse’s *Jazz* series [1947; see pp. 36–37]; the grand finale to your *Bruise Painting* series [six paintings, all 2023] populates the room titled “Witness” [see pp. 38–39]; and numerous abstract sculptural and painterly motifs converge in your new installation *Home* [2023], on display in the fifth gallery. There are all these signals that point to an expansive view on abstraction. What have been important moments for you in understanding what your relationship to abstraction is?

HF I would like to read a quote by Sam Gilliam to you, an artist I know you have a deep relationship with. He talks about abstraction in such a thrilling way: “[It]

RJ This is really challenging because it’s evolving. My relationship to abstraction is almost different day-to-day. I’ve given it a tremendous amount of thought recently and for me, abstraction vacillates between being wildly anachronistic, like really of a different time, and deeply prescient in my thinking because of its connection to improvisation, which is an inherently timeless position, as well as to the notion of the existential and to freedom and to a sense of liberation. And you see it in this exhibition in the use of the song “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” by Louis Armstrong, and how it shows one can be desperate for abstraction in the way that Armstrong narrates an extremely complex relationship to race; how abstraction is almost an inherently desperate position, because it attempts to communicate with so much pace that it sometimes becomes illegible. One of the things that I love about the idea of abstraction is that it’s simultaneously incredibly legible and unspecific.

messes with you. It convinces you that what you think isn't all. It challenges you to understand something that is different . . . a person can be just as good in difference . . . . I mean if that's your tradition, what you call figures, you don't understand art anyway. Just because it looks like something that resembles you doesn't mean that you have understanding. Why not open up?"

HF It makes the act of you bringing Louis Armstrong's song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" into that first room even more poignant.

RJ It's a beautiful sentiment by a beautiful and talented artist. I think he said it as well as it can be said, in that abstraction has been a carrier for me. It made space for me to yell. When I first came across paintings that were abstract—and of course I'm informed by a very American tradition of abstraction—they felt like screams. Like if you saw someone just yelling on the street, you may not know what they're yelling about, but you can understand the sentiment that may have caused them to want to yell, to want to scream in public. When you see certain actions in space, sometimes they are inherently abstract. Whistling is abstraction, clapping is abstraction, crying is abstraction, laughing is abstraction. Those are all gestures that don't specifically communicate to their intention, but we understand them. I may not know what you're laughing at or why you're laughing, but I understand the idea of laughing. So abstraction is this whole form, and it's a timeless form. It's about the actions that humans take, and in some ways it almost predates more legible communications.

RJ That song and Louis's presence have been central to my development as an artist. One of the reasons that I think about Louis so much is quite personal and deliberate in terms of my relationship to modern art

histories. Oftentimes I recognized in my studies that artists of color were missing from certain periods in art history. Clearly, the canon had insisted on choosing a perspective that I and many other folks find to be limited, in that it historically limited the number of voices that were, again, *invited* to be active and visible. I have filled that gap for myself by recognizing the kind of dichotomous histories that were happening alongside some of the painting traditions I have been informed by and interested in. I'm thinking specifically about the contributions to abstraction by people like Louis Armstrong, people like Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman. I've relocated some of these historical figures in music to a more evolved understanding of canonical contributions to the visual art histories of a certain time period, in particular, for me, American abstract histories.

It's a limitation of museums that they don't contain or present a more robust history of improvisation and/or abstraction. Moderna Museet and similar museums have such an investment in certain kinds of abstractions, such a thorough collection of certain kinds of abstraction. But someone like Louis Armstrong is not collected in institutions like this—the contributions he made, and the way his work informed so many of the artists who *are* active in the museum, are absent. In *Seven Rooms and a Garden*, he's quite literally in dialogue with some of those artists displayed on the armature, that monumental grid, and they are in many ways more impacted by him than he was by them.

HF Behind this grid is an extraordinary new work of yours that you have brought to the exhibition: *God Painting "Closed Eyes"* [see p. 29]. I was rereading an interview with Ernest Mancoba, where he gives a perfect

description of abstraction. I'll share it here, as I believe it speaks to *God Painting* "Closed Eyes." He says, "What I am concerned with is whether the form can bring to life and transmit, with the strongest effect and by the lightest means possible, the being which has been in me and aspires to expression." It's a different articulation of abstraction, as it addresses one's inner life, seeking out expression, which perhaps aligns with European and American postwar histories of Abstract Expressionism—let's remember that Mancoba was an important protagonist in the CoBrA movement. But it really comes from a different place, as this "being" inside of him that "aspires to expression" is an *ancestral being*. So he's talking about a different legacy or heritage, an ancestry that he feels inside himself, and he made it his lifelong quest to visualize and manifest this, which is truly extraordinary in and of itself, and one of the many reasons why Mancoba is at the very center of our grid.

Your first work in the *God Painting* series visualizes a new symbol, the *vesica pisces*, the almond-shaped form that emerges between two overlapping circles, which, in manifold mystical traditions, signifies an interface between the material and the spiritual world. You manifest this symbol in the painting, and you repeat it. So many of your abstract paintings—if you'll allow me to say this—have an exquisite quality of obsession, as you repeat or, better said, iterate a sign or symbol until it is exhausted. This was true for the "anxious figure" motif, and it is true for the *vesica pisces* symbol, which is not exhausted at all since you are at the beginning of your journey with it. How has this symbol lived with you over the last six months, since the painting's debut?

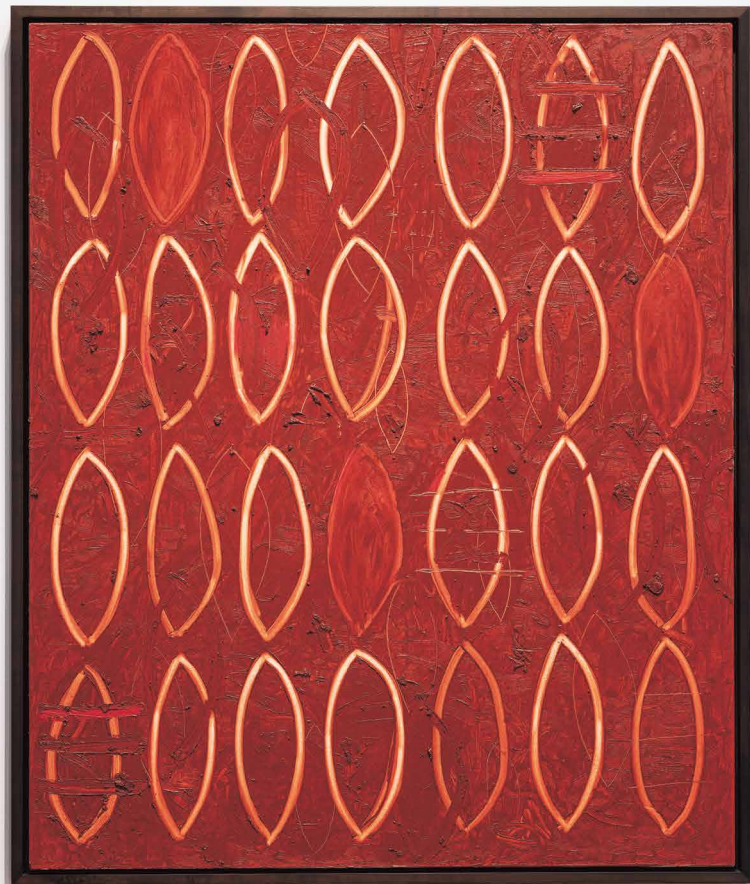
RJ I love hearing Mancoba's conversation around abstraction. It evokes something I've been thinking about

quite a bit recently, which is form, and the way we think about form and its relationship to abstraction, the assumption that form becomes a kind of anecdote, an accompanying position in abstraction. Sometimes when we think about abstraction, we relieve it of the possibility of subject matter. Of course, form is not inherently without the opportunity for signifier exploration, and it can certainly be deliberate in its intentionality. Thinking about Mancoba's work, you recognize that there is a performed symbolism and that there is meaning being constructed in his project. I think another artist who shares that approach is someone like Adolf Gottlieb. They become the antecedent for a work like *God Painting "Closed Eyes,"* which does include, as part of its ambition, a subject matter or an intentionality, a space of really deliberate recognition. It emerges from an experience where I was evolving my relationship to spirituality and needed to find a way to visually identify a sense of a higher power. Through this repetition of a shape, through this meditation, and through this performance of painting, I was able to create the identifiable characteristic I wanted for that painterly space.

If I were to grant myself this courtesy, that painting took a lot of courage. Even speaking as earnestly as I do now, is a challenging labor for me. I come from a more academic background, born into a family that was more invested in atheism and science. To even start to allow and unpack and explore this kind of vulnerability into my project was and remains wildly challenging. But I love the freedom that it's provided me. I continue to challenge the conditions that I had set for myself, because no one told me that I could not speak about the spiritual condition of being. I create that framework for myself. The challenge is to explore this without abandoning the other



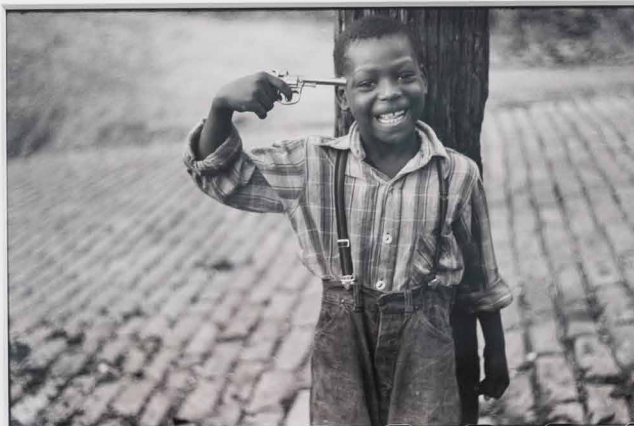






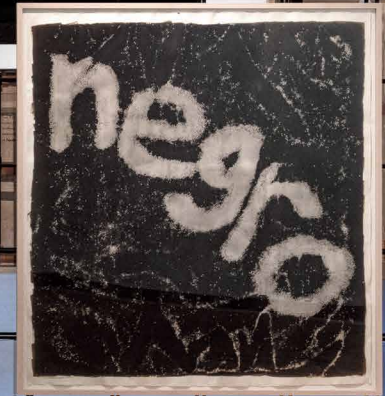


Var god stig ej upp på podiet  
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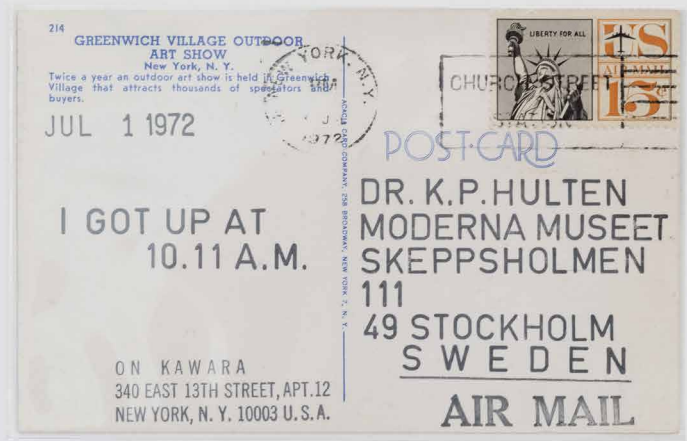












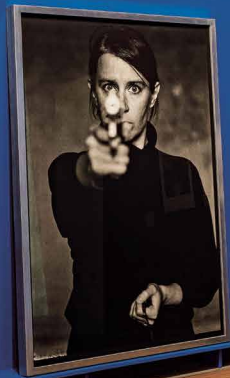




1 Orenthal 1995 Free 2014 Obama 2008 God 2018 John and Tommie 1968 Bird 1974 Toni and I 1977



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**Black and Blue**

Black and Blue is a collection of photographs and text that explore the lives of the individuals who have been the most prominent faces of the Black Lives Matter movement. The collection includes portraits of Orenthal James Simpson, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and George Floyd, as well as images of the protests and riots that followed their deaths. The text provides context for each image and discusses the broader social and political issues that have led to the current moment.

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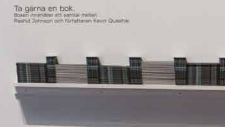
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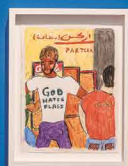
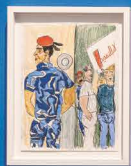




1976 Guaimaro 1957 New York City 1979 Ross 1983

Civil Rights Act 1964 An Easy Death 1991 Berlin Wall 1989 Mother 1986 J&K 1978 Dad 1991





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HF Returning to form for a moment, I am also interested in *how* you manifest this symbol in *God Painting* “*Closed Eyes*” on the canvas, or how you actually carve it out of the red paint, how you scratch into a surface—as opposed to, for example, the *Bruise Painting* series [see pp. 38–39], which is more aligned with a painterly tradition of applying paint to the canvas. It feels fragile and bold at the same time, and, in addition to speaking about form and subject matter, allows us to go into materiality.

prescient concerns in the project, which—in Mancoba’s language—form is part of, and concept is part of, and spirit is part of, ultimately thinking about how a painting in a broader practice can become, in a sincere way, an amalgamation of all these things. To imagine my project as a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk that includes the fullness of my intellectual and spiritual identities.

RJ Without question, there’s a call and response in my painting practice, and the removal of material has always been interesting for me. In the tradition of painting, we more often think about application. It’s inherently how we begin to navigate the idea of what a painting is, conditioning the medium to paint being added to a surface and through those additions we begin to conjure notions of image and strategy and philosophy, to unpack the concerns that the artist is presenting. Yet I’ve always believed in and continue to be fulfilled by the act of removing something. In other words, how one unearths an image, how one removes in order to find something. Historically speaking, that tradition lives in other mediums, for instance, if you think about marble statues and the removal of material to give shape to the artist’s vision. That tradition doesn’t live as strongly in the history of painting, but you see it in the work of artists such as Antoni Tàpies, Cy Twombly, Lee Lozano, or—someone

HF One of my favorite rooms in the exhibition is the second gallery, titled “Smile!”—the Marcel Duchamp room, if you will—where a lavish display of Duchamp’s work is juxtaposed or, actually, confronted with a ready-made that you brought into the room, namely Elliott Erwitt’s photograph *Boy with Pistol, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania* [1950; see pp. 30–35]. On a more personal note, Duchamp was really one of the reasons why I became an art historian and curator. His proposal of the readymade, as an object from daily life that comes into the museum, not only obliterates the artificial boundaries between art and life, but also challenges the institutions of art in their production of value, whether that is economic or intellectual and art-historical value. I think the challenge Duchamp posed to art’s institutions has not been met, which is perhaps one of the tragedies of Duchamp’s legacy, but it also makes his practice a pertinent one to return to.

For Moderna Museet, Duchamp is a grandfather figure. Like Robert Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint Phalle, or Claes Oldenburg, he’s an icon, and we have collected his work in depth. As an icon, he can feel unshakeable, and thus needs to be revisited and understood in our time. It’s one of the objectives that I had set out for myself in making this exhibition. And so, while I was trying to do that by bringing in as many of Duchamp’s works that I could possibly fit on that tiny blue stage, playing with his readymades and his grandiose *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* [1915–23/1961], you said, “All right, if this is your version of the ready-made, I’m going to bring in a single work opposite of that,

else included in our exhibition—Robert Rauschenberg. But indeed, the *God Painting* series really holds at the center this idea of taking something away in order to create the condition for a conversation.



in the corner, as my own readymade,” which is Er Witt’s photograph. The ramifications of that gesture are immense, which I feel every time I step into that room. Tell me about that photo and how it came into your life.

HF It is also striking that you have put a *photograph* in the room, an image that can be reproduced ad infinitum—it brings out a different history of the readymade.

RJ Early in my career I had a significant interest in photography, specifically street photography and the improvisational instinct that comes with it. The artist who really inspired me to be an artist was Roy DeCarava, a photographer who always kind of wandered. I’ve been looking at DeCarava for many years, alongside artists like Henri Cartier-Bresson or Robert Frank, and they brought me to Er Witt and that particular image of the young boy with the toy gun pointed at his head. I remember coming across that image, being both scared by it and challenged by how it could be interpreted. I wasn’t so much challenged by what it was, because in my mind it could simply be a young boy playing with a toy gun. But you can also read the image and place it in a specific time and place, that is to say, Pittsburgh, 1950, and then reframe it as a result of how you locate it into a discourse and create a challenging set of conditions through which to think *with* it. It’s a reflection on Duchamp to borrow that image, and to think about how context becomes an opportunity to inflame a conversation. That’s what Duchamp did so effectively.

RJ I’ve tried to find different ways into Duchamp’s world for people who are less familiar or excited by the radical gesture of his work, through the context of *when* Duchamp is making his readymades. It begins with the shift from a preindustrial world where every shovel was unique and looked a little different, toward a world

HF Duchamp's proposal hasn't lost much of its radicality, but, his work has mainly lived and continues to live inside of museums—the institutions that create the value he was critiquing. There's certainly something ironic about that, but at the same time, it adds tension.

where every shovel started to look the same. This was a catalyst moment. For Duchamp to predate that consistency of objects and then coming into that consistency had to be a radical experience. This is a more anecdotal interpretation of Duchamp's project, perhaps disregarding the poetic qualities of the readymade, but it points to the versatility of how we can approach these objects, and then consider the employability of another person's practice as a readymade. Duchamp could use a urinal made in a factory, so I can use a photograph made by Erwit.

RJ One of the dangers of institutions and the bureaucracy that is inherent to them is that they can sanitize gestures, concepts, and themes that previously felt radical. I don't know if that's the fault of the museum or because of how we engage with the museum, but perhaps it's similar to how a gesture can lose its radical identity when it's hosted within an academic framework, where its radicality is interpreted in piecemeal, unpacked and explored, and then given didactic frameworks. This is one of the real challenges that we face as hosts, also and perhaps especially so in relation to some of the artists and works that we invited into this exhibition. One of the things we attempted to do—and I hope we were successful in—is that we aren't as burdened by the didactic frameworks that have traditionally led to this sanitization. We let things live beyond the didactic unpacking of an artist's project and the delivery of that project within the confines of a structure that, in most cases by fault of their own, institutions are forced to gauge.

HF With Erwit's photograph, as well as every work of yours that is in the exhibition, you show pieces of yourself. The question of self-representation is a constant motif in your work and thus became a major theme in *Seven Rooms and a Garden*, particularly in the last part, when we encounter your installation *Home* [see pp. 42–43]. In this encyclopedia of practice you show us what you make, what you read, the materials you use, the forms you're interested in, the music that reverberates throughout your work, the art histories you align with—all inhabiting the structure that directly cites Sol LeWitt's cube sculptures. In that gallery, *Home* is surrounded by a horizon of On Kawara's work *I Got Up* [1972; see pp. 44–45] from our collection, in which he sent postcards to Pontus Hultén, who was Moderna Museet's director at the time, and other well-known art world figures, from the city he was then in and stamping the postcards with the time that he woke up that day—another great example of an artist marking time and space and factually saying, “I'm here, I'm still alive.” In the last room of the exhibition, we finally see your film *Black and Blue* [2021; see pp. 50–51], a more classic self-portrait, in which the mundane details of everyday life captured within the domestic space of your own home become a stage to consider interiority and—here's what I'm making my way to—the notion of *quiet*, as formulated by Kevin Quashie in his book *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* [2012]. From the beginning, Quashie's book has been instrumental to our conversations, as he gave us so much language on how to consider desire, vulnerability, insecurity, buoyancy, fear, and, ultimately, interiority, *within* questions of race, gender, and class, which are often reduced to a singular thing, rather than expanded on.

Perhaps here I can briefly return to Louis Armstrong and two words that we highlighted earlier in this conversation: *expectation* and *responsibility*. Armstrong and many other historical and living figures like him, were and are dealing with an expectation projected upon them, as they are seen to *represent* a certain group, whether that is black or brown people, queer people, or women—indeed, they are reduced to a singular identity. The Armstrong song that you chose for that first room on abstraction and that you named your film *Black and Blue* after resonates strongly here because of its lyrics: “I’m white inside / but that don’t help my case . . . My only sin / is in my skin / What did I do / to be so black and blue?” Let’s talk about *quiet*.

RJ Yes, Armstrong’s song registers almost autobiographically, as a kind of self-explanation that lives in the song as the character speaks about himself. He doesn’t speak about the collective. He says, “What did *I* do?” He’s really speaking to his own interior engagement and his own reflection, in opposition to the expectations for collectivism and for collective activist positioning. We get to hear this interior dialogue, on how someone feels independent of their relationship to nationality, sexuality, gender, or race, yet informed by all those things. So it’s this beautiful moment of something we’ve stressed in this conversation and in the exhibition at large, namely autonomy.

I’m very appreciative of the introduction to Quashie’s work that you gave me in handing me his book. Subsequently I found that there are a lot of younger artists who are thinking about and reading Quashie’s work. I’m so happy to see that, because I think it provides a way of thinking that has been missing in the conversation around contemporary practice for a long time, namely

HF It feels very appropriate that you embedded *The Sovereignty of Quiet* in your sculpture *Home*. It's a clear reference to that moment of recognition. And speaking of recognition, *Home* is installed in close proximity to the work of two artists that have been very important to you, Sol LeWitt's *3C Half Off Piece* [1969] and David Hammons's *African Stand* [1991; see pp. 46–47]. We named that room "Quiet," after Quashie's book. Visitors meet LeWitt's sculpture in the doorway, as a renewed engagement with the cube and revisiting that history of sculpture, which you cite so explicitly in the cube structure of *Home*. Inside the room, we installed Hammons's sculpture, a work in which he, literally, weighs the history of the African diaspora on a scale, alluding to the forced migration of people and objects

that interiority does not equal navel-gazing. Rather, it's a way of interpreting the world with real truth and real honesty, with vulnerability at its center. It's not self-interest to use your own personal framework to understand the world, to use your own experience to identify what you feel and see happening around you within a broader construction. Reading that book, even in the early pages, just turned something on in me. I was introduced to new themes and ways of seeing in a very nuanced way, things that I felt my work had already, in a really foundational way, been attempting to address.

I felt very seen when reading Quashie's book. It's not every day as an artist that you feel seen. Some of what is inherent to being an artist is feeling that you *need* to make what it is you make, because it's not currently present in the world. It's rewarding when you recognize that what you are considering and thinking does not live in you alone. For me, that book really functions as a vehicle for not being alone.

over centuries. The ceiling is blue, to create a different blue “stage” and indicate that both works are from Moderna Museet’s collection. The space is inaccessible, blocked by LeWitt’s sculpture. It is left alone . . . quiet.

HF We made a previous publication that comprised a conversation between you and Kevin Quashie, focusing on your film *Black and Blue* that you shot in 35 mm film. The work is presented in the last gallery of *Seven Rooms and a Garden*, which highlights different approaches to self-representation in the work of artists in Moderna Museet’s collection, such as Soufiane Ababri, Andy Warhol, Cecilia Edelfalk, Snežana Vučetić Bohm, Melissa Shook, Lena Cronqvist, and Samuel Fosso [see pp. 48–52]. I won’t recap the conversation between you and Kevin Quashie, but I was struck by how he really tuned into the notion of detail that’s so present in the film, especially the quotidian, the mundane detail, the detail of everyday life, as another access point to the discourse on interiority and quietude. From your early practice in photography to your recent films, you’ve had a long relationship with the lens. How did your lens-based practice shape your relationship to capturing detail?

RJ I think you did an incredible job in creating that obstacle. So much of the exhibition is about the act of extending an invitation, of hosting, and then there is this room that hosts the work of LeWitt and Hammons, which the public does not have access to, in quite a forceful way. It creates a dichotomy and pits that room against the rest of the exhibition, in that it both confronts and leaves alone, through the act of creating a barrier. This “quiet” room makes clear, in a very frontal manner, that you cannot enter the space that these two artists populate, in which they duel, a space you can only be witness to from the outside.

RJ I've been invested in detail from the moment I picked up a camera. I fell in love with the kind of lenses that gave me the most information. Quite early on in my photography practice, I adopted a large format because this gave me more opportunity for detail and allowed me to see a kind of topographic landscape in what I photographed. I would use the slowest film I could get my hands on, because it gave me a tighter rein and made it into more of a slow, flowing investigation of whatever it was I was looking at through the lens. Working in 35mm for *Black and Blue* was an obvious choice for me. It allows the film to be a space for intense looking, for really intense detail. As you mentioned, Kevin Quashie and I go into depth about the nuances and reference points of the work, so I won't dive into that now, but I do want to consider the context in which the film was made, which was the waning moments of the pandemic. It was a moment of real quiet for me. The world had slowed down, and it gave me the opportunity to look with more depth, with more time, with more patience. I wasn't living in the city at the time but spending a lot of time in the country with my family. It was both eerie and peaceful. I also recognized that for many other folks the pandemic was not a time of quiet and slowing down, and that I had been given a certain agency and opportunity in experiencing that period in this way. Indeed, a privilege, which plays out as a very deliberate motif in the film. In the film, I think about how we imagine privilege and who it belongs to, but I also wanted to expand on the idea that we have of privilege and the stereotypes associated with it. My work has always attempted to challenge who gets to look inside, who gets to have autonomy, who gets to be privileged, and what the circumstances and conditions of that privilege can be.

In my opinion, these are critical concerns that we have to be aware of in all circumstances of being as well as our sense of self, whether that's about race, gender, nationality, resources, et cetera. How within all those conditions, there are points of oppression, there are points of privilege, there are points of agency, there are points of transition. I hope my project can leave you with the idea that I recognize the wholeness of being as opposed to the confines of certain circumstances of being.

HF As a final point in our conversation, I'd like to discuss the only work that we included that was neither yours nor from our collection: the installation "*Untitled*" [1989] by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, on loan from the Art Institute of Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [see pp. 48–51]. Gonzalez-Torres asked a key question with this work: What makes up a life, or what constitutes a biography? Which events and dates would you name to describe your life? "*Untitled*" manifests as a frieze, a horizontal band of text close the ceiling on each wall, which joins historical events and personal milestones. The public and the private merge, as collective memory intersects with personal experience. The artist expressed that each time the work is installed, the owner—or in this case, we, the borrower—can add or subtract events, thus ensuring the work lives on and remains topical. I invited you to create a manifestation of the work. How did you approach this?

RJ The selection of entries was a delicate process—taking out and adding years and events that reflect both my life and my engagement with Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work. After omitting certain entries, I decided to cluster my entries *after* those from previous manifestations of the work. I included events and years that happened before and during my own life, and during and after



Gonzalez-Torres's lifetime, some of which also resonate with the exhibition as a whole.

I found it very important to honor the intention of this work as a *portrait*, holding the specificity of a self-portrait, while also being open to the more ambiguous and open-ended aspects of the piece. As we discussed, a lot of my recent work, and I would say my project in general, revolves around the notion of liminality, the in-between. I am always looking for a space of ambiguity. The painting *God Painting "Closed Eyes,"* which we discussed earlier, exists as a space of pure liminality and thus potentiality, the symbol carved out of the paint on the canvas and sometimes left open, sometimes filled up and sometimes crossed out—as eyes that open and close. It is through these “eyes” that I approached this manifestation of “*Untitled*,” that is to say: not only is it me, one artist, looking at another artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, through the space-time continuum that the portrait offers and holds, but I also wanted to explore what happens in the space *between* the existing entries of the portrait and my additions. I cannot answer this question, as the proposition really lies within the question itself.

The subtle distinction between subjectivities that occurs in “*Untitled*” speaks to how we were talking about the gesture of hospitality. By deciding that the portrait would live on after his death, he extended an invitation, which comes with a responsibility on the person or institution embracing that invitation. You agree to take care of the work. In that sense, I think of “*Untitled*” as yet another stage in our exhibition.

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RASHID JOHNSON is among an influential cadre of contemporary American artists whose work employs a wide range of media to explore themes of art history, individual and shared cultural identities, personal narratives, literature, philosophy, materiality, and critical history. Johnson received a BA in photography from Columbia College in Chicago and studied for his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His practice quickly expanded to embrace a wide range of media—including sculpture, painting, drawing, filmmaking, and installation—yielding a complex multidisciplinary practice that incorporates diverse materials rich with symbolism and personal history. Johnson's work is known for its narrative embedding of a pointed range of everyday materials and objects, often associated with his childhood and frequently referencing aspects of history and cultural identity. Many of Johnson's more recent works delve into existential themes such as personal and collective anxiety, interiority, and liminal space.

HENDRIK FOLKERTS is curator of international contemporary art and head of exhibitions at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. At Moderna Museet, he has recently curated the exhibitions *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product* (2024), *Seven Rooms and a Garden: Rashid Johnson and Moderna Museet's Collection* (2023–24), and *Every Ocean Hughes: Alive Time* (2023). Folkerts was previously Dittmer Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago (2017–22); curator at documenta 14, Kassel /Athens (2014–17); and curator of performance, film, and discursive programs at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2010–15). He has authored and edited various publications and catalogs, including *Vaginal Davis: Magnificent Product* (2024), *Alexandra Bachzeisis: SHOW/TIME/BOOK BOOK/TIME/SHOW* (2023), *THINKING-IN-ACTION: A Conversation between Rashid Johnson and Kevin Quashie* (2023), *Katalin Ladik: Oooooo-pus* (2023), and *Igshaan Adams: Desire Lines* (2022).

