



Title

Sweat

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Article DOI

Not applicable

Url

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/sweat>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Lisa Moravec: 'Sweat', *Burlington Contemporary* (22nd September 2021),
<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/sweat>

About the author(s)

is a writer and critic working at the intersection of art history and performance studies. She is completing her fully funded PhD thesis, which develops a theory of dressage in relation to animality at Royal Holloway, University of London. She teaches at Royal Holloway and Kingston School of Art, and recently co-edited, with Helen Lewandowski, the special issue 'Humanism after the Human' of *Photography & Culture*.

Cover image: **Fig. 4** *Con-junto (The Ensemble)*, by Daniel Lind-Ramos. 2015. Steel, aluminium, nails, metal buckets, paint buckets, casseroles, palm tree branches, dried coconuts, branches, palm tree trunks, wood panels, burlap, machetes, leather, ropes, sequin, awning, plastic ropes, fabric, trumpet, cymbals, speaker, pins and duct tape, 289 by 304 by 121 cm. (Courtesy Scott Mueller Collection; photograph Pierre Le Hors; exh. Haus der Kunst, Munich).

Sweat

by Lisa Moravec • 22.09.2021

In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, a series of essays about the corruption of social wealth and value creation, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten posit that 'debt is social and credit is asocial'.¹ Although debt can be forgiven, the authors stress that 'it can only be forgotten to be remembered again' as 'restorative justice'.² For them, debt operates 'at a distance to a global politics of blackness that emerges out of slavery and colonialism, a black radical politics, a politics of debt without payment, without credit [and] without limit'.³ *Sweat*, a group exhibition of twenty-six artists at Haus der Kunst, Munich, addresses the tensions that operate between being credited by, and being indebted to, others, in relation to recent decolonialising attempts across art institutions and the art canon.⁴ As the title suggests, *Sweat* explores human bodily functions and physical responses to colonial violence as a site of common ground. The exhibition presents human subjectivity as fluid, socially engaged and resistant to oppressive politics in order to analyse the role of art in the persisting social debt of colonisation. Although twenty-first-century racial politics is not explicitly referenced in *Sweat*, it nonetheless underpins one of the show's curatorial ambitions to institutionally exhibit a racially diverse group of artists, and the subjects they choose to depict.

Sweat stems from a two-year research project initiated by the curators Anna Schneider and Raphael Fonseca, which explored, as the exhibition text notes, how human sweat represents 'artistic strategies of resistance'. The show is bookended by two video works. The first, *Carnaval da Vitória* FIG. 1 by António Ole (b.1951), is a documentary about Angola's liberation from Portugal's colonialist rule in 1975 and the carnival celebrations that followed. The film's narration details the history of Angola's land farmers and the historic importance of the carnival for their community. During the struggle for national self-determination in the twentieth century, the street carnival could only take place under heavy regulations; in 1976 it was reinstated as the 'Victory Carnival'. Whereas Ole incorporates interviews with local residents, the maker of the second film, Isaac Julien (b.1960), approaches the significance of carnival celebrations in a more abstract manner. *Territories* FIG. 2 collages film footage of the annual Notting Hill Carnival in London to create an impression of personal experience in Afro-Caribbean communities. Together, these works pay homage to Okwui Enwezor's (1963–2019) dedication to African art and his service as the Director of the

exhibition's host museum until 2018.

In the accompanying publication, the scholar André Lepecki outlines the paradoxical cultural implications of contemporary carnival celebrations. He notes that, on one hand, they operate according to the 'logic of State power', now the 'post-colonial nation State' as a 'choreographed performance' that reifies 'people's joy and sweat'. On the other hand, 'the people *dancing* carnival', Lepecki stresses, are 'liberated people'

(p.163). The juxtaposition of *Carnaval da*

Vitória and *Territories*, which show the Southern African decolonialised form of carnival celebration and the cultural aftermath of the British Empire, reminds us how Western colonisers shaped the lives of those they subjugated. These films – despite capturing the carnivalesque liberation that Lepecki references – highlight the persistence of racial discrimination, as the carnival, now in its liberal form, is still performed within a 'white' capitalist framework.

The first room of the exhibition brings together paintings, installations and objects by non-Western artists. At the entrance to the show are finely crafted masks by the Korean-Canadian artist Zadie Xa (b.1983), which refer to the myth of Magohalmi, a Korean goddess believed to create landscapes through bodily excretion **FIG. 3**. Xa's large wall paintings also project a mélange of Korean myths and references, such as indigenous mussels and a type of shell collected by a community of female divers on the South Korean island of Jeju. At the other side of the room, a large installation by the Puerto Rican artist Daniel Lind-Ramos (b.1953) comprises found objects, such as plastic brooms and upside-down buckets **FIG. 4**. A second sculpture, *Vencedor #2, 1797* (Victorious #2, 1797) (2017–20), is reminiscent of an armed horseman, recalling the British invasion of Puerto Rico's capital, San Juan, in the late eighteenth-century where the British army was defeated. Xa's recycled myths and Lind-Ramos's historical leftovers of national identity refer to persisting colonial issues in a non-didactic manner, enabling the viewer to explore such colonial references for themselves.

Another room of the exhibition is devoted to non-normative representations of gender and sexuality and stresses the abstractness of the human body. Philipp Gufler (b.1989) references nightclub culture with the installation *I wanna give you devotion* **FIG. 5**. It comprises a collection of posters that he designed and made for the Forum Queer Archive Munich. The posters, which date from the 1960s to the present day, bear witness to numerous events from the active LGBTQIA+ scene in Munich. A textile work by Tuesday Smillie (b.1981) focuses on the New York drag queen and activist Marsha P. Johnson, while a series of digital and collaged self-portraits, *Inner Fire* **FIG. 6**, by the French artist Tabita Rezaire (b.1989) critique racist discrimination

directed at those of African heritage in the political economy. Revealing an ironic mode of self-commodification, one of her digital collages reads:

Bitch better have money
Fuck you but pay me
Anti-capitalist Bae chasing the money
Descendant of a commodity
#reparations

Rezaire's commentary is furthered by the video *SAMBA #2* (2014) by the Brazilian artist duo chameckilerner (Rosane Chamecki, b.1964, and Andrea Lerner, b.1966). It shows a female samba dancer moving in slow motion, as the camera zooms in on her wobbling flesh. The focused camera view alienates her body, transforming it into an abstracted form of sexuality.

Santiago Reyes's (b.1971) public performance series, *Dancing Southward* FIG. 7 is represented in the exhibition through several t-shirts he wore during a number of his dances. Over time Reyes's sweat caused bilingual slogans written on the t-shirts in black marker – 'Xin giu nhip do, pledge my rhythm' or 'meines inneren Pulsschlags, off my inner heartbeats' – to dissolve. Exhibited in its own dance hall is the pop music video *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other* FIG. 8 by Jacolby Satterwhite. The work references video games and produces a digital dance aesthetics through 3D animation and rendering. Satterwhite's mediated performance, in which Black and queer bodies perform a dance imbued with radiating love, presents a utopic vision of posthumanism, of moving beyond gender, sexual and racial categorisations.

Bringing together artists who draw attention to different forms of discrimination, *Sweat* projects a worldview in which human differences do not determine civil agencies and in which humans can also refuse to act in expected ways. The exhibition emphasises the social value of a less violent, decolonialised world, as well as the physical commonalities that can help us to move towards it. In this sense, the show's visceral, human focus resonates with Moten's concept of nonperformance, a mode of performing which posits that human identity remains mouldable in the universally installed societal infrastructures and can resist its total subsumption to them.⁵ However, despite the show's optimistic body politics, the colonisers' debt remains, as Harney and Moten state: 'it can't be repaired. The only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new'.⁶



Fig. 7 *Dancing Southward*, by Santiago Reyes. 2016–ongoing. (Photograph Maximilian Geuter; exh. Haus der Kunst, Munich).



Fig. 8 Still from *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other*, by Jacolby Satterwhite. 2020. HD colour video and 3D animation with sound, duration 24 minutes 22 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; exh. Haus der Kunst, Munich).

Exhibition details Sweat
 Haus der Kunst, Munich
 11th June 2021–9th January 2022

Footnotes

- 1** S. Harney and F. Moten: *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, New York 2013, p.61, available at <https://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf>, accessed 17th September 2021.
- 2** *Ibid.*, p.63.
- 3** *Ibid.*, p.64.
- 4** Accompanying publication: *Sweat*. Edited by Raphael Fonseca and Anna Schneider. 288 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Haus der Kunst, Munich, and K. Verlag, Berlin, 2021). €26. ISBN 978-3-947858-28-6.
- 5** F. Moten: 'Blackness and Nonperformance', MoMA LIVE, as part of the conference *AFTERLIVES: THE PERSISTENCE OF PERFORMANCE*, 26 September 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2leiFByllg>.
- 6** *Op. cit.* (note 1), p.152.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ