

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

orange & red: Resurfacings of Muscle & Blood Memories

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8xs978vq>

Author

Agwuncha, Kelechi

Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

orange & red:
Resurfacings of Muscle and Blood Memories

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

kelechi agwuncha

Committee in charge:

Professor E.R. Cho, Chair
Professor Patrick Anderson
Professor Nicole Miller
Professor Paul Sepuya

2022

©
kelechi agwuncha. 2022.
All rights reserved.

The Thesis of kelechi agwuncha is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2022

Dedication

gratitude to Dr. Boatema Boateng for so leading me in a direction.
thank you Patrick Anderson for grounding me in notions of color & performance.
thank you Ricardo Dominguez for grounding me in my use of *spiral conditions*.
thank you E.R. Cho for your guidance, patience, and reminding me to continue playing elsewhere.
thank you Jun for moving through this *tether* production with me in every physical & imaged way.

thank you mother, twin, & friends for reminding me to rest.

endless gratitude to my ancestors who have made space for my current being +

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thesis Approval Page	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures.....	vii
Abstract of the Thesis	ix
Preface	1
Methodology.....	2
cycle one: orange.....	3
1.1 Introduction	5
1.1 Contextual Background.....	6
1.1 recess	6
1.2 tether.....	8
1.3 Intermission	12
1.4 Gestures & Spiral Conditions	13
1.5 Light Fixtures & Embodied Light.....	16
cycle two: red	20
1.1 Introduction	22
1.2 Contextual Background.....	23
2.1 ritual... ..	23
2.2 mask (1).....	26
2.3 mask (2)	27
2.4 mask (3)	28

2.1 Tether & Gestures of Descent.....33

2.2 Fixtures of Flight & Embodied Ascent35

2.3 *tether* installation concept.....40

Epilogue42

Works Cited.....43

tether credits.....44

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: children work together to play tetherball © Playworld Playground Co.	6
Figure 1.2: a cylindric specimen in black-top © Celina Tent Co.....	8
Figure 1.3: goalie Brianna Scurry counters an attack, 1999, © John Todd.....	9
Figure 1.4: orange character tethers a rope to a tree, 2020 ; still image.....	13
Figure 1.5: a man within the sky operates a crane, <i>synonyms of orange</i> . 2020 ; image still	14
Figures 1.6: June Jordan slowly fades into red, <i>synonyms of orange</i> . 2020 ; image stills	17
Figures 1.7: orange returns home, <i>synonyms of orange</i> . 2020 ; image stills.....	19
Figure 2.1: men work together to escort an Ojionu masquerade figure through a party hall, 2015, YouTube “Nigerian Masquerade Scares Everybody” ; image still	23
Figure 2.2: an empty parking lot sloping downhill at dusk lit with a bright light, © iStock.. ..	25
Figure 2.2: description credit: PhotoAlto Co. Digital Image. © Getty.....	25
Figure 2.3 fluorescent lights glow over two cos-players fencing, <i>Wham Pass Intact : Iteration II</i> . 2020; image still., credit: Alex Cruz.....	27
Figure 2.4: football stadium lights glow over capoeeristas & orange, the camera operator, <i>Wham Pass Intact: Iteration III</i> . 2020 ; three image stills, credit: kelechi agwuncha, Nathan Mansakahn.....	29
Figure 2.5: orange, the camera operator rests as a capoeerista readies himself to perform again, <i>Wham Pass Intact: Iteration III</i> . 2020 ; image still, credit: Nathan Mansakahn.....	31
Figure 2.6: tetherball pole . 2022; installation view ; ^{vi} Image ; credit: Cat Gunn	33
Figure 2.7: red tethers the ball around their body, <i>tether</i> . 2022 ; image still ; credit Jun	34
Figure 2.8: red tethers a sheer cloth around their body then disappears into space, <i>tether</i> . 2022 ; three image stills.....	37
Figures 2.9: analog television attached to monitor; live video jockey & musical performance of <i>tether</i> ; audience watches <i>tether</i> in Structural & Materials Engineering UC San Diego Building. 2022. Installation. three installation views ; Credit: Arlene Mejorado.....	39
Figure 2.10: kelechi plays tetherball, 2022, Digital Image; Credit: Arlene Mejorado.....	41

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

orange & red:
Resurfacings of Muscle and Blood Memories

by

kelechi agwuncha

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor E.R. Cho, Chair

tether is a multi-channel video installation produced as a result of the first auto-biographical video piece I made two years ago, entitled *synonyms of orange*. The video piece reimagines my childhood experiences of playing tetherball, an elementary school recess game that was my first introduction to play. The installation physicalizes my desires through a series of durational videos & sculptural objects that transcend tetherball using Igbo masquerade aesthetics. *tether*, the thesis piece, becomes part of an ongoing filmic color series that consists of several films that use 'play' to explore my imagination and create new fictional realms. The thesis paper documents the internal and creative processes of producing *synonyms of orange* & *tether*. In documenting my journey, I reflect on "muscle memories" and "blood memories" that have allowed me to arrive at the thesis work.

The thesis paper is divided into two cycles. Each cycle addresses how the two seminal pieces engage in different forms of play to center my body & personhood as a former athlete. These also become statements on how gestures of play are a way to remain autonomous from the structure of regulated sports. Cycle one is about my personal athletic history and how I use the color orange as a way to further speculate upon my relationship to tetherball. Cycle two refers to the thesis work and how the color red connects me to ritual & breathe.

Preface

Two years ago, I invited my body to perform in the films I made.

I never included my body in my prior work because I had been grappling with my failure to perform in sports. As a former athlete my body was unable to fully excel, unable to condition itself to *play the part*. My most “successful” sporting performance had been in playing a childhood recess game called tetherball, in which I mastered an ability to *fly*. I moved on towards playing competitive sports throughout my childhood to explore the ways in which my body could manifest movement. But coaches were seemingly unconvinced by my performance. My body found itself comfortably returning to various sports that involved swatting away a ball.

As a child I had developed a routine. On the weekdays I would attend sport practice, but on the weekends I would attend Nigerian-American parties. There I would witness Igbo masquerade figures perform in a spectacular, spiritual ritual. This became a bridge towards seeing the potential in being an invisible figure, but moving in an alternative way. Seeing masquerades performance was a testament to competitive sports also being a constructed theatre of bodily movement, costume, and spatial-temporalities.

I use cinematography as tool to re-choreograph & aestheticize a series of my most embodied childhood memories and sporting gestures. I begin to gesture towards the absence of these interiorities to reconnect my body. Tetherball and a masquerade performance are intimated by two autobiographical video works I construct that center my most integral memories : *synonyms of orange* (2020) and the thesis work, *tether* (2022).

These interiorities can otherwise be understood as muscle memories and blood memories. I first became familiar with the notion of blood memories when I heard Alvin Ailey use this word to describe how his childhood manifests in his dance pieces. He says “dark deep things, beautiful things inside me that I’d been trying to get out : my blood memories. The memories of my parents, uncles, and aunts. Blues and the gospel, songs that I knew from Texas”.¹ Ailey’s dance pieces conjured blood memories to connect the movements of his black southern culture to his present self.

My video pieces often reimagine my athletic past, but I recognize these sports are often heavily rooted in Euro-American traditions of sports. What I define as muscle memory is my body reperforming the sports I once participated in. Although my muscle memories are very forged in Euro-American sports, I find myself as much tethered to blood memories of Igbo masquerade figures. These blood memories encourage me to further experiment with the fantasy of competitive sports and it’s made up rules.

Similar to music, there’s a cyclical nature to the repeating themes in this paper. In the first cycle of this paper, I reflect on my lineage to sports which begins with tetherball and culminates to my first video portrait piece , *synonyms of orange*. In the second cycle, I address the thesis work *tether*, a multi-channel video installation that continues to look at the symbolic potential of tetherball through combining Igbo masquerade figure performances.

¹ *Ailey*, directed by Jamila Wignot (Insignia Films, 2021)

Methodology

Play is not only about what occurs in the field, but also what occurs in the text. Each cycle of the paper begins with a memory that relates to my associations with each color.

I am interested in using play as a methodology to experiment with dominant sporting narratives. This allows for meditations on sports, colors, and performance as it's been formative to my childhood. My filmic work consist of nonlinear, diaristic narratives that use strategies of rhythmic & disjunctive editing to explore different forms of movement. This expresses my physicality. It is my way to commune with the natural world and a reminder of my ability to play with the pace and rhythm of life. My filmmaking style informs the way I structure this paper to evoke the feeling of play ; it's multiplicities and poetic form are intentional. In using poetic voice, I am interested in how fracturing of consciousness can stage personal interventions, rehearse play, and cross over into different modes of speculative thinking.

I locate Audre Lorde's 1985 essay, "Poetry is not a Luxury" which establishes structural techniques that affirm senses and affect as frameworks for interiority of self. I want to use this conception of poetry to inform my writing. As she wrote,

"We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared . And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion poetry. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives it lays the foundation for future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before".²

What is at stake in the experimental horizons of my work are the rules & regulations of sporting and masquerade institutions that contain performers to dominant narrative structures. This paper will address my embodied history to sports (& color), the history of black bodies in masquerade figure performances, and my desires to reconnect with my memories of witnessing / performing in these performing rituals (sports & masquerade figure performance). My sensorial attachment to sports are underlying conditions of imaginative filmic realms I construct.

Below, I continue to address my embodied athletic history to tetherball-based flight, conforming to certain forms of athletic performance, and how the sporting body is both constructed & destructed by state-institutions of play.

There's a subtle conundrum to the word *play*. It defines itself as both a recreational act and a synonym of *theater*.

² Lorde, Audre. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury". *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, no. 3. 1977.

cycle one : orange

orange is my mother's favorite color, because of it's brownish tint & how it brightly emerges in nature. i am reminded of how her protective qualities as a pharmacist seep into my material existence. as a child i would often get sick and she would be the first to direct me on how to take medicine.

orange is the translucent-color of medicine bottles that protects the substance inside.

Introduction

When did sports arrive ?
How did it become dominant & so characteristically American in my life ?

Elementary school recess was the first genre of sport to seduce me into shared languages of movement. It was a recreational space that was my departure towards amateur sports. As a child I felt rescued from stillness and embodied by this sustained relationship to play : a motion that pushed against the limits and impermanence of my body.

Recess consisted of co-existing, varied-tempo terrains.
I could navigate various terrains – asphalt, grass, woodchips .
My body found the most comfort residing in the tetherball courts.
Tetherball defied the parameters of play set by other activities – basketball, jump rope, four square, jungle gym, hopscotch – because I had mastered this ability to *fly*.

Contextual Background

i. recess

First, I locate my situated personal experience & muscle memories involving sports.



Figure 1.1: children work together to play tetherball, date unknown, © Playworld Playground Co.

tetherball was the game where i could fly.
here begins my first memory of play
& it's associated elements that each embody my relation:

a rope
a tethered ball
a galvanized metal pole
a white painted circumference line
a player & i

a feedback loop
a player & i
a thrust above
a back & forth launch from the ground
a back & forth landing upon the ground
a continual flight
a hand swats away
a ball spirals
a rope winds
a gradual return to Earth
a return to body
a ritual

my mind concentrates on a win.
my body prepares to leave again.

a game so abstract, so minimal
so simple it was to fly.
i am lured by this feeling.
i could play forever.

i became a notorious tetherball champion, defeating boys & girls alike. my long arms & long legs became advantages in swiftly striking the high flying ball. as i became attached to winning matches, i became attached to the ball's revolving, cylindrical movement. there's a moment in which a tetherball player & the spectators can knowingly detect the winner: when the ball wraps around the pole its fifth or sixth time the other player often becomes unable to deflect the ball because it begins to lock in a rapid twisting succession. the opponent becomes helplessly defensive. the ball definitively thumps against the pole. the ritualistic spinning & centering of the sphere ends. a new opponent enters the ring to re-activate the ball and defeat the winner.

players stand on the outskirts of the white painted ring in a queue, waiting to defeat the winning champion. choosing which line to stand in became a strategy. i would closely observe reoccurring player's gestures to then stand in the line behind a player i felt would lose eventually. i couldn't wait to make my return ; make my transition.

rule bound games on the recess court had different stakes, more linearized components, more for the eyes to wander upon. basketball was a weaving of the body through multiple players to score ; four square required four hands & low stances to swat away a ball contained to a box & a bounce ; flag football was a sudden thrust of the body forward into a maze of multiple players, all hoping the quarterback would entrust them with a ball to helm a collective distance towards a far reaching goal.

jump rope felt closest to that feeling of flight, but it was a flight out of my control. the incessant launch from the ground was guided by the manipulating speeds of a rope swung by two others. only skillful footwork could outmaneuver the rapid or slowly revolving speeds of the rope. tetherball was this connectedness to just one other body. a shared labor of touch. the centering quality of eyes from the spectators encircling us intensified our kinship. my eyes center upon the flotations of a far shining leathered sphere.

i want my body to do what the ball does.

push forward
spin rapidly
always circle home.

a sudden sound
a harnessing sound
a resounding bell
a disruption to my bodily rhythms
a dominant apparatus of time
a time that shifts masses of children indoors.

the period of play is over. delegates of time or lunch ladies excavate the tetherball poles from the ground. they place it back in storage containers alongside chalk, basketballs,

and jump rope. a door-knob sized hole in the black-top is the only trace left of the game (see **figure 1.2**)



Figure 1.2: a cylindric specimen in black-top, date unknown, © Celina Tent Co.

Tetherball was designed in the 1870's in Britain as a device to practice strokes for lawn tennis. Mostly played by adults, it involved two to four players using racquets to hit a tennis ball attached to an elastic cord atop a vertical metal pole. In the 1880's the United States adopted the game and it soon evolved into our more contemporary version. Sports equipment manufacturers patented the game and introduced more formal rules into the game. Regulations included: using a volleyball attached to a rope, drawing a ten to twelve foot radius, having two players, and using one's hands. It now, mostly belongs to the youth of recess grounds. **Figure 1.1** is amongst one of the few images I found on Google Images that features a tetherball player that resembles me : a black girl recessing in the early 2000's. Other images predominately feature white children and references to Napoleon Dynamite.

I was severed from tetherball after (roughly) the age of nine. My inability to access the recess space and tetherball structure became an infrastructural and temporal interruption upon my ability to fly. The privileging of tetherball courts becomes revealed through recess's refusal to perform as an everyday / anytime space of play. Another root to my conflict was elementary schools beginning to structure time through "periods", designed for productive function.

Recess was designed to release surplus energy.

ii. tether

i was eventually pushed away from recess once moving up a few grades. i began to play on competitive sports teams in the likes of volleyball, tennis, basketball, and *at last* soccer. within competitive sports delegates of time become referees. athletes strictly perform to locally fixed temporalities, painted lines, and audiences that “punish” individuals who are unable to conform (Munoz, 1999).³

uniform conditions upon professional & amateur sporting bodies are not limited to :

shot clocks, coaches, referees, defensive players, offensive players, announcers, time-outs, fouls, wood-flouring, jersey numbers, boundary lines, sidelines, substitutions, trainers, court dimensions, advertisements, match duration, goal perimeter, red cards yellow card, offside, stoppages, points, etc.



Figure 1.3: goalie Brianna Scurry counters an attack, 1999, © John Todd

with a transition to amateur sports, there was a terror in abandoning my tetherball sensibilities & empowered rhythms of *flight* .

this terror is induced by pinstripe delegates of time or referees than maintain scenes of play. the scene matters as much to spectators whose fever pitch chanting grips the room. players’ physical charges of motion is ascribed to a point system. a terror is cast aloud – a critical awakening – by announcers who remind the audience of the redemptive players. a terror subsides in my stillness. my movements have been recalibrated to being mostly benched. my ability to play is now dependent on the quality of my play. this alienation silently provokes a new dimension : a desire to play.²⁴

my gaze was in a space of transit towards a renewed subjectivity; one that idealized an image of an athlete through observations of players on the court / field. this new form of witnessing sports distanced me from my childhood recess subjectivities.

³ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

⁴ Homage to James Baldwin, “Nothing Personal”

the last moment in which i flew was when i played soccer.
i cycled between youth travel teams & high school teams as a
goalkeeper.

my body resides in a net
cushioned pads hug my palms
afar players structure themselves
a fragmented formation upon green pastures
a ball teases out from players feet
my body still, my eyes avert to
a player that breaks away
a ball dances my way
a player rushes my way
a foot retracts to launch the ball in the sky
my body releases from the pasture
i cast my hands to the sky
i strike this monstrous polka-dotted entity
away from my home

i am drawn to the feelings i am no longer
attached to.

*unfolding of a narrative ; embellished memory ;
a point of anchorage ; delay becomes
perspective of formation ; new categories of play
allow more slippages between ; elastic moments
; question sports as an apparatus ; narrative of
emergence*

As I grew older, sports became too difficult to balance with school work. My last year of high school, I made the decision to depart from competitive sports. In this departure, I replaced playing soccer seasonally with focusing on applying to film schools. Now as a filmmaker my body complicates itself in a simplistic binary of either being an athlete or filmmaker. But muscle memory manifests through the films I currently make, which attempt to retrieve & embody memories of play I experienced as a former athlete. This conception of muscle memory features centrally in Samantha Shepherd's book *Sporting Blackness, Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen*³ where she mentions,

“choreographed and improvisational movements enact routine and trained skills and behaviors across time and space. A form of “kinesthesia intelligence” the body has “a kind of spatial intelligence that operates through the muscles and included muscle memory” . For athletes, this combines kinesthesia and proprioception allows them, through the rigors and discipline of training, to actively reproduce past movements seemingly without conscious effort” .⁵

Muscle memory has allowed my body to transcend into more spiritual, ritualistic, & affirming gestural based movements: video jockeying⁶, filmmaking, and music making. It also constructs fictions and subjectivities to create new layers of self beyond athlete. Filmmaking is a ritualistic space that is symbolic of my lineage to movement. It is a return to play. It is not a nostalgic return to childhood , but a practice that manifest these feelings of motion through video essays that meditate upon and celebrate this exploration of play. Use of muscle memory in my films conjures fantasies in which I desire to create new relationships to professional and amateur sports. These competitive sports often inscribe narratives that prescribe,

⁵ Sheppard, Samantha N. *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020.

⁶ VJing or video jockeying, a visual art glitch technique that changes the speed, colors, and transitions of my videos in the moment.

condition, and legislate how or where an athlete may perform. Sports are not an ideology-free space. This is in part, what Ben Carrington describes in *Race, Sports, and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (as cited in Sheppard, 2020),

“It is sport’s assumed innocence as a space (in the imagination) and a place (as it physically manifests itself) that is removed from everyday concerns of power, inequality, struggle, and ideology, that has, paradoxically, allowed it to be filled with a range of contradictory assumptions that have inevitably spilled back over and into wide society”.⁷

I am interested in the bodily freedom that comes with movement. Are sporting institutions aware of their structural violence and limitations upon the body? Are the behavioral scripts or made up rules inscribed upon athletes so embedded in sporting traditions? Within sports, conditioning and regulations discipline athletes’ bodies in ways that *seem* natural, even automatic. Stepping into a particular arena, an athlete must often maintain bodily standards (e.g. body mass index, two-sex system, coach-led practices, performance labor, etc.) to appear before an audience.

⁷ Carrington, Ben. *Race, Sports and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora*. Thousand Oaks., CA: Sage, 2010.

Intermission

The color orange becomes a way to relate to my material existence in fictional realms. *synonyms of orange* is my first video portrait piece that directly explores my relation to sports through a medium in which I would often neglect to include myself. In older work, I would live vicariously through black athletic characters in scripted narrative films I directed. How does my blackness become mediated? How do I situate my body and make visible my experiences on screen?

My lived reality as an athlete had been repressed, but re-emerges through *synonyms of orange*. As a semi-autobiographical piece it resolves my displacement from playing tetherball as a child through an imaginative alter-ego named “orange”, performed by myself. Filmed observations of orange’s durational tetherball performance in various spaces are weaved with an assemblage of lo-fi travelogue footage, found footage, and electronic percussive sounds synchronized to my body’s movement.

I believe that the color orange is a default of brown light or black visibility. My philosophy of orange signifying blackness is an idea that can be related to video & computer-based artist Sondra Perry’s use of the chroma key blue⁸ as a space to think about how blackness can exist in various ways through a digitally rendered space. She says,

“Chroma key blue is used in productions that [are] closer to darkness because of how it absorbs light. It’s a social space of the post-production. A space where we figure out what we’re doing, what kind of world we’re creating, deciding what space we wanted to insert”.⁹

I am drawn to Sondra Perry’s work. She uses digital tools (e.g. 3-D avatars, chroma keys) as a strategy to multiply oneself and open up the psychic space. In the 1980’s video format was designed to allow for media to be easily replicated, erased, and recorded through tape. She expands upon video by using it as a production space to render and trouble the image of a body ; a strategy also attempted by earlier video artist like Bruce Nauman, Ulysses Jenkins, and Joan Jonas. She creates a new relationship to video through works like her installation *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*. In it, she re-creates herself as an 3-D avatar that fails to self-actualize her body because of the computer software’s impediments. Her likeness appears on monitors as abstracted, “ashy”, and attached to dysfunctional desk exercise equipment.

Being part of the structure of sports is about being seen. The use of the camera is inherent to this, so it becomes important to illuminate myself somehow. I play with the cinematics of my digital image & athletic past when performing as orange. I use my father’s hi-8 video camcorder to ground my physicality through its ephemeral and tactile qualities. It’s a sensual practice that reminds me of my body. In the film, orange’s embodiment mostly appears in vague forms: back facing the camera, a shadow, darkened figure, or lights fixtures. Their face is fully revealed to the audience at the end of *synonyms of orange* when they arrive home to their embodiment, which appears in a mirror.

I use my father’s hi-8 video camcorder to document & mythologize orange’s embodied history to tetherball. My father neglects to use it, so it had remained buried in his closet amongst other analog cameras. He once had this role of being a caretaker of memories by documenting our families’ suburban, middle class, second-generation Igbo-American life. He now uplifts new forms of technology through weekly visits and purchases from Costco[®]. I want to preserve this outmoded form of technology that was a material witness of my time as a child. In the lack of oral storytelling from my parents, I locate my own histories to share by assuming the role of a video griot – the sole function of a griot is to tell stories.

⁸ a video effect technique that removes foreground from background, allowing for images to be superimposed in the blue space

⁹ *Park Nights 2016: Fred Moten, Eileen Myles and Sondra Perry*. YouTube. Serpentine Galleries, 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjvYPbnRr9s.

Gesture & Spiral Conditions



Figure 1.4: orange character tethers a rope to a tree, , 2020 ; still image

a camcorder
a speedy machine
rapid rhythmic lines
pixels that paint existence
color is a function of time¹⁰
bouncing between the frame
a compulsion of brownness
a pattern that weaves towards a skin
the bark of tree
and my flesh

A twenty-five foot tree is my first of many experiments for staging tetherball in *synonyms of orange* (see **figure 1.4**). Located in my apartment's backyard , it became a habitual outdoor space where I could safely retreat from the threats of public life amidst the early manifestations of a pandemic affecting America.

maybe anchoring a tetherball ball to a tree could take root. ground my desires. i encase a ball in a net and fasten it to a rope. i begin to anchor it to a branch. a man walking nearby asks me if i need help. he must have seen me struggling to anchor the tetherball.

i hit the ball, striking it once or twice, but it spins only in one direction around the tree, too high and wide for my reach. the ball's inability to be re-directed by a non-existent opponent makes me feel on edge, even worse about recreating this game. after a while, i stop. i begin to realize that although it's somewhat of a pleasure to re-engage in tetherball, i would need to prepare a better structure.

i use a camcorder to at least document this moment that had taken time to stage. by staging my body underneath the camera i appear as a large resilient figure who *seems* to no longer struggle with hitting the ball. once i began documenting myself, i identified my repeating gestures as a *spiral condition*, that was most fascinating. i focus on it. i fracture it. i recast myself as a character named orange who could spatially-resist tetherball's traditional white-lined enclosure to perform. these filmed observations

¹⁰ Paik, Nam June, "Random Access Information". Artforum.1980.

of orange's *spiral condition* led me to make *synonyms of orange*.

there were other ways orange could negate the tree's inability and rely on other structures to generate *spiral conditions* :

orange attaches the camera to a rope, cushioning it between two car-seat headrests, so it safely swings around the tree without damage . orange swings the rope attached to a ball, as almost an alternative lassoing. orange swings a rope attached to a light bulb. orange swings the strings of their hoodie. a man is tethered to Earth (see **figure 1.5**).

i wasn't sure whether i had figured something out, but i liked this infinite dimension of tethering. had tetherball outgrown it's adolescent realm and somehow managed to develop, even splinter within me as an open-ended performance, i wondered.

where did i belong in situating this *spiral condition*.



Figure 1.5: a man within the sky operates a crane, *synonyms of orange*. 2020 ; image still.

The *spiral condition* or tethering is not a micro-aggression, but a ritualistic performance that bridges my premature attachment to play. It also releases me from structure. I romanticize my relations to tetherball as a way to sustain my lineage to play. I became interested in evincing recess's traditional white circular enclosure, periodic time, and metal structure which factored in my severed relationship to play. I start to deconstruct tetherball existing in one space. I gesture elsewhere. orange uses spatial-resistance to push past my backyard and explore various suburban landscapes of San Diego, California. I document the environments in which orange performs.

Competitive sports is a containment of the body, that relies on mastering a technique through training the body to achieve virtuosity¹¹. Within those parameters athlete must bend their body in unnatural positions for a value system of points. Play (pick-up games, recess, recreational sports) is a bodily freedom that feels accepting of disparate forms and bodies. So rather than being concerned with executing traditional tetherball, I developed an obsessive focus in playing with it's variations. I released orange from the metal structure of tetherball to disavow virtuosity. This becomes an aspirational performance of tetherball "to produce a new freedom".¹²

¹¹ "*virtuosity* indicates something in excess of exceptional technical mastery that has been accumulated over time. – as defined in "The Muse of Virtuosity: Desmond Richardson, Race, and Choreographic Falsetto"

¹² Osterweis, Ariel. "The Muse of Virtuosity: Desmond Richardson, Race, and Choreographic Falsetto." *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 3. 2013.

Light Fixtures & Embodied Light

one evening i was walking around the University of California, San Diego campus while casually filming my *spiral* gestures. my black body was becoming more illegible within the camcorder's viewfinder as daylight was escaping, so i started to head home.

i then suddenly became witness to a spectacle : sodium vapor lamps were turning on to light my path. they were slowly making a nightly transition from the color red to the color orange. i was encircled by the lamps on the pathway. i stood there for a few moments feeling elevated, enraptured even. buzzing of the lights further awaken me. piercing the once silence. i was embodied by the lights. i felt a belonging to their ritual of transition.

i then thought about how i could further experiment with the film and make orange's

embodiment appear in other ways. how could orange become part of the environment?

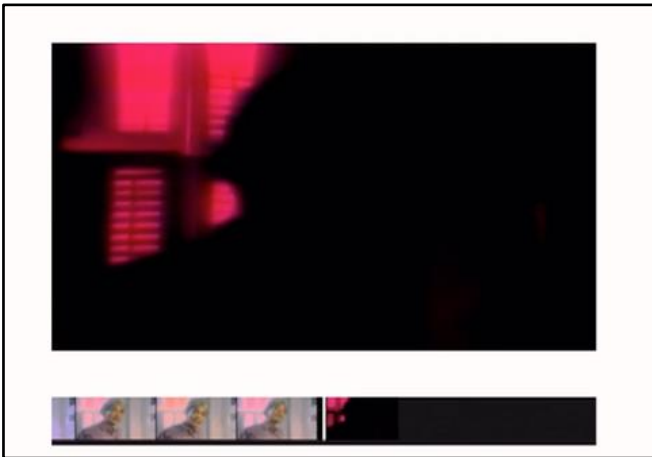
i decided i would temporarily stop documenting orange till i could return home to more available light. i become fixated on filming the light fixtures as i walked home. their turning on was a sensorial ecstasy. it made me realize the importance of being seen. it made my mother's associations with her favorite color become even more real.

upon editing the film, i would use footage of various forms of light –fixtures, found footage, the moon – as a strategy to structure all the spiral gestures & environments i had documented. i use disjunctive editing to rhythmically weave footage to start in the daytime and end in the evening.

now we need to put her out
now she lit, look
she lit, but we need to put her out
go (takes a deep breath)
and she out
so that's how you extinguish your blunt
quickly in ten seconds.

YouTube user Nubeing-Qween LC,
How to extinguish your blunt in 10 seconds, 2016¹³

¹³ *How to extinguish your blunt in 10 seconds*. YouTube. 1directorofpromos Channel. 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLCeSQaFZqU>



Figures 1.6: June Jordan recites the poem “ Song of A Law Abiding Citizen” and slowly fades into red , *synonyms of orange*. 2020 ; three image stills

I appropriate two found footage pieces in *synonyms of orange* to open up the space of possibility for light to make orange visible.

In the beginning of *synonyms of orange* I incorporate found footage of June Jordan reciting her poem “Song of A Law Abiding Citizen” (see **figure 1.6**). Watching the found footage itself disrupted my sense of reality. I became interested in how Jordan’s body leaves a trace. How she departs the video through a seductive red silhouette. How she arrives through a voice of anxiety and confrontational gaze. Her voice becomes a memory. She was a light. Ever-changing colorful lights behind her— a kind of cognitive dissonance – contaminate her sublime, and heighten the irregular scene. She speaks about human’s intimacy to structural & state violence (i.e. nuclear garbage) but the lights consuming her body also become a structural violence.

In the end of *synonyms of orange* I appropriate a voice from a YouTube video entitled, *How to extinguish your blunt in 10 second*. While editing the film, a friend unexpectedly sent me this tutorial video, which features a black woman who goes by Nubeing-Qween LC. Taking a break from intensive editing to watch this tutorial became my needed relief. I was beginning to dissociate from my actual reality. I had been looking for a way to lay orange’s image to rest, so Nubeing-Qween LC’s blunt becomes a metaphor for my body. At the end of the film, orange listens to her voice through headphones and affirms my body by looking at their reflection in a mirror (see **figure 1.7**). I appropriate Nubeing-Qween’s voice, because I too wished to *extinguish* orange’s image or light. I wished to transition to my physical world. I had grown tired of filming, gesturing, and editing. I carrying my camera with me most everywhere to document my ritual. I had accumulated hours of footage. I felt somewhat lost in situating this *spiral condition*. Tetherball was not what it once was. I needed a way to return home to an image of myself.

co-create, sports seeks to manage ; the way we’re conditioned ; push against hegemony ; absorb many spaces ; absorb light; orange is a vessel; retrain sensuality ; translate ; life practice ; carry memory ; unidentifiable fantasized body



Figure 1.7: orange returns home to image of themselves within a mirror, *synonyms of orange*. 2020 ; three image stills

cycle two : red

red is the color that i directly associate with my breathe, my aliveness.
a red inhaler prescribed to me as a kid rescued me from my inability to breathe.
i continue to carry it with me most everywhere i go.

Introduction

My performance of *spiral* conditions within *synonyms of orange* transformed into documentation of a kind of performance art. So I begin to wonder what are the origins of performance art for me beyond sport. Growing up, witnessing Igbo masquerade's perform at Nigerian American parties became a testament to experimental movement that already existed in my culture. Contrary to sports, I could no longer predict the ways a body moved ; I could no longer identify the very body. I could only hold myself to witnessing the exciting ways a figure could move.

When did masquerade performance arrive ?
How did it's aesthetics become dominant , but so characteristically vague in my films ?

Igbo masquerade figure's performances could exist in any space carved out for a drum beat – the grassy field of a local park district ; an office space converted into a birthday party ; the banquet hall belonging to a community college. But there was an incomprehensible language & immediacy to how their gyrations and colorful garments entered the space. My body felt uplifted by watching these veiled bodies dance.

My journey in choreographing my own dramatic performance using masquerade aesthetics is a long, unexpected subversive exploration. It begins with making three short films centering combat sports that incorporate mask-performers : fencing, capoeira, and cos-play. Performance becomes a form of research, as each short brought me closer to developing a more symbolic masked reproduction of the orange character in the thesis work, *red omnibus*.

Contextual Background

i. ritual

First, I locate my situated personal experience & blood memories to ritual.



Figure 2.1: men work together to escort an Ojionu masquerade figure through a party hall, 2015, YouTube “Nigerian Masquerade Scares Everybody”.

masquerade’s performance was the first ritual i encountered.
here begins my first memory of it’s performance.
& it’s associated elements that each embody my relation:

a drum
a tempo
a masked figure
a troupe of boys & men
a crowd & i

our gaze is fixed to
a vibrational figure
it’s body overpowers us
a light bounce of hips
a glorious slumber of hay
a jolted leap towards us
a kind of dauntless rage

my body retreats.
i stumble far away
strained by it’s wonder.

i am distanced by a gloom of fear
but tempted to stay longer
i will build my tolerance
to watch further, to stay longer
a fixed gaze of pleasure

i would encounter Igbo masquerades figures at Nigerian-American parties, mostly looking forward to their graceful emergence. their performance is a spiritual display, a moving art form, or a spectacle that sways with the audience. but this is a momentary pleasure. the large creature thrashes at us when it feels like it, presumably threatened by us standing too close & looking for too long. a drum beat returns them to gently sloshing through the dance halls. i re-enter a trance, my eyes seized by how it's body flutters away, still anchored to a drum beat.

i often looked with caution, standing on my heels. ready to drown in my breathe, ready to depart. i am surrounded by other children who seem as much lured in by this jaded scene. our locked-eyes are nervously held to our bodies ready to trample one another, ready to pull away from the creature's playful attack. a step beyond the outskirts of their performance is another misery. tears engulf children who gasp for air and are cradled in the arms of their mother or father.

my mother once as a child, almost drowned in the afternoon. the masquerade's presence, charged towards her as she pushed her baby brother in a stroller to the village market. her brother experienced his own kind of terror, as he was awakened by the trouble and left alone to suffer from its cruel intentions.

how could a thing summon us to bear witness to its awe, but run us over, making us scurry away from its awe. adults who shower the creature with bills of money were devoid of its harm. also untouchable were those who encircled it's orbit: elder men who would strike drums and young men who would escort the masquerades throughout the dance halls (see **figure 2.1**). standing on the outskirts of this spectacle, i still adored the ways it moved me. i longed to stay longer, so i developed a strategy to not get caught in the frenzy of people it would disperse. i gradually became more skilled in how to look from afar. but still, there were no boundaries to its performance.

i want my body to do what a masquerade does.

spin rapidly
floating in us
burst forward
floating through us

a lowering of the drums
a final strike
an end to masquerade's strife
a residual calm
a going away of fear
a disappearance of the figure that soon becomes a memory

the DJ plays a few songs that shift the encircled crowd back into a more present reality – a chaotic grid of dancing, laughing, and food consumption. instead of joining in the jubilation, i follow the masquerade retreating away. i may be

wandering too far, but for me the spectacle isn't over. the continual stage becomes the revealing of their body and an unmasking to reveal the identity of a black man.

African masquerade figures have a unique approach to gender performance. Masks and garments embrace physical features of various genders, plants, & animals. But wearers of the garment are often exclusively men. I most vividly remember witnessing rare performances of Ojionu Igbo male masquerade figures (see **figure 2.1**), in which they would vibrate their bodies, twirling colorfully tiered skirts of hay. Spirits exist in their cowrie-shell covered antelope-like mask that imbue supernatural qualities upon the wearer. These qualities allow them to perform in a meta-physical way to the speed of drums. This is considered *ikpa ike*, Igbo for the “conscious display of superhuman power”¹⁴. Training male initiates to properly operate these massive garments and play drums in war-themed dances was managed by elders. They maintain a secrecy to masquerade societies which kept out children and women.

In precolonial Africa, masquerades were institutionalized, secret societies of men created amongst communities living in Bantu/Biafra homelands in southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon¹². This included the Igbo, Ibibio, Èkoi, Èfik and Ijò peoples¹⁵. Masquerade figures performed as sociopolitical agents of village governments, as well mediators between the community & ancestral spirits. When they would perform at harvest ceremonies or wander at night to wade off evil forces from the community (e.g. prevent, resolve civil disputes amongst community members, instill social etiquette). “Factors of migration, colonialism, the infiltration of Christianity, and new technology”¹⁵ has shifted many of the figures into public entertainers amongst various kinds of African theatre (e.g. festivals, carnivals, rites of passage). Throughout African diaspora, masquerade performances keep alive tradition and honor our cultural relationship to ancestral homelands.

Igbo masquerades performing troupes were likely not to let me perform alongside them, because I was seen as a *girl*. Similarly, recess sometimes felt like a recession of some kind – a shrinking away of individuality to submit oneself to its gendered conditioning. Recess creates its own policing of gender & power by loosely segregating children by strength – *girls* : jump rope, hula hoop, hop scotch ; *boys* : football, basketball, baseball. But tetherball somehow was most democratic, most inclusive of all genders. In the thesis piece, *tether*, I return to tetherball gestures and imagine my inclusion in a new kind of masquerade figure ritual.

American recess trains differently classed, raced, and gendered youth towards different futures

¹⁴ Okafor, Chinyere Grace. “Behind the Inscrutable Wonder: The Dramaturgy of the Mask Performance in Traditional African Society.” *Research in African Literatures* 22, no. 4. 1991.

¹⁵ Njoku, Raphael Chijioko. “Unmasking the Masquerade: Counterideologies and Contemporary Practices.” In *West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals: History, Memory, and Transnationalism*, NED-New edition., 136–59. Boydell & Brewer, 2020.

ii. mask

(1)

In the fall of 2019 I went to a local movie theatre situated in a mall of La Jolla, California. I had planned to only watch a film, but stumbled upon a masked performance – fencers training in the windowfront of a nearby store. This encounter would inspired me to create a three part filmic series about masked performers, entitled *Wham Pass Intact*.

shuffle forward, jolt up, attack.
retreat, shuffle back.
wham, pass, intact.

a piercing chromatic ring
a beholding of flexible daggers
a white padded garment disguises flesh

gaze circumnavigates.

i stood behind the glass pane, eagerly awaiting fencers' hovered-step joust. with a balletic prance they thrust forward, but a cord attached to their back confiscates full bodily control. enshrinement in padded white gear, masks, and face shields affirms their alien identity.

to get closer and participate in the costumed fun i began to document the UC San Diego collegiate fencing team's various kinds of fencers – foil, sabre, epee. during their practices. i placed their gestures in slow-motion, to study them, but i wished to somehow inhabit this performance in new way. coaches' eventually lent me rubber swords and face shields.

i began to teach myself how to fence in the local parking lot at night with a friend. at first, i felt enraptured as a hero who's moves could soon be actualized for an audience. my youthful muscle memory of sports-play was coming back to my present, but my fencing gestures were too heavy-footed, consistently inconsistent. in trying to solely align with strict Eurocentric fencing patterns, i failed to radicalize from it's traditions and discontinued the costumed fun to return to filmmaking.



Figure 2.2: an empty parking lot sloping downhill at dusk lit with a bright light, © iStock

(2)

I wanted to take an even more speculative approach that would de-program fencing's standard achievement model. I wanted to direct a scene of play with individuals who were well aware of the theatrics of combat, so I enlisted actors to perform in the second iteration of the series. I received a lead for two black male cos-players who were members of "Night Terrors", a local Vampire live action role-playing organization. We agreed to meet-up to film the following weekend.

at night, the two men casually fenced outside. i staged them under the fluorescent light of a closed carpet shop. they both donned uncoordinated blue hoodies, blue jeans, and used fencing gear coaches lent me. they took to my loose behavioral script that leaned towards a saga unfolding...walk beneath the lights ...stretch.. mask up... duel.

but similar to me their fencing ushered in *too* much play. i found myself unconvinced by my their performance, so i attempted to coach them through a *proper* lunge, parry, and remise. i would later slow down their motions while editing, to seemingly provide more elegance to how they moved. but i soon realized i had become caught up in a net of defining a successful athlete.

black men fencing breaks the assumption of how one may relate to fencing. fencing is an elite class based activity that is a part of a fiction / fantasy. it's a realm of a fictional space where i couldn't *play the part*. so how could i become part of the reality. video becomes a space to produce this new narrative.



Figure 2.3: fluorescent lights glow over two cos-players fencing, *Wham Pass Intact : Iteration II*. 2020 ; image still, credit: Alex Cruz

(3)

An overlap between fencing and capoeira was posed to me by Professor Danny Widener who described capoeirista's as "player's who's legs act as sword...an inverse of fencing". I ran with this to begin a new iteration of the series. Surprisingly unfamiliar with capoeira YouTube videos became an introduction.

fighters repel off one another
legs twirling around heads
an orbit of harmless feet dangle
women, men & children deliver
rapid drum beats
hand clapping
songs in a new tongue
holding the fighters steady

i was lured in by the capoeira's contradictory combat-dance. capoeira became the final circuit in my regime of reproducing fencing. it connected me to my blood memories of witnessing masquerade performances when i was a child.

as this memory was emerging, i was in midst of moving back home to Chicago for the summer. once there, i immediately began training weekly in a local park with "Gingarte", a South Side capoeira organization. mostly Black & Latinx folks of all ages, we shuffled along slowly but kept our rhythm going with our berimbaus & drums.

one day, at the end practice, a stoic tall Black man with long locs appeared. he dawned a vintage-looking graphic tee with the org's logo that led me to believe he was a capoeira veteran. i substituted the larger group weekly meetings, and began attending his more intimate duels with a friend, which they both allowed me to film. they were already engaging in a kind of spatial resistance by switching up their weekly practice spaces to football fields, basketball courts, gardens, track & fields, and playgrounds. as i followed them with my camcorder, i fantasized about the exciting ways my body could capture their speedy rhythms...i plank on the ground to achieve the lowest angle... i shuffle beside them ... i let their bodies wander away from the camera. as my camcorder and body were taking on a new ritual of play i decided to reprise my orange alter-ego in the final iteration of *Wham Pass Intact* to blur the line between filmmaker and subject.

Tinta, one of the capoeiristas I had been documenting once mentioned to me that the football field was his favorite place to train. i soon understood why – children would ride their bikes & hoverboards through the lanes of the cross country track, black mothers would accompany their kids driving battery-powered cars, and there was always a steady bouncing of a basketball nearby. they would train in the late afternoons, perhaps to make visible their performance & allow others to witness something new. so it was it was at the football field that I decided to stage their performance and document the final iteration of *Wham Pass Intact*.



Figure 2.4: football stadium lights glow over capoeiristas & orange, the camera operator, *Wham Pass Intact: Iteration III*. 2020 ; three image stills, kelechi agwuncha, Nathan Mansakahn.

There's a spiritual folklore to how capoeira's began. In the 16th Century, Zumbi dos Palmares, an Angolese war commander established a maroon town in Brazil for runaway enslaved folks. To protect themselves from Portuguese colonial forces Palmares organized public rituals of combat practice through "open rodas" – spaces of circular formation. Community members would encircle players to sustain the tempo for these duels using drums, singing, and hand-clapping. I began to integrate into my vocabulary that "fencing" was a term to define bodily exchange that could exist outside of Eurocentric fencing sport. Through this slippage I could reimagine my personal connection to fencing. *Wham Pass Intact* shifted into my internalized meditation on African culture's force in fencing bodies. This returns me to a blood memory, a connective tissue to my culture, and my desires to present a new portal of play and ritual. To radicalize from Eurocentric fencing traditions I decided to look towards my intimate memories of masquerade performance I had experienced as a child.

This notion of blood memory coined by Alvin Ailey stems from his encounters with hearing southern Baptist music as a child while growing up in Texas and Los Angeles. He invokes blood memories by choreographing his ballet pieces like *Revelations and Blue Suite* to reflect on his interiorities surrounding southern gospels, blues, ragtime, folk songs¹⁶. This embodied memory becomes the surrounding force to reconnect himself to his past self. Blood memory manifests through my recognition of spontaneous-dance gestures and drum languages of capoeira that resemble Igbo masquerade performance. Percussion acts as the grounding force in the editing style and musicality of my video work. Rhythm is also a reflex of my muscle memories as a long-time percussionist. I am drawn to capoeira because it uses a percussive instrument called a berimbau to guide the movement of capoeiristas. Within my current artist practice my body inscribes rhythm through tactile forms –a drum machine to create musical scores for video pieces, a video mixer instrument to edit, and structuring the movements of protagonists to the rhythm of videos' score. The footwork of Jana Rush and techno track of Underground Resistance inspire my scores.

To stage the capoeirista's performance, I used a football field to re-signify sports being a theatricalized space that requires bright lights. In the presence of stadium lights, I wanted to bring forth the athletes in a hyper-visible, crystalized way. I was unsure of what costume could be fantastical enough to compare to the masquerade garments so I loosely costumed capoeirista's in sunglasses & their traditional white combat uniform . Whilst dueling they transform into blue suited beings (see **figure 2.4**). I end the film with unstaged footage of them unmasking and stretching to cool-down .

In the chapter "Performers And Spectators Transported And Transformed" Richard Schechner writes "the cool-down is the return of the performer to an ordinary sphere of existence: to transport him back to where he began. Acting, in most cases, is the art of temporary transformation: not only the journey out but also the return".¹⁷ The capoeiristas transform into various characters and then at the end of the film they are seen cooling down and are taking off their blue suits. But as I sorted through the footage I was unable to find documentation of the orange character also "returning to an ordinary sphere of existence". orange rarely features in the film and appears as a mysterious figure wielding a camera to document the capoeiristas ritual. I come back to my earlier idea of the need to "come back home to an image of myself" as a way to feel whole again. I still longed to perform my own desires to masquerade my body. I would soon present my own cycle of masquerade performance (see **figure 2.4**)

¹⁶ Holloway, Jonathan Scott. "The Black Body as Archive of Memory." In *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory And Identity in Black America Since 1940*, 67–101. University Of North Carolina Press, 2013.

¹⁷ Schechner, Richard. "Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed." *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 (1981): 83–113.



Figure 2.5: orange, the camera operator rests as a capoeirista readies himself to perform again, *Wham Pass Intact: Iteration III*. 2020 ; image still, credit: Nathan Mansakahn

Intermission

The color red becomes a way to relate to my material existence in this present natural world. When you see red beyond your internal body and in other physical manifestations (stop signs, track suits, vehicles, etc.), your heart often beats quicker and blood pressure rises. When I see red I become more aware of my aliveness and physicalized self. Trinh Minh-ha in her book *When Red Waxes the Moon Red* identifies the uses of red in various cultures, but grounds the color red as “the color of life. Its hue is that of blood, of the ruby, of the rose”¹⁸. I am excited by ways that red life forms can move, bend, and transcend themselves; the ways the body is a sculptural object that evokes it’s aliveness due to the presence of this color.

The thesis piece, *tether* is a two channel video installation. It is a follow-up to *synonyms of orange*. The orange character is reborn as a red character. This reflects a renewed dimension of the *spiral* conditions. I combine my muscle memory (tetherball) and blood memory (masquerade performance) into a superhuman ritual that rewards viewers with a spectacular performance of flight and tethering.

tether, is a multi-layered spiritual performance that documents unrehearsed scenes of tethering, flight, darkness, and masquerade aesthetics. Within the video red appears in a darkened space as a mask-less figure in a red tassel coat bouncing on a trampoline. As a performative technique of endurance they use a rope to tether themselves to a ball ; this ball spirals around their body as they bounce. Their figuration then becomes transfigured when they incessantly unveil and reveal their nude body using a sheer fabric. The video installation reuses this very sheer fabric as a screen to project the red character’s performance. Appropriated voiceover sounds and a subtle musical score accompany their tether ritual.

tether contests gestures of tethering and disturbs them. Tether is an act of restraint or an object that withholds movement. Traditionally a galvanized pole and the ground are used in a game of tetherball. But for the red alter-ego in my film, they rely on their body to be the structure to tether to. They use a trampoline to accentuate their performance of flight. This performance is about the power dynamics of a self-imposed restraint on the body. It also becomes a process of self-transformation activated by tethering gestures . My work connects to Matthew Barney’s use of his body as a tool. As a former athlete he often documents himself performing physical regimes of tension by placing restraints on his body. His conception of this gesture of tension in his performance films, drawings, and sculptures is as follows, “a restraint on the body as induction into realm of formal relationships – a physical and social space in which the energies of the ego are dispersed and the boundaries between object and agency redrawn”.¹⁹

In the beginning of his *Drawing Restraint* series (1-6), he documents studio exercises in which he attempts to draw on a ceiling & wall while being bound to the downward force of a trampoline or elastic restraints. As the series progresses aesthetics of resistance develop into even stranger spaces and experiments that explore the narrative, cinematic possibilities of restraint. The shift begins with *Drawing Restraint 7*, which centers a video loop of two satyrs wrestling in a high-key lit backseat of a limousine as Barney (also costumed as a satyr) drives. Restraint here becomes about the tension between masculine energies and the endless cycle that can further “attract, repulse, and corrupt each other”. In similar ways, I use my body as a structure of restraint by making it a tetherball pole. Like Barney's transformation, my body becomes released from this restraint and transforms into a liminal being using masquerade aesthetics.

¹⁸ Minh-Ha, Trinh T. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1st ed.). Routledge. 1991.

¹⁹ Barney, Matthew. *Matthew Barney: Drawing Restraint*, Vol. 1, 1987–2002. Cologne: König, 2005.

Tether & Gestures of Descent



Figure 2.6: tetherball pole . 2022;
installation view ; image ; credit: Cat
Gunn

uptight steel
uptight body
a red life form
shrouded in red
i disappear my body
filled with mourning
cloaked in blackness

I constructed a tetherball pole, but invertedly failed to make it a fully functioning one. So I decidedly painted it black to experiment with it becoming a more sensual, invisible object belonging to a mythical space (see **figure 2.6**). This becomes the first of several mythical objects, beings, and realms of darkness I constructed for the *red omnibus* video installation.

in my final year of the graduate program i built a tetherball structure because i told myself i would before departing. i anchored the pole to a tire using the wrong kind of concrete, but somehow it still held steady. i was sure though that the pole would tilt and collapse over a period of time as others played it.

despite this error i played with this tetherball structure for the first time since i was kid. but another failure arises – i could no longer fly. the tetherball pole wasn't built tall enough for me to launch myself in the air to hit the ball. feeling defeated, instead of constructing a better structure i decided to paint it black as a way to didact, disidentify from, and somehow grow further attracted to this now sensual object. had tetherball outgrown it's adolescent realm and somehow managed to mature, even splinter into a new realm of darkness i wondered.

a few months later, i moved on towards filming a newly revised tetherball performance that would renew the orange character into a red character. to ensure i could fly this time, i bounced on a trampoline and attached a tetherball to the ceiling inside a blackened space. red wears a tinsel coat to embody the materiality & surplus energy of Ojionu masquerade figures (see **figure 2.7**) i witnessed as a child. i planned to film this performance with a production crew but i was met with another kind of letdown – i contracted covid, so i cancelled the shoot a day before it was intended.

while in isolation, i so badly desired to move freely. i started watching dance pieces from the likes of *Ailey* (Jamila Wignot, 2021) to Kyle Abraham's *Pavement*. in one scene of *Pavement* dancers walk, jog, and stumble in circular formations around the lifeless body of a black dancer.

upon leaving isolation, i abandon my shotlist and crew to give myself the time to be more playful and loosely structure red's tethering. i also wished to recreate the soloist conditions in which *synonyms of orange* was produced. within two days i generated other *spiral conditions* :

red stumbles around the circumference of a red rope light. red twirls a translucent sheet around their nude body. red ascends to hit a tetherball that swings around as it's attached to the ceiling.

Jun, a friend & interdisciplinary performance artist, offered to take a hold of the camera the third & final day. i was fatigued and left uncertain with all the footage i had accumulated, but i felt something would arise as it once had before. we expected to improvise some more *spiral* gestures, but the tetherball attached to the ceiling fell almost immediately as we began to film. i decided to keep the ball closer to Earth, closer to my body and tether to it (see **figure 2.7**). the rest of the day, we focused on this tethering gesture.

i knew where i belonged in situating this once *spiral* condition.

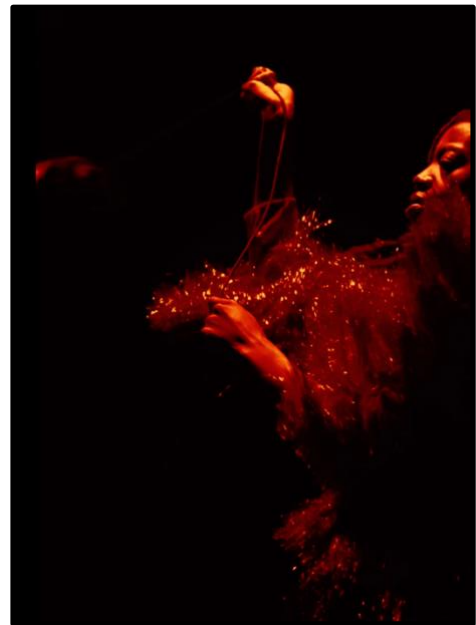


Figure 2.7: red tethers the ball around their body, *tether*. 2022 ; image still ; credit Jun

The ingredients to a standard tetherball game are as follows : 1) a galvanized pole which symbolizes success, strength, or a capitalistic structure ; it's stoic, yet violently rooted architecture feels like it hosts phallic energies of a hegemonic system. 2) a rope which symbolizes constraint, strength, and binding power. 3) a tetherball which is a frame and cyclical way of moving. Through a hegemonic system athletes bodies are made visible through commodified forms of viewership. This makes their performances one's that are programmed and orchestrated by a larger capitalistic structure beyond their control. Performing in sports then becomes limited by an expectations to construct a sporting reality. As Samantha Sheppard mentions in *Sporting Blackness* athletes representation in live and televised games is structured like a film with an overdetermined formula that consists of the following:

“formal verisimilitude (cinematography and editing conventions that mimic television, sports coverage), actor’s physical training (making them credible as athletes), and overall studio production infrastructure (location shooting, uniforms, technical consultants) [that] work together to make these films assuredly plausible, pleasurable, and predictable. These elements cohere within Hollywood film genres, such as the biopic, in formulaic ways that recycle standard narratives about (white, male) athletic heroes whose hard work, self-sacrifice, and paternalistic coaches help them overcome obstacles to win the big game in the end.”

Within this sport industrial complex system, for athletes to be seen by an audience, their performance must be perfected and uniform. How can the red character exist outside of this mode of performance to still be seen in accords with their own bodily rhythms? Red desires to be visible beyond boundaries of re(production) within sports.

Both the orange and red character’s bodily relationship to these tetherball ingredients is queer or counter-hegemonic. Their ‘failure’ in being unable to play traditional tetherball using a metal structure is a metonym for a meditation on resistance towards dominant forms of power like sports. Both orange & red’s alternative modes of tethering become illegible gestures that blur the line between an improvisational dance and sport. As Judith Halberstam describes in *The Queer Art of Failure* , “we can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded”.²⁰ Sports falls into this “dominant logic” or dominant narrative that often necessitates players’ means to success & visibility be confined to boundaries, conditioning, point systems, and a two-gender system.

I use ‘failure’ as an alternative way of making the red character a hyper-visible player belonging to an autonomous space and body. I play with the logic of tetherball after two failed performances : a poorly constructed tetherball structure and a rope that is unable to tether to the ceiling. The red character now relies on their body as the structure or sculptural object to tether to. As a structure the red character galvanizes my relationship towards myself as a performer to generate new forms of becoming. Tether also becomes the gesture of gathering cyclical momentum to physically transform, to fly away into new forms of visibility.

²⁰ Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Fixtures of Flight & Embodied Ascent

Preparing the space to film *tether* was as important as the performance itself. My goal became to remove any clear signifiers of a landscape. I wished to disappear into an ambiguous space that would center red's performance. I covered the windows & doors of the black box space with a black tarp. I then used a black trampoline to accentuate red's flight toward the tetherball I had attached to the ceiling.

The only figures of light that remain visible in the performance become a red rope light stretched around the circumference of the trampoline, red studio lights, red's body, and their various masquerade garments.

i wasn't sure what it looked like to masquerade my body. i performed in several masked inspired outfits – a puffy hooded winter-coat, sunglasses, balaclavas – but they all felt too stiff and gimmicky. i was inspired by the movement of raffia material of Ojionu masquerades (see **figure 2.1**) garments so i wore a red tinsel jacket (see **figure 2.7**) . using the entire Ojionu garment & mask felt indelibly tied to the party space & secret male society, so i distanced myself from appropriating it entirely.

the red tinsel jacket flared in the light. i bounce on the trampoline with fervor to get pulled in, then released by the jacket's abundance of loose, elastic shards. i decided to wear no mask to embrace the seemingly hyper-visible conditions i had staged. there was this grace to the tension on my face when i tethered

i still hadn't achieved this invisible quality of a masquerade i desired, so i played with one final form of disappearance : i used large sheer sheets sitting aside to veil & unveil my nude body. as i drowned myself in the sheets, i felt myself flying away with it. i abandoned the trampoline and glide around the red circumferenced light. i then triggered a fog machine that had been sitting idle (see **figure 2.7**).

upon editing the film i structured the footage from the tinsel jacket, sheer fabric, & nude performances into three acts to indicate a process of transformation. having shot in ultra-slow motion these moments threaded seamlessly.

i love to fly
it's just, you're alone
with the peace and quiet
nothing around you but clear, blue sky
no one to hassle you
no one to tell you where to go or what to do
the only bad part about flying is having to come back down to the fucking world

Rat, from *Streetwise*²¹

²¹ *Streetwise*, directed by Martin Bell (1984)

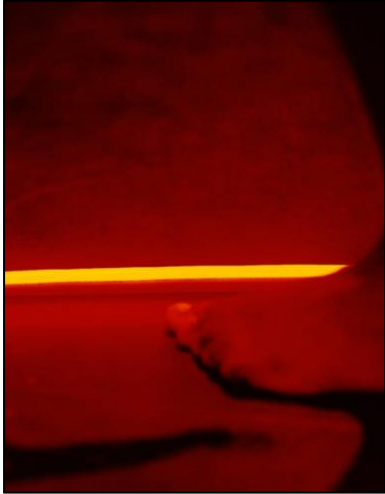


Figure 2.8: red tethers a sheer cloth around their body then disappears into space, *tether*. 2022 ; three image stills.

Flying is one of the most hyper-visible forms of spectacle.

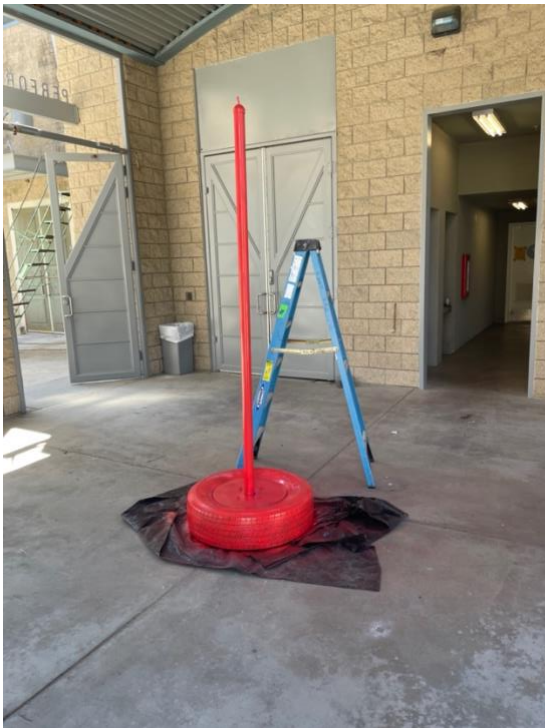
When I fly, I center my image. *tether* is a meditation on flight and questions what it means to be tethered to this desire to be seen through performance. Sports is an intimate stage that allowed my body to made visible as a character performing playful gestures and intimate exchanges with other players. As these memories develop over time, reinterpreting them as evocative, theatrical performances becomes a form of mythmaking. The camera functions as tool to document my reinterpretations of sport, which gives voice to different subject positions (i.e. orange & red character, Igbo masquerades). My desire to be seen is coupled with a desire to be unseen, to live vicariously through athletes who's performances I document (i.e. fencers, cos-players, capoeiristas). The camera functions as a way to *fly* away, to create new realities that reinscribe my blood & muscle memories. In *tether*, I mythologize tetherball as a game of flight or physical transcendence. I transcend my body, pushing past this fixed representation of a black girl playing a childhood game that belonged to recess grounds.

The first appropriated voice I place in *tether & synonyms of orange* belongs to a houseless boy named Rat who is featured in the documentary film *Streetwise* (Martin Bell, 1984). In the film, his voice calmly presides (see lines on page 36) over footage of him launching himself off a bridge, but somehow safely landing in waters below. His youthful voice & bodily release in slow-motion inspired me to develop a speculative framework for tethering gestures being a means of flight. The rest of *tether's* musical score intersperses spoken word pieces and appropriated voices from found footage that touch on & complicate other ideas surrounding flight. This ranges from Toni Morrison's conception of a black character who can fly (in reference to *Song of Solomon*) to Rohan Ayinde' poetic reimagining of himself as a bird.

In *tether*, the red alter-ego transcends their body into various identities – a maskless red tinsel-wearing player , a ghostly sheer-covered figure, and a nude figure whose body is fragmented. The footage is shot in ultra-slow motion as a sensual, fluid way to arrive at different versions of self. This aligns with my earlier idea of 'coming home to an image of myself'. These transformations are a way of doubling myself – becoming & unbecoming tethered to a gendered body. I use the masquerade figure as a mode of a performance because their kinetic movement and garments of invisibility allow them to be seen in spectacular ways ; gender & gaze become circumnavigated through this cloaked identity (see **figure 2.7**). red's performance preserves Ojionu masquerade elements such as the raffia material, veiled embodiment, and the Igbo masquerade's frenetic energy known as *ikpa ike*. But red appears as a maskless figure (re)performing *ikpa ike* through tethering gestures and bouncing that can read as a dance. The movement of the red's character's tinsel jacket mythologizes them a kind of bird who becomes consumed by long strands of hair when they burst outward. The rope light that encircles them is this space of ritual that enacts these movements (see **figure 2.7**). This mimics the white painted circumference line that often encircles tetherball games.

as a child, witnessing masquerade figure perform felt so difficult to explain to friends. in writing this paper, I understand that something becomes lost in containing these illegible feelings and indigenous histories of their performance to text.

to put it simply, masquerade figure performance were communal ceremonies full of affect. they existed in a similar realm of blood rituals that involved sacrificing a goat. witnessing masquerade figures became the only way "contain" these moments, to become embodied & experience a collective consciousness. i recognize the indigenous knowledge of these figures has become abstracted in various masquerade figure & conceptual forms (including my own) throughout African diaspora. so as I develop this work I will renew these ideas and understand that it not just only about performance, spectacle, or sports. it's about a multilayered ritual.



Figures 2.9: analog television attached to monitor; live video jockey & musical performance of *tether* ; audience watches *tether* in Structural & Materials Engineering UC San Diego Building. 2022. Installation. three installation views ; Credit: Arlene Mejorado

tether installation concept

The *tether* film installation and objects are installed and live performed in a theatre that uses techniques of expanded cinema that implicate me – my body as a live performer & the red character's body.

The film begins with the color red surfaced on two multi-channel screens – a translucent sheet & a black & white analog television monitor (see **figure 2.9**) attached to a tetherball pole that is wrapped in paillette circle sequins fabric. red's disembodied voice recites a poem (refer to page 10) that recalls my first childhood memory of playing tetherball & flying. Using a VCR and video mixer I then video jockey the *tether* footage in real-time ; I play with the duration of red's gestures by rewinding, fast-forwarding, flipping, and freeze framing the video. Through this I am able to physically manipulate the gravitational pull of analog footage which acts as a tactile medium. Physically orchestrating the speed & composition of the footage reinforces my subject relation to being a performer; the VCR becomes a sacred tool of memory that is an extension of my body. This sensation of performance mimics red's bodily performance in front of a camera. As Laura Marks points out in *Skin of the Film* "memory is actualized in bodily sensations, and correspondingly is not simply a mental, but an embodied process: perception appeals to the intelligence of the body". Using an analog video mixer is a kind of gestural surrogacy, an embodied process that is playfully synchronizes red's bodily movement to music.²²

tether is shot in ultra-slow motion to resist the sport industrial complex system's overabundance of acceleration which codifies athletes as commodities of speed. Slow motion is a dramatic technique that allows for red's performance to be seen as a ritualistic journey, with poetic gestures that slowly prepare them for a transformation. The rhythmic editing of my video jockeying loops new patterns of red's slow-motioned existence, creating unexpected links that remove linear progressions of time often presented in traditional forms of storytelling. Stylistically, I use the film *Tokyo Olympiad* (Kon Ichikawa, 1965) as a sort of reference to think about the importance of framing the bodily rhythms of the athlete. Filmed largely in slow-motion, it documents Olympic athletes as gorgeously textured energetic radical beings competing in and engaging in intimate rituals. *tether* in parallel uses slow-motion to abstract the body from space-time to release it into a moment of graceful bodily rhythms.

I envision the film's loop being a kind of ritual cycling that would be accompanied by a haunted classical sound that felt like a space or body was collapsing, then regenerating itself over & over again. My live video jockeying is guided by the rhythms of a live musical composition performed by myself and Eva Marie Gonzalez Ruskiewicz. Using synthesizers and a drum machine our live musical score is a rendition of the experimental classical album *Harmattan* (2021), created by the avant-garde musician Klein . We include industrial music, techno, sound effects of red's tinsel garment shaking, and an assemblage of disembodied voices that center ideas surrounding flight. Klein's *Harmattan* album title pulls from her visit to Nigeria as a child during the dry season. The album redefines classical music, as Klein utilizes a DIY process of borrowing friends' miscellaneous instruments and uses Ableton software to produce synthesized strings & horns reinforced with drone sounds. Similar to Klein's nonlinear process, I recreate visuals and improvise melody from their original intent through assemblage.

The installation space, the Structural Mechanical Engineering theatre, is unusual in that it has a garage door that opens up. The audience can traverse the theatre either from the inside or outside, which allows for interaction with the translucent projection sheets inside or a tetherball outside that has a analog monitor attached to it (see **figure 2.9**). The audience is immersed in the color red through the theatre's red seats and red lights. They are also invited to view playing with the red tetherball structure situated outside; it acts a stand-in for red's body. The other sculptural stand-ins for red's body is the vertical translucent screens which replace the standard horizontal projection screen (see **figure 2.9**). My

²² Marks, Laura U. *The Skin Of The Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, And The Senses*. Duke University Press, 2000.

idea to project videos onto translucent sheets, were propelled by Nam Jun Paik's suggestion in his 1980 essay "Random Access Information" that "paintings in the next century will most likely be electronic wallpapers which can be programmed to be very complicated or very simple."

Situating the live performance and video installation in the Structural Mechanical Engineering theatre became especially important because of its dynamic sound system. I am inspired to use this sound system because it retraces memories of music inhabiting spaces acoustically through Igbo masquerade performances. In similar ways, my encounters with masquerade figures was reinforced by an embodied sound of drums that would push out an uncensored reality provoking incomprehensible motions from a masquerade figure. Becoming immersed in the sound and allowing the audience to leave with an embodied sensation mimics these conditions.

I welcome the audience to depart with feelings of embodiment.

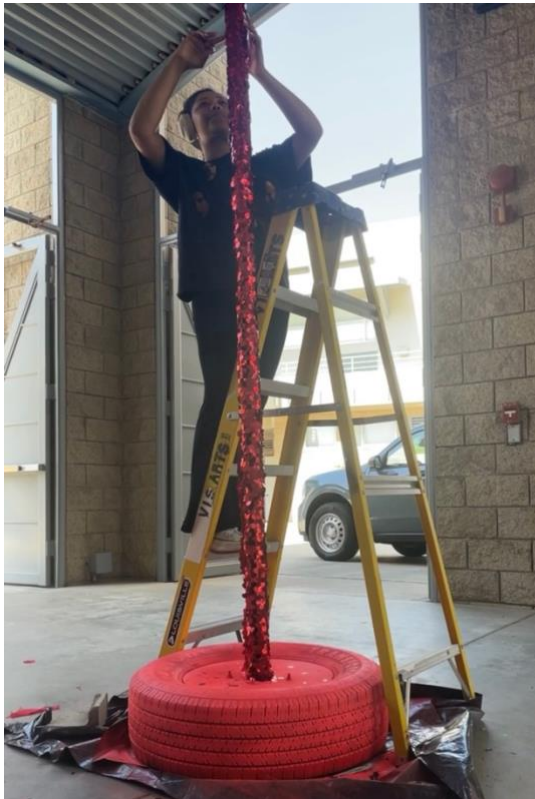


Figure 2.10: kelechi plays tetherball, 2022.
Digital Image ; Credit: Arlene Mejorado

i am looking out
looking forward
i release this play elsewhere.
a bluish sphere nearby
a flotation of some kind
a blue abyss

WORKS CITED

- Wignot, Jamila. dir. *Ailey*. Insignia Films, 2021
- Barney, Matthew. *Matthew Barney: Drawing Restraint, Vol. 1, 1987–2002*. Cologne: König, 2005.
- Bell, Martin, dir. *Streetwise*. 1984 : The Criterion Collection, 2021. Film.
- Carrington, Ben. *Race, Sports and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora*. Thousand Oaks., CA: Sage, 2010. Sheppard, Samantha N. *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020.
- Holloway, Jonathan Scott. "The Black Body as Archive of Memory." In *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America Since 1940*, 67–101. University Of North Carolina Press, 2013.
- How to extinguish your blunt in 10 seconds*. YouTube. 1directorofpromos Channel. 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLCeSQaFZqU>
- Lorde, Audre. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury". *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, no. 3. 1977.
- Marks, Laura U. *The Skin Of The Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, And The Senses*. Duke University Press, 2000.
- Minh-Ha, Trinh T. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1st ed.). Routledge. 1991.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Paik, Nam June, "Random Access Information". *Artforum*. 1980.
- Park Nights 2016: Fred Moten, Eileen Myles and Sondra Perry*. YouTube. Serpentine Galleries, 2017.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjvYPbnRr9s.
- Njoku, Raphael Chijioke. "Unmasking the Masquerade: Counterideologies and Contemporary Practices." In *West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals: History, Memory, and Transnationalism*, NED-New edition., 136–59. Boydell & Brewer, 2020.
- Okafor, Chinyere Grace. "Behind the Inscrutable Wonder: The Dramaturgy of the Mask Performance in Traditional African Society." *Research in African Literatures* 22, no. 4. 1991.
- Osterweis, Ariel. "The Muse of Virtuosity: Desmond Richardson, Race, and Choreographic Falsetto". *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 3. 2013.
- Schechner, Richard. "Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed." *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 : 83–113. 1981.

tether

CREDITS

PERFORMERS

kelechi agwuncha & Eva Marie Gonzalez Ruskiewicz

PRODUCTION

camera operators : kelechi agwuncha & Jun

object construction (& it's iterations): kelechi agwuncha, alexis hithe, Kirstyn Hom , Jun, Kevin Vincent, Matthew Williams

installation lead assistant: mika castaneda

installation production assistants : ebere agwuncha, Jun, Jaz Bryant

SPECIAL THANKS

ebere agwuncha, Rohan Ayinde, Amy Alexander, Patrick Anderson, Dr. Boatema Boateng, Jaz Bryant, Victor Castaneda, E.R. Cho, Lucas Coffin, Ashlyn Dadkhah, Danielle Dean, Wren Gardiner, Matthew Gradala, Maria Antonia Eguiarte, alexis hithe, Hazel Katz , Arlene Mejorado, Nicole Miller, Naomi Nadreau, Paul Sepuya, Justin Tuerk, Kevin Vincent, Matthew Williams, Paolo Zuniga, Colin Zyskowski, The Loft, UC San Diego Visual Arts Department