

# Unburdening Liveness

Tavia Nyong'o

## 1.

“Christie’s to sell NFT of white man being sold as slave” (Levine 2021). So ran a sensationalist headline in the New York *Post* in September of 2021. The ensuing story about revolutionary Black artist Dread Scott’s entry into the market for “nonfungible tokens” was easy tabloid fodder, breathlessly swirling together the worlds of elite auction houses, longstanding partisan mudslinging over the value of transgressive art, and the ongoing fallout from 2020’s “racial reckoning” following the police murder of George Floyd. The work in question, *White Male for Sale* (2021), a 20-minute looped video of an expressionless white man standing on a wooden crate on a busy street corner in a predominantly Black part of Brooklyn, was misleadingly described by the *Post* writer as suggesting that Scott, a committed Black radical who has exhibited work reenacting violent slave rebellions and defacing symbols of a slaveholding republic, “has made peace with at least some parts of capitalism” (Levine 2021). In fact, as Scott explained in multiple interviews (as well as in a conversation I had with him), his intention was the opposite: to stoke discontent with racial capitalism by offering a timely reminder—albeit one stated with tongue partly in cheek—that the market has made living commodities of us all (on racial capitalism see Melamed [2015]). But what is this “liveness” that we buy, sell, and trade under capitalism? And is it the same as the “liveness” of the live arts?

One answer can be gleaned from the \$2,064,000 auction “estimate” that Dread Scott gave to *Art News* before the sale, a figure the artist derived, he said, from figuring “the average lifetime income of a white male, aged 35, if he worked to retirement age at 68” (in Dafoe 2021). The price of speculative aesthetic capital, the artist slyly implied, was ultimately derived from a labor theory of value. In classical Marxist theory, profits can only be secured, and capital can only grow, by paying “free” laborers less in wages, over their working lifetime, than they are compensated for in wages. Although unfree forms of slavery and serfdom were still the dominant forms of dispossessed labor in the 19th century, when Marx formulated his critique of political economy, it was the emergent form of labor exchanged on the free market for wages that captured his attention. He sought to disclose the mystery of how capitalists managed to extract surplus value from the labor process, when that process was officially founded on the free exchange of like for like. Dread Scott’s estimate of his NFT adroitly exploited the whiteness of his sitter to show how this mystery remains unsolved today, long after the supposed abolition of unfree labor. As a free white man, the unnamed sitter is “nonfungible” in our present-day parlance. He cannot be bought, sold, or owned, nor can he be exchanged for another white man or percentage of a white man within the rules of contemporary capitalism. But since history instructs us as to how all such transactions were easily imagined and practiced when it came to chattel slavery, whose modernity has been repeatedly argued in the Black radical tradition, the auction illustrates how thoroughly the most innovative and novel forms of financial transaction are haunted. Placing a white sitter on a fictional auction block thus affords the Black radical artist an

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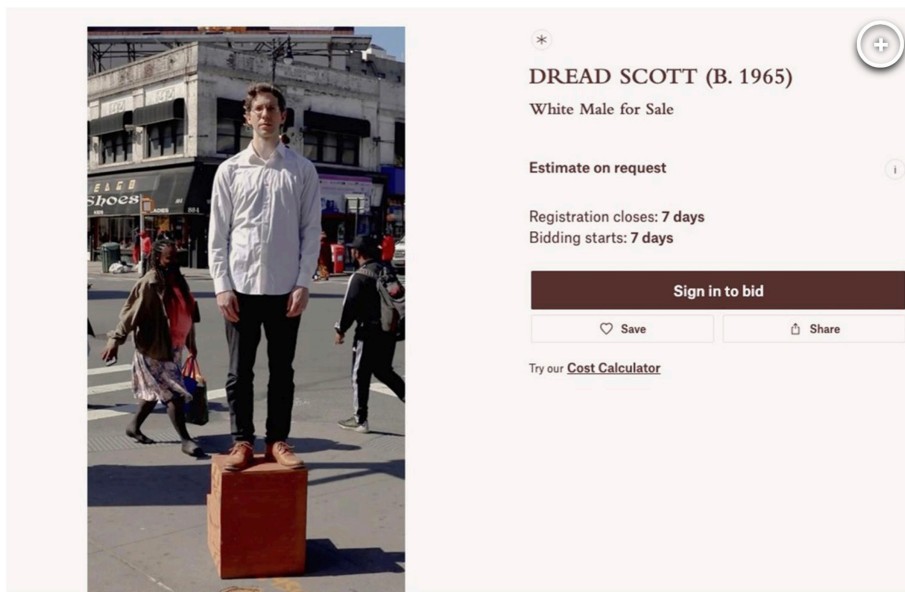
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# Christie's to sell NFT of white man being sold as slave

By [Jon Levine](#)

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Christie's will be auctioning an NFT featuring a white man being sold as a slave.

Christie's

Figure 1. *Dread Scott, White Male for Sale, 2021. White man, NFT auction.* (Screenshot by Tavia Nyong'o)

opportunity to index the real history of chattel slavery on which contemporary capitalism was built, a system in which “labor in black skin” was entirely fungible, without in any sense *equating* it with white labor either historically or in the present (Marx [1867] 1972:275).

This interpretation, I recognize, may be controversial. In the racist imaginary, Dread Scott's NFT auction was perhaps unsurprisingly read as a bald act of symbolic payback. And after all, a tradition going all the way back to Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* has justified white supremacy on the grounds that, if free and equal, Blacks would exact on whites all they had been made to suffer (Jefferson [1783] 2022). But the speculative power of Scott's delegated performance, I maintain, lies in precisely the opposite direction as racial retribution. In exposing the actuarial mechanisms through which abstract labor is quantified in raced and gendered terms, Scott neutralizes the ability of his sitter to serve as either racial scapegoat or white savior. He is simply an average(d) and divisible being whose value at present is determined by his predicted future income stream. As living labor thus reduced to the tyranny of speculative capital, the sitter enters into the field of cultural production—via the emergent technocultural form of the NFT—not as a heroic artist-as-agent like NFT art star Beeple, but just one of the many anonymous “sheeple.” Indeed, this dismissive epithet “sheeple” is a telling phrase from

our contemporary internet slang that conflates humans with livestock—whose fleeing by the predatory class has only intensified. Elsewhere in this issue a theory of “metered togetherness” is posited that may deepen the ideological significance of this metaphoric conflation of humanity with livestock, a conflation that points to, among other structural transformations in the global economy, the increasing significance of aggregated affective labor as a source for profits (see Kimmel et al. 2022). Here I refer to common parlance of “herd instincts” and even “animal spirits” driving (ir)rational market behavior. One might consider Scott’s sitter, for example, as “standing in” for one of the many investors in Gamestop, or the even more numerous hapless but valiant investors in cryptocurrencies, quixotically trying to beat casino capitalism at its own game (Chohan 2021).

I open this essay on liveness and presence with a performative financial transaction in order to recenter the body as an extractive zone rather than (or in addition to) the body as a site of memory, meaning, and identity (on extractive zones see Gómez-Barris 2017). While mindful of all that has been accomplished under the rubric of, for instance, trauma studies, it seems important that it be said that the ruination of the body under racial capitalism does not end or even necessarily start with subjectivity. The impersonal, abstract forces that operate on the body, “producing” its conditions of legibility (such as race, gender, and nationality) are an important additional piece of the puzzle. Put another way, the task today still remains “to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (Foucault 1977:148). While there is no need to impose a pernicious dualism between approaches, I would aver that at present the subjective has gained an upper hand over the asubjective and genealogical (consider for example the terrible glut of memoir in recent years), and that we are therefore due for some theoretical course correction. With those provisos in mind, I seek here to provide some notes towards a potential revisioning of “liveness” as a critical catchphrase, perhaps a re-livening of it.

Nothing about Dread Scott’s performance was “live” in the ordinary sense: the only audience to a live performance would probably have to be the passersby on the street the day Scott filmed. And yet the work had everything to do with “liveness,” thought of here not as the privileged object of study of a particular discipline, but rather as a virtuality to be contested over within the broader social field. What do I mean when I speak of liveness as virtual? While the “virtual” is sometimes taken as a fancy synonym for the “digital,” I mean it in the sense given to the term by Deleuze: as the field of potentiality (in contrast to actuality) (see King 2015). Life here really refers less to the technical definition given to life in biology, and more to the open-ended nature of potentiality. Virtual life is that which cannot be determined in advance. While respectful of the Freudian positing of a “death drive” as the destiny of all life, this approach to liveness is limited by neither ontogeny nor phylogeny. It also puts pressure, as Donna V. Jones encourages us to do in her important study *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*, on the idea of life itself (2010). Tackling the perplexing vitalism of a revolutionary generation of Black poets and lawmakers, Jones invites us to question the coherence of life as received dogma, suggesting that even the contemporary life sciences have increasingly abandoned it. When we attempt to determine the value of “liveness” for performance studies, consider that we may be burdened by a history of primitivism that has accumulated around the word. It may be time to dispense altogether with this mysterious and possibly imaginary “stuff” that we call life, and in so calling, posit as the ultimate source of value. In Dread Scott’s NFT, we may instead see the figurative unity of living labor and living commodity as if in a futuristic hologram.<sup>1</sup> Life that generates surplus value just by living; this is a fantasy of racial capitalism. The point of minoritarian performance, I submit, is to ruin that fantasy.

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1. It may be thought here that the life in question is solely that of the white sitter. To the contrary, I have confidence that the reader will understand the assumption of every preceding paragraph includes the life and labor of the Black artist in its formulation.

## 2.

If the first section of this essay is made possible by the thinking of Randy Martin (2013) on derivative aesthetics, this next section turns to an encounter with the thinking of José Esteban Muñoz (1999). I am weaving their distinctive approaches to the minor-major relation to remount an understanding of “liveness” that is not burdened by normative aspirations towards presence. These normative aspirations include the pursuit of an objective and disciplinary definition of the live, whereas the work that linked Martin and Muñoz as performance theorists was their shared sensitivity to a conjuncture in which that disciplinary definition had grown constrictive.<sup>2</sup> Specifying the theories and methods of minoritarian performance on such terms presents a challenge to the bourgeois academy and its division of intellectual labor, divisions that both shape and are shaped by entrenched culture industries. Performance studies is often misunderstood, for example, as focused on the live *as contrasted with* the mediated arts. The manner in which the life of the body can serve *as a medium* (for instance as a medium for the store and transmission of value) is conveniently obfuscated by this ordering of academic things. The conventions and demands of academic labor reinforce this obfuscation, with entire departments and schools organized in silos that mystify the common racial and economic logic underpinning the culture industries. And, as a sort of scholarly superstructure to this pedagogic and economic base, debates in the field endure for reasons one might be forgiven for attributing to the self-reinforcing need to have something to argue about. “Liveness,” we well know by now, is an aporia. But it seems to be an aporia whose reproduction is indispensable to the coherence of the field. What would it mean, then, to admit and even exacerbate this incoherence, to release the field’s antibourgeois energies, and, along the way, to unburden liveness of all it has been set up to do for performance studies knowledge projects (Auslander 1999; Phelan 1993; Ridout 2020)?

This is what Muñoz was arguing for in *Disidentifications*: unburdening performance studies of its field imaginary as the discipline that “owns” liveness. It has proved much easier said than done. Start with the term itself, which still “belongs” to performance studies, more or less. When Muñoz entered the debate over 20 years ago, he introduced the “burden of liveness” that he saw was experienced by minoritarian subjects and presented it as a challenge to the idealization of liveness in performance studies (Muñoz 1999). This burden, for Black subjects, is experienced as the weight of the historical memory of the scaffold and the auction block, and the terrifying spectacle of life displayed as the blazon of its imminent tortuous death by lynching or living entombed in slavery (Hartman 1997). In the wake of this living hell, Muñoz sought to illuminate the ways in which liveness could nonetheless serve as a space of possibility for Black and other minoritized subjects.

This space of disidentification proved generative for many, even as doubts as to the efficacy of the performative gesture remained a constant skeptical refrain. And over the past decade, Afropessimists have come to emphasize the singularity and nonequivalence of the post-slave condition of the Blackened being, over and against “coalitional” concepts like “people of color” or even “the minoritarian” (Sexton 2010; Wilderson 2010). This approach to cultural politics emphasizes the futility of speech or other acts made in protest of an anti-Black world, and suspects concepts like Asianness and brownness to be Trojan horses for whiteness. And surely Blackness, Asianness, and brownness are not equivalent to each other. From the Black Marxist perspective of an artist like Dread Scott, however, as I’ve sought to suggest, nonequivalence (i.e., nonfungibility) is not only assumed but is positively insisted upon. Let us recall that the introduction of the “token” reintroduces the violent mercies of market transaction supposedly cordoned off by the idea of “nonfungibility.” Under such circumstances, the nonequivalent is formally subsumed within capitalist extraction, and thus subject to the social logic of the derivative (Martin 2013). What is more subversive at the present conjuncture is not nonequivalence, which is assumed as a premise of capitalist speculation, but *indeterminacy*, which is a threat to command and control. Only through grappling with the open-ended indeterminacy of life can we arrive at the revolutionary standpoint

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2. It might even be the case that theorizing “the conjunctural” could be the crossroads where the otherwise divergent political trajectories of cultural studies and performance studies might meet. But that is a topic for another essay.

needed to oppose racial capitalism from within. Liveness is therefore not a terrain to be abandoned so much as deterritorialized, as the turn towards utopian conceptions of the performative in the field, led by scholars such as Muñoz, Jill Dolan, and Jayna Brown, makes clear (Dolan 2005; Brown 2021).

But the power of the bourgeois position on “liveness,” as is usually the case, is its proximity to common sense, or what everyone already knows. Shouldn’t the presence, or absence, of live performers be one of the most obvious distinctions one could make about a work of art? Isn’t quibbling with common sense the kind of counterintuitive gesture that alienates intellectuals from their communities of origin and accountability? The field of minoritarian performance has long held that the answer to this question is no. We the minoritarian are not simply being obstreperous when we suspect the self-evidence of liveness. We object insofar as we find the self-evidence of liveness, the command to appear on command, to be part of the deep violence of majoritarian enjoyment, a violence that territorializes life and its futures within a calculus of extraction and profit. When we step outside the temptation of that enjoyment, when we become queer, trans, and feminist “killjoys” in relation to the common sense of liveness, we discover that there is little about live presence that is obvious, beginning with the language we use to account for it, a language that appears clear but turns out to be clouded with ambiguity (on feminist killjoys see Ahmed 2010).

Muñoz’s resistance to the common sense equation between liveness and performance—which at one point he termed an “obstructive fetish” for the field (1999:189)—had everything to do with the violent histories of the colonial modern, which tend to place people of color on display and outside history, laboring to display their eccentric particularities for a crypto-universalist white audience (see also Fusco 1995). It is this legacy, I warrant, that informs a more recent comment by Fred Moten. “If the performances I have most usually invoked are not live,” Moten notes in *Stolen Life*, “this has been a function of my preference for how Blackness displaces the particular (and sclerotic) notion of presence that liveness is supposed to instantiate” (2018:241–42). Blackness, in this formulation, is that which aesthetically resists each and every command to appear (see also Copeland 2013). Both Moten and Muñoz push performance studies to grapple with concepts of Black and minoritarian performance that do not fetishize liveness or presence. My interest here is in pursuing a concept of the virtual that abandons these fetishes while sustaining a focus on process, becoming, and the indeterminate. This is somewhat tricky to do, given how in flux communicative capitalism has grown, anticipating and in some senses subsuming the virtual. It used to be possible to believe ourselves when we said that someone was either here or not. Today, social life is increasingly lived like certain subatomic particles, both here and not here, measured and immeasurable, isolated and yet acting on each other via Einstein’s “spooky action at a distance.” And it is certainly not the case that racial capitalism at present “knows what it’s doing”; on the contrary: the very chaos of just the past five years should be as bold a caution as history could provide against believing the present order’s own fantasy of itself as sturdier than it is.<sup>3</sup>

The version of Black performance adopted here is therefore one that makes space for ambiguity, opacity, and the cloud of unknowing. It is a Black performance whose genealogy can be found in, amongst other recent publications, Jayna Brown’s marvelous *Black Utopias* (2021), as well as in her other writings on speculative life at the cellular level (2015). Although not herself drawn to the concept of the minoritarian to the same degree that Muñoz was, Brown shares with him a fascination with the grumpy utopianism of Ernst Bloch ([1954] 1996). What is more, Brown’s theory of “speculative life” is both wholly original and in deep conversation with a lineage of ecstatic Black women seers reaching back at least to Sojourner Truth, the abolitionist, feminist, mystic, and wanderer who

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3. The stimulating and necessary accounts of McKenzie Wark, for instance, present a picture of the vectorial class whose overweening power over information is even greater than capital. This class, however, is still powerless to do more than preside over the catastrophic collapse of the life world that gave rise to it, lending some doubt as to the ultimate nature of that power (Wark [2019] 2021).



captioned photos of herself with “I sell the shadow to support the substance.”<sup>4</sup> Speculative life in Brownian terms is Blackness lived, as it must be lived, within the confines of a given apparatus of race, class, and gender, but in perpetual contact with an unbounded plenitude that anti-Blackness exhausts itself in attempting to colonize (Brown 2015; on the apparatus, see Weheliye 2014; on unbounded plenitude within Blackness see da Silva 2013 and 2014). Skeptics hastily conflate such concrete utopianism with humanist “optimism.”<sup>5</sup> To clarify what is going on, there is a useful distinction drawn by the uncertain commons collective between the *firmative* speculation of capitalist futures industries and the *affirmative* speculation of indeterminate resistance (uncertain commons 2013). But they aren’t wrong to identify a world-building project here. The worlds of speculative life are not known or fully knowable worlds, however, much less are they worlds that are amenable to surveillance, colonization, or extraction. And yet, perhaps paradoxically, they are worlds worth fighting for.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.

This essay began as a talk given at the invitation of the artist Sharon Hayes on the occasion of the founding of a performance studies program at the University of Pennsylvania. Delivered in January 2020, just before the world changed, that talk discussed a group of contemporary Black artists who seemed to me to defy the live/mediated distinction. My agenda was to contribute ideas towards a new program in performance studies that was unburdened of the liveness fetish. I could of course not have anticipated the abrupt transformation in our collective relation to copresence that the Covid-19 pandemic would introduce, but I suppose I might well have expected that history would continue to present ironic reversals of my theoretical certitudes. Certainly, the efficiency with which my current institution, for instance, sought to prohibit live theatre for reasons of public health, while continuing to demand a draining regiment of remote presence, had a way of focusing the mind about the value of co-presence. I may have deconstructed liveness for decades in seminars and writings, but when faced with its elimination, I found myself among its institutional champions. And this went far beyond the return to stages. Any one of the millions who defied stay-at-home mandates to take the streets in protest of police murders of unarmed Black people during the summer of 2020 can testify as to the continued salience of presence and participation. A new generation discovered the “magic actions,” as Tobi Haslett named them, that only become possible when Black people rise up against police batons, get cracked in the skull, and come back swinging (Haslett 2021).

The swift repression of even the memory of this insurgency just months later suggests that this “magic” of collective action draws much potency from the aforementioned affirmative speculation: an insistence that we are not yet dead or defeated, that our future is still unwritten. Firmative speculation, by contrast, employs every tool in the arsenal of technocapitalism to colonize that future and remainder life. One of those tools is the distraction, dissociation, and even destruction of memory. A fearsome question therefore presents itself—and it is also one that bears crucially on the intergenerational transmission of memory in an era of escalating violence on a world scale: Can the magic actions of radical resistance ultimately succeed in anything other than bringing down repression at a greater power and scale? Put another way: How can the radical act take shape within a social field without becoming a self-canceling gesture?

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4. This is a reference to the *carte des visites* photographs Truth sold as collectibles to support her missions. Her radical formulation can best be approached in the context of the present essay as a black NFT *avant la lettre*.

5. Even optimism in a tempered Leibnizian form might yet be affirmed if we draw upon contemporary astrophysics to affirm this Earth as the *only* of all possible worlds (at least within this solar system) to have maintained conditions for life. For an accessible introduction to theoretical cosmology from a radical Black femme perspective, see Prescod-Weinstein (2022).

6. The “fight” I evoke here is specifically a reference to the identity of “warrior poet” as adopted by Black lesbian socialist feminist poet Audre Lorde ([1984] 2020). It is a spiritual militancy, not a form of interpersonal violence.



Figure 2. EJ Hill, *Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria*, 2018. “Where on earth, in which soils and under what conditions will we bloom brilliantly and violently.” Installation view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. (Photo by Brian Forrest)

Perhaps the life of Black resistance is lived only in the present. The past is but a history of our defeats, and the future a fiction imposed upon life through innumerable oppressive mechanisms, from debt to prison sentences to fantasies of the good life. Into this interregnum an even more terrible burden of liveness emerges for the minoritarian subject: the burden of bearing witness to a world of indomitable pain. Epidemics of suicide have long alerted us to this particular burden of being alive, as well as the slow death and lateral agencies that Lauren Berlant wrote of so eloquently (2011).

While the performance I revisit here in closing occurred before the pandemic, I look back on it as a form of meditation on the durative powers of affirmative Black speculation even in a world without hope.

The piece is EJ Hill’s 2018 endurance piece, *Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria*, in which the artist stood immobile on a sports podium in the Vault Gallery of

LA’s Hammer Museum for all 78 days of its *Made in LA* biennial. This work was in the tradition of endurance art by well-known figures such as Tehching Hsieh, Carolee Schneemann, Pope.L, and Papo Colo. It followed Hill’s prior endurance piece, *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy*, in which the artist lay prone inside a neon-lit sculpture of a roller coaster for the run of the Studio Museum’s 2016 Artist in Residence show. Hill’s living, breathing, prone body in the earlier piece was both a still act (Young 2010) and a quiet act (Quashie 2012) that simultaneously offered and withheld the potential referred to in its title. Read (somewhat against the artist’s expectations) as a commentary on the police murder of Mike Brown, the Missouri teenager whose dead body lay on the street for four hours on a summer afternoon as national outrage mounted. The still, quiet refusals of *A Monumental Offering* offered up the artist’s Black male body as a substitute, but not in the mode of a sacrifice. Clad in white, and illuminated by lavender neon, Hill lay in a meditative repose suggestive of the altered states of dreaming and child’s play. A nod to the deep exhaustion felt by Black bodies weighed down by work and care, nerves frayed by cycles of alarm and outrage, the simultaneous proffering and withholding of energy in this piece affirmed the capacity to do something in response, even if “doing something” in this case looked like “doing nothing.”

That the endurance art of EJ Hill entails much more than “doing nothing” was underscored in 2018’s *Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria*. Here the physical condition required to stand motionless was immediately apparent to anyone who entered the gallery in which he stood. It was obvious to the point of discomfort, especially when the visitor had to meet the challenge of the silent artist’s direct gaze. In counterpoint to the accelerated circulation of art on Instagram and other algorithmically curated flows of images, Hill’s work brought the viewer into a dyadic encounter with a Black body

in superheroic arrest. This piece held multiple valences. On the one hand, sports remain one of the most highly mediated and spectacularized modes of performance (and the first to return during the pandemic, let us recall, even before vaccines) where the Black body is an obstructive fetish for mass audiences. In allegorizing his participation in *Made in LA*—and in the art world broadly—to sports competition, Hill both accedes to the punitive demands for presence and subverts it. He accedes insofar as he places his body literally on display during museum hours, but he subverts through that selfsame context of a museum gallery, which enshrines Hill's presence with a fleshly excess, insofar as that location suggests both a historicity and (collective) agency that the burden of liveness mitigates against. Behind Hill, neon text evoked the word radical's etymology in "root" when it asked: "Where on earth, in which soils and under what conditions, will we bloom brilliantly and violently?"

These two arresting images of persons standing—one on a block, the other on a podium—seem to span the powers of firmative and affirmative speculation in performance in our present moment. The interconnectedness between the two is suggested in a comment from another artist and theorist of Black virtuality and remote presence, Martine Syms, who has noted:

Philip Auslander's concept of liveness points to a contradiction in the conditions of my visibility. I have to be repeatedly thrown against deathness to be alive. Whatever happens to a shitty JPEG or GIF has consequences on my body. It's called compression. The image is now part of my flesh. I began thinking deeply about the intimate relationships we have with our tech and the ideologies embedded within them. I'm fascinated by the ways we disidentify, negotiate, or change them to fit real life. (2019:201)

Syms's insight into the deathliness—the violence—of the image points towards the need to unburden our concept of liveness and presence. Made just before the rise of the NFT, her prescient comment that "whatever happens to a shitty JPEG or GIF has consequences on my body" points towards a bleak future that we need to refuse. Unburdening liveness may not necessarily entail a refusal to appear, given all the ways "the image is now part of [the] flesh." Rather it entails updating our grasp of the contradictions of the visible, amid the ongoing search for the conditions for our brilliant and violent bloom.

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