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ARTFORUM

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OPENINGS

Kevin Beasley

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Kevin Beasley, *I Want My Spot Back*, 2012. Performance view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 26, 2012. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

KEVIN BEASLEY kneels before two turntables in the lower-level theater of New York's Studio Museum in Harlem. He's in the middle of a set that is by turns haunting and propulsive, mixing samples that range from extra-percussive house beats to attenuated ambulance sirens, as his spoken-word excerpts betray their midwestern origins and unmistakably American character. Lines from Malcolm X's 1962 speech "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?" are audible one minute; the next, the Cleveland neighbor who helped free Amanda Berry after she was held hostage for a decade recounts the story of her discovery. The set culminates with the sweet and sweaty promise of Detroit techno/house artist Theo Parrish's 2011 track "Black Music," but through it all, the audio clips that kicked off the set never stop reverberating: *They killed him for no reason. They killed this nigger for no reason. He dead as a motherfucker. They killed this nigger for no reason. That guy is laying in the street dead. That man dead, man. Say he had his hands up and everything. Still shot him. The man laying in the street dead as a motherfucker.*

In her influential essay "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?," published in the catalogue for the 1994 Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art," poet and critic Elizabeth Alexander considers the stakes of representing antiblack violence, attending in particular to the video that famously documented the 1991 beating of Rodney King by police officers in Los Angeles. To be black, argues Alexander, is to have no choice but to confront documentary evidence of the spectacularized violence waged against black people in the United States. "In order to survive," she writes, "black people have paradoxically had to witness their own murder and defilement and then pass along the epic tale of violation." Alexander's title is not only an ethical interrogative but an ontological quandary about the difference between blackness and looking—the kind of looking that, in the Western tradition, has long been the birthright of the sovereign subject, who is free to take pleasure without reservation or threat to bodily integrity. To be black is not a biological or even a cultural fact, she suggests; to be black is to be a vexed onlooker.

Yet looking is not the same as listening. Art historian Huey Copeland has recently argued that many artists of color working around the time of King's beating refused codes of visual and racial representation through recourse to "other bodily faculties . . . : the haptic, the written word, the thinly surrogate, and most signally, the voice." The voice, in particular, goes places vision cannot. Indeed, the terrible beauty of Beasley's set ventures onto perilous ground precisely through use of the voice. He pairs audio clips—which, via the words of a secondhand witness, repeatedly describe the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—with a club track, which he performed at the Studio Museum just over a month after Brown was shot.

The juxtaposition risks aestheticizing Brown's killing, but in fact it subtly underscores the dreadful ordinariness of such acts, as the club and the bloody street are spaces of both eventfulness and habit. To hear a recurring testament of horror from someone who himself did not see Brown's body produces a knowledge of the trauma, not through authenticated firsthand testimony or through the retribution that remains unattainable by due process, but rather in the way such accounts are so often transmitted in communities in which trauma occurs—through a chain of hearsay that feels more reliable than a sworn statement. The chain starts with unwilling looking, which Beasley reproduces by refusing to image it, instead using sound that produces a mental projection of an image in its visual absence. The focused vector of vision is exchanged for something more expansive, even shared. Immersed in and surrounded by the invasiveness of a sound that, once heard, cannot summarily be averted or forgotten, you feel the other listeners rocking next to you.

Beasley—born in 1985 in Lynchburg, Virginia, educated in Detroit and New Haven, and currently based in Queens—works in an expanded sculptural language in which sound not only occupies space but is a material that changes spaces themselves through exertions of mass, weight, content. It's noteworthy that Beasley does not exploit CDJs to the extent his contemporaries in, say, GHE20 G0TH1K or DIS do, instead preferring the physicality of turntables. For him, the materiality of sound seems to have a transitive property, flowing from the haptic immediacy of analog turntablism to the palpable presence of a bass line or a voice. For his 2012 work *I Want My Spot Back*, for example, Beasley was invited by choreographer Ralph Lemon, on the occasion of a dance series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, to occupy the institution's atrium gallery. During his two one-hour sets, Beasley mixed and slowed down just under forty a cappella tracks by deceased black male rappers from the early to mid-1990s, using more than ten subwoofers and loudspeakers to transform the music into a physical sensation that literally made the museum's walls shake, creating a vibrational force as architectonic as it was somatic. Beasley's acousmatic music—composed for live presentation using speakers—often functions in *negativa*, as the listener hears sounds without recognizing their originating sources. But while they may be disembodied, abstracted, even nameless, the rappers in *I Want My Spot Back* are here, for as long as their voices issue from Beasley's speakers. Vocality in Beasley's work is always mnemonic, recalling and addressing the departed, and redressing the proximity of black life to social death as the artist points to the potential for everyday culture to attend to loss.

Beasley's sculpture likewise explores the physical pressure of things that remain out of sight. He produces assemblages in which detritus, found or saved, is agglomerated with resin and polyurethane foam, a material that, despite its commercial ubiquity in everything from insulation to surfboards, often remains unseen. Beasley combines a polymer catalyst and reactant to produce the foam, which remains malleable for about half an hour. Within that window, he wrestles his combines into shape—molding, wrapping, stuffing, and embedding. In the resulting works, foam spills formlessly from a sneaker; bulges, bound and taut, beneath fabric or plastic wrappings; or serves as a primordial matrix for bits of junk. The sculptures bear the traces of postindustrial urban cycles of use and disuse, alongside the imprints of his body. Yet despite their folds, holes, and seepages, his objects (like his performances) refuse to represent a body, instead indexing the absent body's actions and movements—a fugitive remainder, reminding the viewer of what was once there.

Beasley's absenting presence—presence as voice, as indexical mark, presence that may be active and collective or haunted, spectral, and deferred—strategically negotiates the reality of being an embodied subject who cannot elide the dangers of subjection or its historical and political specificities; it is a mode of presence that quickens and guards against embodiment's enmeshment with the violent dynamics of spectacularization. His practices of dislocation and recontextualization, his stagings of fragmentation and unstable materiality, and his fleeting consolidations of the mnemonic trace seem to ask: What does it mean to assemble things when those things are beats, limbs, corpses, or people brought provisionally together to mourn or to protest? He encourages us to begin our response by swaying in our seats.

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