

bitforms gallery

Disembodied Behaviors

Julie Béna, Vitória Cribb, Kumbirai Makumbe, LaJuné McMillian, and Alicia Mersy

Curated by Zaiba Jabbar and Valerie Amend

November 10–December 19, 2020

Screening program presented in gallery

Tuesday–Saturday, 11AM—5:30PM

Virtual exhibition presented on [New Art City](#)

Live November 10, 11AM EST

[Disembodied Behaviors](#) celebrates the potential of digital individuals, who range from avatars imbued with cultural memory to AI narrators, to dismantle predictive structures of power. Selected works by Julie Béna, Vitória Cribb, Kumbirai Makumbe, LaJuné McMillian, and Alicia Mersy implement measures of social critique to reject self-fulfilling prophecies and commodified capital applied to populations. Personification acts as a tool to breathe life into data archives and abandoned materiality. Artworks advance autonomy through the unraveling of established binaries, proposing future landscapes in virtual space. This allows us to engage future landscapes in the digital component of the exhibition, which we are pleased to present in collaboration with [New Art City](#), an online art space for works of new media. The virtual presentation of six site-specific, multi-user experiences echoes the gallery's screening program in a 3D atmosphere.

Alicia Mersy's *Fear Eats the Soul* opens to contrasting iconographies, mixing wellness and care with news and finance. The artist collapses currency symbols and soothing eye masks into amalgamated motifs that oscillate above scrolling headlines. Borrowing the title from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, Mersy speaks to the antagonizing authority of fear, and its deadly effects on the mind and body. News headlines are replaced with appeals to the viewer, "Be Who You are Behind Your Mind," "Formless Presence," and "Shift Your Thinking to Awareness." In a nod to self-help videos and fear-mongering news publications, Mersy encourages us to move beyond the body, engaging a deeper sense of self. The set of instructions signaling virtuosity resonate like that of news headlines, a disembodied suggestion demanding action.

An avatar in a slick bodysuit weaves through an atmosphere punctuated with bursting projections of light while dreamlike soundtracks echo their fluid motion. LaJuné McMillian's *Movement Portraits–Nala* is part of a larger series titled *The Black Movement Project*. This series is a new body of work that archives data collection of performers through motion capture, historicizing the movement of Black bodies. McMillian worked with Nala Duma, also known as Ntu, to capture this live performance. McMillian extracts the physical components of Ntu's movement, later assigning an avatar to enact his choreography. The resulting artwork profiles contemporary life through motion, yet transcends the burden of place and time with abstraction. Through this process, McMillian questions what happens when the archival process of data collection is ritualized and recorded, later inviting witnesses. Ntu's flourishing movement is translated to memory without concession.

What is it like to be infinite? In *Anna & The Jester in Window of Opportunity*, we witness Julie Béna's exploration of materiality and absence through a jester grappling with existentialism. Our bell-adorned protagonist navigates through a mostly deserted corporate terrain of steel and glass. She encounters a series of characters that pose intangible questions of embodiment, "Have you stretched your existence enough to help you solve your problem?" The perils of abstraction and concretism befall the jester at every turn, inciting within the viewer the same baffling questions. We are left with a reminder to remain opaque, as transparency can breed conformity.

Vitória Cribb addresses the physical body's presence in *Ilusao*. Programming text sprawls across the screen as we enter a landscape of glossy, finely rendered hues. In an attempt to rationalize the contemporary body as one that is untethered by form, Cribb cites how relationships have become impalpable due to technology as a predominant method of

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communication. The artist uses an avatar to represent the separation of self while elucidating how Black bodies are viewed with similar parameters as digital bodies—exploited and reduced like files or software. The work spotlights the importance of projected data in relation to Covid's trajectory, explaining that the pandemic has forced worldwide attention to a curve rather than a straight line. Sinuosity, the ability to curve or bend easily, signals a type of flexibility that is imperative to this exhibition. It is echoed in McMillian's animation of Ntu's choreography and demanded in Mersy's headlines. However, *Illusao* warns of the fine line between flexibility and manipulation and in closing gently reminds us to straighten our posture.

Evo, the voice replacement used by Kumbirai Makumbe in *Evo's Turn*, is an AI grappling with its own Blackness. As Evo speaks, it pans across a nondescript desert cloaked in night. Within this work, Makumbe removes the body, encouraging the AI to question if they can possess a physical form. Evo personifies Blackness as silver sap, an entity that reflects while retaining its own characteristics. Throughout the work, Evo defaults to a loading screen, buffering in a feeble attempt to grasp its relation to the artist despite its lack of sentience. Silver sap represents a disembodied behavior—a characteristic of unique individuality. As Evo continues through the desert, silver shapes appear amongst the stars, glitching as they attempt to achieve reflection. Blackness isn't a color, Evo describes, it is an idea conceived in relation to whiteness.

Disembodied Behavior seeks to honor these alternative states of being. Each work presents a focused refusal of normative behaviors, including conventions of time and space, typically applied to bodies. This rejection allows artists to usurp the mechanisms of suppression, fear, and conformity, thereby expanding into landscapes that defy prophetic systems of status-quo.

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Julie Béna, born in 1982, is a graduate of the Villa Arson in Nice and attended the Gerrit Rietveld Academie at Amsterdam. In 2012-2013, she was part of le Pavillon, the research laboratory of le Palais de Tokyo. In 2018, she was nominated for the Prix AWARE women art prize. She is represented by Gallery Joseph Tang (Paris) and Gallery Polansky (Prague). Julie Béna's work is made up of an eclectic set of references, combining contemporary and ancient literature, high and low art, joking, and seriousness, parallel times and spaces. Comprising sculpture, installation, film, and performance, her work often seems to float in an infinite vacuum, unfolding against a fictional backdrop where everything is possible. Over the past years, Béna has developed a range of personal cosmologies in which she stages seemingly banal characters and objects that have enigmatic conversations and interactions with each other. In 2019, Béna had solo exhibitions at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, CAPC museum in Bordeaux and the Amparo Museum in Puebla Mexico. Her work has recently been exhibited at the Biennale de Rennes (FR); Polansky Gallery (CZ); 1646 (NL); C art C Madrid (ES); Bozar (BE), Protocinema (TR-US), or Chapter NY (US). Within the last years, Béna has staged performances at Centre Pompidou (FR); ICA London (GB); M Leuven (BE); Palais de Tokyo (FR) and Performa NY (US). Julie Béna is represented by Galerie Joseph Tang, Paris, and Polansky Gallery, Prague.

Vitória Cribb is the daughter of a Haitian father and Brazilian mother born and raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She studies Industrial design and the core of her LOUQUAI project is digital art with a focus on exploring the convergence between the immateriality of new media and their relationship to physical and tactile media. Her works bring a surreal aesthetic with reflections, questions and narratives referring to the present and the past. At the moment the artist explores body-related themes in a society where black people are viewed as digital bodies - always reduced, exploited, manipulated and discarded as a file or software.

Kumbirai Makumbe is an artist & designer who has a keen interest in curatorial methodologies. They are situation dependant, transform and metamorphose to ceaselessly take on various forms and maneuver through a diverse range of spaces. They take special interest in the materiality of digitally generated matter, the endless possibilities of their employability but also their ever-increasing capabilities for communication. They place significant effort into speculative explorations of alternative modes of being and thinking that could negate exclusionary acts and ideologies. Their work continually interrogates the multi-dimensionality of blackness, exclusionary acts and notions of inclusion, 'in-betweenness' and 'caring'.

LaJuné McMillian is a new media artist and creative technologist creating art that integrates performance, extended reality, and physical computing to question our current forms of communication. LaJuné has had the opportunity to show and speak about their work at National Sawdust, Creative Tech Week, and Art & Code's Weird Reality. LaJuné was previously the Director of Skating at Figure Skating in Harlem, where they integrated STEAM and figure skating to teach girls of color about movement and technology. They have continued their research on Blackness, movement, and technology during residencies at Eyebeam, Barbarian Group, and Barnard College.

Alicia Mersy (b. Montreal, Canada, 1988) is an artist and filmmaker of Lebanese/French origin who lives and works in New York. Her work uses the camera to connect to people and to the divine, by forging pathways towards personal and collective peace within a world of infinite production and boundless orientation. Mersy draws from big phenomena including the natural sciences, global capitalism and the infinitude of galactic spirituality to explore decolonial aesthetics and political resistance. Her approach to new media, photography and installation creates space for conversations surrounding self representation, social, class guilt politics, and the resistance of repressive global structures. Mersy received an MA in Fine Arts from Central Saint Martins in 2015. Alicia Mersy's work has been featured in exhibitions at The Institute of Contemporary Arts (London, UK), Tel Aviv Museum of Art (TLV, Israel) and The Migros Museum of Contemporary Art.

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