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SAME DIFFERENCE

Malik Gaines on Julius Eastman

By Malik Gaines

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Cover: **Barbara Hammer**, ***Multiple Orgasm***, **1976**, 16 mm transferred to digital video, color, silent, 5 minutes 32 seconds.

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Julius Eastman at a rehearsal of the S.E.M. Ensemble, Griffi s Sculpture Park, East Otto, New York, 1975. Photo: Christine Rusiniak.

THERE IS SOMETHING very homosexual about using "multiple instruments of the same kind." This is the ensemble instruction composer Julius Eastman gave for performing some of his most exciting scores, in which groups of players work through themes and variations, all on the same musical instrument. These compositions were introduced to new music audiences in the 1970s and '80s and have been rarely heard since. Still, they are thrilling to witness live, as was made possible by the miraculous "That Which Is Fundamental," an exhibition and concert series presented in Philadelphia at the Slought Foundation and the Sanctuary of the Rotunda in 2017 and expanded earlier this year at the Kitchen in New York. In performance, visual cues and subtle spatial arrangements separate layers of sound, setting off differences within a thick field of sameness, as the ensemble finds its repetitive groove and breaks into simultaneous improvisations, which then fold themselves back into the collective, a whirl of thrusts and driving declarations. The singular becomes many, the many become a mass, the mass dissolves into ecstatic singularities. Rather than typical arrangements of complementary instruments—heterosexual

arrangements—these pieces amplify each instrument by disavowing its uniqueness.

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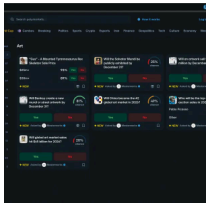
In this concert series of epochal consequence, the insistent percussiveness of *Evil Nigger* (1979) was quadrupled by four pianos; that instrument's already wide range was made extra when thirteen pianists played those same four pianos at the conclusion of *Crazy Nigger* (1979). The simple tonal changes of *Gay Guerrilla* (1979) resonated with badass power on eleven electric guitars; the sonorousness of cello stirred so much drama on

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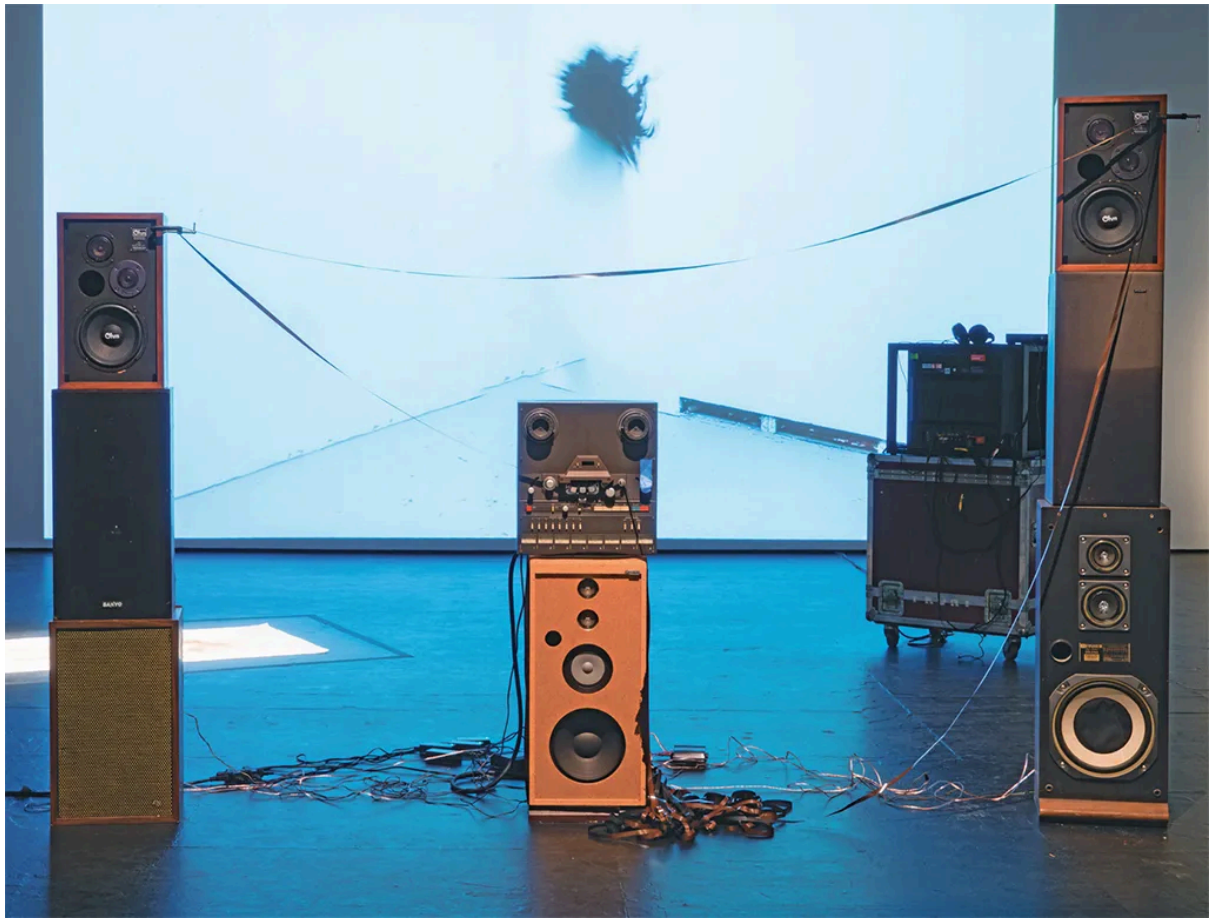
the ten cellos of *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* (1981); and the brightness of the trumpet glowed more brightly than might seem possible through the seven trumpets of *Trumpet* (1970). While some of these pieces call for specific instruments, others Eastman queerly left unspecified; *Evil Nigger* is most commonly performed on four pianos, but it could be done on any instrument capable of playing its themes. In this work, there is both the restraint and reduction one might associate with minimalist ideas, and also a radical openness, a demand for uncontrollable diversity.

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In Eastman's work, there is both the restraint and reduction one might associate with minimalist ideas, and also a radical openness, a demand for uncontrollable diversity.

"I don't know if he even wants this to be known," allowed Tiona Nekkia McClodden, the artist and curator who, with curator and composer Dustin Hurt of the nonprofit Bowerbird, spearheaded this revival of Eastman and his work. The now-deceased composer is finding new audiences these days, though many of his scores had been lost at the time of his death, at age forty-nine, in 1990. That same radical openness that feels so important today was an awkward fit for archival consecration. While Eastman's diminishment in the music world is often attributed to his legendary conflict with avant-garde godfather John Cage in 1975, he was active into the '80s, appearing frequently at the Kitchen, touring, and collaborating with musicians such as Meredith Monk and Arthur Russell. Though trained in composition at Philadelphia's prestigious Curtis Institute of Music and steeped in the serious music of his time, Eastman appears to have been something of a performance artist in the contemporary sense: a self-trained singer, actor, dancer, writer, and improviser, and the designer of an extraordinary life. This life was underprepared for the kind of posthumous

continuation we expect of artists deemed great. McClodden's uncertainty signals a kind of refusal in Eastman's work, and suggests the possibility that he didn't actually care what history made of him or his music, preemptively rejecting the rewards for production associated with what theorist José Esteban Muñoz called "straight time."



View of "A Recollection. Predicated.," 2018, the Kitchen, New York. Foreground: Raúl Romero, *Untitled, tape loop in D*, 2017. Background: Sondra Perry, *Double Quadruple Etcetera I & II*, 2013. From "Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental." Photo: Jason Mandella.

This differently ordered temporality is fundamental to Eastman's compositions: Many of his scores, such as *Evil Nigger*, are organized on time lines, offering musical information that shifts at predetermined intervals, rather than following the regular order of notes played. The score for the vocal piece *Macle* (1971), performed gleefully by the Ekmeles ensemble in Philadelphia and New York, offers blocks of information that four singers move through in sequence, sometimes containing notes, sometimes describing approaches to singing, and sometimes providing other cues, such as an instruction to sing a favorite pop song. Even the more regulated scores play tricks with time, such as the one for *Femenine* (1974) a sound bath of a work, performed at the Kitchen by the S.E.M. Ensemble, with which Eastman himself was associated. In this piece, a quick, energetic melody is repeated on vibraphone and reflected and refracted by a group of strings, woodwinds, a keyboard, a piano, and a trombone while two sleigh-bell machines play a constant pulsing rhythm. After an hour of this, I had lost the sense of what day it was. Muñoz's notion of "queer time" is apt for thinking about Eastman's approach and the horizon of possibility opened by itineraries that refute the fixity of the reproductive clock.

McClodden's commitment to reviving Eastman is itself an act of queer futurity. The artist meets Eastman's own refusal to endure in the record with a determination to represent him there, responding, in part, to a younger generation's desire to center black and queer heroes whom white patriarchal history has sidelined. As composer George Lewis has written of Eastman, "It is not difficult to imagine intersectional pressures exercising a

strongly and personally destabilizing series of blows, of a sort that few of his colleagues in what became Downtown classical music would have been prepared to fully analyze or appreciate." McClodden and Hurt's own reparative acts of imagination follow and build on those of other keepers of the flame, including Eastman's jazz-musician brother, Gerry Eastman, who has watched over his estate; composer Mary Jane Leach, a friend of Eastman's who has preserved and reconstructed many scores; historian Renée Levine Packer, who with Leach edited the 2015 volume *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music*; the music library of the State University of New York at Buffalo, where some recordings are preserved in challenging formats; and various friends, admirers, scholars, and associates, such as photographer Ron Hammond, who recently remembered a photo he had taken of the original score of *Trumpet*, which aided in the resurrection of that piece.

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Julius Eastman, *Crazy Nigger*, 1979. Performance view, Sanctuary of the Rotunda, Philadelphia, May 19, 2017. Photo: Ben Tran.

The exhibition that serves as a counterpart to the concert series emphasizes such traces. In Philadelphia, McClodden organized a selection of scores to read and a listening room of rare recordings. In New York, the Kitchen's own archive filled in detail about Eastman's history there, displaying posters, articles, programs, projected images, and other ephemera. This material suggests that many works have yet to be reconstituted: What happened during that Steinway improvisation of 1982? Such questions have mobilized others who share a growing interest in Eastman's legacy, reflected in unconnected works by Pope.L, Jace Clayton, and the Otolith Group, in a concert in Okwui Enwezor's 2015 Venice Biennale (as well as in my own discussion of that in *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the*

Left: A History of the Impossible [2017]), and in a lot of writing now under way, including work by scholars such as Tavia Nyong'o and Ethan Philbrick. The radical openness of Eastman's oeuvre made space for many of us to jump in.

By staging the exhibition inside of an archive, McClodden extended a fresh version of this invitation to young artists, who had their own perspectives to add. Sondra Perry's projected video *Double Quadruple Etcetera I & II*, 2013, shows a sped-up figure moving to the point of exhaustion, visible only in evocative blurry traces, having been digitally erased after the fact. The video *DIS/PLACE*, 2016, by Shyboi, aka Yulan Grant, set on a small 4:3 monitor, offered a montage of old video clips documenting both black queer nightlife in New York and festive parties in Jamaica, blurring cultural scenes. Scores, sculptures, and collages all expanded a formal terrain, allowing sound to shape-shift into other media and demonstrating the translatability of Eastman's influence. The concert series also provided present responses in performances by Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste and LaMont Hamilton, Tracie Morris and Hprizm, and others who have picked up where Eastman left off. While updating the programs with today's interdisciplinary combinations, these works offer a black ground as a context.



Julius Eastman, *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*, 1981. Performance view, the Kitchen, New York, February 3, 2018. American Contemporary Music Ensemble. Photo: Paula Court.

This context was also a contrast, as the concert series deployed predominantly white ensembles. These musicians are already rehearsed in a difficult minimalist repertoire and have done much to reconstruct Eastman's bits and pieces. In this sense, the mischievous composer has refused even the kind of black queer recovery that our widened representations now allow for, upsetting some racial ideas about who is authorized to perform what, or what kinds of music belong to whom. Though perhaps as a result of this more black and queer classical musicians will form avant-garde groups. The *New York Times* reported in February that the publishing company G. Schirmer had reached an agreement with Eastman's estate to "restore, reconstruct, publish, and promote his music," which will certainly widen the reach, expand the available material, and

raise the prices on all of it. Enhanced prominence may come to support facile diversity mandates, but it will also continue the work of "That Which Is Fundamental," giving more kinds of artists and audiences exposure to a crucial repertoire that is crazy, evil, and gay.

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