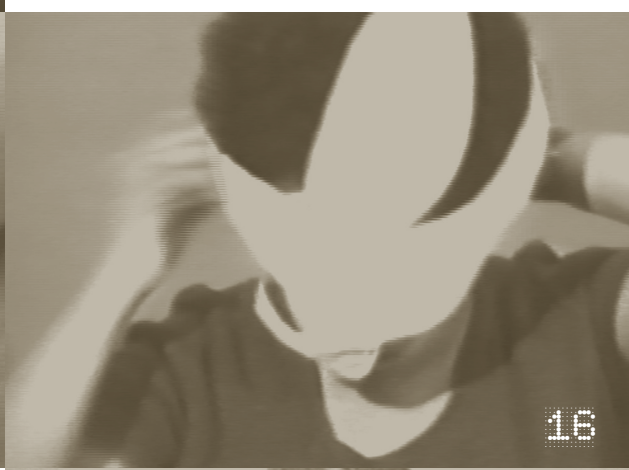
VideoStudio Playback

Houston Conwill
Maren Hassinger
Fred Holland
Ishmael Houston-Jones
Ulysses Jenkins
Senga Nengudi
Howardena Pindell



Spring 2011

"No, Like This." Movements in Performance, Video and the Projected Image, 1980–93

Thomas J. Lax

–"I am laying on the floor. My knees are up. My left arm is extended to the side."
–"Is it open?"
–"The palm of my left hand is open. Um, it's not really open. It's kind of cupped a little bit, halfway between open and shut."
–"Like this?"
–"No, like this."
–"Do we have to do this now?"
–"Like this?"
–"Okay."
–"Okay."

This informal, circuitous, instruction begins a vignette in *Babble: First Impressions of the White Man* (1983), a choreographic collaboration between artists Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland. Although Houston-Jones is, as he says, laying on the floor with his knees up and his left arm open, his voice is prerecorded and removed from his onstage body. *Babble* goes on, incorporating pedestrian reflections on the performers' experience ("My boots are making black marks") and anxieties about the performance's success ("We're two minutes and twenty-two seconds into the performance. Do you think enough has happened yet?"). Bringing contact improvisation—a characteristic form of improvised postmodern dance—and recorded sound together, *Babble* stages what is simultaneously a performance that has already occurred and a rehearsal for a performance to come.

Houston-Jones and Holland's performance draws attention to the dancers' encounter with the audience and highlights the difference between the predetermined codes of language and their meaning when actually used. By setting live human bodies to a technologically reproduced voice, *Babble* addresses the mutable boundary between human and machine. While mechanical manipulation is commonly thought to be synthetic and external to original artistic work, their performance demonstrates the ways in which technology determines something thought to be as organic and natural as the human body.

For its conceptual framework, this exhibition draws on *Babble*'s tension between spontaneous human creativity and technology's possibilities and limitations. Bringing together work in film and video made primarily between 1980 and 1986 by seven artists who were profoundly influenced by performance, music and dance, *VideoStudio: Playback* considers the ways that artists have explored technology's mediation of our lives, public and personal, artistic and everyday. Responding to the proliferation of technologies of reproduction—handheld cameras and the moving-image culture of broadcast television and computer graphics—the artists in *Playback* charted new paths for the perception and reception of art in three important ways. First, their use of video and film contrasts with the assumed use of these forms as documentary media. Rather than accept a single, objective point of view, the videos use technology to document performances that emphasize the multiple positions of performers

and audience members by drawing attention to how these viewing positions shape and create subjective experiences. Second, their juxtaposition of moving images with installations and multilayered performances underscores their emphasis on engagement with art objects. In this way, they asserted that art objects were things to be related to, and not simply static reflections of the real world. Third, videos made to stand alone extended artists' formal considerations of shape, color and scale from painting and sculpture into the moving-image format. All three modes of artistic production—documentation of performance, incorporation of film and video into performance, and the televisual shift to stand-alone video—bring together formal concerns with the visual cultures of television and mass media and the political and social context in which these technological and cultural developments arose.

Working in Southern California, Philadelphia and New York, the artists in *Playback* emerged in the mid-1970s and early 1980s. At the time, conceptual, performance and installation art had been increasingly used as forms of artistic production and critique, and continued to offer new possibilities for socially engaged artists. In Los Angeles, in the wake of the 1965 Watts Rebellion and urban sprawl, artists including Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Ulysses Jenkins, Barbara McCullough (b. 1945) and David Hammons (b. 1943) gathered at Studio Z, a hub where artists exchanged ideas and experimented with new work.[01] Emphasizing the importance of ritual, these artists referenced African cultural forms in their work, which was often improvisatory and performance-based. While at the time other artists of African descent referred to African tropes to stand in or represent blackness, the group associated with Studio Z emphasized materiality and abstraction over figuration.

Many of these artitsts also worked in New York, where they showed at filmmaker Linda Goode Bryant's (b. 1949) Just Above Midtown Gallery (JAM). The first black-owned New York gallery, JAM was an interdisciplinary space that supported artists including Houston Conwill and Howardena Pindell, as well as artists of color who at that time were often exhibited only at community centers and "community galleries" at cultural institutions. Holland and Houston-Jones—who also showed at JAM—first met in Philadelphia, where they trained in postmodern contact improvisation, which emphasized physical contact as the starting point for exploration through movement improvisation.[02] As part of the downtown New York performance art scene, Holland and Houston-Jones joined a group of artists, including Meredith Monk (b. 1942) and Robert Wilson (b. 1941), who were seeking to expand avant-garde theater to include music, film projections, installations and sculptural objects. Using contact improvisation as both research methodology and performance technique, they adapted the movement they created into a set of rules, limiting factors and transitions to give dancers structure for a performance. Across their videos, the artists emphasize a tension between extemporization and control, reflecting a committed interest in serious play.

VideoStudio: Playback considers the ways that artists have explored technology's mediation of our lives, public and personal, artistic and everyday.

Often working actively together, these multimedia artists generated an intense artistic cross-fertilization as collaborators, performers, videographers and object-makers for one another's works. Mediating technological shifts through art-making, these artists demonstrate how the increased availability of cameras extended understandings of real time into posterity. This access also fundamentally changed the physical experience of spectatorship to one in which new technologies created a human body contingent upon and formed by technology. Indeed, these artists questioned whether technology accommodates human creativity or precedes it, setting parameters for how art and visual culture are made and understood. As digital technology and social networking have enabled both social movements and global art practices to occur through channels like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and CNN iReport, the seven artists in *Playback* represent an early precedent for new media discourses in art history and artists who at an early moment forecasted the ways identity and social life would become increasingly mediated by the kinds of spectatorship enabled by technological innovation.

Playback is the fourth installment of *VideoStudio*, an ongoing series of video and film exhibitions inaugurated in fall 2008. Reflecting the Studio Museum's commitment to time-based art, the program demonstrates the influence of recent technology on contemporary art. The spring 2011 season of *VideoStudio* is the first exhibition in a series dedicated to video works made in the late twentieth century. While previous *VideoStudio* exhibitions have presented compilations of contemporary video, *Playback* reflects on the historical use of video by multimedia artists.

[01] Kellie Jones, *Taming the Freeway and Other Acts of Urban HIPnotism: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Boston: The MIT Press, forthcoming), and Kellie Jones, "African American Avant-Gardes, 1965–1990: Modern Art in Los Angeles, A Conversation" (public program with Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Barbara McCullough, Senga Nengudi and Kellie Jones, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, January 16, 2008).

[02] For more about the emergence of contact improvisation—and its relationship to the civil rights movement and black social protest—see Danielle Goldman, "Bodies on the Line: Contact Improvisation and techniques of Nonviolent protest," *Dance Research Journal* 39 (Summer 2007): 60–74.

Houston Conwill
(b. 1947)

Cake Walk (stills), 1983

In November 1983 at Just Above Midtown/Downtown, the second location of Linda Goode Bryant's exhibition space that was one of the first New York galleries to show the work of artists of color, visual artist Houston Conwill presented *Cakewalk*, an installation and performance piece that signified a culmination of a decade of artistic development. *Cake Walk* (1983), the work on view in *VideoStudio: Playback*, is a video documentation of the performance piece from that exhibition.

Historically, a cakewalk was a "funny, strutting dance" [01] that originated in the mid-eighteenth century, in which American slaves competed against one another to win cakes and for the amusement of slave owners. During the dance, couples performed in a "high" style that was at times critical and mocking of the Victorian culture of their masters. In Conwill's performance video, the artist and five other dancers move through a series of motions and dance to a soundtrack that includes Gregorian chants, spirituals and ragtime music. At times, the music is accompanied by two voiceovers. One recalls a child's first steps and the process of learning to walk and move through the world, while the other is a scientific explanation of the process of walking, taken from orthopedic surgeon and scholar Verne T. Inman's 1981 paper, *Human Walking*.

a cakewalk was a "funny, strutting dance" that originated in the mid-eighteenth century

Other elements of Conwill's installation are visible in the performance video, including four earth-covered, triangular sculptural forms, each with a mirror at its center (representing the living, as each reflected the actions and motions of the dancers and all those who moved through the exhibition space), and four triangular paintings made from Rhoplex and latex. [02] The triangular sculptures and paintings are paired, with each pair representing a different Southern city that has a strong historical association with African Americans: Memphis, Louisville, New Orleans and Atlanta. The dirt covering the sculptural forms is from the gravesites of people Conwill considered wise from each of the cities. A third element, a cosmogram, or graphic representation of a belief system, is painted on the floor and is the most visible of all of the installation elements, as the dancers in *Cake Walk* move on and around it during the performance.

In the years before *Cake Walk*, Conwill explored notions of "funk," or popular culture, and its differences from "high" culture. Overall, Conwill's artistic practice is concerned with notions of African-American space. In his words, he was "especially drawn to myth, ritual and the transmission of wisdom and culture across continents and generations." [03]

Houston Conwill was born in Louisville, Kentucky. He received a BFA from Howard University in 1973 and an MFA from the University of Southern California in 1976. He is the recipient of various commissions and awards, including the 1984 Prix de Rome and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award in 1987. He is best known for large-scale sculptures and installations that he created in collaboration with poet Estella Conwill Majozo (b. 1949) and architect Joseph DePace (b. 1954), including the Langston Hughes Memorial at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, *Rivers* (1991).

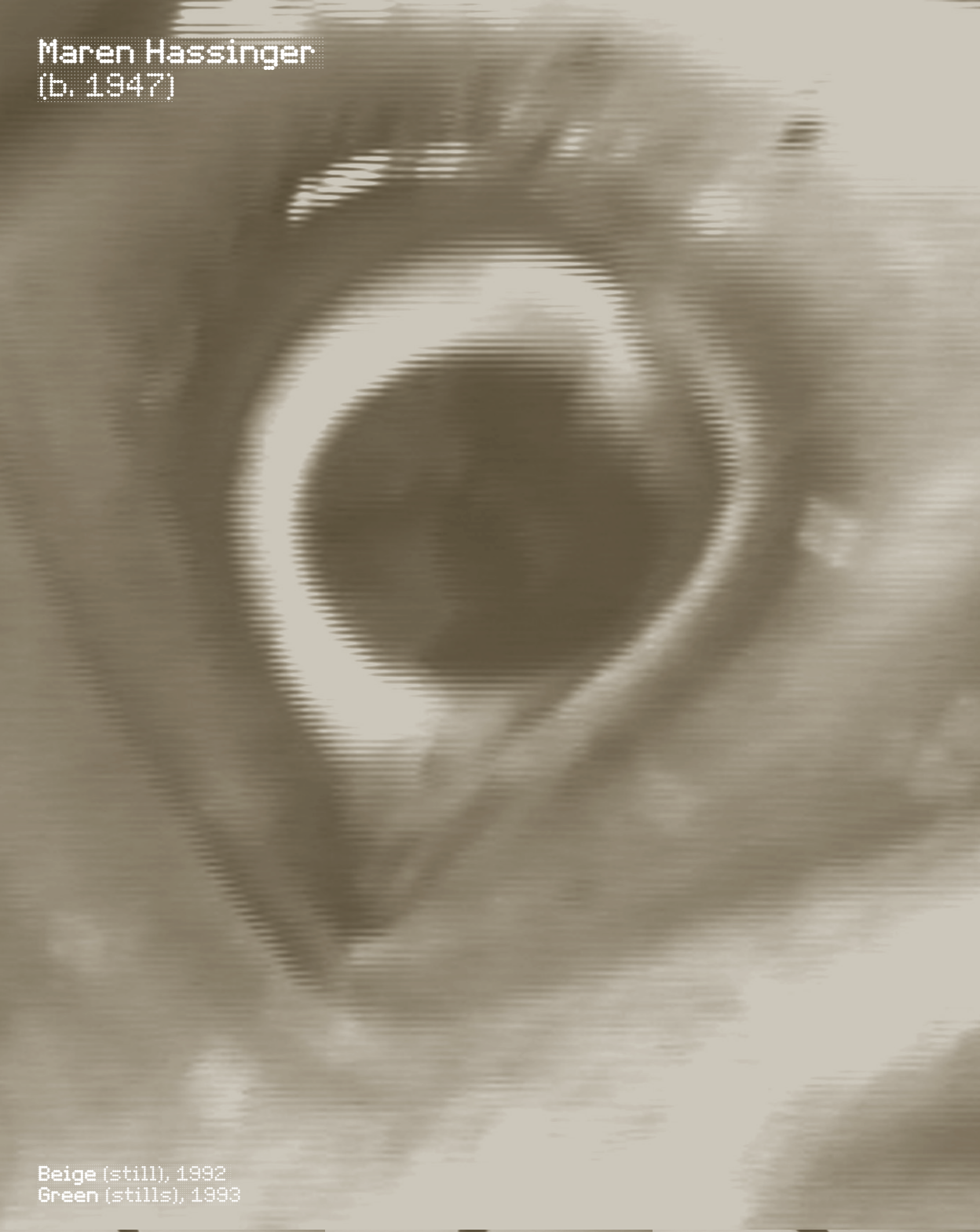
– Lauren Haynes

[01] Lucy R. Lippard, "Funk Rises," in *Cakewalk* (exhibition brochure) (New York: Just Above Midtown/Downtown, 1983), 7.

[02] Ibid.

[03] Houston Conwill, Artist's Statement, in *The Joyful Mysteries 1984–2034 A.D.* (exhibition brochure) (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1984).

Maren Hassinger
(b. 1947)



Beige (still), 1992
Green (stills), 1993

Maren Hassinger's video *Green*, created in the early 1990s, is a meditation on the symbolism and various references that the titular color calls to mind. As the on-screen imagery moves in and out of focus, and from tight close-ups of leaves and rippling water to shots of fabric and traffic lights, it evokes language that personifies the color green—green becomes "shivering," "damp," "sexy" and a "protective blanket." The tranquil voice of Senga Nengudi, a close friend of the artist and frequent collaborator, can be heard offscreen throughout the film, narrating a poetic, free-form text written by Hassinger. *Beige* (1992) depicts a montage of wintry Long Island scenery as seen from a moving car, incorporating images of a neutral-colored, silky scarf and a hand amid browning leaves. Hassinger created *Green*, *Beige*, and similar video works in the 1990s while living in East Hampton, New York. Both were exhibited in a storefront gallery there, displayed on monitors swathed in green and beige materials, respectively. The style and intent of both mark a departure from Hassinger's previous videos, which were created primarily as documentations of performances.

Each video uses color to investigate a longing or nostalgia for closeness with nature, as well as a more complicated ambivalence towards the relationship between urban (or suburban) and natural worlds.

Each video uses color to investigate a longing or nostalgia for closeness with nature

This constant reconciliation of binaries—organic and manufactured, hard and soft, abstract and figurative—has echoed throughout Hassinger's work from the 1970s onward. In the 1985 sculpture/installation *A Quiet Place* (on view in the spring 2011 exhibition *Sculpted, Etched and Cut*), earthy, branch-like forms are in fact created with wire, cables, concrete and rope, indicating Hassinger's interest in the contrast between natural and industrial materials, as well as between biomorphic figures and the cold, formal space of the gallery. Often, Hassinger's performances and sculptures are interrelated—while the former may rely on props or actual sculptures, the latter frequently suggest movement, informed by Hassinger's background in modern dance, particularly the techniques of Lester Horton (1906–1953).

Born in Los Angeles, the artist returned there after college and collaborated closely with a supportive artist community that included Nengudi, Barbara McCullough and Ulysses Jenkins, among others. These artists, through David Hammons's Studio Z collective and Jenkins's Othervisions Studio, developed an "alternative infrastructure" that provided a means for both professional and technical support with videos and performances, embracing the fluidity of exchange fostered by the collective spirit.[01] Hassinger and Nengudi, in particular, worked together very closely on many interrelated projects—one artist initiated an idea, and the other helped execute it, as exemplified by *Green*.

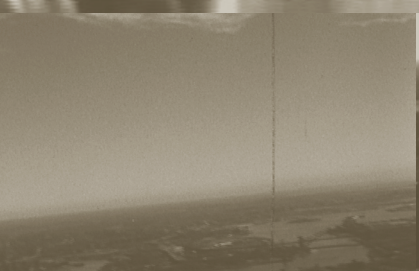
Maren Hassinger received her BA from Bennington College and an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the recipient of a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant (1996) and two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships (1982, 1984), and was an artist in residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem (1983–84). She has been Director of the Rinehart Graduate School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore since 1997.

– Abbe Schriber

[01] Joann Hanley, "Women, Art and Technology: A Brief History," in *Art/Women/California, 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections*, eds. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 314.

Fred Holland
(b. 1951)

Cowboy (Carlos Abraham Foster) (still), 1984
NYC Overhead (stills), 1985



Babble: First Impressions of a White Man, a performance piece by artist Fred Holland, performed with collaborator Ishmael Houston-Jones, combines elements of dance, theater and multimedia installation. The performance opens with the shadowy figure of a white man in a trench coat standing on the periphery of a cool blue light. Inactive and in profile, the man remains as Holland and Houston-Jones perform, while prerecorded voices take the place of the artists' live voices. The voice-overs correspond to the performers' actions and are clearly meant to be more script than narration. Through the audio, Holland and Houston-Jones rehearse choreography, direct each other and contemplate upcoming performances. Instructional phrases, such as, "left hand, right hand, knee!" are repeated as the artists' movements roughly match up with the recordings. However, the performers make no efforts to lip-synch or gesture speech. This separation of body and voice is the crux of *Babble*, as the disconnect between language and its human vessels is demonstrated again and again.

The work's theme is further elucidated by ethnographic photographs projected on the back of the stage, including some, presumably from the nineteenth century, of Asian women and the welted back of a slave. These historical images give clarity to the work's title, which refers to the incoherent utterances that indigenous people heard when first encountering Europeans. The projected photographs hover in the background like the ghosts of colonialism as Holland and Houston-Jones act in the postcolonial present. Recorded voices continue and alternate between coherence and nonsensical jumbles as words are recited forward and backward. In the second vignette, Holland and Houston-Jones put on overcoats that hang on the stage. As the lights turn red, their collaborative efforts are abruptly transformed into contention and violence. The performers square off at center stage and wrestle intensely.

The projected photographs hover in the background like the ghosts of colonialism

Babble's multilayered visual presentation, film projections and multitude of performers, props and racial political themes are the telltale elements of Holland's artistic practice. Holland, a native of Columbus, Ohio, studied painting before moving to Philadelphia in the late 1970s. There, he was drawn to the freedom and immediacy of improvisational dance and began to perform regularly, taking a hiatus from painting. Holland's performance works of the 1980s take on a materiality and consciousness of objects and images that reflect his background as a visual artist. Many of his performances incorporated Super 8 film shot by Holland himself. For example, *Cowboy (Carlos Abraham Foster)* (1984) documents Carlos A. Foster, an expert cowboy who was raised on a cattle ranch in Cuba and immigrated to the United States in 1960. The film shows the longtime Bronx resident riding his horse while a subway train passes in the background. Holland saw Foster as both an urban anomaly and proof of the variety of the black experience. While a captivating film in its own right, *Cowboy (Carlos Abraham Foster)* was originally included as a projection in Holland's 1984 work, *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders*, another collaboration with Houston-Jones. Today, Fred Holland has returned to his visual practice, which now reflects his experience as a performer, and often includes objects that suggest interaction with the body, such as walkers and wheelchairs.

– Tasha Parker

Ishmael Houston-Jones
(b. 1951)

Untitled Duet (Oogala) (still), 1983 (with Fred Holland)
f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g (stills), 1984

In *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g* (1984), performed at PS1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1) in New York, dancer Ishmael Houston-Jones is nude, besides a pair of black combat boots, tube socks and a black bandana covering his eyes. He staggers into an open gallery space with an audience before him. The performance is ironically accompanied by a series of country songs—including "Filipino Baby," "Goodbye, L.O.Vietnam" and "There's a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere"—all dealing with U.S. military engagements abroad. In 1983 and 1984, Houston-Jones, a self-identified socialist during the period, spent time in Nicaragua teaching dance classes. This was during the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra dealings, in which funds raised by the illegal sale of arms to Iran were covertly used to support counterrevolutionary forces in Nicaragua. Many of Houston-Jones's Nicaraguan students were also soldiers, who showed up to class with their rifles. Militaristic elements, perhaps influenced by the performer's political standing and experiences in South America, pervade *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g*. Houston-Jones's surrendering gestures, simulating bound hands and shackled feet, recall images of prisoners of war. His movements and covered face also call to mind more recent images, such as the photographs of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g* is an example of Houston-Jones's improvisational dance style, which starts with a limited number of premeditated elements, often including props and music, and unfolds into spontaneous performance.

Houston-Jones's surrendering gestures, simulating bound hands and shackled feet, recall images of prisoners of war.

While *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g* displays Houston-Jones's solo practice, *Untitled Duet (Oogala)* (1983) showcases his virtuosity in contact improvisation, a form of dance based on spontaneous physical dialogues between two or more moving bodies and their combined relationship to the physical laws that govern their motion—gravity, momentum and inertia. Performed with Fred Holland at Danspace in New York, *Untitled Duet* shows each dancer responding to the movement of the other, alternating between intertwining movements and moments of solo exercise while the partner watches. At times, Holland and Houston-Jones roll on top of each other and let inertia carry their bodies across the floor. The performers communicate through gestures and at times vocally instruct each other. Originated in 1972, contact improvisation was still a radical form of dance when Houston-Jones began to practice it in the late 1970s.

Language and improvised speech are also important elements of Houston-Jones's works. The idiosyncratic title of *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g* is a play on the term "fission," which means to split something into two or more parts. Houston-Jones's separation of each letter creates a literal fission of the title. In the latter part of the performance, he smacks and punches himself in the chest multiple times with great force. With movements that evoke memories of physical and emotional trauma, Houston-Jones seems to be conjuring a fission of the soul, separating what remains of the good from the bad.

VideoStudio: Playback highlights Houston-Jones's contributions to improvisational dance, which has become a staple of contemporary dance. Today, he is a New York-based choreographer, educator and writer. His most recognized work, *THEM* (1985), was reenacted at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York in 2010.

– Tasha Parker

Ulysses Jenkins
(b. 1946)

Without Your Interpretation (stills), 1983

Ulysses Jenkins is an early pioneer of video, new media and performance, whose artwork since the 1970s has been "concerned with social crisis and survival." [01] Though Jenkins's work spans an incredibly diverse range of media, it is linked by an investigation into physical and digital forms of public space—from the screen to the sidewalk—as sites for myth-making, highlighting the role of identity in urban and technological development.

Jenkins's computer-animated video *Z-GRASS* (1983) foregrounds the later proliferation of computer technology and digital programming as artistic media. It developed out of a workshop Jenkins took at the Long Beach Art Museum, California, on the ZGrass (Z-Box Graphics Symbiosis System) computer program, an early form of two-dimensional computer animation that, in the workshop, was used to create architectural renderings. As the indexical, structural markings of buildings, the renderings were an ideal jumping-off point for Jenkins's interest in social space, particularly the rapidly changing neighborhoods of Los Angeles. He manipulated the renderings into stills and abstracted and animated them, creating a work that alludes to graffiti-inspired aesthetics and repeats the superimposing and overlapping of shapes and colors. Through *Z-GRASS*, Jenkins examines the formal and social architecture of urban space and subtly critiques the gentrification processes around him. Dissonant, almost feverish, electronic audio effects accompany the images, establishing the work's ominous, frenetic tone. Many of the artist's other works are narrative, figurative videos that incorporate appropriated film footage in addition to computer-generated effects—*Z-GRASS* is, in fact, one of the few videos that Jenkins produced with the ZGrass computer program.

Though Jenkins's work spans an incredibly diverse range of media, it is linked by an investigation into physical and digital forms of public space—from the screen to the sidewalk—as sites for myth-making

Throughout the 1980s, Jenkins explored collaboration and collectivity through his interdisciplinary media arts studio Othervisions, and his art band of the same name. The 1983 performance and video *Without Your Interpretation* was created with a large crew of collaborators, including musician Vinzula Kara, who had helped Jenkins with *Z-GRASS* that same year, and a Los Angeles-based band called Life in the Park with Debris. [01] *Without Your Interpretation*, like many of Jenkins's works, reconfigures and reinterprets the form and aesthetics of ritual, drawing from traditions of the *griot*, or keeper of communal histories in West African culture. Jenkins juxtaposes a live musical performance by the band with footage of choreography inspired by legendary modern dancer/choreographer Rudy Perez (b. 1930). Interspersed with this imagery is footage that ranges from news broadcasts to nature programs, reflecting the tensions and political realities within American culture in the early and mid-1980s.

Ulysses Jenkins was born in Los Angeles, and has lived and worked in Southern California for over thirty years. He received his MFA from the Otis College of Art, Los Angeles, is a three-time recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Fellowship (1980, 1982, 1995) and twice won the NEA's Black Filmmaker's Hall of Fame first place award in Experimental Video (1990, 1992). He also received the California Arts Council's Multicultural Entry Grant as artistic director of Othervisions Studios in 1992. Jenkins has taught at the University of California, San Diego; Otis College of Art; and California State University, Dominguez Hills. He is currently Associate Professor at the University of California, Irvine, in the Claire Trevor School of the Arts, Department of Studio Art.

– Abbe Schriber

[01] Ulysses Jenkins, "The Nature of Doggerel," Ulysses Jenkins personal website, http://ulyssesjenkins.com/nature.html (accessed February 7, 2011).

[02] Ulysses Jenkins, "Without Your Interpretation," Ulysses Jenkins personal website, http://ulyssesjenkins.com/nature.html (accessed March 2, 2011).

Dance Card (stills), 1986

Like much of her sculpture, installation, video and performance, Senga Nengudi's 1986 *Dance Card* (formerly titled *Nature's Way*) is rooted in dance and the aesthetics of the body moving through space. Nengudi's work in the 1970s and 1980s was part of a historical, interdisciplinary exchange between visual artists and the dance community, which, beginning in the 1960s, examined the phenomenological experiences and interactions of bodies with objects and the environment. *Dance Card* depicts an archetypal seduction ritual, set against a large-scale installation of branches that Hassinger made for a solo exhibition at Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum. Two men (played by Ulysses Jenkins and Frank Parker [b. 1945]) compete for the attention of one woman (played by Maren Hassinger), who ultimately has her way with both of them. Performed at the opening of Hassinger's exhibition, Nengudi's collaborative performance brings live bodies in direct contact with sculptural objects and the environment.

Since the 1970s, Nengudi has integrated the distinctive media of performance and sculpture to create comprehensive environmental installations that encourage viewer interaction. Often her pieces are composed of found materials such as tape, rocks, dirt, newspapers and seedpods, inviting a sensory and tactile experience that borrows from and references a range of cultures. Among her more well-known works is the "R.S.V.P" series of the mid- to late 1970s, in which she stretched multicolored nylon mesh pantyhose into abstracted, organic forms that at once reference the material's original utility and mimic the heft and flexibility of its wearers' bodies.

Nengudi has integrated the distinctive media of performance and sculpture to create comprehensive environmental installations that encourage viewer interaction.

Nengudi's work is also frequently site-specific, shaped in direct response to the physical attributes or geographical location of a place. For instance, the celebrated 1979 performance *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* ("fets" being short for "fetishes") takes the form of a ritual in the cavernous area underneath a busy Los Angeles expressway. Nengudi chose the location because the atmosphere felt right for the project, and had what she called "an African feel to it."[01] By staging ritualistic performances at the very sites of urban sprawl, Nengudi and her cohorts imbued a vastly different ambiance to the area. The piece was originally commissioned by the California Department of Transportation, or CalTrans, which had been attempting to put sculptures and murals on or in the spaces of urban development. After decorating and draping columns in the area with her signature pantyhose material and other detritus, a performance took place at the site's opening ceremony, featuring Hassinger, David Hammons, members of Hammons's Studio Z collective and others. The performers played music and wore self-fashioned costumes, props and headpieces, implementing the aesthetics and actions of ritual or ceremonial process into an unmistakably postindustrial, emotionally charged site.

Senga Nengudi was born in Chicago and received a BA in 1966 from California State University at Los Angeles, where she majored in art and minored in dance. Nengudi later went on to receive her MA in sculpture there in 1971. She has been included in several exhibitions at the Studio Museum, including *California Black Artists* (1977), *Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum* (1989) and *R.S.V.P.* (2008). Nengudi currently teaches in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

– Abbe Schriber

[01] Barbara McCullough, "Shopping Bag Spirits and Freeway Fetishes: Reflections on Ritual Space," African American Performance Art Archive, http://aapaa.org/2009/11/23/shopping-bag-spirits-and-freeway-fetishes-reflections-on-ritual-space-1979/ (accessed February 28, 2011).

Howardena Pindell
(b. 1943)

Free, White and 21 (stills), 1980

Howardena Pindell's first video, *Free, White and 21* indicates the artist's awareness of video as a potent medium for translating activist ideas and subject matter. Though one of the few videos Pindell has created in her career, *Free, White and 21* is widely considered a pioneering force in early video art through its documentary visual strategies and performative, near-theatrical construction of characters. Recounting autobiographical experiences of racism in the art world and her personal life, Pindell appears as three separate women—a black woman artist, a woman in white face and a blonde wig, and an ambiguous character who wraps her head in white gauze. The video was first shown in *Dialectics of Isolation*, a 1980 exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery showing work by women of African, Native American, Asian and Latino descent and organized by artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985). It was the first of Pindell's works to openly introduce and reconcile illustrations of selfhood—a theme she continued to explore in a series called "Autobiography," which extended over twenty years and was influenced by her travels abroad. [01] While *Free, White and 21* deals with highly personal issues of bias and discrimination, the remainder of the multimedia "Autobiography" series captures a more spiritual, inward exploration of self. Another work, *Doubling* (1995), the only other video Pindell has made to date, was created during a video workshop fellowship at The Kitchen fifteen years after *Free, White and 21*. *Doubling* takes a confrontational style similar to that of *Free, White and 21*, and, through "confessional"-style recitations and photographs of war and human cruelty, examines the concept of "doubling"—"the ability to act humane toward your own group and inhumane toward another," as the video states.

Free, White and 21 indicates the artist's awareness of video as a potent medium for translating activist ideas and subject matter

Prior to *Free, White and 21* Pindell had already begun working with photography and technologically-based imagery. In her classic "video drawings," Pindell drew arrows and diagrams directly on acetate gels, which were then juxtaposed over a television screen and photographed. Throughout the 1970s, Pindell also made gridded, serial abstractions that drew on the systematic ordering of Minimalist art. In paintings from the 1980s, she experimented deeply with color, texture and surface, using a vast array of evocative materials and detritus that reflected the world around her—sequins, confetti, glitter, beads and even perfume. As the decade progressed, Pindell gravitated further toward a handcrafted aesthetic, investigating the possibilities and boundaries of painting.

In 1979, Pindell left her curatorial position in the Museum of Modern Art's prints department, where she had worked since 1967, to teach at the State University of New York, Stonybrook. She was very active in the rising feminist movement and was a founding member of the historic, women-only A.I.R. Gallery. Pindell had increasingly noticed an undercurrent of latent racism in the predominantly white, middle-class realms of the art world and the feminist movement. Pindell's reactions against this, combined with her feelings toward American political culture and current affairs, as well as her burgeoning interest in third-world feminism, contributed to an increasing overlap between activism and art-making.

Born in Philadelphia, Pindell received her BFA from Boston University in 1965 and her MFA from Yale University in 1967. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Painting (1987), as well as a College Art Association Artist Award (1990), among other awards.

– Abbe Schriber

[01] Lowery Stokes Sims, "Synthesis and Integration in the Work of Howardena Pindell, 1972–1992," in *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings: A Retrospective Exhibition 1972–1992* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Potsdam College, State University of New York, 1992), 18.

VideoStudio: Playback
March 31–
June 26, 2011

Exhibition organized by Thomas J. Lax, Program Associate and Exhibition Coordinator.

Essays by Lauren Haynes, Assistant Curator; Thomas J. Lax; Tasha Parker, Curatorial Fellow; and Abbe Schriber, Program Assistant, Curatorial Department.

Brochure organized by Elizabeth Gwinn, Communications Manager, and Lauren Haynes with Thomas J. Lax and Abbe Schriber.

Designed by Pentagram
Copyedited by Samir S. Patel
Printed by Cosmos Communications

144 West 125th Street
New York NY 10027
studiomuseum.org
212.864.4500

Works in the Exhibition

Houston Conwill
Cake Walk, 1983
Digital video, color, sound
Total running time 13:53
Courtesy Ulysses Jenkins

Maren Hassinger
Green, 1993
Digital transfer from VHS, color, sound
Total running time 11:04
Courtesy the artist

Beige, 1992
Digital transfer from VHS, color, sound
Total running time 10:00
Courtesy the artist

Fred Holland
Cowboy (Carlos Abraham Foster), 1984
Digital transfer from Super-8, color
Total running time 05:00
Courtesy the artist

NYC Overhead, 1985
Digital transfer from 16mm, color
Total running time 16:00
Courtesy the artist

Ishmael Houston-Jones
f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g, 1984
Digital transfer from Digital Betacam, color, sound
Total running time 16:00
Courtesy The New York Public Library, Moving Image Archive with permission of the artist, the Estate of Dave Dudley and MoMA PS1

Ishmael Houston-Jones and **Fred Holland**
Babble: First Impressions of the White Man (excerpt), 1983
Digital transfer from Digital Betacam, color, sound
Total running time 28:20
Courtesy The New York Public Library, Moving Image Archive with permission of the artists and New York Live Arts

Untitled Duet (Oogala), 1983
Digital transfer from VHS, color, sound
Total running time 16:00
Courtesy Fred Holland

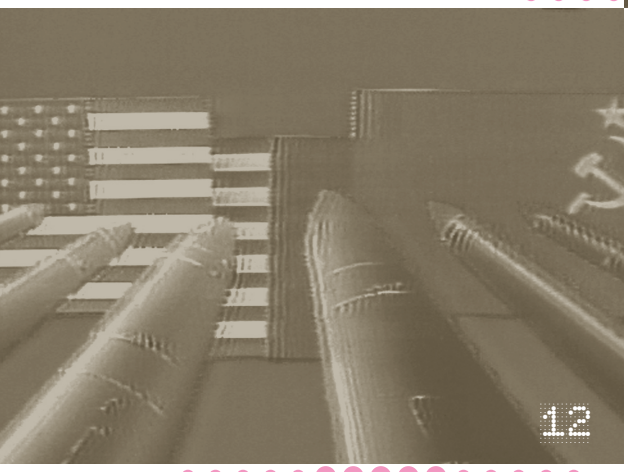
Ulysses Jenkins
Z-GRASS, 1983–84
Digital video, color, sound
Total running time 03:04
Courtesy the artist

Without Your Interpretation, 1983
Digital video, color, sound
Total running time 13:53
Courtesy the artist

Senga Nengudi
Dance Card (excerpt), 1986
Digital transfer from VHS, color, sound
Total running time 05:24
Courtesy the artist

Howardena Pindell
Free, White and 21, 1980
Digital transfer from VHS, color, sound
Total running time 12:15
Museum purchase 06.7.1

STUDIO
MUSEUM
HARLEM



STUDIO MUSEUM HARLEM