October 2022

Harmony of Difference: Theorizing Rashid Johnson's New Universalism in the Grids of Antoine's Organ

Mark Fredricks
University of South Florida

Harmony of Difference: Theorizing Rashid Johnson's New Universalism in the Grids of *Antoine's Organ*

by

Mark Fredricks

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts
with a concentration in Humanities
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Scott Ferguson, Ph.D.
Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D.
Margaret Miller, M.A.

Date of Approval
October 14, 2022

Keywords: contemporary art, visual art, abstraction, aesthetics, minimalism, Kamasi Washington

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge and thank the members of my committee. Throughout my time in the Humanities and Cultural Studies department at USF, Scott Ferguson has challenged me to examine my ways of thinking and presented alternatives to conventional methods of making sense of the world in which we find ourselves. Dan Belgrad was the first face of the department for me and has been both a grounding and provocative force during my experience of the program. Margaret Miller has been abundantly supportive of this turn to academia, in both her role on the committee and as my boss in my "day job" at USF's Graphicstudio and Contemporary Art Museum.

This process could not have been possible without the support of my family, including my parents Ray and Bonnie and my parents-in-law Ed and Sherre. My children Charlie and Maya have provided unceasing optimism and remarkable patience for the amount of time I've spent occupied with my studies. To my wife Susan, there just aren't enough words. Thank you for *everything*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

My reading of *Antoine's Organ*, a sculptural installation created by the artist Rashid Johnson in 2016, explores the artwork as a richly textured response to the limited universalism of modernism. I argue that *Antoine's Organ* is a multimodal expression which crafts a *harmony of difference* using the aesthetic language and forms of both visual art and music. The term "harmony of difference" is taken from and inspired by a composition of the same name by jazz musician Kamasi Washington, and is used within to describe Rashid Johnson's counterpoint strategy to work differences with and against each other, mobilizing the grid's organizational properties to craft a harmony through their relationship. This paper builds upon extant writing on Johnson's art which has just scratched the surface of his engagement with the grid and adds to the discourse around the grid in contemporary art which recovers its unique abilities to connect and cohere without imposing sameness or cutting across the inherent idiosyncrasies of humanity. Similarly, Johnson uses the aesthetic grid to mutually invoke and critique its historically problematic notions of universality, foreclosing the grid's reductive power to homogenize difference. In figurative and literal conversation with the grids of artists including Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Josef Albers, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Mickalene Thomas, I show how *Antoine's Organ* recasts the grid from its connection to the whiteness and privilege associated with minimalist art to an unconditional universalism by centering both personal and collective ways of being Black within and beyond its rigid structure.

HARMONY OF DIFFERENCE

"The shape of the square confronts the silhouette of the amoeba."

– Alfred H. Barr, 1936 (19)

"…As for form
We create our own
Like an amoeba
Our edges know no limits…"

– Ntozake Shange, 2018 (16)

Antoine's Organ is a sculptural installation created by the artist Rashid Johnson in 2016. Measuring about 15 feet by 30 feet by 10 feet, the installation is a massive black steel grid, filled with an assemblage of live plants, grow lights, books, CB radios, video screens, roughly sculpted shea butter busts, and at its center, an upright piano. The live plants are a diverse mixture of sizes and species. Some are framed within compartments of the grid structure, while others are large enough to extend into neighboring cells. Plants emerge from the top of the armature or pour out of it, cascading outward in a vibrant counterpoint to the rigid centralized grid structure. Grow lights are placed strategically throughout, providing both nutrition to the active plant life and creating bright gestures that emphasize the rows and columns of the installation. A variety of books are placed in stacks throughout the installation; a few examples are the multiple copies of Dick Gregory's 1968 comedic and political manifesto *Write Me In!* placed next to visually colorful editions of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Elsewhere Debra J. Dickerson's *The End of Blackness* punctuates a cultural conversation between copies of Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* and Randall Kennedy's *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal.* Incised busts of crudely formed shea butter note the presence of the artist himself, intimate markers of his hand amid an installation

form which the artist has likened to a brain (Strainchamps). Video screens play some of Johnson's short films, forming a more direct connection to the artist's brain and exemplifying what Rosalind Krauss has called the post-medium condition of contemporary art (*"A Voyage on the North Sea"* 20). Tucked within the structure and marking the main deviation from other similar works is an upright piano, activated periodically while the installation is exhibited by its namesake pianist Antoine Baldwin or other performers.

My reading of *Antoine's Organ* explores the installation as a richly textured response to the limited universalism of modernism, a multimodal expression which crafts what I will term a *harmony of difference* through the aesthetic language and forms of both visual art and music. This paper builds upon extant writing on Johnson which has just scratched the surface of his engagement with the grid, and it adds to the discourse around the grid in contemporary art that recovers its unique abilities to connect and cohere without imposing sameness or cutting across the inherent idiosyncrasies of humanity[1]. Johnson uses the aesthetic grid to mutually invoke and critique its historically problematic notions of universality, foreclosing the grid's reductive power to homogenize differences and instead mobilizing its organizational properties to gather difference and craft a harmony through their relationship.

The grid throughout modern art is used to express a limited form of universalism, what I am calling a *bare universality*. Its aesthetic action repeatedly strips away particularity in what Jaleh Mansoor calls "a universalism gone wrong" (55). In this way, the modernist grid is properly conflated to a hegemonic freedom and independence among a privileged class to create and view art untroubled by the personal differences and heterogeny of experience lived by those

[1] For other studies redeeming the use of the grid in contemporary art, see Kathryn Brown, Dan Cameron, Jonathan Koestlé-Cate, Lex Morgan Lancaster, Jaleh Mansoor, Eve Meltzer, and Lara D. Nielsen. See Kaira M. Cabañas for consideration of its significance in Latin American art and Margarita Tupitsyn for a study of its use in Russian art.

outside the world of modern art. Mansoor lays out the stakes of modernism's bare universality when she states, "Those who understand themselves to be outside the fictional parameters of hegemony are justified in decrying the term 'universality.' But what might it mean to stage it?" (57). Johnson provides an answer to this question, as his grids serve as organic building blocks, chloroplastic structures which vivify the panoptical cell walls of modernist autonomic grids. He generously uses personal, social, and cultural signifiers within his artworks to layer difference through a process of personal reckoning. Methodically taking stock of personal experience is used to craft a particularized universality, echoed by the words of filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha when she says, "the deeper we go into ourselves, the wider we go into society" (Chen 82). Johnson uses the grid as the skeletal center of *Antoine's Organ* to physically structure the plants, books, video screens, and other formal elements of the installation, and he uses the grid as its aesthetic center to structure the way it makes meaning.

I broadly categorize the way the aesthetic grid wrangles conceptual, symbolic, metaphorical, and literal signification as the *metaphysics* of *Antoine's Organ*. A formal reading of the installation recognizes that Johnson physically combines the modernist grid with a diverse mixture of culturally and socially significant objects. My analysis of the metaphysics of the installation reveals that Johnson intertwines the spectral universalist strivings of the art historical grids of minimalism with objects that operate as icons and indexes of broader social ideas, markers of identity and difference. Around and within all these elements, the black steel grid underpins and organizes the installation, establishing a serial physical logic while also defining a conceptual framework for its metaphysical exploration. The physical grid marks the edges of the installation, but the metaphysical grid knows no limits, its repeating geometry stretches out indefinitely.

My analysis of *Antoine's Organ* takes inspiration from Eric M. Kramer's aphorism, "Metaphysics is politics" (12). The installation is predicated on the interplay between a Black artist reckoning with the largely white art historical lineage of the grid while at the same time invoking it as an aesthetic framework. All considerations of Johnson's installations have touched upon his use of the grid as a reference to modernist and minimalist art, but this paper offers a sustained study of the way that Johnson uses aesthetic grids within *Antoine's Organ* in both physical and metaphysical forms to seek a new way to engage with difference. Johnson employs the grid to structure difference in a way that doesn't merely acknowledge or champion it. In a process of gathering and layering, Johnson uses a counterpoint strategy to work differences with and against each other to form a harmony of difference. *Harmony of Difference* is the title of a 2017 jazz album by Kamasi Washington, and I am using this musical reference to describe and understand Johnson's visual expression which carefully combines elements to create a composition that exceeds its component parts. Johnson appropriates the modernist, and specifically minimalist, form of the grid to reject its history of bare universalism and to introduce particularity. Or, if I repurpose the words of Jaleh Mansoor describing the art of Mona Hatoum, Johnson's work "asks us to reconsider universality as a necessity in thinking particularity" (53). By reorienting the grid, Johnson also reorients the relationship between artwork and viewer, introjecting a rebalancing of social and racial stakes into how *Antoine's Organ* is presented and viewed. In its presentation, the scale of the grids at work in *Antoine's Organ* take up space and thus deny a traditional critical distance, occupying the institution and refiguring the artistic autonomy of the artwork itself. Through the process of creating and challenging the barriers that make up the physical and metaphysical aesthetic grids structuring this installation, Johnson

creates a space for the intertwining of difference and the formation of a particularized universality.

In what follows, I trace a focused biography of Rashid Johnson to stage the impact of the details of his life on the unique expression of *Antoine's Organ*, which uses grids to weave together personal, collective, and fictional histories made from cultural objects and imagery. I then step back to consider the history of the aesthetic grid's bare universalism in order to understand the way that *Antoine's Organ* implicates and transvalues the modernist grid. I detail the role of music in Johnson's contemporary practice and reframe my reading of *Antoine's Organ* using the temporal and durational language of music, specifically Kamasi Washington's *Harmony of Difference*, establishing a grid-like framework which organizes and structures our intuitive understandings of universality. In figurative and literal conversation with the grids of Sol LeWitt, I show how *Antoine's Organ* recasts the grid from its connection to the whiteness and privilege associated with minimalist art to a particularized universality by centering both personal and collective ways of being Black within and beyond its rigid structure. Through dialogue with the grids of Carl Andre, I detail how Johnson's further centering of Blackness within the institutions of museums and galleries is achieved by the literal and metaphorical completion of *Antoine's Organ* by the viewer. A theorization of the metaphysics of bodies of work by Josef Albers and Felix Gonzalez-Torres situates and illuminates Johnson's use of books in *Antoine's Organ* as a surprisingly musical expression. Finally, by analyzing correspondence and incongruity between *Antoine's Organ* and a grid-based installation by contemporary artist Mickalene Thomas titled *Better Nights*, I offer that both artists use the grid to trouble traditional ways of understanding artistic autonomy, bringing longstanding challenges of received ideas about critical distance to bear through the experience of the artworks themselves. Ultimately, I

find that by using the aesthetic grid in concert with the piano, *Antoine's Organ* functions well beyond the creation of a particularized universality; its centering of a multivocal and complex Blackness posits unconditional universalism which resounds even louder through comparison to the bare universality offered by traditional understandings of the modernist and minimalist grid.

I'M JUST A THIEF WHO'S CITING HIS SOURCES

> *"Young artist seeks audience to enjoy poly-conscious attempts at post-medium condition production.*
>
> *Must enjoy race mongering, disparate disconnected thoughts and sunsets (really). Familiarity with the work of Sun Ra, Joseph Beuys, Rosalind Krauss, Richard Pryor, Hans Haacke, Carl Andre and interest in spelunking the death of identity a plus. I'm looking for an audience with a good attention span that is willing to stay with me through the good and the bad. I enjoy creating videos, producing sculptures, and making photographs. My interests are costuming, Sam Greenlee novels, Godard films and masturbation. Ability to hold conversation using only rap lyrics, and a sense of humor a must."*
>
> – Rashid Johnson, 2008
> (Goody 47)

Rashid Johnson's use of individual experiences to address collective issues makes his own history and biography useful in considering his manipulation of physical and metaphysical grids in *Antoine's Organ*. Johnson was born in Chicago in 1977 to Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Jimmy Johnson, who divorced when he was two years old. His mother has a Ph.D. in history and became the first woman and first African American to chair the history department at Loyola University Chicago. She has also written several books of poetry and contributed narrative texts and poetry to the catalogue of Johnson's 2015 Drawing Center exhibition *Anxious Men* (Gilman 19-43). Johnson's father was a photographer, painter, and sculptor who ran his own CB radio business (Goldstein). Johnson credits his father's photography from Vietnam for sparking his interest in photography (Gellner 53). Book titles from his mother's library such as Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* would pique his interest in the discourse of African American thought, and later figure into his sculptures and installations ("Rashid Johnson" *The Talks*). Johnson credits his stepfather, Carlton Odim, for introducing him to important works of

literature (Stackhouse). Born in Nigeria and an attorney in the Chicago area, Odim would provide a cultural perspective of African identity distinct from that of African American identity, complicating any singular notions of Blackness (Goldstein). These familial influences are foundational throughout Johnson's work, bubbling up in some of the titles of his artworks, CB radios and books included in installations, and a self-portrait of his father included in several projects.[2]

Johnson received a Bachelor of Arts from Columbia College Chicago in 2000 and attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2004 and 2005. His first artworld success came from his photography, when a series of Van Dyke Brown prints of unhoused men in Chicago were included in the Studio Museum's landmark 2001 exhibition titled *Freestyle*. *Freestyle* sought to question and redefine the ideas of Black artistic practice at the dawn of a new millennium. In the words of curator Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* was organized to answer the questions, "How would black artists make work after the vital political activism of the 1960s, the focused, often essentialist, Black Arts Movement of the 1970s, the theory-driven multiculturalism of the 1980s, and the late globalist expansion of the late 90s?" (Kim and Golden 14). Johnson responded to these questions with a series of photographs titled *Seeing in the Dark*, which sought to "shatter assumptions about the homogeneity of black people" by returning subjectivity to the men pictured (Widholm 29). In titling the works *Jonathan*, *Jonathan with Hands*, and *Jonathan's Eyes*, the three works included in *Freestyle* communicated the particularity of Johnson's subject as an individual, while the tightly cropped framing expressed

[2] *Green Belt* (2009) and the wallpaper created for the 2015 Drawing Center exhibition *Anxious Men* both feature a self-portrait of Johnson's father; *Citizen Band (Explorations in Topology)* (2008), *Plateaus* (2014), and *Antoine's Organ* (2016) are three examples among many of works featuring CB radios and books; individual artwork titles have included *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (The Power of Healing)* (2008) and *The Crisis* (2019).

the universality of Jonathan's features without limiting perception to the anonymous and derogatory category of "homeless person."

As his career evolved, Johnson embraced the diagnosis put forth by Rosalind Krauss in her 1999 book *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. As he said in 2013 about his approach to medium specificity, "once I realized that having a singular commitment to a particular mode was not in the cards for me, I let all of the things I was doing bleed together. That's when I started making the work that I find to be pushing in the direction of what I'm trying to do today" (Goldstein). Looking across the past twenty years of work, Johnson's oeuvre involves art production in the realms of photography, collage, assemblage, sculpture, metalwork, ceramic, mosaic, woodwork, branding, costuming, performance, video art, and feature film direction. Despite the tremendous breadth of *medium genericity*, Johnson's work displays a remarkably consistent voice in its thematic content. From his portraiture included in *Freestyle* which captured humanity's innate dignity, to his feature film version of Richard Wright's *Native Son* which portrayed the tragic story of the character Bigger Thomas, Johnson's artwork regularly explores a tension between his personal experiences and the social and political implications of those experiences. In his words, "I don't want to refer to the black experience in a singular way. The work offers an opportunity to connect to a set of voices that speak to my thinking and the way that I understand various lineages. I'm just a thief who's citing his sources" (Fowle 84). Johnson's sources layer and interact in counterpoint structures to construct a universality that honors its constituent particularity. To understand this particularized universality, we must uncover the historically problematic aesthetic grid used to structure it.

COUNTERPOINT: PERSPECTIVE

> *"Instead of asking of an image, text, or sound what it means or represents, we ought to ask what it does, how it operates, what changes it effectuates, what forces it channels, and how it affects bodies conceived not as signifying subjects but as themselves collections of material forces."*
>
> – Christoph Cox, 2014
> (Bois et al. 31)

> *"The poet, however, has always worked through incongruity, changing perspective in order to allow for a broader view of the world and to prevent us from presuming that our categories are adequate."*
>
> – Joshua DiCaglio, 2017 (110)

The way *Antoine's Organ* centers a complex understanding of Blackness through its manipulations of the aesthetic grid can be understood by turning to Rosalind Krauss's theorization of the grid's singular ability to grapple with a plural understanding of "the forms of Being" ("Grids" 59). Krauss's 1979 essay "Grids" explored the dualism of the grid's physical and metaphysical powers at a time when modern art was considered to have officially given over to postmodern art among scholars and critics. Krauss's theorization of the modernist grid has influenced nearly all the "reams and reams of artspeak" on the grid in visual art since its publication (Dailey 171). The relationship between the aesthetic grid and modernism's bare universalism is revealed by her imperialist or colonialist framing of the autonomy of the modernist grid. She states that "the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves" ("Grids" 50). Krauss aligned the use of the grid with its industrial formation in minimalist artworks and positioned it not just against the natural but as limiting the agency of organic forms. While these initial incitements by Krauss are focused on the formal and visual use of the grid in modern art and its capacity to order serial elements, it is

her turn to the grid as a structure for the metaphysical properties of artworks that provides a much more fertile ground to make sense of its use by Rashid Johnson in *Antoine's Organ*. When Krauss refers to the grid's "function as the multilevel representation through which the work of art can allude, and even reconstitute, the forms of Being," she opens up the power of the aesthetic grid to extend beyond material concerns ("Grids" 59). Far outside (or deep within) the material or industrial constitution of the visual form of the grid, Krauss acknowledges the grid as a way for art to express pluralities of Being, and in doing so, experience becomes particularized, and difference finds structure. The grid's ability to structure the metaphysical realm is recognized by Amy Goldin when she notes that it is, "as close as we can come to perceiving pure being" (53). The multivalent power of the aesthetic grid reconstitutes a diversity of perspectives, providing an ordering principle and visual language of connection among difference.

Krauss presents the duality of the grid's physical and metaphysical ordering as a false binary, aligning with either formalist or conceptual readings of artworks. She sketches out an ongoing argument that the visual form of the grid can be read two ways: centripetally, moving from the outside in, what I call bounded; and centrifugally, moving from the inside out, what I refer to as boundless. I associate the bounded understanding of the grid with Krauss's formalist reading which takes the edges of the artwork as reified markers of humanity's autonomy, "introjection of the boundaries of the world into the interior of the work," ("Grids" 61). This view begins with the edges of the artwork and uses the grid as a map of its physicality, a chart of the artwork's imposition of itself onto natural forms, such as the black steel grid of *Antoine's Organ* and its interaction with the many plants placed throughout the installation. Conversely, the boundless reading of the grid takes the artwork as a visual fragment, "a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric" ("Grids" 59). This reading understands grids within an

artwork as a conceptual ground which extends beyond the physical artwork, mapping not (just) the physical artwork but charting its extension into the metaphysical, such as Johnson's choice of black steel as a cultural signifier and social critique, as we will see.

The grid's association with metaphysical ordering goes back to its uses in early modernism. Krauss cites the writings of Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, who considered the grid to be "a staircase to the Universal" ("Grids" 52). The grid as a figure of bare universality has continued throughout its use in modern art; its aesthetic action strips away particularity. As Lucy Lippard notes when speaking about a grid project of Sol LeWitt, "LeWitt's work, like that of some of his colleagues (notably Judd, Morris, Andre, though they have little but fundaments in common) depends on the eye being restored to a state of innocence, or a state of perfect union with the brain" (45). In this quote, Lippard identifies some of the major practitioners of minimalist grid-based works, arguably at their heyday in 1967. She then theorizes the necessity of perceiving grid works unclouded by the embodied details of experience in order to appreciate their universal qualities, prescribing the viewer's ability to switch on and off the particularities of identity and markers of difference to allow participation in the bare universality conveyed by these grids. Critique of modernism's bare universalism is abundant, as Mark C. Taylor states, "When the ideal of universality is put into practice uncritically, it can quickly lead to a uniformity that excludes or represses everything and everyone deemed different" (31). Put simply, Leigh Raiford states, "whiteness is considered universal and all others [are considered] racialized, specific, particular" (82). In a 2021 reprinting of the 1971 publication *Black Art Notes,* Francis and Val Gray Ward provide a framework for a universality which is not stripped bare of particularity, one which honors the differences that constitute it. They state that universality is only possible through the embrace of the particular, "In short, blackness demands

from the artist, a consistent honesty, a truth to his being, and the fulfillment to his obligation of being black. If these standards are obeyed, his range of subjects and themes will be limitless, and his universality never in question" (Lloyd et al. 22-23). Johnson's meticulous commitment to mining personal experience is used to craft a particularized universality, which is structured by the organizing powers of the aesthetic grid. Johnson presents this particularized universality as a critique and reconsideration of the bare universalism offered by the modernist grid.

COUNTERPOINT: TRUTH

> *"Aww shit, the grid is gone*
> *Universal mind blown, come on!*
> *What you gonna do when the grid goes down?"*
>
> – Public Enemy featuring Cypress Hill and George Clinton, 2020

> *"For [Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner], musical structure's permutations provided a foundation for their thinking about serialism."*
>
> – Rosalind Krauss, 2007 ("LeWitt's Ark" 113)

Rashid Johnson's use of intertwined references to albums, song titles, and musicians throughout his life and work have inspired my use of Kamasi Washington's 2017 jazz album *Harmony of Difference* as a musical anchor to structure my thinking around *Antoine's Organ*. The album is a journey through aspects of humanity which are particular to each individual while their commonality also structures our intuitive and practical understanding of universality. Washington gathers elemental qualities of desire, humility, knowledge, perspective, and integrity in a series of five compositions, then in a final sixth tune called "Truth," he layers each of the melodies from the previous compositions to create an expansive harmony of difference which preserves and honors the individuality of each previous composition. Washington's melodic repetition-with-difference establishes an internal seriality to *Harmony of Difference*, an approach to composition that invokes the grid's ability to organize without flattening dynamism. My consideration of *Antoine's Organ* under the light of this musical composition opens up pathways into the physical and metaphysical operations of its grid structure.

The importance of music to Johnson's artistic practice is seen in the inclusion of record albums in his artworks, appropriating song titles for artworks and exhibitions, and purchasing and preserving Nina Simone's childhood home with three other artists (Bradley). The experience of listening to Washington's *Harmony of Difference* offers an unfolding structural parallel to my understanding of *Antoine's Organ* as a gridded expression of beauty in difference. Artist Adam Pendleton describes Nina Simone's music as "demand[ing] a kind of deep listening, a kind of geometry of attention" (Bradley). I argue that *Antoine's Organ* traces and unwinds its constitutive differences in a similar temporal and durational way. To unpack and appreciate *Antoine's Organ* requires a geometry of attention to the many cultural signifiers comprising it, and historical references implicated by it.

Washington's *Harmony of Difference* serves as a reminder that understanding *Antoine's Organ* may come through the analysis of its particular parts, but its true expression exceeds them. Washington describes his motivation for writing *Harmony of Difference* by saying, "My hope is that witnessing the beautiful harmony created by merging different musical melodies will help people realize the beauty in our own difference" (Washington). His composition is an expression of beauty which exceeds the particularities of its components through the intertwining of difference. I maintain that the understanding of *Antoine's Organ* is a form of aesthetic pleasure which is rooted in Washington's ideas about "beauty in our own difference." As Rashid Johnson said in a 2015 interview: "I like beauty. It's taken me a long time to really, honestly admit that to myself, but I'm very challenged by attractive things. I find that to be a real blessing, that I'm still very interested in the poetry of art, not just the concepts. Not just art as a delivery system, but art as an opportunity to bring joy both to the eyes as well as to the mind" (Black). Johnson uses the grid to grapple with his expressions of beauty in *Antoine's Organ*, employing it

as what Lex Morgan Lancaster refers to as, “a form of abstraction that exceeds its own borders” (134). Kamasi Washington’s *Harmony of Difference* serves as a reminder that understanding *Antoine’s Organ* may come from the consideration of its constitutive parts, but that its success as an artwork exceeds these particulars and emerges as a universal expression contingent on our intertwined engagement with it on emotional, intellectual, and critical registers.

COUNTERPOINT: KNOWLEDGE

> *"I mean, the world is really going to hell in a toboggan, and I'm putting these boxes together."*
>
> – Sol LeWitt, 1969
> (Alberro and Norvell 121)

> *"I paraphrase something attributed to John Coltrane, who says to Wayne Shorter, as they slam out clusters of notes on the piano: 'See about starting a sentence in the middle, and then go to the beginning and the end of it at the same time, both directions at once.'"*
>
> – Emmanuel Iduma, 2018 (2)

Rashid Johnson's use of the grid to both physically and metaphysically structure *Antoine's Organ* confronts its own history of bare universalism and hegemonic imposition of sameness. *Antoine's Organ* specifically recalls the artwork and practices of minimalist artist Sol LeWitt, whose modular structures frame the physicality of the aesthetic grid while charting metaphysical and theoretical explorations of early conceptualism ("Mart Performance"). In a brief series of questions in conversation with curator Kate Fowle, Johnson splits open the tension between the historical and contemporary interpretation of the minimalist grid as he interrogates his own motives for working with it. He asks, "Can I stage a 'sit-in' of a Sol LeWitt-type armature? Does this then establish Minimalism as an 'institution'? As a black artist can I even assume the right to inherit the practice?" (Fowle 34). These questions forefront race in Johnson's decision to use a black steel grid to structure *Antoine's Organ*. In asking whether a Black artist can participate in minimalism, Johnson demonstrates the whiteness of the vast majority of artists associated with the art movement, reinforced by Lucy Lippard's previously mentioned list of artists: Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre. Earlier in the same essay,

Lippard anthropomorphizes and depersonalizes LeWitt's grids by calling them "multipartite skeletons," thus stripping away any particularities of racial identity (45).

The minimalist grid's long association with knowledge systems is acknowledged by Lara D. Nielsen, who notes that it, "can be used to make sense of the very forces it enacts and transforms, on the understanding that cultural production cannot be separated from material registers of the real" (289). "Material registers of the real" are grist for the mill of the grid, supplying the data which the grid organizes, categorizes, and homogenizes. According to Donald B. Kuspit, LeWitt "bends his objects under the yoke of mathematical order to imply a universal meaning" (44). The use of the grid to strive for universal meaning relies on knowledge systems such as mathematics and linguistics and strips away the particularity of data in favor of the relationality of data systems. This bare universalism attributed to LeWitt's sculptures is called into question by Johnson's harmonization of difference in *Antoine's Organ*. Johnson introduces particularity into his grids by painting them black and adorning them with a host of social and cultural signifiers, "insisting on blackness as a multiplicity," to use the words of Adrienne Edwards, and rejecting the bare universalism advanced by the modernist grid on both physical and metaphysical levels ("Blackness in Abstraction" 62). Johnson's implementation of LeWitt's grid mobilizes its own recovery, further revealing something that Eve Meltzer describes as LeWitt using a "law of equivalences…to spawn differences" (117). In both *Antoine's Organ* and Meltzer's understanding of LeWitt's work, the grid is used to structure difference and manage particularity rather than deny variation or impose sameness. Meltzer denies LeWitt's assertion that his art, "has nothing to do with the world at all" (121). Despite his claims, LeWitt's grids can't help but structure knowledge of the world and organize different ways of being within it. Consequently, in *Antoine's Organ* the grid has everything to do with the world.

Johnson provokes a further reconsideration of the aesthetic grid when he asks one more rhetorical question, "If I occupy it, is it appropriation, a revolt, or an invasion?" (Fowle 34). By my reading, it is all three: Johnson occupies the grid's bare universalism through appropriation, revolution, *and* invasion. With one act, Johnson appropriates the form of the grid, revolts against it by painting it black, and invades the white institution of minimalism by inserting what Adrienne Edwards calls the "profound capaciousness" of "blackness in abstraction" ("Blackness in Abstraction" 68). LeWitt himself acknowledged the significance of "blackness in abstraction" when speaking about his decision to use white grids. He said, "By the end of 1965 the pieces were painted white instead of black. This seemed more appropriate for the forms and mitigated the expressiveness of the earlier black pieces" (LeWitt 59). It would seem that *expressiveness* is another particularity to be stripped away by the bare universalism of the modernist grid.

Beyond simply color, Johnson's use of black steel participates literally and metaphorically in a broad cultural critique of a dominant society which institutionally abuses its power over its citizenry. As he said in a 2017 interview, "More than ever the work is about oppression. It's about fear and insecurity at a time when these things are present in all of our lives" (Benson). Johnson's 2008 sculpture *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* shares its title with a 1988 song by the hip hop group Public Enemy, whose politically charged lyrics reckon with the racial and class-based injustices in the United States. The sculpture *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* takes the form of Public Enemy's logo: crosshairs of a rifle scope with a Black man in its sight ("Chuck D Explains Public Enemy's Iconic Logo"). In Johnson's version of the logo, the center is empty, leaving open the possibility of anyone becoming an enemy to be viewed through the riflescope of institutional authority. The crosshairs of *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos* are layered among other signifiers of Blackness to weave a visual narrative throughout Johnson's

works, becoming what Julie Rodrigues Widholm calls a "postminimal gesture of reductive form infused with social content" (36). In the 2009 print *Thurgood in the Hour of Chaos*, the crosshairs appear spraypainted on top of a portrait which, according to Huey Copeland, "conceptually reconfigures space-time through aesthetic means" (303). In this image, Johnson draws together contrapuntal cultural references to create a harmony of difference, mixing a contemporary graphic with a fictional portrait of an important historical figure in a way that Shawn Michelle Smith calls "looking forward and looking back" (16). In a series of works made from red oak flooring, Johnson branded the crosshairs into the wood planks. Smith was speaking of Johnson's photography when she said that he "rupture[s] narratives of historical progression," here we see that rupture as Johnson links Public Enemy's indictment of the contemporary United States prison system with some of the machinery of slavery (Smith 31). Black steel, then, goes both directions at once: it acts as a physical substrate while also serving as a metaphysical framework which introjects and projects Johnson's cultural identification and historical reckoning.

COUNTERPOINT: HUMILITY

> *"In all instances, blackness in abstraction is about a contingent encounter in which the work of art's ability to affect the viewer and the viewer's ability to be affected by the work of art mobilize in such a way that they are both transformed."*
>
> – Adrienne Edwards, 2016
> (*Blackness in Abstraction* 10)

> *"[Antoine's Organ] functions, in a lot of ways, as a delivery system. Meaning that, it has an endless number of signifiers and reference points inside of it, whether you take the launching pad of minimalism or the structure of the grid as a space to start thinking about how the object functions in relationship to art history, or whether you take the idea of inhabiting those kinds of spaces, how you can live inside of a historical discourse."*
>
> – Rashid Johnson, 2018
> ("Rashid Johnson at Unlimited")

Antoine's Organ reorients the aesthetic grid to center a multivocal expression of Blackness within the institution of the museum, crucially leaving open the final moment of completion to occur and recur each time the artwork is viewed. Earlier shelf-based wall sculptures such as *Rumble* and *The Awakening* (both 2011) were built upon flat grids of mirrored tile, and in 2014 Rashid Johnson's practice transitioned to monumental, floor-based, gridded installations such as *Antoine's Organ*. Emerging from a personal and historical relationship to artworks of Carl Andre, the reoriented grid of *Antoine's Organ* troubles the physical relationship between artwork and viewer and continues a conceptual conversation which questions the distinction between subject and object.

In elemental works such as *144 Lead Square* and *144 Magnesium Square* (both 1969), Carl Andre expressed a humility in his restrained construction of grids of metal plates on the floor, working against sculptural traditions of volumetric presentation and demarcation. By

reducing sculptural form to a depth of a mere 3/8 of an inch, Andre's "rigorous rejection of verticality and volume" provided a "critique of traditional definitions of sculpture as necessarily figural, monumental, enclosing, containing, and hierarchically composed, or as an abstraction that protrudes upward and outward into space" (Rorimer 282). Andre's rejection of traditional sculptural form extended further when he invited the viewer to walk on these metal plains. When Andre embraced a flatbed picture plane to present a grid perpendicular to the viewer, he reconfigured the structure of the grid and enabled the subsumption of the viewer into the work. This reorganized the grid to physically contain a subject who may now stand upon it. Andre's reorientation of the grid is an active democratization of his art, forcing the viewer to occupy the same space as the artwork and achieving what Julia Bryan-Wilson refers to as a "leveling" (54). The metal plains of Andre's gridded floor works destabilize the relationship between artwork and viewer, becoming "foundational *platforms*–literally and spatially–for new kinds of relations between object, maker, viewer, and institution" (Bryan-Wilson 54). Where Andre's artwork achieved a conceptual shift from plane/plain to a discursive platform, Johnson's dimensional expansion of the aesthetic grid opens it up to a rebalancing of stakes with implications for both artist and viewer.

Johnson uses the reorientation of the grid to claim a personal agency and offers that empowerment to the viewer. In this quote, he explains how his personal interaction with the reoriented grid of Andre's work structured difference and empowerment between Johnson and the museum[3], an institutional environment marked by impositions of hierarchy and hegemony:

> Oftentimes, folks who came to the museum didn't know that you could stand on the Carl Andre sculpture. So, I would walk into the middle of the sculpture and freak out people

[3] In this case, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (Bailey).

> who were walking through the museum. They'd see me, [and be] like, "What is he doing on the sculpture?" And I felt really, I don't know, like, empowered, that I, one, had the knowledge that I could activate it, and two, that my young black body was there in the center of this kind of canonical historical work, and that I was present in it, and that I could engage it, and activate it, and turn it on. (Bailey)

The massive scale of *Antoine's Organ* invites the spectator to transgress the boundary between subject and object, viewer and artwork, in a manner similar to Andre's decision to invite the viewer to physically enter the plane of the artwork. For Johnson, interacting with Andre's sculpture was a rebalancing of social stakes, a structuring of Johnson's racial difference within and upon the institutional whiteness of the art museum and a canonical modern artist. Both artists have built an ethos of mutuality and egalitarianism into their artworks through the orientation of the aesthetic grid, each realizing a particularized universality that honors difference and literally connects viewer to artwork. The ability of the viewer to enter the space of the artwork creates a moment of dissolution of difference, removing a traditional barrier separating artwork from viewer. The removal of this barrier expresses a humility on the part of the artist, they are absent as the activation of the artwork is achieved by the viewer, not merely in the subjective perception of the artwork, but in the literal completion of the work. Michael Tymkiw notes regarding Andre's metal plains, "a spectator's body, when stepping on one of these works, assumed the verticality typically associated with a sculptural object" (230). Andre's works leave open the final moment of completion to be achieved by the viewer. Johnson's orientation of the aesthetic grid in *Antoine's Organ* similarly relies on the viewer to, in his words, "turn it on."

COUNTERPOINT: INTEGRITY

"There is no art that does not contain in itself as an element, negated, what it repulses."

– Theodor W. Adorno, 1970 (11)

"History is in fact an incomplete cube shirking linearity."

– Adam Pendleton, 2017 (342)

Approaching *Antoine's Organ* with Kamasi Washington's *Harmony of Difference* in mind encourages us to consider its constitutive aesthetic grids beyond just physical structure and engage with their metaphysics, their nonmaterial aspects. The metaphysical grids of *Antoine's Organ* look both forward and back, offering up new possibilities for the grid as they cause us to identify metaphysical structures in past bodies of work. By drawing out these metaphysical grids, we find their aesthetic action can create either structures of difference or impositions of sameness. Analyzing these metaphysical grids affords us the opportunity to reconsider some of the meanings and significations created by these artworks. For example, beyond the stacked or nested physical grids of Josef Albers's prodigious *Homage to the Square* series we find an engagement of the aesthetic grid on a metaphysical level which exceeds the limits of physical contiguity. In this series, Albers experimented with color theory, using the concentric squares to present color as a mutable and contingent quality, fundamentally affected by subjective perception. However, individual sensual experience is only part of the aesthetic functioning of these grids. When the thousands of works comprising *Homage to the Square* are considered collectively, I see a noncontiguous yet conceptually linked grid spanning both space and time. This idea realizes a potentiality John Elderfield saw in grid paintings, that individual works could

be united within an "irregular perimeter" which can extend to "a theoretically infinite continuum" (56). We can consider the individual works as cells of a larger grid whose integrity is not defined by the rigidity of a formalist grid; this conceptual grid is structured metaphysically as it pushes the notion of scale to a more expansive expression and activates the aesthetic grid in a new dimension. Each cell of this metaphysical grid exists both as an independent work and as part of the larger whole.

The scale of decentered metaphysical grids was pushed even larger by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose artworks known as paper stacks also emancipated and democratized the cells of these grids. From around 1988, Gonzalez-Torres produced serial works consisting of what he referred to as endless copies, exhibited in the form of stacks of variously blank, colored, and printed paper. Viewers are encouraged to take one of the papers, which are presented and replenished to maintain an ideal height. The paper stacks are activated in the construction of an abundant yet tenuously scaled metaphysical grid as each sheet of paper is taken by viewers of the work. This decentered grid grows and shrinks as each page from the endless edition is hung, discarded, repurposed, or lost. An important distinction can be made between the metaphysical grids of Albers and Gonzalez-Torres. If we consider the purchase and placement of works from the *Homage to the Square* series by museums and collectors, the cells of its metaphysical grid form a map of the global network of canonical artworld institutions and collections. The cells of the metaphysical grid formed by Gonzalez-Torres's paper stacks are an organic and pulsating representation of the impact of the artist, emancipated from the institution and spilled out among a public not limited by the social, racial, and economic gatekeeping of artworld institutions. While the decentered grids formed by Albers's *Homage to the Square* and Gonzalez-Torres's paper stacks exceed physical limitations and exist on a potentially global scale, they still rely on

the physicality of each work in the series to manifest as cells in their larger grids. Rashid Johnson uses books within *Antoine's Organ* to craft a truly metaphysical grid which is not dependent on the physicality of its cells.

Before *Antoine's Organ*, Johnson created an aesthetic grid which was metaphysically organized, rather than physically constituted, similar to the grids formed by Albers and Gonzalez-Torres. A series beginning around 2008 called *Cosmic Slops* displays remarkable consistency and variation ("Rashid Johnson: Cosmic Slops"). *Cosmic Slops* vary in size and orientation; sometimes they are rectangular, sometimes they are square, sometimes they are turned to be oriented as diamond shapes. Most often they are given the shared title *Cosmic Slop*, but larger versions sometimes add evocative cultural and historical references in quotes, such as *Cosmic Slop "Black Orpheus"*, *Cosmic Slop "The Berlin Conference"*, or *Cosmic Slop "Planet Rock"*. Johnson creates the works by heating and mixing black soap and wax, then pouring this liquid onto boards. The composition of early versions focused on the natural flows and shapes resulting from the poured and dried mixture; over time Johnson began incising the black soap and wax before it dried, adding another layer of abstraction to the compositions. The similarities and differences among these black-on-black works form a physically decentralized but metaphysically connected grid of related yet unique cells. The scale of this metaphysical grid is global; Johnson emphasizes the connection between each cell using black soap and its cultural ties to Africa, and by the title, coming from a 1973 song and album by George Clinton's pioneering band Funkadelic. The title *Cosmic Slop* embraces duality, referring to both the formal "slop" of the dried runs of black soap and wax on the surfaces of each of the paintings, and the cosmic metaphysical connection between individual works in the series and their connection to Africa through the use of black soap. Katherine Brinson identifies the "specific cultural

resonances" being expressed in the *Cosmic Slop* series and describes it in narrative terms, "it's almost as if he's setting up this paradoxical situation whereby he is telling stories with an abstraction" ("Storylines: Rashid Johnson"). The black-on-black monochromes create connections through their material composition and through the structured similarities and differences between each artwork, each cell in their decentralized aesthetic grid. For George Clinton, *Cosmic Slop* served as one among many compositional touchstones, with multiple versions appearing throughout the greater Parliament/Funkadelic constellation of artists and music groups. For Johnson, works in the *Cosmic Slop* series reinforce the metaphysical integrity of the grid as a formal and structural touchstone.

Johnson "tell[s] stories with an abstraction" in a more literal and compelling way through his decision to place books throughout *Antoine's Organ*. The books serve as elements which expand the metaphysical scale of the artwork while recursively reflecting the grid which physically structures it. Johnson selects books which, in the words of Leigh Raiford, "read Blackness as a series of signs rather than as essence" (80). Johnson's carefully curated selection of books presents Blackness as complicated and heterogeneous, expressing a richly textured portrait of Black experience with choices such as *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Other books including Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* and Randall Kennedy's *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal* are unflinching and uncompromising in their consideration of racism. Johnson places multiple copies of each title in small stacks throughout the installation. He speaks to this decision by saying, "I want these books to be registered multiple times, to be considered in multiple conversations, in relationship to one another. That's how the narrative I want begins to unfold" (Fowle 116). Placed in multiple, the books serve as formalist figures, creating small grids which participate in a

recursion of the black steel grid of *Antoine's Organ* itself. Johnson's decision to place the books in multiple skews their visual language from a book as an index of its contents to become an icon which loosely reprises Johnson's reimagining of the modernist grid.

Placing the books within his installation also establishes origins of discourse and creates the potential for connections among viewers familiar or curious about their subjects. Grids akin to the meshes of data networks emerge from the metaphysical connections formed between the stories and ideas included in the books and their identification by the viewer. Like Sol LeWitt's *Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974), these metaphysical grids are created by the viewer, activated and formed in an abstract space outside of the artwork itself. The transitory spaces between book and viewer where stories and ideas connect can be described by what Jakub Zdebik calls, "a way of considering the grid as the very condition that makes it possible for abstract functions to shuttle from system to system" (213). This metaphysical grid is sparked by the books in the installation but not reliant on their physicality, it is instead formed in between sites of identification and meaning, projection and perception, bearing a resemblance to John Rajchman's description of Deleuzian abstraction when he says that it, "supposes the subsistence of connections that exceed the messages of a medium and ourselves as senders and receivers of them" (73). The metaphysical grid formed by the books in *Antoine's Organ* exceeds its components to express a harmony of difference, a gathering of particularity crafted in musical form as well as literary. In considering Mark Bradford's painting *Los Moscos* (2004), Kathryn Brown describes his use of maps in a way that bridges their cartographic function in order to "capture multiple imaginary experiences" (101). Johnson uses books in *Antoine's Organ* in a similar fashion. Where Bradford "calls into question the type of knowledge traditionally conveyed by maps," Johnson uses books to suggest not just the ideas within them, but to act as formal gestures within the artwork (K.

Brown 106). Brown sees Bradford "permit[ing] a new way of conveying information about places and the people that inhabit them," and Johnson employs books in a multimodal expression of both their contents and the multiplicity of their possible understandings by the viewer (106). Like a musician reading a written score who hears the music at the same time, the books in *Antoine's Organ* effloresce upon their consideration by the viewer. In the words of Albers himself, "Hearing music depends on the recognition of the in-between of the tones, of their placing and of their spacing" (5). Each book in *Antoine's Organ* represents a note, a discursive fetish which initiates the organizing of cultural knowledge and critique into fractalized recapitulations of the physical grid.

COUNTERPOINT: DESIRE

> *"The very dynamic that makes modernism possible tends at the same time to restrict its movement to an increasingly narrow ambit. For this reason, what appears as loss from the standpoint of autonomy is at the same time a tremendous liberation of formal energies, made possible precisely because the old forms are no longer required to respond to interpretive questions."*
>
> – Nicholas Brown, 2019 (19)

> *"The grid…is both the ground of this system and, by its replication, the system itself."*
>
> – Andrew McNamara, 1992 (73)

The massive scale of *Antoine's Organ* has profound implications on how and with who the artwork interacts, raising fundamental questions about the nature of the autonomy of art objects. By comparing *Antoine's Organ*, which uses scale to limit its own autonomy, with *Better Nights*, a 2019 contemporary installation by the artist Mickalene Thomas which uses scale to transfer its autonomy to other artists, I uncover engagements with autonomy which trouble art historical understandings of the perceived importance of achieving critical distance when engaging with artworks and the nature of artistic autonomy.

A working understanding of artistic autonomy is required before proceeding. In 1975, Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn, members of the Art & Language group, expressed concern that Donald Judd's striving for autonomy in his art paradoxically made those artworks more dependent on institutional forms. Addressing Judd, they said that, "…you wanted *a more autonomous art object*, what you would call 'more objective.'…It means that the more 'objective' you make your work, *the more necessarily dependent the work is on a culturally institutionalized situation*" (Beveridge and Burn 130-131). Beveridge and Burn pit the

autonomous artwork against an artwork that relies upon the "culturally institutionalized situation" for its presentation and existence in the world, with the implicit and unquestioned idea that independence from institutions is a good thing. It's clear that *Antoine's Organ* is highly dependent upon a "culturally institutionalized situation" for its presentation and is therefore lacking in what we might call artistic autonomy. Writer Seph Rodney criticizes *Antoine's Organ* by saying that, "More than anything else the work is a signifier of the socio-economic heft that Johnson can now wield." Rodney argues that we are conditioned to equate expensiveness with significance, and that *Antoine's Organ* is not much more than an "aesthetic boondoggle." Rodney, along with Beveridge and Burn, all seem to be obliquely contending that artworld success leads to a dependence on the institution, and this hinders the autonomy of the artwork. I contend that while it may signify the artworld success of Rashid Johnson, *Antoine's Organ* also calls into question the benefits, effectiveness, and desirability of autonomy within an artwork. Johnson is able to create a work at the scale of *Antoine's Organ* because of his success and "socio-economic heft." Autonomy as a measure of relative independence is at odds with the action of the artwork in the world. Judd considered his own artworks culturally embedded when he said, "I've always thought that my work had political implications" (36). Johnson, too, wields socio-economic heft to ensure that the cultural critique, personal intimacy, and expressions of Blackness within the artwork are able to structure difference and create connections among an audience in an institutional environment associated with whiteness, hierarchy, and hegemony. The relative autonomy of the works of either Judd or Johnson is an inadequate measure of their political, social, and cultural impact.

Rashid Johnson manipulates the scale of the physical and metaphysical grid structuring *Antoine's Organ* to intensify the relationship between artwork and viewer. The monumental

scale of the artwork imposes itself on the viewer, totalizing the phenomenon of its experience and denying the ability of a distant perspective. This massive scale dominates the perceptive relationship with the viewer who "cannot attain the necessary distance that permits comprehension of its entirety" (K. Brown 105). The scale of the artwork creates a tension which cannot be resolved by adequate critical perspective, removing the option for what Walter Benjamin termed "a matter of correct distancing" (89). The denial of distance opens up the viewer to a converse experience of *Antoine's Organ* through what is "largely a matter of scaling" (Higgins 256). The scale of the installation closes off its generalized perception and invites close inspection of the composition of each cell of its grid. The viewer is thus drawn in to examine details of the plants, or video works by Johnson, or perusing stacks of books. This conflicting experience presents a universal experience of the artwork's monumentality that is particularized by the details found within each cell of the grid. These physical and metaphysical dimensions of *Antoine's Organ* are constituted by and simultaneously challenge the bare universalism of the stark modernist grid.

Insight into the way artistic autonomy is affected by the scale of the grid is also seen in *Better Nights*, a 2019 installation at the Bass Museum by contemporary artist Mickalene Thomas. *Better Nights* was the second iteration of installations which were inspired by polaroid photographs of parties hosted by her mother, Sandra Bush, in the 1970s and 1980s. *Better Nights* featured three main components, all designed by Thomas "according to the domestic aesthetic of the period" ("Better Nights"). One room was a gallery of paintings, prints, and photographs curated by the artist; a second space was a video gallery selected by Jasmine Wahi. The third component was a functional performance space and bar, intricately decorated with gridded mirror walls and flooring, and featuring five geometric-patterned mirror works by Thomas. The

performance space was physically structured by the aesthetic grid, with the mirrored surfaces achieving a crystalline effect of recursive complexity. Titled *Inanna #1-5* (2019), Thomas's mirrored artworks imposed their geometry at angles to the grid of the room, reinforcing and deepening the visual complexity of the space. The assertion of angularity within the aesthetic grid is considered by Adrienne Edwards in an essay about Thomas's first installation in this series, *Better Days*. "The intersectionality of identity in Thomas' works emerges in the form of spaces of disorientation. Her creations erect a multitude of aesthetic and conceptual off-lines in the context of normative straight lines of art and society in the West, which are always already read as white, straight, and oblique" ("Better Days"). Thomas's placement of artworks which assert their diagonality among a gridded performance space weaves conflicting geometries to harmonize difference, "re-imagining a black radical aesthetic" ("Better Nights").

My reading of the massive scale of the aesthetic grids structuring the installations of Johnson and Thomas has implications for our understanding of artistic autonomy. Their installations deny the possibility of distance, taking up space and preventing apprehension from afar. Where Johnson's massive scale creates an individual experience as the viewer engages the artwork up close, Thomas's scale creates a social experience and lays a groundwork for the intermingling of difference. She describes the social experience of *Better Nights*, "There's no hierarchy. There's no degree of separation here and that's how I see my world" (Rosen). Both artists take up space in an acclamation of socio-economic status. For Johnson, ownership and exhibition of *Antoine's Organ* is restricted by the level of organizational power required by its potential acquisition or exhibition. The presence of plant life within the artwork makes the ownership and display of *Antoine's Organ* a caretaking responsibility: one must water the plants and ensure that the grow lights are providing adequate nutrition for them, in Johnson's words,

"the people who house it have a certain responsibility" ("Rashid Johnson in Conversation with Dr. Nicholas Cullinan"). What in one sense gives *Antoine's Organ* the appearance of being a self-contained and autonomous environment also limits the scope of institutions capable of displaying it, restricting its artistic autonomy to a smaller set of *culturally institutionalized situations*. Similarly, Thomas is able to leverage her success as an artist to center a uniquely Black, queer aesthetic within the museum. However, instead of limiting the autonomy of *Better Nights*, Thomas structures the artwork as a transference of autonomy and conferrer of power. As she has said, "Queer spaces usually are almost always for me more inclusive and where there are no boundaries" (Edwards "Better Days"). Thomas takes space to create an intersectional, celebratory zone which elevates fellow Black artists, musicians, and her own voice, simultaneously spectacularizing and normalizing these perspectives and experiences through the massive physical and metaphysical scale of the grid. This too is a wielding of socio-economic heft in a transgressive act which harmonizes difference.

OUTRO

> *"Because of the lost interpretive key in an era of informational saturation, we are forced to come to terms with the fact that the actual function of the grid is aesthetic."*
>
> – Jakub Zdebik, 2021 (226)

> *"There is never any end. There are always new sounds to imagine: new feelings to get at. And always, there is a need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so that we can really see what we've discovered in its pure state. So that we can see more clearly what we are. In that way, we can give to those who listen, the essence—the best of what we are. But to do that at each stage, we have to keep on cleaning the mirror."*
>
> – John Coltrane, 1966

As shown in this paper, the multimodal signification of *Antoine's Organ* is achieved through Rashid Johnson's artistic decisions that both harness the structuring power of the aesthetic grid and neutralize its homogenizing tendencies. Cultural, racial, and institutional critique; metaphysical manipulations; reconsiderations of artistic autonomy; all are enabled and expressed through his use of the grid. The pluralities of Blackness expressed by Johnson reflect a particularized universality due to their association with the bare universality proffered by modernist and minimalist grids. However, the totality of the installation accomplishes something beyond a particularized universality. *Antoine's Organ* realizes an unconditional universalism through the figure of the piano at its center.

Where the grid forms the skeleton and organizes the signification of the installation, the piano at its center is a generative sexual and emotional organ powering its expression and providing the grist for the serial logics of the grid. Like the human figure that activates and completes Carl Andre's metal platforms, when the piano at the center of *Antoine's Organ* is played, the installation blooms into another dimension and extends the artwork into the

intangible realm of sound. Johnson described his addition of a piano by saying, “a live musical performance could bring my sculpture to life in a way I hadn’t considered” (Gassmann). Music emanating from the piano further expands the presence of the already monumental artwork in order to take up metaphysical space. In this way the piano works as a bridge between the physics and metaphysics of *Antoine’s Organ* and liberates its embodied experience.

The piano’s ability to shuttle between physics and metaphysics is enlightened by considering Rosalind Krauss’s thoughts on the duality of the figure of the window in symbolist painting. She notes that, “the window is experienced as simultaneously transparent and opaque” (“Grids” 58). The transparency of the window allows us to see through it, but its opacity converts it into a mirror and its focus becomes immediate. This duality both rationalizes the surface of the painting and provides a portal beyond it. The window collapses the binary of bounded and boundless readings of the grid and charts both the physical and metaphysical explorations of the artwork. For Krauss, “this liquidity points in two directions,” the figure of the window looks both forward and backward at the same time (“Grids” 59).

Rather than being focused on the surface of a painting like Krauss’s symbolist window, the piano in *Antoine’s Organ* also collapses the binary of bounded and boundless readings, but it turns its attention outward towards the viewer in one direction and the institution in the other. The piano connects to the viewer as they activate and complete the work, placing them in time by attuning them to their own durational perception of *Antoine’s Organ* through the language of music. Moreover, the piano works in the opposite direction, adding musical compositions to the multilayered expression of Blackness announced by the installation. When activated musically, the presence of the installation is further expanded and even more successfully occupies the

institutions in which it is shown. *Antoine's Organ* sonically announces the socio-economic heft of the artist as the rhythmic form of music extends the serial markers of its grids.

Like the stacks of books placed throughout the installation, the piano recurses the aesthetic grid in visual form, 88 keys which form a bounded physical grid. But the piano shuttles between bounded and boundless readings of the grid, and each note on the keyboard produces harmonic overtones and sub-harmonic resonances that stretch well beyond the range of our hearing, forming "an infinitely larger fabric" of sound (Krauss "Grids" 59). The black and white notes on the keyboard recapitulate the antagonism between the white grids of Sol LeWitt and the black steel armature of *Antoine's Organ*. The sharps and flats of the black keys of the piano, sometimes called "accidentals," resonate with the expressiveness of Blackness in abstraction and provide what is sometimes referred to as "color" when describing musical compositions, but only when played in combination with the white keys, sometimes called "natural" or "whole" notes. Johnson's centering of Blackness and centering of a keyboard within the installation inverts and collapses this binary by naturalizing what was once denigrated as "accidental" and restoring an unqualified "wholeness" to the full set of keys. Like the piano's engagement with the grid, Johnson's expression of wholeness is also recursed on both physical and metaphysical levels, "his range of subjects and themes [is] limitless, and his universality never in question" (Lloyd et al. 22-23). As the crucial difference between *Antoine's Organ* and Johnson's other installations in the same mode, the piano is the installation's own particularity, an "abstraction that exceeds its own borders" (Lancaster 134). As such, the piano liberates the expression of *Antoine's Organ* from any limited particularities and achieves an unconditional universalism.

Rashid Johnson uses the grid in *Antoine's Organ* to organize and structure its many personal and cultural signifiers on both physical and metaphysical levels. His aesthetic grids

work particulars and differences against each other, layering them in a counterpoint structure. The minimalist and modernist grid is limited by an interpretation of its history which sees impositions of sameness and homogeneity, only able to achieve a bare universalism. In *Antoine's Organ*, however, the grid is set free by the piano at its center. The installation crafts a new universalism which exceeds the aftereffects of narrow interpretations of the aesthetic grid and expresses a universality which knows no limits. By bringing together the grid and the piano, *Antoine's Organ* gathers the full spectrum of tonality provided by each key of the keyboard, each book, each plant, each cell of the grid, to create an uncompromised and unconditional harmony of difference.

REFERENCES

Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Continuum, 2002.

Alberro, Alexander, and Patricia Norvell. *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegelaub, Smithson, and Weiner*. University Of California Press, 2001.

Albers, Josef. *Interaction of Color*. Yale University Press, 1963.

Bailey, Spencer. "Rashid Johnson on Escapism and Upending the Notion of the 'Monolithic Experience.'" *Time Sensitive*, The Slowdown, 22 Oct. 2019. https://timesensitive.fm/episode/rashid-johnson-artist-director-hbo-native-son-escapism/.

Barr, Alfred H. *Cubism and Abstract Art*. The Museum of Modern Art, 1936.

Benjamin, Walter. *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. NLB, 1979.

Benson, Louise. "African-American Artist Rashid Johnson Is Exploring Life in the Trump Era." *i-D*, Vice, 7 June 2017. https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/3kd8by/rashid-johnson-art-interview-culture-trump-james-baldwin-hauser-wirth-somerset.

"Better Nights." *The Bass Museum of Art*. https://thebass.org/art/mickalene-thomas/.

Beveridge, Karl and Ian Burn. "Don Judd." *The Fox*, no. 2, 1975, pp. 128-142.

Black, Matt. "Reflections: Rashid Johnson's Post-Black Art." *NOWNESS*, 2 June 2015. https://www.nowness.com/series/reflections/rashid-johnson-matt-black-post-black-art.

Bois, Yve-Alain, et al. "Abstraction, 1910–1925: Eight Statements." *October*, no. 143, Winter 2013, pp. 3–51, doi:10.1162/octo_a_00130.

Bradley, Adam. *The Artists Turning Nina Simone's Childhood Home into a Creative Destination*. The New York Times, 16 Mar. 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/t-magazine/nina-simone-childhood-home.html.

Brown, Kathryn. "The Artist as Urban Geographer: Mark Bradford and Julie Mehretu." *American Art*, vol. 24, no. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 100–113. doi:10.1086/658211.

Brown, Nicholas. *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 2019.

Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. University of California Press, 2010.

Cabañas, Kaira M. "If the Grid Is the New Palm Tree of Latin American Art." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 33, no. 3, Oct. 2010, pp. 365–383. doi:10.1093/oxartj/kcq031.

Cameron, Dan. *Living Inside the Grid*. New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003.

Chen, Nancy N. "'Speaking Nearby:' a Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha." *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, Mar. 1992, pp. 82–91. doi:10.1525/var.1992.8.1.82.

"Chuck D Explains Public Enemy's Iconic Logo." *Fact Magazine*, 19 Aug. 2014. www.factmag.com/2014/08/18/chuck-d-explains-public-enemys-iconic-logo/.

Coltrane, John. *Meditations*. Impulse! Records, 1966.

Copeland, Huey. "Rashid Johnson." *Artforum*, Summer 2012, pp. 300–303. https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201206/rashid-johnson-31090.

Dailey, Meghan. "'Living Inside the Grid' New Museum." *Artforum*, May 2003, pp. 171–172. https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/200305/living-inside-the-grid-46771.

DiCaglio, Joshua. "Language and the Logic of Subjectivity: Whitehead and Burke in Crisis." *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 50, no. 1, Feb. 2017, pp. 96–118. doi:10.5325/philrhet.50.1.0096.

Edwards, Adrienne. "Better Days: A Mickalene Thomas Art Experiment." *BETTER DAYS*. http://betterdays-basel.com/essay/.

Edwards, Adrienne. "Blackness in Abstraction." *Art in America*, ARTnews.com, 5 Jan. 2015, pp. 62–69. https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/blackness-in-abstraction-3-63053/.

Edwards, Adrienne. *Blackness in Abstraction*. Pace Gallery, 2016.

Elderfield, John. "Grids." *Artforum*, May 1972, pp. 52–59. https://www.artforum.com/print/197205/grids-36215.

Fowle, Kate. *Rashid Johnson: Within Our Gates*. Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, 2016.

Gassmann, Gay. "A Giant Art Installation with 250 Plants - and Live Jazz." *The New York Times Style Magazine*, The New York Times, 8 Sep. 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/t-magazine/art/rashid-johnson-hauser-wirth-antoine-baldwin.html.

Gellner, Uwe. *Rashid Johnson: Sharpening My Oyster Knife*. Kerber Verlag, 2009.

Gilman, Claire, et al. *Rashid Johnson: Anxious Men*. Drawing Center, 2015.

Goldin, Amy. "Patterns, Grids, and Painting." *Artforum*, Sep. 1975, pp. 50–54. https://www.artforum.com/print/197507/patterns-grids-and-painting-36072.

Goldstein, Andrew M. "Rashid Johnson on Making Art 'About the Bigger Issues in Life.'" *Artspace*, 31 Dec. 2013. https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/rashid_johnson_interview-51948.

Goody, Dick. *Seminal Works from the N'Namdi Collection of African-American Art*. Oakland University Art Gallery, 2008.

Higgins, Hannah. *The Grid Book*. MIT Press, 2009.

Iduma, Emmanuel. "Akinbode Akinbiyi." *A Sum of Encounters*, July 2018. https://sumofencounters.com/Akinbode-Akinbiyi.

Judd, Don. "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium." *Artforum*, September 1970, pp. 36–37. https://www.artforum.com/print/197007/the-artist-and-politics-a-symposium-37542.

Kim, Christine Y., and Thelma Golden. "Introduction. Post..." *Freestyle*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2001.

Koestlé-Cate, Jonathan. "Grids: A Kraussian Perspective on New Windows for the Church." *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2014, pp. 672–699. doi:10.1163/15685292-01805004.

Kramer, Eric M. *Modern-Postmodern: Off the Beaten Path of Antimodernism*. Praeger, 1997.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. Thames & Hudson, 1999.

Krauss, Rosalind E. "Grids." *October*, vol. 9, Summer 1979, pp. 50–64. doi:10.2307/778321.

Krauss, Rosalind E. "LeWitt's Ark." *October*, no. 121, Summer 2007, pp. 111–113. doi:10.1162/octo.2007.121.1.111.

Kuspit, Donald B. "Sol LeWitt: The Look of Thought." *Art in America*, 1975, pp. 41–49.

Lancaster, Lex Morgan. "Feeling the Grid: Lorna Simpson's Concrete Abstraction." *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 131–155. doi:10.1353/asa.2017.0019.

LeWitt, Sol. "Illustrations: Works by Sol LeWitt, 1962-1977, With His Commentaries." *Sol LeWitt*, edited by Alicia Legg, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, 1978, pp. 49–165.

Lippard, Lucy R. “Sol LeWitt: Non-Visual Structures.” *Artforum*, Apr. 1967, pp. 42–46. https://www.artforum.com/print/196704/sol-lewitt-non-visual-structures-36736.

Lloyd, Tom, et al. “The Black Artist - His Role in the Struggle.” *Black Art Notes*, Primary Information, Brooklyn, NY, 2021, pp. 18–28.

Mansoor, Jaleh. “A Spectral Universality: Mona Hatoum’s Biopolitics of Abstraction.” *October*, vol. 133, Summer 2010, pp. 49–74. doi:10.1162/octo_a_00003.

“Mart Performance | Marcia Plevin / Sol LeWitt. Emptiness as Fullness /A Conceptual PERformance Dance.” *YouTube*, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto, 21 Apr. 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQGiwo92fgg.

McNamara, Andrew. “Between Flux and Certitude: The Grid in Avant-Garde Utopian Thought.” *Art History*, vol. 15, no. 1, Mar. 1992, pp. 60–79. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8365.1992.tb00469.x.

Meltzer, Eve. “The Dream of the Information World.” *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, Mar. 2006, pp. 115–135. doi:10.1093/oxartj/kci046.

Nielsen, Lara D. “This Kinetic World: Rethinking the Grid (Neo-Baroque Calls).” *Performance Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1, June 2017, pp. 285–309. doi:10.21476/pp.2017.31127.

“Paper Stacks.” *The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation*, www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/c/paper-stacks

Pendleton, Adam. *Black Dada Reader*. Koenig Books, 2017.

Public Enemy. “GRID.” *What You Gonna Do When the Grid Goes Down?*. Def Jam Recordings, 2020.

Raiford, Leigh. “Burning All Illusion: Abstraction, Black Life, and the Unmaking of White Supremacy.” *Art Journal*, vol. 79, no. 4, 2020, pp. 76–91. doi:10.1080/00043249.2020.1779550.

Rajchman, John. *Constructions*. MIT Press, 1998.

“Rashid Johnson - Artists | Hauser & Wirth.” *Hauser & Wirth*, www.hauserwirth.com/artists/2830-rashid-johnson.

“Rashid Johnson at Unlimited, Art Basel 2018.” *Hauser & Wirth*, 10 June 2018, https://www.hauserwirth.com/ursula/16996-rashid-johnson-unlimited.

“Rashid Johnson: Cosmic Slops.” *Richard Gray Gallery*, https://www.richardgraygallery.com/exhibitions/rashid-johnson.

"Rashid Johnson in Conversation with Dr. Nicholas Cullinan." *Frieze*, 16 Oct. 2020. https://www.frieze.com/video/watch-now-rashid-johnson-conversation-dr-nicholas-cullinan.

"Rashid Johnson." *The Talks*, 18 Apr. 2019. https://the-talks.com/interview/rashid-johnson/.

Rodney, Seph. "On Grieving and Mourning with Art." *Hyperallergic*, 3 June 2021. https://hyperallergic.com/650469/on-grieving-and-mourning-with-art/.

Rorimer, Anne. "Ground Rules." *Carl Andre Sculpture as Place, 1958 - 2010*, edited by Michelle Piranio and Jeremy Sigler, Dia Art Foundation ; Yale University Press, New York , NY; New Haven, CT, 2014.

Rosen, Miss. "Inspired by Her Mother, Mickalene Thomas' New Show Is Her Most Personal Yet." *AnOther*, AnOther Magazine, 13 Dec. 2019. https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/12142/mickalene-thomas-better-nights-miami-art-basel-the-bass-exhibition-interview.

Shange, Ntozake. "The Silence Is Broken/Get Going." *Rashid Johnson: The Rainbow Sign*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 2018, pp. 14–19.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography*. Duke University Press, 2020.

Stackhouse, Christopher. "Rashid Johnson." *Art in America*, ARTnews.com, 3 Apr. 2012. https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/rashid-johnson-3-62935/.

"Storylines: Rashid Johnson." *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, 5 June 2015. https://www.guggenheim.org/video/storylines-rashid-johnson.

Strainchamps, Anne. "Race, Yearning and Escape in the Shelves of 'Antoine's Organ'." *Wisconsin Public Radio*, 25 July 2017. https://www.wpr.org/race-yearning-and-escape-shelves-antoines-organ.

Taylor, Mark C. *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Tupitsyn, Margarita. "The Grid as a Checkpoint of Modernity." *Tate Papers*, Autumn 2009. https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/the-grid-as-a-checkpoint-of-modernity.

Tymkiw, Michael. "Planes of Immanence: Walking on Carl Andre's Art in Moments of Protest." *Art History*, vol. 44, no. 2, Apr. 2021, pp. 226–254. doi:10.1111/1467-8365.12561.

Washington, Kamasi. *Harmony of Difference*. Young Turks Recordings Ltd., 2017.

Widholm, Julie Rodrigues. *Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks*. Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012.

Zdebik, Jakub. “The Grid and the Visualization of Abstract Information: Three Eighteenth-Century Models.” *Data Visualization in Enlightenment Literature and Culture*, edited by Ileana Baird, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021, pp. 199–229. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-54913-8_6.