

A Family Affair

Jacolby Satterwhite's Queer Utopics

Queerness's form is utopian.

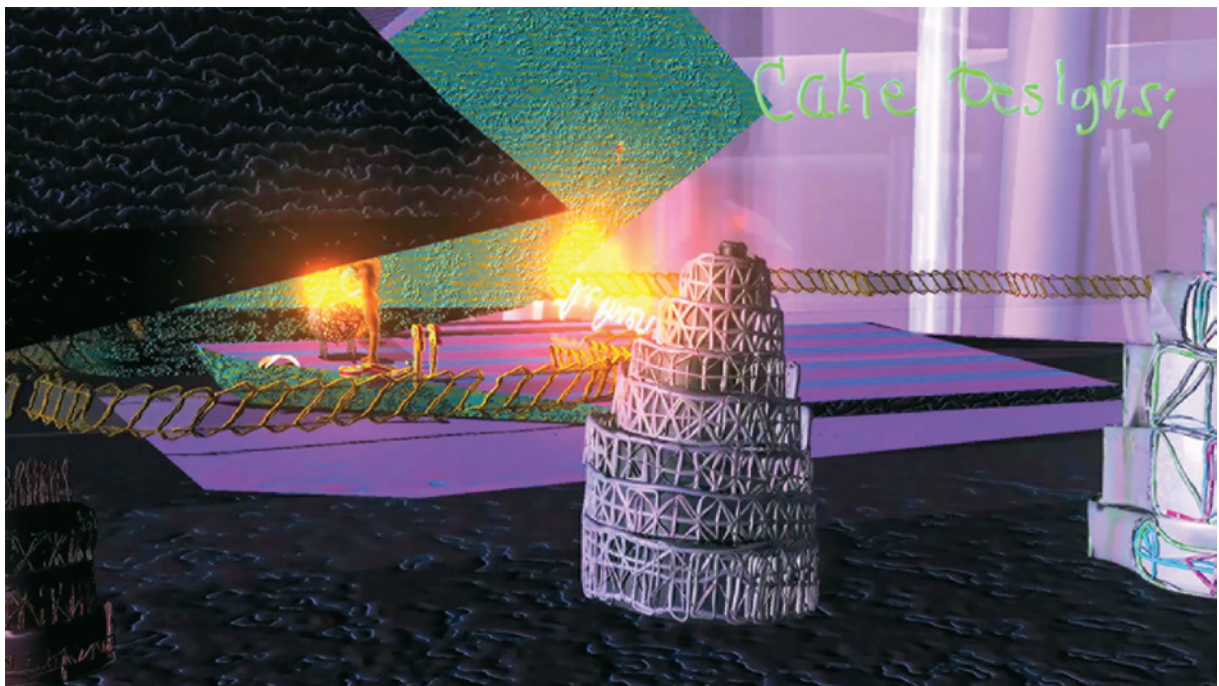
—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia:
The Then and There of Queer Futurity*

This stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) is a hallmark of queer affect: a “revolution” in the old sense of the word, as a turning back.

—Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds:
Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*

Christina Knight

Jacolby Satterwhite is known for creating virtual worlds that feature multiple avatars of himself voguing within densely rendered neon landscapes. He populates those landscapes with three-dimensional objects painstakingly traced in the animation program, Maya, from drawings that his mother made during his childhood in the hopes of striking it rich on the Home Shopping Network. This article will focus on an early work, *The Country Ball* (1989–2012), an animated video that brings together archival footage from Satterwhite's family during a 1989 Mother's Day cookout, alongside his mother's drawings of what he calls “recreational American material culture.”¹ I argue that Satterwhite's virtual performances link queerness and utopia: his animated avatars make manifest his desire to occupy a world as multiplicitous and far-reaching as his sense of self. I believe, however, that this queer utopics begins with Satterwhite's mother and her crafting of a creative



Jacoby Satterwhite, *The Country Ball*, 1989–2012. Video stills. Courtesy and © Jacoby Satterwhite and Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York



Jacolby Satterwhite, *Country Ball Home Video*, 1989. Video still. Courtesy and © Jacolby Satterwhite and Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York

process in the midst of terrible constraints on her physical and economic mobility. By reading the artist's virtual worlds through his mother's drawings, I investigate a similar strategy of making do to make new, or reworking the mundane in the service of the marvelous.

Queering the Archive

In the VHS footage that the artist sources in *The Country Ball*, the viewer can see Satterwhite at age three interacting with his cousins. He is a tiny figure frenetically dancing in a neon green top, trying to keep up with the girls and their disorganized choreography as other family members dance and socialize in the background. In discussing why he uses the video, Satterwhite says:

I was obsessed with family footage. In the video, I notice that I'm constantly obsessed with hanging out with girls. And my cousins, they're kind of excluding me and pushing me out. No Jacolby, you can't—that's what the girls do. It felt like this desperation to be loved and to belong. It's something I still, I think I still

deal with today. Kind of like, how do I reperform all of those bodies from my past? It's like a reconstruction. In my *Country Ball* world, that's where I really explore the possibility of queerness.²

Here, the artist articulates a desire to reconstruct and reperform the past, particularly the exclusions he sees in the family archive, and these center on the policing of his gender performance in an otherwise jovial family setting. Crucially, as Elizabeth Freeman articulates in the epigraph that begins this essay, Satterwhite links queerness with a "stubborn lingering of pastness."³ That is, his experiences of rejection at an early age and his sense of not properly belonging are productive of his sense of self and of his queerness. It is not simply that the past "lingers" but rather that the "obsessed" artist returns again and again to the site of exclusion in the hopes of "reperforming" or reprising his role. Here, the notion of identity as iterative and citational opens up the potential to perform differently, augmenting that which is documented in the VHS tape with the more capacious imaginative space of memory.

In *The Country Ball*, this turn backward coincides with a lush, layered, even dizzying combination of three-dimensional drawing, animation, and video. If shot through with melancholic attachment, the past nevertheless becomes one tool among many to craft a new world. But before looking closely at Satterwhite's complex queering of time in *The Country Ball*, I want to turn to the process and practice of the artist's unlikely collaborator: his mother, Patricia Satterwhite.⁴

Patricia Satterwhite: Queer(ing) Failure

In a 2014 clip from the Charlie Rose Show, Satterwhite tells Rose that when he was growing up, he first took his mother's constant drawing at face value.⁵ He remembers learning draftsmanship in an attempt to assist her as she made thousands of sketches, modifying the everyday objects that order middle-class home life. Patricia's drawings run the gamut of slight improvements to things that exist (for example, an outdoor sink with a cover) to inventions the use of which remains mysterious (for example, an all-in-one hat, collar, and pocketbook with three mirrors, and an instant replay camera). At a certain point, however, Satterwhite discovered that his mother was struggling with a serious mental illness. After being diagnosed with schizophrenia, she could no longer work a traditional job and became homebound. Her drawing, thus, became a way to otherwise occupy and order her increasingly disorderly thoughts. Satterwhite credits a great deal of his current success to his mother's influence. When he was a child, her creative output inspired his own desire to draw and paint, but he also attributes his return to her drawings later in life as the tool that enabled him to turn away from his restrictive art school training toward both a more personal archive and an attendant development of his own artistic voice. Her drawings, in his words, led him to "find a kind of agency as a creator."⁶

What might the act of drawing utilitarian objects have done for Patricia herself? The artist's mother's persistence on drawing and design as a method of ordering the world around her, though destined to fail as a get-rich scheme, nevertheless charts a kind of failure that is spectacular in its proliferation. In an interview, Satterwhite describes his relationship to his mother's practice in the following way:

I'm removing her intentions of the drawings and combining them with my intentions. It's interesting that her drawings were trying to subscribe to the most normal thing you can be, and they enter my universe and they become something else—they become queered. It's queering the purpose of the object.⁷

Satterwhite is right to assert that his mother's drawings are shaped by a normative, if perhaps not "normal," relationship to middle-class, aspirational materialism. I need not rehearse the many sites in which "striking it rich" through grit and inventiveness is offered as a way to navigate the structural inequality that pervades American life. Also much rehearsed is the idea that bootstrap ideology incorrectly and perniciously places the onus directly on the disenfranchised to dream and scheme their way out of social exclusion. But was Satterwhite's mother simply trying to insert herself into a normal, if aspirational, version of capitalism?

It is useful to read Patricia's incessant remaking of the world she encounters as more utopian than pragmatic; that is, rather than simply imagining her drawings as failed because they neither reached their intended audience nor yielded a financial payoff, we might think about failure as a tool for understanding the sometimes hidden contours of the social order. By this I mean that any practice that exposes the limitations of the social and financial mobility of marginalized people does the powerful work of critique. In this case, failure itself—and even more important, incessant trying that always ends in failure—cuts with additional force. In this way, Patricia's drawing practice rhymes with what Jack Halberstam has called the "queer art of failure," which he describes as "turn[ing] on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."⁸ Importantly, her "quiet losing" here does not mark Patricia as a failure; instead, it suggests that all the effort in the world could not make her legible to a system premised on her invisibility.

What life was Patricia imagining when she drew and redrew such imaginative images of American material culture? She primarily focused on the objects that surrounded her in the world of her house, the four walls that made up her entire horizon once her illness left her homebound. Rather than

imagining a utopia in some other time or place, she breathed new life into her surroundings, literally developing a practice of picturing that remade the world of her isolation and exclusion into something, if not more functional, then more fantastical. This queer potential in Patricia's practice made space for Satterwhite's own explorations, when later in life he struggled to find his voice within an art training that insisted both on an adherence to a Western painterly tradition (which has historically hidden or excluded black subjects) and a masterful, unique perspective on that tradition. An attention to how everyday black folks like Patricia have always found ways to remake the world in their own image, in spite of their marginalization and illegibility, was surely useful to Satterwhite, who as a young artist began to stage his own intervention through different means.

The Country Ball

Watching *The Country Ball* feels like walking through a funhouse at an amusement park. A dancing Satterwhite is surrounded by neon, three-dimensional drawings; patterned geometric shapes; and faceless monochrome figures performing tasks. Interspersed throughout are windows that contain the archival footage of the young Satterwhite's family. In addition to the dynamic visuals, the artist scores the work with a soundtrack taken directly from the 1989 home video, creating an immediate disjuncture between futuristic cyberscape and the sounds of 1980s dance music.

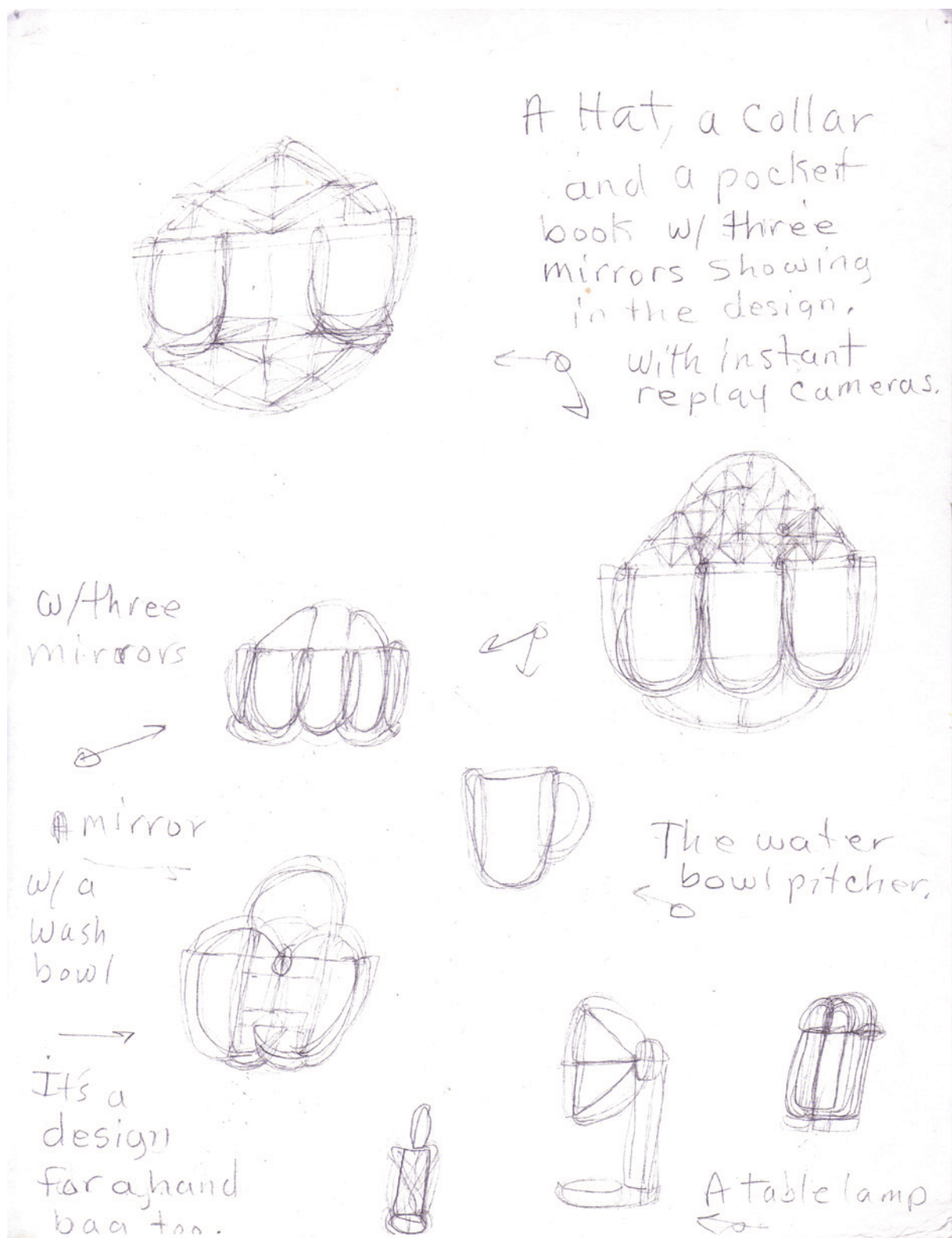
The music, even as it indexes a time when Satterwhite felt policed by and alienated from his family, carries a queer trace: the artist's older brothers had a habit of bringing their collection of New York City house music to family barbecues in the 1980s.⁹ The casual way that this music, so closely aligned with black, urban, gay culture in the 1980s, integrates into the family's celebration points to the relationship between black queer subcultural expression and pop music at the time: both Madonna's *Vogue* and Jennie Livingston's documentary about the Harlem ball scene, *Paris Is Burning*, come out a year later. It also reveals that the ubiquity of this expression did not necessarily reflect an embrace of gender nonconforming behavior like that of the young Satterwhite. This makes the artist's inclusion

of the sounds of his family speaking and laughing in *The Country Ball* an ambivalent gesture: the voices create a party atmosphere that nevertheless must be reimagined. Indeed, outside the tiny windows that glimpse the VHS past—at one point even raining down from the "sky"—the cousins and aunts and uncles that populate the original video are replaced in this virtual world by avatars of the artist himself, multiplied. Though the clips of the original party pervade the new virtual world, Satterwhite miniaturizes them—his dancing figure always exceeds the tiny moving bodies from the past.

Satterwhite also disorients the viewer through his use of scale and perspective. Bodies shrink and then loom large. What at times seems like perspectival space shifts suddenly, flattening and reshaping itself into a pillar or a plinth. The newly animated drawings telescope too: in one shot a cake is a cake; in another, the cake becomes a structure on which to stage spectacular choreography. The savvy art-historical viewer might notice a similarity between that cake design and Vladimir Tatlin's 1919 work *Monument to the Third International*, otherwise known as *Tatlin's Tower*. That artist's vision, a 1,300-foot design meant to celebrate the Bolshevik Revolution, was also a work of utopic dreaming that was never realized.¹⁰ In *The Country Ball*, working with Maya allows Satterwhite to literally expand on this tradition of constructivism, stretching Patricia's cake drawing into a tower and then transforming it into a platform upon which to populate, frame, and showcase the fluidity of his ever-multiplied voguing body. The realm of possibility itself seems to shift as soon as we grasp it.

Other references abound. For example, when Satterwhite names his work *The Country Ball*, he gestures to a history of queer subcultural expression that not all audience members may grasp. In this case, he refers to the Harlem ball scene, which began in the 1920s with pageants held for and organized by all manner of black gender and sex nonconformers. Nearly a century later, this scene is characterized by ethnographers Emily Arnold and Marlon Bailey:

Led by house mothers and fathers, houses function as families whose main purpose is to organize elaborate balls and to provide support for their children to compete in balls as well as to survive in society



Patricia Satterwhite, "A Hat, a Collar and a Pocket Book," ca. 1998–2008. Graphite on paper, 8 x 11 in. Courtesy the artist. © Jacolby Satterwhite

as marginalized members of their communities of origin. Houses offer their children multiple forms of social support, a network of friends, and a social setting that allows free gender and sexual expression. Ultimately, houses within the ballroom community constitute figurative, and sometimes literal, “homes” for the diverse range of members involved in them.¹¹

The culture around the contemporary ball scene is thus both a space in which to perform spectacular feats of fashion and dance for a supportive audience and one in which people, whose identity expression puts them at higher risk for being thrown out of their homes, can remake those kinship structures.

In keeping with this tradition, Satterwhite’s virtual country ball enables the artist to revisit his past and transform his experience of isolation into one of celebration, though he queers these signifiers of ball culture in the service of his singular vision. He uses his virtual ball as a platform upon which to perform nonbinary gender, and he does so in an elaborately ornate fashion familiar to balls. Nevertheless, Satterwhite avoids remaking his family entirely, instead using *The Country Ball* to center an intergenerational dialogue around object design. What is passed down from mother to son is an approach to self-fashioning that exists in the ludic, imaginative space of recreational material culture. This is perhaps the queerest family of all.

Also important to his utopic vision is the artist’s take on voguing: his is a slowed-down, campy revision that also links Satterwhite’s dance to his training in drawing and painting. In an interview, he describes his approach in the following way:

Voguing is a dance expression with a phenomenology sensibility. It’s a movement style that has a direct relationship to objects, consumerism, class and luxury. It also has the strongest relationship to drawing. The movement style assists me in strong image construction. Referencing modern dance and voguing echoes the lyrical angles, positive and negative space relationships found in my mother’s drawings. For me voguing lends itself to image making. Not only am I describing the object my mother drew using my body. I’m also using my body to create much more interesting shapes.¹²

In the world of *The Country Ball*, this version of voguing looks like the artist’s avatar interacting with and gesturing to three-dimensional versions of his

mother’s drawings or literally drawing with colorful lines of foam that extend from his limbs. These motions are interspersed with the more familiar duck walking, dips, and twirls of contemporary vogue dancing.

In addition to reworking the language of vogue as a part of his “drawing” of three-dimensional space, Satterwhite’s invocation of the form borrows from a Camp aesthetic that mines the humor of failure through parody. By his own admission, Satterwhite lacks formal training in dance, and much contemporary vogue is performed by incredibly virtuosic bodies with an astonishing amount of control. In keeping with my desire to look more closely at what first *appears* to be failure, I want to invoke Camp as one way to think about Satterwhite’s performance as a playful and intentional revision of vogue rather than a failure to meet its high standards.

Here, rather than refer to Susan Sontag’s famous and deeply problematic 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” I am instead thinking with and through Moe Meyer’s revision of Sontag’s formulation.¹³ Meyer’s intervention is to reunite the depoliticized objects and “sensibility” described in Sontag’s essay with the queer cultural producers who employ it in order to revise a representational apparatus that excludes them. Meyer tells us that through Camp, queer subjects employ parody as one such tool of revision:

Parody becomes the process whereby the marginalized and disenfranchised advance their own interests by entering alternative signifying codes into discourse by attaching them to existing structures of signification. Without the process of parody, the marginalized agent has no access to representation, the apparatus of which is controlled by the dominant order.¹⁴

On its surface, parody may simply seem like mimicry, a bad or lesser reproduction of an original. This implicitly pejorative reading surfaces in Sontag’s description of Camp as “the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experiences.”¹⁵ Her attempt to identify the pleasure in performances of heightened theatricality that seem to lack the “genius” associated with originality nevertheless fixes originality and seriousness as the norms through which one should read Camp’s “failure.” To understand more clearly how Satterwhite differently uses parody, it is instructive to look to another context



Vladimir Tatlin, *Model of the Monument to the Third International*, 1919–20. Photo: bpk Bildagentur/Art Resource, New York



Jacyby Satterwhite, *Jacyby Satterwhite and Jay-Z Perform Picasso Baby at Pace Gallery*, 2013. Courtesy and © Jacyby Satterwhite and Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York

in which the artist performs his version of voguing, this time in front of a live audience.

In 2013, hip-hop artist Jay-Z released an album titled *Magna Carta Holy Grail*, which features a song called “Picasso Baby,” in which the artist announces his wealth, social status, and talent; flaunts his ownership of a Picasso painting; and also suggests that he is a “modern day Pablo.”¹⁶ Jay-Z’s assertion of his own value through the completely conventional lenses of wealth and Western notions of artistic “genius” notwithstanding, the song was made more interesting by the rapper’s invitation to a range of contemporary artists and art-world figures to share the “stage” with him as he filmed his music video over the course of an entire day at Pace Gallery in Chelsea, New York City. This idea was inspired by Marina Abramovic’s 2010 work *The Artist Is Present*, and Abramovic played a central role by performing with Jay-Z for his project. Satterwhite was present for this taping, and while his performance did not make the final cut of the eight-minute minidocumentary/

music video, I believe the outtake that includes his performance tells us something important about his particular brand of Camp parody.

In the outtake, Satterwhite employs some familiar vogue vocabulary, dipping to the floor and duck walking, but he also begins moving in a style that incorporates a more heteromale swagger. He responds to the rhythm and gesture vocabulary of hip-hop emcees but takes that movement to an even greater extreme—at one point making an extended, rhythmic gesture toward his crotch. At this moment in the performance, this heightened instant in which Satterwhite parodies hip-hop hypersexualization, Jay-Z turns away from the artist and disengages. But again, moments of discomfort or failure are instructive. The tension between the two performers of masculinity—one restrained and in control, the other more expressive, more “theatrical” and responsive—exposes the white cube as a space of ideological, quiet control. In this case, Jay-Z’s appropriation of Pace Gallery somehow displaces an

artist whose work is much more likely to be found on its very walls.

In the *Picasso Baby* minidocumentary, when prompted to describe why he invited practicing visual and performance artists into his music video, Jay-Z laments the loss of a bygone era that existed before the gallery system separated art from other kinds of culture producers. He suggests that hip-hop artists also bear the blame, positioning visual art as the kind of bourgeois culture that their music seeks to contest. Yet, Satterwhite's "failed" performance during the shoot pushes back against the rapper's democratizing impulse in two important ways: first, democratization of a space without the necessary frameworks to interpret different kinds of expression actually *produces* failure.¹⁷ The second is that parody, and the attendant discomfort that it produces, exposes the asymmetries of power between the two men with an incredible economy. Both men occupy the same gallery, but the camera registers whose choices drive the action: when Jay-Z disengages, the scene rapidly concludes.

Though we have taken a lengthy detour, I believe these insights can help us understand what Satterwhite does in *The Country Ball* when he parodies and remakes queer expressive forms like voguing and balls. The inclusion of "country" in the title is one clue, as it suggests a revision of the centering of urban spaces in the development of and literature around ball culture. Yet, Satterwhite goes further with his three-dimensional world: this lush space is both otherworldly and entirely familiar. Scored by the artist's melancholic attachment to the past, it includes and revises traces of the actual family that inhabited that past. This attachment, this "stubborn lingering of pastness," situates Satterwhite somewhere between the heteronorm and the homonorm, between straight time and queer time: this "no time" is the "no place" of Satterwhite's utopia.

Queer Diaspora/Queer Utopia

I want to conclude with a question that I do not yet have the answer to: What is the particular utility of utopia for artists in the African diaspora? Further, why does an engagement with drag or other kinds of queer expressive culture assist black artists in their work of envisioning utopia? One answer may lie in

what scholar Nadia Ellis has called the "territories of the soul." In the introduction to her book by the same name, she explores a queer consciousness pervading black aesthetics. She writes:

Black diaspora is characterized by a distinctive desire to belong "elsewhere," which desire produces a productive tension between attachment and a drive toward intense and idiosyncratic individuation (unencumbered by location, heritage, or even, indeed, by materiality). . . . Queer theory guides my traversal of critical orientations between pessimism and celebration, orientations that are often held to be worlds apart. For failure in queerness is really just the mark of the insufficiency that makes trying necessary.¹⁸

Ellis suggests that artists across the African diaspora imagine new worlds in order to critique rather than replace the present. Indeed, as is the case with Satterwhite's mother's drawings and recordings, the asymmetries of power that order the present may preclude the possibility of successfully making a "new world." But, as Ellis tells us, "failure in queerness is really just the mark of the insufficiency that makes trying necessary." In short, the art making that Satterwhite and his mother engage in performs capitalist desire with a difference: each designs a completely idiosyncratic world inflected with personal loss as well as an inexhaustible proliferation of images of the world made "better." This intergenerational striving replaces the elusive path to American financial success with the "no place" of utopia, suggesting that this "no place" is the only place like home.

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Notes

- 1 New York Close Up, *Jacolby Satterwhite Dances with His Self*, YouTube video, 08:58, August 16, 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LgtGM1Wcss.
- 2 New York Close Up, *Jacolby Satterwhite Dances*, 5:54–6:33.
- 3 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 8.
- 4 I call her by her first name (Patricia) or "the artist's mother" here only because she shares a last name with Jacolby.
- 5 Charlie Rose, *Whitney Biennial '14*, Vimeo video, 24:40, March 31, 2014, charlierose.com/videos/16971.
- 6 Charlie Rose, *Whitney Biennial '14*.
- 7 New York Close Up, *Jacolby Satterwhite Dances*, 6:54–7:17.
- 8 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC:

Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

9 R. Kurt Osenlund, "Jacolby Satterwhite Evokes Queer Spaces of Every Kind in Epic Tribute Album to His Late Mother," March 10, 2017, www.out.com/out-exclusives/2017/3/10/jacolby-satterwhite-evokes-queer-spaces-every-kind-epic-tribute-album-his-late-mother.

10 This was partially because the amount of steel it would take to complete a tower of that size was not readily available and because of the prohibitive cost, as Russia was in the midst of a civil war. The design, however, also raised real questions about the viability of whether a tower of this height could support its own weight.

11 Emily A. Arnold and Marlon M. Bailey, "Constructing Home and Family: How the Ballroom Community Supports African American GLBTQ Youth in the Face of HIV/AIDS," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 21, no. 2–3 (2009): 174.

12 Priscilla Frank, "Artist Turns Mother's Old Sketches Of Inventions into Surreal Performance Art (NSFW)," Huff Post, January 24, 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/24/jacolby-satterwhite_n_4639876.html.

13 For example, Sontag suggests that "to emphasize style is to slight content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical." Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 64. Recent scholars have attended to the ways this formulation excludes the use of Camp by gay and lesbian people of color. For two excellent examples, see José Esteban Muñoz, who challenges Sontag's "Notes" through analysis of lesbian Chicana performance: Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 119–20, 128. Also see Pamela Robertson, who considers the ways in which blackness has been used historically to authenticate performances of Camp: Robertson, "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity,' and the Discourse of Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, 393–95.

14 Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), 11.

15 Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 62.

16 "Jay-Z, *Picasso Baby*: A Performance Art Film," 10:44, www.universal-music.de/jayz/videos/picasso-baby-a-performance-art-film-326307 (accessed April 17, 2020).

17 Democratization is in quotes in part because the guest list for the event was highly curated and consisted almost entirely of celebrities.

18 Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 6.