

Gallery 1 + 2

***GRACE BEFORE JONES: CAMERA, DISCO, STUDIO***

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*GRACE BEFORE JONES: CAMERA, DISCO, STUDIO*

"One spotlight on your face. That's all you need to generate mystery".

Grace Jones, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 2015.

It might seem surprising that a contemporary art centre is dedicating an exhibition to Grace Jones (or, as I like to say, "through and around Grace"). But contemporary art often takes you to strange places.

When the idea first emerged, almost two years ago, it was just an intuition. But we quickly came to realise that something meaningful could be done, in that specific and sometimes too rigid format of the exhibition.

Grace is the embodiment of many topics that Nottingham Contemporary has been exploring in recent years: black image-making; gender and performance; and the production of popular culture. Her career has many facets—music, but also fashion, design and cinema—and she collaborated with some of the best-known artists of the postwar period: Andy Warhol, Keith Haring and Robert Mapplethorpe, to name but a few.

These arguments convinced us that an exhibition on Grace Jones could work (oddly enough, no one had staged such a project before).

But as the curator of the project, together with Olivia Aherne, I rapidly faced many questions: should it act as a biography? Could

such an exhibition include everything audiences would expect from a presentation of this kind? Did we want people to leave the exhibition knowing more about Grace? At one point, I even wondered whether a more interesting challenge would be to include no images of Grace Jones at all. That idea, of both showing and withholding, would go on to shape our research and selection.

You will encounter many pictures of Grace Jones covering her face, playing hide-and-seek, not fully revealing herself. Grace plays with the camera in a singular way, always looking for the lens while at the same time escaping or confronting it. In her memoir, she describes a photograph taken by Anthony Barboza, used as the poster image for this exhibition: "Tony took a lovely, unsparing and very peaceful close-up of my face, lips slightly parted in either defiance or invitation [...] It was one of the first—if not the first—professional photographs taken of me, a moment of birth. I am not looking behind. I am looking straight ahead."

One of the most fascinating things about Grace is the way in which she made, at the end of the 1970s, a dramatic shift from disco to dub. We often forget that Grace Jones was, first of all, a disco queen. While this is made clear throughout the exhibition, we also wanted to draw a line between the glitter and feathers of her disco period and what came after, in the 1980s and early 90s.

This is conveyed by the DIY treatment of the spaces and the exhibition design, devised with local architect Borja Vález. The exhibition makes use of theatre flats as dividers and walls. From the beginning of the project, we were interested in the idea of the "backstage" as a threshold space. Several videos and photographs show Grace in backstage situations or in the recording studio. Ultimately, the whole exhibition is intended to act like a kind of studio, a place where things are trialled and rehearsed, a place that allows for failure and experiment.

So that is why the show is subtitled "Camera, Disco, Studio". But why "Grace Before Jones"? There are many ways to answer that question: since Grace isn't Grace's original name; since "grace" also means effortless elegance; or since an exhibition of this kind can never be complete—it is continually shifting. *Grace Before Jones* does not attempt a fully-fledged overview of Grace Jones' career (how could it, when her career is still very much evolving?).

Because of this, we couldn't put an end to the exhibition, so you may leave with a feeling of unfinished business, or of the lights coming up before the night is over. In various ways, the exhibition extends beyond Grace Jones herself: some pieces jump back to earlier figures; others only have intuitive relationships to her; while many were made with and for her, by a community of creatives decimated by the AIDS crisis (one of the final moments of the exhibition).

While *Grace Before Jones* does not follow a conventional chronology, it does open with the first professional photograph of Grace (taken by Anthony Barboza) and ends with one of her leaving Andy Warhol's funeral (by Catherine McGann). This booklet develops upon the exhibition's themes and two galleries—"Right Light" and "Night Sight"—to give context, anecdotes and some historical anchors.

We hope you enjoy the show!

- *Cédric Fauq*

#### ARTISTS' ENTRANCE

The moment you enter the gallery, you glimpse an early photograph of Grace that contrasts with the images we know of her. We do not know its source or author (online it is wrongly attributed to Anthony Barboza and *Essence* magazine). It emphasises her ties to Jamaica, where she was born and grew up until her teenage years. But her necklace is a disturbing element, in that it almost resembles a collar. Could we say that, just as this photograph "captures" a young Grace Jones, she was also in the process of being freed from the camera's lens?

In her biography, Grace Jones relates one very telling anecdote: "I got [...] arrested for disorderly conduct. My first official trouble with the

authorities. When they tried to take my mug shot at the police station, their camera never worked when I was put in front of it. Perhaps I was too demonic. They tried a few times. It worked when I wasn't being photographed. As soon as they tried to capture my image, nothing would happen."

This opening section acts as the antechamber to the exhibition. With works by Charles White, Terry Adkins, Martha Rosler and Kayode Ojo, it questions the muteness of images (their inability to speak); asks us to reflect on our colonised gaze (how the way we look is tainted by the colonial project and its production of images); and establishes a certain legacy of the black (and queer) entertainer. This section also sets the scene with a lighting feature that brings up the question of "right light" (the title of this first half of the exhibition), so important in photography, while also asking: under what light might Grace Jones be revealed?

#### AN UNRULY CHRONOLOGY OF THE ULTRABLACK IN GRACE

This section is an exercise in visual study, operating through analogies and layering. Bringing together photographs of Grace Jones with works by Eldzier Cortor, Julia Phillips, Charles White, El Anatsui and material from the Black Beauty modelling agency, it questions blackness and puts forward the idea of the ultrablack (a black beyond blackness).

"Black skin becomes an endlessly pliable surface, rather than a finite one, as we witness a body seemingly without depth, pure surface. Jones's skin [...] resembles a 'reflecting metal surface'. Blackness is something fluid yet dense, an everchanging surface, and yet never simply just that: it cannot hold an identifiable shape and does not have a distinguishable inside."

Uri McMillan, "Introduction: Skin, Surface, Sensorium" in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* (February 2018)

When Grace Jones first started modelling in New York, she was told that she didn't share the features of "black beauty" standards. She worked with the Black Beauty agency but only for a month, before being told: "Your face doesn't fit. You are really black and your lips are big but your nose is too thin and your eyes are too slanty. You won't get the catalogue work that brings in the big bucks."

It is crucial to note the different shades of black that Grace Jones plays with (from putting on a white face to darkening her skin tone), to make herself look more surreal and astral (like the figures in Cortor's, El Anatsui's and White's drawings). The political implications of such versatility with her skin tone are many, as she notes in her memoir: "I didn't want to be thought of as 'black' and certainly not as 'negro', because I instinctively felt that was a box I would be put in that would control me. I didn't want to be fixed as anything specific

[...] I wanted to be invisible, unmarked, too elusive to be domesticated. Oddly enough, I did this by standing out, often by accentuating details about myself that were down to the colour of my skin."

## INTERVIEWS

In 1969, Andy Warhol founded *Interview Magazine*, together with John Wilcock and Gerard Malanga. A portal into celebrity culture's backstage areas, the magazine is well known for its airbrushed covers, which were created, from 1972 to 1989, by Richard Bernstein (the myth goes that he was Warhol's favourite artist). At the beginning of his career, Bernstein painted abstract works (some of which you will find in the second half of this exhibition). But he quickly turned to celebrity portraits, based on photographs which he often took himself, using a mixture of airbrush, pencil, correction fluid and collage. Grace was featured on the cover of *Interview Magazine's* 24th issue.

The covers on show here are in dialogue with two video interviews of Grace Jones that are also artworks. One is by artist Anton Perich, and shows Grace talking to her hairdresser in French, as she gets ready for a performance. The second comes from an episode of Warhol's MTV talk show *Fifteen Minutes* (the title a nod to his famous line: "In the future everyone will be worldfamous for 15 minutes"). Although only



five episodes were produced between 1985 and 1987 (the year that Warhol died), these programmes embody much of Warhol's philosophy, specifically when it comes to the blending of art and pop culture.

Another interview, this time written, is presented here for the first time. It is the transcript of a previously unpublished interview by the black feminist author Michele Wallace—daughter of artist Faith Ringgold and author of the important *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979). The interview took place in 1983 and was meant to be titled "A Fierce Flame".

## PROTO-DISCO

In 1966, upon leaving Syracuse in New York State for New York City, Grace Jones shaved her head. "My shaved head made me look more abstract, less tied to a specific race or sex or tribe, but was also a way of moving across those things, belonging while at the same time not belonging. I was black, but not black; woman, but not woman; American, but Jamaican; African, but science fiction." Something of a punk move, she nonetheless became a disco queen.

Her first three albums (*Portfolio*, 1977; *Fame*, 1978 and *Muse*, 1979) were all recorded at the legendary Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia. They were produced by Tom Moulton, famous for

having devised the 12-inch single vinyl format. Despite a tumultuous collaboration, these three albums found an audience, even though Grace looks at them with some critical perspective now. In her memoir, she talks about how she "sowed the seeds of disco's own destruction" even as she "helped disco become disco".

She adds: "You have to separate the commercialised style of disco from the underground places where the ideas first appeared. Disco got a terrible reputation, like it was anti-music, but its beginnings were in many ways more radicalised, inclusive, and openminded than rock. It was as much an assault on the corniness and narrow-mindedness of rock as punk. Where it ended up was the fault of the white, straight music business, which drained it of all its blackness and gayness, its rawness and volatility, its original contagious, transgressive abandon."

In this section of the exhibition you will find Richard Bernstein's album artwork, as well as technical sketches and original signs from Sigma Sound Studios.

## GRACE & THE MACHINE

In 1979, Grace Jones had her face moulded by her then-partner and collaborator Jean-Paul Goude to produce multiple ultra-realist masks.

Grace Jones had multiplied, and, in doing so, turned herself into both series and sculpture—an armada of Grace.

In many ways, Grace Jones embodies aspects of the cyborg, both in her replicability and her voice. In his 1998 book *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, theorist Kodwo Eshun calls her a "womanmachine", adding: "The model—as girl, as car, as synthesizer—incarnates the assembly line time of generation, obsolescence, 3-year's lifespan[...] The model is the blueprint for the post-Cold War cyborg, the womanmachine modified and mutated by the military-medical-entertainment complex."

This is something Grace continuously plays with. The cover of her last album to date, *Hurricane* (2008), reemploys the motif of the assembly line, with her bust multiplied. And in one of the album's tracks she sings: "I'm a man-eating machine."

In a 2006 essay, the late theorist Mark Fisher describes her voice as "wreathed in echoes[ ...] set adrift in a malevolent haze of eerily circulating vocal fragments, figments and FX". Later on, Fisher focuses on the screams and laughs inserted in Grace Jones's songs, which also disrupt the shiny cyborg like treatment of her voice.

## GOOD GRACE GOUDE JONES

In the late 1970s, Grace Jones met Jean-Paul Goude and Chris Blackwell. She left behind the disco aesthetic, and started recording at Compass Point Studios, founded in 1977 by Blackwell in Nassau, Bahamas. She developed a harder-edged image, and her music began to blend dub, rock and electro (Joy Division meets Sly and Robbie, who were her regular collaborators). The way her records came to be crafted could be compared to the way in which Goude manipulated her image. As Grace said, "Jean-Paul dug into me, bit into me, scratched and stretched me, and made very clear what the colour of my skin was."

Poet Kevin Young takes a critical perspective on this: "Goude's manipulation of Grace Jones's literal image 'I cut her legs apart, lengthened them, turned her body completely to face the audience like an Egyptian painting, and of course, once it was all done, I had a print made which I used as my preliminary drawing. Then I started painting, joining up all those pieces to give the illusion that Grace Jones actually posed for the photograph and that only she was capable of assuming such a position'—is contraband that views the mask as reality, strains to convince us it is."

Presenting these images, as well as the documentation of their production, is an attempt to take a fresh view of the imagery that has

become central to the myth of Grace Jones. It enables us to reflect on the fetishisation of black bodies, and more specifically black female bodies. For example, Lynn Goldsmith's photograph here embodies the struggle to negotiate Grace Jones' own agency within Jean-Paul Goude's photographs.

### ANTONIO'S GIRLS

Grace Jones met Antonio Lopez when she moved to Paris in the early 1970s. Her decision to travel to Paris was motivated by career opportunities and because she "liked the sound of a city where Josephine Baker, well known for being naked but for a few well-placed feathers, was a heroine." Lopez was a successful Puerto Rican fashion illustrator and photographer, who worked very closely with his partner Juan Ramos.

Grace Jones recalls that: "Antonio loved the new girls constantly coming into town because of the fashion and the vague promises made to them, giving him something else to look at, sketch, dream about[...] he had a way of making you feel like the one, his favourite, and in a way, at the moment he was with you, drawing you, he meant it [...] Every time Antonio drew me it gave me a clue about how to do my makeup and work on different looks, different ways of shading and shadowing. He had been working with Yves Saint Laurent and

Karl Lagerfeld since the very early 1970s, and it was an unbelievable way for me to land to Paris."

Black cultural studies specialist Uri McMillan has written that: "Lopez [is] an under-recognized and under-theorized exemplar of surface aesthetic whose drawings and photographs revel in luminous, effervescent, and polished surfaces be it skin, water, or burl wood while indexing women of colour as iconoclastic figures of glamour, shine, and exquisite potentiality. In doing so, his artworks generate new geometries of being while remaining, paradoxically, on the surface."

#### REHEARSALS FOR...

This section displays rehearsal and backstage situations: from Tseng Kwong Chi's photographs of Grace being painted by Keith Haring, to Adrian Piper's *Funk Lessons* (1983), where the artist teaches an audience about the history of funk music and how to dance. It also includes a moving portrait of Grace Jones as a ballerina by Ming Smith, who—along with Anthony Barboza—was part of the Kamoinge Collective of black photographers. The two met as Grace Jones moved to New York to start her modelling career.

Also presented here is video documentation of an infamous event referred to as "Disco Demolition Night". On 12 July 1979, a crateful of disco records was blown up on the baseball field of Comiskey Park in Chicago, triggering a riot of anti-disco and rock fans. The event has been seen as having racist and homophobic motivations. The 1979 year also marks the moment when Grace Jones moves on from disco.

### ...A DANCE FLOOR

Grace Jones once drew a parallel between DJs and artists, saying, "The DJ was a kind of sculptor of atmosphere and mood." What if art history was also written in nightclubs? Such spaces were originally homes and garages. This is explored in Tim Lawrence's book *Love Saves the Day* (2003), which traces the emergence of nightclubs by way of rent parties, French discothèques, gay men's underground spaces and David Mancuso's parties at The Loft in New York during the 1970s.

During this period, plenty of art could be found in the city's clubs, such as the Palladium (1985-97), founded by the creators of the infamous Studio 54 (1977-80). Architect Arata Isozaki was commissioned to redesign the space, and various artists were invited to intervene, among them Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francesco Clemente, Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf. Presented here is an image of the mural at the Palladium bar, along with a preparatory drawing. Not only was the architecture filled with art, Isozaki devised a

dancefloor overlooked by a pair of 25-screen arrays that displayed videos, most notably works by Laurie Anderson.

This section is choreographed between moments of silence and a club atmosphere, with lights on and off, revolving around a setlist of all of Grace Jones's 83 songs (excluding remixes and extras).

Presented on the doors into Gallery 2, is a list detailing which track will be played on each day of the exhibition, moving chronologically through her back catalogue.

## PILLS

Drugs were an intrinsic part of nightlife as well as counterculture in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Grace Jones herself has been open about her experiments with LSD, most notably through the controversial figure of Timothy Leary: "He'd established the Psychedelic Research Foundation at Harvard in 1960, was dismissed by Harvard three years later, and in 1966 founded the League of Spiritual Development, with LSD as the sacrament. Leary was in favor of these controlled settings, sincerely believing that psychedelic drugs should be approached in a serious, scientific manner for psychological and spiritual enlightenment."



This section of the exhibition includes a 1993 video portrait of Leary, by the duo Retinalogic (Chris Graves and Joey Cavella). An extension of a multimedia lecture series, it features the music of Psychic TV (one of artist Genesis P-Orridge's bands). In dialogue with the video are drawings by Adrian Piper (produced under the influence of LSD), and early works by Richard Bernstein, the artist behind the *Interview Magazine* covers. Reminiscent of amphetamines, the *Pills* series was produced with the assistance of Paloma Picasso, daughter of Pablo Picasso.

## PODIUMS

The largest section of the exhibition is devised as a cross between a catwalk, a dancefloor and a stage. It delves into the relationships between performance, fashion and club culture. Key figures include three fashion designers Azzedine Alaïa, Patrick Kelly and Issey Miyake who have been instrumental in devising Grace's image at various moments of her career. Miyake and Grace met in Paris in the mid-1970s. Together they embarked on an experimental fashion show called *Issey Miyake and 12 Black Girls*, which was presented in Tokyo and Osaka in 1976. Grace notes that, "He wanted the models he used to have a dangerous and ambiguous kind of allure."

Very little documentation of the event exists today, though Grace recalls her time in Japan fondly, explaining how formative it was for her apprenticeship in Kabuki theatre:

"The powerful, extreme makeup that I favoured, the flamboyant costumes and exaggerated gestures...Kabuki is an investigation, really, into eccentricity while maintaining something completely pure [...] The way my live shows developed over the years was based on that Japanese trip[...] He made me realize that to make my presence felt I could stand still, and radiate intense inner life without having to dance around like all the others. I was the countdown to an explosion that was about to happen."

This was only an extension of what Grace had already understood and implemented in her wide-ranging work across music, fashion and cinema. In the mid-1980s, she featured in movies such as *Conan the Destroyer* (1984) and the James Bond film *A View to a Kill* (1985), for which Alaïa created her outfits. Alaïa's clothes are like soft sculptures. In fact, before moving to fashion, he studied at an art school in Tunis.

Kelly might be lesser known, but he is as important as his peers. An Afro-American designer who—paralleling Grace's trajectory—made a name in Paris, he liked to play with pattern, buttons, black memorabilia and other accessories, often on the verge of kitsch. Fascinated by figures including Josephine Baker and his grandmother, Kelly's creations were a tribute to blackness and queerness.

In addition to material related to Miyake, Alaïa and Kelly, are works by other designers, including jewellery designer David Spada and fashion illustrator Antonio Lopez. They dance with works by contemporary artists such as George Henry-Longly, Alexandra Bircken, Kim Coleman and Derrick Adams, all of whom problematise fashion as sculpture, pattern-making and collage. Dotted around are photographs and videos of Grace Jones performing or standing still, sometimes dressed in nothing but Keith Haring's paintings.

## REFLECTIVE SURFACES

The title of this subchapter is borrowed from conceptual artist Adrian Piper's *Some Reflective Surfaces* (1976). The work, the recording of a performance, relates to her experience as a 17-year-old discothèque dancer at Entre Nous nightclub in New York, where upon catching her own reflection in a mirror, she suddenly becomes hyper aware of herself performing. Becoming both performer and spectator, self-displayed and voyeur she would go on to write:

"To succeed in dancing to disco music, and to perform the full spectrum of figures and gestures that are part of that, is to express one's sexuality, one's separateness, one's inner unity with one's own body; and in a sexually repressive, WASP-dominated culture, this is to express defiance. I think this explains why certain kinds of people become so uncomfortable around blacks and gays on the dance floor

who can really strut their stuff. In fact, I think this explains the racist and homophobic reaction many people have to disco music, generally [...] Voluntary self-objectification, of the kind that occurs in dancing, in performance of any kind, in modelling, or in permitting oneself to be looked at or done to sexually, can be an act of political defiance, a gesture of brazen shamelessness, a celebration of self that absolutely crushes and makes ridiculous any attempt at devaluation or disapproval."

The array of material presented in the tunnel gathers archival material and works that reflect on the making of the space of the club (through audio engineering, scenography and fashion) as a liberatory space. It also acts as a mirror to the adjacent "Podium" section. Focusing on Larry Levan, Willi Smith and Patrick Kelly, it tracks a lineage of black gay creators whose work continues to resonate today.

## CURTAIN CALL

If there is no end to *Grace Before Jones*, the death of many of Grace's collaborators in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s marks a clear shift in her career. Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Antonio Lopez, Richard Bernstein, Patrick Kelly, Larry Levan, David Spada, Tseng Kwong Chi, Willi Smith—all died of AIDS-related complications. This final section is a space of mourning and melancholy, but also a

space that still wants the party to continue. As the poet Kevin Young has written, "Paradise is what disco promised."

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Leandro Pitz for the graphic design.

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