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Grace Before Jones

Live transcript

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SPEAKERS

Cédric Fauq, Uri McMillan

00:00:03

Cédric Fauq: Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us tonight to the talk. I'm the former curator of exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary, and I'm really pleased to be joined tonight by Uri McMillan with who we are going to be in conversation for about 45 minutes, I would say, about some of the issues that are touched upon in the exhibition *Grace Before Jones* which I co-curated, together with Olivia Aherne, and which is currently still on display but that no one can see I guess, [laugh] and I'm going to read a bit of your bio Uri, if that's okay. Uri is a cultural historian who researches and writes in the interstices between black cultural studies, performance studies, queer theory, and contemporary art. His first book *Embedded Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance, 2015*, is on black performance art, objecthood, and avatars staged by black woman artists. He has published articles on performance arts, digital media, hip hop, photography, and 19th century performance structures in varied arenas such as *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*; *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*; *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, and *e-misferica*. In addition, he has lectured in art museums, including MoMA ps1 and the Hammer museum and published numerous essays on black contemporary art for the Studio Museum of Harlem. His work has been supported by the Ford Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson foundation. So if you just want to say hi to start with. Yeah. I'm really pleased actually because, that we are in conversation, because you were actually like very important as a source of thinking for me on

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when I was like working on the, on the show, and actually one of your, some of your writing appears in the booklet of the exhibition, which helped me kind of yeah problematize ideas around blackness and black image making I would say and I might to start with, like, read that very quote I'm referring to, which is like from an introduction to the woman and performance feminist theory that you edited. Right? Yeah. And the text was titled Introduction: Skin, Surface, Sensorium, and that's from like February, 2018, it was published in. And you wrote, I quote

black skin becomes an endless, 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 ever changing surface and yet never simply just that: it cannot hold an identifiable shape and does not have a distinguishable inside.

Sorry for the hiccups [laughs] in English, and I thought that maybe that was like a good, good way to start by just like asking you about your relationship to Grace Jones and how she kind of echoes some of the work you've been doing and then you can also like explain, to give like a broad scope or broad idea of like what you've been like working on for a few years now, how that comes into place in relation to to what we're going to speak about tonight.

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Uri McMillan: Sure. Well first of all, you know, thank you for inviting me to be part of this conversation and I wish I was actually there to see the show in person but the virtual rendering of It has already given me a lot to work with. Um, yeah you know it's interesting because you know, I remember the last year that I was finishing my PhD, I literally had finished my dissertation, and I was watching the corporate cannibal video. And I just knew that it was something that I wanted to write about. But, you know, it was something I kind of left in the background, until you know, I finished a book a couple of years later and got the first book out. And then when I was really thinking about, you know what I wanted to work on next, strangely enough, you know, Grace just has a way of kind of like you know creeping back into your life, you know, so I think for me, I started thinking about that video, again, and I think maybe the

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space of having years between it, I finally, I guess had the language to kind of talk about it. And as I began thinking about her, you know it's interesting because you know I didn't necessarily think that she was going to become such a big figure in my thinking but I think that I'm really attracted to writing about people who are a bit misunderstood, and people who, I think particularly someone like Grace, who we all know who she is, you know, we're all familiar with the work, but she's a very hard person to write about, you know like you really have to sit with her for a while because the work is so multivalent. And she as a figure never sits still, because I think there's that aspect of her. The challenge I run into about somebody who is inherently transnational, like someone who's equally at home in Spanish town as she has in Paris as she is in New York, and you know somebody who I think doesn't always, it doesn't, is not a figure who fits very easily into cultural histories you know so in some ways what I had to do as I started really thinking about her, I had to really, I've been like you know really teaching myself a lot about her trajectory. And I think what I started really realising is that what I was writing, or what I had been writing the past couple years like I've really started to think about you could like you know what does the cultural history of New York City in the late 1970s look like. And if she is kind of a central figure like who are the other central figures around her? So I started thinking about that, and I think I was also interested in thinking in particular for Jones, somebody who I think has been kind of not as celebrated as she should be in part because I think that she can't be easily placed and say alongside you know black photography for instance or black image makers until really recently, I think a lot of work has come out recently about people, figures like Anthony Barboza and Ming Smith, that have really made that link much clearer than it has been. But I think you know I was really interested in telling a different story you know what is the story that we can tell about Grace Jones, that goes in directions that we don't expect it to go? You know, can we talk about her outside of the context of her work with Jean-Paul, for instance, like you know if we did like what would that look like? So I think that I was interested in that. And it's funny you know when I tell people that I'm writing about her you know I've noticed that almost every time I tell somebody that, that everybody has a very particular memory of Grace, you know whether it was somebody who went to a concert in the 80s or the 90s, whether it's a memory of you know, a sibling who had a vinyl

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record of hers. So I just noticed that there has been a way that I don't think the scholarship has really caught up to the way that she operates and people's cultural memories. I think she has been a figure who has I think been really prominent in some, a lot of ways, about the way that people think about you know black image making, I think the limits of what like you know, how you can be a black artist, and the kind of different ways you could be a black artist, a black artists and performer, so yeah I think I've been thinking a lot about that and yeah it does, I think I've also just been really thinking about you know like what does black avant garde work look like, you know? And I think if we think about that then there's really no way you can't talk about Grace because I think Grace is one of the central figures of what a black avante garde history would look like. So I've just been thinking a lot about all of those different things with her.

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Cédric Fauq: It's quite interesting to hear, I actually for me like me makes me think of my own kind of relationship to her. Because I was born in the early 90s, she was not someone that was kind of like as permanent as she was before, but and actually it is quite interesting because the exhibition as we devised it kind of stops historically, around the early 90s, at the kind of like, yeah, I would say like peak of the AIDS crisis, I would say. And the first kind of, when I tried to kind of go back to my first memories, the first memories I have of her, I keep going back to my mother, but at the same time she's not I when I asked her, she's like yeah maybe that yeah that person that lady like a James Bond movie [laughs], so maybe I did say something but for sure, the when like the first time I googled her was when there was that whole kind of like yeah like thing around Lady Gaga, basically and Grace Jones like reclaiming some kind of level I guess you're like what she, the influence she had on like more contemporary pop icons, and I was like very much, I was very much into Lady Gaga when i was a teenager. And I was like, Who is that person that is like reclaiming [laughs] whatever like the fashion, the style, and even the music, and I was kind of like, okay, that's interesting but I only kind of came back to her much later and kinded to start to understand the importance she had, but then when I started to work on the show, I also, one of the things that was very, very important to me and you mentioned actually is like, to not focus only on the Jean-Paul Goude

imagery basically, and see outside of that, and complexify basically the image that we can have of her and so that was like focusing on maybe the disco era in the first place and actually like, how did she start to kind of build up the image that is maybe more imprinted into our minds now, when we speak about Grace Jones? And one of the first image we start with in the show is actually like an image of her that is so different from what we know of her like. And that is actually like we haven't been able to track down the the photographer, an image that seems to, yeah, she's very young looking. Her hair is like, kind of put back, but like that like seems naturally treated. And she has a choker at the same time. And it was I was very much, kind of like interested in starting with with that image that is a bit unsettling to be honest, then very much kind of create a contrast with the images that will come later in the show.

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Uri McMillan: I think what's interesting I think about what her, because this is another thing that attracted me only after I started really investigating, that you know I think for a lot of people, when people think of Grace Jones and modelling, they think of like a lot of the work that came out when she was in Paris, you know, a lot of those works, with the work of people like you know Helmut Newton and like these really accomplished photographers, but a lot of the much, I think the, it's almost like a pre history, like the pre history of the work that people are familiar with, are most familiar with, like people don't know for instance that in the beginning, like you were saying you know her images at the very beginning of her modeling career look very different, you know, and I think in some ways what we see as a kind of struggle in the very beginning because you know, she, I think her first modelling job was a before and after for Essence magazine. You know, and then she did a couple of different images in essence, with, you know, with Barboza. Yeah, but you know, it's like those are the like the earliest images that we have with her. But like you said that particular, I know the image you're talking about now, like the image of her with her hair, I mean it looks so incredibly different than the Grace that we're familiar with, it almost looks like a completely different person. So I think you know what's interesting about that is also you know like we always think of Grace as the kind of androgynous figure, that we have become really familiar with but I think when you see those earlier images we realise that like

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you know, that androgyny really did not completely come into play until much later, like you know the late 70s and I think in particular, like when Jean-Paul decided to kind of shave her head. But I think before that, you know, I think what's really striking about some of the images is that she's much more feminine looking, then people are familiar with, you know,

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Cédric Fauq: Yeah definitely there is that there is like, as you mentioning the the way the hair is being styled is very different and in the Essence photoshoot that is like actually Barboza photographs. Very much like encoding to the Disco era. And, and she has a huge Afro, which is like not something we used to, I mean, when was the last time she wore one? I mean, that's like so odd, and at the same time very interesting because, obviously, in the history of black image making at the time, I guess there was that, that the whole idea of like black beauty. And what I was trying to also kind of show with the exhibition was how she actually did not fit the criteria of black beauty and how she, that's something like she speaks about very openly and how she had to kind of, because of that, create her own category, which is like an un-category, or like a non-category I would say. But I, actually like, one of the image of Barboza that that I think relate a lot to like those lines that I read from you on the idea of surface and blackness and depth, and that metallic, yeah the idea of like metal skin, is very much like manifests a lot for that image of Anthony Barboza where you have that kind of face zoomed in, and it's a black and white image but somehow the texture makes it like not black and white to me. I don't know if you see what image I'm talking about. It's such a, and also because there is nothing else it's just the face, it's just a face.

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Uri McMillan: Well you know what was funny about that image as you know I was looking through the exhibition catalogue from the Kamoinge workshop and then, I didn't see this before but there's literally an image of three or four of the members of the workshop in a room around a table talking, and that image is just sitting on the wall. So I just thought that was really interesting because I had never seen that image before, that I'm going back to a year of saying it's like you know it's really, it's really striking when you start to see that you could actually kind of place her

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within these discussions about, you know, like Black Power imagery, for instance, it's I think there's a kind of conception that Grace is so far from that but she's not, I mean she's far from it in terms of the image that we know her for, is very distinct from that, but when you see the kind of trajectory it's really interesting to think it's like oh yeah like you said like, you know, we think in the very beginning of her modeling career I think there was a real struggle to kind of place her within that context and I think the fact like you said, that the context doesn't fit for her at all really, you know, but sometimes I think of the Barboza, that image of the face as one that's closer to the work that comes later. You know, I just think the way, because I think it's also closer in the sense of like I talked about in the article, the way that um, you know, Grace really plays with ideas of surface and depth, you know, and she really I think embraces the idea, like the negative connotations of surface as superficiality, as something that's lacking seriousness, and the way that she kind of takes on some of those connotations of surface, you know, in her other work, like whether it's performance work or visual work.

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Cédric Fauq: Yeah that's quite interesting to hear, and makes me think as well of how maybe that idea of, because the surface of the skin somehow to me, one of the things that I was also like interested in, in showing and putting in tension was the way she could, or like photographers had accentuated her blackness somehow, like worked with like very dark images. And, which made it actually also accentuate the androgyny. And herself sometimes playing with like white makeup and whitening her face, looking like some kind of a doll, like a doll, it's somehow you could say that it has its' ill effects. I mean I don't know it's it's interesting to me I haven't been able to kind of fully come to terms with it, I think. But it was very interesting to me the way she she felt like very, she had the license to kind of like, at the same time, get darker and play with that and at the same time playing with white makeup. I don't know if you have any kind of like,

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Uri McMillan: yeah i mean i think that's the interesting thing, when you look at all the images, that I agree there is something about, it almost seems as if a lot of the images actually focused on her skin itself, like

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there's almost this fascination that we'd see in terms of even just like the lighting, for instance, that and I see this, you know we see this across a lot of different photographers she works with, it's like there is this real interest in almost creating um, you know I keep wanting to say like a visual fantasy of blackness because there is a way that her skin is really kind of a lot of these images even like some of the other ones like Helmut Newton for instance, like there's such a focus on making the skin almost lacquered like you know, like really shiny, really polished to a buff, you know some of the images where she's almost fully nude for instance and like literally the skin that's actually like the focus of the image. So there is a way that I think, you know, I think most people recognize that Jean-Paul did that in terms of uh you know like producing, the kind of producing this like rich dark sheen with her skin but you know other photographers did that as well. So I think that's also part of the reason why I think in particular when people think about Grace, you know, people often think about her skin, you know like, the particular production of blackness that is present in her skin I think also becomes the predominant way that people, visualise her in some way. So yeah, I think there is a real way that the photographers have really influenced that perception of her.

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Cédric Fauq: Actually to, to sorry to cut in, interesting, because obviously when we also think about the Helmut Newton photographs or even like Jean-Paul Goude or others, I think the kind of, like that metallic shine or like the way her skin looks like lacquered is like, turns her into like a machine, and obviously the figure of the cyborg is like very, it's something that she played with a lot. And obviously like, somehow, there was like a full circle thing to me happening when she, the corporate cannibal era started, where it was, she kind of like fully embodied and at the same time, was also taking some distance with I would say. I mean the cover of the album is just, I mean that's at the assembly line is so telling, I would say but also for me was like the way they were able to play, or she played with like multiple Grace Joneses. In, even in like live concerts for the one for the one man show that's like so, so strange I mean I wish I had seen this live.

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Uri McMillan: I saw her perform at the Roseland Ballroom, I guess that was the, it was right before I moved out of New York, so I think it was the only performance she did in the US for the hurricane album and I remember that one of those, I don't remember what song she was performing but she literally brought out a clone, and then danced with the clone. So you know I think there is a way that she really plays like you say with the perception of herself as some sort of like Cyborg or machine right and I think you know like you said, the way that her skin was really polished, I think particularly with Jean-Paul's work with some of the album covers that really lends itself to that perception of her as a kind of machine like figure and I think you know even the, that commercial, the Citron cx commercial. You know, which I like you know is, so, even to this day like it's just really fun to watch, you know there's I think there is a way that there's just something really seductive about the vision of her as a kind of machine. This kind of larger than life figure that's kind of like you know partly, you know, partly man, partly machine. But I also think it's partly you know other people like you know even like the Bernstein, the Richard Bernstein, photographs that run the disco album covers, you can start to see the play with that as well because I think there's a way that the lighting also comes into play there, like lighting, play with surface, all that stuff comes into play with those album covers.

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Cédric Fauq: And it's interesting because I think we often see, we often see those like those three covers and more actually as like this soft Grace Jones. But I think in the kind of like scholarly work that has been like established around the idea of disco, or the disco era, and how that's also attached to, yeah, reproducibility, I would say, and, of like the voice, and this idea of like never ending music. I think it's like quite interesting to actually link that up, to not actually like see it as something so separate but actually like very much, yeah, and it's so interesting because that's tying to airbrushing a photograph, and somehow you could say that to apply this on the skin is a way to lacquer the skin as well I mean, I don't know it's quite interesting, that's not something I had like kind of thought of.

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Uri McMillan: Thinking of yeah, the techniques of the airbrushing, you know, and the way that when you see those images of her, that's when you, I think you really start to see this kind of the aestheticisation of Grace, and a way that she seems almost tailor made for someone like Bernstein, I mean, I think those images are still to this day like incredibly interesting to kind of look at. Yes, I think, you know, disco is interesting to think about in particular with Grace because I mean Grace has become like the personification of disco like she is the person that everybody thinks of when they think of disco and I think particularly something like Studio 54, like she has become like, she still remains like the main figure of that, so yeah I think it's interesting to kind of think of those album covers in the context of that because I think to even see, you know, I think the idea of like you know recreational drug use, like all the things that we associate with disco and the way that those album covers play with that. And I think even like the role of someone like Antonio Lopez too, you know, I think like you know a lot of people don't know it's like a one of those album covers, I think it was maybe the first one like you know, originally was an Antonio Lopez photograph that she was using for her modeling book, you know, so I think this way that like you know a lot of the things that, you know, we, I think that another way to say this is like you know we see a lot of the way that Grace moved in between different photographers in a way, those photographers actually work together to produce these images. So even images that we think are only, you know, made by one person actually are the product of the collaboration between different people.

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Cédric Fauq: Definitely. In relation to to to to the idea of photography and actually the, one of the things I was trying to think of for the show was her relationship to the camera and how cameras, could be seen as a weapon, as well, and specifically in relation to like that, that has been established between like the camera and black bodies. And so, so I was interested in like having those tensions between images of her where she's like, really, facing the camera in some kind of a confrontation, even. And some of those where she's like, hiding or trying to like avoid the lens. And often, that often, playing with like garments. Which is interesting when you speak about, you just started to speak about

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Antonio Lopez. And obviously like she had like a modelling career. But I was very interested to like, yes see how she she actually used garments to hide herself somehow, it's kind of, or create a certain scheme, maybe, which is something that is very compatible, I think with like Yves Saint Laurent for instance or Issey Miyake. And actually the hood thing, and sunglasses and everything she kind of like, gloves and other accessories that we attach to, I think we, we think we've seen Grace do this some of the time, we actually know her, Kind of like completely hidden behind lots of different, lots of different clothes, and that's something that is kind of yeah I think hopefully like present in the exhibition, even like there is like an image of her like coming out of the Andy Warhol funeral. And she's like, literally like wrapped up in clothes, and that's to me like where like the Lady Gaga thing comes, is like so interesting because when Lady Gaga started her career that she was like using that hood, she was using sunglasses, she was using gloves. And, yeah, there's no doubt, when you, when you watch like the two, where you can clear like comparisons between the two and it's kind of interesting when you think of like such icons that they actually, like to me like somehow it could be anyone behind all of this, which is, yeah, which is very interesting to me and something that could be problematised, I guess,

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Uri McMillan: Yeah i mean, i think i totally agree, and I think there's something really interesting because you know it's funny because that's actually one of my earliest memories of her too you know like I definitely remember the very specific types of outfits that she wore in the late 80s and the 90s that were like super exaggerated, like you know the oversized, like the shoulder pads, like the really fancy milliner, you know, the hats that she had made for herself. So I definitely think there's a way that she like performs fashion that I definitely can see other people like Lady Gaga like the primary example of that but yeah I was even thinking about, there's some photograph that Ming Smith, took of her at Studio 54, where literally it's just you know her like holding this long piece of fabric. See, I definitely think when I think of her I definitely think of things like you know like the synthetic moulded bustiers perhaps, like the big oversized glasses, the accessories. So I think yeah there's definitely a way that she's very comfortable with exaggerated proportions when it comes to fashion I think like you were saying I think it comes from

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people like her work with people like you know Kenzo Takada and Issey Miyake, where she's very comfortable with almost like very avant garde fashions. But they look really natural on her. You know, so I think about that I think even about you know that maternity dress that Lopez, and Jean-Paul made for her. That same thing you're saying like super exaggerated, like very Cubist proportions. And you know there's like a practical reason she has to hide because she's trying to like you know hide her pregnancy while promoting her disco album, her last one. But I think like you're saying I mean, I've been thinking lately just about that tension between the way that you can claim her in a tradition like post modernism in terms of these like very forward thinking visual techniques and like comfortable, you know, the comfort of using fashion to help do that work. But I think like you were saying, on the other hand, the kind of way when it comes to black folks, and photography that the camera also has a particular history to it, and it has not often been one that has been about producing affirming images, you know, if anything it's been the exact opposite of that. So I think you know I do I've been thinking a lot about that tension lately between, you know the camera being liberating in terms of being able to create images of us all, but also at the same time, Jones really tarrying I think with how, she carries a lot with visual stereotypes of black folks, and you know, there's kind of like this dangerous kind of play that she does where she's able to kind of perform stereotypes but also slip out of them at the same time. So I think that's also what makes her I think a really kind of complicated figure, but also like a fascinating one at the same time.

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Cédric Fauq: Definitely. I mean, it's interesting in terms of the adjective that we use to speak about her. I mean, quite often when I was talking about the the exhibition to some people they were saying that she yes she had something that was fascinating but also like scary. Some people were using that word. And I think it's kind of interesting in relation to like her blackness. definitely, but also the fact that yes she can not be categorised or like, even in relation to gender like. And at the same time something that yeah like puts like can like make people, some people uncomfortable and at the same time draw them to her. And yes, she definitely plays with that in relation, I mean there is like that whole thing about stillness that we talked about as well beforehand that I think

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is like very fascinating in relation to like how black bodies have been like kind of in the history of movement, forced to move quite often, and how stillness, the stillness that black bodies can embody is like often threatening. I mean, even in relation to like when you have like, I don't know how I don't know what the expression is, but like black people just like occupying public space, and just standing where they are. That's something that puts, that makes people uncomfortable. And in relation to like black performance I think that's, that's something that is, yes so so so interesting the way she plays with it and, she has that, she tells that story of like going to Japan for an Issey Miyake runway show, and to learn, learning about Kabuki theatre, and how that, kind of like taught her about the power of stillness, basically, and how she could manipulate it and play with it. And when we spoke, we were mentioning the fact that that's something that to me, can be found in the way Beyonce performs today.

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Uri McMillan: Yeah, I mean, I remember being really surprised when I read that because I just did not think of her performances in that context but when she said it, and you know her memoirs, I thought oh that's really interesting because you're really making it clear that a lot of your performance techniques are actually derived from Japan. And I just thought that was a really, it made me think it's like you know I think we have to, we have to kind of create this context for Grace where all of the parts that she's using are present. So if you have to talk about Japan, at the same time you talk about Jamaica and you talk about Paris, you know, there's a way that like you know I think that's what makes her really rich as a cultural figure, but also really unusual that she's drawing on so many distinct cultural traditions in her work. But yeah, I do think there's a way that you know yeah like withdraw and stillness, as performance techniques are also particularly unusual because it's like you said like we don't think of them in relationship to black people, like we think of black folks performing a kind of form of access and exteriority. And I think that's also part of the reason why people often refer to her as scary because she does not perform the emotional expressivity that people are used to seeing particularly with black women. You know there's a way that she really. She does sometimes perform a kind of almost like robotic kind of coldness you

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know and i think that it's interesting that some people find it, they use the word scary but at the same time they're also attracted to it at the same time, you know so I think that's what's also interesting about Grace is the kind of responses that she provokes from people are often kind of contradictory. You know, but I think like you said about occupying public space I mean I think there's a way that, that's also what makes her a really interesting cultural figure and like somebody who was unapologetically black, and has been unapologetically black for so long, but also being androgynous, and become almost you know completely fearless and confident. Even in ways like when the ways that like audiences have to kind of get on board. Because you know as we've kind of seen like Grace as a figure, like she does not back down, she's not going to fade into the background. Like, you're gonna have to do that before she does it. [laughs]

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Cédric Fauq: One of the things that is like, that I struggled with, in all honesty was obviously like the, some of the images that were made by Jean-Paul Goude, for, with her, I mean for me like you, and she says it like when she comes back to some of the kind of like difficult images of her in cages or like, like with like accentuated like features that kind of black features specifically, like, but fall into racist tropes. I was very much like whoa, how do I deal with this in the framework of the show. And, and I haven't found like the solution to be honest but what I kind of came to terms with was the idea of self objectification, and how maybe that was like a sort of like in some way like a performance strategy. And, actually, avoid being objectified by, and othered by the gaze of someone else basically. I don't know if like you have something to add to that, but that's.

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Uri McMillan: Yeah, I mean, I struggled with that too you know because. So if I'm being really honest, you know, there was a while we're actually, I don't want to write about the Jean-Paul images at all because there is just a way that I feel like in a scholarship, particularly in art history. The bulk of the focus is on those images, to the point where nobody really talks about anything else. And then you know this past fall, for some reason I just decided like you know what like it's time to actually go

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back and think about these images and try to see if there's a way to talk about them. And you know when I really started thinking about it, like looking at what she says in her memoirs, you know, I did think. I think there is a kind of way we could talk about them that does kind of allow Jean-Paul to get the last word, because I think in some ways what I see in her memoir, is a real kind of reckoning with that, and I think the way that she talks about it is that she's very much aware of, she was very much aware of what she was doing, even while she was posing for those photographs and even while I think navigating his kind of, you know, I'd say like racist fantasies, that she still found it liberating, you know, and she's still to this day doesn't completely castigate him for those images because she still thinks of them, there was something liberating in the kind of visual fantasy that he was making of her, and she says in many ways, he was creating what she saw in terms of herself, you know, so I think in some ways like we often think of those images as, Oh, this is completely Jean-Paul kind of imposing his vision onto her. But the way that she frame said it's more like no like they were kind of co-creators, and he was creating a visual fantasy of the way that she saw herself, in addition to the way that he saw her. I think in that way. Yeah, I think we have to kind of think of her in a different way and I think even like her performing a form of objecthood, where she is very much kind of, just because she is performing a kind of self objectification doesn't mean that she doesn't have any agency in the matter, like she's very much aware of what she's doing. And I think, you know to me it just seems like she was really, I think if we go back to those images in the very beginning that we were talking about, like I think she liked the sense that he was creating something very distinct from the way that people thought the black woman should be visually represented, you know I think his vision was so different that despite, I think what we see now as the kind of, you know, the very like primitivist fantasies that she participates in in these images, there is a way that I think it gets her closer to the artistic vision she has of herself. So I think in that way. That's the way that I kind of reconcile it, I mean again that's hard but I think I still think of it as okay when she's participated in these visual constructions with with him. I think the tension that we see is just a tension of black photography in general and black subjects, you know, that's the way that I kind of think of it.

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Cédric Fauq: Yeah, I mean, I met him, and he was very very emotional. Actually, he was very very emotional and I haven't, I'm not able to kind of fully, I mean it's difficult for me to watch those images but at the same time I have, I struggle to kind of be like that's wrong and that should be like erased from the whole kind of like imagery that surrounds her. But yeah, and at the same time this. I mean, you know, even the somehow, the Keith Haring paintings, as well, onto her body are also somehow, I mean, they are exotifying her as well. But no one. I mean, it's less often kind of like talked about [laughs] I guess Keith Haring because of the figure that he is today, is somehow untouchable on those issues. I mean surely some people have been like kind of like, going back to that work, and the motifs and patterns that he's been using, but to paint those on like black bodies I think to me is like, because he was obviously, I mean I haven't seen images of those paintings on white bodies. Or maybe I obviously it's like white paint and like the contrast and everything but,

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Uri McMillan: Yeah, think of that as you know I read like Ricardo Montez recently published a book about Keith Haring, and I wanted to read the kind of. I was interested in what he would have to say about you know Haring's work with her, you know, and I think one of the things that you know he said, or what I took from that was, I was even just thinking about the way that art historian Robert Farris Thompson was invited, I didn't know this, was invited when they, he was invited to watch Haring paint Jones. And that's when he comes up with this idea about you know Jones is like the theory, the key, she is the perfect kind of body for his theory. I think there's just this way that I think with Haring. The way that Jones operates as a kind of fulcrum for white male theorisation, like that's what's kind of disturbing about the Haring, because there's this way that she is seen as like the perfect vehicle for them to then project these kind of primitivist frameworks onto her, you know, so I think like you're saying like those images now, I mean absolutely there's a way that you actually you know we can see that very clearly. But I think you're right I mean I think there is a way that because of the kind of figure that Haring is now there's a way that people don't want to completely castigate him for that. But I do think there's this way that you know, the kind of way that she is seen by him as a perfect personification of pop and primitivism at

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the same time, you know it's problematic for sure. You know, I just think that's, and I think it kind of goes into the way, it's very reflective of the way that these particular people viewed blackness. That's the thing that you know I kind of see when I think about these images

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Cédric Fauq: Talking about self objectification, I think one of the, the interesting figure that come into play as well was Adrian Piper, in relation to our own experience with like clubs, and disco. And you actually also researched at Adrian Piper and I was like what, that's like, [laughs] such a like bridge to make, I thought that was like yeah, no one is never gonna be like linking Grace Jones to Adrian Piper, but actually you kind of also, she's also part of the female performers, and artists that are surrounding you. And if you want to talk about more of this.

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Uri McMillan: Yeah, you know, I think, even when I was writing the book and because like Grace wasn't in the book, but I was there was a point afterwards when I started thinking about her that I remember thinking to myself, Oh, it's really interesting to think about the two of them together because they were in New York at the same time. And they were going to these nightclubs, but they just weren't going to the same clubs per se, it's like you know Studio 54, and the Enchanted Garden, for instance and Queens were the places that Jones really went. I think also obviously places like you know Paradise Garage for instance, whereas you know Piper like Max's Kansas City was like her main place, but I think even like you know, Adrian knew when she was a Go Go dancer, initially, and I think, you know, I love that writing that Piper does about being a Go Go dancer and being inside the cage and dancing in the cage, and like, you know, I just love that she's literally talking about that space, but then she does this thing that's so it's like it's such a philosophical discussion about what it means to perform self objectification. Yeah, and I think that's what's really interesting to kind of think about her theorizing that and doing it so early too, I mean like doing it in the 70s. So that's one way to kind of think of them together. Because I have been thinking about the way that a lot of these figures who write about the space of disco and the kind of love that they really have for it, I mean if you think about Jones's memoirs, I mean, the way that she writes about a lot of these

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spaces and she still has a lot of affection for them. So I definitely think there's a way that you know I think of the two of them together and, yeah, even with Piper just thinking about you know her all of a sudden deciding in the early 80s, that you know, she's going to do the funk lessons performances and like you know teach people how to dance to funk music while also at the same time lecturing them about the origins of funk music. So yeah, I just think that there's a way that I think we don't think about that enough. I've just been thinking about, even just thinking about the nightclub as like a form of pedagogy, like you're teaching people how to become versions of themselves that the disco kind of enables you know and i think you know we see that over and over again but even the way that Jones talks about her own relationship to disco and I think even things like you know LSD, as a way of her becoming a kind of better more enhanced version of herself.

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Cédric Fauq: So good to hear, because it's exactly the kind of like, yeah, connections I was trying to make so for Adrian Piper, there's that kind of recording of that performance piece where she is thinking about her herself in like a club environment and disco and self objectification but also those first kind of drawings executed under LSD basically, so yeah I mean it's good to hear. It's good to hear.

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Uri McMillan: But I think people now especially too because, what's also been interesting to me is how I don't know anything about the whole history of LSD and it's only I think been recently because people, you know I think Michael Pollan's *How to Change Your Mind* helped facilitate this but I think there's actually, I've just been noticing recently that there's been a lot of interest in LSD now, and then people are looking at it differently than they used to. And I started thinking about that also in the context of Grace because, you know, when I was reading her memoirs, I was really struck by when she talks about LSD and I thought oh like I didn't know that LSD was such a huge influence over her. But the way that she discusses it, it was. So I just was, you know, thinking about that, that sort of really made me think that's like, oh wow you know, recreational drug use really did a lot of work but not the way that we typically think about, oh like you know people were just taking all

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these drugs and partying at Studio 54, it's like no like people were taking these drugs but for some people, they really facilitated freedom, you know, they, LSD actually I think particularly for like a black woman, like, Grace Jones, like it actually helped her become the Grace Jones that we now know. You know, it helped her like get rid of a lot of the influence of growing up as a Pentecostal for instance.

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Cédric Fauq: And I think we, I think we kind of touched upon one of the points I'm looking at the list of subjects and issues we wanted to kind of talk about, and surely there is like much more to say and like I think we focused a lot on the, on the image. And we haven't spoken about the sounds of, although that's, that's something that could have also been kind of like analysed and talked about parallelly, because it's kind of interesting to see how the two intersect, or not. But yeah thank you, thank you so much for that conversation which, at the same time, comforted me in like the things, the intuitions that I had, like this mental time, made me think of new possibilities and connections to make.

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Uri McMillan: So I might think about, I mean think about, you know, going off of what you just said, even um yeah like thinking about the images, the visual and the music actually intersecting when it comes to Jones like a lot of ways like you have to talk about both of them simultaneously in some of these images because images themselves are kind of loud. So I think even that is like, you know, really interesting to think about in relationship to her work.

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Cédric Fauq: That's for another another talk, I guess. [laughs] Well thank you so much for sharing. I don't know if like, are you planning on publishing anything, anytime soon, focusing on race or else or?

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Uri McMillan: So I'm still trying to think about who, I've been thinking about Pat Cleveland lately too. Because I definitely when I've been, you know, building this archive, she just keeps popping up in it, so I've also been potentially thinking about adding her into the mix but um yeah you

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know I'm just finishing up some of the work and yeah we're hoping it's gonna come out in the next couple of years for sure.

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Cédric Fauq: We'll be on the lookout for that for sure. Well thank you, thank you so much and to everyone who is watching. Stay tuned.

Colophon

Programme Assistant: Ryan Kearney