

WOODY DE OTHELLO, 2021

Sculpture of the (Dis)-tempered Environment

by Mario Gooden

And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating. It's an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.

—Frantz Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952

A giant house fan, the color of a yellow school bus, sits on a gray carpet surrounded by two orange trees and two *Monstera deliciosa* houseplants, commonly known as Swiss cheese plants, in dark cobalt-blue ceramic pots. Two of the pots are set on light-yellow ceramic stools as three taller stools, which appear as if they could be made of wood dipped in clay, stand in a group off to the side. The installation is enclosed on two sides by painted walls that frame the setting, suggesting the interior of a tropical waiting room. The fan is the personification of emotional weariness, enduring labor, and exhaustion rendered by its wilted form in the heat and humidity of the equatorial day. While the fan's fatigue can barely maintain its protective guards, even the heating, venting, and air-conditioning (HVAC) grille in one of the walls of the setting appears to be tired and overworked by the stresses of daily life. Yet this architectural detail in Woody De Othello's *Cool Composition* (2019) installation belies the initial impression of an abject quotidian existence to offer an uncanny counter-narrative suffused with embodied energy and sly humor. In fact, the spatial composition consists of singular sculptural works that stand on their own, but, when brought into spatial juxtaposition, reveal hidden systems at work—and at play.

In his 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel described the condition of heightened anxiety derived from the chaotic metropolitan experience at the turn of the twentieth century as “the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli.” Furthermore, the mind of the metropolitan subject is stimulated by the differences between momentary impressions and the “rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.”¹ Simmel states that the metropolis exacts a discriminating intellect centered in the transparent, conscious, and higher levels of the psyche. While the intellect protects against the threatening forces of the external environment that might unmoor the subject, the mind is also

engaged in the intellectual interrogation of its relationship to the time and space of its context: “What appears in the metropolitan style of life directly as dissociation is in reality only one of its elemental forms of socialization.”² This condition grants the individual new kinds of personal freedom while at the same time allowing for new contemporary social and political structures and experiments.

Thus, the work of early avant-garde artists such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1895) or Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” (1912) may be seen as surreal efforts to express the abject despair of the intellectual confronting overwhelming external forces. On the other hand, Dadaist experiments such as Jean Arp’s *Human Concretion* series (*Concrétion humaine*, 1933–36) moves toward abstraction, the blurring of conventional modes of representation, and the probing of the subconscious, in order to dismantle standard processes of reasoning in the face of the chaotic metropolis. According to Arp, “Dada aimed to destroy the reasonable deceptions of man and recover the natural and unreasonable order. Dada wanted to replace the logical nonsense of the men of today by the illogically senseless. That is why we pounded with all our might on the big drum of Dada and trumpeted the praises of unreason.”³

Such Dada experiments extend to Kurt Schwitters’s *Merzbau* (1923–37) architectural intervention in his studio. The project comprised a total of eight rooms in his house at 5 Waldhausenstraße in Hannover, Germany. It is one of the most important artworks and myths in modern art, and the inspiration for many installation artists, despite the fact that it no longer exists—it was destroyed by a British air raid in October 1943. The *Merzbau* was a performative architectural assemblage of abstract and deformed surfaces that manipulated time and space along vertical, horizontal, and diagonal axes. The construction was an aggregation of found materials, surfaces, and sculptural forms applied to an architectural substructure. Originating from a single column in the main space of the studio, the *Merzbau* expanded to several rooms, creating convex and concave cavities as a hyper-expression of the forces of production, chance, and anti-rationalism that blurred the traditional distinctions between interior and exterior. Although the work portends adherence to Dadaist nihilistic tendencies of refuting hierarchical systems and challenging political and social orders, a close reading of the work reveals an underlying dependence on modernist composition and a performance of modernist visual codes. Furthermore, the extreme formalism of the *Merzbau* appears to make it an expression in and of itself. For in its process of negation, the installation masked its own building systems in relationship to the physical, political, and social infrastructure of the house itself, situated in the Art Nouveau bourgeois Waldhausen suburb among large single-family homes with gardens.

While Othello’s sculptures of everyday domestic objects bear some semblance to Arp’s Surrealist works, unlike Schwitters’s *Merzbau*, Othello’s *Cool Composition* installation does not consist of individual sculptural representations by their very nature. Rather, taken together or singularly, the works are signifiers of hidden infrastructures and networks of control. These are political, social, and economic structures of power and oppression that burden and weigh down upon Black and

brown bodies. They are systems of comfort—and discomfort—analogous to a building's HVAC system, represented by Othello's air vent sculpture *Dark Space* (2019), which serves as a respirator to architectural spaces, and makes the room breathable or not.

In *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, architectural historian and cultural critic Reynar Banham explored the impact of environmental engineering on the design of buildings and argued that technology, human needs, and environmental concerns must be considered an integral part of architecture. Furthermore, Banham maintained that innovations in mechanical environmental control such as air conditioning and electric lighting may be more valid tests of technological modernity than a building's steel or concrete construction, and more important than a building's style or visual aesthetics. Banham's investigation of interior comfort in the domestic environment in "The Well-tempered Home" extolled the virtues of Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie-style houses and traced their de-emphasis on the exterior wall, for providing environmental comfort, to the writings of Catharine Beecher and her attention to the difference in house types in her major works, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy of 1841* and *The American Woman's Home of 1869*.

In 1869, Beecher—who was known for her opposition to women's suffrage, as well as her opposition to abolitionism while favoring *gradual emancipation*—presented floor plans for a theoretical Midwestern house type and introduced the concept of a unified central core of building systems, around which various rooms of the house assume an open or *free plan* layout. At the center of the house exists wood and coal storage, with a hot-air furnace in the basement feeding a single heated flue that services the upper floors; a centralized indoor plumbing system with hot water; under-floor duct work providing fresh air; and a vent stack for extracting foul air. A careful examination of the floor plans exposes that the *American Woman's Home of 1869* is clearly an upper-middle-class home for a family of means, as the illustrations include a drawing room, twin conservatories on the first floor, and extensive bedrooms with areas for seating on the second floor. Additionally, the basement includes laundry services (a laundry stove, laundry slides, and an ironing table) as well as separate walk-in pantries for fruit and vegetables. Published four years following the end of the US Civil War and at the beginning of the Reconstruction era, the design raises questions regarding the implicit labor required to maintain the house, the bodies that performed that labor, and the relationship of those bodies around a centralized environmental system. Finally, the identification in the first-floor porches labeled as "piazza" references antebellum house types in Virginia and Charleston, South Carolina. Banham notes that while other methods of heating and ventilation have since rendered Beecher's technological innovations obsolete in detail, the house type she proposed,

... is in all environmental and most structural essentials the house that most Americans inhabit and most American tract-developers are building, a clear century after her book was published. Its innumerable advantages and manifest suitability to the way of life its inhabitants appear to prefer, have to be set against one inherent environmental defect of some gravity—its inability to deal with the heat and humidity

of the summers to which most of the Continental USA is subjected.⁴

Expanding upon Beecher's conceptualization of the open domestic plan, and allowing for extreme porosity of the exterior walls in order to gain maximum daylighting and air, Wright's *Baker House* (1908) in Wilmette, Illinois, and his *Robie House* (1910) in Chicago decenter the buildings' mechanical systems and make explicit the relationships between labor and environmental control. Rooms labeled "servant" are aligned horizontally or stacked vertically to the buildings' boiler rooms and hot-water heating and distribution system. Wright is undoubtedly one of America's most prodigious architects and designers. However, the structural inequalities of his work and thinking cannot be overlooked: the domestic comfort and climate control in his designs are explicitly for white Americans. As architect, cultural historian, and Wright scholar Mabel O. Wilson acknowledges, "When Wright says America, he means white America. That's the transparency of whiteness that has always been constructed in the US. When [Wright] says 'I have done projects for alien races, such as the Japanese and the negroes,' he clearly does not see blacks as Americans. Rhetoric aside, that is part of his beliefs."⁵ These ideas are further elucidated in Wright's 1945 manifesto of sorts, *When Democracy Builds*, which conflates his ideas for expansion within the horizontal landscape with American democratic ideology and the pioneering of white settlers in their struggle for land against nonwhite Native populations. Here he stated,

USONIANS! Your Pioneer days are not yet over! Perhaps Pioneer days are never, should never, be over. But the frontier has shifted ... The White man must pioneer again along the New Frontier! The true course for Democracy is now Decentralization and will therefore be met on every side by intrenched encumbrances, scheming interference, insidious dangers. These are all there in force to be again cleared away by those pioneers of today working now for a more constructive success-ideal for human power: Organic Culture for the Free Citizen in the Nation that is the Free City.⁶

While Woody De Othello's common domestic objects and anthropomorphic vessels slump and contort under the weight of the precarity felt by Black and brown bodies, they also point to the engineered social modes that produce atmospheres of traumatic environmental control. These engineered modes are an entangled structure of subjugation that Othello's sculptures subversively illuminate, from the earliest coal- and oil-burning heating systems, which are the products of imperial resource extraction; to the colonial exploitation of labor that is the foundation of much of white wealth and the American dream of home ownership; to the invention of central air-conditioning systems that not only enable the expansion of capitalism but are also tied to the emissions of carbon dioxide, global warming, and environmental degradation that disproportionately affect minority communities. However, the works are not exclusively about the abject and the traumatic. As much as the works attest to certain human and emotive qualities, the sculptures are also a reembodiment of the vitality of the Black body moving through, and occupying, space.

In Othello's *Study for Time* (2018), a single long arm with hands at either end wraps around itself in a hyperbolic contortion. The sinuous movement of the arm allows one hand to support a stool at its fourth leg position by curling into itself, as if performing a backbend with one's head on a floor, while the opposite hand forms a figure-eight movement at the top of the stool. Furthermore, the stool serves as a pedestal to index this performance in the gaze of the viewer. Four timepieces are visible at the upper part of the arm: the first is a disfigured alarm clock that balances precariously, but upright, at the upper elbow; the second and third comprise a double-faced wristwatch pushed high above the wrist; and the fourth is a kitchen clock, dipped into a coffee mug, held by the second hand and rested atop the stool. The overall sculpture is reminiscent of the melting watches in the Surrealist painting *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) by Salvador Dalí. However, unlike Dalí's painting, Othello's sculpture—marked by the fusion of time and space, and the apparently continuous movement of the arm as its own self-conscious body—is hyperaware of its locus in four-dimensional space-time.

Similarly, *Defeated, depleted* (2018) represents a body in a state of multiple contortions. Whereas the movement in *Study for Time* suggests a light nimbleness, this work evokes the burden of a profound weight, contained in a large headlike vessel that is knotted at the top and oozing glazed black viscera from some monstrous origin. Again Othello sets the body in motion atop a stool, here with two arms wrapped in a counterclockwise position around the head; an oversize ear that destabilizes the scale of the sculpture and the viewer's gaze; and two pairs of lips that lend an air of Cubism to the assemblage. This black body and the play of light on its glossy surface is at once familiar and unfamiliar. It is an alien "race" that is sublime in its *otherness* and knowing presence. It is an ontological emancipation, and the manifestation of Fanon's ideation, "A slow construction of myself as a body in a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of myself and the world—definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world."⁷ In his body of work, Woody De Othello brings together the naturalistic, informed by technologies of power and environmental controls, with the visionary. The work is not only a commentary on the Black experience—its exhaustion, burdens, and uneasiness—but a challenge to notions of Black representation through its complexity of mystery, horror, luster, beauty, and power. This is the uncanniness of Black life. This is what Black Surrealism looks like.

1 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 415.

2 Ibid.

3 Jean Arp, "I Became More and More Removed from Aesthetics," in *On My Way: Poetry and Essays, 1912–1947* (New York: Wittenborn, Shultz, 1948), 48.

4 Reynar Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 101.

5 Mabel O. Wilson, interview by Hannah Wood, "Rethinking Frank Lloyd Wright: Thoughts from a trip through the Rustbelt," *Archinect*, September 7, 2017, <https://archinect.com/features/article/150026631/rethinking-frank-lloyd-wright-thoughts-from-a-trip-through-the-rustbelt>.

6 Frank Lloyd Wright, *When Democracy Builds* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 113–14.

7 Frantz Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 91.