SO! Amplifies: Wu Tsang's Anthem (2021)

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Abstract

***SO!* Amplifies. . .a highly-curated, rolling mini-post series by which we editors hip you to cultural makers and organizations doing work we really really dig. You're welcome!** *We are excited that today's post on Wu Tsang's* Anthem *, currently on view at the Guggenheim through September 6, 2021, is written by Freddie Cruz Nowell, co-author of the exhibition texts!*

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Aesthetics, Black Studies, Curation, Film/Movies/Cinema



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***SO!* Amplifies. . .a highly-curated, rolling mini-post series by which we editors hip you to cultural makers and organizations doing work we really really dig. You're welcome!** *We are excited that today's post on Wu Tsang's* Anthem, *currently on view at the Guggenheim through September 6, 2021, is written by Freddie Cruz Nowell, co-author of the exhibition texts! He is related to the curator of the exhibition and cares deeply about the collaborative, creative endeavors of Wu Tsang & Moved by the Motion.*

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The artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang (b. 1982) creates atmospheric performances, video installations, and films that envelop audiences into spaces where narratives become sensually ambiguous, collective experiences. Tsang's new site-specific installation, *Anthem* (2021), was conceived in collaboration with the singer, composer, and transgender activist Beverly Glenn-Copeland (b. 1944, Philadelphia) and harnesses the Guggenheim Museum's cathedral-like acoustics to construct what the artist calls a "sonic sculptural space."

Occupying the entire rotunda, *Anthem* revolves around an immense, eighty-four-foot curtain sculpture that flows down from the building's glass oculus. Projected onto this luminous textile is a "film-portrait" Tsang created of Glenn-Copeland improvising and singing passages of his music, including *a cappella* descants and his rendition of the spiritual "Deep River." Filmed during the COVID-19 pandemic, near Glenn-Copeland's home in rural Nova Scotia, this non-linear video alternates between scenes of the musician performing with various instruments and stunning landscape shots of the eastern seaboard sky.

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Instrument and Landscape View of Wu Tsang's Anthem (2021), Images courtesy of The Guggenheim

Harnessing the generous sound-reflecting quality of the Guggenheim's concrete walls, *Anthem* weaves Glenn-Copeland's voice and body percussion into a larger tapestry of other voices and sounds placed along the museum's circular ramp, building a soundscape that wraps around the space. When I asked the exhibition's curator X Zhu-Nowell about the striking ethereal, translucent quality of the curtain sculpture, X remarked,

> *It was a collaboration with the textile company Kvadrat. Wu visited their showroom a few times to select textile from thousands of the samples. This particular textile called power is semi translucent (created almost a hologram feeling), but still able to capture the light from the projectors very well. Wu once said that 'when there is a curtain in the space, it turns the space into a stage.' Curtain is very important to Wu's practice.*

The installation's dimmed light ambiance also veils the fourteen speakers that Tsang positioned along this darkened path, each of which plays a uniquely composed track that accompanies Glenn-Copeland's music.

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https://youtu.be/hnGaY0TfiAg

Working in collaboration with musician Kelsey Lu and the DJ, producer, and composer duo of Asma Maroof and Daniel Pineda, Tsang conceived this arrangement of sounds as a series of improvisatory responses inspired by the call of Glenn-Copeland's voice. The musical responses created by this diverse group of musicians include ethereal string tremolos, dreamy whisper sequences, and impromptu drum patterns, among other ambient sounds that help cultivate an alluring and reverberant listening environment.

Harnessing the generous sound-reflecting quality of the Guggenheim's concrete walls, *Anthem* weaves Glenn-Copeland's voice and body percussion into a larger tapestry of other voices and sounds placed along the museum's circular ramp, building a soundscape that wraps around the space. X Zhu-Nowell described the process for the exhibit's speaker placement:

> *We had a few mock-up to test the speaker placement. The two loudspeakers are placed on the rotunda floor because it's unique capacity to fill the entire rotunda. The 12 additional Bose speakers were placed throughout ramp 3 – 6. We evenly distributed them, 3 speakers for each ramp. Ultimately, the goal is to work with the unique acoustics of the building, and working with the decay, allowing the time and space for the sound to bound on the concrete walls. The piece is 18 mins long, and in a continuous loop. It was not designed to cultivate a single prime viewing location. Instead, the piece was built to be experienced as one move through the space, and 18 mins is around the pace of one walk from the bottom of the rotunda floor to the top of ramp 6.*

Visitors are encouraged to traverse upward from the bottom of the museum to the top of the building, and vice versa, and explore how *Anthem* ascends and descends along the spiral path.



Alternative View of Ramp: Wu Tsang's Anthem (2021)

The title of this exhibition, *Anthem*, draws from lesser-known histories of the word meaning *antiphon,* a style of call-and-response singing associated with music as a spiritual practice. Unlike a conventional anthem, which amplifies the power of a song through loudness and uniform sound, this installation enhances the call of Glenn-Copeland's voice by combining it with ambiguous vocal timbres, changing tints of ambient sound, and other heterogeneous sonic and visual textures. Within this lush yet complicated auditory environment, Tsang's *Anthem* also cultivates moments of quiet, rest, and reflection, reimagining the rotunda as a compassionate atmosphere for collective listening and looking.

In addition to the immersive video installation on view in the rotunda, this exhibition also includes a touching companion film, titled "∞," which visitors can access behind a luxe pleated curtain that divides the first floor side gallery from the main space. This video is a short interview that Tsang shot during the filming of *Anthem* of Glenn-Copeland and his partner, Elizabeth Glenn-Copeland, a theater artist, storyteller, and arts educator.

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Wu Tsang: Anthem part of the exhibition program Re/Projections: Video, Film, and Performance for the Rotunda March 19-September 6, 2021, image courtesy of The Guggenheim

This dialogue captures autobiographical aspects of the couple's intertwined creative process and artistic development, reflecting on myriad meanings of love in relation to their lives and work. Within the context of the oppressive and exploitive conditions of transgender "visibility" in contemporary culture, Tsang's seemingly conventional yet uncommon record of this elderly and interracial couple exists in tension with the normative frame of transgender representation. It also extends the conversation within Tsang's artistic practice around the centrality of collaboration, specifically long-term and intimate collaboration.

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Photo of Wu and Glenn on set in Nova Scotia, from Wu Tsang's IG feed

Since 2016, Tsang has frequently worked with a "roving band" of interdisciplinary artists called Moved by the Motion, cofounded with the artist Tosh Basco. Core members of this revolving cast include Maroof, Pineda, the dancer Josh Johnson, the cellist Patrick Belaga, and the poet and scholar Fred Moten. *Anthem* exemplifies how she uses collaboration as an aesthetic strategy for undoing conventional modes of authorship and to make space for marginalized narratives. For Tsang, "making art is an excuse to collaborate."

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Featured Image: Still of banner/ installation View of Wu Tsang's *Anthem* (2021) at the Guggenheim, courtesy of curator X Zhu-Nowell

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Frederick Cruz Nowell *is a Ph.D. Candidate in Musicology at Cornell University. He is a scholar with a specialty in historical avant-gardes, and cross-disciplinary research into the history of music theory, contemporary art, and popular music. His dissertation research (Supervisor, Prof. Andrew Hicks) lies at the occult intersection of artistic experimentalism, Euro-American counterculture, and the history of music theory in the early twentieth century. It traces how speculative music-theoretical concepts (i.e., cosmic harmony, biological rhythms, color-harmony, and ontologies of sympathetic vibration) fused into the practices of European avant-garde artists via fashionable occult religious movements (i.e., Theosophy and Anthroposophy) and various cults of health and beauty (i.e., harmonic gymnastics, Eurythmics, free body culture* (Freikörperkultur)). *Intimately intertwined with one another, these social developments were integral to the larger infrastructure of the unwieldy "back to nature"* Lebensreform (*the reform of life) movement, which laid the foundations for progressive counterculture in the twentieth century.*

Before pursuing graduate studies in musicology, Frederick was a University Fellow at Northwestern University in the Department of Art, Theory, & Practice, where he received an MFA. He also holds a BFA from SAIC (the School of the Art Institute of Chicago). Since 2018, he has co-curated exhibitions with X Zhu-Nowell under the moniker Passing Fancy.

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Sound and Curation; or, Cruisin' through the galleries, posing as an audiophiliac–reina alejandra prado

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