

THREE

THE

HARD

WAY

THREE THE HARD WAY

July 10–August 23, 2015

Logan Center Gallery
915 E 60th St, Chicago, IL 60637
Tue–Sat 9 am–8 pm, Sun 11 am–8 pm
arts.uchicago.edu/logan/gallery

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Artists-in-Residence (from left to right):
James T. Green, David Leggett, and Ayana Contreras.
Photo by Tracye Matthews.

Notes on Three The Hard Way
by Theaster Gates

Techno-social-punk is a hybrid form that merges Black creative contemporary culture with a new world order. It has landed at the Arts Incubator in Washington Park in the form of three transmitters: Ayana Contreras, James T. Green, and David Leggett.

Three the Hard Way takes a cue from Gordon Parks Jr.'s 1974 Blaxploitation masterpiece featuring three of the most important action heroes of the era. The film's plot charts a group of brothers who know that white supremacists are planning to destroy the world by poisoning the most elemental resource—water. Actors Jim Kelly, Jim Brown, and Fred Williamson—playing the film's protagonists—are tasked with saving the free Black world. These brothers fight to keep Black alive. In this way, the grandeur of their program is matched by an urgent call to arms. This exhibition, in its title and intention, mirrors this call by responding to our contemporary social milieu. It is a call to be heroic, strategic, and willing to take risks for new Black futures.

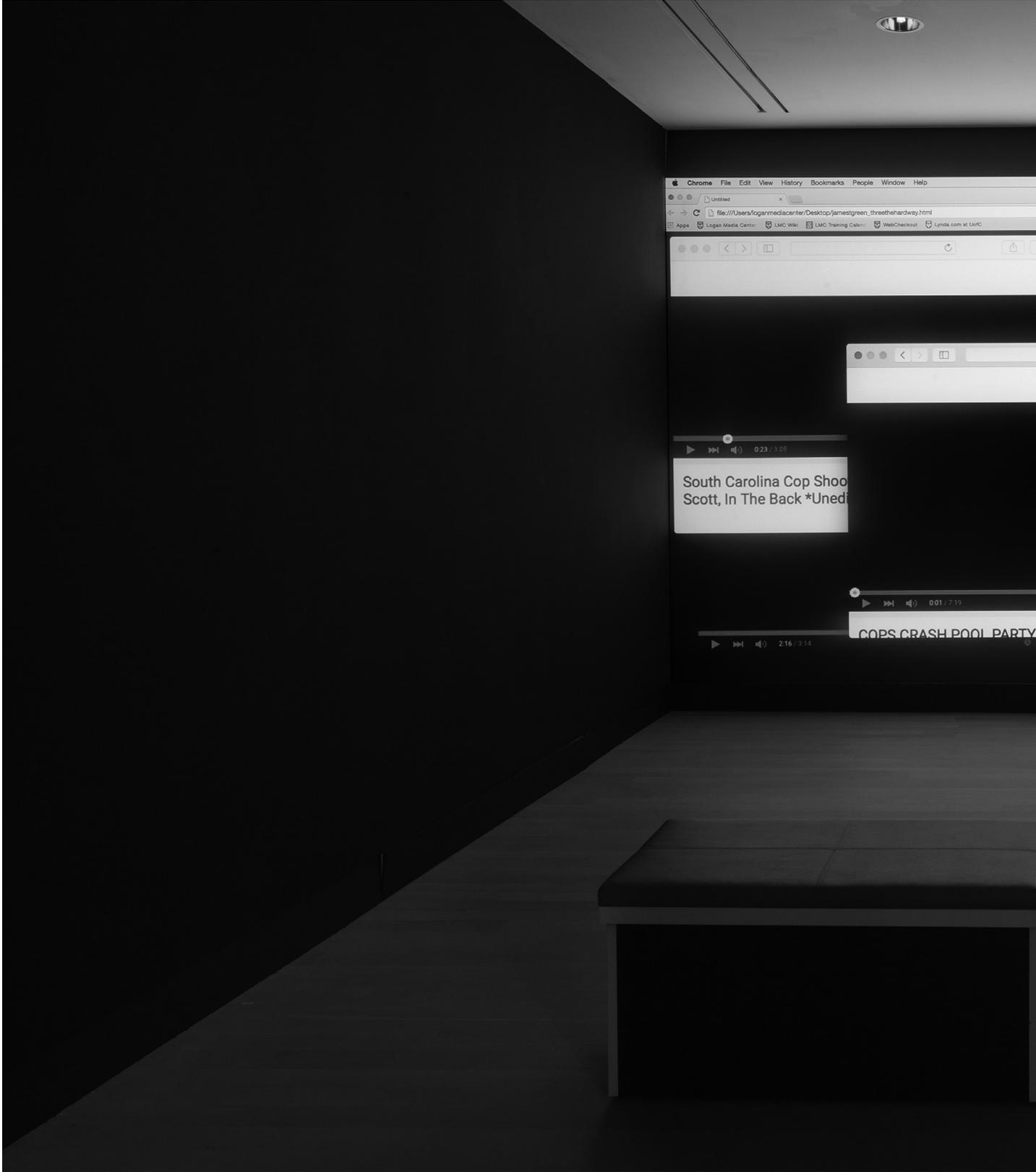
Contreras, Green, and Leggett's work offer us important and refreshing ways of understanding a set of possibilities. Contreras addresses musical histories through material culture, presenting subjective encounters with the aural through photography and archival material. Green's contribution addresses transparency, accountability, and utopia within the sphere of the virtual. Leggett takes Black humor and queerness as a starting point in a series of paintings. Referencing imagery from Black culture in the 1980s and 90s, the artist willingly embeds his own positionality, not as the Karate hero played by Jim Kelly, but as a vulnerable and self-conscious Black self kicking in the mind of a Bruce-Lee'd, Black Belted world. Leggett tries, with humor, to offer us a way into painting and out of the pain.

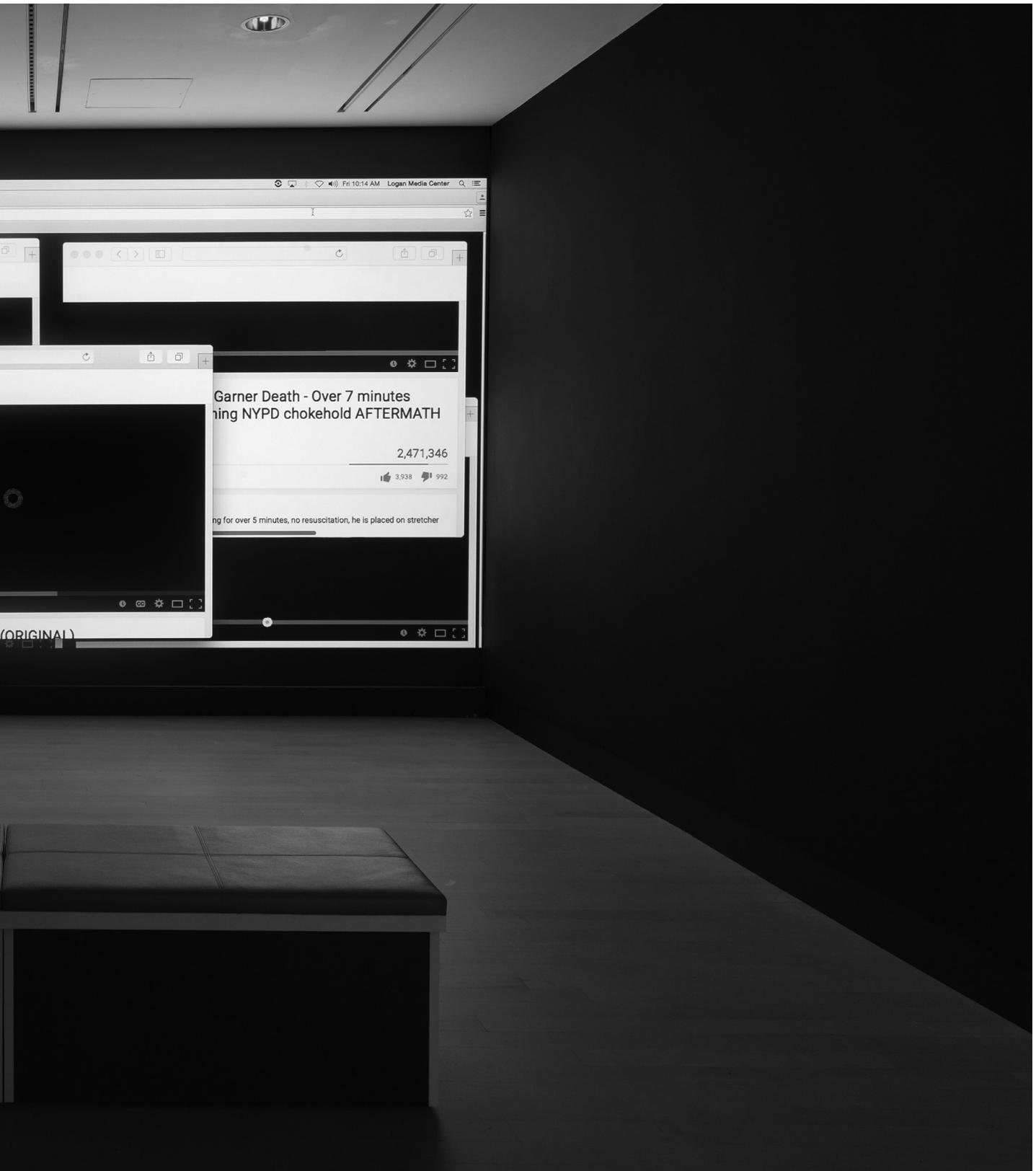
Given the breadth of perspectives offered by these artists, I am very excited that in its fourth year, the Arts + Public Life and Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture Artist Residency can continue to boast incredible alumni who are working in Chicago and beyond. Our former artists-in-residence are completing public art commissions, selling work independently, creating new pathways for themselves and their colleagues through artist-run spaces, and working as educators and administrators throughout the city. Arts + Public Life's intention is very simple: to create opportunities for artists of color to grow, be successful, and engage with communities on the South Side, throughout the city, and beyond. Since the Arts Incubator's opening, we've been able to serve artists and the Washington Park community in ways that celebrate existing strands of artistic practice on the South Side. It also brings celebrated and emerging artists to this rich community in order to enhance the histories of artistic excellence that make up the fabric of the area.

It is an honor to have witnessed the thoughtful and generative exploration by this year's resident artists. *Three the Hard Way* provides insight into how their radical thinking and generous daily engagements resonated with irony, world salvation, and a bit of necessary Black and Brown conspiracy.













***Time to See:
Ayana Contreras,
James T. Green,
and David Leggett
by Zachary Cahill***

The following is a series of interconnected vignettes on works by the artists in the exhibition, *Three the Hard Way*. It is hoped that this section of the catalog will function as another venue of the exhibition—a kind of supplement or off-site. Below I will discuss one work by each artist in the show. These three pieces are not in the Logan Center Gallery exhibition but are indicative of the artists' broader practices and resonate deeply with the themes of the exhibition. Various methods for dealing with time are revealed as each artist addresses their time in different ways. Each artwork, I would offer, at once encapsulates time, digests it, and speaks to "our time," a time that presently constitutes one of the historical low points in American race relations. This situation provokes the question among artists working at this moment, "in these times": How does an artist, through their art, engage in such painful and fraught times? Which might be best answered by another question: how can an artist not engage with such a time? The artists in *Three the Hard Way* answer these questions plainly, with pathos and insight.



Worst black
history month ever

David Leggett: Month after month ...

... then, an artwork hits you.

Reminding you what art can do. What an exhibition might mean. How an artwork can articulate something so clearly and yet you can stumble around trying to explain what it is that the work in question is doing. Why you feel it captures a moment more precisely than ... well ... just about anything else. Art historical parlance and theoretical eloquence fall short. These sorts of works demonstrate how it doesn't take much (materially) and simultaneously takes everything (emotionally, spiritually, and so forth) to stick like a magic splinter in the mind of the viewer.

Comedy is one such magic splinter. It is also a salve. Or: it is that miraculous element that allows us to keep going when there is no more fuel left in the tank. As such it can pierce and heal at the same time. A painter, David Leggett, in this sense is equally a type of comedian—working in the same vein as artists like Kara Walker or Robert Colescott—who registers the absurdities of contemporary American life. Leggett often uses acid bright colors to match the vehemence of his critique of the aforementioned absurdities.

Ever, an ink drawing from 2014, evinces an ability to bind interpretive language with its declaratory power. In Leggett's drawing we feel time compressed, a picture of the endless waiting for justice for African-Americans in an America built on slavery, inequality, and white supremacy. The year that saw the police murder of Michael Brown; the non-indictment for the officer who committed the crime; the mind-boggling, military-level response to protests in Ferguson; the police murder of Eric Garner in New York City, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and Freddie Gray in Baltimore; cops physically assaulting teenage girls at

a pool party; the mass murder at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston; and Sandra Bland (and on and on and on).

Worst. The painful truth that David Leggett's drawing articulates is, just when we think it can't get any worse in 2014–15, somehow, with a stomach-wrenching, clockwork reliability, it does. In the face of all this "worst," we try to remind ourselves that things have gotten better since the Civil Rights era, but it feels like little consolation.

"How can this still be happening today?" we ask in disbelief.

Somehow many of us naively felt that while things were very far from perfect, we told ourselves that the wicked days of white terror were behind us, only to find that not to be the case (again and again). Textbook and Hollywood myths of racial harmony give way to reality.

In the face of this broken myth, why (or how?) does Leggett's drawing shine forth with ... what exactly? Hope? No, it is not hope that animates his drawing. But maybe it is confirmation.

It confirms that our grim disappointment is real. That it's not all just in your head—that the unthinkable is happening and the unsayable keeps getting said. The confirmation found in the drawing registers our quiet rage and taps into a deep well of sadness. A rage and sadness that the worst black history month keeps happening—that it is endless. The Worst Black History Month Ever! It's the "ever" that keeps coming back: ever and ever. Leaving us to wonder, when will it ever end?

What were you doing the night of November 24th, 2014?

First & Last Name

One sentence response.

Send your response



James T. Green: I was sitting in the studio, watching the live stream. // Brent Knepper: Just returned from Minneapolis, I stayed in with my dog and a

James T. Green: One Night

What was I doing the night of November 24th, 2014? The question places me in time.

Working across performance, installation, video, and online works, conceptual artist James T. Green takes up the survey format in his work entitled *we (speak)* (2014) as a way to dig into what will undoubtedly be remembered as a turning point in America's history—the non-indictment for police officer Darren Wilson for the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Green's *we (speak)* is similar to Hans Haacke's *MOMA Poll* from 1970, which polled museum attendees about United States policy in Vietnam. Both solicit audience response in relation to an unfolding national trauma. Both hone in on a specific topical event.

In some ways Green's work also shares an affinity with On Kawara's *Date Paintings* (1966–2013). Much of contemporary art is allergic to specificity, out of fear that an artwork might become overly didactic and “close down meaning,” reducing its poetic effect. In so doing it supposedly limits potential audiences that would benefit from a more open-ended rendering, making the work more democratic. So goes the thinking of a Kantian derived aesthetic. But, as anyone who is familiar with On Kawara's work knows, it is precisely through the specificity that his work takes on a deep poetic (even spiritual) air by grounding the work in the time itself. Equally, people with any passing knowledge of Haacke's work understand that it is his unflinching look into the political that lends his work a kind of aesthetic punch. James T. Green's *we (speak)* deftly combines these modes of working to hyper-specific ends. Indeed, throughout much of Green's practice he is able to generate a powerful impact in the work by not shying away from the specific. He is in essence a time-based artist. Not in the conventional sense of the term using

video, performance, etc. Instead, I think of Green's work as time-based because he is working with historical time: or better stated—real time.

So where was I on the night of November 24th, 2014?

I remember it well for all its cognitive dissonance—the debates that were had that night, the surprising way belief systems came into conflict with each other. That varying assumptions about race are coming to the surface during the presidency of Barack Obama makes only too perfect sense. Even if we just take a recent *New York Times* headline like, “Poll Finds Most In US Hold Dim View of Race Relations,” we see an inherent disconnect. This article, like many others, goes on to point out how people's views on race have grown “dim” under Obama's tenure.¹ The paradoxical aspect about such articles is that the press is even polling people at all about race. Which is to say, before the first African-American president took office such polls in the mainstream media were few and far between.

The poll is in fact a highly subjective format, programmed by people to seem impartial and official. This is what makes Green's piece *we (speak)* so gripping. It is not some faceless organization standing on high, arbitrating opinions and formulating consensus. It's his face, Green's reactions to the events on the night of November 24th, 2014. We witness the artist witnessing, mapping his own response to the unfolding night's events onto people's replies to his survey. It is a distillation of the time of our shared relationship to a specific moment in history. It calls us to witness and shows us what it means to be a witness. To be a human witness. Living. Breathing. In our times.

1 “Poll Finds Most in U.S. Hold Dim View of Race Relations,” http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/us/poll-shows-most-americans-think-race-relations-are-bad.html?_r=1, (August 13, 2015)



Ayana Contreras: Time Regained

Appropriation Art has a long history dating back to at least Marcel Duchamp and achieved widespread acceptance as an artistic strategy in the 1980s with artists like Richard Prince and Sherry Levine. Cultural appropriation no doubt has an even longer history and made its way into Modernism in the early days of the 20th Century when artists like Picasso and Brancusi, famously enamored with art from Africa, took to quoting African masks and sculpture. Variations of the technique continue to this day.

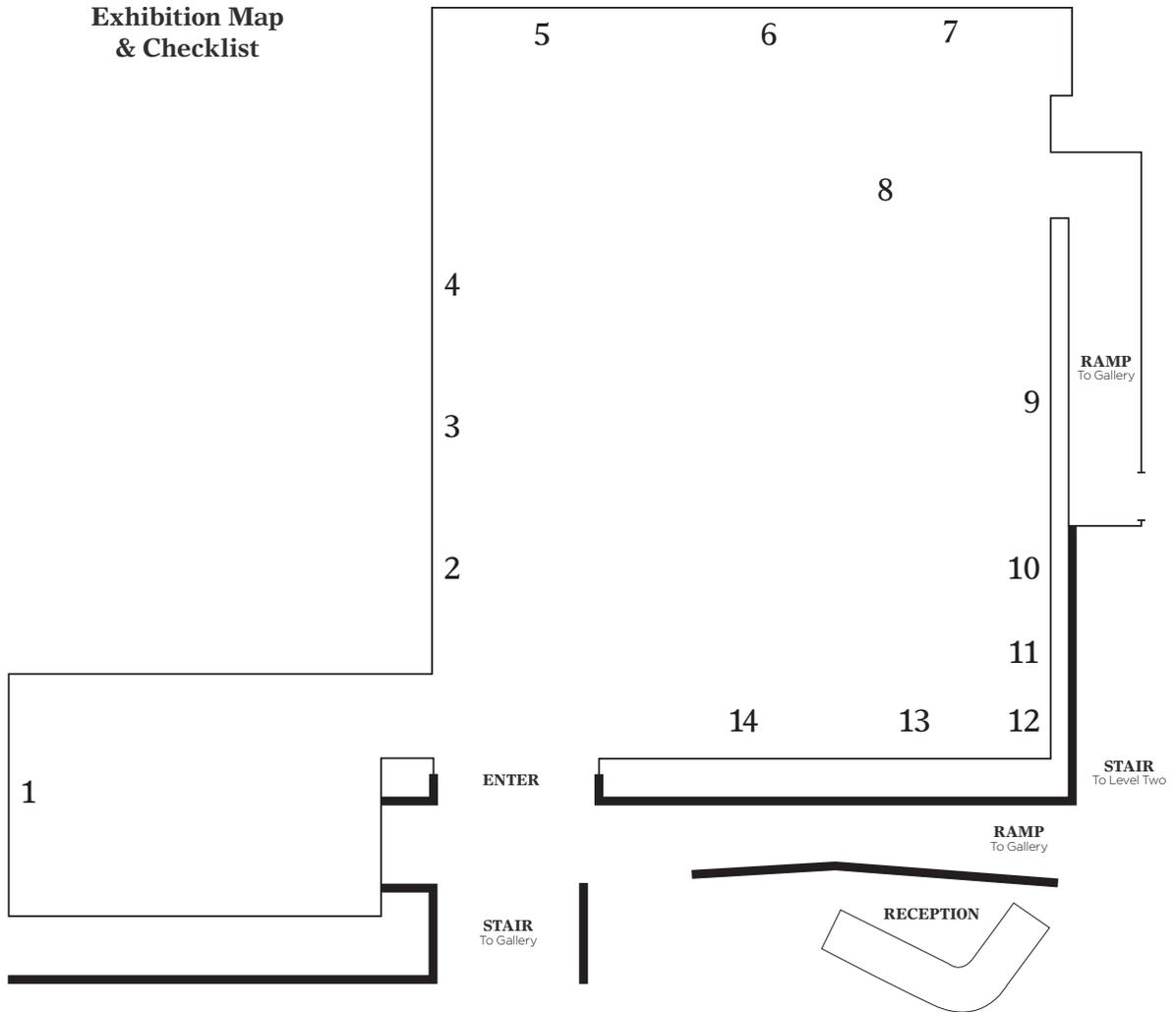
Yet even for its near blanket acceptance in academic jargon, the term *appropriation* is really just a clinical-sounding term for theft. Cultural appropriation is then the theft of culture facilitated by war, violence, and colonialism. No doubt this is an oversimplification. Nevertheless, if we recast cultural appropriation in consideration of today's financial and technological language it might be better understood more simply as identity theft, other people performing aspects of your cultural identity (perhaps most commonly, white artists cashing in on the aesthetics of blackness—as was the aforementioned case with Picasso). Working against these trends, artists like Willie Cole, Ayana Contreras, and in the idiom of a First Nations aesthetic, Brian Jungen (all of whom have worked with variations on traditional masks) have asserted a type of cultural re-appropriation whose work in reclaiming traditional forms effectively announces: *Hey! You took what's mine and I want it back.*

Ayana Contreras is an artist and media producer deeply invested in the African-American diasporic archive—researching, sourcing, and presenting materials that range from magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet*, to vinyl albums of Soul and Gospel music on her radio program *Reclaimed Soul*.

Throughout her work Contreras consistently abides by a dedication to bringing to light the lost or the forgotten, tracing lived experience through ephemeral material and then re-presenting it in a way that puts distinct temporalities into conversation with one other. She thereby creates something like a continuum or what French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called “collective memory.”

With her recent sculpture *Ancestor Worship*, Contreras shifts the vectors of her archival impulse to draw on a deep historical connection. Combining a mask from Cameroon with a Victrola record player and a coffee table, she creates an assemblage *cum* totemic sculpture. It is a sculpture that is re-animated, not only by means of its formal re-articulation of the mask paired ingeniously with the bell of the record player and elegant symmetry of the overall form but through the inclusion of music. Music and the sound of the voice have the power to make the past present. In a very real sense it calls forth the spirits, if we remember that the etymological root of spirit is *spiritus*, meaning breath. *Ancestor Worship*, as the artist has indicated, is conceived as a spirit guide, and as is fitting with the rest of Contreras's artistic output, the past is summoned up not out of a languid nostalgia but rather to preserve the integrity of Black culture and serve as a guide to help point the way forward in our troubling times.

**Exhibition Map
& Checklist**



Three The Hard Way

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|---|---|---|--|
| <p>James T. Green</p> <p>1 <i>Official (Original)</i>, 2015
Animated GIF</p> <p>David Leggett</p> <p>2 <i>Chiraq</i>, 2015
Acrylic and collage on paper mounted on panel</p> <p>3 <i>Die Brucke</i>, 2015
Fabric dye, collage, and acrylic on canvas</p> <p>4 <i>Chocolate rainbow connection</i>, 2010
Acrylic and felt on canvas</p> <p>5 <i>Dragon Breath</i>, 2015
Acrylic, collage, and mixed media on paper mounted on canvas</p> | <p>Ayana Contreras</p> <p>6 Archival materials:
<i>LIFE</i> magazine, Oct 1969 issue
<i>Cotton Comes to Harlem</i> record, 1970, United Artists Records
Found photographs, circa 60s–70s</p> <p>7 Interactive record station</p> <p>8 Record display stand</p> <p>9 Archival materials:
<i>Ebony</i> magazine, Mar 1969 issue
<i>Ebony</i> magazine, Mar 1968 issue
<i>Seed</i> magazine, Vol. 5 No. 5, Jun 1970 issue</p> | <p><i>The Wretched of the Earth</i>, Frantz Fanon, 1969, Grove Press, Inc
<i>We Walk The Way Of The New World</i>, Don L. Lee, 1970, Broadside Press
The Impressions poster, 1972</p> <p>James T. Green</p> <p>10 <i>we(act)_01</i>, 2015</p> <p>11 <i>we(act)_02</i>, 2015</p> <p>12 <i>we(act)_03</i>, 2015</p> <p>13 <i>we(act)_04</i>, 2015
Digitally manipulated JPG file, inkjet print</p> | <p>David Leggett</p> <p>14 <i>We made it</i>, 2014
Acrylic, collage, and mixed media on paper mounted on canvas</p> |
|---|---|---|--|

Programming

Wed, Jul 29, 6–7:30 pm

Artists in Conversation:

Ayana Contreras with Richard Steele (Host, WBEZ)

Wed, Aug 5, 6–7:30 pm

Artists in Conversation:

James T. Green with Faheem Majeed (Artist)

Wed, Aug 12, 6–7:30 pm

Artists in Conversation:

David Leggett with Zachary Cahill (Lecturer, DoVA)

Sun, Aug 23, 2–4 pm

Closing Reception and Catalog Release

Presented in partnership with Black Artists Retreat [B.A.R]

Artists' Biographies

AYANA CONTRERAS is an artist that works in sound. Her artistic process revolves around the idea of creative reuse as a means of building community. She hosts and produces a show called *Reclaimed Soul* on Vocalo 91.1 FM (a sister station to WBEZ). Each program features an all-vinyl soundtrack from her extensive personal collection, as well as original audio documentaries about people who are using old items for new artistic or cultural endeavors. She also interviews original Chicago Soul artists and musicians. Ayana additionally produces a radio program called "The Barber Shop Show", broadcast live from a Barber Shop in North Lawndale, which airs on Vocalo and WBEZ. Ayana was a 2011 Dorchester Projects Resident Artist.

For details visit: ayanacontreras.wordpress.com

JAMES T. GREEN has developed a diverse practice that includes technology-based media, social media, performance, video, and object making. His work has been shown at EXPO Chicago (2012–13), the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2013), the Chicago Cultural Center (2012), the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2012), and the Gene Siskel Film Center in Chicago (2013). James has completed residency programs at Artists' Cooperative Residency and Exhibitions (2011–2012) and Chicago Artist Coalition's HATCH Projects (2012–2013). In 2013, James helped to organize the Filter Photo Festival in Chicago and in 2014 was selected to perform at The Chicago Home Theater Festival.

For details visit: jamestgreen.com

DAVID LEGGETT is a visual artist and blogger who lives in Chicago. He received his BFA from Savannah College of Art and Design (2003), and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2007). He also attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2010). His work tackles many themes head on, such as hip-hop, art history, popular culture, sexuality, the racial divide, and the self, taking many of his cues from stand-up comedians. David hosts "Coco River Fudge Street," a daily drawing blog started in 2010. David has shown his work throughout the United States and internationally, including a solo show at 65 Grand Gallery in Chicago in 2014. He received the visual artist award from 3Arts in 2009.

For details visit: davidleggettart.com

Colophon

This publication is produced on the occasion of the exhibition *Three the Hard Way*, held between July 10th and August 23rd, 2015 at the Logan Center Gallery, Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago.

Featuring the University of Chicago's 2014/2015 Arts + Public Life and the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture Artists-in-Residence: Ayana Contreras, James T. Green, and David Leggett.

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