

## ***Notes from the Wood Shed***

Woodshed:

*noun*: a shed where wood or fuel is stored

*verb*: the act of rehearsing a difficult passage of a composition.

When the tobacco smoke also smells of the mouth which exhales it the two odors are married by infra-slim.

-- Marcel Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*  
(1975)

How can this photograph challenge ontological questioning?

-- Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin'" (2003)

I call this basic conception "the heterogeneous sound ideal." By this term, I mean that there exists a common approach to music making in which a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound (timbre) is sought after..."

-- Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music (1992)

*At the surface:*

Anteriorly speaking, a lot can happen at the surface. Two inches away from the face of *In the Spirit* (2023)<sup>1</sup> we encounter a photographic tapestry woven with cotton threads and filled with timbral nuance. Our proximity sustains a closeness against which balances a "fall" into a spiritual field of cotton — consumed by the *totality of (black) experience*. Here, boundaries of vision and fiber seem to fluctuate. In front of our face is a series of pixilated dots, reminiscent of an image projected on/from a screen. Amazing how proximity — with its revelation of the relationship between *closeness* and *closedness* — provides insight into the structurality of weaving as the grounds of our image. *The image is rooted by the weave?* An ontological question, or just one of practice? Returning to the *close(d)ness* to (of) this surface, we see that the pixels of thread map a shifting tonality. With the slight movement of the eye up-and-down and side-to-side, patches of interlacing dark and light threaded-dots transition into fields of cadmium yellow, yellow ochre, 115 Butterscotch — an inexhaustible movement of subtle chromatic accents. Looking deeper, through the fuzz and away from the surface, our eyes move with an attenuated focus. Tracking by millimeters rather than inches, we can begin to see the difference between the tightly woven and the fuzzy, between meaning and uncertainty. What we *mean* is that at this proximity something different is happening. There's a subtle layer of lint hovering above the *close* and *closed* warp and weft of the previously mentioned dark and light pixels, such that, with a tiny shift in our depth of field — 1-2 millimeters (0.0787402 inches) to be precise — the nap appears to float above and/or in front of an impenetrable, unified field of tiny cotton particles.

What happens in the interstice of weave and fuzz? How do we account for separability? *A moan?* What is the significance of *sensing this difference?* How does the distinction between weave and fuzz relate to broader concerns about the exclusionary practices grounded in differentiation?

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<sup>1</sup> For the remainder of the text, we will use the full title, as well as the abbreviated *Spirit*, to identify this artwork.

“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing over to the woodshed we go.”<sup>2</sup>

*An aside from the Woodshed:*

Famed artist Marcel Duchamp provides both term and boundaries for the thinly perceivable experience of differentiation. He called the subtle distinctions between objects the *infrathin* (*infra-slim*). Paradoxically, this gap refuses definition, which Duchamp resolves by offering the oral as an example: “When the tobacco smoke also smells of the mouth which exhales it the two odors are married by infra-slim.”<sup>3</sup> *Hear/Here* orality’s location (the mouth) functions as an expression of liminality (exhaustion), marks the *infrathin* as the operation of differentiation, the precondition of which is sensitivity. In addition, Duchamp’s mouth foreshadows the photograph’s phonic substance, and a move to appreciate the paralinguistic.

“animal shedding wood”

*Return to the surface:*

Our path back to the surface, to sur-face, to the thing in front of our face is prefaced by a *sensitivity to difference* in sound. *Hear/Here*, Duchamp’s differential index — the *infrathin* — is a framing device. We can deploy it to arrive at an understanding about the strange visual effect (re)produced when distinguishing weave from fuzz. The shift in millimeters as described above is but a mechanical representation of the acute attunement required to establish a boundary between what *is* woven and what *ain’t* closed, what *is* meant and what *ain’t* certain, what *is* visible and what *ain’t* heard. This *sensitivity to difference*, the recognition of the *infrathin*, is necessary for reading the weave/fuzz distinction as one of body/fur, because, while we cannot touch it, our eyes (re)tell a haptic tale in which the *Spirit’s*<sup>4</sup> animate materiality (its fuzzy fibers) recall the fur of an animal.

“swing”

*Return to the Woodshed:*

Optically touching upon the animal, we are reminded of poet and cultural theorist Fred Moten’s concern with paralinguistic expression when he cites French poet and social theorist, Edouard Glissant, in *In the Break* (2003). The recitation goes something like:

Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise.<sup>5</sup>

To those *indifferent to difference* (tone deaf), the slave’s paralinguistic scream will always be misheard as the voice of a wild animal, thus inferior. To remain ignorant to difference and bypass the *infrathin* is to foreclose on the value of the wordless. “The extreme and subtle harmonics of various shrieks, hums, hollers, shouts, and moans”<sup>6</sup> — shrouded elements of the *totality of black experience*, our field of cotton — are not to be repressed or closed, but openly

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<sup>2</sup> Here Duke Ellington’s famous lyric “it don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing” to map the reader’s movement from the tapestry’s surface and the space for critical practice, the woodshed.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, (Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1975), 194.

<sup>4</sup> *In the Spirit* (2023)

<sup>5</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Moten “Black Mo’nin’,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 66.

deployed towards a respect for difference, towards universality. Said another way, the moan functions at the exhaustion of language. Moaning reaches where words can't. And *that moan*, well that one is a metonymy of alterity's value. Shrouding and silencing the photograph's sound — the moans, hums, whistles, trains — is to radically destroy the ontological (essential) performances and practices central to black sociality. Both missing the moan and bypassing the *infrathin* speak to us of the significance of focusing on the moments of differentiation, as they might (re)tell us more than science forecloses.

*"We must shed modernism's defense of the linguistically legible."*

*Return to the surface.*

Swinging back halfway between points A and B (the surface and the woodshed) — beyond fur's legibility, but far enough to see narrative — things come into a different focus. The fact that we stopped halfway upon our return to the surface mustn't be read as a semi-committal practice. How can our position within the *infrathin* become a tactic to conjure and deploy our duet's transvaluation of difference — to express the universal? What can a trickster-artist and a poet (re)tell us about searching the photo's surface for sound?

Duchamp & Moten open us to the possibility of the phonic substance of the photograph in the woven image of James Brown. No longer directly focused on our weave/fur dilemma, the picture, that, is to say, the woven image, optically blends to show black musician James Brown dressed in a preacher's robe. Grasping a microphone, Reverend Brown preaches us a sermon. Organic shapes of yellow, pinkish-red, and intense green mingle with the woven photograph such that at this distance they realize an expression of black spiritual *ecstasy/extension*. Following Moten's instruction to "listen while we look" transforms the tapestry of Brown's performativity into a sonic marker of the *infrathin* — the difference (*differànce*)<sup>7</sup> — the moment of exhaustion that moves mourning into celebration, highlights the tethered-severance between weave and fuzz and discloses the uncertainty of meaning. *Hear/Here*, Black performance is animated by *accents* of organic, nebulous, colorful shapes, and the knowledge that photographs contain sound and other indirectly, indivisibly invisible matter.

*In the Spirit* doubles back on the ontological significance of cotton to the photograph(ic), to black sociality, to black expression, and to Moten's epigraph — "How can this photograph challenge ontological questioning?". At this distance cotton carries an abundance of meanings (and uncertainties). No longer close(d) to and in the figure/ground dilemma, our halfway point discloses *the image* as a possible repertory of the *totality of Black experience*. In addition to the phonic resonances of the brutal facticity of "civilization" — moans, shouts, and hollers — the tapestry is an open and an expansive (cotton)field of possibility. *An openness to the possible abundance of the image might disclose its possible inexhaustibility*. We must remember to remain *sensitive to difference*, open to the possibilities of uncertainty, continually shedding modernism's limits.

*"swing"*

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<sup>7</sup> See Jacques Derrida *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

Return to the Woodshed:

When Olly Wilson (re)cites Duke Ellington's lyric "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that *swing*,"<sup>8</sup> he moves to sketch what he calls the *heterogeneous sound ideal*. We can define *this* phonic substance as "improvised simultaneity" — the use of multiple instruments, sounds, and accents (each with its own discrete resonance) to develop "mosaics of tone, color and pitch."<sup>9</sup> Wilson sees this timbral contrast between multiple sounds within the jazz ensemble as a clear illustration of the ontology of black performance: *respect and integrity for the individual within a collective essential for the black musical tradition*. Timbral nuances reflect the valuation of differentiation (the soloist) within a collective (the ensemble), the moan at the word's end, and the fuzz/weave distinction.

Although plurality is sought, he individuates the unaccompanied 20th-century African-American vocalist as the embodiment of "the most highly developed, imaginative realization of the heterogeneous sound ideal."<sup>10</sup> At *this* site/sight, the African-American vocalist/soloist "preserves the heterogeneous sound ideal" in the wordless forms of the "holler," "cry," and "moan." The paralinguistic is operational if the black vocalist has "*developed the sensitivity* to know precisely when to utilize an extraordinary range of vocal timbres in order to achieve his or her purpose."<sup>11</sup> The purpose being to reinforce an already present sense of cultural solidarity between performer and witness — when the performer and audience become one. To this aim, the soloist only succeeds — merges with the witness — if they've developed an awareness of the execution of the timbral nuance integral to moaning. In the form of the black vocalist the heterogeneous sound ideal collapses the *infrathin* — the boundary between performer and crowd, weave and fuzz, surface and woodshed, meaning and uncertainty.

"We really sheddin' now!"

*Lasting View from the woodshed:*

From the woodshed we see *the work* in totality. Between us and Reverend Brown's fur (in the *infrathin*) is a repertory of *timbral nuances*. In the intervals, athletes leap the gap between performer and audience, color and handwork collapse weaving into painting, and, between all of this exists an uncanny African sculpture, an enlarged toy, and a giraffe skull. Standing in this open space — between surface and shedding, weave and fur, arts and craft, word and wordless, and meaning and uncertainty — reveals that this exhibition privileges difference as an expressive model — the heterogeneous sound ideal in haptic a/effect. *At its surface, Black Exhaustion* emerged as a function of racial fatigue; a deeper consequence of the racial and cultural climate from the beginning of COVID until today. *So tired we moaned*. Fatigued from the performances demanded of *us*. Over with false promises and brittle allyships. Forget about struggling for excellence against an all-white backdrop of mediocrity. Screw chasing Casper with his comic whiteness! Can we find a break in the action to resurrect (new) practices? These intervals are operational in that they provide space to workshop exhaustion; to focus on the timbral nuances between weave and fur. *Black Exhaustion* expands the woodshed to include

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<sup>8</sup> Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music," in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagal Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 157. Italics mine.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Italics mine.

the field between itself and the surface. We exit encouraged to stroll between points. That between *hear/here* and there, woodshed and surface, animal and human, and institution and gallery an animal always sheds.